

Hell

by Stanya Kahn

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A small guy made of knotty red sinews climbs up from the pit of Hell. He stands on a mound of gravel in the center of a murky pool waiting for his banishment. He's being cast out of hell for having only one ball. It dangles by a thin yellow cord between his bony legs, black and hairy and oozing pus, caked with grime. He reaches down and swings the sack over his shoulder. The cord breaks and his one ball flies into the dark water behind him. Now he has no balls. Maybe this is a music video. My head is the camera. I pan up for a shot of the whole pool, see the shadow of something in the water, Leviathan maybe. Yes, a huge snake the size of a subway train bursts to the surface, its glistening, wet head morphing from human skull to menacing elephant. It's foreboding and flashy, a wild display of evil and power, a true beast from below. The ritual of banishment matches the severity of the sentence. Swooping down to focus on the shivering outcast, I am now the one chosen to enact the final ceremony of expulsion. I toss a necklace of heavy coconuts around the little guy's neck. It's sad. He's so small and so fucked up. He's just a bulge of indiscernible flesh bumps gnarled into the vague form of a miniature almost-human. Where will he go? Where do you go when you've been booted out of hell? The weighty coconut manacle hangs around his neck, dragging on the floor as he turns and shuffles off the mound into oblivion.

I burned my hand at work, but I'll go in today anyway. I have to steam, iron, and organize the fall season sale items for Macy's Thanksgiving catalogue. I will summon the models when it's time for them to dress, I will dress them, put on their shoes, tell them they look great.

All the clothes are too big. Way too big. The girls are size 1 and the clothes sometimes a gargantuan six or eight. They giggle and we laugh along how silly these big clothes are! We pin them in, pull hand fulls of fabric tight behind them, making boxy sweaters appear form-fitting and sexy. We pin their pants, all down the back legs, around the waist, pull the crotch up in back, pin it to the waistline. The girls watch themselves in the mirror, mesmerized by their own images. They cross their arms and pout. Please stand straight I say, again and again. They wrinkle the clothes, they're

spaced out and boring. Sometimes they chat. The hairdresser is talking about art, how at one time he'd wanted to be a curator. What's that? The girl asks. Isn't that a person who repairs ancient paintings?

Sometimes they talk about their boyfriends. The Russian chicks love to party. They come in blank-eyed and pretend they don't understand English so they don't have to gab through hangovers. I whack their feet into place, shove their arms around. When the stylist asks the girl to turn around I say, Oh she doesn't understand English. Then the girl protests sullenly, Yah, I understand. She might only talk with the makeup artist and hair guy. They will make her look beautiful. She looks like a big-headed frog with pale skin and thin corpse hair. Undernourished, her see-through, veiny neck reminds me of a spring roll at the Vietnamese restaurant. She tells the makeup artist Oh man last night was so crazy. Look. She shows a diamond ring poking up from her bony ring finger. My boyfriend is so crazy. I was doink a fashion show at like 2:00 am at the club where he works and he came onstage and proposed to me! How crazy is dat? I was like yeah of course oh my god! But I don't know, he's so crazy! My hair looked really good. I totally love how they did my hair.

Sometimes they share their world views, especially the American girls: I think we should just totally kick ass, I think we should blow those bitches away. They hate us for no reason. Let them kill each other. What are they fighting over anyway? Israel wants Afghanistan's oil?

The Russian girl adjusts her thong. I tap her shoulder. Ok, Natasha. Your turn on set. Knock 'em dead.

Every night I visit another hopped up hereafter, each one a redecorated Hell. Afterlife cosmology is not one of my concerns. I don't have any conscious postmortem affiliations. I'm open to but not completely convinced by ghost worlds, nirvanas, purgatories, reincarnation scenarios, cloudy retirement vistas with joke-telling harp strummers. I have a soft spot for zombies, I relate to their dead-but-not-dead-enough plight. They walk the earth, they torment the living, they clomp around and everyone hates them. Which I think is hypocritical of the living, but that's another issue. I know a lot of dead people and so far they only visit me in dreams.

Of all the beyonds, according to my detailed, non-believer visions, Hell is clearly the most glamorous, the most eternal and the most cogently devastating.

A bustling marketplace in an ancient city: bells and baubles and gauzy clothes. Spectators gather to watch an elephant rip a man to pieces. By the time I push through the crowd to get a glimpse, the guy has no legs and only one arm. I say how could an elephant do this? And who is this poor guy? He is Gomorrha the crowd informs me. Everyone's lighthearted. This is what we do on Sundays, plus, he volunteered. Gomorrha's bloody stumps are caked with dirt and he looks faint, like maybe he's had enough. But the people want more. Where's that elephant? Let's finish this thing! I wander away, peruse the stalls of the rambling bazaar: dates, incense, yoga classes, meat and nuts. I think I'd like a tunic too, maybe some sandals.

Often it's nothing so impressive, just a thinly veiled, low-level depression like TV. Smoke and lights and a stage lit up in gold and Reese Witherspoon wrangling a slippery pole as queen of the devil house dancers. No red and black motifs, just yellow and soft chamois loincloths, beaded faux Native American bustiers and glittery lassos. Hell as way out west and tinseltown on the outskirts, beer stained parking lot, someone puking by the trash bins, pudgy bouncers out front chewing on toothpicks, murmur of a couple of grouchy dancers having a smoke and mulling the idea of moving to Vegas.

I am always surprised by what turns out to be the most terrifying. No half-humans or movie stars, no beasts or infected testicles, just an oversized swimming pool covering half the desert floor, vast as a landing field, dammed at one end with a monstrous wall of concrete so tall I lose my breath at the sight. I try to look away but I can't. A buoy bobs helplessly in the center. The juxtaposition of the tiny and the huge, the natural and the fabricated is unbearable, nauseating. I go weak with fear. I lose my footing, and suddenly dangle over the edge of the bridge, miles in the air above an unfathomably deep, endless aquatic nothingness. This most certainly is Hell.

I love water. I love swimming. I like oceans, pools, lakes, streams, creeks, kiddie pools, sprinklers, puddles, bathtubs. Whenever we take a trip to the health food store, I scan the fences of the nice neighborhood looking for signs of a pool. Look, there's the filtration hut. I wonder: what shape did they go for? Rectangle? Kidney? How about river rocks and a Jacuzzi? Maybe a poolside cabaña and lilacs growing around the base of a naked marble boy peeing fountain water into a stone carafe. How killer to have a pool.

LA is hot as hell in the summer. Hot as blazes they say, hot as the devil's a-hole. Dry and vibrating, the air as stinking yellow and brown as the dusty hills. We have AC in the bedroom, but sometimes I can't sleep at all. I lie awake clicking and ticking and not slowing down. And usually it's a mistake to watch reality shows before bed. Because then each time I move my leg or roll over, the rest of the team has to decide if that was a good move or should I be voted off. I shift back trying to hold my place in the line-up. I'm doing all the competitions at once: American idol, So You Think You Can Dance, So You Wanna Be a Hilton, Fear Factor/Couples Extreme. I like the show where you try to get fired. One girl took her shoes and socks off in a swanky clothing boutique and sat on the floor chatting on her cell phone, telling her friends how boring and stupid her new job was. The other staff huddled around the cash register whispering about the awful new girl but they still waited til 2:30 to fire her, that's how dumb they were. The girl won \$25,000.

Today Natasha and Christina discuss the "looting" in New Orleans. "Why didn't they leave when they were warned? They just want to live like that. You can't help them." I slap the back of her leg into place. \$25,000 to rip a model's ponytail off her head and shove it in her mouth. The president has announced zero tolerance for crimes against property. The radio in the RV announces the arrival of troops fresh from Iraq with the order: shoot to kill. Where do you go when you get kicked out of Hell? Now I know. Back to earth as a sick joke. The devil himself flies overhead in Air Force One. He appears on the evening news with a sparkle in his eye. After surveying the damage from far above, he says with a smile: This is all going to be great. We'll have a bigger and better Gulf Coast. He is excited about the new construction. On national television he assures Trent Lott that his beautiful house will be rebuilt: And I look forward to sitting on the porch.

This time I face a river with flat, sodden banks. I climb onto the water itself and walk away. I walk right down the river and wave triumphantly to a glass box full of scientists looking on and taking notes. They give me the thumbs up. I think maybe I'm not in Hell after all. Then I walk right past Ralph Fiennes shivering in a speedo. I try to get away, step onto a grassy outcropping and find a soggy pamphlet on a rock. It's a brochure for a youth summer camp, an extensive catalogue of activities and events, with color photos and bold text. "Your kids might DIE here!" announces the first

caption giddily. A kid wearing huge, arm length foam mitts tries to grasp an oversized pencil. "Rigorous writing exercises daily," touts the bubbly font. In the next photo, a kid is pummeled on the lawn with soft rubber bats. A preteen kneels as if praying, mouth open wide, face strained in a yell, in front of a large bean bag chair with a painted-on smiley face. "He who prays LOUDEST and LONGEST to the most ineffectual GOD, wins!" says the banner above. Fur-lined cubicles house adolescents humping pots and pans above an LED screen: "Don't stop until we say." They look tired. Everything is useless or humiliating, stupid or dangerous. Girls wearing paper hats rub fork ends up and down their shins, boys in floor length gowns bend over a stagnant pool, reaching for dead fish with their teeth. The last page is the application form, already filled out and ready to go.