

None of the Above

1. *Two Cats from Crazy*

Maggie heard footsteps on the walk, solid and purposeful, like the march of an advancing militia. *Her sister*. She dropped the forkful of cheesecake and ducked behind the net curtains. The thud of footsteps became the thump of a fist. "Mags, I know you're in there," Evelyn called. "Open up."

No reply.

Evelyn's voice came through the door, hollow and nasal, as if from a police megaphone. "*Chhh* – Maggie Lum – *Chhh* – put down the fork and step away from the cheesecake," it said. "We have you surrounded!"

Maggie clicked open the deadbolt and slouched into the dining chair.

Evelyn stood cross-armed in the doorway, surveying the tower of unwashed dishes and the blackened bulbs in the overhead fitting. A small yellow cat began to weave a figure eight around her ankles, leaving tufts of its tawny fur on her sheer black tights. Another cat, larger and flecked with grey, lay stretched across the table as if basking on a bearskin rug.

Evelyn pulled the door closed, cleared her throat and sat across the table from her sister. "We need to talk," she said. She whisked the cat from its resting place and began to pluck tufts of fur from her coat and skirt. "I'm worried about you, Mags. I reckon you're about two cats from crazy." She pulled some papers from her handbag. "Here," she said, extending her arm. "I've spent the entire morning on the phone. I got you an interview."

Maggie sighed. She had spent the entire morning trying to remove the sticky label from the inside of a non-stick frypan. "But I already have a job," she said, dragging lazy plough lines across the cheesecake with her fork.

"Afternoons at the library," Evelyn said, voice like tiny scissors, "are fine if you are a) a school-leaver, or, b) a geriatric. But you are neither. It's at Dr. Murray's office. He is Amy and Adam's paediatrician. He needs a new receptionist. It's tomorrow at nine." She smiled. "I would imagine Reg will be well pleased."

Reg was a sore subject at the moment. Maggie was still smarting from the rumours. About his late night antics. The stalking incident. She'd rifled through his truck, found duct tape, grease paint, commando-style clothing. She'd seen enough *CSI New York* to fill in the rest herself.

"It doesn't matter," she said. "I binned him."

"That's just great." Evelyn groaned. She leaned forward and planted her elbows on the table. "That is, if you want to end up a) the lonely cat lady, or, b) the neighbourhood spinster."

"Aren't there any other choices?"

"Not from what I can see."

"I hate multiple choice."

2. *Convictions*

Maggie stared into her closet. She removed a green dress from the rack, holding it against herself and swishing side to side in the mirror. Her sturdy legs jutted beneath the hemline. Tree-like. Not quite the effect she was after. *Evelyn*, she thought. Evelyn with her kitset life and her alliterated offspring. How could they be sisters? It wasn't fair. She must have been switched at birth. Things like that really happened.

Maggie pictured her real mother, crouched in a hospital basement, torch in hand, searching the archives for some trace of her misplaced baby girl.

Deedle-deedle-dee. She snapped open her cellphone. Reg again.

"I told you to stop ringing me," she said. "I don't know you anymore."

"I told you I could explain," Reg said. "Just give me a chance."

"Explain?" she said. "Someone bloodied your nose – over a grammatical error."

She had come home that day. Reg sat on the tailgate of his truck, a lamb shank pressed to his swollen face. He had passed a warehouse, he explained. A notice hung on the window. *Help Needed: Stalking Shelves*. Reg asked to see the manager, a burly Irishman with a dragon tattoo. It hadn't gone well.

"You can't just go around correcting people," Maggie said. "It's one thing to circle the errors in the Herald and send them in anonymously for a laugh. But to get in someone's face –"

"You see, Maggie, that's where you and I differ," Reg said. "You are a woman of narrow vision. You have no convictions."

"I do. Mine just don't involve the police." She grabbed a blue floral dress from the rack, holding it against herself in a celluloid pose.

"No – not that one," Reg said. "Something more conservative, more sparsely vegetated."

Maggie whirled towards the window. Reg sat in the planter box outside, phone to his ear, a fractured grin on his face.

"You are so gorse to me," she said, yanking the drape shut.

"Don't be like that, Maggie," Reg said, following her around to the kitchen. A black Persian on the windowsill pawed at the eyeball bobbing between the broken slats. "Let's go down to Noel Leeming and look for typos in the product manuals. You know, like old times."

She wanted to let Reg explain, to make it all make sense. She wanted to tell him how she felt, but her words

This story was placed Second in the Takahe Short Story Competition 2009 by judge Elizabeth Smither.

always tangled like hairs in a drain. She wished she was more like Reg. He had such an easy way with words.

Maggie loved words, too. They just had mixed feelings about her.

3. *As If*

Gina stood at the Issues Desk, eyeballing Maggie. "Issues?" Gina said, tapping an acrylic on the sign next to Maggie's head. She flashed a Samurai smile. "I suppose you always did have issues."

That voice, Maggie thought. In her mind a reel began to play. *Maggie Lum – You're so dumb!* After twenty years the worn loop of Gina's voice was still playable on demand. She stared at Gina, noting the hug of her tailored blazer, the straight line of her shoulders dropping steeply downward – like the direction Maggie's life had gone in the years since they'd last met. Maggie felt sweat forming between her thighs. She wished she could be transported by police escort directly to Jenny Craig.

Gina laid a stack of encyclopaedia-sized texts on the counter and released a dramatic sigh. "I'm doing some research."

Maggie stared vacantly, mouth gaping, like the tiny circles Gina used to draw above the 'i' in her name. She scanned Gina's card, studying the name before handing it back. "As if?" she said.

Gina snatched the card back. "*Asif*," she corrected. "It's *Asif*. I'm married now. My husband is Egyptian. He's a doctor. What about you? Did you ever get married?"

"Un-no," Maggie said, sliding the books across the counter.

"Oh," Gina said, voice tinkling with insincerity. "I'm so sorry to hear that."

Yeab, Maggie thought. *As if*.

4. *Pressing Buttons*

Maggie stared into the bakery case. She should be looking at hot meals, but the cheesecake sat seductively, all glossy in its crumbly shell. She felt disgusted. It had been one of those long-shadow days, like late afternoon all day long. She heard Reg's voice in her head. 'No convictions,' it said. She looked down at the display case. A sticky label stared up at her. *Scones .90 a peace*. Perfect, she thought. Just perfect.

"Unbelievable!" another voice said. Maggie looked around, realising that this voice had come from outside her head. A man beside her stared at the wall where, in small black and white tiles, a portrait of a young Elvis hung. Looking harder, Maggie noticed that it was not made of tiles at all, but slices of toast arranged to form an image. She blinked, but the image remained. Evelyn always told her she had the mental stability of a sandcastle. Perhaps the tide had finally come in.

"Go figure." The man shrugged. "It's probably a bloody American – they're the only ones I know who could burn

toast and call it art. I guess you could say that one man's toast is another man's treasure."

Maggie stared wide-eyed into the black and white face of the King. Things seemed strangely clearer to her in that moment. *Less* black and white. 'That,' she thought to herself, 'now *that* is bloody genius.'

She scooped up the cheesecake and started for the door. *Deedle-deedle-dee*. Evelyn.

"We need to talk about tomorrow," the voice crackled. "It's an important day. We can't afford any stuff-ups."

A pause. "I'm not going," Maggie said.

A staticky gasp.

Headlights appeared from the distance, slowing alongside Maggie, drawing up to the kerb. "I'm happy with my little library job," she said to the phone.

"Strewth, Mags. I'm only trying to help. I moved heaven and earth to get that interview for you. Honestly, trying to get you to do something with your life is like trying to coax a horse up a fire escape."

Maggie stared into the headlights. "Uh - gotta go," she said and pressed the 'end call' button.

5. *No Place like Home*

"Get in," Reg called, flinging open the passenger door. "There's something that's been bugging me for weeks. It's time I took care of it."

Maggie bit her lip. What did she have to lose? This is it, she thought. I'll either be killed or be saved. Against her better judgement she hopped inside.

Reg drove in roguish silence, head low on his shoulders, a balaclava in his lap. He brought the truck to a stop at the office of a prominent land agent. She watched him climb out and lift a box from the back. She could see the agency logo on the glass, beside it a full-length image of Dorothy, long plaits dangling, tiptoe in her ruby slippers. A caption above her read, *Theres no place like home*. The vertical hold in her brain began to wobble. She watched through the window as Reg bent down, rummaged through the box, and lifted out a thin paintbrush and a small pottle of paint. But rather than witness him defiling the office façade as she suddenly feared he might, she watched as Reg carefully, almost lovingly painted a perfect apostrophe on the glass.

Staring out at him she felt both pity and admiration. She had learned something very important in that moment. About Reg. About convictions. About grammar.

Reg got back in the truck and met her eye. Maggie drew in a deep breath, held it, then exhaled.

"Can I take you home, now?" Reg said, tousling her hair.

"Yeah," Maggie said. "I'd like that." She smiled to herself, barely able to resist the urge to say to him, *There's no place like home*.