

Did you print this?

You should have. Check out Toner online for more issues, free downloads and information. You can even get involved and start writing for Toner. And who knows; the next one of these you pick up might have your story in it.

www.tonermagazine.com



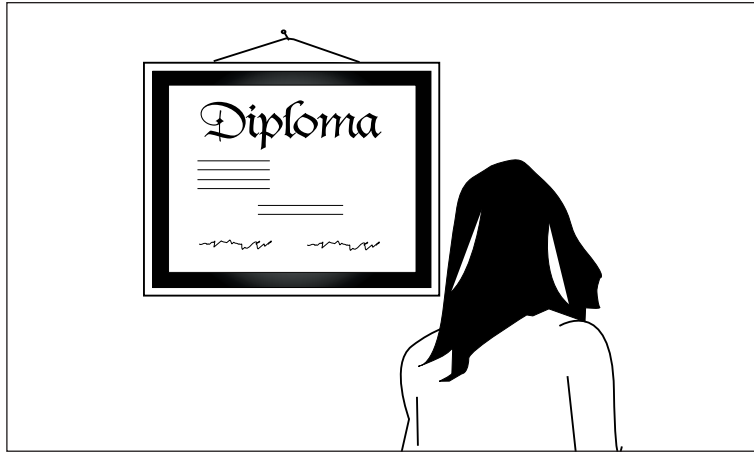
tonermagazine.com

all stories and artwork copyright © tonermagazine.com and/or the individual authors and artists. please feel free to print and distribute as many copies of toner magazine in its original, unaltered state as you'd like. in fact, we encourage that sort of thing. please do not feel free to charge money or equivalent for those copies, alter the publication in any way electronically or otherwise, or post any or all copyright material online or elsewhere for profit or not.

TONER



the Prodigal Son's Return



"Maybe I can get something for the frame . . ."

Myself, I decided I would get dressed and go see about a substitute teaching position at the Board of Education building. It's humiliating, I know, but I'm conversant with the reality of not attaining my dream job right away, so I'm not even bothering to search. I just have this interminable necessity to be in New York. Being indiscriminate about employment is the only path to take; otherwise I could get stuck here forever. And for \$75 a day, I could withstand the humiliation.

I arrived at the building and the woman behind the desk handed me ten forms. If I wanted to baby-sit children, I would have to get a TB test, a drug test, fork over \$140 and wait three months to get on a list where I "may or may not be called into work." Even though three months lingering in unemployment limbo was an intolerable amount of time, she lost

me at the \$140. My plans for substitute teaching, like my motivation for my high school freshman assigned reading of *Great Expectations*, was destroyed by the Toms River School system.

People assume the homebound college graduate has failed in some way, or that they didn't work diligently enough to make a direct move into the "real world."

But disgrace only hovers over the idea of living with your parents; it's a social stigma attached by past generations. Every time I eat at my Grandmother's and am daft enough to complain about my life, she always reminds me that "when I was your age, I was already married with your Aunt and your mother."

"Find yourself a rich man Libby," she then says, "and settle down."

And those last two words, those are the ones that induce ulcers. It can

⁴ Harpo

A TALE OF ECUADOR AND HALLEY BONDY

¹² For a Bouncer

A RATIONALIZATION BY KEVIN EISEN

¹⁴ the Neurosis of Coming Home

A MEDITATION ON INDIA AND THE WEST
BY ERIN DECOU

²⁰ Love in a Strange Place

ADVENTURES-WITH-BOY-LAND
BY MOLLY FRIEDMAN

²⁵ the Only Move I Could Have Made

A QUARTER-LIFE CRISIS BY LIBBY LEONARD

less days, and ran every morning to catch one of the gigantic, hot buses headed toward the island's various beaches. Paradise and Paraga were close to the center of town and easy to access, but we'd heard about one called "Elia" from Antonios and the locals who'd served us dinner. The buses to Elia were on the other side of the port. We arrived sweaty and surrounded by tan Americans all seeking the same undiscovered beach.

A heavy older woman in a straw hat sat across from us on the bus, a large camera hanging from her leathery neck. It looked like she was traveling alone.

"Wow, you guys are tan! How long you been here?"

R took the bait.

"Just two days. We're leaving tomorrow actually."

"Oh I see. Honeymooners?"

"No," R laughed and looked away from me, out the window of the bus. "We've been studying abroad in London."

"Great city. I was there with my husband a ways back. You two were probably still in diapers. The only city that's prettier in the rain than in the sun, don't you think?" She chuckled and laced her hands over her stomach. I had to ask.

"Where's your husband now?"

She didn't seem surprised. "Oh, you know. The usual. We left each other. I don't mind. Traveling's

more fun without someone else's head blocking every sunset, right?" I watched her stomach ripple as she laughed.

Elia was better than the others, but didn't quite live up to our expectations.

The bright reds and oranges of the seats on Virgin Atlantic flight #11 to New York seemed out of place on the chilly London morning as we left. Once again, we'd requested seats next to each other and once again we'd been seated across an aisle. I made sure the row was free of attendants before leaning over towards R, the plane racing down the runway. I wondered if any kiss could really compete with the neon lights of Amsterdam or the Aegean Sea at dawn.

We waited for our luggage inside the dismal waiting room of Newark airport. I wondered if a love this simple had a chance. The grey walls and sad faces of the workers put an end to my wondering. No love is ordinary; we could compete here. And that was a start.

I threw out my guidebook on my way out of the airport, and the pictures I took never made it out of their drugstore envelopes. R bugged me about that all summer.

there are no grooming businesses or dog shows or movies with astute dogs that play basketball. There you can kill your pup if she barks too loud, and your wife if you catch her in bed with someone. There, no water exists to flush away the urine smell in bus stations, churches, or schools. There you can order a hot dog/white rice/mayonnaise platter and your companions won't flinch. Harpo might be greeted with smiles and strokes, but she would really be just another digestive system hogging the troughs.

"The dog shit is different here."

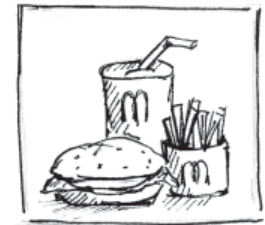
My buddy Ty from California was commenting on the aging piles that hurdle the Quito sidewalks on your way to work.

"It looks anguished. No healthy American coil. Maybe it's the altitude."

We chalked up another reason to feel superior.

#855: American dog shit is happier.

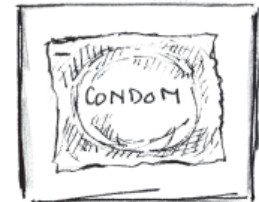
We had already listed America's obvious advantages—food, health care, clothing, housing, education, fitness, contraception, human rights, law and order, transportation, clean air technology, and absolute reign over the entire universe—so we were excited to get witty with dog shit. We relied on our sardonic smarts for escapism because we were too scared



FOOD



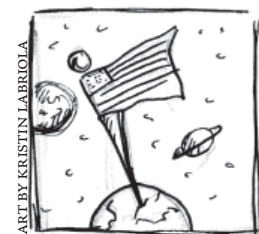
HOUSING



CONTRACEPTION



TRANSPORTATION



REIGN OVER UNIVERSE

ART BY KRISTIN LABRIOLA

here.”

“No I am. So I’ll see you at the train station around 4.”

I walked out into the cold air towards the metro where the au pairs supervised children on the pink and purple merry-go-round. I looked back over my shoulder at the café. He’d finally uncrossed his arms.

We decided to go to Amsterdam at the last minute. It was so close, and the stories we heard from others who had returned were too good to be true.

Arriving at Centraal Station late on a Friday night was like getting lost in an outdoor insane asylum where the staff had been run out of town. Even the train conductors were falling down and laughing at invisible pictures on the walls. Combined with the striking modern facilities and architecture, it resembled a carnival from the distant future.

After dropping off our bags in our shockingly pretty budget hotel, we walked eagerly into the night.

“Did you see all the bikes? We should rent one,” R said.

“R, it’s not like Bermuda, you don’t just rent a bike at a corner stand. Besides the guide book says you can walk the whole city in like, half an hour.”

We were really only looking for an ATM to pay the concierge for our room, and naturally, found

ourselves in the heart of the Red Light District by accident. Out of every corner and every sex shop, guys in black clam diggers and gold chains begged us to watch the live sex shows. The streets were so small that we wound up brushing up against every tourist and Dutch alcoholic – you could get high just circling the block.

“Oh, there’s the Bulldog! The guidebook says it’s like the McDonald’s of smoke shops.” I made a mental note to never say “the guidebook says” again.

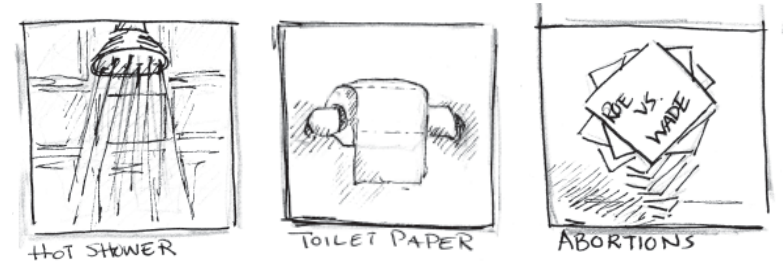
“We should try it.”

“Really? Right now?”

“Why not? That’s what we came for and I don’t really see any ATMS anyway.” R was right. The closest thing to an ATM around there was the 25 cent Rent-a-Porn machine.

The menu at the Bulldog organized cannabis by country. R chose the weakest from Thailand and I opted for the hot chocolate. The last time I smoked, I got lost in a massive panic attack, sitting at the computer for hours and searching the web for all the possible fatal diseases I might have contracted. It happened one of the first months I was with R, and I remembered looking at him before I fell asleep in my haze, feeling so lucky to have met him before I died.

Two Thai sticks and hot chocolates later, we left the wooden enclave of the Bulldog, and found ourselves on the edge of a canal lined



“What are houses made of in Ecuador?” my mother asked.

“Concrete.”

I felt like an expert all of a sudden.

I took a six hour bus ride to visit Ty at the orphanage. I figured I could squeeze an article for the newspaper out somewhere. Ecuador’s water appropriation was a hot topic at the time and I assumed—correctly—that orphanages were getting a paltry end of the deal.

I was also itching to see Ty again. I didn’t seem to be interacting with anybody sans detached amusement. My latest friends included a Colombian architect with a crack addiction, a lackluster Mormon missionary from Salt Lake, and a cherub-like arsonist from Argentina. These were the interactions I wrote home about, but in my most private of spheres they didn’t exceed good material. Ty was the only one who could make fun of his own damn self.

I arrived at León while it was still dark. It was much warmer in these coastal towns. The air was lighter and cleaner, the vegetation denser. The cabbie dropped me off at a church gate and charged me two American dollars. He was actually ripping me off, but I was in no mood defend principles for pennies. He told me the neighborhood was dangerous, that he’d do anything to help out “una gringita muy sexy,” so he’d wait behind me while I rang the bell. He parked very close. This made me feel far more antsy than any potential crimes lurking in the trees. He left only when I mimed excitement at someone approaching. “Someone comes now, thank you.”

But in reality nobody approached the gate except four pissed off Guinness colored German shepherds. Their wails stung the night’s silence and one by one the orphanage lights turned on. I tried frantically to shush the dogs but they only barked louder. One of them clawed at the gate, which only then did I realize was hanging by a flimsy wooden hinge.

Love in a Strange Place

BY MOLLY FRIEDMAN

You never realize how beautiful your boyfriend is until he's on an airplane, surrounded by the ridiculously ordinary population. It made him sparkle. He seemed to melt into his seat, with his black sweater and unseasonably tan skin. Most people said we passed for brother and sister – I'd never figured out whether or not that was a good thing.

I leaned across the aisle to kiss him just as one of the British flight attendants began charging down the row, informing us of our position on the runway.

I looked at the empty seat next to R. We'd requested seats next to each other, but instead got two across the aisle. We hadn't switched, despite the empty seat.

There's nothing more cliché than an American couple spending Valentine's Day in Paris. I'd been already, like every East Coast preppy girl,

weened on Audrey Hepburn's style, elementary school French classes, and two parents so hopelessly in love that romance was the family's clumsy second language. R, on the other hand, grew up in New Jersey without even a sister to uphold Paris' myth of love and adventure.

We were both spending a semester abroad in London, and since this was our first diversion, we'd packed too much. R wound up carrying most of our luggage up and down the hills of Montmartre.

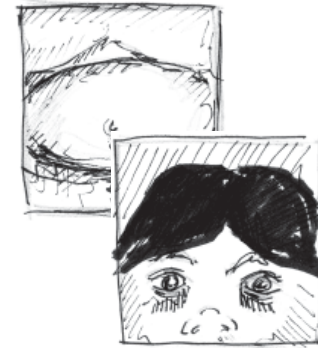
"Oh my god there is so much dog shit everywhere. I can't even see where I'm stepping."

"Yeah well maybe try walking in the street or something."

"No, all those scooter guys are speeding by everywhere."

R tried to imitate one of them, but all the bags got in his way.

"Well I don't know what to tell you. Dogs go to the bathroom, and no one has to pick it up. Would you



too chubby too pale too dark haired reflection. Think about the intricate details of every social encounter so she'd have fodder for gossip. Think about more and more reasons to feel bad including the neighbors' god awful vinyl siding. Vinyl??

My point: at the end of the day Ecuador simply has no time or energy left to tolerate gays, starve their bodies, or groom their pets. She has far bigger fish to fry.

"This is Hor-Hay. He's my favorite. He's fourteen but looks about seven, doesn't he?"

Ty's favorite was presently vomiting in the backwoods of the orphanage. Ty stroked Jorge's little head and spoke to me nonchalantly, rightfully confident that the kid had no idea what we were talking about.

Jorge was a small black boy with no body fat. I couldn't fathom

that he had anything to heave but innards.

Actually, the puke did begin to resemble intestines as it collected on the ground. Ty looked repulsed, but I couldn't detach my eyes from the strange buildup. Was he actually losing his intestines?

"Bichos," mumbled Jorge between heaves.

We all became transfixed with the pile. The intestines were beginning to wriggle on the grass. Fucking. Wriggling.

TY: "EWWWW!"

JORGE: "Bichos!"

WEBSTER'S: *bichos* (zoología) small animal (insecto) bug; creepy crawly; *bicho malo nunca muere* – the devil looks after his own.

Jorge was sick for an entire week. A small indigenous orphan named Tito—after I bribed him with American lollipops for an interview—told me that Jorge drank from the tap the day he got sick. So he vomited live worms. Apparently it happens all the time.

#856: American Vomit is Often Stationery.

The newspaper never printed my story. I wish I could say that the article would have caused uproar, but I think it went unpublished



brought a chute from that descendant in Thailand and planted it where the first one stood. And so this tree is holy, original, like the lineages that go on and on, bearing the same sap and wisdom as those

that came before.

I prostrate three times in front of the golden Buddha that beckons in front, and then walk around to the tree behind. Inspired by my image of the Buddha sitting here

“No, I mean I’m heading back to Jersey.”

“You lucky, lucky slut.”

I smiled peacefully at the bottom of Ty’s mattress. I predicted that within two months Ty would fall straight through the rusty springs of the bed frame and come tumbling down with his mosquito net.

“Ohmigod how was it?”

“Um, fucked up.”

“Yeah I read your online travelogue thing. I can’t believe you hung out with a crackhead! Did you smoke crack?”

“I took a hit.”

“Ohmigod!”

I sipped my Natural Light, the cheapest beer and it cost over a buck.

I always hated drinking beers in

New Jersey living rooms, watching the boys play video games and pretending I was still close to girls I had grown apart from. But this time I was thankful for the stagnant stimulation level.

I sank deep into the couch and avoided any more questions.

ing with trains) at this point I was still unaware of and unaccustomed to the madness. And madness it is, the very definition of madness.

The initial move toward the incoming engine, the mass quiet as the crowd waits for the doors to open. Younger men streak to the barred windows. They throw blankets, handkerchiefs, anything they can, into those spaces, even before the over-crowded car has had time to open its doors and let out its sardined passengers. And then the doors open (finally someone finds the latch) and the madness really begins. A race on the platform as passengers-to-be squirm toward the open doors, but there's no room even for the others to exit the train in the first place. So body meets body as the platform pushes into the open doorway, the train car, full, exerting itself outward.

There is hardly room in this narrow Indian train car door for two adult bodies, certainly none for two girls with their packs, backpacking through India, and so I watch as my friend Mary hoists herself onto the stoop of the car, supported by the crowd and clashing with an old man who just wants to get off the goddamn train. I watch as her pack gets utterly stuck on the door, lodged firmly between it and the old man who pushes with all his might to get out, veins popping out against his thin flesh.

But he is experienced, this man, has been through many of these Indian train wars before, and steels his teeth against the pack. I watch as Mary is pulled back by the man and her own luggage, as she turns with a look of complete helplessness, still pulling for her spot on that train but also now for mere balance. And finally, like some cruel joke, the man pops out and into the squirming crowd, is lost as he becomes anonymous. Mary lurches into the train, moves into the empty space and now I know it's my turn.

So I go, hoisted more by the impatient crowd than by my own will, and struggle against the next experienced exit-er, feeling only the pack pulling, the man elbowing, the steel against my side and front, nowhere to go but then I'm through and somehow it's just like Mary except I couldn't see it, couldn't see my own desperate trapped look and so it's not so bad.

The train is full so fast, the seats taken by those hands sticking selfishly through the windows, and so I stand for maybe an hour with my pack still on until finally I can put it down between one old lady's feet. And there I sit, enveloped by sweat (my own) and strangers, waiting for the next battle to begin. There is a baby wailing, its mother spooning sips of water into its mouth, an empty catheter protruding from

better that I get home while I can still drive there. I have a case of beer in the fridge. I figure I'll get drunk at home and work that fat lump over on the keyboard.

I walk around the corner through the puddles, letting first my shoes and then my socks soak through and splash up my pant legs. Before I left last year, people knew me here.

It's hard to explain, but I was that guy, that guy everyone knew. Even when someone didn't, I was able to somehow transfer the confidence of knowing that they should into conversation. Who knows why me, but I'm telling you I could talk to people with a sense of entitlement back then. I could walk up to anybody, anyone at all, and talk about anything I liked. That sense is part of what made me feel more normal back then. That's not something that exists for me anymore.

I walk past my car in the public lot and turn up the street toward home as the rain bounces off my head. There was a time when I walked for hours like this through Paris, rain dripping off my nose and my hair and into the back of my coat and down my neck. I walked for hours, through streets and alleys and over and back across the Seine two, three and four times at least. I don't remember. It's the same feeling though. That foreign

feeling. Walking past buildings, people, signs, all of them meaningless, all of them deaf.

They forgot about me when I left, forgot how important I was. This schmuck at the bar is just the latest extension. My pants are starting to stick to the fronts of my legs. I sidestep into a patch of mud.

I'm not dealing so well with this anonymity. When I was well known, well liked even, I could toss my associations around like salt over shoulders—names, dates, relationships... these were other people's priorities. It seems that back when I was important, other people didn't have to be.

I don't know anyone here anymore. I never made the effort. I don't know whether to leave the house, and if I do leave the house, I don't know where to go. The places I used to spend my time feel empty to me now. They feel unimportant.

I drop my coat in a wet crumple by the door and set my wallet and keys down on the table beside it. I've lost my place here. I've set aside and closed a massive book with no chapters on a Sunday afternoon and come back to it drunk on a Wednesday morning. It's ridiculous, I know, but my mark here is fading. Maybe it's already gone.

And I'd so looked forward to coming back to this place. I guess I'd taken it for granted that it would look forward to me.