

SCHRÖDINGER, CAT

by Anna Scotti

We hadn't been together very long, but I knew his walk, and I had no doubt, even seeing him from behind. It was the first thing I'd loved about him, that loose-limbed shambling gait, arms swinging, his stride as long as two of mine—and twice as long as the girl's beside him. I guessed what she was saying, her face turned up, white teeth gleaming against her milky skin—something breezy and light and just right and absolutely unlike anything I could ever come up with. Philip's black hair hung down and obscured his face, but I knew him, and I knew her too, a little, the curvy blonde who worked behind the pharmacy counter at the drugstore. She looked like a college student, maybe nineteen or so, which made her ten or twelve years younger than I. Their arms swung in time, just for a moment, and then he let go of her hand and put his big arm across her creamy shoulders. I felt a slow, sick lump form in my chest and opened my eyes very wide to keep from crying.

"Philip," I told him, right off the bat, when he walked in the front door an hour later. "I saw you with somebody—with that girl."

He turned to me slowly, shrugging out of his leather jacket. "What girl? You saw me do what?"

"Is she one of your students?" I asked. "Never mind. I don't care. I just want you to be honest with me. I

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don't want you sneaking around—I don't want to be the police."

Philip smiled. "You're not the police, Isla. Tell me what you saw. There's an explanation, I promise, whatever it was."

His face was so broad and open. Philip is highly intelligent—you can't earn a Ph.D. in applied physics and land a university teaching job if you're not. But he was also—or had seemed to be—the most honest, open-hearted, open-minded person I'd ever known. It made him gullible, sometimes, but that just made me love him more, that this intimidatingly brilliant scientist-scholar could fall for a time-share pitch your great-grandma would be wary of, or get suckered into blowing an entire paycheck on a donation to save wolves in Montana.

It hurt me, now, that wide-open look on Philip's sweet face. I couldn't

be angry with him. It was normal that students would be drawn to him—everyone was drawn to him. Maybe a greater man wouldn't have succumbed to temptation, but I didn't love a greater man. I loved him.

He came toward me. Touched my hair, then cupped my chin in one gentle hand. "Tell me, Isla. What happened?"

I felt tears rising and I wanted to slap myself. I did not want to be the heartbroken loser girlfriend, helpless in the face of trouble. I wanted to be cool and calm and maybe a little bitter. Worldly wise. Aloof. I collapsed against his chest, sobbing.

"I saw you with her. Holding her *hand*," I cried. Philip stroked my hair. "Tell me who," he whispered. "Tell me exactly what you saw."

"Philip. You know what I saw." I pulled away from him and rubbed at my eyes with the heel of my hand. "Don't do this, please. Don't treat me like a fool."

"Isla." He reached for my hand but I pulled away.

"I trusted you!"

"You *do* trust me. You still can. Isla, I can explain whatever you saw, but you have to tell me what it was."

We had a good thing. We were both sevens or eights in the looks department, both liked to stay fit, both seemed to have pretty decent personalities and healthy expectations. I wasn't as ambitious as Phil, but I'd been working hard my entire adult life and I owned my condo and car free and clear. When I'd gotten a really nasty e-mail from a woman I'd considered a friend, Phil had held me for hours as I alternately sobbed, railed, and whimpered. When he'd been unable to make his agreed-upon rent a couple of months in a row, I'd

told him to forget it. We supported each other that way.

I'd been alone for nearly a year before I met Philip in the campus bookstore. I was looking for something to read on my break—I work in the bursar's office—and he was buying a backup battery for his laptop. I wasn't incel—I got plenty of offers, from students who were too young, professors who were too old, and workmen who were, for the most part, too married. A college campus may not be the best place to work if you're single, female, and looking, but I liked my job and at times I liked my solitude too.

The last breakup had been tedious—not even ugly. No screaming matches, no thrown wineglasses—just a kind of gradual, bored petering-out. One Saturday I realized I hadn't seen Andy in a week, and that I didn't really care. When he phoned the next afternoon, I answered with a text, which he answered with nothing. Done.

There was a long line at checkout and Philip ended up behind me, and we started talking. I liked his golden eyes behind thick glasses, and his silly loose-limbed walk and the way he used his hands for talking, and the hank of black hair that kept falling in front of his eyes. Coffee, dinner, and then for our third date he took me stargazing up the Templin Highway, and I was all in. We lay on our backs on the hood of his beat-up Ford Fusion and he showed me Ursa Major and Orion and then he started rambling on about the difference between a constellation and an asterism (short answer: none) and I didn't care; it was his voice that got me, soft and deep, and his warm arm under my shoulder, and his big palm cradling my head. Within three weeks, Philip was sharing my pantry, my bed, and the formerly stray rag-

doll kitty I'd coaxed in from the alley and adopted three years prior. Philip promptly christened her "Schrödinger," though I'd been calling her "Muffintop," but I didn't mind the change. It was fun hearing him explain the reference on the rare occasion we'd have colleagues in.

Philip was just a year or two older than I, but already an associate prof, and I liked that. In fact, he was in line for the next tenured spot in his department, although it seemed as though the most likely to retire, an ancient, jovial physicist who liked to reminisce about his work on the Super Proton Synchrotron back in the seventies, never would. Philip did a killer imitation of Professor Steubens that I felt only slightly guilty laughing about. I liked Philip's silly sense of humor, his horn-rimmed glasses, and the elbow-patched jacket that he might or might not have been wearing ironically. I also liked his six-pack—yeah, a science geek who works out, imagine!

"You were holding hands with the girl from the pharmacy," I said. Philip's glasses were smudged and it made him look appealingly vulnerable. "You had your arm around her."

Schrödinger, sensing discord, pushed against my legs, trying to separate us. Philip nudged her away with one foot, but gently.

"The Asian girl?" Philip said uncertainly. "Or the fat one, the one with blond hair?"

I shrugged. "I think most men would use the term 'voluptuous' rather than 'fat,' but yes, that one. Wait a minute. Why am I telling you? You were there! You know who you had your arm around!"

Philip bent to scoop up the cat in one arm. "I know how upset you must be, Isla," he said gently. "There's something I need to tell you. Will you

come sit with me for a minute? Please?"

I hesitated, then let him steer me to the sofa. Schrödinger settled into my lap for petting. I worked my fingers into her thick grey fur. Stroking a purring cat is better than any therapy.

"So, you know about my work."

I nodded. "You teach physics. And trig."

Philip shook his head, a little impatient. He really hated that undergrad-trig block, and it was a bit spiteful of me to mention it.

"Yes, of course, but I also do research. You know that. And what I've been working on—"

"Right. *It's complicated*. You've told me before. But what does that have to do with Pharmacist Barbie?"

Philip laughed. He stopped petting Schrödinger and touched my cheek, turning my face to his. His lips brushed mine very gently. "Nothing, and everything. Isla, listen. You've heard about Nick Bostrom's theory—he's the Oxford professor that—"

"That says we're all living in a virtual-reality simulation. Right. Him and Elon Musk."

Philip nodded. "And a lot of other scientists." He paused. "Including me."

I nodded. "We're living in one of an infinite number of universes that are each only slightly different from another. And in at least *one* of those universes you're a cheater." I pulled away from him. Smacked my hand into his chest, hard. Schrödinger got up, indignant, and moved away.

Philip caught my hand in his. Held it and turned those golden eyes on me, full force. "Not a cheater, Isla. Just—probably just *with* her. Maybe I never met you."

"Please, Philip!" I sighed. "I guess I should be glad you at least respect me enough to come up with something

original. So this is all a misunderstanding caused by some random warp in the space-time continuum.”

Philip grinned. “Not exactly how I’d put it in the lab, but—yeah. Not random, though—at least not at first. We caused it, Isla. I mean, not the omniverse itself, but the overlapping of one tensor into another—” He was getting excited, moving his hands around as he spoke. “You know what an atom is, of course—”

I nodded, already zoning out. “The smallest piece of matter that—”

Philip interrupted. “Well, no. Matter is *made* of atoms, not the other way around. See, atoms form molecules, and—”

“—and are formed of protons, neutrons, and electrons,” I recited dully, accessing some undergrad classes years in the past that I probably hadn’t understood fully even then. “The electrons kind of swarm around the nucleus, and, and—” I strained to remember. “Changing the number of protons inside the nucleus changes what element the atom is. Like lead to gold.”

Philip sighed. “Well, not exactly, Zosimos, but you’ve got the idea. Anyway, atoms aren’t really matter at all—if you break them down, they’re just, sort of, waves. Or maybe strings, if you prefer. There are these subatomic particles—you’ve heard of quarks, right? And there’s gluons, and what’s remarkable—

“What’s remarkable is how you’ve turned something I saw with my own eyes into a high-school physics lecture. Even if there *are* alternate realities, we’re living in *this* one.”

Philip nodded. “Yes. Mostly.” He got up, suddenly serious. “Isla, can you trust me, please? You might—you might see or experience some other weird things. We’re working on something pretty spectacular. I can’t share

it with you now. I can only ask you to trust me and to love me the way I love you.”

I knew it was crazy. Universes can’t collide. We can’t see other might-have-been worlds. But I also knew that I loved him, and he hadn’t asked very much of me until now. Maybe I wasn’t smart enough to discuss string theory with my boyfriend, but I was smart enough to know that well-educated, good-looking straight men aren’t exactly thick on the ground. I’d found one, and I wanted to keep him.

A week later I came home early and discovered Philip sprawled on the couch, watching Bill Nye and smelling like a brewery. Schrödinger was curled on his chest, letting him scratch the thick fur around the triangles of her ears, her gorgeous blue eyes half-shut in pleasure.

“This joker’s not even a *scientist*,” Philip chortled. “He’s got a B.S. in mechanical engineering from Cornell!”

“Well, a monkey could get one of those,” I said mildly, but Philip was too far gone to appreciate sarcasm. “Are you *drunk*?” I demanded. “It’s four-thirty in the afternoon!”

“Not *drunk*, Isla. Just out of pain for a minute. Is that okay?”

“Out of pain from what?”

Philip stopped grinning. He looked confused. Touched his neck, right at the collarbone. “My—remember? I—” Something flashed in his eyes behind his wire-rims. Wariness? It might even have been fear. “Nothing. Sorry.”

Philip seemed suddenly sober, hoisting his lanky frame up off the sofa. He slipped on his TOMS and grabbed his keys off the coffee table, and went out without saying goodbye. One thing I noticed; Philip didn’t have a big wardrobe, but the green-and-white-striped shirt he’d been

wearing was one I'd never seen before, and the last time I'd checked, his glasses had been black plastic, not wire-rimmed.

A half-bottle of pinot noir and a determined Google search led me to a definite conclusion: Not only did I not understand multiverses and quantum fields and the laws of space, time, matter, and energy, but quite possibly neither did anyone else. But some pretty hefty intellects were on record arguing that we're all just living in a simulation of some kind, like our world isn't the real one at all. Or not the only real one, anyway. Was it possible that Philip was actually involved in something frighteningly huge and mysterious? The pinot made it seem so, but deep down I'm pretty hardheaded. I didn't know what I believed.

Philip came in a couple of hours later, wearing his regular glasses and a shirt I recognized. I waited to see if he'd mention the drinking, the reference to some heretofore unknown injury, the glasses. He didn't. Curled against his warm chest in bed that night, I thought about bringing it up. Then something else came up, and I let it go.

I lingered at the pharmacy the next afternoon until she was alone. I sidled up to the counter and she started to ring up my purchases: a box of epsom salts I didn't need, and a roll of Lifesavers I wouldn't eat. Her nametag bounced perkily on her pneumatic chest: Stacey Jackson.

"Hey," I said brightly, as if it had just occurred to me. "How's Phil?"

Stacey stared blankly.

"Philip Becker," I said again. "I'm sure I've seen you with Dr. Becker. Aren't you guys—" I grinned. "You

know, tall guy, nice-looking, black hair, glasses? Maybe thirty, thirty-one?"

"Hmmm . . ." she said thoughtfully. "I'd *like* to meet a guy like that, but I can't say I have."

I gulped. "Sorry. I must have mistaken you for someone else."

But I hadn't. I knew I hadn't. Curvy figure, glossy pink lips, sun-streaked hair. Check, check, check. I left without paying for the stuff, and didn't turn around when Stacey Jackson, Homewrecker from Another Dimension, called after me.

So I had a choice. Accept that something really big and really weird was going on, or accept that I was a lunatic, Stacey was a liar, and Philip was some combination of the two. Give me big and weird any day.

As I made my way back to the office, the path to the quad was thick with students and workers. Philip turned when I called his name, but his face was questioning. "Yes?"

I hurried to catch up with him. "I'm on a twenty-minute break. Got time for coffee?"

He grinned. "Well, I'd be delighted." He hesitated. "But I'm afraid my wife would insist on joining us." He turned toward the quad and waved. "She's there—the one who wonders why I'm chatting up a very attractive woman instead of joining her for lunch."

I followed his gaze. The quad was packed. It was hard to see exactly to whom he was pointing. She might have been the tall African-American woman wearing a little blue beret and a grim expression, or she might have been the slightly younger white girl dressed in paint-stained overalls, with a baby sling over her chest. A baby sling! I searched his face.

"Philip. Don't you know me?" I touched his sleeve. "I know about

your work in the lab—the, you know, *Matrix* stuff.”

His smile fell away. “I can’t talk with you. I’m sorry. Ask—ask me later.” He hesitated. Took a long look at my face, like he was searching for something. Then he shook his head and hurried away, melting into the crowd.

A *baby* sling?

So there it was. Weird, funky, inexplicable life. It was crazy and ridiculous and impossible, but so is everything, when you think about it. If there’s only one universe, only one reality, how bizarre is it that I am here, or that you are? What were the odds that that one egg, of three or four hundred, and that one sperm, of five hundred *billion*, got together to make me, or you, or anyone, and not someone else entirely? Everybody knows nobody wins the lottery—or gets struck by lightning, for that matter—except that somebody always does.

Schrödinger disappeared sometime between dawn and dusk on a beautiful day in May. Since I’d officially adopted her, I’d tried to keep her inside, but Phil would occasionally relent and let her out if she scratched hard enough at the screens. He was a sucker for that cat, and it made me feel all tender and mushy toward him. If he was that indulgent as a pet owner, what would he be like as a parent?

Schrödinger wore a belled collar to protect the local songbird population, but I worried about who would protect her from coyotes, cars, and mean kids. That morning she was begging to go out and we were desperate for another hour of sleep; we’d celebrated our eight-month anniversary with a little too much Prosecco the night

before. So I didn’t say anything when Philip got out of bed and opened the door for Schrödinger before scooting back in next to me. But my ragdoll baby wasn’t around when I tried to call her in for breakfast, and when I got home that evening, she still hadn’t turned up. I knew she was probably fine—she’d been a street kitty before I’d found her. But my hands shook as I checked the patio and parking lot. I loved Schrödinger. She’d seen me through a lot, and I’d cried plenty of tears into her soft grey fur.

Philip searched the neighborhood with a flashlight for over an hour as I waited on the front stoop in case Schrödinger came back. She didn’t. Phil’s voice was grim as he came around the corner, holding something in one hand. A blue leather cat collar with a jangling bell.

“I’m sorry, baby,” Philip said. “I need to get the shovel. She’s—it looks like it was really quick. I found her out on Blaine Road. She never knew what hit her.”

I got up heavily. “I want to see her.”

Philip shook his head. “No, you don’t. I wish I didn’t have to. I’m gonna dig a place for her here in the yard, while you go upstairs and get me a pillow case.”

And that’s what we did. After Philip returned with the little pillow-cased bundle and placed it in the grave, we knelt together and packed earth into a small mound. I made a little ziggurat of rocks on top to keep the coyotes out. Then we went upstairs and Phil held me on the sofa while I clutched Schrödinger’s collar in one fist and the last, sour glass of flat Prosecco in the other.

“Do you think,” I asked at last, “there’s a parallel world where you didn’t let Schrödinger out, and she didn’t get run over, and I’m holding

her on my lap and petting her right now?"

Philip nodded. "Indubitably. Many."

I set the collar on the coffee table and got up.

"I'm so sorry, Isla," he said soberly. "I wish I could change things. I'm really sorry I let her out."

My eyes were irritated from crying and my head felt fuzzy. "I'm going to bed."

"Isla—"

I shook my head. "I forgive you, okay? I'm not mad. But I'd like to be alone for a while, if that's okay."

It hurt, to hurt him. And it also felt good. Maybe the real me had been replaced by a meaner version from another universe.

Life went back to normal, or to what had come to seem like normal. I missed Schrödinger and I missed Phil too. He was at the lab until ten or eleven most nights—a couple of times he didn't come home at all. Twice he'd wandered in wearing different clothes and a dazed expression, and once he'd even asked me if he should feed the cat.

Late on a sweltering morning in mid July, Philip texted and asked that I meet him on the quad. I hated to leave the comfort of our subzero office. My assistant Latasha and I had been fooling around on Instagram, looking through pictures of her sister's wedding and stalking various acquaintances. I told Phil I'd grab sandwiches at the student union.

"I was hoping we could split Chinese," Latasha grumbled.

We hadn't gotten to the honeymoon pictures yet. Her entire extended family had met in Costa Rica for something called a "destination wedding," and had then "honeymooned" en masse in a beachfront hotel. But I'd scarcely paid attention, anyway.

I'd come across something quite a bit more interesting that I wanted to pursue in private, not under Tasha's perspicacious gaze.

"Next time," I promised. "My treat."

Philip arrived just a moment after I did, chugging down the path with a folded blanket, a bottle of sparkling water, and a fistful of wilted dahlias. He was red-faced from rushing, and from the heat. We found a spot in the shade and I unwrapped our lunch. "What are we celebrating?"

"Nothing," he said quickly. "Just wanted to spend some time with you."

I passed the bag of chips.

He took one. Caught a couple of kids on the blanket next to ours observing hungrily, and tossed them the bag.

"Hey, thanks, man," the boy said gratefully.

Philip shrugged. "You're welcome. Enjoy." He turned to the girl. "Aren't you in my Physics 765?"

She giggled. "No! I'm only a sophomore!"

He made a puzzled face, flirting a little, and although the boy looked annoyed, I couldn't be. Philip liked women, and they, him. It was part of his charm. I wished he would have given me another shot at the chips before he'd forked them over, though.

That night there really was something to celebrate. Old Prof Steubens had apparently given up the ghost that afternoon. It was sad, of course; death always is, but the professor's wife had been gone for years, they hadn't any children, and frankly, it was time. Still, I felt a little guilty as we toasted Philip's almost-certain tenure review, sitting at the dining-room table with a pizza and a bottle of Lambrusco my boss had given me at Christmas.

"He was a nice old guy," Phil said.

"Cheers," I agreed. "A gentleman

and a brilliant scientist.”

“In his time,” Philip qualified, “no doubt he was.” He looked at me over the flame of the candle I’d stuck in a mayonnaise jar. “I want to thank you, Isla, for—well, for everything. For believing in me, for trusting me, even when my work might have made it seem—”

I traced his big knuckles with one finger. “That’s what people do, when they love each other.”

He smiled. “Yes. But you’ve gone above and beyond. I know it hasn’t been easy.”

“What happened to Dr. Steuben, anyway?” I asked.

Phil shrugged. “Heart, maybe. Our assistant found him on the floor of the lab. Looks like maybe he passed out and hit his head.” He hesitated. “It’s possible the police will investigate, just to be sure it was an accident, you know?”

“Police? Really, Philip? That’s so dramatic!”

“Yes,” he agreed. “And frankly, I’m a little worried. See, it happened—apparently—right before I texted you to meet me on the quad. And—Isla, they’re going to think I was there, but I wasn’t! I mean, I was in the lab, but I wasn’t in—” He stopped abruptly. “I’m not supposed to talk about this!”

I waited.

“I was not in this universe,” he said flatly. “I entered the lab—I was probably *seen* entering—and I didn’t leave in any way the *police* are going to recognize, until—until after. When I saw him lying there, I panicked, and I just got down to the quad as fast as I could, hoping—well, you know.” He drew a deep breath. “So, if they ask, maybe we could just say I got to the quad a little earlier than I really did, you know?”

I didn’t answer.

“Isla?”

“If it was all so spur of the moment

and panicked, why did you have that bouquet,” I asked. “The dahlias, and the blanket?”

He shook his head slowly. “Jesus. Jesus, Isla. I’m not supposed to—okay. I brought the flowers for you. And the blanket. I brought them from—” He didn’t point. Just rolled his eyes upward. “You know.”

I nodded. “Thank you for trusting me with the truth,” I told him. “You can count on me to say what needs to be said.” He cupped his hand over mine. It felt nice.

“It wouldn’t mean much,” I told him, “*love* wouldn’t mean much, if we only had faith in things that are easy to believe.”

I meant it. I hadn’t felt so confident, so sure, in months.

It was a bit ironic that the cops came in right when I was screen-shotting a very interesting picture of the young pharmacy assistant. She was all over the ‘gram—Facebook too—Stacey at the beach, Stacey on a surfboard, Stacey on a hike, Stacey toasting with a group of friends. Not a single picture of Philip to be found. And yet—

I got up to meet the detectives. Latasha looked on, wide-eyed, before I motioned her away.

“Afternoon, Ms. Davis,” the taller cop said. He was a lanky Black man, thirty-something, with gorgeous soft lips and close-cropped hair. His partner was a pale, stocky redhead with freckles. “We’d like to ask you a few questions about your whereabouts yesterday morning—”

“I’ll bet you’re here so that I can provide an alibi for Philip Becker,” I said, sounding a bit smug even to myself.

The cops exchanged a furtive glance. “What makes you think he needs one?” Red asked.

I ignored the question. “We had a picnic lunch on the quad in the late

morning,” I offered. “Not something we do often, but for some reason Phil definitely wanted to meet me there, where hundreds of people were gathered, and he made it a point to chat up some kids nearby like he wanted them to remember him.”

Detective Tall Dark and Handsome lifted one sable eyebrow. “Interesting theory,” he conceded. “Do you happen to know the exact time?”

I’ve heard of couples happily married sixty, seventy years, but personally, the longest-lived relationship I’ve had with a guy has been eighteen months, and that was an anomaly. A cat, on the other hand, will love you faithfully for two decades, if you take care of it right.

I probably could’ve forgiven Philip for the cheating and the lying, and that he was capable of murder might not even have occurred to me. But he never should’ve messed with my cat.

Whatever had been in that bundle we’d buried in the front yard, it wasn’t Schrödinger. Because there at the very edge of Stacey Jackson’s cooking selfie—Stacey in a really cute pale-blue romper, scooping something gloppy and indefinable from a pan onto a red china plate—there at the very edge of the photo was a fluffy tail I knew well, caught mid-swish as a very pretty ragdoll cat stalked out of the kitchen and out of frame.

I’d meant what I’d said to Philip. I’m no hypocrite. Love really *doesn’t* mean much if you have faith only in things that are easy to believe. It had been very hard for me to believe that Phil was a lying, cheating, murdering, fiscally irresponsible sociopath who’d stoop to stealing my cat. It had been hard to believe what a fool he’d made of me, albeit temporarily. But there you have it. Ain’t love grand? ●

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STRANGER THAN FICTION (Continued from page 80) And Lamson’s demonstration smacked of a diversion staged for Bedbrook’s benefit, so there would be an independent witness to confirm there was no poison in the capsule.

That left the Dundee cake. The judge who presided over the trial, Justice Henry Hawkins, was convinced that Lamson had added aconitine to a section of the cake, then served the poisoned slice to John while he and Bedbrook ate untainted portions. Hargrave Adam reached the same conclusion when he chronicled the case for the Notable British Trials series in 1913.

But Stratmann, who offers the most recent account of the Lamson case in her 2016 book *The Secret Poisoner: A Century of Murder*, rejects this theory. The burning sensation Stevenson described would have been far worse for Percy John, who would have spat out the cake or stopped eating it. She suspects the poison was already in the capsule Lamson topped up with sugar or, in “a piece of misdirection worthy of a conjuror,” he had switched that capsule with one containing poison when Bedbrook was distracted.

Regardless of how the poisoning was accomplished, Stevenson’s testimony and findings helped to build confidence in forensic science and expert testimony. Lamson, Hargrave Adam asserted, was a “cunning and subtle poisoner” and responsible for “one of the most cruel, callous, and calculating crimes that the mind of man can conceive.” But he proved to be no match for a skilled and determined scientist with a taste for poison. ●

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Dean Jobb’s latest book, *The Case of the Murderous Dr. Cream: The Hunt for a Victorian Era Serial Killer* (Algonquin Books), tells the story of Thomas Neill Cream, another doctor from America who, like Lamson, convinced his victims to swallow capsules laced with poison. Dean Jobb teaches in the MFA in Creative Nonfiction program at the University of King’s College in Halifax, Nova Scotia.