**The False Actors**

Philip Kuan

This felled lemon, shriveled and yellow, will serve no purpose. As I hold it up to the others, a shadow falls behind me.

“I remember this.” He whispers.

I turn to face him, already tiring of his condescension. *Does he remember being a prick?* I'd like to snap. “Do you have it?” I ask instead. The man pulls out a sealed manila envelope, and as I unravel its string I ignore his pallid stare, tugging at roots beneath my skin.

“What is this?” I mutter. I read it again, parts aloud, expecting to hear snickers at my own expense. He doesn’t bite.

By the time I finish, I'm livid. “I can’t submit this.” My teeth are throbbing from the clenching of my jaw but still he shrugs, daring to utter that “It’s not mine.” The words sound mechanical, so greased that I'm provoked. "Yes, it is. It IS. Don't think you can just cut me off. Give me something else you bitter old prick."

The man blushes as he pulls out a fidget spinner. "Such staggering vernacular. No wonder you needed it." He gives a wink and spins his toy absurdly, fully embracing the accusation. I slap it from his hand before he can spin it again.

"You're doing this on purpose!" I hear myself screech. The outburst grates him more than I expect. "Of course I am, you buffoon! Didn't you read the ending?" The man, suddenly wrinkled, doggedly reclaims the crumpled envelope from the ground. "But not for why you've assumed. Look, buddy. If I were the author, and I were deceiving you with these…this facade so ridiculous that I’m even now obliged to plant my right foot forward " - to prove his point here he brushes the dirt off of the envelope, and here he does plant his right foot forward - "in accomplishing this, how would I puppeteer **your** actions?"

I’m speechless, perhaps out of panic. Perhaps I’m too befuddled to define the old man standing before me, who's likely had weeks to rehearse what’s happening.

"Oh, I’ve had more than weeks," he quips. Clearly, he’s memorized it. "So, let’s go through what else is possible. One, perhaps someone else is filling in our moments. Like a coloring book. Only it isn't me, because I’d never suggest this ending. And in spite of the first-person narrative, we both know that it isn't you." He digs through another pocket. "Something else then? Something religious? An avatar of the flash fiction cliché? A demonstration to editors of what fun there is to be had, when toying with atheists?” His hand settles around something beneath his coat. “I suppose it’s all possible, but such arbitrary behavior would leave us so hopelessly dispensable, that I'd prefer to deny it altogether." I can see the glint of his fingers fumbling. He's clearly nervous, thinking of what’s about to happen.

"Maybe we're toy soldiers on an assembly line,” he continues. “Trapped between that half-second groove of a recognizable now and our reader's next sentence." He pauses, possibly struggling to recall the rest; or possibly procrastinating. "No. To me, the **real** me, investing anything further into this sham of a dialogue isn't worth a damn, not when every syllable in every sentence has reached my lips so flawlessly. Toy boat toy boat toy boat." Pulling out his knife, he points it towards me like a gun. "So here’s my God-given drive. Overcommitting to this scene. For me it’s my only chance of surviving it, whereas you still have an opportunity to decide whatever comes next."

At first, I think I've offended him, and begin to apologize, but as he stutters on about breaking the binds that have us so well-behaved, I start to get it. And as we wrestle ourselves to the floor, I become irate again. The idea that this man presumes that I would sacrifice MY life to prove a fiction…it is so blatantly, so irresponsibly fictional! This is why I have no qualms about hoisting the blade away from his weaker grip, then sliding it betwixt his ribs.

What a hypocrite. What a coward, for coming at me. While waiting for his wheezing to fade I skim the pages once again, slowing at the final paragraph. It is a final appeal for spontaneity, a request for improvisation, and for what? For the sole purpose of putting into jeopardy this piece’s anticlimax. I snort contempt at the awkward addendum, tacked on drivel that was so purposefully left in. Disgusted but dignified, I head back into my house, thinking of how to dispose of the body. As I shut the door, a part of me struggles to ignore this story's parting implication, that I will disappear when I leave the scene.

Note to protagonist: To break the cycle, do not return to your house.