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Henderson Lovely, Last of the Munchkins

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Henderson Lovely, Last of the Munchkins

Abstract

Pat Pratt awoke frantic with the thought that it was raining. He was at the window, drawing the curtain, before fully awake. Long shadows of trees and mailboxes cut across the neighborhood lawns. His heart lifted. This was the day he'd been waiting for since he'd become mayor and somehow, in the last few weeks, it had snuck up on him.

Keywords

experience, politics, deceit, celebration

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December 14, 2012

Henderson Lovely, Last of the Munchkins

Fiction by Kevin Catalano

THE DAY OF THE OZ FESTIVAL

Pat Pratt awoke frantic with the thought that it was raining. He was at the window, drawing the curtain, before fully awake. Long shadows of trees and mailboxes cut across the neighborhood lawns. His heart lifted. This was the day he'd been waiting for since he'd become mayor and somehow, in the last few weeks, it had snuck up on him.

Pat's knees and ankles crackled as he sneaked past Brett, who was asleep on the couch. He accidentally looked full-on at the scar that gnarled his son's forehead like a gouged-out third eye. Pat shivered and quickly occupied his thinking with song. *I could while away the hours, conferring with the flowers, consulting with the rain.*

Unsure of what his houseguest, Mr. Lovely, ate for breakfast, Pat set out English muffins, grape jelly, Raisin Bran, bananas and oranges, and an Entenmann's coffee cake. It wasn't until now, seeing the food displayed on the counter, that he realized he'd imitated a hotel's disappointing Continental breakfast. He'd offer to make Henderson an omelet, though something told Pat that the old man's meal would be Wild Turkey spiked with coffee.

Pat spooned Chock full O'Nuts into the filter and heard Brett stir.

“You coming to the parade today?” he asked over his shoulder, scattering grounds on the floor.

“What do you think?”

Pat mopped the linoleum with his hand, then brushed off the grit over the sink. He went into the family room, keeping his eyes steadied on the tip of Brett’s nose, a respectable distance from the scar. “I would like you to come.”

“That’s not going to happen.” Brett pulled the blanket over his head.

“Please. It’s important to me.”

Brett flung the blanket off and said to the ceiling. “It’s important to Dean, too, but you wouldn’t know that.”

“After all I’ve done to make this day happen, and you’re concerned about Dean?”

“That’s funny, Patrick. I could have sworn you dedicated the festival to him.”

Pat absently scratched below his pajama bottoms, conjuring an itch on his tailbone. “I need to get Henderson up.”

Pat hurried down the hall to escape a comment Brett was sure to hurl. He knocked on the bedroom door. “Good morning.” No answer. He knocked again, put his ear to the door, then entered.

Henderson was in bed, awake. He stared at Pat, milk-blue eyes sharp and clean as though he’d been waiting for him all night.

“Did you sleep okay?” Pat asked.

Henderson licked his toothless mouth like some half-frog creature. He cleared his throat. “Let’s get this over with.”

THREE THOUSAND, SIX HUNDRED AND SEVENTY-FIVE DAYS UNTIL THE OZ FEST

Dean and Jason Fleming had been abducted at the Oz Festival ten years ago. Some demented couple swiped the kids in broad daylight, right from under everyone’s nose.

The national media painted Chittenango as a bunch of dumb hicks for allowing it to happen. *Seems like someone would have noticed something*, the stylish newscasters had said, shaking their heads, clucking their tongues. No one saw a thing. The boys' father—Karl Fleming—had left them alone for a few minutes, and when he returned, they were gone. Poor eight-year-old Jason didn't make it back. Dean did, but his mind was wrecked, and who could blame him? At ten, he'd killed his female kidnapper, and then swam his brother's corpse through Oneida Lake. The other abductor was eventually caught, since Dean was able to direct the police to the abandoned house on the lake. Chittenango, however, wasn't the same.

Pat was the festival's coordinator at the time. He was also the village historian, specializing in the life of Oz author L. Frank Baum, who was born in Chittenango. While Pat was not blamed for the abduction, it was his beloved celebration that quickly got the ax. Parents in the village had passionately argued that continuing the festival would be imprudent, and too horrific a reminder. There hadn't been an Oz Fest since.

Pat sought to change that. He'd become mayor two years ago, winning the election 568-392, on the campaign promise that he would renew Chittenango's tarnished image, which would bring much-needed revenue. The best way to do that, Pat had assured, was to resurrect the Oz Fest, making it twice as big as the prior ones in order to get the attention of the entire state of New York. Of course, Pat had no choice but to dedicate the festival to Jason *and* Dean Fleming.

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It was not an easy sell. There was very little money to fund a festival, since the village—like most of Upstate New York—had been hit hard by the recession. The biggest obstacle, to Pat anyway, was that there were no Munchkins. Five of the surviving, original movie Munchkins used to attend the Oz Fest: the Coroner, one of the Lollipop Guild, a Sleepyhead, a Trumpeter, and a Villager. They were the main attraction. However, during the ten-year hiatus, they had all died off. Most casual followers of the film believed that these were the last of the Munchkins. Oz enthusiasts—including Pat Pratt—knew otherwise. Cast as one of the many soldiers of Munchkin City, Henderson Lovely had never made a single public appearance affiliated with the film. Pat understood that if he really wanted to convince the village about the festival, he needed to lure Henderson here.

ONE DAY UNTIL THE OZ FEST

Pat misted Windex on a framed, original 1938 photograph of the Munchkin actors posing in front of the Culver City Hotel. He'd recently won it on E-Bay for three hundred dollars—a staggering price considering his meager wage. Pat couldn't resist the purchase. It was the perfect addition to his extensive collection of *Wizard of Oz* memorabilia that ornamented his home: original movie posters, autographed head shots of Judy Garland and Jack Haley, ceramic figurines and commemorative plates, and throw pillows with film scenes stitched into them. Pat also believed the photo would impress his special guest, who would be here at any moment.

“Has it occurred to you that everything’s hung too high for a midget?” Brett said,

leaning in the entranceway. Ever since Pat had corrected his son's use of the term midget, Brett had been saying it twice as often. Pat had suggested, as subtly as possible, that Brett stay at a friend's house for the weekend, forgetting that the only person he hung out with was Dean Fleming. He'd even considered sending Brett down to North Carolina to stay with his mother. No way in hell Brett would go for that.

"Couldn't you put on a collar shirt, just while Henderson is here?"

Brett wore a yellow, *Limbaugh for President* T-shirt. Pat wasn't sure if it was ironic, whether anything his son did was ironic.

"How about," Brett began, putting his finger to his lips in mock thought, "I slip into one of Mom's old dresses and pretend I'm Dorothy?"

Pat stomped past him into the kitchen. "Right. Thanks, Brett."

"No seriously," Brett said, following. "I'll shave my legs and put on some lipstick, and we'll show that tiny old midget what a freak show we really are."

Pat placed the Windex under the kitchen sink next to the garbage pail. He lingered, closed his eyes and inhaled deeply, taking in the odors of day-old chicken bones and Pine Sol. *Birds fly over the rainbow, why oh why can't I?* Pat came up from the sink and smiled at Brett. "You go do that."

Over Brett's shoulder, a reflection of light came through the bay window and moved across the wall of the family room. A car had pulled into the driveway. Pat's chest flipped.

"Please be good."

Pat rushed out to the front porch and watched as the driver got out of a black, dinged-up sedan. Henderson had insisted over the phone on being picked up in a limousine. Pat was disappointed to see that for the money—nearly 100 dollars—the vehicle was a Lincoln Towncar. Apparently, Henderson was upset, too.

"What in the hell you got me riding in, Mayor?" His voice was strident and screechy, grating like a rusty door hinge. The frazzled driver fled the car to retrieve the wheelchair from the trunk. He glared at Pat as if blaming him for Henderson's assumed behavior. "Why didn't you just rent a guldern Chevy Lumina. You ever ride in a Lumina, Mayor?"

Pat trotted down the driveway and ducked his head into the car.

Henderson Lovely wore a Tampa Bay Rays cap that half hid a long, severely wrinkled face. Big, drooping ears flanked the length of his head. His eyes were soft and blue, nearly ghostlike in their transparency. As expected, Henderson was tiny, though Pat was not prepared for the incongruity of size and age. Incredibly, he looked like an elderly, eight-year-old boy.

“My apologies for the car, Mr. Lovely,” Pat said in his official, mayoral voice—low and authoritative. This was the same tone he used during town meetings when fielding complaints about infrastructure or garbage pick-up.

“Just get me in the guldern house. Need a drink.”

Pat tipped the exasperated driver the contents of his wallet—six dollars. He grabbed Henderson’s green suitcase, and wheeled the old man up the ply board he had laid over the porch steps.

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Brett was lurking in the shadow of the doorway, the light just catching his scarred brow.

“Jesus Christ,” Henderson said to Brett. “You look like death warmed over.”

“Thank you, sir.” Brett smiled.

“The hell happened to this boy?” Henderson turned to look up at Pat.

It was a good question. Pat still didn’t know, as Brett refused to talk about it. He was certain, however, that Dean was involved—most likely he had chucked something at his son. Pat had tried, and continued to try to get Brett to admit it was Dean, so that he could have Dean arrested and out of his hair. Inexplicably, Brett was loyal to his attacker.

“My father beats me.”

Pat laughed nervously. “Don’t... pay any attention to him.” Then Pat perked and said in a deep voice, “Pay no attention to that man behind the curtain.” He waited for the reference to take, but Henderson freed himself from Pat, and wheeled past Brett and into the house. He went straight for the kitchen, knocking into a chair as he opened cupboards with a broom handle.

“Where you keep the whiskey?”

“I’m sorry Mr. Lovely,” Pat said. “We don’t keep alcohol in the house.”

“What kind of respectable man doesn’t keep something stiff to offer his guests?”

Pat began to answer, but Henderson cut him off.

“Boy!” he screamed. Brett came into the kitchen. “Put some decent clothes on, we’re going out. Surely there’s a bar in this...” he omitted the obvious adjective, “...town.”

“Pat,” Brett said, “the old man and I are going to get drunk. Give me your car keys.”

Pat gave his son a look. He went into the refrigerator and pulled out a liter of Pepsi. “How about a nice cold soda?”

Henderson grumbled and spun the wheelchair around, gashing the dry wall. He went into his suitcase and pulled out a bottle of Wild Turkey.

“Get me a glass with ice, Mayor.”

Pat’s heart was fluttery with the kind of panicked palpitation that rendered him lightheaded. He put a handful of ice into a commemorative Oz glass and displayed it to Henderson, who scowled. With the glass in one hand, he had to open the bottle’s cap with his teeth. In doing so, his dentures flung from his mouth. The teeth landed on the carpet.

“Get those for me, boy.”

Brett stepped back. “Um.”

“Brett,” Pat ordered, “get Mr. Lovely his teeth.”

Brett shook his head.

They all three looked at the teeth glistening on the rug. Pat finally bent down and grabbed them, the slime shivering his neck and armpits. Henderson opened his mouth. Pat looked at Brett, who nodded, amused. Pat eased the dentures halfway into the hot, moist mouth, then pushed the rest in with his fingertip. It made a sexual, unctuous sound. Henderson sucked the dentures into place, then looked at Pat as if this were a test, and Pat had failed.

ONE HUNDRED AND EIGHTY-TWO DAYS UNTIL THE OZ FEST

Tracking down Mr. Lovely was surprisingly easy. He was living in a retirement community in Tampa, and it only took a few phone calls to the clubhouse secretary to get Henderson's number. Convincing him to come to Chittenango, however, was far more difficult. After attempting the nostalgic, sentimental appeal—which had absolutely no affect—Pat resorted to money. He offered Henderson \$5,000. Henderson said no. He offered \$7,500. Henderson said no. He offered \$10,000. Henderson said yes. Pat hung up the phone that afternoon in December feeling shaky. Neither he nor Chittenango had anything close to that amount of money.

Pat woke the next day with an idea. He would raise the money, campaign for it, and inspire people to give donations. He had secretly missed running for mayor—politicking before small crowds, earning people's votes. He'd do it again: persuade the village that bringing Henderson Lovely here could draw positive attention to Chittenango once again. People from all over Central New York would come for the weekend-long festival to see the last living Munchkin. They would spend their money here; they might even return to see the Erie Canal Landing Boat Museum, or the Chittenango Falls State Park.

To help advertise his efforts, Pat would build a sign—a donation thermometer to mark the progression of the money raised. Trent Shirley, Pat's neighbor, cut him the 8-foot tall, wooden thermometer, and Pat painted it in his garage. He then strapped it to the roof of his station wagon, drove into town, and stabbed it into the snowy lawn of First Presbyterian Church, the location of the Oz Fest come June.

Chittenangoans were skeptical about paying so much to acquire Henderson, but they were willing to give it a shot, thanks to Pat's enthusiasm and rhetorical savvy. First Presbyterian held a few bake sales; the Rotary Club sold spaghetti dinners, and the local pizzeria agreed to have Tuesday night specials—two one-topping pies for ten dollars—the proceeds of which went to the fund. Pat himself sold raffle tickets at the Chittenango Bears basketball games. All of this amounted to *maybe* a thousand dollars. Pat had to make his case for the Oz Fest elsewhere.

He campaigned tirelessly over the next few months. He went to Canastota, Cazenovia, Oneida, Verona, Manlius, Oswego, Utica, and DeWitt, putting up flyers, talking to people outside grocery stores and banks, and, most thrilling, speaking at town meetings.

...This isn't just a cause for Chittenango, went the end of his speech. This is a celebration for all of Central New York, to prove our resilience in the face of adversity. To prove to the country that if we can dream, then we can survive, and

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if we can survive, then there is hope for all of America.

Pat loved giving this speech, and it grew more flowery the more he gave it. The response from the few people who came to the meetings, sitting in metal folding chairs in church basements sipping coffee from Dixie cups, was a polite applause.

Each time Pat drove into the village with his can of red paint to fill in another segment of the *Bring Back the Oz Fest!* thermometer, it had been toppled. Once, Pat righted the sign and was met with a spray-painted *Fuck You*. These were no doubt the antics of Dean Fleming. He was making it clear that he did not approve of the festival. Pat was too focused on money to worry about the blaring irony of trying to honor someone who didn't want it. One obstacle at a time, he told himself.

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Pat's big break came when the *Syracuse Herald Journal* covered his efforts and included the story on the front page of the local section. Pat requested the headline, "The Mayor of Hope," but the editor stuck with the banal: "Chittenango's Oz Festival Returns, Wants Munchkin." The end of the article provided contact information for donations, and soon after, the checks began to arrive. By the end of April, the snow nearly melted, Pat stood on a stepladder and scraped the bottom of the can to get enough paint to fill in the rest of the thermometer. Many residents came out to view the accomplishment. They clapped and cheered.

The moment didn't last, however. An egg came hurling from nowhere and splattered the thermometer. Everyone, including Pat, looked for the source. The only thing anyone saw was someone across the street darting into the trees.

ONE DAY UNTIL THE OZ FEST

Pat assembled the lasagna while Henderson and Brett watched baseball in the family room. Every now and then Henderson would ask Brett about girls.

"You getting any snatch at school? Any pretty girlfriends you can invite over here?"

Pat quietly spooned the ricotta on the noodles so he could hear Brett's answer. He knew little about his son's personal life. He'd quit inquiring about it after his wife had left.

Brett laughed off Henderson's questions, and said something about calling up hookers and putting them on Pat's credit card. *Fat chance*, Pat thought. *My credit card's all maxed out.*

The lasagna was in the oven. Pat took the Munchkin photograph from the wall, careful not to smudge the glass frame. He crouched beside Henderson's wheelchair.

"Does this bring back any memories, Mr. Lovely?"

Henderson examined the photo, rattling his unsecured teeth around in his mouth. He then noticed the Oz memorabilia on the walls as if for the first time. He swallowed the rest of his bourbon, ice cubes crashing his lip. "What kind of life is this?"

"I'm sorry?"

"This is the way your house looks all the time? All this horseshit?"

"Excuse me, but—"

"Where're the pictures of your boy or your wife?" Henderson looked gravely at Pat. "You got a wife, don't you?"

"She left us losers," Brett said.

"Looks like a child's room in here," Henderson said. When Brett thrust back on the couch and kicked his legs in the air, laughing, Henderson joined.

"Okay," Pat said, standing and re-hanging the photograph. His hands were shaking. "Okay." He fled into the bathroom. *I could tell you why the ocean meets the shore; I could think of things I never thought before.* He sat on the toilet, fingering the triangle he'd made with the tip of the toilet paper, what he had once admired at a semi-fancy hotel. This couldn't be the way it was going to go, he thought. No way.

The three sat down to the table when dinner was ready. Henderson ate a couple bites of the lasagna and salad, and then pushed it away and worked on his third bourbon. Pat hoped the old man was jollier in his intoxication, and so he tried engaging him. "Do you have any interesting stories to tell about being on the set of the *Wizard of Oz*?"

Henderson grumbled and shook his head.

Pat slumped, but during dessert—Strawberry shortcake with homemade vanilla ice

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cream—he tried again, this time whispering a question into Brett’s ear. Brett waited a moment, and then asked Henderson if he’d ever seen Judy Garland naked.

“What?” Pat slapped Brett’s arm.

Henderson took the question very seriously. “I sure wish. Had a fierce crush on her, yessir.” He twirled the ice in his glass, making music. “Damn shame what happened to her.”

“You mean, the interview on the Jack Paar show, when she said how unruly you all were, and every night you had to be rounded up in butterfly nets?”

Henderson glared at Pat and said very slowly, “I mean how she overdosed.”

This took whatever life there was from the meal, but Pat was undeterred. He had Henderson here, and he was going to take every advantage, no matter how it wounded his pride.

Once Henderson and Brett migrated to the family room, Pat abandoned the dishes to the sink and snuck a DVD into the player. He then backpedaled to sit in the recliner, and held Henderson’s expression in his periphery. On the television screen, pouty-lipped Dorothy scampered down a dirt road with Toto. Pat skipped ahead to where Dorothy opened the door of the once-airborne house, and the picture shifted to brilliant color, illuminating the flowers and yellow brick road.

They didn’t get very far in the scene before Henderson shouted.

“The hell is this?”

“I just thought we’d watch the scene in Munchkin City.” Pat was sheepish. “You know, where you come on.”

“No guldern way!” Henderson barked. “I never, not once, watched this stupid picture, and I want to die knowing I never watched it.”

“You’ve never seen it?” Pat turned to face Henderson as if confronting someone with a major crisis. “This is the most magical, amazing, wonderful—”

“Dad.” Brett never called him Dad. “He’s serious. Turn it off.”

The look in Henderson's needling eyes revealed he was beyond livid.

"Will do." Pat jammed STOP and sunk into the recliner.

"Good," Henderson said. "Now boy, turn it to *Law & Order*. It's just starting. And you." He shook his empty glass at Pat. "I could use a fresher up."

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ELEVEN THOUSAND, THREE HUNDRED AND FIFTEEN DAYS UNTIL THE OZ FEST

The first time Pat had seen the film, he was six or seven. He sat on the bristly, industrial carpet in front of the television. The huge, colored bulbs on the Christmas tree were blinking just beside him. His father was smoking clove-scented cigarettes. His mother watched from the doorway of the kitchen, moving a dishtowel around a plate. The songs and characters overcame Pat. He felt he was hovering just above the floor, disconnected from his home, his body. Afterwards, his father had told him that the author of this story was born in their very own village. In a house that was walking distance from their own. Pat's heart pounded with possibilities. Of all the places in the whole, wide world, the man who created the Scarecrow and Lion and Tin Man was born right here! What a gift. What a wonder. That night, when he found it impossible to lie still in his bed, he looked at the dusty globe that sat on his dresser and spun it on its axis, examining the continents and oceans. Suddenly, he lived somewhere. He, Pat Pratt—a boy who had very few friends, who wasn't good at sports or drawing, who wasn't the brightest in school—was now somebody.

ONE DAY UNTIL THE OZ FEST

They sat through two excruciating episodes of *Law & Order* during which Henderson demanded absolute silence so that he could follow the plot. It was 11 PM, so Pat got out blankets for Brett, who would sleep on the couch, and dropped by Brett's room to make sure it was presentable for Henderson. No surprise, it smelled like marijuana. Pat sprayed the room with half a can of Febreze until it gagged him.

Pat returned to Henderson to see if he needed help getting ready for bed. The old man's chin was on his chest, the wattle of his neck glistening with drool. He was asleep.

"Want some help?" Brett said from the couch.

"No, I got it."

"Good."

Pat wheeled Henderson into Brett's room. He tried to jostle him awake, but Henderson was stubbornly unconscious. Pat rubbed his bald head and sighed. He unzipped Henderson's jacket and unbuttoned his shirt, and worked them off his small arms. The skin sagged from Henderson's sternum like an oversized sweater. When he pulled off the socks, Pat was horrified by Henderson's feet—they were purple and curled as though they'd gone rotten. Looking at this withered, decrepit man passed out in the wheelchair, Pat wondered what kept Henderson alive. He seemed so shriveled and frail that the slightest nudge of nature could tip him into death.

He easily hoisted Henderson out of the chair, and placed him into Brett's bed. In an unexpected memory-lapse of the reflexes, Pat tucked the covers under Henderson's chin, just as he used to with his son.

THE DAY OF THE OZ FEST

An hour after wrestling Henderson out of bed and rushing him into the shower, Pat and Henderson drove into town. Pat had assumed, which was apparently stupid, that Henderson had a replica soldier costume from the film, as had all the other Munchkins. Henderson explained that he'd never once participated in one of these ridiculous events, so why in the hell would he have a replica of his costume? Henderson elaborated on this point all through breakfast, and on until they were in the car, just to be sure Pat had been thoroughly ridiculed.

They drove by the park in front of First Presbyterian. Tents, vendors, food trailers, and a few rides were set up and ready for the crowds. A massive, inflatable Emerald City Castle was coming to life. The stage and surrounding bleachers were being assembled where, after the parade, Oz scenes would be reenacted, and the best costume contestants would be judged.

They passed under the banner that stretched across Genesee Street: *Welcome Back to the Oz Festival!* Underneath was written: *Featuring the Last Surviving Munchkin, Henderson Lovely.* At the bottom, in smaller font: *Dedicated to Jason and Dean*

Fleming.

People were already claiming their spots on the curb for the parade. Pat winced at the green-brick sidewalks that used to be yellow, and the FOR RENT signs hanging in many of the windows. In the last five or six months, many of the shops on Genesee had closed. Worse, it was the Oz-themed ones that hadn't survived: Emerald City Lanes, Oz Cream, and Auntie Em's Café. Pat had tried to persuade residents in the seasonal newsletter to eat and shop locally. To offer his own support, he frequented these places almost daily. He'd spent more money than he cared to admit bowling (alone), eating ice cream (in winter), and ordering the lunch special every day of the week (almost always shepherd's pie). Eventually, even he quit these pitiful routines seeing as he was often the only person in these establishments.

Pat stopped the car to allow a convincing Wicked Witch across the street. She wore a prosthetic chin and nose, crooked and warted. She looked at Pat menacingly as she skirted by. Her eyeballs glowed white against the hunter-green of her skin. Pat waved, enthralled at the enthusiasm this woman had put into her costume.

"Isn't she great?" Pat said to Henderson.

"That's a grown guldern woman playing make believe," Henderson said. "It's pathetic."

Pat suddenly feared that Henderson would be just as rude to the residents as he was to Pat. This hadn't occurred to him before this comment, since he'd assumed that Henderson's aversion was personal. After all, a lot of people didn't like Pat. He told himself that was the price of ambition, of being the catalyst for Big Change. It wasn't about popularity, though honestly, he hoped people would ultimately extol him once they saw how successfully the Oz Fest went.

"Mr. Lovely, I hope you'll behave today." Again, Pat employed his mayoral tone. "We are paying you a lot of money to be here. So please—"

Henderson pinched Pat's thigh. Pat howled.

"Don't you dare try to make me feel guilty," Henderson snapped. "You're the knucklehead who squandered a mess of cash to get a wrinkled old fart to wave in your parade."

"Why are you even here then?" Pat was surprised he hadn't thought to ask before. So he asked it again, this time more commandingly.

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Henderson looked out the window and rapped his knuckles on the glass. He might have been looking at the families setting up beach chairs and blankets on the side of the road.

“I resented all the others for putting on their ridiculous costumes and dancing around in all your parades and festivals.” Henderson’s voice was soft and pensive, while retaining a throaty edge, as though anger were a breath away. “Before we were in that picture, we all worked the freak show circuit in carnivals, travelling round the country so people could gawk at us. I was Bitty-Ton. I wore a rabbit pelt on my crotch and carried an albino python around my shoulders. I’d been doing that since I was seven years old. Didn’t even know my real name. The one I got now I made up for the Oz picture. After the picture, I went back to being Bitty-Ton. You know the contract we all signed, how we were paid horseshit, got no royalties. Toto the guldern dog got paid better. And fifty, sixty, seventy years later, the only way we could make any kind of living was to dress up like clowns and come to your parades. Even after all this time, we’re still little freaks.”

“So... why are you here?”

Henderson looked at Pat disgusted. “I got my reasons, and I’m here. So keep out of my personal affairs. Fine with you?”

Pat turned into the large gravel parking lot of Oneida Savings Bank, where the floats and paraders were making ready. Pat found a spot and threw the stick into park. It went against his deep-seeded code to inflict anger upon an Oz actor, but he had taken enough

abuse.

“Listen to me, Mister Lovely. I don’t give a”—he searched for the right cuss—“two shits what you have against me. But I have personal... affairs too. I sacrificed a lot to make this day happen. And I’m paying you handsomely for your services. So I’d appreciate it if you were a little bit more respectful.”

“It’s about the money?” Henderson shot back. He reached into his back pocket, pulled out a tattered wallet, and whipped out a check. “Here’s the money, right here.” He jammed it in Pat’s face. “Take it. Take it and drive me to the airport. I don’t need it, don’t even want it.”

A small noise escaped Pat’s throat and bounced around his open mouth. He sucked his tongue in search of saliva. Just as he found a drop, there was a knock on his window. It was Maureen Benson, newly-appointed parade coordinator. She wore a headband with lion’s ears; her nose was painted black and she’d drawn whiskers on her cheeks.

Pat cranked down the window. “Hey Maureen, we’ll be right there.”

Maureen smiled at Henderson. She said to Pat, “We’re behind schedule. Just waiting on you.”

Pat rolled the window back up, slowly. He hoped the check wasn’t still in front of him. Hoped it had never been produced in the first place. He looked past the check, through it actually. *Where troubles melt like lemon drops, away above the chimney tops, that’s where you’ll find me.* He said to Henderson, “All set?”

Henderson’s glassy-blue eyes steadied on Pat’s. He said nothing for a long moment, then smiled. Pat couldn’t interpret it, but luckily, the check that had never existed was put back in Henderson’s wallet.

Pat tugged the wheelchair out of the back seat and helped Henderson into it. Maureen was there to usher them through the motley crowd of marchers. Designers were making final adjustments to the dozens of Oz-themed floats. Marching bands quizzed their instruments. Girls dressed as Dorotheas or Glendas, and boys dressed as Scarecrows or Lions, darted around them. Then there were the regulars who came from all over Upstate New York to participate in any parade; these were the Civil War reenactors, the rescue missions with their army of dogs, the bagpipers, and the Shriners in their tiny cars.

Then they reached their float. Apparently, the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts had built it.

A wobbly, cardboard rainbow with only three colors, not even the primary ones, arched over the seats in which Pat and Henderson would sit. Behind that was a slipshod yellow-brick road comprised of yellow and orange sponges. It took Pat a few moments to recognize the swirling mass of pantyhose and stretched cotton jutting from the back of the float—a twister.

Maureen hurried them aboard before Pat could find more flaws. Pat climbed on, then yanked up Henderson. Maureen's husband, Rich, got into the black Ford pickup that would tow the float. He started the truck, and the stereo in the cab blared the film's soundtrack. Maureen gave Rich the thumbs-up signal. There was a quick jerk, and they eased onto the road.

A group of twenty or so children dressed as Flower Munchkins surrounded Pat and Henderson's float, shouting the lyrics along with the soundtrack. *She's gone where the goblins go, Below! – Below! – Below!* Their voices were discordant but earnest. Pat was unaware of the addition of the children, but he was, at last, pleasantly surprised by something.

The float turned onto Genesee Street. A smattering crowd clapped and waved. Others looked on indifferently, talking on cell phones, or hands shoved into jean shorts. A handful of out-of-towners who thankfully showed up, snapped photos of Henderson. The children were more interested in the Smarties and Dum-Dums that the Flower Munchkins tossed at them. Pat spied a few kids perched on their father's shoulders who waved ardently at Henderson. They seemed to have been told prior about Mr. Lovely, and were excited about witnessing him. Maybe when they grew up and hopefully remained in Chittenango, they would tell their own kids, "I saw the last living Munchkin."

Henderson appeared to be enjoying himself. He shook his little hand here and there, calling out a squeaky hello to those who yelled his name. His unwavering hand tapped his knee to the music. His face even ribboned into a wrinkly smile, one that made him nearly unrecognizable as the crank who'd been staying with Pat.

It was at this moment—when Pat saw that this impossible parade was happening—that his heart seemed to radiate the entire spectrum of colors. He felt he could open his shirt and out would arch the rainbow he knew lived dormant inside him, and all the riches of possibility would sprinkle at the feet of his people. If only Brett were here to see this moment. But wasn't he?

Just ahead, standing in front of the closed-down video store, Pat spotted a pair of crazed-looking teenagers. They wore colorful, striped shirts with suspenders. Their hair

Catalano: Henderson Lovely, Last of the Munchkins
 was heavily gelled and slicked back. Their cheeks were thickly rouged. Brett and Dean began shouting unintelligibly at Pat. Their pants, which Pat could now see since the crowd had given them space, were rolled up to their hairy calves. They both gripped paper bags.

Pat's rainbow went monochromatic, then retreated back into him and sat there heavy in his chest. He turned away, and waved to the crowd on the other side of the street. Pat felt the float jerk to a stop. Brett and Dean were standing in front of the pick-up truck. The music had ceased. The crowd had hushed. Where was the police? Why wasn't anyone doing anything?

The two approached, eying Pat. Henderson didn't seem alarmed, but rather, amused. Maureen had ushered the Flower Munchkins away. Brett and Dean climbed into the bed of the truck with some difficulty, and when they stood—only a few feet from Pat and Henderson—they wobbled. They'd been drinking. Pat couldn't even look at Brett. At this moment, he wasn't his son.

Brett and Dean cleared their throats, smiled at each other, and then began. *We represent the Lollipop Guild, the Lollipop Guild, the Lollipop Guild....* They sang out of the sides of their mouths. They kicked their feet herky-jerky style. *And in the name of the Lollipop Guild*—and here, they offered to Henderson and Pat the contents of the paper bags: two forty ounce cans of Genesee Cream Ale—*we wish to welcome you to Munchkin Land.*

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December 14, 2012

Henderson Lovely, Last of the Munchkins

The crowd remained silent as if someone had used a remote control to pause them. Brett and Dean held the cans of beer suspended. Henderson suddenly broke into laughter. He raised his arms and clapped. A few in the crowd joined in. Henderson took the beer from Dean and winked at him. Dean actually smiled at the old man. Henderson raised the beer to the crowd in a cheers salute, and then he drank. More residents whooped and hollered.

Pat finally acknowledged Brett.

“Take the beer, Dad.”

Pat expected his son’s eyes and voice to fill him with venomous hate. Wasn’t this sabotage? Or, perhaps like the launched dentures, another cruel test? But there was no resentment. Somehow, it seemed a harmless command. When Pat reached out and accepted the hefty can of beer, Brett’s expression softened. Pat realized his eyes had wandered to his son’s scar, and that it no longer repulsed him—at least not now.

Their offerings accepted, Brett and Dean clasped their hands together and tossed their fists over their shoulders. The entire crowd cheered.

Pat felt a jab in his side. “Stand up, Mayor,” Henderson said. “You’re on.”

His legs raised him as though being hand-cranked. When he stood, the residents

Catalano: Henderson Lovely, Last of the Munchkins

cheered. Emboldened, Pat imitated Henderson: he lifted the can to the Chittenangoans and took a chug of the warm beer. The people roared and pumped their fists. He took another swig, the foam fizzing his nose, causing him to cough. The alcohol was already warming his blood. Henderson put an arm around Pat's waist, and they drank together.

Brett and Dean hopped off the truck. They ran down the street, laughing and pushing each other. Maureen directed the Flower Munchkins back to the float. The truck started up again, and with it, the music.

Kevin Catalano is the author of a collection of short fiction, *The Word Made Flesh* (firthFORTH Books). His stories have appeared, or are forthcoming, in *PANK*, *Pear Noir!*, *Atticus Review*, *Gargoyle Magazine*, *Used Furniture Review*, and others. He has an MFA in fiction from Rutgers-Newark, where he also teaches literature and composition. He lives with his wife and daughter in New Jersey. Visit him at www.kevincatalano.com.

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