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A SENSE  
OF  
HUMOR

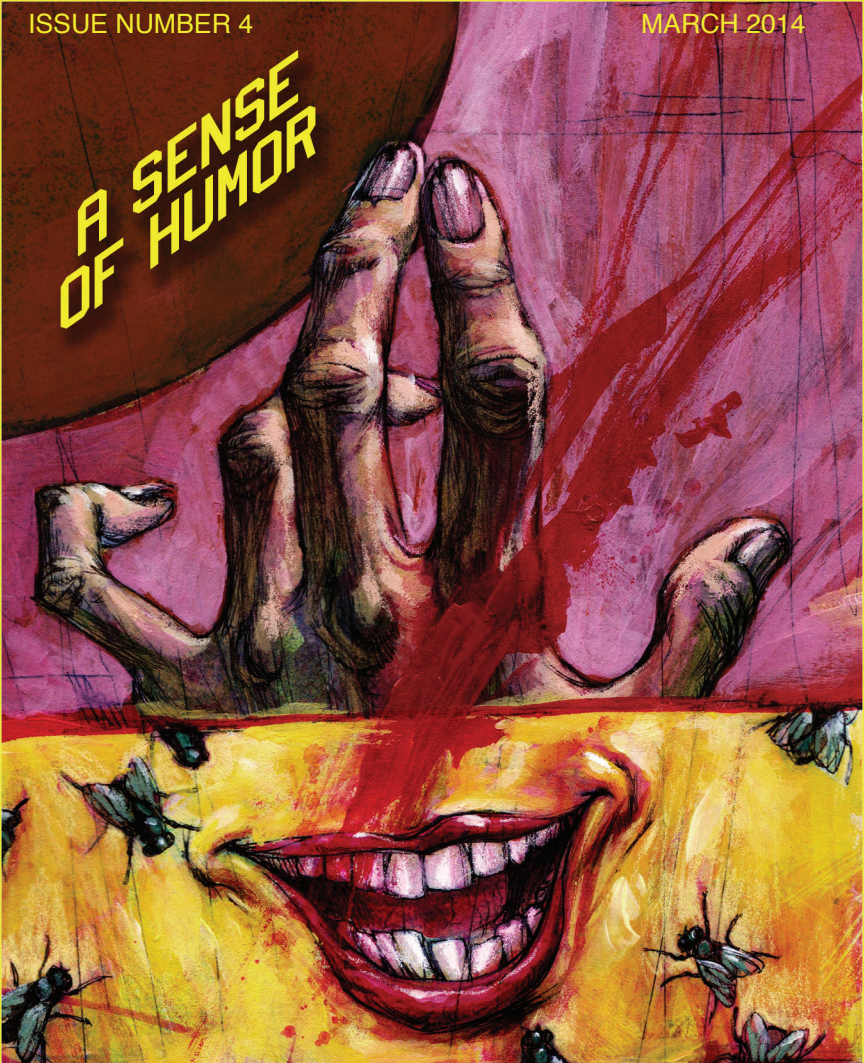
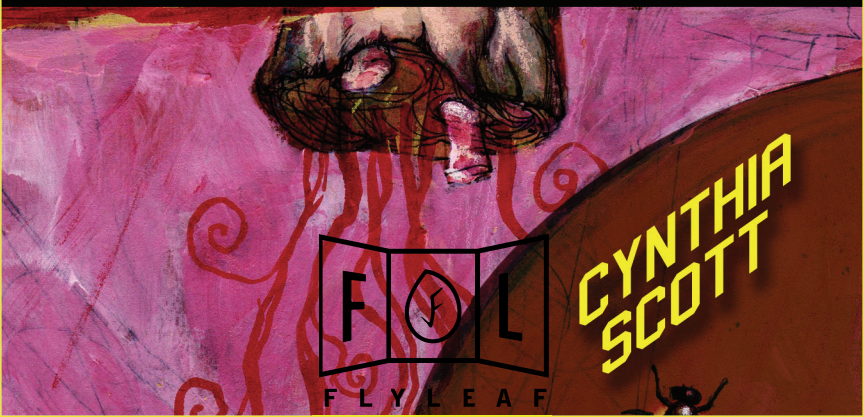


ILLUSTRATION BY TIMOTHY TANG



FLYLEAF

CYNTHIA  
SCOTT

She rubbed her eyes twice when she saw the hand. It lay between the rows of collard greens, gray and waxen, cut clean at the wrist, with dull fingernails, clenched fingers, and clotted blood around the clean, white bone. It looked like something for sale at a Halloween store, something trickster children might use to scare the bejeezus out of little old ladies, except that it wasn't made of rubber. Flies buzzed around it and black ants trooped over it, tearing its flesh with their powerful mandibles and carrying away the bits to God knew where.

Vernice reeled back and threw up in the dirt.

She ran into the house and called her husband, Mel, who told her to sit tight; he was coming right over. She did as he told her. Literally. She sat in the living room and didn't move a muscle. When Mel arrived, wearing his sanitation department jumpsuit and a SF Giants cap pulled down over his eyes, he asked her where it was. He did not acknowledge what "it" was. She pointed meekly toward the backyard patio door. It was still open, drawing in cold air.

"Where it at, Vern?" he asked again.

Vernice told him, her mouth still tasting of vomit. Mel went outside. He returned a few moments later, his face ashen. It seemed to Vern that he had acquired a few more gray hairs in his beard, a few more lines around his eyes.

"We gotta call the cops," she said.

He creased his brow and bit down on the corner of his lip. She expected him to say, 'hell no.' He hated cops, had been pulled over by them too many times to count and for no reason at all. When he was nineteen he had been roughed up by them and tossed in jail, the victim of mistaken identity. He would have been railroaded

to prison (the cops were that convinced they had their guy, and who was going to tell them otherwise?) had it not been for the fact that the person who had done the deed turned himself in. So she didn't expect Mel to want anything to do with cops, even for a reason like this, but he surprised her.

"Do it," he said. "Call 'em. Goddammit."

First came the uniforms. Then forensics. They trampled through the house, trampled through her kitchen garden, writing things down on notepads, marking spots in her garden, bagging items, canvassing the alleyway behind their backyard, taking photographs. She had never seen so many cops in her life. Mel kept out of their way. After answering their questions, he went back to work; he couldn't afford to take a day off. He didn't want to be around because of the cops and the hand that still lay in the garden like a tuberous root springing from the ground. It was too much for him. He preferred the steadiness and simplicity of collecting garbage.

Vern stayed in the house. She sat on the couch and watched TV. She was staring at the screen while the uniformed cops questioned her. They asked her to tell her story. She told them how she woke up that morning with an odd feeling that something bad was going to happen, though she did not know what. She went downstairs and made breakfast for Mel before he went to work. She described the breakfast—eggs and bacon; toast and coffee. She mentioned how she had burned the toast because she was so distracted by this lingering omen until one of the cops told her to tell them how she found the hand. But that was the point she was leading up to, the point of the story she was foreshadowing. She wanted to build toward that, not for their sake, but for her own. She wanted to

prepare herself when she revisited that awful moment when she discovered the hand in her garden, the moment when she realized it was real, that this awful thing lying in her beautiful garden had once belonged to another human being.

When she told the story a second time to the detectives who arrived shortly after, she embellished, lingered over the feeling in her stomach, the burned toast, the awful sensation when she realized the hand was real. She relived the moment again in her mind, shaping it so that she had control over it, control over her own reaction to it. The detectives let her speak. They nodded politely, jotted what she said down onto their notepads, asked questions: did she notice any strange activities the night before? Can she recall any strange noises, anything that seemed unusual? But she kept lingering at that moment when she realized the hand was real.

She repeated the story to her neighbors who gathered outside, watching the street and foot traffic in their small, quiet neighborhood. She told them that awful feeling she had, the omen, and they nodded and understood. Hadn't the same thing happened to Beverly Raymond when she found out her son had been killed? That whole day before the cops came knocking on her door she had had a terrible feeling, like something was crushing down inside her. She knew something terrible had happened. She called her son, and when she could not reach him she called his girlfriend and his friends, and when they did not give her answers she got an even deeper, more awful feeling inside.

"When they knocked on her door," said one of the neighbors, "she just knew Clayton was gone."

"Um, hm," said another. "You always know."

Vernice nodded because she understood now too,

how knowing and feeling and understanding were all one in the same. So, by the time she was interviewed by the local television stations, she led with that simple truth: “I had a bad feeling something was wrong.”

Later that day, after the police finally departed, leaving behind the yellow tape they had wound around her backyard fence, the muddy footprints on her carpet, and the general air of disturbance, she locked all the doors and windows and waited for Mel to come home. Too unsettled to start dinner, she watched TV instead, recording the segments reported on the local news of “the incident.” She learned that the police were waiting for more forensic evidence to determine whether to investigate this as a homicide. They continued to canvas neighborhoods, asking more questions. The news anchors all led with the story about “a bizarre incident in Richmond,” and broadcast her interview. On each channel, it began differently—“I had a bad feeling” to “I knew something was wrong” to “Just had a feeling, something weren’t right.” In each variation the story was still the same, but compressed—polished.

Her friend Avie called and said, “Turn to CNN. They got you on there too.” Her daughter Noreen called from Atlanta and said she “had gone viral.” A clip of her interview was posted on YouTube, which she thought was strange, but on the whole everything that entire day had been strange.

“Looks like you’re famous now, Mama,” Rennie said. But fame seemed beside the point.

After Mel returned home, they exchanged stories. Word had gotten round to the department about what happened, so Mel’s coworkers bombarded him with questions, explanations, requests for details. He told them as best he could, but he always lingered over that unsettled



feeling he had of having so many damn cops in his home. He retold the times he had been roughed up, beaten up, thrown in jail, accused of crimes he hadn't committed, and so couldn't wait to get the hell out of his own home. His own damn home! They nodded, understanding, but he repeated it to them: "That's my damn home and they all up in there, asking me where I been at and what I been doing, acting like I had something to do with that goddamned hand." Vern rubbed his shoulder as he recounted his story and she nodded and understood and retold her own story again, although this time the more polished version, the version she told to the media, and not the first version she told him when he came home earlier that morning, still raw and brutal in its visceral experience.

"I just had a feeling something bad had happened," she said. "That's why I ended up burning that toast."

Mel nodded and rubbed his chin. "Whoever did it, though, knew what they was doing, 'cause I didn't hear nothing last night."

"Me neither."

"It was quiet as church last night, wasn't it? Didn't hear nobody running around in that alleyway back there. And you know how the Barkers' dog be howling anytime somebody walking through there. Didn't hear a peep."

"That's what I told the police. I didn't hear nothing strange last night."

"They must've sneaked through there quiet as mice and tossed it over our fence."

He shook his head. Vernice rubbed his shoulder.

"They were slick about it though: you gotta hand that to 'em."

They paused for a moment, both realizing what he had said, and started laughing.

"They must've had a helping hand," he said and they

broke into another volley of laughter. Mel was on a roll. “Hands down, they knew exactly what they were doing.”

“Now, Mel,” she said, slapping his back. “Come on now.”

“They didn’t want no hand in any of it.”

“Oh, Good Lord,” Vern said, sputtering with laughter. “My poor collard greens, too.”

“Just so you know, I ain’t eating none of them collard greens now. We could be living hand to mouth, and I still wouldn’t eat that shit.”

“Mel,” she cried. “Stop it. Stop it now. You ain’t right.”

But he continued with his jokes and Vern continued laughing and thanking God she married a man who still had a good sense of humor.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

CYNTHIA SCOTT is a freelance writer, blogger, and copyeditor at Zharmae Publishing Press. Her fiction and essays have appeared in *Graze Magazine*, *Dogplotz.com*, *eFiction*, *Bleed.com*, *Rain Taxi*, *Bright Lights Film Journal*, *Strange Horizons*, *Creosote Journal*, and others.

## ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

TIMOTHY TANG is a freelance illustrator and concept artist. He was born in Manila, Philippines and studied illustration at San Jose State University. He currently lives and works in the Bay Area. He loves hip hop and urban culture and follows the Battlerap scene. He also likes island related things and subjects because they remind him of home (the Pacific Islands).