

A close-up photograph of a red and black striped sock. A lizard's foot, with its toes spread, is resting on the red part of the sock. The sock has a distinct black band around its middle. The background is a plain, light-colored surface.

Lucius Shepard

ETERNITY AND OTHER STORIES

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and Other Stories

LUCIUS SHEPARD

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ETERNITY AND OTHER STORIES

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ONLY PARTLY HERE

There are legends in the pit. Phantoms and apparitions. The men who work at Ground Zero joke about them, but their laughter is nervous and wired. Bobby doesn't believe the stories, yet he's prepared to believe something weird might happen. The place feels so empty. Like even the ghosts are gone. All that sudden vacancy, who knows what might have entered in? Two nights ago on the graveyard shift, some guy claimed he saw a faceless figure wearing a black spiky headdress standing near the pit wall. The job breaks everybody down. Marriages are falling apart. People keep losing it one way or another. Fights, freak-outs, fits of weeping. It's the smell of burning metal that seeps up from the earth, the ceremonial stillness of the workers after they uncover a body, the whispers that come when there is no wind. It's the things you find. The week before, scraping at the rubble with a hoe, like an archaeologist investigating a buried temple, Bobby spotted a

woman's shoe sticking up out of the ground. A perfect shoe, so pretty and sleek and lustrous. Covered in blue silk. Then he reached for it and realized that it wasn't stuck—it was only half a shoe, with delicate scorching along the ripped edge. Now sometimes when he closes his eyes he sees the shoe. He's glad he isn't married. He doesn't think he has much to bring to a relationship.

That evening Bobby's taking his dinner break, perched on a girder at the edge of the pit along with Mazurek and Pineo, when they switch on the lights. They all hate how the pit looks in the lights. It's an outtake from *The X-Files*—the excavation of an alien ship under hot white lamps smoking from the cold; the shard left from the framework of the north tower glittering silver and strange, like the wreckage of a cosmic machine. The three men remain silent for a bit, then Mazurek goes back to bitching about Jason Giambi signing with the Yankees. "You catch the interview he did with Werner Wolf? He's a moron! First time the crowd gets on him, it's gonna be like when you yell at a dog. The guy's gonna fucking crumble." Pineo disagrees, and Mazurek asks Bobby what he thinks.

"Bobby don't give a shit about baseball," says Pineo. "My boy's a Jets fan."

Mazurek, a thick-necked, fiftyish man whose face appears to be fashioned of interlocking squares of pale muscle, says, "The Jets . . . fuck!"

"They're playoff bound," says Bobby cheerfully.

Mazurek crumples the wax paper his sandwich was folded in. "They gonna drop dead in the first round like always."

"It's more interesting than being a Yankee fan," says Bobby. "The Yankees are too corporate to be interesting."

"Too corporate to be interesting?" Mazurek stares. "You really are a geek, y'know that?"

"That's me. The geek."

"Whyn't you go the fuck back to school, boy? Fuck you doing here, anyway?"

"Take it easy, Carl! Chill!" Pineo—nervous, thin, lively, curly black hair spilling from beneath his hard hat—puts a hand on Mazurek's arm, and Mazurek knocks it aside. Anger tightens his leathery skin; the creases in his neck show white. "What's it with you? You taking notes for your fucking thesis?" he asks Bobby. "Playing tourist?"

Bobby looks down at the apple in his hand—it seems too shiny to be edible. "Just cleaning up is all. You know."

Mazurek's eyes dart to the side, then he lowers his head and gives it a savage shake. "Okay," he says in a subdued voice. "Yeah . . . fuck. Okay."

. . .

Midnight, after the shift ends, they walk over to the Blue Lady. Bobby doesn't altogether understand why the three of them continue to hang out there. Maybe because they once went to the bar after work and it felt pretty good, so they return every night in hopes of having it feel that good again. You can't head straight home; you have to decompress. Mazurek's wife gives him constant shit about the practice—she calls the bar and screams over the phone. Pineo just split with his girlfriend. The guy with whom Bobby shares an apartment grins when he sees him, but the grin is anxious—like he's afraid Bobby is bringing back some contagion from the pit. Which maybe he is. The first time he went to Ground Zero, he came home with a cough and a touch of fever, and he recalls thinking that the place was responsible. Now, though, either he's immune or else he's sick all the time and doesn't notice.

Two hookers at a table by the door check them out as they enter, then go back to reading the *Post*. Roman the barman, gray-haired

and thick-waisted, orders his face into respectful lines, says, "Hey, guys!" and sets them up with beers and shots. When they started coming in he treated them with almost religious deference, until Mazurek yelled at him, saying he didn't want to hear that hero crap while he was trying to unwind—he got enough of it from the fuckass jocks and movie stars who visit Ground Zero to have their pictures taken. Though angry, he was far more articulate than usual in his demand for normal treatment, and this caused Bobby to speculate that if Mazurek were transported thousands of miles from the pit and not just a few blocks, his IQ would increase exponentially.

The slim brunette in the business suit is down at the end of the bar again, sitting beneath the blue neon silhouette of a dancing woman. She's been coming in every night for about a week. Late twenties. Hair styled short, an expensive kind of punky look. Fashion model hair. Eyebrows thick and slanted, like *accents grave*. Sharp-featured, on the brittle side of pretty, or maybe she's not that pretty, maybe she is so well-dressed, her makeup done so skillfully, that the effect is of a businesslike prettiness, of prettiness reined in by the magic of brush and multiple applicators, and beneath this artwork she is, in actuality, rather plain. Nice body, though. Trim and well tended. She wears the same expression of stony neutrality that Bobby sees every morning on the faces of the women who charge up from under the earth, disgorged from the D train, prepared to resist Manhattan for another day. Guys will approach her, assuming she's a hooker doing a kind of Hitler office bitch thing in order to attract men searching for a woman they can use and abuse as a surrogate for one who makes their life hell every day from nine to five, and she will say something to them and they will immediately walk away. Bobby and Pineo always try to guess what she says. That night, after a couple of shots, Bobby goes over and sits beside her. She smells expensive. Her perfume like the essence of some exotic flower or fruit he's only seen in magazine pictures.

"I've just been to a funeral," she says wearily, staring into her drink. "So, please . . . Okay?"

"That what you tell everybody?" he asks. "All the guys who hit on you?"

A fretful line cuts her brow. "Please!"

"No, really. I'll go. All I want to know . . . that what you always say?"

She makes no response.

"It is," he says. "Isn't it?"

"It's not entirely a lie." Her eyes are spooky, the dark rims of the pale irises extraordinarily well-defined. "It's intended as a lie, but it's true in a way."

"But that's what you say, right? To everybody?"

"This is why you came over? You're not hitting on me?"

"No, I . . . I mean, maybe . . . I thought . . ."

"So what you're saying, you weren't intending to hit on me. You wanted to know what I say to men when they come over. But now you're not certain of your intent? Maybe you were deceiving yourself as to your motives? Or maybe now you sense I might be receptive, you'll take the opportunity to hit on me, though that wasn't your initial intent. Does that about sum it up?"

"I suppose," he says.

She gives him a cautious look. "Could you be brilliant? Could your clumsy delivery be designed to engage me?"

"I'll go away, okay? But that's what you said to them, right?"

She points to the barman, who's talking to Mazurek. "Roman tells me you work at Ground Zero."

The question unsettles Bobby, leads him to suspect that she's a disaster groupie, looking for a taste of the pit, but he says, "Yeah."

"It's really . . ." She does a little shivery shrug. "Strange."

"Strange. I guess that covers it."

"That's not what I wanted to say. I can't think of the right word to describe what it does to me."

"You been down in it?"

"No, I can't get any closer than here. I just can't. But . . ." She makes a swirling gesture with her fingers. "You can feel it here. You might not notice, because you're down there all the time. That's why I come here. Everybody's going on with their lives, but I'm not ready. I need to feel it. To understand it. You're taking it away piece by piece, but the more you take away, it's like you're uncovering something else."

"Y'know, I don't want to think about this now." He gets to his feet. "But I guess I know why you want to."

"Probably it's fucked up of me, huh?"

"Yeah, probably," says Bobby, and walks away.

"She's still looking at you, man," Pineo says as Bobby settles beside him. "What you doing back here? You could be fucking that."

"She's a freak," Bobby tells him.

"So she's a freak! Even better!" Pineo turns to the other two men. "You believe this asshole? He could be fucking that bitch over there, yet here he sits."

Affecting a superior smile, Roman says, "You don't fuck them, pal. They fuck *you*."

He nudges Mazurek's arm as though seeking confirmation from a peer, a man of experience like himself, and Mazurek, gazing at his grungy reflection in the mirror behind the bar, says distractedly, weakly, "I could use another shot."

. . .

The following afternoon Bobby unearths a disk of hard black rubber from beneath some cement debris. It's four inches across, thicker at the center than at the edges, shaped like a little UFO. Try as he might, he can think of no possible purpose it might serve, and he wonders if it had something to do with the fall of the towers.

Perhaps there is a black seed like this at the heart of every disaster. He shows it to Pineo, asks his opinion, and Pineo, as expected, says, "Fuck, I don't know. Part of a machine." Bobby knows Pineo is right. The disk is a widget, one of those undistinguished yet indispensable objects without which elevators will not rise or refrigerators will not cool; but there are no marks on it, no holes or grooves to indicate that it fits inside a machine. He imagines it whirling inside a cone of blue radiance, registering some inexplicable process.

He thinks about the disk all evening, assigning it various values. It is the irreducible distillate of the event, a perfectly formed residue. It is a wicked sacred object that belonged to a financier, now deceased, and its ritual function is understood by only three other men on the planet. It is a beacon left by time-traveling tourists that allows them to home in on the exact place and moment of the terrorist attack. It is the petrified eye of God. He intends to take the disk back to his apartment and put it next to the half shoe and all the rest of the items he has collected in the pit. But that night when he enters the Blue Lady and sees the brunette at the end of the bar, on impulse he goes over and drops the disk on the counter next to her elbow.

"Brought you something," he says.

She glances at it, pokes it with a forefinger and sets it wobbling. "What is it?"

He shrugs. "Just something I found."

"At Ground Zero?"

"Uh-huh."

She pushes the disk away. "Didn't I make myself plain last night?"

Bobby says, "Yeah . . . sure," but isn't sure he grasps her meaning.

"I want to understand what happened . . . what's happening now," she says. "I want what's mine, you know. I want to understand exactly what it's done to me. I need to understand it. I'm not into souvenirs."

"Okay," Bobby says.

"Okay." She says this mockingly. "God, what's wrong with you? It's like you're on medication!"

A Sinatra song, "All Or Nothing At All," flows from the jukebox—a soothing musical syrup that overwhelms the chatter of hookers and drunks and commentary from the TV mounted behind the bar, which is showing chunks of Afghanistan blowing up into clouds of brown smoke. The crawl running at the bottom of the screen testifies that the estimate of the death toll at Ground Zero has been reduced to just below five thousand; the amount of debris removed from the pit now exceeds one million tons. The numbers seem meaningless, interchangeable. A million lives, five thousand tons. A ludicrous score that measures no real result.

"I'm sorry," the brunette says. "I know it must take a toll, doing what you do. I'm impatient with everyone these days."

She stirs her drink with a plastic stick whose handle duplicates the image of the neon dancer. In all her artfully composed face, a mask of foundation and blush and liner, her eyes are the only sign of vitality, of feminine potential.

"What's your name?" he asks.

She glances up sharply. "I'm too old for you."

"How old are you? I'm twenty-three."

"It doesn't matter how old you are . . . how old I am. I'm much older than you in my head. Can't you tell? Can't you feel the difference? If I was twenty-three, I'd still be too old for you."

"I just want to know your name."

"Alicia." She enunciates the name with a cool overstated precision that makes him think of a saleswoman revealing a price she knows her customer cannot afford.

"Bobby," he says. "I'm in grad school at Columbia. But I'm taking a year off."

"This is ridiculous!" she says angrily. "Unbelievably ridiculous . . . totally ridiculous! Why are you doing this?"

"I want to understand what's going on with you."

"Why?"

"I don't know, I just do. Whatever it is you come to understand, I want to understand it, too. Who knows. Maybe us talking is part of what you need to understand."

"Good Lord!" She casts her eyes to the ceiling. "You're a romantic!"

"You still think I'm trying to hustle you?"

"If it was anyone else, I'd say yes. But you . . . I don't believe you have a clue."

"And you do? Sitting here every night. Telling guys you just got back from a funeral. Grieving about something you can't even say what it is."

She twitches her head away, a gesture he interprets as the avoidance of impulse, a sudden clamping down, and he also relates it to how he sometimes reacts on the subway when a girl he's been looking at catches his eye and he pretends to be looking at something else. After a long silence she says, "We're not going to be having sex. I want you to be clear on that."

"Okay."

"That's your fall back position, is it? 'Okay'?"

"Whatever."

"Whatever." She curls her fingers around her glass, but does not drink. "Well, we've probably had enough mutual understanding for one night, don't you think?"

Bobby pockets the rubber disk, preparing to leave. "What do you do for a living?"

An exasperated sigh. "I work in a brokerage. Now can we take a break? Please?"

"I gotta go home anyway," Bobby says.

• • •

The rubber disk takes its place in Bobby's top dresser drawer, resting between the blue half shoe and a melted glob of metal that may have done duty as a cuff link, joining a larger company of remnants—scraps of silk and worsted and striped cotton; a flattened fountain pen; a few inches of brown leather hanging from a misshapen buckle; a hinged pin once attached to a brooch. Looking at them breeds a queer vacancy in his chest, as if their few ounces of reality cancel out some equivalent portion of his own. It's the shoe, mostly, that wounds him. An object so powerful in its interrupted grace, sometimes he's afraid to touch it.

After his shower he lies down in the dark of his bedroom and thinks of Alicia. Pictures her handling packets of bills bound with paper wrappers. Even her name sounds like currency, a riffling of crisp new banknotes. He wonders what he's doing with her. She's not his type at all, but maybe she was right, maybe he's deceiving himself about his motives. He conjures up the images of the girls he's been with. Soft and sweet and ultra feminine. Yet he finds Alicia's sharp edges and severity attractive. Could be he's looking for a little variety. Or maybe like so many people in the city, like lab rats stoned on coke and electricity, his circuits are scrambled and his brain is sending out irrational messages. He wants to talk to her, though. That much he's certain of—he wants to unburden himself. Tales of the pit. His drawer full of relics. He wants to explain that they're not souvenirs. They are the pins upon which he hangs whatever it is he has to leave behind each morning when he goes to work. They are proof of something he once thought a profound abstraction, something too elusive to frame in words, but has come to realize is no more than the fact of his survival. This fact, he tells himself, might be all that Alicia needs to understand.

Despite having urged Bobby on, Pineo taunts him about Alicia

the next afternoon. His manic edginess has acquired an angry tonality. He takes to calling Alicia "Calculator Bitch." Bobby expects Mazurek to join in, but it seems he is withdrawing from their loose union, retreating into some private pit. He goes about his work with oxlike steadiness and eats in silence. When Bobby suggests that he might want to seek counseling, a comment designed to inflame, to reawaken the man's innate ferocity, Mazurek mutters something about maybe having a talk with one of the chaplains. Though they have only a few basic geographical concerns in common, the three men have sustained one another against the stresses of the job, and that afternoon, as Bobby scratches at the dirt, now turning to mud under a cold drenching rain, he feels abandoned, imperiled by the pit. It all looks unfamiliar and inimical. The silvery lattice of the framework appears to be trembling, as if receiving a transmission from beyond, and the nest of massive girders might be awaiting the return of a fabulous winged monster. Bobby tries to distract himself, but nothing he can come up with serves to brighten his sense of oppression. Toward the end of the shift, he begins to worry that they are laboring under an illusion, that the towers will suddenly snap back in from the dimension into which they have been nudged and everyone will be crushed.

The Blue Lady is nearly empty that night when they arrive. Hookers in the back, Alicia in her customary place. The juke box is off, the TV muttering—a blond woman is interviewing a balding man with a graphic beneath his image that identifies him as an anthrax expert. They sit at the bar and stare at the TV, tossing back drinks with dutiful regularity, speaking only when it's necessary. The anthrax expert is soon replaced by a terrorism expert who holds forth on the disruptive potentials of Al Qaeda. Bobby can't relate to the discussion. The political sky with its wheeling black shapes and noble music and secret masteries is not the sky he lives and works beneath, gray and changeless, simple as a coffin lid.

"Al Qaeda," Roman says. "Didn't he useta play second base for the Mets? Puerto Rican guy?"

The joke falls flat, but Roman's in stand-up mode.

"How many Al Quedas does it take to screw in a light bulb?" he asks. Nobody has an answer.

"Two million," says Roman. "One to hold the camel steady, one to do the work, and the rest to carry their picture through the streets in protest when they get trampled by the camel."

"You made that shit up," Pineo says. "I know it. Cause it ain't that funny."

"Fuck you guys!" Roman glares at Pineo, then takes himself off along the counter and goes to reading a newspaper, turning the pages with an angry flourish.

Four young couples enter the bar, annoying with their laughter and bright, flushed faces and prosperous good looks. As they mill about, some wrangling two tables together, others embracing, one woman earnestly asking Roman if he has Lillet, Bobby slides away from the suddenly energized center of the place and takes a seat beside Alicia. She cuts her eyes toward him briefly, but says nothing, and Bobby, who has spent much of the day thinking about things he might tell her, is restrained from speaking by her glum demeanor. He adopts her attitude—head down, hand on glass—and they sit there like two people weighted down by a shared problem. She crosses her legs, and he sees that she has kicked off a shoe. The sight of her slender ankle and stockinged foot rouses in him a sly Victorian delight.

"This is so very stimulating," she says. "We'll have to do it more often."

"I didn't think you wanted to talk."

"If you're going to sit here, it feels stupid not to."

The things he considered telling her have gone out of his head.

"Well, how was your day?" she asks, modulating her voice like a

mom inquiring of a sweet child, and when he mumbles that it was about the same as always, she says, "It's like we're married. Like we've passed beyond the need for verbal communion. All we have to do is sit here and vibe at each other."

"It sucked, Okay?" he says, angered by her mockery. "It always sucks, but today it was worse than usual."

He begins, then, to unburden himself. He tells her about him and Pineo and Mazurek. How they're like a patrol joined in a purely unofficial unity, by means of which they somehow manage to shield one another from forces they either do not understand or are afraid to acknowledge. And now that unity is dissolving. The gravity of the pit is too strong. The death smell, the horrible litter of souls, the hidden terrors. The underground garage with its smashed, unhaunted cars white with concrete dust. Fires smouldering under the earth. It's like going to work in Mordor, the shadow everywhere. Ashes and sorrow. After a while you begin to feel as if the place is turning you into a ghost. You're not real anymore, you're a relic, a fragment of life. When you say this shit to yourself, you laugh at it. It seems like bullshit. But then you stop laughing and you know it's true. Ground Zero's a killing field. Like Cambodia. Hiroshima. They're already talking about what to build there, but they're crazy. It'd make as much sense to put up a Dairy Queen at Dachau. Who'd want to eat there? People talk about doing it quickly so the terrorists will see it didn't fuck us up. But pretending it didn't fuck us up . . . what's that about? Hey, it fucked us up! They should wait to build. They should wait until you can walk around in it and not feel like it's hurting you to live. Because if they don't, whatever they put there is going to be filled with that feeling. That sounds absurd, maybe. To believe the ground's cursed. That there's some terrible immateriality trapped in it, something that'll seep up into the new halls and offices and cause spiritual affliction, bad karma . . . whatever. But when you're in the middle of that mess, it's impossible not to believe it.