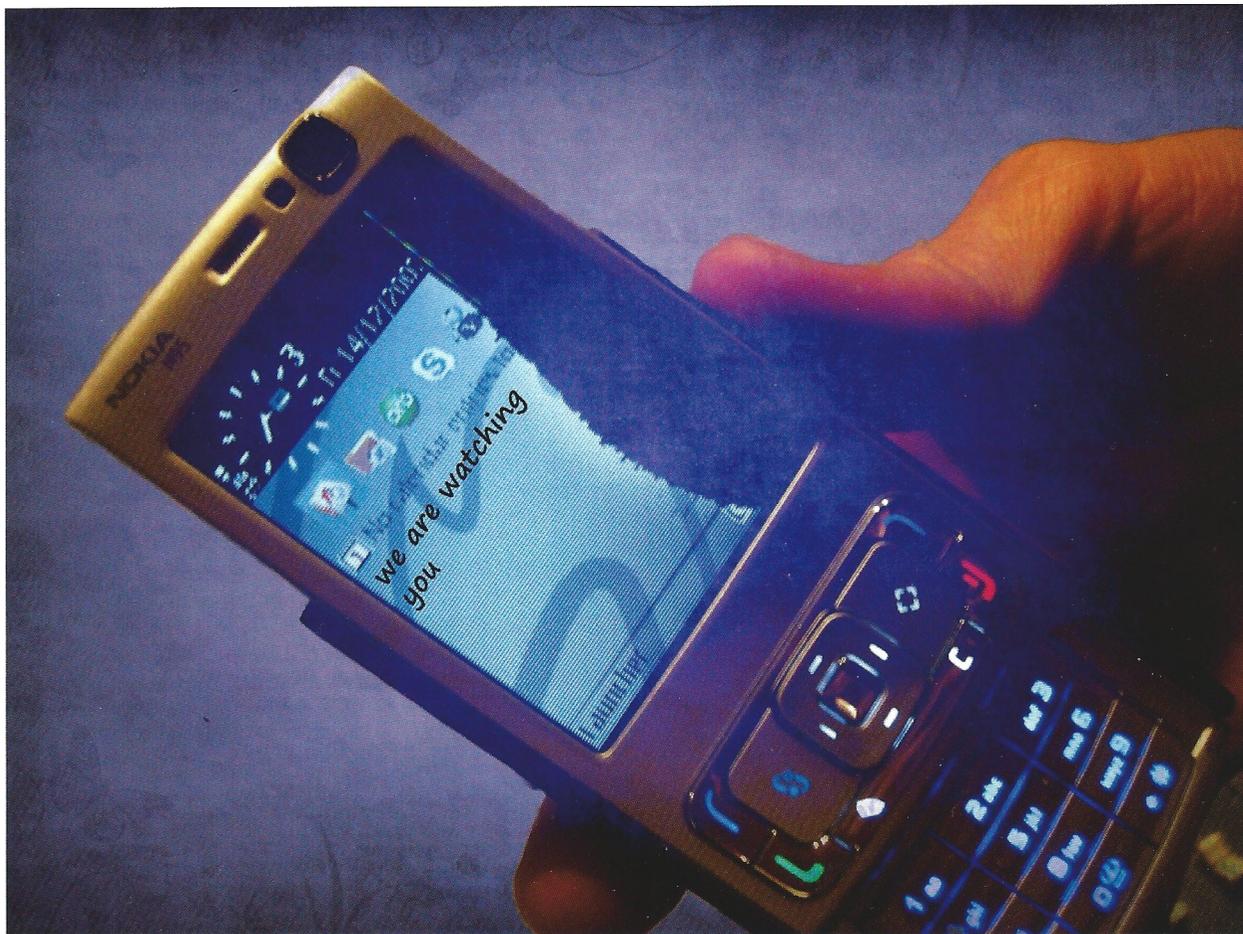


the front view

fiction

Jiffy

by Kirie Pedersen



An emerald-green pyramid rises above Director's office at the center of the complex. The windows are darkened. Heath sees a shrouded figure moving around inside. She waited three weeks before she met him. As they stand outside her office door, Flores lets him know he should not speak. Her desk spans the entire room, separating her from them. She wears a bizarre two-piece outfit with a gold faux fur collar. Heath does not

mention the bodies that show up outside his apartment or in the nearby river.

Everyone here has an escape plan.

"Do you want to make out?"

Heath's sister Janet was twelve, two years younger than Heath. Heath's attic room had a single, tiny window. One wall held a plywood base on which Heath constructed

mountains, trees, houses, and roads. His model cars were lined up along one end in perfect precision.

"My friends and I practice all the time," Janet said.

"I once did something very terrible."

"With Uncle Don?"

"Don took me to stock car races," Heath said. "For that, I am eternally grateful."

"Just make sure you're never

alone with him." Janet tapped Heath's chest. "Especially when he's drunk."

When Don arrived for Friday dinner, bearing his bottle of wine and a cluster of grapes for Janet, Heath waited in the driveway.

"If you're drunk, you can't come over anymore."

Heath's father never understood why his best friend never visited again.

When Heath was a senior and Janet a junior, she tapped again on the door to his attic room.

"I need you and all your friends." Janet was in charge of procuring dates for the boarding juniors and seniors for spring prom at her prep school.

"It's not as if they get a chance to meet anyone appropriate," Janet said. She was on scholarship, a day student, and, therefore, presumed to have access to men.

Boys. Dates.

"My friends and I are appropriate?"

"Rent a tux."

On prom night Heath led a procession of gleaming cars down Interstate 5, and then to the high gates of Janet's school. Girls leaned out the leaded-glass windows of the upper floor dormitories. As each of Heath's friends was announced inside the main lobby, a girl descended the curving staircase. She slid her hand into the crease of the boy's arm, and they walked together into the formal ballroom.

To thank him, Janet matched Heath with Jiffy, the most beautiful senior. She had creamy skin and high cheekbones, and she was almost as tall as Heath. It was the style for the younger girls to have a crush on one of the seniors. Most had crushes on her.

Jiffy murmured into Heath's ear and led him out a narrow side door. They descended into a labyrinth of tunnels beneath the school. Heath felt like an ant moving in a giant underground cavern. Jiffy removed a loose wedge in the stonework and extracted a flask. She smelled like salt on the shoreline when the tide receded.

Every Saturday for the remainder of the school year, Heath drove his turquoise Mustang to the school's

arched entryway, was buzzed in by the night watchman, and waited on the burgundy love seat in the great hall until Jiffy descended. Each week, she selected an elegant restaurant for their date.

During finals, Jiffy called Janet into an empty classroom. "Tell your brother I can't see him anymore." This was the first time any non-scholarship girl had spoken to Janet unless she absolutely had to.

"Can't you talk to him or write him a note?" As a bell called the girls to chapel, Jiffy scrawled something onto a scrap of paper.

Heath failed most of his own final exams. Janet tiptoed around the house as if he were ill.

Janet was small, slim, and pretty, with short curly hair. The night before she was to enter the prep school as a sophomore, she broke out in acne for the first time, and it didn't go away for the next three years. Despite the prep school's promise to procure Janet a full ride to the Ivy of her choice, their father wanted Janet to be a flight attendant. Heath filled out the application, and soon received a call from a recruiter in Houston. He fasted for two weeks.

"That's not going to change your height," Janet said.

In Houston, Heath wore flat shoes and slouched.

"Stand up straight!" the recruiter said.

On the flight home, Heath got very drunk.

As Janet aged step by step along with Heath, she attracted what their father called the "endless stream." He meant men. He did not know Janet or Heath was scarred by Don's early attentions, and they didn't know either. At any rate, it would never have entered their minds to confide in him. Between marriages, affairs, dissolutions, and bifurcations, Janet joined 12-step programs. Holidays, once made bearable by drinking that began at Thanksgiving and continued through New Year's, became dramas. When Heath offered his tray of carefully prepared drinks, Janet burst into tears and called her latest boyfriend "in the program" to drive a hundred miles in the middle of the night. Heath hid his flasks in the pantry

beside the washer and dryer. He and his father hunkered over stacks of laundry to pour whiskey into their morning coffee.

For the first and only time, they were close.

On the final day of his life, the old man perched on his peach-colored couch and leafed through the photo album from his birthday party the previous week.

"Well, that's that." The old man placed the album on the low table beside the couch. "What are you going to do with your life now, without me to take care of?"

A few hours later, when Heath returned to prepare the evening meal, he found the old man curled up on the couch.

"Just like a newborn baby," Heath told Janet. Janet called 911 and the EMTs shocked the body with paddles. The body twitched like a fish.

"Being with you must have finished him off," Janet said.

Heath's students liked the tall, handsome substitute teacher and the way he paced the aisles and learned their names the first day. At RockYourSub.com, Heath was a "red hot chili pepper." As the students worked at their computers, Heath glanced at his monitor. If he pushed the wrong button, his e-mails would be illuminated on the gigantic screen in the front of the room. He posted his romantic and employment profiles on dozens of sites. He received thousands of responses. He wondered what lies they told. On one site, Janet was "matched" with him.

"Your profile has nothing to do with who you actually are," she said. "I wouldn't even know it was you."

Heath hated the question: What is your type? Blond? Petite? Full? Likes Szechwan/Vietnamese? Movies? Walks in the park? "The penis doesn't lie," Isaac Singer said, although Heath realized that was not true. The penis could repeatedly con you. Heath tried inanimate women, mannequins, and cybergirls. His fleeting erotic loves soothed him. In chat rooms Heath could camouflage, deviate. At first, he spied on other worlds. Then he inhabited them. The greatest thrill had been crossing the line to become a woman, and then

lurking for someone like him, someone he never found. As a woman, he learned why women thought men were jerks.

"You just want to return to your youth," his girlfriend said when he told her he was thinking of teaching in Mexico for the winter. Trying to escape his father and sister, his country, at 19, Heath had volunteered in an orphanage outside Jalisco for six months. It was the happiest time of his life.

Maggie had a great sense of style. She scoured boutiques and secondhand shops for one-of-a-kinds that would not qualify as couture, but looked hip on her. When he was with her, Heath could do anything, say anything, and she never remembered. In the moment,

"I'm on electronic monitoring," he complained. Sometimes, when he couldn't sleep, he looked out the window and saw Maggie's orange MG parked beside his Mustang in the lot.

he made pronouncements of love and passion and forever. He liked girls who had no brakes. He liked the Hank Snow song, "Goin' 90 miles an hour down a dead end street."

"Do you even know what border towns are like?" Maggie asked. "*Maquiladoras*?"

"Why don't you come with me?" Heath asked, although he wasn't sure he meant it. Maggie called him at work, on his cell, and on the land line at his condo. She e-mailed and texted. If she could not reach him, she called Janet.

"I'm on electronic monitoring," he complained. Sometimes, when he couldn't sleep, he looked out the window and saw Maggie's orange MG parked beside his Mustang in the lot.

Heath read to Maggie: "Five minutes from culture. Enjoys a subtropical climate with an average annual temperature of 74."

Flores, the recruiter for the Mexican college, called almost as often as Maggie. "You will have a luxury apartment near campus. All

expenses paid."

On their final Sunday before Heath left, Heath and Maggie wandered the open air market hand in hand, picking out fruits and vegetables to fill Maggie's refrigerator. Heath worried that Maggie did not eat enough.

Heath stopped in front of a booth that sold plants. "I like bonsai," he said.

"That makes sense."

"Why does that make sense?"

"Because you like control." Heath edged away. "It's a control issue. Like ejaculation." For years, he couldn't and didn't really see the thrill in it. Then he discovered the thrill, and for a while was more relaxed.

"You can't handle death," Maggie

said. "You're running away from your father's hatred."

"He's dead," Heath said. "I accept it." Although it was true he felt the grip of the old man pulling him into the grave.

At four in the morning the first day of the new year, Maggie dropped him at the airport. With his earplugs, headset, and two pills, the flight dissolved into white noise. Heath awoke over the Gulf of Mexico as the sun set in unlikely shades of orange, green, and turquoise on stucco mansions with bright-blue spots of pool. The cabin smelled like burned coffee.

The other passengers vanished out the front doors of the airport, and Heath looked for someone with a sign, perhaps flowers, or a small delegation of children. He heard the synchronized thud of marching feet, and a posse of 15 men in tight yellow shorts and matching polyester shirts marched into the empty lobby, circled it once, and then left. A tiny woman flew through the door.

"I am so sorry," she said,

breathless. "The Directora will kill me!" Zisa was the Directora's assistant. She sped past a tiny graveyard that adjoined the airport parking lot, and gestured at the box stores and fast food outlets that lined the arterial. Zisa seized a cell phone and thrust it at Heath. "You tell her! Tell her you are here!" Zisa lit a cigarette with a lighter shaped like the Empire State Building.

At the border nobody asked for Heath's papers or checked his bag. Flawless highways gave way to piles of bricks and debris. Traffic lanes were separated by fences with gaping holes. Zisa darted through a small hole into oncoming traffic, then back into her own lane before skidding to a stop. As Zisa extracted a key and opened a door, Heath wrestled his green suitcase from the back of the tiny car. The door opened into an inner courtyard paved with large red tiles. Dead ficus stood in huge clay pots beside a wide wooden door across the courtyard. "Ulga! It's Zisa!"

After a long pause, the door opened, and a woman stood blocking the entrance. She said nothing. Ulga had wide blue eyes and curly brown hair. She wore tight turquoise shorts, her bare legs pale beneath them, and a loose, almost transparent top, tied at the bodice with a ribbon. She held a limp pink object against her belly.

"Mission accomplished," Zisa said, and she turned and ran away across the courtyard.

"What are you doing here?" Ulga asked in a flat voice. The pink bundle lifted its head, and Heath saw it was a puppy—a poodle.

"Flores," Heath said. The puppy licked Ulga's arm. As if she had survived a terrible accident, Ulga's arms and legs were streaked with white scars. "Flores said I must arrive today so I could start orientation tomorrow."

"Orientation?" Ulga laughed, a harsh, guttural sound. "You think you're going to have fucking orientation?" Heath lifted the limp pink rag into his arms, cradling the puppy like an infant, and he edged into the apartment.

As Heath explored the apartment, Ulga talked. In the past six months, she had lived in five

countries. She departed each under dramatic circumstances. "The CIA was after me." That was Costa Rica. "I had to be smuggled out in the bottom of a boat."

In Korea, she was raped. "He left me for dead in a ditch." In Thailand, she took pity on a British man and moved him into her luxury accommodations.

"Ah, love," Heath said, examining the mold that lined the inside of the refrigerator.

"He stole my identity and everything I owned," Ulga said. "I had to flee the country."

On the flight, she suffered an embolism in her leg. "Luckily, I was headed to Canada."

"Home and family."

"National medical," Ulga said.

"Could we turn down the TV?"

The effect of the blue pills had long since worn off, and Heath's nerves felt like they were on the outside of his skin. Ulga snapped off the TV, picked it up, and tossed it into a small room with two single beds. Heath wondered if they were expected to room together. Flores hadn't said anything about a roommate.

"I need to unpack," Heath said.

"Flores doesn't even know you're here," Ulga said. "They threw *me* into a classroom of students who don't speak a word of English, and I'm supposed to teach them British literature."

"May I use your cell?"

He carried the phone onto a small balcony, and for a moment, he heard Maggie's voice.

"Maggie?" Heath said. "Maggie?"

Ulga was standing so close beside him, he jumped. "Happens all the time," she said cheerfully. She extracted the cell from his hand.

That evening, Ulga went out, and Heath began to clean the apartment. He was on his hands and knees in Ulga's closet, rolling up newspaper covered with dog shit, when he heard the front door open.

"What the fuck are you doing?"

Ulga started to scream. "That's Buddha's room."

"This place is filled with Buddha's shit," Heath said.

"Don't touch my newspapers."

"Stop screaming, Ma."

"I'm sorry. I talk too loud. I'm

slightly deaf. What did you just call me?"

"I'll buy you more newspaper," he said.

"I'll get you for this."

Ulga sat and watched as Heath scrubbed the apartment with disinfectant and spread fresh newspaper. Every page featured a corpse. This 12-year-old's skull was crushed when a car struck his scooter. This 10-year-old was raped by her uncle. Heath spread a flag of paper behind the plastic ficus. These two women were found bound and beaten on a deserted road. "The deaths are believed to be gang-related," the headline said.

"Everyone here is in the Mob," Ulga said. "Wait until you meet Directora."

"The Mob runs the schools?"

"You'll see," Ulga said. "I'm only waiting for my paycheck, and I'm out of here."

"Where to?"

"Thailand," she said. "It's paradise. You should come with me."

"I thought your boyfriend stole your identity?" But Ulga wasn't

Shepherds, Lhasa Apsos, and golden retrievers. Ulga extracted the poodle from her massive straw basket. A man inside the store led Ulga and Heath to an alcove. He placed the limp puppy on a metal tray. Its cropped tail thumped. The man plucked bottles from shelves and extracted a syringe.

Heath read the label of the bottle. "What does this do?" he asked.

"The puppy swallowed some of its hair. This will make it vomit."

"What is he saying?" Ulga peeled a wad of dollars from a wallet embroidered with figures of Mexican gods and birds.

"The puppy has hairballs," Heath said. Ulga tucked the puppy back into her straw bag.

"If this puppy dies," Ulga said, "I die."

The pet store man went out into the heat to attend to some customers, and Heath touched one of the white, slightly raised lines along Ulga's arms. "How did you get those scars?" Ulga lifted her blouse and tugged down her bra. It was as if someone had attempted to saw off her breast.

He carried the phone onto a small balcony, and for a moment, he heard Maggie's voice.

"Maggie?" Heath said. "Maggie?"

listening. She held Buddha to her face and kissed him.

"This is my boyfriend," she said.

As if racing through a war zone, Ulga dragged Heath between speeding cars and stacks of rubble. They crossed a canal with a jacket of green slime. Edges of appliances and cars thrust from the surface. Heath thought he saw a hand rising from the rubble, but Ulga refused to let him stop. Beneath a nearby bridge, people sold scraps of clothing. In the propane-scented air, Heath's face was coated with fine dust. From the sidewalk outside the pet store, Heath could see his own country, with its miles of perfectly paved highway. On the sidewalk in the hundred-degree heat were cages of cocker spaniels, pit bulls, poodles, bull mastiffs, German

"My eight-year-old son came home from school one day and found me in a pool of blood."

That evening Heath chopped fresh avocado and squeezed lime juice over the chunks. He chopped tomato and cilantro. He inhaled the musky scent. As he unwrapped the paper that enveloped the fresh tortillas and turned on the flat-topped range to warm them, he felt a searing pain in his foot. Heath flipped the range off. Fire rose through every vein in his body. He saw the half-dead wasp where his bare foot had crushed it. In a moment, Ulga appeared holding a syringe.

"Morphine," she said. "Pure."

"This is a bee sting," Heath said. "Get that out of here." Ulga stepped closer.

"I need ice," Heath said. "Or



baking soda."

"You're crazy."

After rummaging through the freezer, Ulga found an ice cube. Heath tucked it into his sock and hobbled back to the kitchen.

"Maggie wants me to come home," Heath said. "Her father is dying."

"She's just trying to manipulate you," Ulga said. "Trust me. I know."

"Your family manipulates you?" He had overheard her talking to someone on her cell. "I need to come home," she was saying. Her voice was different from the one she used with Heath or Flores.

"My family won't have anything to do with me," she said.

"Keep secrets secret," Heath said.

The puppy screamed the entire night. When Heath returned from work in his teacher's uniform, dusty and exhausted, the puppy seemed to have actual tears behind the pink curls. Heath fashioned a sling from one of Ulga's scarves so he could carry Buddha around the apartment as he prepared dinner. Still, in the night, the puppy screamed, but in the morning it lay on its back, playing with a toy between its two front paws. Perhaps it was getting

better.

The next day Heath arrived back at the apartment to find the front door open. "Ulga?" Heath sat on his narrow single bed. The smell seemed stronger here. He looked beneath the bed. Heath removed his shirt and placed it gently over the puppy, then tucked the edges beneath the feet and finally, over the palm-sized head.

Ulga appeared in the doorway. "What the hell is your problem?" she said. When she saw the shirt he held clutched against his chest, she began to howl, a sound far worse than anything Heath had heard in his entire life. Still holding the puppy, Heath leaned his full height against the wall, and his tears fell straight from his eyes to the floor.

In his seat at the rear of the cabin, Heath inserted his yellow earplugs, and then placed the headset over his head. His cell phone had never worked during his entire stay. Now it vibrated in his pocket, and he lifted it out to see someone had left a message.

"We are watching you." It sounded like the Directora, but he could not be sure.

The airplane moved slowly from

the loading ramp, accelerated, and began to rise. Heath stared out at the glistening coast, the silted levies, and the bright mansions with their blue eye of pool. He reached over his head and pressed a button. A steward appeared beside him.

"I'm sick," Heath said.

"Go," the flight attendant said. He shrugged. Heath fought gravity to climb the aisle as the jet continued to angle upward. He could have been a terrorist, he thought, but the passengers were already asleep, and nobody even glanced at him.

about the author

Kirie Pedersen's M.A. and B.A. are in fiction writing and literature, where she worked closely with Annie Dillard and Eugene K. Garber. Shorter works have appeared or are forthcoming in Quiddity International Journal and Public Radio program, Wisconsin Review, RiverSedge, and Glossolalia, among others. She resides between New York City and the Seattle area.

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