

ANNA SEIDMAN

Untitled (TpPt2), 2015

Tape and water-based paint on rag, 10.75 x 13.75 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

CHARLIE JANE ANDERS

Captain Roger in Heaven

1. Marith

Marith didn't mean to start a sex cult, she just wanted to feel sexy for once. She had a stiffness in her neck and shoulders, like a harness she could never unbuckle, and recurrent pain between the notches of her elbows, and she couldn't tell occupational pain from psychosomatic pain any more. Maybe it was all psychosomatic, one way or another. Marith lived near the Silver Spring station, in one of those narrow brick tenements that's an apostrophe in someone else's sentence. She worked in a record store that also sold sports memorabilia and old video games, and after work she went to the bowling alley, where she never bowled or watched anyone bowl. She sat with her back to the lanes, sipping a Bud Light and listening to the sound of the balls crashing against the pins, which made her feel like she was on a cruise ship.

This one night, a girl was sitting next to Marith at the bowling alley. Tanya was a grad student in psychology, who laughed with a skittishness that said she always put all of herself out there. Tanya's pale skin looked like it bruised at the merest touch, so she probably thought all hurt was superficial, and her blonde hair flopped in front of her perfect cheekbones. She was so damn beautiful, and she was talking about operant conditioning in a way that made Marith's heart clatter. Any moment now, Tanya would realize that she was talking to a dull person, and then she would bail.

So when Tanya asked Marith about herself, she lied: "Well," she said, "I work in a record store. But actually I'm apprenticed to Timur. He's a sex prophet. He doesn't like the word 'guru' because it's appropriative, and he's not really a sex 'god' or anything. Just a prophet." She found herself talking about Timur for hours: his shrewd teachings, his ability to collect orgasmic energy (or "Argroms") in a kind of flower vase for later use. His ability to make anyone sexually crazy just by inscribing symbols in midair. Tanya wanted to meet this amazing man, of course, so Marith had to improvise.

"He doesn't want to meet any new people," Marith said, keeping her voice down, so Tanya practically had to kiss her to hear. "He's very secluded and reclusive and secretive. People are always trying to steal his secrets or investigate him or exploit him, so he has to be really really careful. He

waited a long time before he would take me back to his vellum, which is what he calls his sanctum.”

“Wow,” said Tanya, her pale blue eyes widening. “I’m really fascinated by the idea of collecting orgasmic energy. I actually did a big research project on Wilhelm Reich and his theories about cosmic life energy. But I always suspected that orgone was too nebulous and omnipresent to be useful, and I like the idea of focusing on just sexual energy. Plus I think the notion of collecting energy in a vase rather than a box is really clever, because it’s less square. And I’m very curious about what kind of techniques your friend is using, it sounds like there must be a mixture of NLP and Tantra and a few other things. I promise I won’t tell anybody anything, but I would just love to meet this man for myself.”

“Well,” Marith said. “I’m afraid I can’t just introduce just anyone to Timur. I have to be able to vouch for you first.”

“Is there *anything* I can do to earn your trust?” Tanya said, long slender fingers just resting on Marith’s tanned forearm.

At the well of Marith’s home, in her narrow bed, Tanya shucked her clothes like she was changing into the best costume ever, and then she bounced on the bed, totally naked and completely hairless as well, her toes fanning in midair as she laughed and demanded that Marith show her just a hint of the secrets of Timur, the Sex Prophet.

“Well. I’m not supposed to practice them with outsiders.” Marith disrobed more slowly, feeling self-conscious about her rounded workaday body. “But, I mean, also it could be too much for a normal person. I don’t want to overwhelm you.”

“I’m ready,” Tanya said.

“Maybe you should smoke this,” Marith said, handing Tanya a pipe and a lighter. “Just to help you get in the right frame of mind so it doesn’t shock you too much.” She made sure Tanya smoked two whole bowls before she tried to do one of the Sacred Runes. “This one is called the Righteous Goat. Let me get the fingers the right way—just watch out, because this is going to send a pure energy surge right into your neocortex. Are you ready?”

Tanya nodded, total solemnity in her dilated eyes.

Marith spent a minute arranging the fingers of both hands into the coolest goat-shaped pretzel she could

manage. Then she turned around and pressed her hands into the center of Tanya’s collarbone, pushing her back into the bed so she nearly banged her head against the tiny bookcase. “Expelliarmus!” Marith shouted.

“Ooh,” Tanya said, wrinkling her nose and smiling. “I definitely felt something. That was cool.”

“You did?” Marith said. “I must tell Timur, he’ll be so pleased to hear that.”

“Do it again!” Tanya said. Marith did it again.

After that, Marith and Tanya hung out twice a week for a month or two, and Marith teased the younger woman with hints of the forbidden knowledge of Timur the Sex Prophet. But unfortunately, by the time Tanya proved that she was ready to meet the great Timur, the Sex Prophet had left town for a few months—he was visiting some of his disciples in Lithuania, and Marith wasn’t sure when he would be back. “But he told me to keep practicing while he’s gone, and also to work on perfecting the Orgasmic Energy Vase.”

“I think I know someone who might be able to help us with the vase thing,” Tanya said. “There’s a cute postdoc in the physics department named Leon, who consulted me for a project he was doing in his spare time on parapsychology—you know, the notion that stray psychic energy could become trapped in higher levels of reality, or cosmic ’branes. I think he would be very interested to hear about Timur and to meet you. Plus he’s really, really cute.”

“Okay,” said Marith, feeling nervous about trying to bring another person in on her Sex Prophet hoax, but not sure how to get out of it. “Okay, sure. I’ll check with Timur. But I’m sure he’ll say it’s fine.”

2. Carolyn

Carolyn felt like a walking cliché: thirty-five years old, never had an orgasm. She wasn’t repressed; she’d had a decent number of lovers and one and a half husbands. But she just hadn’t quite ever “gotten” there, either on her own or with anybody else, and she’d never wanted to make a big deal about it. She enjoyed the act, she felt thrilled and playful and adored in bed, and she hadn’t thought it was worth being goal-oriented or whatever. Maybe she’d read too many issues of *Cosmo* and gotten too good at faking. Now she was alone, after a slew of condescendingly gentle practical

jokes, and wasn’t sure she needed another permanent presence in her bed ever again.

But then she kept seeing those sex fiends, handing out their literature at the farmers’ market or roller-skating in the park. Holding hands. Laughing too much. Carolyn decided to take a leaflet as a joke, or a conversation starter at the next committee meeting, and the guy with the cloud beard let his hand brush hers when he wished her a frenzy day. (Friendly day? She couldn’t tell if it was “frenzy” or “friendly.”) The leaflet talked about their Sex Prophet, Timur, who had Ascended to another plane of sexuality, but you could bring him back to Earth with the right hand runes and enough stored energy inside an Orgasmic Energy Vase. It was goofy but also kind of sweet, with all its talk about the importance of being Considerate. The Clan of Miasma didn’t seem to impose much morality on its twenty-odd members, but the main exhortation seemed to be Consideration.

Carolyn found herself parking a half a mile down the road from the three-story plantation-style house where the Clan of Miasma mostly lived, like she was just going to scope it out. She ventured a little closer, just close enough to stand by the edge of the gravel driveway, when something flew at her. She flinched—but it was a Frisbee. Somehow, she caught it and threw it back to the thrower, who was the cute cloud-beard boy who’d given her the leaflet. She wound up playing Frisbee with cloud-beard, whose name was Greg, and another guy named Jamil for an hour without anybody trying to tell her about Timur or his Sex Prophecies, or Argroms, or nth-dimensional orgasms, or any of that stuff.

“It all just sounds kind of ridiculous,” she told Greg.

“Oh, it’s totally ridiculous,” Greg said. “I’ve seen proof, but I still don’t really believe any of it. I’m just waiting for a better explanation to come along for the things I’ve seen.”

She came to their house three more times without taking off any of her clothing or seeing anybody else naked. They did show her the vases, of which they seemed very proud, and demonstrate to her a little bit of the interdimensional palpation techniques they had been developing.

The fourth time she came out to the Clan of Miasma’s house, she couldn’t get in at first, because *they* were blocking the driveway. A gang of well-dressed people, mostly white, holding signs with Bible verses on them and praying

loudly. One baby-faced man yelled about false idols and people being led into temptation and consigned to Hellfire. Carolyn hadn’t ever been religious, and she still mostly thought the Clan of Miasma were a bunch of goofy weirdos who would make a good story down the line, but she found herself getting offended on the Clan’s behalf by the fact that the First Church of Galilee, the megachurch over in Chevy Chase, had bused in a whole gang of protesters.

They pushed against her, shoving their bibles in her face and shouting with their starchy breath in her face. One of them even spat on her.

“You people,” she shouted at the clean-cut prayerful mob, “have too much time on your hands.” They just jostled her harder, cried to Jesus and tried to lay hands on her, until she felt herself destabilized, falling to the ground, in danger of being trampled under their nice boots.

Carolyn finally pushed her way through and marched up to the Clan’s veranda. She barely made it inside the house before she tore off all of her own clothing, so emphatically she lost a button. “I want you”—she flung her panties—“to harvest all the goddamn orgasmic energy out of me that you possibly can.”

Greg and Jamil looked at each other, raising an eyebrow. “I think we can do that,” Greg said.

“Challenge accepted,” said Jamil.

Carolyn started spending a lot of time at the house after that, whenever she wasn’t working in the oncologist’s office where she did the billing or helping out with the homeless shelter where she volunteered one night per week. She found that being around all these freaks made her feel younger than she’d felt in years, and the orgasms were actually pretty splendid after all. She got to experiment with sex with women and assorted others and also discovered that threesomes were just more Companionable than other kinds of sex—that was another word the Clan liked, along with Considerate. They liked things that were Companionable. There was refreshingly little talk about Timur, their departed Sex Prophet, although people made jokes about him sometimes.

So Carolyn was there the day the government delivered the Visualizer. “What the fuck is this?” Tanya, the perky blonde who was sort of in charge around here, demanded of the man in the gray uniform who rolled up the giant cardboard box on a hand truck.

“Government regulations, ma’am,” said the man, who had a few tufts of curly hair under his plain gray cap. “Your religion has reached a large enough membership to receive its own Visualizer.”

“Visualizing what?” Tanya asked.

“The Afterlife, ma’am,” the man said, giving her papers on a clipboard to sign.

The device was like a big old television set, but with an alphanumeric keyboard along one side instead of a channel tuner. You could type in the complete name of anyone who had died, recently or long ago, and it would show you where they were in the Afterlife. After this technology had been developed, the Christians had pushed through a law insisting that every religion over a certain membership threshold had to own one. And then there had been some controversy because devout Jews went to no afterlife that the device could visualize, nor could it really represent Nirvana or samsara or reincarnation. And there had been a bit of a political scandal when people discovered just how many U.S. presidents were being flame broiled in a very Hieronymus Bosch-inspired Hell.

So the members of the Clan of Miasma amused themselves for an hour or two plugging in the names of their grandparents and various rock stars and their old grade-school teachers. But this became too depressing after a while, and they rolled into the corner and put a cloth over it.

By the time Carolyn moved out of her tiny apartment and into the Clan of Miasma’s house, she didn’t even think of it as joining a cult any more—she just enjoyed hanging out with these people, and the frankly incredible sex was just a tiny part of a very Companionable existence. Apart from the fact that she sometimes had to cross a line of prayerful maniacs to go home after work, she stopped thinking of it as a big deal or anything.

Until one day, Carolyn was walking from her car to the homeless shelter, hoisting a big box of hamburger buns for the evening meal they were going to be serving, and she didn’t see a beer truck coming out of a convenience store driveway until it crushed her.

After the Clan of Miasma buried Carolyn and had a pretty low-key improvised ceremony—she was the first of their members to die on them, and they hadn’t come up with anything yet—they resisted the temptation to look

at the Visualizer for as long as possible. But at three in the morning, the night after they’d put her in the ground, Greg found himself coming down the stairs in just his boxer shorts and turning the machine on.

And there was Carolyn, submerged naked in a lake of fire, with demons pulling out her eyes and tongue with exquisite slowness. Those fuckers had been right. She’d gone to Hell.

3. Leon

“We don’t know that this thing even works.” Tanya gestured at the hateful box yet again. It was still showing Carolyn, in Hell. Now they were flaying her skin in a slow spiral, like an orange peel, while she begged for someone, anyone, for mercy. “It could be a trick. A hoax. It’s showing exactly what they would want us to see.”

“If it’s a trick,” said Greg, who’d been one of Carolyn’s lovers and the closest to her of anybody, “they sure did a good job of capturing her likeness. How did they do that?”

They kept turning it off, but then that felt like turning their backs on her. Their friend and lover, being tortured. Brutalized. By the worst atrocities that an ageless imagination could come up with. Things that would be considered war crimes, or the actions of a major sociopath, if anybody did them on Earth. The games never stopped, but they changed every time anyone looked.

And meanwhile, the First Church of Galilee seemed to gain strength and intensity from what had happened to Carolyn. They were there every day, blocking the driveway, shaking their leather-bound volumes and waving signs about the fire that was waiting for everyone in this house. The Reverend Clark Barker himself seemed energized, licking his lips, like he’d just eaten a steak dinner.

For days, nobody could even talk, and when they talked about their vases and the teachings of Timur and all the rest of that crap, it was with a weariness, like they were all preparing to grow up at last. What choice did they have, now that they knew Pascal’s Wager was rigged? They all had a gun to their heads.

Leon couldn’t sleep for three days because he could dream of nothing but Carolyn’s face, distorted, as though she was squeezing out tears with her cheek muscles.

Endless promethean mutilation. Leon had barely known Carolyn and he’d never had sex with her or anything. (He’d never been intimate with anybody here, aside from one fully clothed cuddle session with Marith, the Clan of Miasma’s housekeeper and head bottle washer.) Leon was here for the physics.

Leon’s postdoc had been going down the tubes when Tanya had shown up one day and told him about this wild orgasmic energy project. The notion of chasing a quasi-Reichian whip-poor-will had seemed liberating, since he’d spent months bashing his head against a wall made of superstrings. And soon they were collecting energies that Leon could not name, much less understand, and it had only made sense to start recruiting more subjects. Until suddenly, they had a house full of people, and a name, and teachings. Leon couldn’t help feeling he’d helped lead Carolyn into damnation.

Microsleep seized Leon, pulling him into tiny slices of dreams, and in them Carolyn always called out for his help, his personally. Leon took comfort in dumb repetition, like brushing his teeth for two straight hours, and that’s when he found the answer.

“Wait a minute,” he said out loud, to the bathroom mirror. “Carolyn went to *their* afterlife because we don’t have one of our own. We just need to make our own afterlife, and then we’ll be fine. Maybe we can even rescue Carolyn eventually.”

He explained it to Tanya twice before she could understand his sleep-deprived rambling. And then she shook her head. “How do you *make* an afterlife?” she asked. “Isn’t it just something that exists? What would you even make one out of?”

“I don’t know,” Leon said. “I’m guessing we would make it out of orgasmic energy. We have vases and vases, lest you forget. Maybe if you get enough Argroms focused in one spot, you can open up a pocket reality? And then you just have to set up some kind of conduit, so that people go there after they die.” Leon started to make one of his trademark weird jokes, but he was too wiped and this conversation was already weird enough.

“Shit,” Tanya said. “You’re right, we have to do this. But damn. I mean, if we were supposed to have our own afterlife, wouldn’t Timur have said something? I wish Timur was still here. He would know what to do.”

“What was he like?” Leon asked. “Timur? I mean, what was it like to be around him?”

Tanya bit her lip, and looked down, then looked up again with a practiced expression. “Timur was very, very gentle,” she said. “He was a very gentle and kind person. I feel like he still talks to me sometimes.”

“Well, if he talks to you any time soon,” said Leon, “ask him how to open an nth-dimensional conduit that can capture someone’s essence immediately after death. Because I have a feeling the physics are going to be insane.”

Leon looked out at the window at the dozen or so people waving their signs on the driveway. He could just make out what they were chanting if he listened hard. They seemed to be able to sustain anger and judgment for hours, without needing to refuel. The longer he stared, the more it seemed to Leon that the Christians were generating their afterlife, focusing psychic energy so that they made a stable conduit and created something on the other side of it. They were almost writing lines of code in the fabric of reality.

Leon still didn’t have sex with any of the other Clan members, but he watched them more intently than ever. He measured their Argrom levels and tried to build some tool sets to direct the amassed energy to a single point in space-time until it began to weaken and perturb. Like a lens distorting, or the rainbows that form on a soap bubble. The more people having sex at once, the greater the dimensional flux. “You may want to start recruiting new members more aggressively,” Leon told Tanya.

And he also noticed something else. One time, Jamil the chubby comic-book geek started spanking Donnie the aspiring bluegrass musician with one hand while sticking two fingers of his other hand in Donnie’s asshole, and Jamil teased Donnie about the squealing sounds he was making. And Leon discovered that the readings were all of a sudden off the frigging chart. Like, there was a localized space-time event forming in the middle of the room, and it was practically like the pearly gates were opening to their very own private Heaven.

“Sexual humiliation,” Leon told Tanya that evening. “It seems to increase the concentration and directionality of the energy flow. Also, edgeplay. Bondage, animal masks, clamps, enemas. I would experiment. I think we’re very close to a breakthrough. So to speak.”

Tanya nodded slowly, like she was trying to figure out how she was going to explain this to her fellow Clan members.

“There’s something else,” Leon said. “Once we have a stable pocket universe, it’ll be basically just a blank void. A *tabula rasa*. It’s almost like programming a computer: we need to learn the language of afterlife creation and use it to construct a world that any of us would want to spend eternity in. I’m guessing that’s going to require a lot of dogma, or liturgy, or whatever.”

“You focus on trying to stabilize the pocket universe,” Tanya said. “Leave the rest to me. I think I know who to talk to about making it a proper afterlife.”

4. Sophie

The first few months Sophie was living at the Clan of Miasma’s house she barely even noticed Marith, the lady who seemed to be constantly scrubbing and cooking and keeping to herself. Tanya was their leader and frequently the center of attention, and Greg was the fun bouncy one. Jamil told all the silliest jokes and helped them get their sense of purpose back after Carolyn died. But the dark, curvy Marith just faded into the background, and she disappeared when everyone else was making sexytime.

But then one day Sophie noticed Marith standing in the kitchen watching some bread rise or something, wearing puffy oven mitts and a streaked apron over a long cotton dress. She leaned over to open a drawer, and her dress clung to her hips. Marith let out a deep sigh and straightened up, looking out the window with a dreamy look in her brown-green eyes. As if the snowdrifts were fairy dust. Her brown hair slipped out of its tie and fell along her neck, just grazing her collarbone, and her small mouth was pursing.

Sophie was filled with a sudden powerful desire. “I’d like to give you a bath,” Sophie told Marith, who smiled, slowly.

Sophie spent hours trying to come up with the perfect bath scenario. Candles, sure, but what else? Incense? Maybe a bath bomb from that fancy bath-and-body place downtown? What kind of music would make a bath sexier or more luxurious? Sophie wound up playing *Stevie Wonder’s Original Musiquarium I*, and she knelt at either end of the tub, kneading first Marith’s shoulders and then her

wide, expressive feet. Marith let out a slow sigh of pleasure.

Sophie was one of those people who are better at being desired than desiring. She’d had to learn from scratch as an adult how to sit and stand and walk, how to style her black hair, how to dress and do her nails and makeup. A feral creature until her early twenties, when she was doing a comp lit degree at American U., she had taken herself in hand at great expense. But she had no idea how to respond when men and some women started flirting with her and asking her out, because they took her at face value.

So the Clan of Miasma had come as a huge relief to Sophie. She could have sex with people she liked and admired, without having to go through the whole process of flirting and idealizing the other person, and being idealized, and imagining their sexuality in relation to her own. Just hook up, as long as everything else seemed copacetic. Sophie had pretty much nonstop sex, with all sorts of people, her first few months in the Clan, and they had built a whole Sophie Yang section of the Orgasmic Energy Vases. Eventually, though, she’d kind of slowed down, and the sex was no longer such a big thing for her.

But Marith was the first person Sophie had ever actually propositioned in her entire life. It felt thrilling and scary—weird, in a different way than learning to accept propositions from other people had been. But worth the plunge.

Sophie leaned in, cupping Marith’s face in both hands, and kissed her in a cloud of steam. Marith let out a deep moan, which encouraged Sophie to go further, and soon she had her hands around both of Marith’s breasts, kneading and splashing. They ended up on Marith’s bed in the back room, where nobody ever went, and Sophie took great precision in laying Marith down and exploring from her instep to her inner thighs with her tongue and her fingers.

Sophie slept in Marith’s bed that night and woke up feeling even more definite that she’d found where she belonged. They held each other a long time, curled around each other’s knees and elbows, and Marith smiled at Sophie with a drowsy warmth. “We should get up and have breakfast and start on our chores,” Marith said, but Sophie said just five minutes more.

Tanya came to see Marith a couple mornings later, while Sophie was still dozing in Marith’s bed. “I need to talk to you,” Tanya whispered, sounding way less

authoritative than Sophie had ever heard, “about Timur. I need to know more about him.”

“I already told you everything, twice,” Marith whispered back. “You know more than I do, at this point.”

“But I don’t know anything. How did you meet him? What exactly did he say, the last time you saw him? What does it mean that he transcended to another plane of sexuality?”

“You already know all of the answers,” Marith said. “In your heart.”

“For fuck’s sake. Don’t give me that. I am comfortable with a certain amount of bullshit for the sake of group cohesion, but this is me you’re talking to. Just tell me the truth for once.”

“Okay. Listen, Timur never really . . . Timur was kind of a . . .” Marith took a deep breath, as if she was going to say something difficult. Then she turned and looked over her shoulder at Sophie, who was sitting up in bed listening to this. Tanya couldn’t see Sophie, from where she was standing in the doorway, but catching sight of her new lover seemed to help Marith make a decision. “Timur taught me a rune, that I never showed anybody else, that could maybe let us reach that higher sexual plane. It’s called the Hair Tsunami. And “hair” can be spelled either way.”

“We need it. So bad,” Tanya said. “We think we’ve managed to create a stable opening in space-time after all, and we’ve glimpsed a pocket universe on the other side. But we need to turn it into something that has enough consistency and substance that you could spend eternity there. Marith, this is serious. You know what happened to Carolyn.”

“I do,” Marith said. “So the thing about Timur ascending to another plane of sexuality, here’s what I think it means. I think it has to do with tuning into the right kind of awareness. Like, when you’re getting close to an orgasm, and you feel like you’re leaving not just your body, but all of your *you*. Becoming free of all of the accumulated garbage, the neurosis, all the slowly decaying self-image that makes us who we are. Eventually, you might dissolve into a kind of blissful state of collective awareness, but it could take a couple million years.”

“So basically,” said Tanya, “a kind of slow shedding of character armor. Okay. That makes sense. But please, you gotta teach me that rune. And tell me every single detail you know about the cosmology and stuff. Where Timur

came from, what he said before he went away, what he believed in, everything.”

“I will,” Marith said. “Come find me after I get done helping with lunch. I’ll give you the full download.”

Sophie could barely wait until the door closed. “So wait. You were the only one who ever met Timur, in real life? Our glorious founder? So you’re *the* person who actually knows what we’re doing here? You have to tell me everything. I can’t believe it.”

Marith just smiled and finished putting on her floor-length skirt. “Timur didn’t found this community. We all did. It means whatever we decide it means.”

“Oh, la di da,” Sophie said. “That’s a lovely sentiment. But Timur was the one who gave us the runes, and, and the vases, and the principles we supposedly live by. And you were his anointed one. Why aren’t you in charge, anyway? Why are you hiding out back here and letting Tanya and Greg call all the shots? What is that about?”

“It’s my choice,” Marith said slowly. She put on one shoe, as if she hadn’t yet decided whether to put on the other one. “I never wanted to be in the forefront of any of this. I didn’t even expect any of this to become such a big deal. I didn’t choose anything, really. Timur chose me and gave me his teachings, and then Tanya found me. I was just a vessel, I guess.”

Sophie kept laughing, until she worried that Marith would think she was being mocked. “You are so much more than that.” Sophie came over to where Marith was sitting at the foot of the bed and touched her shoulders gently. “You’re the heart of this community. I saw it even before I knew any of this. And maybe it’s time for you to step forward and tell everybody what you know. You can’t hide forever.”

Marith shrugged. But then she turned and gave Sophie a slow kiss, touching Sophie’s face with one palm and then breathing in Sophie’s ear. Neither of them got out of bed that morning.

5. Brady

Stars showed through the slats in the porch swing, like skin under fishnet stockings, with just a blade of the young moon coming into view every now and then. Brady felt at peace lying there under the swing, even though he’d

taken too much of something, and then gotten frozen out of the orgy inside the big old house. Who gets shot down at an orgy? Brady felt the planks under his fingertips. His mouth tasted like the dry ice machine from every rave in art school, along with that glitter that was half edible, and everyone always forgot which half was which. Brady was going to get up and stagger home to The Ex any moment now. Then someone sat on the swing and started talking in a high, melodic voice about the death drive. Her voice was so sweet. Her ass hovered above Brady's face, denim blue, with a gluteal fold that enclosed every possibility in life. "But for people to cathect onto *me* as an alternative to confronting mortality salience is almost like, I don't know, libidinal bankruptcy—" Something in her voice made Brady certain of the rightness of his act, even as he reached one hand through the gap between the swing's two halves and made a cup.

Brady's hand got trapped. The owner of that incredible butt, the blonde girl who'd hosted the orgy—Tracey? Tanya? Tanya.—had leapt to her feet, and she had Brady's wrist in a crushing grip. Brady's whole body was contorted because his hand was stuck in the swing. Blood flow crimped. "Do that again and I'm calling the cops, asshole. Get the fuck out of here and never come back." He tried to explain that it was all fun and he meant nothing by it, and this was an orgy after all, but she flung him off the porch, using his own unsteady weight to send him into the driveway. Gravel all up in his face.

The Ex was awake when Brady got home. She had the television on, some dating game show, and was talking to her friend on the phone while swiping pictures on a tablet screen, and Brady had a pang of remembering when he had adored her lack of attention span. He and The Ex had broken up six months ago, but neither of them could afford to move out, and they were almost better at ignoring each other than they'd been at loving each other. Except as Brady headed for the walk-in closet where he'd set up a bedroll, he heard The Ex say "death drive" to her friend, and then he had to wait for her to get off the phone.

"What does that mean, 'death drive'?"

The Ex shrugged. "Freudian bullshit. We seek out painful experiences on purpose, so we can numb ourselves, because what we actually want is to return to nothingness."

Brady had a mental image of his hand coming up out

of a hanging chair, like a horror movie. "People seek out pain because they're stupid, though." That was the thing Brady had left art school understanding: people make complicated pieces of art to explain human behavior, when the real explanation is almost always stupidity.

"Like I said, bullshit." And then The Ex had headphones on, blasting Tay Swif, plus the TV turned up loud, and Brady went into his closet and groped in the dark for earplugs.

Months passed. Brady finally got his own place, miles from DC or Baltimore, with a couple of roommates who were half his age. A real bedroom meant he could do art again, in theory, and he set aside a few hours per week for cursing himself in front of a pile of unused art supplies.

One day Brady had a stabbing pain in his side, right where he'd hit the ground when Tanya threw him off the porch. Justice, he figured, but when the pain worsened he went to the ER, and they called it hepatitis. Transplant list so long, his name was on the elbow of the person holding the paper. Basically screwed. He read on the internet about people getting drugged and waking up in a bathtub full of ice with their liver missing, but Brady had no clue where to get that much ice, or a big enough tub.

Brady sat there in the ER, on the bench with the metal armrests, and tried to process the fact that he was going to die. He clutched at his side, which somehow hurt way worse now, and wondered who would miss him. Who would even pour one out at his wake? Would The Ex even show up? Then he realized, he wasn't just dying, he was going to Hell.

Brady hung out at a punk house where they had one of those Visualizers, which they'd just started selling at Walmart. There was this one painter, named Captain Roger, who used to have a show on PBS where he would paint a whole landscape in half an hour, wearing a sailor hat, and Brady had watched it every day in art school, eating Froot Loops from the box. Now Captain Roger was dead, but he'd gone to Heaven because he was a devout Episcopalian. He still did a whole painting in half an hour, but he was surrounded by angels and seraphim, and he painted waterfalls with sparkles and rainbows coming out of them. The Internet was full of gifs of Captain Roger in Heaven.

At some point, the punks got tired of watching Captain Roger and someone suggested switching to the Hell

Channel. The Hell Channel was a guy named James Dixon who had been a hot comedian for a minute, under the name of Jammy Dicks. He even got on the *Daily Show* once, as a guest correspondent. Now he was being deconstructed—his intestines unrolled, his organs sorted into neat piles, and so on—while he screamed and screamed. The punks recited Jammy Dicks's most emblematic comedy routines in unison—like the one about fat girls and K-Y Jelly—while they watched him get taken apart by fire-engine-red, leering monsters.

The next thing Brady knew, one of the punks was slapping his mouth while also talking in a very soothing voice. "Hey, man, it's cool, you're safe. We're all cool here." Another slap that rattled Brady's head. Brady realized that he was shaking and barking, and his face was soaked. He had no memory of the past few minutes. Brady tried to say that it was fine, he was under control, but it came out as yipping. His pants were wetter than his face.

"Shit, we better change the channel," one of the punks said.

They switched to Jiffy, who was an up-and-coming Visualizer star. Jiffy had been a gay rights activist in the seventies, and then a Radical Faerie in the nineties, and now he was a giant purple unicorn, with a dolphin's tail instead of back legs. He trotted/swam across the shimmering Fields of Liberation, under the beneficent smile of Timur the Sex Prophet, until he met a swarm of pixies (which were apparently another dead perv, named Rebekah.) Brady got his tongue back in his mouth, he started to feel calmer again. Timur seemed to smile directly at Brady, like it was all going to be fine.

The skinny blonde, Tanya, wouldn't even let Brady in the house. Brady was working hard to avoid looking like a crazy person. Like, he controlled his eyes so they didn't bug out. He was not muttering to himself in the middle of a conversation with another human. Even with his eyes open, he kept seeing Jammy Dicks having his body parts alphabetized. A large part of Brady felt like he was already in Hell and it was exhausting to pretend otherwise. "Please," Brady said. "I'm dying, they're going to get me. Please, I need Timur. Please."

Tanya actually rolled her eyes. "I'm sorry," she said through the chain. "I truly am. But we have a whole set of teachings now, we came up with seventy-two categories

of Consideration, based on Timur's precepts. And there's just no way we could accept you. Try the Hare Krishnas, or Eckankar."

Brady lost track of time, and then two large men were restraining him and he had blood in his eyes and mouth. "Not my fault!" he said. The two men gripping his arms were not demons, and they were not tearing his body apart. Important to remember. Blood mask disguised everything as itself. The porch light was a dark sun. The hands let go of Brady and he immediately lost balance and crashed. He heard a dread wail, coming closer. He lay in a fetal position under the porch swing, and he could see starlight through the slats again.

6. Tanya

Ernest Becker had ruined anal sex for Tanya. Any time she took it up the ass, or penetrated someone else anally with toys or strap-on, she found herself thinking about Becker's famous dictum, "We are gods with anuses." To Becker, who wrote *The Denial of Death*, this contradiction defined human nature: we are capable of such brilliance, such soaring imagination, but we still have to expel dead matter through our buttocks, reminding us we are going to die. As a grad student, Tanya became consumed with Becker's idea that you would go raving insane if you ever accepted the reality of death, even after her adviser (a Žižek fanatic) insisted that awareness of mortality was a precondition for consciousness. This bitter debate was why Tanya wrote in Sharpie on a classroom whiteboard, a species of textual murder-suicide that ended her academic career.

Now Tanya hunched on the caved-in sofa, listening to Greg rant about how they needed more rules so that people like that Brady asshole never even came near the Clan of Miasma. "There's going to be an army of Bradys at our door. We need a whole set of new rules, to weed out the shitheels." Tanya remembered when Greg used to be easygoing.

Tanya was only half listening to Greg. She couldn't help staring at Marith, who held hands with her new sweetie, Sophie, on a single tiny ottoman. The look of contentment on Marith's face, the faint flush as Sophie's free hand grazed Marith's ear. Marith had emerged all at once from her isolation and started socializing with the

rest of the Clan. Tanya couldn't even explain it to herself, but seeing Marith with Sophie felt like an unresolvable contradiction.

At first, Tanya thought she was feeling threatened by Marith's presence because Marith actually had a link to Timur, one that Tanya only pretended to have. But then she realized she didn't give a shit about her authority—she kept hearing that Joni Mitchell song in her head nonstop, the one that goes, “Lately I wonder what I do it for.” Tanya's phone had not stopped shivering in weeks. People needed answers: about the Seventy-Two Precepts, or the meaning of Desire without Self, or how they were going to get a plumber on the Saturday of a three-day weekend because the toilet was barfing again. The look in Brady's eyes, right before he started beating his head against the wall of their house, kept coming back to Tanya in flashes. Tanya used to worry the Clan of Miasma would go completely off the rails, but now she had the opposite fear: that her little family might be the only sanity left in a world of gods with anuses.

Marith didn't even notice Tanya's desperate gaze. And meanwhile, Timur kept staring at Tanya, with depthless eyes that never needed to blink.

The Sex Prophet hovered in the sky over their afterlife, *Shimsanpa*—blazing with inner light, like the sun in an old *Teletubbies* episode. He never spoke, but sometimes he seemed to see through the screen of the Visualizer and even maybe react to things people said in his presence. He was a Lithuanian man in his fifties or early sixties, with a high forehead, a neat beard that had one wispy braid hanging down, and a thin-lipped smile.

Timur, as an actual physical presence, had not been in any of the visions or lessons or maps of the afterlife that Tanya had cobbled together from what Marith had told her. But here he was. Tanya had started to see Timur's face as an indictment of her failure to make the Sex Prophet's teachings come alive. She'd left a Timur-shaped hole, and the dozen Clan recruits who had died thus far had filled it, with an actual Timur. Or else, this was the real Timur, and he had come to join his people. Either way, he crept under Tanya the fuck out.

“We need personality tests,” Greg was saying.

“You know who has personality tests?” Leon said. “The fucking Scientologists.”

Greg held up a tablet, with that website that ranked

religions according to quality of afterlife, plus ease of getting into the nice version for people who joined. The Clan of Miasma was right there at the top. “Just wait until we have a few thousand people in *Shimsanpa*, and they all have friends and relatives who want to join them,” he said. “*Shimsanpa* is clearly a product, at least in part, of the imaginations of the people who go there. Letting even just one psychopath in could be catastrophic.”

Tanya tried again to make eye contact with Marith, but she caught Sophie's eye instead. Sophie smiled at her, but it was not a friendly smile.

“I want to hear what Tanya has to say.” The challenge in Sophie's voice was unmistakable. “Tanya, you knew Timur better than anybody, right? So what would Timur say?” As Sophie spoke, Timur seemed to wink.

Of course. Marith had told Sophie the truth, that Tanya was a fraud. Tanya tried to play it off: “Well, I mean, Timur! He's inside all of us.” But this sounded shitty and unconvincing, even to her. What kind of half-assed cult leader was she? She tried for a tone of reassurance, but then she caught Timur's leering eye again and found herself in that kind of downward spiral where the fakery just eats itself. She'd burned out on dreading this moment, but now that it was here, she still couldn't stand it. “I,” Tanya said, “I mean . . . You know, I think. I mean. I don't know.”

Sophie kept dropping hints as subtle as dildos, and everybody started to wonder what was up. Timur seemed to laugh until his head wagged, like if he had a belly it would be heaving.

Tanya got up and walked out of the living room onto the porch where she nearly stepped on three people she didn't recognize who were daisy-chaining naked under that porch swing that Tanya kept wanting to throw in a bonfire. Brady was dead, and Tanya had not been able to summon the aplomb to look him up on the Visualizer. Out on the lawn the Christians waved signs and Tanya marched right up to them. The Reverend Clark Barker shook with rage—no, wait, it was tremors, and the left side of his face appeared immobilized, along with his left leg.

“So you've made your own Heaven.” The Reverend Clark Barker spat between facial tics. “Do you think that makes you God?”

Tanya shook her head. All she could think of to say was, “I don't believe in Heaven.”

Tanya walked down the road, past subdivisions where people were shouting in disjointed rhythms, past strip malls where tires and appliances were burning in the parking lot, past a Primitive Baptist church where a hostage crisis was taking place and the police spoke into bullhorns. She kept walking until her knees and hips were sore, under a sun that was strangely distant and faceless.

Somehow Tanya ended up at the bowling alley where she had first met Marith. She stood in the parking lot for a moment, watching the neon pins flicker, and thought about how she had come here with a couple other grad students, right after the Sharpie incident. They'd bowled a couple hours, and Tanya had kept noticing this beautiful girl at the bar, looking at neither the lanes nor the big-screen TV. She was just in her own head, as her hands played off each other, like they might have been fairy-tale puppets. Tanya kept looking over at this girl, whose brown lips always pursed, except when they lifted into a wicked half smile. A couple days later, Tanya had gone back to bowl alone, and the girl was there again, but none of Tanya's attempts at flirting had even made an impression. When Tanya went a third time to the bowling alley, she'd needed twenty minutes in this parking lot to psyche herself up—you can do this, you are a flirting wizard—before she'd sat herself down next to the cute girl and just introduced herself.

Now Tanya sat at that same bar, with a plastic cup of MGD, staring at the lines of notifications on her phone until she turned it off. On a weekday afternoon, she had the place to herself, except for one old guy at the bar and a couple of ladies bowling. The carpet underfoot was plastic shag, almost like a miniature golf course.

Sitting here, Tanya saw things more clearly than she had in months. She remembered Marith's smile as she'd spun this whole story about Timur, how shy and playful she'd sounded. Tanya tried to imagine the life she and Marith could have had. Just the two of them, living in an apartment above an antiquarian bookstore, eating the shitty fake Dan-Dan noodles that Tanya used to make out of instant ramen, soy sauce, Sriracha, and Skippy peanut butter. Every night Marith could have told Tanya more stories, about Timur or anything else she wanted. They could have fallen asleep watching television together, or reading books on human sexuality and folklore. Maybe she

could have taught Marith how to bowl. Tanya was starting to realize that the Clan of Miasma was a consolation prize.

Tanya had this idea, in the back of her head, that Marith would somehow guess where she had gone and would come looking for her. The only person who could possibly guess Tanya's location was Marith, and maybe she would show up alone. The two of them could talk in private, and Tanya could apologize, explain herself at last. Marith would beg Tanya to come back to the Clan, because Marith didn't want to be stuck being the voice of Timur herself, but maybe also because Marith still cared for Tanya? Maybe Marith would even say that she understood, and it wasn't Tanya's fault that Marith's private fancy had become this whole crazy production. Tanya had the whole conversation mapped out in her head.

But Marith never showed. After a few MGDs, Tanya felt wiped out, and the darkness outside was triggering a kind of primitive shelter instinct. She could probably crash with Joyce, one of her grad-school classmates, for a few days. But she kept remembering that she'd left an awful mess, back at the Clan house, and it was her responsibility. She had made her choice a long time ago. The power went out at the bowling alley, and Tanya was left staring at the silhouettes of bottles. Someone dropped a bowling ball on her own foot, and her yelps echoed around the room. Tanya's head started to throb and she was seeing migraine blobs, like afterimages of neon, as she sat alone in total darkness.

Charlie Jane Anders is the author of *All the Birds in the Sky*. She organizes the Writers With Drinks reading series and was a founding editor of io9, a website about science fiction, science, and futurism. Her fiction has appeared in *Tin House*, *McSweeney's Internet Tendency*, *ZYZZYVA*, *Pindeldyboz*, *Tor.com*, *Asimov's Science Fiction*, the *Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, *Lightspeed*, and a ton of anthologies. Her story “Six Months, Three Days” won a Hugo Award and her novel *Choir Boy* won a Lambda Literary Award.