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Trivia Night

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Fiction



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BY COURTNEY SENDER

ED SULLIVAN HAS BEEN HOSTING Balls-to-the-Wall Wednesday Night Trivia at Mad Maxie's for as long as anyone remembers. "Ed Sullivan" is not his real name.

He never drinks before he takes the microphone, but tonight he orders a tequila shot with salt along the rim. When I ask why, he tells me new people are coming today for his ten-year anniversary. I say congratulations, but I deflate; I didn't even know he was married.

"My ten-year anniversary at Mad Maxie's," he says.

"Congratulations," I repeat, punchy with relief, so I say before I can stop myself, "Do you want to come over for dinner? To celebrate?"

He smiles. I picture us from the outside: Ed Sullivan like some normal guy, ordering a drink, and me like some normal girl, elbow on counter, pouring it. He plucks the shot glass by its rim from my hand and says, "I'll meet you when I come down." He swallows the shot in one

quick gulp, then turns and walks to the stairs.

I watch the see-saw of his hips as he leaves. I wonder what will it be like, having Ed Sullivan for dinner — even though I know that Becky thinks Ed Sullivan is tragically hers, and I don't want it to get out that I think even the place where he's losing his hair is full of wonder.

Ed Sullivan is pacing the third floor of Mad Maxie's. This space was designed for trivia nights, my boss Liang says every Wednesday. Actually it used to be a fire station, but I agree: The ceiling is too high to notice, with whirling fans and a pole that reaches the floor between the bar on one wall and the booths on the other.

Ed Sullivan is standing behind the railing two stories high and looking down on all of us like God Himself, in pale skin, pink pants, a Hawaiian shirt, and a diamond earring as big as my fingernail. He raises his microphone and leads with a long A. "Aaand it's another Balls-to-the-Wall night at Mad Maxie's, the fairest game in town, where we never ask the same question twice! You know the drill, dear Hatters. Write your team names for my girl Becky at the Loco Lounge. That's this booth here, newbies, beside our resident Keeper of the Card — stand up and say hello, Becky!"

Beside me, Becky jams her heels into our red plastic bench and waves the cardboard sign where I write the weekly scorecard. I see that she's even more convinced that Ed Sullivan is in love with her. She winks, and the bar cheers longer for Ed Sullivan's girl than they ever do for me. I'm not offended; she needs the extra tips to feed her twins.

"Any new Hatters tonight?" Ed Sullivan says. He reads off the list of regulars and follows with, "Yes, we're joined tonight by two new contenders: the Brain Squad —" Even I can tell the name's pitiful. Boos

go up so loudly that Ed Sullivan says, "Now you play nice, Hatters. Show 'em what your Uncle Eddie taught you and give a Mad Maxie's welcome to our second new invention, That's What She Bled!"

The crowd whoops, and two under-sunned businessmen I don't recognize wave from baggy button-downs. The taller of the two, a bald man with gray stains under his arms — Benjo, that's what his credit card said — points at Ed Sullivan. I see Ed Sullivan, usually so smooth, fumble the microphone on its way to his lips.

The Valedicktorians, our all-time reigning champions, signal me over.

"Yeah?" I say.

"I been waving at you for five minutes," says their captain, Hal. "Get those guys a drink." He removes the Bail Bonds pen from behind his ear and aims the tip at the tall bald man. Hal works at an office supply store, but by night he's the local history pro for his team, answering questions about the Ravens cheerleaders and — more quietly — the new malls at the Inner Harbor. He puts a hand high up the side of my ribcage and I act like it's my waist; Hal loves winning and hates waiting, and he never has change for his twenties.

Ed Sullivan is swinging a packet of index cards over his head like a war hero waving from the deck of a ship. "Answers go on these slips, folks, then you've got *ninety*— nine-zero — seconds to run 'em to Becky. Win three rounds in a row and the Mad Hat Trick shot's on us. And you better win fairly because why?"

"We crack nuts!" the bar yells. Some guys who haven't broken Top Ten all year bang their fists on the corner table.

"We crack nuts!" Ed Sullivan calls back. "You cheat just once and you. Are." He waits, and the swell of voices picks up with him as the whole room says, "Outta here!"

Ed Sullivan stills. I close my eyes and bow my head to respect his

moment of silence, sacred as the National Anthem at Camden Yards. But the four kids on the new Brain Squad, who don't know, keep talking about what's on tap until Hal tells them to shut the hell up. The Brain Squad is probably underage, but I'm not planning to check.

As soon as they go quiet, Benjo the bald businessman claps; I lift my chin again in time to see Ed Sullivan throw a nervous glance at the numberless clock Liang mounted last month.

"First pitch of the evening," Ed Sullivan says, a little shakily. "A curve ball: What sizzling American model/actress was born with the plain-Jane name Tara Patrick?"

Ed Sullivan knows everything. He doesn't hold a list of facts or prompts. He really is the fairest game in town, and it's like a religion: He's never tolerated cheating once in all his time here, which seems like forever but I guess is ten years. Liang tells me this is true, but he only took over Mad Maxie's three years ago. That's when he renamed the place. He pretends he's been here forever because roots matter in a bar-n-grill; when Liang was the only wait staff, he served BBQ Wacko Wings to a rhinoceros of a guy who said, "Did I order wok-o wings?" Liang laughed, but the next day he installed his rocking chair behind the bar. Now he won't leave it all night.

"Thirty more seconds, folks," Ed Sullivan calls. I stand in the stampede toward Becky taking drink orders. Most people put in for the buck-fifty Blue Moon drafts, and some blonde girl wants a Jack and diet coke; the Brain Squad isn't ordering just yet.

"Time's up!" Ed Sullivan crows from the top. "The answer is Carmen Electra, my favorite Baywatch babe, who graced this very establishment in late 2003." Hal gets high-fived by the Valedictorians, and I see Benjo from That's What She Bled raise a victorious arm. Ed Sullivan holds the inside of the railing unsteadily as he leans out over the crowd. "Uncle Eddie told you it was a curve ball, didn't I?"

He waits for the bar to agree, then winks theatrically, and the whole place cracks up like Ed Sullivan is their best friend and he just won't stop it with the killer jokes.

Hal's team wins their free drinks by a landslide. I make \$20 off his seat alone. Ed Sullivan climbs downstairs after all his Hatters have left, and I stand, not wiping down the counter, watching him: He shakes the jar next to the scorecard, pretending he can hear the dollar bills that are his tip. Becky is already chattering to him about something I don't listen to.

"Hey, sweetie," calls a slick voice: Benjo, sitting on a barstool, his bald head shiny with sweat. "Can you bring your boyfriend over? I wanna say hi."

"You know him or something?" I say. I don't know why I should feel protective of Ed Sullivan, when he's talking to Becky instead of finding me for dinner, but I do.

Benjo laughs. "Do I know — what does he call himself?"

"Ed Sullivan," I say, proudly.

"Ed Sullivan," he repeats in a nasal, mocking four-note tune, half his mouth an uneven smile. "He's a buddy from high school. Bring him over."

I bet Ed Sullivan used to take pity on Benjo in high school. Still, Benjo's roughness reminds me what I know: I'm asking for trouble, inviting Ed Sullivan over, no matter how much I want him to come. Becky's lent me a shirt tonight, tight as a second skin, and maybe he won't know dinner just means dinner.

Once Becky's left to throw the trash out back, Ed Sullivan finds me pulling on my sweater by the front doors. "Ed Sullivan," I say. "Listen,

I'm very tired. I'm sorry. I don't think I'm up for dinner tonight after all."

Ed Sullivan droops like Hal the office supplier just hopped on his shoulders for a piggyback. "I can cook," he says. "You have leftovers? We can make Bubble and Squeak, English style; you know what that is?" He does seem to know what dinner means; I feel so bad I fumble the sweater to the beer-soaked ground.

"No, don't bother about me," I say, and because he's still watching me, I add, "That guy wants to see you."

He nods like that's just fine, then sees it's Benjo I'm talking about and keeps standing in front of me, nodding. The first straitjacket Liang ever pinned to the wall hangs behind Ed Sullivan's head. I notice that his hands are trembling as I bend to pick up my sweater, and a scrunched-up sock falls right out the top of my shirt. It lands undeniably on the floor between us.

Ed Sullivan is still nodding. I hope maybe he didn't see, but my shirt is sagging on the right side, and he crouches to the floor.

Before he can stand back up, I grab my sweater and wriggle inside. I'm already out the door when I hear it. "My name is Raymond Ternell," he says. His voice sounds so faint I wonder if I made it up; I turn around but he's looking into his palm and not at me, the sock cradled like origami in his hand.

Benjo heads in our direction. He's even taller than I'd imagined. "We missed you today, Ray," I hear him saying on my way out.

I'm glad for the silence outside, so I can think about what I've learned: "Ed Sullivan" doesn't sound a whole lot like "Raymond Ternell," but I guess not all these stage names do.

When I get to my apartment, I dump my jacket on my bed and reach into my collar to remove the second sock, mad at myself for letting the first fall out. Confidence. I'm supposed to fake the same confidence that carried me through high school, when even my best friend Becky got pregnant and dropped out. I told myself: Don't let those things be ahead of me; pretend like they're behind.

My near-miss date is making me jittery. I Google "Raymond Ternell." He used to do academic quiz bowls in a Baltimore City high school just a few blocks from mine, like I did, but he wasn't anything special at them, like I was. He never held the school record or captained a team, though he was in the Sun a time or two. He graduated ten years ago.

As I fall asleep, I have my nightly dream about Ed Sullivan: He knows all the answers but gives them to me, then nods in agreement as I stand on the third floor of Mad Maxie's in a loose white-cotton summer dress and lob him questions. "You could have won your high school quiz bowls," I tell him. "But you let the girl you loved take all your glory. That's what Google doesn't know, right?"

Looking up "Ed Sullivan," of course, is useless.

"Did you hear?" Liang asks the next afternoon. "About Ed Sullivan?"

"Hear what," I say, hanging a wine glass by the stem. I hope he hasn't told about my sock.

"He went out this morning and strung himself up on a lamppost."

It's like my tongue goes sanded and then sawed clean off. I canceled my dinner with Ed Sullivan last night. Inside my chest, guilt sifts and settles like a Guinness.

"Well, he pretended to, anyway. Some ex-quarterback on the way to work found him on South Charles, rope around his neck, trying to throw the end over a post. Apparently he tied the knot wrong: he would've fallen right out."

"The only two stories in the world," Ed Sullivan says, a cool breeze following him in through Maxie's double doors. "A character comes to town, or a character leaves town."

I try acting regular. "Did you have a good morning?"

Ed Sullivan narrows his eyes. He's wearing a zebra-print cut-off leotard over plain old jeans, and his arms look solid but wiry. I wonder if he held tight to the man who got him down this morning. I wonder what it felt like for that man: if he knew who it was he unhooked from the lamppost; if his fingers electric-shocked when they made contact. Ed Sullivan and I have never touched. I've made sure of this.

"Do you know how many Shakespearean characters tried what I tried?"

Liang mutters, "You weren't trying, Ed," and walks into his office behind the bar.

"Were you upset I uninvited you last night?" I say.

"An unlucky thirteen, though more successfully. And not at all."

Ed Sullivan tells me he's just here to pick up his check. When he turns to Liang's office, the tendons in his neck stick out like chicken bones. I think for a second about putting a fingertip to one of them, but I see a red raw necklace under his chin and I feel sick. He says something quiet as he takes the check, then walks past me toward the door.

I poke my head into the office. "Between you and me," Liang says, "don't you go sticking around here too long."

"I love Maxie's," I say. "Besides, who else is hiring me, without any college?"

"So go to college." Liang looks around his office, which is filled with

picture-hanging wire and empty frames he plans to fill, and one photo of his ex-wife that we're not allowed to ask about. "I've been thinking about making a scholarship, Aubrey. I could help you." I start to say no thanks, I'm safe and settled here, I'm even learning every night there's trivia, but Liang says, "Just look what happens if you don't." I glance behind me, where Ed Sullivan is gliding ice across his neck.

"What'd he say to you?" I ask.

Liang sighs. "That the other games in town give their winners double shots."

I watch Ed Sullivan pull up his jeans before he steps outside. They have a hole behind the knee.

"See you Wednesday," he says.

That night, I can't pour my guilt about Ed Sullivan down the drain. If I'd only let him come for dinner, maybe he'd have been too tired or — I try not to believe this, but I can't resist — too happy to wake up early in the morning with a piece of rope. I'm imagining him, happy, when Becky calls. She puts Alisha on the phone.

"Aunt Bray?"

"Hi, honey."

"Momma says you're watching us next week, 'cause Old Ma Keller's busy."

This is news to me. "Put Momma on."

Becky tells me she needs a little break; she's going on a date with a mechanic after trivia night. Maybe this time she'll find the twins a father.

"Ed Sullivan will have to mend his breaking heart," she says. She laughs. I wonder if she knows about the lamppost. I wonder if Becky

really is breaking Ed Sullivan's heart, and if that's what stood him on the folding chair.

"I'll watch them Wednesday after work," I agree, and when I hang up I'm glad I disinvited Ed Sullivan from dinner.

"I don't want to hurt you," I call down to my imaginary Ed Sullivan as I go to sleep. "But you can hurt me worse, can't you?" He nods enthusiastically two floors below.

I don't see Ed Sullivan for six more days, until the next Balls-to-the-Wall. In the meantime, I'm downtown and I see a book called *1001 Things We Bet You Didn't Know*. I think, Ed Sullivan would like that book. I buy it.

On Wednesday, the Brain Squad changes its name to the Brain Squashers and starts ordering Bud Light. Now that Benjo poses a serious threat to the Valedictorians, Hal has stopped buying him drinks.

Ed Sullivan is already prowling the balcony when I arrive, shuffling the sample answer slips like he never met a lamppost in his life. He's wearing a rhinestoned tunic printed with a map of the world, purple land on yellow ocean. I can't believe it: even in the low-lit bar, he's shining all over again.

"And our final question for the Raving Round, dear Hatters, is for the scientists. Double shots on the line. We all know that bird bones are —"

"Hollow!" yell the Brain Squashers.

Ed Sullivan rewards their new confidence with an emphatic echo. "That's right, hollow! But your question is: What *units* are their bone densities measured in?"

A defeated Brain Squasher sticks out his hand and orders a Basket

Quesadilla. The kitchen's so backed up that when I finally toss the order on the table, Hal's team has won again — but only barely, after Benjo risked too many points and forgot to say "cubic."

"That's What She Bled, ladies and gentlemen!" Ed Sullivan calls from the top as Benjo's table walks out, leaving me nothing but change. "Give our favorite underdogs a hand." I think this is a joke; in my mind, Ed Sullivan doesn't have favorites. He loves every team he's ever played with and carries pictures of them in his wallet.

"Bray," Liang says from his Off-Your-Rocker. I've been lazing at the bottom of the stairs, finding the bone and muscle in Ed Sullivan's thin arms instead of closing up. "I can't go tracking down money for people who don't do their work. What will I write in my letter of recommendation?"

He rises from the chair to hand me a computer printout. Aubrey's Scholarship, it reads, in fingerprint-smudged ink.

"Liang," I begin, my throat tight, but Liang is frowning at the smear.

"Clean copy," he mutters. He disappears into his office.

Benjo stumbles in the front door I've left open.

"Benjo!" says Ed Sullivan, sticking out his right hand. "Good game tonight. You'll get 'em next time."

"That was a steaming load of bullshit, Ray," Benjo says. His lapel is splashed with beer. "What you did tonight."

I guess Ed Sullivan doesn't know what Benjo's talking about either, because he stays quiet.

"You know I'm in insurance, and you didn't ask a money question all game." He knocks on Ed Sullivan's temple with an open palm, I don't think very hard but I can't see because Ed Sullivan is against a wall. "Hal and them have Omar on their team. An anthropologist, for chrissakes. You threw them that question."

Ed Sullivan doesn't even blink. "Benjo," he says, "Ben, I told you your

first night and I'm telling you now, there's no planning. Nothing I can do. It's tough luck when that happens, the wrong question. It's tough luck on everybody."

Ed Sullivan is so flat against the wall he's on his toes, and Benjo pushing on him seems to want him even flatter. I want Liang to emerge from his office and I wish another man were here somewhere, even just a zitty Brain Squasher. Ed Sullivan's wallet falls from his pocket when he lifts his hands, almost touching the Rorschach smear on the dark brick wall. I think for a second that he's going to dive, right over Benjo and down again. But really his arms are saying Nothing to hide, Officer, and Benjo says, "This why you didn't come last week?"

Benjo is leering at the hem of my skirt on my thigh. I realize that I should help Ed Sullivan, but a cold tubful of fear washes my insides. If I move toward them, one atop the other on the wall — What if Ed Sullivan can't save me, because I'm supposed to save him?

I hear Liang shuffling in his office. Benjo must hear it, too, because his grip on Ed Sullivan loosens. At the screech of a printer, he spits on the Atlantic Ocean of the tunic and leaves.

I run to the door as soon as it closes. I lock it twice, the deadbolt and the chain, then I walk to Ed Sullivan and pick up the wallet that's fallen open on the floor. I hold it out to him. We stand there for I don't know how long, my arm reaching and Ed Sullivan pancaked on the wall. He has tiny lines next to his mouth, like trails of toothpicks dragged across his cheeks.

A siren goes off on the street. Liang emerges, clutching a sheet of paper. Ed Sullivan doesn't take the wallet, so I press his shoulders to get him off his toes and push it deep into the front pocket of his pink pants. I never imagined they would feel so soft.

I invite Ed Sullivan for a late dinner that night, after Becky drops off the girls. He brings a bottle of Cabernet.

"Oh," he whispers at the door, seeing two breathing lumps under my comforter. "Should I be quiet?"

"It's OK," I say. "They wish I had TV, they like to sleep with people talking."

Ed Sullivan doesn't seem to believe me. He's looking at the white carpet under my table like it's some kind of trivia he hasn't seen before, and suddenly I'm wondering whether there's anything soft on the floor in his apartment.

"Should I take off my shoes?" he says.

"Don't worry," I tell him. "Just sit down."

The first piece of daylight seeps through the blinds as I bring out mashed potatoes and a roast chicken I bought at 7-11 after work. Once I sit, I remember to get the plastic wine glasses I bought with them. I'm across from Ed Sullivan, facing the bed just a few feet from the table. I try not to think how Becky would feel if she knew I was wining and dining Ed Sullivan beside her sleeping kids.

"The year 1977 was the first known use of the phrase 'comfort food,'" Ed Sullivan whispers.

"Huh." I find I'm not sure what to say to a real live Ed Sullivan, real live in my studio. "Do you think that's when we started needing more comfort?"

"Only according to Webster's. The OED didn't add the term until 1997."

"Ed Sullivan," I say, "how do you know these things?"

"It's not hard to learn," he says, "if you pay enough attention."

"Things like a bird's bone density?"

"All kinds of things."

I wonder what sad kinds of things Ed Sullivan has learned. I wipe

away the thought of him, walking down South Charles with a particular plan, morning light like dishwater in his eyes and images of me — or Benjo or Becky but maybe it was me, telling him don't come to dinner — in his head. I notice that he hasn't filled his glass. "I'm sorry," I say at the bottle. "I don't have an opener." If he thinks that's strange for a bartender, he doesn't say so. He draws a corkscrew from his keychain and takes the Cabernet under his arm like a football.

"I don't drink anyway," he says. The cork pops. He sets it next to his plate and lifts my wine glass, but I tell him me too and we leave our empty cups on the table.

We eat. I want to know about him, and I want him to know I want that, but I don't know where to start. "Where didn't you go with Benjo?"

"My high school reunion. But it would have been ... you know how those things are." I don't, but I'm certain now I'll never go to mine, either. "Hear you're leaving town, at least. Maxie's making you a nice scholarship."

"Maybe," I say. "I'm lucky to have a job here for now. Plus I might move up someday. Design a place like Liang, or." I stop.

"Host trivia, like me?"

I don't say yes, but I don't say no, either. I quell the picture of me in my white dress on the balcony.

Hannah snorts and stirs. We both turn to her, but she only hooks one ankle over Alisha's and keeps sleeping. The sky is purple, spilling into pink. Ed Sullivan leans toward me, shielding his mouth from the girls. Very quietly, he says, "Would you sleep with me if I asked you to?"

My heart revs. Is this how it works, I marvel, so direct? I plan to say no, but the word stalls in my mouth. I think I'm understanding what it feels like to want to say yes — like two hands are on my back, pushing me toward him — but I'm conscious of Hannah and Alisha on my bed.

"What about Becky?" I ask.

"Becky?" The table rattles under his arms. I wonder how often he asks a question he doesn't know the answer to.

"You call her your girl."

He actually laughs, so loudly I see bits of gold dotting the crests of his back teeth. I check that the girls are still asleep.

"Trivia!" he says. "My girl. These pants. It's all performance, Aubrey, don't you know that?" This seems like trivia, too — a fair shot at the fairest game in town — but when the real Ed Sullivan talks, I don't know all the answers. "I didn't expect that question," he says. He fidgets his fork around his mashed potatoes like it could spear a piece of his mind. "What a beautiful thing."

I debate whether Ed Sullivan is calling me beautiful. The diamond in his ear glitters, the chicken bones in his neck bulge, and I believe with a buzz of elation that he is.

"I've never slept with anyone," I decide to say, surprised it's the truth that arrives in my mouth. I hope he won't tell Becky.

His leg jumps so high that the wine bottle spills onto my white carpet. He gets down on his knees blotting at the spot, but after a while he stops. I say, "Are you okay down there, Ed Sullivan?" He says the stain won't come out, he should have used club soda. I tell him it's okay but he wants to leave. I tell him he doesn't have to — I don't tell him I want time to think about his question — but before I can decide on a response he's gone.

I curl up at the foot of my bed below Hannah and Alisha once Ed Sullivan leaves, watching the sunrise from behind my eyelids, unable to imagine what I'd be doing right now if I'd only said yes. The girls don't move, but I feel kicked in the heart. I dread not getting asked the same question twice. Slow as a grill press, careful not to wake the twins, I cuddle up under their sleeping feet, arriving at my answer: If Ed Sullivan's the God of Trivia, then I will be his angel.

The next day, Liang asks if I've started my applications. "They're a lot of work," I say. "Why don't you give that scholarship to Becky?"

Liang flushes. "I made it for you."

"It's just that I like working here," I say, but the truth is I don't want to leave Ed Sullivan yet. Not when he's tying himself to lampposts and forgetting he did it and spilling his wine, wanting me. Liang has stood my scholarship print-out over the photograph of his ex-wife, but I pretend I don't notice. I have a plan.

"Hey, Liang?" I say. "What was Maxie's called before it went Mad?"

Liang barely looks at me. "My," he says, his eyes on his computer screen. "My Maxie's."

Perfect.

Every day this week is an obstacle in the way of Wednesday. I have this image of Ed Sullivan, sopping up wine, which my mind loops so many times I half-believe he'll drop to his knees the second he sees me.

He doesn't, of course. What he does instead is ask if it's all right. I don't know what he means, so he reminds me that he ruined my white carpet.

"It's not ruined!" I say. I hear in my voice a pitch of mock-outrage that I recognize from Becky. I smile, wanting to tell him the question I've prepared — but I feel myself going mute. The fantasies that seemed so easy at home become impossible here.

"Aubrey!" Liang calls. He wants to know how long I plan to leave him by himself behind the bar, so I'm watching through beer taps and vodka bottles when Benjo approaches Ed Sullivan. I envision Ed Sullivan smashed against a wall, but Benjo only claps a hand on Ed Sullivan's shoulder like they're old buddies who have an understanding. I'm relieved that Maxie's is so friendly. I'm glad I've decided to stay — so glad that, halfway to the second floor, I catch Ed Sullivan by the cuff of his pink pants. My happiness makes me brave. "Hey, Ed Sullivan," I say. He climbs a few steps down. "What do you say I ask the final question tonight?"

Ed Sullivan's forehead becomes deep lines. "I can't allow guest questions, Bray. They might be biased."

"Mine's not biased!" I hear my real outrage now, and how much I wanted to take my turn on the balcony. "I got it from a book." I got it from Liang actually, but this sounds less debatable.

"I saw that book," he says — even though I'm mad, I get a little thrill that he's mentioning his night at my apartment — "but I can't just trust a book you found."

My anger turns in on me: How could I have rejected him, Ed

Sullivan, my only chance? And now he's changed his mind about me, quick as a cat.

"Don't you want to know my question?" I say. He looks like he does. He leans his ear toward my mouth like he's about to hear this secret, and I drop my jaw like I'm about to tell it, but instead I whisper, "I think I know the answer —"

Ed Sullivan pulls away, scanning the room. He's wobbling a little, from the kind of shakes that knocked out our untasted wine.

"Please," I say, "listen," and I surprise myself with boldness when I hoist myself up a step and plant my palms on the back of his head, pulling him into secret-telling range. His face is inches away and his mouth purses, and a stream of air that sounds like Shh is floating from his lips to mine, and I forget what I'm about to say because his mouth is so close, and I can't tell if it's me or him pulling it closer. My eyes fill up with his blurry face, then he twists his head and kisses me on the neck.

My whole body goes electric. I want to stand in this moment a while, seeing rather than imagining the mouth that just kissed me, but someone grabs my elbow. I worry instinctively that it's Becky, knowing now that Ed Sullivan isn't hers, but Liang thrusts a bulging black garbage bag into my arms.

"I need you to take this out," he says.

"Not now, Liang." I see him trailing Ed Sullivan with his eyes, frowning. "That's Becky's job."

"Go," he says. "All the way to the dump, in fact. Take my car." I find myself covering my neck with my hands, wanting to hold in the kiss. I don't open my hand for his keys. "You want to lose your job, Aubrey? Give me a reason, and you're gone."

Liang looks at me without compassion. I believe him. I don't want to lose my job, not now when I almost have Ed Sullivan. I go.

By the time I pull into Maxie's and take my place next to Liang, I've missed most of Balls-to-the-Wall. I can't say if Ed Sullivan's voice has been trembling up there as much as his lips are down here, shooting voltage out from that spot under my chin.

I check the scorecard: The Brain Squashers have become Give Good Brain, and Hal's team and Benjo's are dead tied. Ed Sullivan's voice sounds tired as he says, "And now your final question of the night, folks."

I will him to look at me. I feel the power of his kiss on my neck, drawing him to me. And yes — his eyes are looking nowhere, then they jump to Liang, and finally they land on me. I know how he'll prove we're each other's. I inhale at last to speak my question.

But Ed Sullivan's eyes jerk off mine like a lassoed calf. "My final question," he says. "What, according to *The Wall Street Journal*," and rises onto his toes, and I follow his gaze past Hal's ready pen and all the way to Benjo, Balls-to-the-Wall's insurance expert, who's somehow started writing before the question's even finished, "is the consumer safety spending limit on a single life?"

I look up at the balcony, where Ed Sullivan is removing a trembling flask from the pocket of his DayGlo dress shirt, and something about him cracks.

The thing I know right then is that Ed Sullivan cares about Benjo, more than he cares about Hal or the Brain kids. He's been performing fairness like he performed his rope and folding-chair trick, and for the first time I think that from so high up it's not like he's the god of everything beneath; it's just like he's alone, that's all.

He repeats his final question, and I shut my eyes and ears and imagine what would happen if I became Ed Sullivan's angel: I would open my apartment door and lead him to my empty bed. I would unbutton his neon yellow shirt, raise it above his head, and drop it to my white-carpeted floor. I'd feel the edges of the orange wife beater he'd be

wearing underneath, my palms circling the tops of his shoulders and the bottom of his waist, and then I'd pull it off him. His skin would be damp and pale under my hand, and maybe there'd be brown hair tufting along his chest. His heart would thud in my palm. I'd slip off his diamond earring. I would hesitate, his back against my sheets, then I'd unzip the soft pink pants and tug them down over his knees. I'd pull his socks off with his pants. Socks would litter the floor, and he would shrink and shrink until he was just white and brown and life-sized, nothing more.

I would slide next to him, lay my arm across his stomach, let my fingertip dangle at the top of his remaining waistband.

"Raymond?" I would say.

But before I can keep imagining, a shout goes up beside me and the floor starts pulsing under pounding feet. I open my eyes to find Benjo's team rising in celebration. Hal's head is in his hands. Ed Sullivan is saying something, teetering in glittering technicolor, his elbows hitting the front side of the railing with a hollow bounce, but I don't stick around to watch him; I kiss Liang on the forehead and leave Mad Maxie's for the night, because I know my ninety seconds here are up. ■



COURTNEY SENDER PHOTO

Courtney Sender's short fiction has won the Boulevard Emerging Writers contest, the Glimmer Train Fiction Open and the Lawrence Prize for best story in Michigan Quarterly Review. Her stories also appear in The Kenyon Review, American Short Fiction, Tin House, Amazon Day One and Crazyhorse. A MacDowell Colony fellow, she holds an MFA from the Johns Hopkins Writing Seminars and a B.A. in English from Yale, where she teaches. She is currently finishing a novel.