

Fictionist

For this installment of *Fictionist*, we present a piece by Christopher Bollen, a writer and critic who is also the editor-at-large at *Interview* magazine and whose first novel, *Lightning People*, was recently released. Here, in *The Golden Horde*, Bollen delivers a poignant tale of complicated relationships between partners, friends and New York City itself.

The Golden Horde

A Short Story by Christopher Bollen

Why do I fold these paper napkins in the shape of sailboats? Why do I bother to place the unbroken eggs on his plate, while mine run into the cottage cheese and make a soup of the sliced tomatoes? I'm giving him five more minutes, and then I'm leaving. I've already said "Neil" twice at the door of the bedroom, first in the hopeful register of a hospital visitor trying to rouse a coma patient and then sternly like an accusation. "NEIL! It's noon. Get up." I'm already late for Vincent's sponge bath. Does he think I particularly enjoy savoring the minutes before I climb six flights of steps in a tenement building on Perry Street to spend my Sunday afternoon applying antibacterial soap to an 83-year-old Vietnam War veteran who is managing to die slowly of lung cancer and HIV? As I recall, I wrote both of our names down on

the volunteer sheet, and it was Neil who demanded we serve for the LGBT Center and not the ASPCA, where I simply wanted to walk traumatized dogs in orange "Adopt Me" vests around the neighborhood. Neil, damn it, get out of bed, your breakfast, which I prepared for you, is getting cold, and Vincent has the audacity to yell at me when I'm more than five minutes late like I'm holding him up from the rest of his day.

It's not like he came home late. He threw his house keys on the nightstand at five in the morning before pulling the pillow out from under my head and shoving me, albeit gently, against the wall. I pretended to be asleep, but I always crack an eye open to make sure it isn't six or seven a.m., because that means I have enough circumstantial evidence to start an argument. Like I need any more material to use against Neil about his ridiculous choice

of a career. "The club king of nightlife"—and yes, that's a direct quote from a *Sunday Styles* newspaper profile on Neil back in 2004. The custodian to the pickled drag queens and swollen Brazilian bartender strippers and reality-television celebrities who amass at the parties he hosts at the Wanderlust Club. Wanderlust?—the damn place refuses to do anything but stay put. Sure, eight years ago, when I was an unpaid assistant at Gray Page Advertising, I couldn't believe my luck at being yanked from the long lines outside of the club entrance and into Neil's wiry, orange-freckled arms. I felt like I had won the grand prize on a game show, when in reality what I had won was the game-show host. But guess what, Pat Sajak isn't exactly a never-ending wheel of Acapulco vacations and brand-new dishwashers to live with. It's rather rough to watch the man you love stumble



half-hungover around the living room in stark daylight with the residue of other people's cigarette smoke clinging to his skin. I told Neil countless times that it isn't natural for a human being to meet four thousand people in one year. The nervous system isn't built to hug that many foreign bodies, and brains can't handle the memory load required for that amount of names. When I mention this, Neil engages in a prolonged fight with his tired facial muscles to produce a zealous six-tooth smile and that's when I accuse him of turning on for me. You've never seen a man turn on better. Neil can be wrestling with four-alarm pneumonia and a legal assault over child support with his psychotic ex-wife—a Salvadorian woman, by the way, who he only married in the first place so she could legally remain in the United States to our own citizens' detriment—and as soon as he steps foot in Wanderlust he turns into some haloed faith-based minister of absolute hysterical fun.

What those night-tweaked partygoers don't get to witness is Neil slumped over on our knockoff Knoll couch, his head hanging toward his knees, whispering in defeat, "It's my job, Sam. It's how I make money. I don't have the skills to do anything else." He's 45 years old. Silver hair has started to make metal nests in his ears, which I assume is his immune system's method for preventing premature hearing loss due to all of the blasting dance music he is forced to listen to. White hairs are ascending the back of his neck like they are gathering their forces for a full takeover at the peak, and Neil of bloated eye bags and creaking knees often has to stop to catch his breath while waiting for our building elevator. No wonder he doesn't come with me to Vincent's sixth-floor apartment. Even that

dying octogenarian somehow manages to lug his battered body down to D'Agostino's and back with the assistance of his two stainless-steel canes. I know that because Vincent rarely disappoints in brandishing his teak backscratcher at me on my weekly visit to tell me not to touch his groceries. He counted each peach in the fruit aisle and again after checkout, and so help him god if there is a single peach missing. So help him god. I ask Neil how soon it will be until I should expect to direct my volunteer nursing duties toward taking care of him, just to save me the trouble of lathering Vincent's sinewy, glassine thighs. He coughs out a laugh, then just coughs, and proceeds to list the names of celebrities he took care of—i.e., "partied with"—the night before. Neil's voice turns solemn as he recites famous names with which he is clearly infatuated and honored to share close geographic proximity. I know this roll call simply signifies that Neil is doing his job, serving the club's requirement for glamour and fleeting mentions in gossip pages, all of which spontaneously divest wallets like opulent bouts of diarrhea. But I am truly embarrassed for him in these moments—a beleaguered middle-aged man trying to make his business sound momentous when he's really orchestrating seating sections and cutting pimps out their surcharge by introducing escorts to their preferred closeted consumer base. I'm more embarrassed for Neil when he brags about these celebrities than I am when I find Vincent with his boxers strung at his knees, his flaccid penis covered in white hair now even having trouble with its last serviceable function. "The bed's wet," Vincent hisses, as if the bed were to blame for the urine rash on his buttocks. Or maybe he blames me, five minutes late for his secret rendezvous with



antiseptic hibiscus-scented soap. When I once tried to use a non-perfumed discount variety, he threw the bar at my head.

I don't think Vincent understands that I am visiting him for free. The daily machinations of the here and now—what time it is, who I am, why he can't find a box of Pall Malls by his bedside—mystify him to the point that he rolls over in heartbreak. He's not confused about the past. The past has page numbers. It has an index and comes with four-color mental pictures: the hunter green army shirt he wore while his troop prowled for "gooks" during the Tet Offensive; the

filmy blue sky peeking through dense patches of trees on the West Side Highway while orgies regrouped and concerted moans under the cicadic buzz of Manhattan traffic; the purple of a bruise on the base of the spine before finding a second and a third, which will eventually blot out sleeping partners entirely. Vincent gets to talking during his sponge baths, which I think, perhaps, is his own generous way of trying to divert us both from the grim fact of his body. He speaks of the past in the present tense: "Bill is a carpenter," "Gilles dances for ABT but he is not still performing," "You can't

tell if the firepower is yours or theirs, guns don't got accents, do they? Not at night they sure don't. You tell me what Wilcox is going to say about shooting point blank into dense brush on two hours of sleep." I have to use a special prescription cream on Vincent's skin after I bathe him, which is supposed to prevent cracking, but my fingers go numb for hours after I moisturize his legs. I once had the brilliant idea of turning my visits with Vincent into a creative-writing project. I'm a specialist of advertising jingles—"Olympia's French Roast: Start Your Bank Day Sipping on the Left Bank," I wrote that. I thought his story might make for a decent first-time screenplay. Once I brought a notebook with me and told him, encouraged him actually in a cajoling, kindergarten-teacher voice, that we should write down what he remembers of his life. Vincent pulled the sheet higher up his concave chest, stared at me for a full minute, and said, "Why? What do you need it for?" Actually, right after that he started haranguing me about not touching his groceries.

Maybe I should leave him. Maybe instead of washing my plate and leaving his eggs to congeal on the table, I should gather my business suits and underwear and my share of the toiletries and scrawl a quick note that reads (remember, I'm a jingle artist): "You slept through our relationship. You didn't hear the alarm." I'm only 35, and unlike Neil and his vampiric skin condition, I look my age. I can run three miles on the treadmill without turning into an active volcano of nicotine eruptions. I attract sidelong glances in the aisles of the supermarket from 20-year-olds who know just how to fondle a bag of Tostitos to insinuate that they are looking to return to their apartments with more than chips. I don't need to be

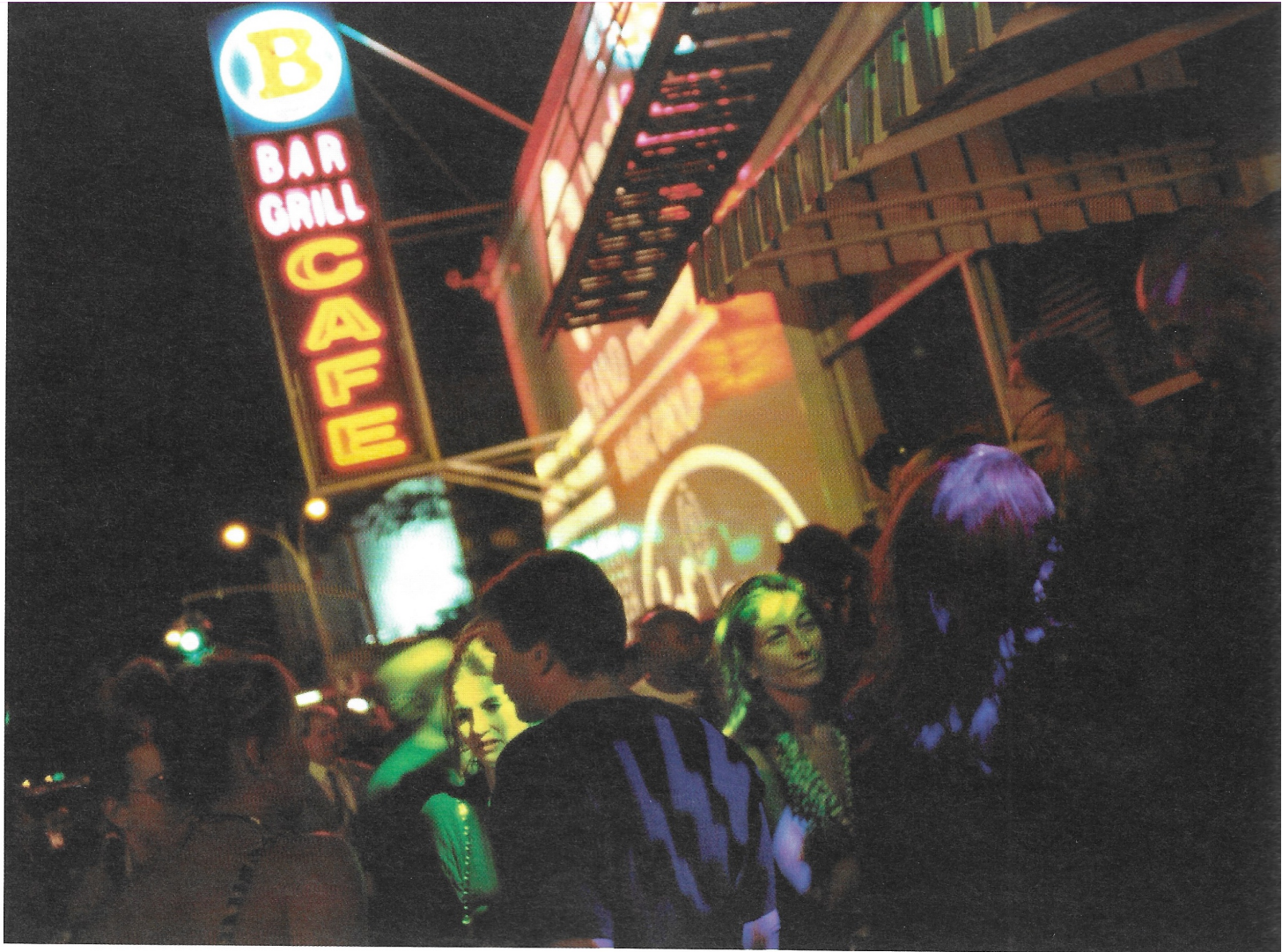
tapped on the shoulder and have my partner point to his erection under the blanket to understand that it's my duty to spend five minutes applying lips to satisfy a human need. I'm not the kid I once was in those early photos at Wanderlust with Neil and some foundation-caked, seven-foot transsexual, often printed in the social section in the back of gay weeklies, caption reading: "Lady Revlonia with Neil Burton and boyfriend." I stopped going out seriously four years ago, and unlike Neil, who sees an occasional night off from the club as an opportunity to reconnect with our own liquor cabinet, I limit myself to a few beers. What are the memories that I'm storing up for my own dementia-ridden rant to some angelic volunteer while cocooned in the sunken mattress of my deathbed? Whenever I suggest going out for old times' sake, Neil whistles in agreement and offers to reserve one of the VIP booths with bottle service at the club. His shoulders collapse and he has the victimized look of a child who has just been bitten by a pet when I tell him that I don't want to waste my life inside a drugged-out dance party. "I don't see why you don't support me," he screams. "What I've achieved! Everyone in this city is dying to get in there. And you throw it back at me like it's garbage." Neil doesn't seem to understand that no one is going to remember their misguided nights at Wanderlust, that they aren't going to keep the body-odor fumes of that place swirling through their minds all the way to the grave, that they might, in fact, wince when they think of it later, that the whole purpose of going to a place like that is not to remember anything, to reduce time to one big, cosmic blur like the burn-out on a film reel before the projector motor kicks back in.

I know I'm being too hard on him. Neil is gentle, patient

I told Neil
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thousand people
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can't handle the
memory load
required for that
amount of names.

in his complaints, sympathetic with his fingertips. He has a seven-year-old daughter named Frieda, who appears at our front door every other Saturday carrying a pink plastic purse with a pink plastic comb wedged in a corner of her frizzy hair. Frieda speaks the same quantity of English as our Peruvian cleaning lady who arrives on competing Saturdays. She lives in Canarsie, Brooklyn, with her mother, who has somehow managed to clip the wings of Frieda's American experience down to an insulated microcosm of Salvadoran Spanish. What child, I ask, prefers a bowl of fish-head soup to a cheeseburger and curly fries? I can't actually interpret her whining. I need Neil to translate. But I love Frieda's confidence, the way she doesn't see herself as expendable, a seven-year-old playing a minor role in the Manhattan universe

of two gay men. She climbs the ledge of the sofa to position her legs around my neck without asking if I feel like being ridden. She litters the living-room floor with her sole-puncturing neon Legos, and once I fell into a fit of apoplexy when I caught her constructing gaudy Lego walls around a pink-and-yellow base. "What's that you're building, honey?" I asked, kneeling beside her. Frieda never bothers with reassuring eye contact. "The place Daddy work. El club nocturno." Jesus, I thought. And you're probably colorblind just like your father. To his credit, Neil manages to wake early on Frieda's Saturdays. He zips around the apartment with his arms already stretched out waiting for the knock that will bring her running to fill them. He crayons with her at the table and builds pillow islands for endless viewings of Latin American *Sesame Street*. "Shouldn't we be sneaking her English lessons?" I suggest. "Maybe you'd like to watch with us and pick up her language," he counters. Sometimes Frieda and I go for walks to Washington Square Park together, I as horse and she as fearless conquistador. I relish the longing stares I receive from barren heterosexual couples, and I think, this must be what it's like, to walk out in the world so easily, a clean, uncomplicated family unit without any secrets or compromises. "Oh, is that your little girl?" a cooing woman will ask, sliding off her mitten to fondle Frieda's fingers at my ear. "Yes," I lie. "She's mine all right." "Ohhhh..." I tell the woman about imaginary playgroups and roller-skating birthday parties, our eyes sharing the blessing of ritualized innocence. Then Frieda ruins everything by unleashing a stream of indecipherable, rapid-fire Spanish, and I quickly hurry away, leaving the woman to stare after us and wonder if it's her duty to report a possible



kidnap to the authorities.

Vincent hates children, which is no surprise since he hates adults as well. Whatever illegal preschool is being conducted in the apartment above his, the constant ghostly running of little feet across his ceiling sends him into a rage. “Deport them, deport them all,” he wails, while pounding his fist on the wall behind his bed, on the other side of which only an elderly, wheelchair-bound Polish widow resides. “You think we were in that war to spread democracy,” Vincent reels, noticing my stunned expression and redoubling his animosity

with squinted glaucoma eyes. “We weren’t trying to win hearts, we were trying to kill as many as possible. So there wouldn’t be any more of them. And then I come back here and the government tries to exterminate all of us.” Vincent has never gotten it out of his head that AIDS was introduced by the military to stamp out inner-city homosexuals, which is why all of his war medals are stored in a locked toolbox under his bed, the contents of which he is constantly threatening to pawn as if I should care whether they’re pinned to his chest at his final viewing. Vincent has

somehow mated that paranoia with insider theories about 9/11. “What’s your government got planned for us next?” he asks me accusatively like I have some special landline to the president’s homeland terror commission. For Vincent, the whole island is under perpetual attack, and I’m increasingly thankful when lifting his shoulders not to find a loaded gun underneath his stained, uncased pillows.

Neil consented to donate his sperm to his soon-to-be-ex-wife right after 9/11, because, as he puts it, his own survival mechanisms were going haywire

and were causing him to make frantic mortality choices. I don’t mention that another of those frantic mortality choices might have been falling in love with a twinkish advertising executive a decade younger than he. I love Frieda’s visits to the point that I’ve used her as emotional blackmail, suggesting that we renegotiate the custody agreement to share the responsibility of raising her. Neil sighs wearily at this prospect. He leans his arm against the wall and then leans his forehead against his arm. “How can I raise her if I leave every night at eight and

don't get home until five in the morning?" Which, of course, is my point. "Sam, that's as close as we get to having a child. Can't it be enough for you? It's still a family. You and me and Frieda on Saturdays." He's almost in tears now, but did I mention, that it's eight o'clock at night when I bring this up and Neil is wearing a pair of stonewash jeans, a black T-shirt two sizes too small to conceal his paunch, and a lime-green blazer with a white rose pinned to the lapel that has already started to brown? "I'm 10 years too old to keep doing this," he says quietly, and I think, no, more like 20. He kisses me needily on the lips before he leaves, a kiss like a thirsty dog at a puddle of rainwater. There is a desperation in his eyes that indicates he doesn't have the strength to reconstruct his life if I were to abandon him. "I love you," he tells me, holding on to the doorframe, as if that sentiment is as solid as the walls.

Which egg will be the last cracked in the pan? Which carefully folded napkin in the shape of a sailboat will be my final attempt at saving this relationship? We are still capable of peaceable times together, the lazy rainstorm afternoons where we lay in opposite directions on the sofa, deserting nonfiction bestsellers on the wonders of the human brain or the inevitable collapse of Western capitalism, which we made a show of buying at the bookstore, to concentrate on the calluses on each other's toes. We love to plan vacations that we never go on—the ruins of Machu Picchu, the narrow isthmus beaches of Panama, places where Frieda will be put to vernacular use—but my company requires two months advance notice on vacation requests and Neil's brain has been systematically rewired by years in the nightlife industry to be incapable of committing to events more than a week away.

Another party, another celebrity birthday around the next corner, another vodka sponsor or famous deejay flown in from Ibiza, another opportunity to earn \$500 blowing air kisses over a golden crowd too young to have any idea what they are stealing from this man while being stolen from at \$20 a drink. What they are stealing from Neil is a waking life, which I suppose is all I'm asking for. Last Thanksgiving we took the subway to watch the Macy's parade float through Columbus Circle. An hour in, just as a gigantic yellow Pop-Tart with the face of a malicious mathematician soared by the Trump Tower (the panicked cheers confirmed that it was SpongeBob SquarePants), I looked over and found Neil asleep standing up, his eyes closed and his jaw hanging open. "Damn it, Neil," I yelled. "I'm not Frieda. I have no interest in watching cartoon characters overtake midtown. I wanted to do this together." Neil shook himself to consciousness in time to track my red coat zigzagging through the crowd.

Framed in a refrigerator magnet is a photo of Neil and me taken that Thanksgiving afternoon. Our eyes are bright and starry because we had both been crying from the argument on the corner of 50th Street and Sixth Avenue. The sleeve of Neil's white coat is stained with coffee from the full cup he threw angrily into a garbage can after I suggested it might be time for a break. An acquaintance of ours happened to be passing by and noticed the camera in my hand. She mistook our dazed expressions as some kind of manic joy and insisted she take a picture of us. Our smiles in the photo are stiff and exaggerated. But much later, after I had the photo printed and put it in the magnet frame, I often stopped at the refrigerator

door and saw us cut loose from that memory: Neil and me, two very different exotic creatures who had been lucky to find each other. Our smiles were engineered to withstand that horrible Thanksgiving afternoon when we stood on the street like two exhausted rope holders trying to keep our relationship from blowing away. In my romantic moments, I still suppose we can withstand.

Last week, Vincent and I had a breakthrough. Or maybe it was a breakdown. His doctors have put him on an experimental medication with hallucinatory side effects. I opened his front door and walked down his hallway, as I do every Sunday, unsure whether he will still be alive at the end of it. And like every week, I found him lying in bed, as if AIDS and cancer are lazy deadly diseases waiting for the other to complete the grueling work of finishing him off. Only this time Vincent didn't berate me about my tardiness or accuse me of plotting against my homeland. His eyes, furry and black, like two hair-clogged shower drains, followed my movement with twitching difficulty. "Dean, is that you?" he asked while reaching his dirty fingers out. "Dean, where have you been?" "I'm here," I said, gathering his hands in mine at his bedside. "Everything's all right." "Dean," he sighed, and now pus brightened the coronas of his eyes. "I thought you were gone. I thought they got you. It was me in that car waving when they wouldn't let me see you. I was the one they wouldn't let in. They must have told you. Did you get the blanket and that old sweatshirt? I went back for them, but they said they had thrown them out." I squeezed Vincent's hands and told him I knew it was he. I told him that I had gotten those presents. "Please don't leave. Oh, don't." Vincent closed his eyes, and

I tested the temperature of the tap water with my fingers. When I began to sponge his legs, his feet wiggled and his eyes shot open. "Who are you?" he screamed in a frighteningly saner pitch. "I'm here, Vincent. It's okay," I said. "No it isn't. It's not okay. Get the fuck out."

I'm going to be a half an hour late for Vincent today. If he's in his right mind he'll never forgive me. And if he's in a more deluded mindset he might once again find temporary forgiveness in a lost love named Dean. Yesterday, when Frieda visited, Neil turned the entire living room into a cruise liner. He created sails out of old sheets tied to broomsticks, transformed a wooden salad bowl into a steering wheel for his daughter to turn, and taped blue construction-paper waves against the walls. They sailed for hours toward the bank of windows gleaming in light, hunting for desolate islands and the fins of predatory fish. Neil had so much energy he even swam to save Frieda when she decided no end was in sight and jumped off the coffee table to drown. Neil can't save himself or even me, but he can find the strength to doggy-paddle toward his daughter to rescue her from the waves. Didn't he notice me standing alone by the wall, waiting for him to swim to me too? I'm giving him five more minutes to get out of bed, and then I've had it. He'll stumble into the kitchen and find two perfect eggs on a plate and a napkin sailing along the side of it, but I won't be here. I'll be gone. This is the last napkin I've folded for our rescue. Damn it, Neil, wake up. I need you to be Neil for me. Don't you get it? I need to be Sam for you. The real ones, before those too are lost. There is only so much daylight. It's already tilting the buildings. It's climbing off the clock. **M**