

Iain Grinbergs  
**Batboy**

*Batboy*

She saw me on her security camera. I didn't know she'd installed one by the back door. I'd gotten hammered on cheap vodka and left my mask—but not my cape—at home. Didn't she know I was out there, though? I thought she liked it. I wonder what changed her mind. The blinds were often half-closed—her way of teasing. Did I ruin it by leaving my mask? She used to comb her strawberry-blonde hair so slowly, letting me feel her tenderness. She'd check herself out in the mirror, hands moving down her sides—like she wanted me to know the shape of her. She did so many wonderful things for me.

I liked her best. She was fresh, like a begonia bloom or Venus in that Botticelli painting. Always glowing, even when taking out the trash or feeding strays off paper plates. I never had the nerve to talk to her, not even at the pool, where she wore that striped bikini. Her name was Charlotte. I heard her friends say it.

"How you doing, Batboy?" an inmate shouted. Laughs followed.

"Didn't think the Dark Knight was *that* dark."

"Who's the real Joker, freak?"

A guard said it first—Batboy. He smirked like he knew me. But what do you expect from a prison guard, especially one in Florida?

The cell's about the size of the closet my dad locked me in when I was ten—for spilling soda on his police uniform. "Learn silence," he said, leaving me there while he went to work. After crying, what else was there to do but play dress-up and poke through old boxes? That's when I found photos of my parents with another kid. A boy. They never told me. I pissed in a large, round wine bottle my mom had used for coins.

I didn't hurt anyone—I only watched. Like at the movies. Still, they charged me. It's been blown way out of proportion. And my cot smells like meat and bleach. What's with the toilet having no seat? Can you really start chaos with a toilet seat? I bet my mugshot's online by now. Along with the footage. I can imagine the ignorant comments.

They took everything—wallet, keys, phone. Losing the phone felt like an amputation. Not because anyone was texting me, but because of her. The pictures. Even her cats, like the tortie one in her window. I can't afford my own on my after-school checks.

The slot opens. "Lunch," a guard says. Colorless bullshit on a gray tray. I set it on the cot.

*Batboy.* Can't stop hearing it. Is that what I am now? I look at myself in the scratched metal mirror—warped and funhouse-like. Are my eyes really that dark? I sit down and lean my head back on the cold wall. Fluorescent hum. A cough. Scratching.

She must be thinking of me. Maybe we could've had a life together.

## Wilderness House Literary Review 20/3

Two little girls named Georgiana and Isabella. I could be a good dad. I won't be here forever. It wasn't a felony. People forget. New replaces old. The world turns. We'll probably get nuked anyway. When I'm out, I'll move. Change my name. I never liked it. I've heard good things about Colorado. I could work on a ski lift. Or California. Become a fire tech. Those guys would probably laugh about it.

I wake up to the guard unlocking the door. "Come on, Batboy." He leads me through a few doors to a long beige room with phones. I enter my PIN and call my dad. He soon pops up on the screen, his hair thinner than I remember, even though we still live in the same area.

"Can you hear me?" I say.

"Yeah."

"Okay."

He says, "You good?"

"Why did you answer before?"

He clears his throat. "I'm working on getting you out of there."



I miss my mom. Sure, she had a drinking problem, but she wasn't always like that. And she loved plants. We won "Yard of the Month" a few times. You won't be surprised, then, that when a Yorkie shat in her Mexican heather, she bagged it and stuffed it in the woman's mailbox. The cops came. Dad handled it. I was upstairs gaming when they argued. Next morning, he had nail marks down his neck, and she had a puffy lower lip.

I asked her for a Batman costume that Halloween. I tried to get another boy to be Robin, but he wanted to keep playing baseball, which I always found boring. I guess it's a little weird I never outgrew loving Batman. But who decides what's for kids and what isn't?



Dad looks like he wants to say more but doesn't. He just ends with "Sit tight." Then he hangs up. The guard walks me back.

"How you crime-fighting when the crime is you?" someone yells.

I turn, but can't see who.

"Move," the guard says.

I want to say I didn't do anything bad. But what would it change? These guys probably didn't finish high school. Not that that means much in Florida.

When I was seven, Dad took me shooting in a wet field of dandelions. He handed me a rifle, showed me where to grip. He didn't warn me about the scope—or maybe I forgot. When the rifle kicked back, the scope purpled my eye.

Charlotte

I knew he was a creep. I caught him watching me from the parking lot too many times. Sometimes at the pool. I never thought he'd actually peep, especially in an apartment complex. Everyone has phones now. Cameras. Like the one I installed. Maybe part of him wanted to be caught. I'm tired of thinking about him, but why was he carrying a doll's head?

My little brother asked for a Batman nightlight. I don't think I can buy it. It feels too surreal. Too weird. And of course the guy is the son of an ex-cop. He worked with kids at an after-school program. One of my theater friends said he made her uncomfortable too—he asked her out once. She texted to check in, but I can't think straight.

Meditation doesn't help. Yoga doesn't either. Baking works better. Chickpea brownies mostly. I use allulose—it's better for you, especially with diabetes in the family. I do throw in a handful of regular chocolate chips, though, and I make sure I keep them away from my cats.

Last night, I thought I heard footsteps. Probably nothing. A stray cat. A drunk neighbor. But once you've been watched, everything starts sounding like a threat. I slept with the TV on—low volume. *The Golden Girls* reruns.

My therapist managed to squeeze me in. She says I'm doing the right things: journaling, routine, staying connected. The officer asked if I'd "encouraged" him. He used that word, like I should've been thinking about the guy every time I walked to my car or went to the pool.

If I hadn't installed the camera, would he have escalated? Come inside? Is that why the cat bowl was out of place? I hate even asking. It's the fucking twenty-first century. Why is this shit still happening to women?

My mom wants me to come home to Ocala. Just for a little. She sent a video of Wizard snoring on the couch, tongue hanging out like always. He's getting old for a bulldog. I should go back. Even for a weekend. I started crocheting again. A blanket—pale pink and off-white, soft enough for the cats. But even counting stitches, I remember that footage. His face. That trance. The cape. His shorts hanging low. The doll's head. I keep saying: What the fuck?

Mom calls again. I think about ignoring it.

"Hey," I say.

"There's a statute against voyeurism," she says. She's had wine—I can tell. "It says 'lewd, lascivious, or indecent intent.' That's a crime." Then: "But what if he identifies as 'they'?"

I tell her that's not funny. She's serious. I say I'm sure the law still applies. I can still see his mouth in the video, slightly open, breathing.

There's this weird thing that happens—people want your story. They repeat it, dissect it, turn it into fiction. "You're so brave." "You never really know someone." "That kind of thing didn't happen in my day."

The leasing office sent an email: "unusual activity." Didn't name him.

## Wilderness House Literary Review 20/3

Just “a resident.” Like he was average. Like he wasn’t outside my window at 2:36 a.m. in a cape, holding a doll’s head. Did he do it just for me? Why Batman? Was it a joke? Did he rehearse what he’d say if I caught him? It sounds stupid. No, not stupid. That’s what my therapist says—use better words.

Mom’s still talking. I tell her I’m tired. I say I’m going to try to sleep.

### *Batboy*

“You don’t look like no superhero in here,” someone called out.

“Don’t make Batboy mad,” another voice said. “He’ll start carrying your head around.”

I wanted to yell at them to shut the fuck up, but I knew better. That kind of thing could get you stabbed with a sharpened toothbrush. They told me pedophiles get dealt with. I wanted to scream that Charlotte was over eighteen, otherwise she wouldn’t be in college. But it wouldn’t have mattered. They called me dirty. Sick. One of them said he was going to turn me from Batboy into Buttboy.

It all feels like a bad dream. I’m clammy again. I stand up and shake out my arms, trying to breathe. I don’t even like kids—not in that way. But I know how it looks, working at the after-school program. Sure, Charlotte looks young, but not that young. And Alexis, back home, she just wanted someone to hang out with when she was bored at Budget Barn. We didn’t touch. Not really.

I sit back on the cot and stare at my slides, feeling nauseated. Then I lie down. I remember the shape of Alexis’s small mouth and wonder how they’ll spin the old texts. They’re going to make me into something I’m not. But the lawyer knows what he’s doing. My dad has connections. Things will work out. I’ll move out of state. Start over. Colorado has those nice hot springs.

Maybe I’ll write a book. Tell my side. There’s a market for everything. Always some white guy in a black hoodie doing a podcast about cancel culture and wrongful accusations. I’d sit there sipping coffee and give them the truth. Tell them how people twist things they don’t understand. No one wants complexity—just headlines and villains. I could wear thick-rimmed glasses, get a taper fade. Look the part. Charlotte would come around.

But who would actually care? Who would buy the book? The world doesn’t want nuance. It just wants an easy story. I press my face into the pillow. I tell myself it’ll be fine, but the thought feels thin now, like the crappy mattress under me. Alexis once told me I had “lonely eyes” when she passed back a joint. She said it like it was romantic. Maybe she really saw me. She got the closest.



I wake up sweating and desperate for water. I go to the sink and practically suck on the faucet. Then I splash my face and chest, trying to cool down.

## Wilderness House Literary Review 20/3

My dad did some of those things, but not all. I know I heard my mom scream. But she always screamed. Then it stopped—like someone cut it off. He locked me in the closet for “protection.” Could he have done something to her? No. He said she just left. He said she was tired of him. Of me.

“Women can be flighty creatures,” he told me, tinkering with something metal at the dining table.

“But she’s coming back, right?” I asked.

He twisted whatever it was in his hand. He looked like he had been assembled by some careless god with his thin neck but broad chest.

I remember being a little kid, terrified at how high he’d throw me. My mom would scold him: “You’re throwing him too high! Stop treating him like a rag doll!” He would just laugh. Sometimes, I thought he wanted to hurt me. But then I’d see other dads roughhousing with their sons and think maybe I was being dramatic. And once, when I was vomiting from a migraine, he sat by me and held my shoulder. He got me water and pills when my mom wouldn’t.

*Charlotte*

I tried baking avocado brownies today, but I fucked them up—overbaked, rubbery mess. And avocados are the worst. They’re ripe for, like, three hours, and then it’s game over. I keep thinking about what Grammy said before she passed: There’s always something to laugh at. But what would she say now?

She’d want me to laugh, I think. I tried watching SNL, but it just felt too silly. Captain Meatball’s been extra snuggly. I think he knows something’s up. I gave them both extra treats, even though the vet says they’re overweight. But, honestly, there’s BMI bias for animals too.

Sometimes, I just want to sit and feel the world directly. That’s what the Buddhists do. But that’s always been hard. I think about what Grammy said about forgiveness. She was a real Christian—not like the showy ones at her church, all frills and feathers. I used to cringe at it, but I get it now. She actually lived it. Even when she swore, it was sweet somehow. Only Grammy could swear endearingly.

I only saw her truly lose it once. That was during the World Cup. I don’t remember the year, but Argentina lost to Germany. She threw a pillow, spilled her tea, disappeared for a while, then came back and offered me a cookie like nothing had happened. I should ask Mom how Grammy ended up here from Argentina. Pretty sure she met Pawpaw there.

Grammy would probably call it all fucked up but tell me to pray anyway. I don’t really believe in God, but maybe there’s some kind of force, or energy. What if we’re all one consciousness and sometimes it just glitches? I don’t know what I’m even saying. Maybe Jenny’s right—you can’t rationalize the irrational. But what if the irrational is rational? I’m just spinning out. Maybe I’m losing it.

## Wilderness House Literary Review 20/3

I miss Grammy. And Wizard. My mom. Dad. It's been some time since he passed. The house still doesn't feel right. I know what he would've done to that guy. I know he—

My mom calls. She says the police are releasing him on bond. The hairs on my neck stand up. She says she told me this would happen. I set down my pen, close the journal. I hear Wizard barking. She must be in the yard, prodding her peppers. She tells me to come home for a little while. I toy with my necklace, pacing. She asks if I'm still there. I say yeah, I'll call back. I hang up. Madonna rubs against my leg. I can hear Captain Meatball licking himself in the hall.

### *Batboy*

We're on the way to the house. My parents' house. Past all the faded strip malls and fast food chains. The one Asian grocery's still hanging on. They kept my phone. "Buttboy, your time will come," one of the inmates said on my way out. "Guys like you get iced."

I can't look at my dad, so I focus on his hands gripping the steering wheel. They look smaller than I remember. For a second, something sharp and sad presses down on me. I want to ask him about the photos I found in the box, but not now. Not yet. I'm glad Mom's not around anymore—she wouldn't have survived this.

We stop at a red light. A few cars drift by. A gull coasts overhead. A plastic bag gets sucked under a semi and shot back out.

"I guess I can't talk to her," I say.

My dad turns his head, slow. "What?"

"Charlotte."

"No," he snaps. "Of course you can't fucking talk to her." Then, after a pause: "Are you retarded? Did I raise a fucking retard?"

"I'm sorry," I mumble. "I just want to clear things up."

"Just like your mother," he mutters, his neck blotching red. "Thank Christ she left."

I unbuckle and reach for the door. The light turns green. He grabs my arm—hard—but doesn't say anything. His face is burning. His eyes say enough. Someone honks.

At the house, he pulls into the driveway and tells me to get out. As I shut the door, he says the back one's unlocked. I don't move. I just stand by Mom's rhododendron, trying to be completely still, like maybe stillness will make things go back to normal. He throws the truck in reverse. I watch his taillights shrink. I wonder where my brother is now.