

## THE MAN BETWEEN COSTUMES

*Austin Kodra*

Martin Dillon is going to die. Drive off a cliff, in fact. First, he'll lose everything. His business and fortune; his family and his rivalry. He'll be headed out of town for good, and the audience will cry for him to stop, so he'll pull over at a bar on the outskirts. They'll only see him order the first drink: a vodka-something. Then fade to black.

They won't see him get soused and flounder over to the dartboard, or stare hard in silent contemplation at the bottom of his empty highball or try to pick up a woman or announce that this is his world, goddammit, and nobody, especially Kelly, is going to take it from him.

He'll be driving when we next see him, after a short break, bloodshot and soured like a madman. All the important story lines of his life will wave around him in a foggy tribute: his family's feud with the Kellys for three decades, Martin himself at the center of it. Shady business deals at the Atlantic Lounge.

Dillon Enterprises and Kelly Incorporated, in that pecking order; investment firms in a city too small for two. Offshoot cosmetic companies, chain retailers. Crossover marriages, affairs—full circles of the juicy stuff. But mostly Martin's soul mate, Valerie, who isn't with him anymore, who he lost when his 1980s El Salvadoran deaf mistress returned to town with his bastard son, Felipe. There had been paternity tests, a court case, one ruling or another. Nina flew back to El Salvador with her son in one hand and a settlement check in the other, the whole ordeal swept under the rug.

After the flashback, it will happen. The topple over a guardrail, the plunge into a black valley in slow motion, as all deaths must happen, for effect.

But for today's episode, Martin's fiancée, the thirty-year-old born at the beginning of all this, is his son's ex-wife, Lauren. They will agree, after a brief examination of the issues that they deserve to be together. Forget all the naysayers. And CEO of Kelly Financial, Heath Kelly, who lost his right leg in a freak snowmobile accident, will have a diamond ready for Valerie's finger; a proposal at the Lounge while Martin holds Lauren's hand a few tables over. A prosthetic is on its way for Kelly, after another few weeks of therapy.

It is easy to forget the others. The Paulinos, Italian immigrants who run everyone's favorite family restaurant, Paulino's, and who offer, on the house,

too many pasta-somethings that nobody ever eats. It's where they all congregate to bribe and threaten, swindle and make jealous, confess. Take, for example, the Parish family. The oldest daughter, now in her twenties give or take, has fallen in with Blake, an outsider from the countryside with slicked black hair and a penchant for evil. Something dark lurks in his past, assuredly, though nobody's quite sure yet.

Today the pearled and made-up mother will meet Blake at Paulino's and tell him to back off or else, and when she excuses herself to the bathroom, Blake will crumble something in her coffee, and before she or anyone knows what's happening, before the top of the hour, she will blink awake, and from his bed Blake will dangle a tape and tell her he's won this round.

Martin, of course, also once slept with the Parish matriarch. Martin, of course, also blackmailed and has been blackmailed. He knows these old ropes. To leave them will kill him.

## §

Roger doesn't hear Ray creak open his dressing room door, doesn't see the way Ray makes a fist and presses his knuckles to his forehead. Ray has produced and Roger has acted for thirty-plus years, five shows a week; and they both assume they're old friends, though neither has expressed that mutual

feeling. As he hovers in the doorway and watches Martin transform back into Roger after the day's filming, Ray wonders what will happen to them when it ends.

Ray clears his throat and taps the door. Roger turns, halfway stripped down to underwear and black socks, suit jacket unbuttoned but still draped on the slumping coat hanger of his shoulders. Tie unknotted. Suds streak his face from where he's begun to scrub off his makeup. Roger always insisted on doing his own undressing at the end of each day. Ray is still not sure why—they have interns for that—but he appreciates it. Old fashioned, he thinks.

Ray knows only one way to speak with Roger after all these years, after all the split-second decisions and shortcut speeches. He only knows how to talk to Roger in a way that squeezes each second like the last drop of juice from an orange.

Ray clears his throat and delivers the news. Roger laughs him off at first, reminding Ray how this business works in circles, how there are always threats, close calls, and last-minute changes. That there would be legions of fans up in arms, that someone would know well enough to save the show.

"Not this time," Ray says, his voice timid in a way it's never been with Roger. "It's over." He tries to touch Roger's shoulder but Roger recoils, and

Ray explains that it's coming from all angles this time: network, market shares, focus groups, social media. He tells Roger they've already started pre-production on a replacement, a game show with household products and internet cats. "They're branding it 'The Price Is Right' of the social media age."

As he watches Roger's eyes dart across the floor, Ray knows there is something more to say, but he tells Roger there isn't.

After Ray closes the door behind him, Roger grabs a vase from his dressing room table and looks into the mirror. He can't quite tell who he seems more like—himself or Martin. Four of the light bulbs around the mirror have burnt out. He wants to blast them all, shatter the vase into the mirror, glass-on-glass-on-glass. But right now, he's too desperate to be Roger.

## §

Martin's CFO, Arnold Benedict, will try to convince him to sell before his company's stock plummets on the backs of bad securities. Benedict has a knack for numbers and has relocated at Martin's special request. The two met in the Virgin Islands, off screen, during their years in uniform—Martin, a common infantryman in the U.S. Army, and Arnold, a pilot in the Royal Air Force. The chance meeting of two heroes, and here they will collide, meeting over drinks again, trying once more to save their worlds.

“Yes, the recession is even going to hit you, Mr. Dillon,” Arnold will mutter in his light accent as he slides an unlabeled folder across the Atlantic Lounge’s smooth oak bar.

(With a steep drop in ratings, the writers tried infusing real-world references to attract an audience that is increasingly more interested in believability.)

Martin has gotten away with so much over the years. Illicit sex, back-door deals. He once even schemed to control a share of Kelly Incorporated for a few weeks. So why would this be different, he will think.

“Is that so, Mr. Benedict.” Martin will stare Arnold down with his black eyes, those coals that have wooed so many women, that have broken Kelly down time and again. “Is that so.”

Martin will slide the folder back to Arnold without looking inside. Martin doesn’t believe a changing market will strip his power. He doesn’t believe a slick group of young investors will bet on his downfall, that Kelly will swoop in with a handful of cash for one last stab at glory. “Now you listen to me. Kelly is afraid. They’re all afraid.” He will stand to leave, lean down so his face is inches from Arnold’s. Dramatic music will swell as the two men, the two old friends, stare each other down. “Don’t you ever forget that.”

## §

At the daily cast meeting to end the day, the execs from impeccable office buildings downtown make an appearance and present the case for cancellation. Roger doesn't listen, but he forces stoicism and apparent attention, as Martin would at a board meeting. When it's over, Roger steals away, not wanting to talk with the stunned and furious others. He decides against the upscale Greek place two blocks away, where the wait staff knows the current plot lines and his name and his usual order of Lamb Kleftiko but still ask him every night what he'd like to eat. He decides against dodging questions about what's going to happen next, how Martin is going to react, how Martin is going to get out of this jam.

Instead, he slinks to the underground rail and rides the red line seven stops to a neighborhood he's never been to, not in his lifetime in the city. He zips up his coat to his chin, squints into a cold drizzle. The neighborhood is like any other, maybe a tad more rundown; high-rises facing more high-rises, endless blacked out windows, a few dotted with lamplight. Corner stores, laundromats, delis. All the places you'd find some version of in any other part of the city.

Scanning the street for a bar, Roger spots a box of a place a few buildings down, with iron bars over the windows and a backlit marquee that reads “Dollhouse. \$2 Well Drinks Every Night.” He hustles toward the bar’s entrance, and before he enters, he checks to his left, his right. He knows the idea of someone following him here is absurd, but he still worries.

The door groans open and bells jingle to announce his arrival, though nobody turns to acknowledge him. At the L-shaped bar a few yards in front of Roger, a bartender straightens a paltry assortment of liquor bottles so their labels are facing out. A few bodies drape barstools, occupy the maze of circular tables obscuring the floor, and stand near the pool table and jukebox in the back. Decoration is sparse: fake candles lighting the tables, a few posters on the walls advertising long-past shows by bands with names like Steam Reflection and Radioactive Botany.

Everyone looks stiff, as if the long work-week has frozen each of them in place. In the back corner, an old man tosses a dart that misses the board wildly, and a woman at the bar throws her arm around a young man next to her, though the young man doesn’t seem to respond to her advances.

As he makes his way to the bar, Roger notices streams of cords, like veins, stapled to the hardwood floor. He bumps into a man slouched over an empty



mug, but before Roger can mutter an apology under his breath, he realizes what he's touched isn't skin but hard plastic. In his confusion, Roger turns and sees that the man is no man at all, but a wax doll, unblinking green eyes, downturned mouth, almost a frown, his olive skin a sheen in the bar's dimmed track lighting.

"They have coin slots on the backs of their necks." The bartender has switched to running already clean mugs and tumblers under a faucet. "It just seemed like you were surprised. Figured you hadn't been in before."

Roger takes an empty stool at the bar. A few stools down, a young pig-tailed blonde sits facing him, a denim skirt barely covering her long, slender legs, mouth slightly open, eyes narrowed and seductive. "Gin and tonic, please."

"Sure thing." The bartender mixes the drink, sloppy and strong, spilling a puddle of gin onto the bar. He slides it in front of Roger. "They won't ever fight with you. That's a big draw for most people."

Roger takes a long gulp of his drink and cringes. He hasn't drunk in a long time. "So what, they tell you how much they want to fuck you or something?"

"Ha. No. Well, this one here sort of hints at it," the bartender says as he jerks a thumb in the direction of the blond who Roger decides looks a lot like

the current version of the Parish daughter. She was born on-air in 2000, a teen by 2007, an adult by 2012. Rapid aging, they call it. She is an intern at Dillon Enterprises, a condition to keep her mother quiet about the affair. The daughter occasionally fetches Martin coffee. She dates that scoundrel Blake, mistaken by her youth.

“They mostly talk about who they are, how they got here. Origin stories. You know.”

“Another, please.” Roger slides the glass back to the bartender, already feeling lightness spread through his head and shoulders.

“Tough day?”

“Something like that. Just found out I’ve got two weeks left.”

“Left for what?”

Roger looks the bartender in the eye, watches him blink a few times, and then runs a finger across his neck.

The bartender takes half a step forward and leans his elbows on the counter. “Fucking Christ, man” he says, and he keeps his lips parted, as though he wants to say something else, but nothing comes out. Just the black hole of his mouth. Instead he turns and mixes another drink, this one sloppier, stronger, the puddle bigger. “On the house.”

Roger takes more heavy gulps and peers around the bar. He counts the faces, which begin to mimic movement, the small flinches and ticks he'd learned to reproduce so well as Martin Dillon. He doesn't want to talk anymore. He fumbles in his jacket pocket for his wallet, his numbed fingertips making it hard to grasp the leather and yank it out.

"How much for a listen?" he says, his tongue's grip on the words slipping away. The bartender is nothing like Paulino, even though he gave him a free drink—more rough-edged, more genuine in his concern.

"Dollar." The bartender avoids looking at Roger, as though hearing the death sentence would be the same as stitching it behind his own eyes. Roger slaps a twenty on the table, no words, and the bartender reaches under the register, brings up two rolls of quarters, breaks them in half on the countertop, and sprinkles the coins into a pile in front of Roger.

There's the Wall Street banker who grew up on a farm in Idaho plowing, harvesting, and solving Rubik's cubes. The man of seasons who's a department store Santa, fruit picker, public pool lifeguard, and Little League umpire, who's made the move to the big city after thirty years in a small town in Minnesota. The woman who crammed her life in a backpack and doesn't really want to talk, just wants to sing and strum the only three chords she knows on her

guitar. The sound technician who worked for a 70s funk band that nobody's ever heard of, and then edited sound on local radio for a classic rock station in Wisconsin.

Roger drinks and listens. Drinks and listens. He's impressed by how thorough and detailed and genuine all these stories seem. Soon, the tales blend and become one, like a legend, like a collage of what he believes is normal and good. He wants to kiss them all on the lips, tell them how proud he is, but he doesn't. One by one, he makes his way around the room, feeding quarters into the dolls' necks, touching them more and more to feel his numbed skin against theirs. He laughs at how stupid he's being, but he's also glad he doesn't have to tell his story back—he's afraid he would mix them up, that Martin would have a secret passion for portrait photography and Roger would love the rhythm of the speed bag, the dense weight of the heavy bag.

He meanders to the last doll, a woman who he thinks, in his drunkenness, looks eerily like Valerie from the beginning of the show: long black hair, straight-back posture, powerful, a matriarch capable of anything and everything. She sits at a table burrowed in a corner, a fake candle illuminating inquisitive eyes that watch over all the other dolls.

Roger stuffs his nose to the back of her neck, half-expecting the lavender perfume Valerie wore on set to overtake him, transform him into Martin, that forceful man who wouldn't have time to listen. Martin, who would run his fingertips down Valerie's spine and win her back from whomever she had left him for. Not Roger, who had never married, who had forgotten how romance worked with real women who didn't fling themselves from one affair to the next, who didn't pine and scheme and backstab into his bed, who didn't believe in soul mates for the sake of story.

Like the others, gears churn inside the Valerie-doll after Roger plunges the last quarter into the slot. A new shimmer backlights her skin, and a rich voice like a cello's c-string flows from a speaker inside her chest.

## §

The market will crash. Just like Arnold told him it would. When it does, Martin's office phone will blink furiously like a switchboard, the lights for each line flashing on and off, trying to convince him to pick up, to talk to panicked investors, furious vice presidents, and account managers. Martin will stuff his hands in his pockets, gaze out the window, his thirty-something story view of the sparkling city and its river. Like an emperor surveying his streets, gold and black with fire.

Martin will rest one foot on the windowsill and start to step up when his secretary enters without knocking.

“Mr. Dillon. I’m so sorry to bother you. But the calls. I can’t . . . They won’t stop.”

“Of course, Angie. Just let them go to the machine. You can go home early.”

Angie will nod and duck out, closing the door gently behind her. As Martin hovers at the window, the flashbacks will begin. His children being born. Holidays, dishes full of cranberry sauce and mashed potatoes covering a long table, the foggy glow of Christmas lights, the kisses from the most memorable New Years’ celebrations. Proposals, weddings, birthdays. Signing the contract to acquire Brush Cosmetics.

The fights will remain in the past, in the memories of the audience. The affairs and shouting matches and gossip and accusations. The times he lost to Kelly. Those are not the life events Martin Dillon will choose to remember while he weighs his foot against the precipice of his own mortality.

After the memories drain away like floodwaters into sewer grates, Martin will turn and grab his winter coat from its hook near his office door. He will

fit the big black buttons through their slots, one by one, all the way up to his chin—he will disguise his shame behind the coat’s tall collar.

The audience will not see him walk the wind-whipped streets, imagine the tall downtown buildings collapsing like shattered men brought to their knees. They will not watch how, when he’s seen them all fall around him, when he is the last man standing among the rubble, how he will find his way to his luxury car with the seat warmers and leather upholstery, how he will drive to the outskirts of town, to a dimly lit bar he’s never been to, how he will power off his phone and try his best to disappear at a dark corner table, how he will ask the bartender to keep the vodka-somethings coming, how he will refuse the bartender’s offer to call a cab, how the keys won’t fit easily into the ignition, how he will press the accelerator too hard, hit the curb, leave a trail of black tire marks on the cracked asphalt of the bar’s parking lot.

### §

The only way Roger can keep the Valerie-doll’s words inside his mind is to rest his forehead on the table so it looks as if he’s passed out. Galaxies of color whirl behind his eyelids. The doll’s voice broadcasts through the pinpricks of light.

“My mother was a dancer until she was twenty-five, and then there was a car crash. A truck T-boned her, and her left leg got pinned against the steering wheel. She lost the leg. She never danced again, but she did have a little girl, and she showed that girl all her competition videos, over and over, from the time the girl was old enough to sit still. She pointed at the screen and told the little girl what each movement was called and how it was done. My mother signed the girl up for a bunch of different dance classes like ballet, jazz, modern, and even hip-hop. For going to a week of classes, she’d take the girl out for frozen yogurt.

“But what the girl really wanted was to play with her friends at the creek near their house. She tried to catch small frogs and had one of those insect jars with the holes poked out of the top. She imagined what it might be like to live like one of those creatures. She let go everything she caught.

“The girl kept dancing even though she hated it. Her mother had once told her dancing was the best way to be free inside her own body, but the girl always felt someone else was making her arms and legs move. Soon, the girl forgot what it was like to play at the creek. She’d now and then remember something that would make her smile for a minute, but the feeling always left as soon as it arrived.



“In another life, I was that girl. I was my mother’s other leg and a kid who wore dirty overalls. I stopped dancing. And now I’m a woman who doesn’t really know how she got here. I work with numbers for a company that works out numbers for other companies. I watch “Dancing with the Stars” with a few coworkers each week, and I never talk about the moves or how bad the celebrities are. I just watch and try to fit in. Who does that make me? Who am I more like? Sometimes I wonder if I ever was that dancing girl, or if somehow I just made it all up.”

Roger thrusts his head up so quickly that it slams against the wall behind him. The Valerie-doll continues on with her story. Her current hobbies, her on-and-off relationship with her mother. But Roger decides he has heard enough. Leaning on the table for support, he stands and worms his arms through his coat sleeves. He stops by the bar to pay his tab on the way out.

“You take care of yourself out there. Sure you don’t need a cab?”

“Yeah, yeah, I gah this,” Roger says, in a too-loud voice proving the exact opposite. He waves a hand at the bartender as he turns to leave.

Outside, the frigid wind has picked up, whining through the streets’ awnings, through pocked brick and around lampposts and newspaper dispensers. But Roger feels warm and tingly from the bar and the gin and

tonics. He reaches into his pocket and on the third try pulls out his cell phone. His fingers are too numb and loose to slide the screen the way he wants it, so he uses the voice command instead: “Call Ray Cell,” he slurs.

“Would you like me to search the internet for ‘Claw Bay Bell?’” the automated voice replies.

“Fucking thing . . . CALL. RAY. CELL.” His lips and tongue feel exaggerated as he strains to enunciate each syllable.

“Calling Ray Cell,” the voice spits back.

Straight to voicemail.

“Ray, Ray, Bo Bay. Iss Martin. I mean Roger. I mean whatever.” Roger interrupts his message to laugh at himself for a moment. “Ya know sumpin’ buddy? I’ve never, not once in my stupid life, been there at night. Ja know that? Thirty years, Ray, and I don’t know how to be alone. Listen to me, Ray. I told you I’m not going down like a sack-uh-shit. Roger mighta let that happen like a turd, but nah me. I’monna do sumpin’ about it. Another thing . . .”

Before Roger can finish, a different automated voice tells him his time is up, that he can press one to leave another message. He hits the end call button and stuffs the phone into his pocket.

And from there, instinct takes over. It shuttles him down the sidewalk, back into the underground railway, onto the red line headed downtown. Instinct forces him to collapse onto one of the hard plastic seats and listen for the correct stop. He's not thinking anymore, just doing. Deep, subconscious memory. Reflex and action.

He trudges up the subway steps, braces himself against the chill, stumbles two blocks to the TV station's building where his studio sleeps. All of this without question, without hesitation. All of this as though he were in a dream and had no control over his body, the liquor making it flow like water with the current. He stutter-steps through the revolving door and straightens his back to pass the night receptionist.

"Hey there, Mr. Grayson. Cold one out there, isn't it?"

"Uh-huh." Roger avoids eye contact. "I just forgot something. My, uh—my passport."

The receptionist gives Roger a curious look. "Of course, Mr. Grayson. You just let me know if you need anything."

Roger walks to the elevator and carefully steers his finger to the button, his movements like slow motion, a highly conscious but inevitably unsuccessful attempt to appear sober. He hears the familiar ding and the silver

doors slide open. He chuckles at the magic of it, how he doesn't understand how any of it works.

Eighth floor. Red emergency exit lights and a few stray overheads illuminate his path, waver in his vision. To get to his dressing room each day, Roger passes all the permanent sets: the Atlantic Lounge, Martin's office, the den where Martin pours himself drinks, the bedroom, Paulino's, the hip coffee shop. Tonight, they are all silhouettes, their hard edges softened. Tonight, this is a ghost town, abandoned in a way Roger has never seen it, left for dead like the culmination of Martin's worst fears.

The custodial staff has made its rounds, and the sets look too perfect. Everything cleaned and reset by phantoms. Roger might be able to name one or two of the people who have picked up after him over the years, who have cleaned Martin's messes to ready the set for another day in this make-believe, two-dimensional city. This deserted kingdom.

After squinting at the darkened sets for a long moment, Roger strides down the hallway to his left, aware of the thud and echo of each step. He runs a hand along the wall to steady himself. He knows this hallway better than the layout of his childhood home. He stops in front of the last door on the left. "Roger Grayson – Martin Dillon." Two gold stars decorate the plaque.

Roger fumbles with his keychain, pokes a short, stubby key at the lock until it fits and creaks open the door. He flips on the light switch. Four of the mirror bulbs are still dead.

He stares at himself. Distorted and wobbly with drunkenness. For more than thirty years he has looked into the same mirror, sometimes as Roger, sometimes as Martin. He has never thought, until now, to choose whom to become. He has always stripped off one costume and buttoned up the other without much consideration for the man between outfits.

He waits for the image to clear, to steady, but the room spins in random circles like a carnival ride. Though he desperately wants to, he cannot see straight, and because of this a rage he hasn't felt before boils in his chest—something close to animal—and he looses a long yell that morphs halfway through into a sobbing scream. He claws for whatever is close. First, a potted cactus. He hurls it at the mirror. The ceramic pot shatters, taking a few of the light bulbs with it and spilling a mound of dirt on the carpet. A wire trash basket. A stack of *New Yorkers*. A half-burnt vanilla candle. He flings each item as hard as he can at the mirror, and each knocks out a light bulb or two, vines the mirror with razor-thin cracks, and falls to the floor. The room darkens by degrees. His makeup box. A vase. That is the last object. An empty

vase. It strikes and smashes the final lit bulb, and the room goes black. After all the broken things settle, the room is silent. The fractured mirror. A dark, shapeless figure trapped within it.

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**Austin Kodra's** father recorded every episode of *The Young & the Restless* on VHS tapes while Austin attended elementary and middle school. This is Austin's first published short story. His poetry has been a finalist for the Moon City Poetry Award and has appeared or is forthcoming in: *The Adroit Journal*, *Animal: A Beast of a Literary Magazine*, *Barnstorm*, *Connotation Press: An Online Artifact*, *Harpur Palate*, *Prime Number Magazine*, and elsewhere. He lives in Knoxville, TN, with his family.