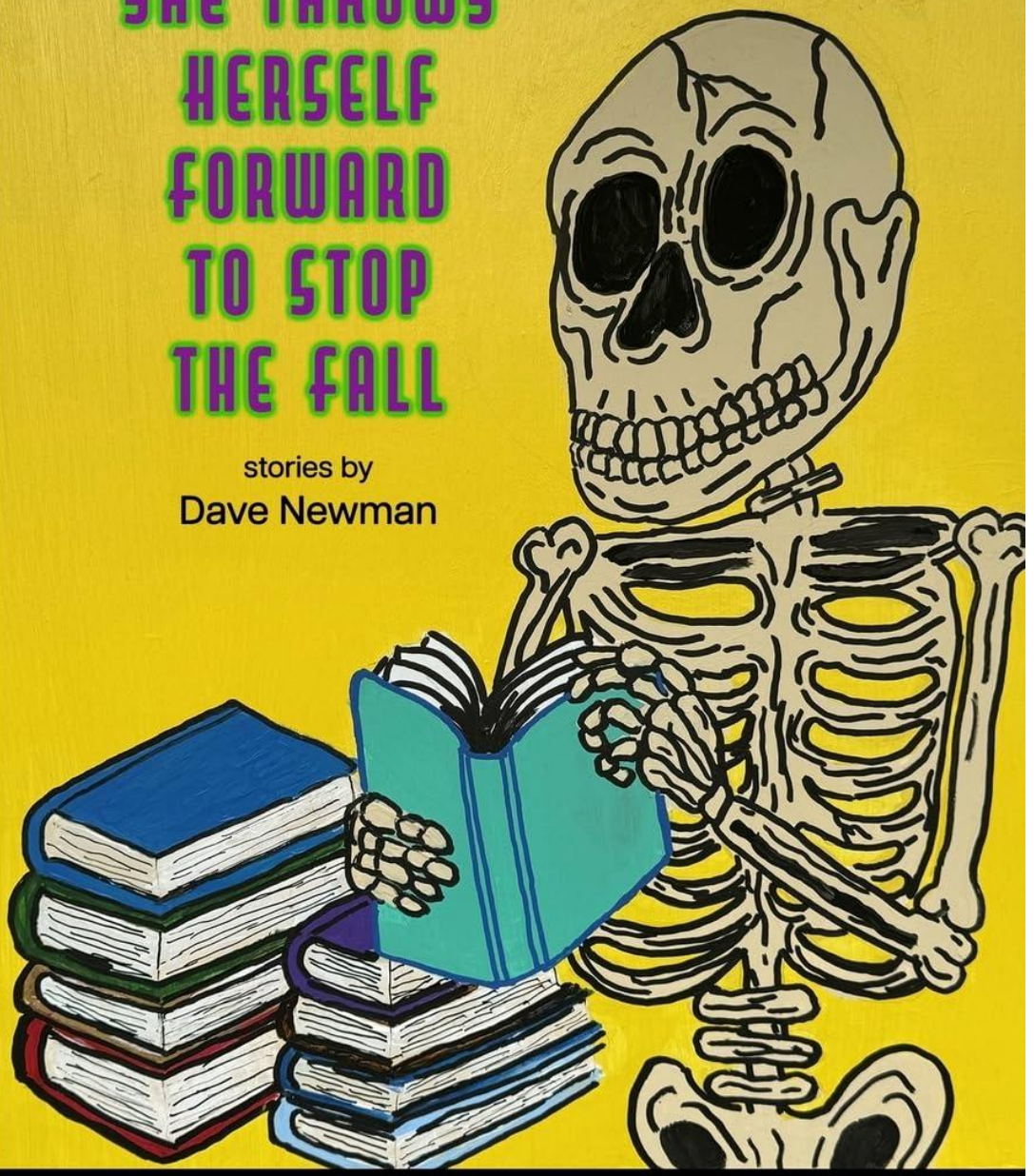
SHE THROWS HERSELF FORWARD TO STOP THE FALL

stories by

Dave Newman



"Truly one of the best writers of his generation."

—Gerald Locklin, author of *Charles Bukowski: A Sure Bet*

JULEEN

Juleen wants to punch Max in the face.

Max is twenty-two years old, a mountain bike dude.

Juleen is thirty-three, five-months out of rehab.

This morning, on the coffee table in the living room, Max left a bag of weed, two rolled joints, and six empty beer cans. This evening the daughter Juleen desperately wants back in her life is supposed to arrive at 6:00, dropped off by her father.

The father is straight and steady and holds a good job in accounting.

He never asks for child support.

He never mentions that Juleen lives in a college apartment with a roommate named Max who leaves drugs on the table and eats Powerbars, who drinks energy drinks and wears sporty clothes, who majors in film studies and carries his phone around like a third hand.

Juleen wears the same four outfits, sometimes washing them in the bathtub. She drinks water. She eats whatever,

whenever. She majors in psychology because she does not know what else to major in. She does not smoke weed. When she did drugs, she did drugs. She never left her drugs on the table like loose change.

Max wants to make a movie on his phone, a documentary about mountain bike dudes, and premiere it at a coffeehouse.

Juleen owns a welfare phone filled with pictures of her daughter.

It's 3:00.

Juleen cut class to come home and redd-up, to wipe the sticky spots, to vacuum. The bathtub needs scrubbed and Juleen bought cleanser. She bought bubble bath because kids need baths, kids like bubbles. She bought a little lizard thing at the dollar store because lizard things are probably fun in the bathtub and moms want their daughters to smile at them and squeeze plastic lizards filled with sudsy water and laugh.

The last time Juleen saw her daughter, they played at a park and some hippie girl let them throw her dog a Frisbee. Juleen wept in bed that night because her daughter loves dogs and Frisbees, because Juleen could not buy her daughter a dog, because she could not have a dog in her apartment, because she could maybe afford a Frisbee but maybe not.

After all these months of being sober Juleen is still Juleen and, of course, she had done these things to herself and, of

course, these things made and make her pathetic as a mom, obviously, even as she only cares about the opposite now, please.

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It's 3:05.

Juleen stands on the coffee table, palms flat against the ceiling, stretching her muscles from neck to toes. She says a prayer to whomever, to the ceiling. She doesn't believe in god despite the god stuff in rehab but she hopes, always, because hope is a god too, more generous than most.

She jumps down.

She walks the living room, searching for Max's bike helmet, his water bottle, anything to stomp into plastic dust and fabric, but he's taken it all to class or his job at the sub shop or to some trail he's pedaling on, sweating his boy sweat and not worrying.

Max always says, "Race the world. Don't let the world race you."

Juleen does not know what that means except Max does not have a child and his brain is a cloud of weed smoke and quotes from shitty Eastern philosophy books he pretends to read.

Back the coffee table she places her palms flat on the ceiling.

Breathe motherfucker, she says, her mantra.

People—counselors, friends, even Max—think she wants to drink, to drug. They see the veins in her forehead and her neck muscles, and they think she will dive into a bottle or pop dope and fall into a couch, drooling. But she wants focus, not loss. She wants time and money so she can get happy the way people with time and money get happy, by taking their daughters to places that cost money, bounce houses and pizza parlors, the store at the mall where girls make their own teddy bears and kiss the plastic heart and place it in the bear's furry chest before they fill the body with stuffing that smells like vanilla cake. Parenting makes being a drug addict look inexpensive.

Being here, present, is easy.

Getting there, to a day worth something, is the crush.

Yesterday, Juleen stood in a grocery store for ten minutes, trying to decide whether to buy Fruit Circles or Fruit Loops, whether to save two dollars and lose the vitamins they pump into the name brand or to spend the two dollars and not buy the lizard bath toy.

Juleen steps on the plastic bag of weed and wants to punch Max in the face.

She pushes the ceiling again.

Forgive Max, he's a fucking kid.

Only one other person responded when Juleen was apartment hunting because fucking kids do not want to live with old ladies who are recovering from drugs and have a daughter and sometimes can't make the rent. Or, worse, they want to live with old ex-junkies because they are young and male and horny and one said, "You into orgies?" when Juleen showed up with her checkbook and said she was just out of rehab, trying to be honest, trying to imagine a dude in a Cleveland Cavaliers basketball jersey as a young adult.

"No, I am not into orgies," Juleen said, "but thanks."

"Me neither," the boy said, "but I could be," and winked.

Forgive all of them because they are young and terrible and Juleen was worse than all of them and she still wonders if she is better than anyone now.

Sometimes Max buys groceries and cooks Juleen dinner. He brings home subs for her and leaves them in the refrigerator with friendly notes. He bought her an alarm clock because her crappy phone does not have an alarm, because she did not know phones had alarms until Max showed her his iPhone one morning.

Do not punch Max in the face.

Do not.

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Juleen first banged her daughter's father at a party when he was still in college and she was bartending at an afterhours club and sleeping all day. It was a fun thing, banging her daughter's father, like getting drunk or eating breakfast at three in the morning or banging a cute guy who'd only slept with one other girl. Her daughter's father styled his hair with gel and wore shirts with collars. He asked questions, he was interested, he cared. He was a sweetie, still is a sweetie. He loves his parents. They love him. They paid for his college and he thanked them profusely.

They are good people.

Juleen can recognize good people.

She understands that she can be good people but that she is not but that she will be.

On the night they banged, her daughter's father said, "What about your parents?" in his inquisitive way and Juleen said, "You're kidding?" and kissed him and took him by the hand to the back bedroom where they fucked on a pile of coats and he shivered and came in two minutes and apologized and offered to buy them snacks.

When Juleen found out she was pregnant, she tracked him down and stopped by his apartment, embarrassed yet broke, planning to ask for money to pay for the abortion, half the abortion if he got weird.

She said, "Sorry to show up like this."

He said, "I'm glad you did," and invited her in.

She said, "I'm pregnant."

He thought about that, not angrily, and said, "You're sure it's mine?"

Juleen said, "You're my one and only."

He sat down on his crummy college couch, which was nicer than the couch Juleen owns now, then slid to the floor and took a knee and asked her to marry him.

Juleen said, "Oh sweetie, get up," and helped him to his feet.

Juleen couldn't have gotten married because she still wanted to get fucked up. Getting fucked up was a lot of fun and it kept her from thinking about things like money and jobs and futures and dead parents. Imagine a boxing match. Imagine two hands, one made of whiskey and one made of cocaine. Juleen believed in fists.

And now someone was offering a third hand, another way to fight.

Why had she never considered a baby?

Juleen said, "You really want this kid?"

He said, "Why wouldn't I?"

Juleen was glad she hadn't mentioned the abortion.

She didn't think men understood pregnancy, how babies were built.

It took time for her daughter's father to understand they weren't getting married.

It took a longer time for Juleen to quit getting fucked up, like most of her pregnancy, like her baby could have been born with three heads and two toes, something she never plans to admit to anyone, ever.

No, she sometimes hears herself in her head, speaking to a panel of judges and doctors, I did not while I was with child.