

## Half-human by Maartje Wortel

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Translated by Michele Hutchison

*Every man builds his world in his own image. He has the power to choose, but no power to escape the necessity of choice.*

Ayn Rand

I read recently that as soon as you wake up in the morning you've already decided whether you are going to have, say, an ice-cream, that day. Not consciously, something in you has already decided. Today you are allowed an ice-cream.

You shouldn't believe everything you read in the papers, but thinking about it in retrospect, I now know it's true.

Something in you has already decided. This was how it was for Michael Poloni. He had to wait a long time. Yet he did finally get what he wanted, if I've understood it correctly. In any case, he looked happy, not something you can say about everybody. If I ever ask anyone, 'How do I look today?' Nine times out of ten they'll say, 'Are you sure you want me to answer that?' The tenth is my mother. She says, 'Kiddo, you're a stunner and you know it.' Those are the days I wear my hat.

But anyway, it's not about me right now; it's about Michael Poloni. His story began about six months ago with an accident. It had all began much earlier than that, of course, but on that Saturday when the accident took place it really started. Something in him had already decided long before. Today you are allowed an ice-cream. And the realization about what that means always comes later, once you've eaten your ice-cream, see?

Let me say this first: as it turns out this whole story doesn't have anything to do with me. It was only random chance that I, James Dillard, 43 years-old, born and bred native of Los Angeles, took part in this story, but only from the sidelines and only for a couple of months.

It was a Tuesday morning, I'd eaten a bagel, after that I'd taken a shit while reading a chapter from *The Road to Los Angeles*. I had brushed my teeth and pondered whether to shave

or not. I'd had a coffee with my housemate, Allijah, a beautiful girl. We were sitting out front with the warehouse doors open. I was watching the traffic and she was telling me about her exams, which I wasn't interested in since she already had a boyfriend. One of the neighbours said hello, she had a gammy leg. I wondered whether it wasn't a bit dicey for her to keep on driving. I was also thinking about what I'd do that afternoon and that everything would be the same as the day before and the day before and the day before. I wasn't doing anything, hadn't my whole life. I lived from anti-climax to anti-climax. You can go and live in a big city like Los Angeles but it doesn't solve anything.

My parents are filthy rich. They kept sending me money that I'd spend on expensive cheeses and alcohol. I'd get up, select the cheeses, cut the cheeses, eat the cheeses, get drunk whatever I drank, I'd reread the same books, have pointless discussions with my housemates about things they didn't find pointless, they were young, you couldn't blame them.

Things went as they always bloody go: sometimes I'd throw things, sometimes we'd dance in the sitting room, I always tried to get one of the girls into bed, usually it almost worked. (Almost, almost, almost). A housemate ( a real player) once told me that a man can compare the chances of getting laid with surfing; you need to know exactly when to hit the wave, then everything will take its course. Nothing ever took its course for me, I was always too early or too late, I'd miss every wave. After another such failed attempt, I'd go for a lie-down, cursing on many occasions, until I fell asleep and then the next day would be just about the same as I've just described.

It was a big moment for me when the letter arrived. I'd once put my name down on a list saying I'd be interested in being on a jury. And now it had happened. There was going to be a court case and I would be the one deciding who was guilty and how guilty they were. It sounded like fun work, I spent every day assigning guilt and degrees of guilt, only the people here couldn't do a lot with it most of the time. And so I was happy to get the letter. I could finally call the shots, administer justice. This was Los Angeles, the city of fools, and I could say who. Me, James Dillard.

I had to say an oath and swear allegiance to God and the American flag. Beforehand, I didn't think I took God or the American flag seriously, but now it came down to it, things turned out different in practice.

All I can say at this point in time is that it wasn't over with the first case they called me for. And certainly not with that first letter. It is never over when you think it is over. Life is sometimes tied up in intricate knots.

A new case would come about as a result of the first case; it probably didn't have that much to do with the first case at the end of the day, but the cases had enough in common for the same jury to be called, it was the easiest thing to do.

I called my mother. I had been trying to reach her all morning. When she finally picked up, I said, 'Mum, I have a new court case.'

There was a brief silence. She went outside because I could hear the wind.

'Did you make that much of an impression?' my mother asked because she knew that being on a jury was primarily a lottery.

I would have liked to have told her that this was true, that I'd been called up again because I'd made such an indelible impression. But of course it wasn't true, I hadn't even said much during the first case, I had been nervous and concerned about whether I looked handsome. And trustworthy. I needed the bathroom for most of the court case, I looked at the suspects, the witnesses, the victims. I thought – are you supposed to raise your hand when you need to pee? Nobody did, anyway, so I didn't either. And now there was suddenly a new case. This was fantastic for me, don't you see?

I can tell you this already, that second case didn't have a thing to do with the first one. It was much, much worse and more complex. It was fucking freaky. I had never heard of anything like that. I didn't know what to think and whether it was up to us to lay down the law. You are considered innocent until proven otherwise. I can tell you: everybody is bloody guilty. You. You. You. And between all those yous I will insert some meaningful silences.

As I point a finger at you.

## **PART 1**

### **Something in you has already decided.**

1.

Cans of soft drink needed to be bought. Diet coke. And vitamin pills. Everything a person needs in a single tablet. He also needed bullets, just to be sure, the box under the bed was past its sell-by date. He had enough cigarettes. Five packets. Enough to last a few days.

He sat on his bed and smoked a cigarette, it was raining ruthlessly. His digital alarm clock beeped eight times in short succession. On the other side of the street, two women stood on a balcony, they drank something from a plastic beaker, slowly, as though mistrusting it. He wondered why they were on the balcony. Maybe they'd just had a smoke.

Michael had slept terribly, he had woken up continuously with a dry mouth. He had thrashed around, had restless dreams. Something about wild water chutes, a marble staircase, his mother being ill. He put on his sandals and walked to the phone to call for a cab. He had become used to hearing the same voice in the mornings, the question 'Where to?' He didn't want to go anywhere, but the fact was that Michael Poloni had to go to work, just like anyone else.

Dark clouds glided overhead as though someone had picked up a remote and put them on fast forward, Christ they were going fast. The weather wasn't the reason that Michael didn't walk to work. He easily could have, it wasn't far, just a couple of blocks from his apartment, but he took a cab, every morning the same routine. The control centre knew his instructions: stop right in front of the door, toot twice, half past eight. He would have liked to have given more instructions: that he didn't want to talk, that he wanted to open the door himself, that he would rather not have to listen to the radio. He had restrained himself.

When he was young he'd had to walk to school, whether he wanted to or not, along with Rafael and Paulo who couldn't muster much enthusiasm for their younger brother. They were happy enough just the two of them. This didn't bother Michael, he would slowly trail along after them, sunk in his own thoughts. Now he'd sit in a taxi every day sunk in his own thoughts: usually about what he'd read in the morning papers, that there was once more/still a

war somewhere, that nuclear disasters had occurred, shootings, family dramas, that there were drugs gangs and floods. Sometimes he'd think about his work, the money he was saving for the future, the women who tried to seduce him, his mother, Magda-Maria Eva Poloni-Lopéz, the books he was reading, scientific research, migration and the beaches in Mexico, how he'd sat next to his father José Alexander Poloni on the bus in the summer holidays, always the same route, through the village, to the sea and back, without ever tiring of it.

In the hall next to the coat rack was a small round mirror. As he put on his black jacket he studied his face and his white polo shirt; checked whether he had shaved properly, if the collar was sitting right, that there weren't any stains on his shirt. He rubbed a little sun cream into his hair, his father had taught him this. 'Then you'll always smell like summertime and the sea, it makes people trust you.'

Michael wasn't the kind of person who wanted to be trusted, nor did he want to smell of summertime and the sea, but the stuff made his hair appear thicker. It was a pleasing side-effect that the sun cream made him think of his father, a man he liked to remember. This was not something all children could say. Michael Poloni's father had been a friendly man/ father/ bus driver who didn't say much, but compensated with eating and reading. He had died five years ago and though Michael had been mad with grief, his father's death had also been something of a relief. At least there was one person less for him to disappoint now. He neatly combed his hair into a parting and was ready for the working day. His hairline ran diagonally across his head, like a road with an indeterminable destination. A few days previously, Michael had read in the *Los Angeles Times* that you could tell whether someone was stressed by looking at their hair.

Before leaving his apartment, he looked through the peephole in the door and saw what he saw every morning: people opening their doors, people closing their doors, but usually there wasn't anyone about. He turned around to check his appearance once more in the mirror, gave a framed picture of the virgin Mary a quick stroke, put a hacky sack in his trouser pocket, and briefly touched his scar.

In the common corridor on the third floor, it smelled of sweat and onions. There were scratches in the linoleum in some places, they hadn't been there for long, perhaps someone had just moved in or out. Michael lit a cigarette and followed the scratches to the lift at the end of the corridor. Since he'd been living in this apartment, the lift had broken down once, it had gotten stuck between the fourth and fifth floors. Floors he had no interest in.

He pressed GROUND FLOOR. A sign at eye-height read MAX. 6 PERS. 500KG.

That worked out at about eighty-three kilos per person. He had once read that the head was the heaviest part of the human body. How much would a eighty-three kilo person weigh without their head?

The lift stopped at the second floor, a woman with blond hair got in, he'd seen her before, but Michael didn't know who she was. (Monica Teronda from Washington. Twenty-eight years old. Living with her boyfriend of forty-six. Had suffered a miscarriage two months previously. Worked sixty hour weeks at a casting agency in West Hollywood and hoped to get a film role herself. At night she dreamed of this. During the daytime too.) She was wearing a raincoat or perhaps it was a coat that just looked like a raincoat, maybe that was fashionable. She nodded and gave him a friendly smile, as though she knew him. Michael nodded back. He let his eyes glide over her shoes, high heels which made the most of her muscular calves. Her legs were encased in flesh-coloured stockings. He found that attractive, like skin over skin, an extra protective layer over whoever she was.

The lift stopped on the ground floor, the doors opened creakily. They exited along a corridor and through a glass swing door onto the street. The woman was in a hurry, she walked quickly. Michael didn't look at her but at his own feet, the grey and black Nike dunks he'd put on, beating rhythmically on the asphalt. A plastic coffee cup rolled across the pavement, the wrapper from a pack of biscuits flew past. Just think of all the bloody stuff that flew past you on a typical day.

When he looked up to cross the street, he saw the woman with the raincoat standing next to his cab. Of course he couldn't be one hundred percent sure that it was his cab, but it was, it was one of those things you just knew.

The woman lent forwards by the door, her knees bending outwards slightly, and asked the driver something (Jack Houston. A blond man with a square chin. Addicted to adrenaline; spends his pocket money on parachute jumps from various spots in California. Sitting room full of aerial shots. Falls in love with great frequency) gesturing with her hands. Michael crossed over too, quickened his pace, something he only did when necessary, he preferred not to walk fast.

'Excuse me,' he said in as friendly a tone as possible, as he ground out his cigarette butt on the ground. 'This is my cab.'

The blond woman smiled at him. The smile made him nervous, it could mean anything.

He wanted to get into the taxi and ignore the woman. He briefly wondered whether he should say, 'You take it, you take the cab.' As nonchalantly as possible.

Should he let the woman take the cab because she was a woman?

He hesitated for a fraction of a second. Again he repeated, 'This is my cab,' before getting in. He squeezed the hacky sack in his trouser pocket.

The taxi driver looked tired, like many people in this city. As though his life wasn't going well. Michael didn't dare to look at him.

'Sepulva Boulevard, Mission Hills,' he said.

The taxi driver didn't reply but began to drive. He was thinking about the woman in the raincoat for sure.

Outside someone was being arrested, it didn't matter that it was early in the morning. The person being arrested kicked the police car, this didn't matter either, the red lights on the car carried on flashing, two policeman held the man in a tight grip, he was carted off. The day had begun.

At work they said: 'Good morning to you.' The woman on the phones (Rebecca Kingsey. The boss's only daughter. C cup. Doesn't know her father but apparently he's a plumber from Santiago. Has a scar above her right eye, because when she was a child she fought with a boy who hit her with a rake. Every morning before work she jogs five kilometres along the LA river, even though it has dried up in most places) nodded and smiled at him like the woman in the lift had done this morning. Her earrings swayed backwards and forwards, they reminded Michael of the circus.

He too said, 'Good morning to you.' He raised a hand and disappeared from sight, into the left wing of the building.