Another week, another finalist in our ongoing WEIRD WORDS 2 short fiction contest. This nightmarish little number comes to us courtesy of author Ethan James Petty. It's called…

MAKING THE CUT

By Ethan James Petty

"Yes, he's mentally ill. No, that doesn't automatically make him a pervert," said June, pinning her cell tightly between ear and shoulder as she hooked all seven grocery bags onto her slender fingers. Her left foot nudged the "Healing Helpers" van door shut, nearly causing her to topple. Embarrassed, she glanced up at the old man's smokey window. The curtains shifted.

"Junebug, a little secret from the book of men. We're all perverts, we're just very good at hiding it *until* we're mentally ill. What are you wearing?"

"Hah."

"Not for *me*. For him."

"Ew. So now I'm the pervert?" June poked the call button next to the water-stained smear that once read Carl Edison.

"Don't want to give the poor old guy a heart attack. How often does he see *hot young thangs* ?"

"Just me. And only once a week. Relax. His heart is safe. I wore my ugliest turtleneck. Baggy jeans. My knees aren't even showing."

"Good. Got to be careful with old guys and knees. I'll see you tonight. Bye bye."

"Bye!"

June knew this ritual well—ring once, wait ten seconds, ring again. That way Mr. E knew it was a friend. He buzzed her up.

She's flashing the cleavage again, thought Mr. E from the opposite end of the peephole. If he hadn't been so preoccupied—no, so *obsessed* with the end of everything, he might have achieved the pity-thrill she was throwing his way. June was a class act, doing whatever she could to remind him that there was a world outside his house, one full of exciting new people and things to see. If that meant flirting, she flirted. They both knew it would never come to anything. She was a shoulder to cry on, a wall at which to bounce ideas, and a limitless source of information about the world he'd shut out decades ago. She'd once told him that she could fix him if he'd just step out into "Junebug's world," but he knew what waited beyond the door, despite her colorful stories: old things. Dead things. He was one of them.

Mr. E processed his deadbolt, locks, and chains, knowing he had only five seconds to retreat into the kitchen before June opened the gateway. Sure enough, he heard the rustling grocery bags as, six seconds later, she stepped in and plopped them down on the table. He heard the door thump back into place, followed by the soothing click of each lock. *Good girl*.

"Did you get it, June?" Mr. E stumbled into his living room, startling her. Usually, he'd grill her with a series of bizarre, specific questions, just to make sure she was really June and not something else. Not today. Today was moving far too fast and his time was running short.

"I think I got everything on your list, Mr. E, and some extras, too. I've been clipping coupons and I managed to stretch your hundred bucks really far this week."

"The razor. Did you get the razor?" His voice was mud.

She frowned at his shaking hands and the way he turned his head sideways when he looked at her. This was Mr. Edison from last year. Not Mr. E. As a volunteer, she'd worked hard to tame the beast standing before her and she hadn't seen it for a long while. Mr. E had never trusted any social worker before, which bought June the helper of the month badge twice last year. Today, though, he was way off. Regressed. He hadn't bothered untangling the wispy mess atop his head, nor had he changed his grungy plaid pajamas. His eyes bulged. His nostrils flared as if gasping for air.

"Are you finally going to shear off the beard?' she asked. She hoped her perfect smile might dig out his, as it usually did, but there was no emotion to be mined from the old man's face today.

"The beard, yes. It's grown itchy." It certainly looked itchy.

"I'm not supposed to do this—you know the rules: food only, but I know you don't have any other way to get things. Kind of feels like I'm smuggling a file into a prison. You aren't planning an escape, are you?"

He shrugged.

June fished through the bags, setting aside canned jumbo raviolis, fortune cookies (he didn't bother with the fortunes, just the cookies), and what few vegetables she could sneak in each week without protest. Finally, she found it, not the ultimate x-treme smooth glide disposable she wanted to buy, but what he'd specifically demanded—a box of plain old razors. Razors-in-the-Halloween-candy razors. *Menacing little bastards*. She wasn't stupid—though she felt stupid now—she knew this was risky business, but she'd felt she was at a crossroads with him. That all progress would be flushed if she denied him his simple request. Besides, if Mr. E wanted to off himself, he already had a pretty impressive arsenal, didn't he? His cabinets were filled with toxic cleaning products, he wore a belt and certainly had access to bedsheets, should he choose to take the hangman's route. And of course, he could always just plunge into the urban jungle outside his door, which
he
was absolutely convinced would kill him. Still, she'd gambled and now she was doubting her bet as the roulette wheel began to slow.
Please don't land on red
.

Mr E exhaled hard. These *were* smuggled goods. These were game changers. He snatched them from her hand whip-fast and ran his grubby fingernails around the package edges looking for a breaching point.

"Maybe this was a bad idea," said June. "I can get you something better. I'll pay for it myself. Hey! Maybe you can come out with me. There's a barber around the corner. Real close. It's on me."

"June, how old do you think I am?"

"Thirty-five?" She smiled again.

"I was born in '36."

"I've seen wars reshape the world, presidents shot, diseases cured, and new ones born. You are a beautiful girl and a wonderful human being, but please don't try to parent me." There it was. There was the tone that had convinced her in the first place. "I'm tired, June. And it's time to go."

"OK, I'll go. Just promise me you'll be here next week. Can you do that?'

“Of course. Where else would I be?” asked Mr. E.

Unsatisfied, but without alternatives, June left. She listened for the inevitable ritual behind her, knowing exactly which lock corresponded to each click.

Do the cuts go horizontally or vertically? The man in the mirror wasn't specific, thought Mr. E. He stood before the glass, awaiting further instructions, but the reflection was quiet.

Elly Otrava's emergency dispatch assignment had been running five years. It was hard to estimate the specific type of *emergency* her employer sought to intercept. She didn't know how the magic worked, but it always did. She had faith because she'd seen the miracles. Today, they took the form of a panicking red light.

“911 emergency, how may I help you?” asked Elly.

“Hello, I—I'm a social worker. And I think one of my friends is going to kill himself.”

“Calm down, hon. What's your name?”

“June Janson.”

“Pretty name, June. What's the man's name and address?”

“Mr. E. I mean Carl Edison. He lives at 216B Glenn.”

That was a hit. She circled the address in her special list. Finally, here was her chance to push the magic into motion. “June, why do you think Mr. Edison is suicidal? What did he say?”

“It wasn't anything specific, really. Well, he wanted razors… like *really* wanted them. Just the blades. And he wasn't himself. He was acting—they don't like us to use the word, but...”

“But he was acting crazy. OK, hon, I'm going to send over the police. I need you to leave the premises. We don't want you getting in their way. And if the man has razors, you definitely want to keep your distance. Don't feel bad, sometimes people lose themselves for a little bit. We'll take care of him. You did good today. You probably saved a man's life.”

“OK. Hurry. Please.”

“Goodbye, hon.”

Elly dipped a wrinkled hand into her purse and fished out a compact mirror. She popped it open and waited for her reflection to change.

“We've got one. Mr. Carl Edison,” said Elly.

“Fantastic. Is there any chance at intervention?” asked Mirror-Elly.

“No. I'm deleting all traces. It's out of our hands now.”

“He'll be pleased, Elly,” said Mirror-Elly. “Perhaps you'll be next.”

“Oh, I hope so. Do you think it's possible?”

Mirror-Elly winked. Elly zipped up her purse and strutted off the job. She never returned.

Where are they? It had been twenty minutes and June hadn't heard so much as a siren yet. Her 911 calls came up busy. She screamed at his window with no response, threw rocks, and even assaulted his neighbors' buzzers when Mr. E's had no effect. Nobody would help.

“Please, Mr. E. Don't put this on me.” But it was completely on her. Her mistake. Her lack of maturity, of judgment. Her fault. She could already hear the Healing Helpers rationalizing why they would have to report *her* to the police. She had to be the one to make this right.

June scrambled into the HH van and plowed it right onto the lawn, grinding yuccas beneath her tires and grinding the door's hideous fuchsia paint along the complex's jagged wall. She took one more shot at a reasonable response and mashed the horn several times. Faces popped into windows, none of them Mr. E's. She swore at them.

Mr. E ran the tub full blast. It was a deep claw-foot, but the stream was heavy; the water was already overflowing onto the tile. He didn't notice. He was staring eye-to-bloodshot-eye with the dead man in the mirror. This shell was spent, dried up, worn out and nearly blind, but not deaf yet; he could hear some maniac honking outside. Had they finally come for him?

His reflection spoke to him, as it sometimes did. It passed along further instructions, whispering. *The water must be deep. The cuts must be deep.* Still no specifics. This was a test of faith.

Mr. E held the gleaming blade between thumb and forefinger. Presented it to the mirror for approval. It nodded back. *It's time*.

Even perched atop the van, the second floor was out of reach. June was going to have to scale the brickwork at least a couple of feet to reach his windowsill. She kicked off her sandals and dug her toes deep into the crevices. *Goodbye, pedicure*. She scraped her bare knees and felt a warm droplet shimmy down her leg. When she managed to hoist herself up enough to grab the ledge, dread reminded her that she'd never achieved even one chin-up during Phys Ed. But this was a different moment, this one fueled by adrenaline and chased by guilt. She put everything into one solid heft and soon found herself balancing on the sill. *Please be open*
. It was.

She slid down into the room and her bare, bloody feet dunked into cold water. The room was dark and flooded. She pulled the chain on the single hanging bulb and illuminated the sinister weapon. It sat on the rust-stained sink, a smattering of blood pooled beneath it. *No. No!*

She spun towards the water, horrified by what she might find, yet hoping there still might be time, but there was no body in the room, living or otherwise. Instead, a single clown fish spun circles in the bathtub amidst severed chunks of seaweed.

“Mr E.!” she shrieked, bursting from the bathroom and scouring his apartment. She tore through every closet and corner. She double-checked the front door, hoping to find it gaping, but the locks were unmolested. Nobody had left the apartment.

Transported, Carl Edison drifted naked through the depths of the ocean, his bloody bathwater womb guiding him through the saltwater, deeper and deeper. He wasn't the only one; all around him floated similar bubbles, most of their inhabitants alive, but many dead. Some of the dead ones had apparently killed themselves with misguided cuts or wounds that were simply too deep. His own gashes, one on each side of his neck, began to open and close as new muscles adjusted to new functions. His tub-bubble soon collapsed, leaving him floating free in the seawater. *This is it. Survive your birth*. His new gills understood their purpose and soon took over breathing for him. Then he saw it rise from the black maw below.

Whatever it was, Leviathan, Kraken, or some vast underwater god, it was always changing. Sea life burst from infinite abysses in its shapeless body – fish painted in colors he'd never dreamed swam beside colorless, blind things that would soon feed in the deepest chasms. Where a face might have been, a colony of squid undulated and filled the water with ink as it articulated each of its malefic syllables: *FEED ON THE FAILURES. THROUGH THEIR SACRIFICE, YOU WILL GROW. WE HAVE MUCH TO DO, CHILDREN.*

Weeks later, June's probation at Healing Helpers was over. She tapped the bottom of the upturned fish food canister, peppering the aquarium with orange flakes. Her clown fish darted towards its meal, devoured it, and then floated around the tank. June imagined he was smiling, so she did too.

“Funny, isn't it, Mr. E? After all this, I'm still taking care of you. I guess you and me were meant to be together.”