

THE UNDERWRITER

By Matthew Lewis, St. John's – Senior Short Fiction

He is sitting in the multiplex food court staring into his sandwich. It is not a good sandwich. There is a slice of baloney and a thin sheet of mayonnaise and not much else. Nothing else, in fact. Harold Trimm does not waste his time with sandwiches. He does not believe in sandwiches. They are created for ingestion, destruction. He bites the sandwich. The sandwich is warm. He holds the sandwich away from his mouth and chews. The crest of his teeth indented in the soft bread.

Beyond the sandwich a circuit of shoes. Harold Trimm is not a man who spends much time looking up. He works, he eats, head down. He will come up for air only occasionally. The shoes are varied. High heels: assorted reds, shades of polished black. Blue branded loafers. Semi-casual loafers, semi-formal. He does not understand the difference. Derby shoes, of course, various fibres: leather, rubber, buckskin. Rawhide, possibly. There is bottled water next to his cellphone. Homemade iced water. What he does is, he freezes the water overnight. Then it melts through the day. Several pairs of oxfords: frilled threadwork, patterned, like bolts in a ship hull. Burgundy wine, browns, mostly. The water is frigid. It thaws in chunks. When he drinks he can feel the length of his throat.

A lone pair of snakeskin high tops.

He has seen these boots before. A finance executive, thirty-fourth floor, delicate hems. He has seen them up close only once. An elevator ride. Rattlesnake tan, an impressive glaze, flawless. Each scale a selfish collector of light.

Snakeskin, the executive.

More high heels now. The way the stem of them avoid the slip of the tiles. The women are not aware of their heels. They avoid the cracks and joins of the ceramics with an unappreciated grace.

There are no sneakers here, no running shoes. No clogs or sandals. The companies here do not allow these types of footwear. This is a shared-cost court. Pyramidal plate glass, steel latticework. It is positioned between the back-ends of four high-rise buildings. Masses shunting through the connecting pedways like blood vessels. Two of these buildings are competing companies but they agree on food. They agree philosophically on food. They come, they are replenished, they go back to work. A refueling station, battery-like. This is the stuff of business, four minds, one stomach.

Snakeskin shuffles his way through a lineup. The boots are silent at this distance.

Harold Trimm can name any number of shoes. He knows a lot about shoes. Esoteric knowledge, unnecessary knowledge. The parts of them: insole, outsole. Like a mechanic knows vehicles. The word vamp. He never invited this knowledge. The knowledge trickled in over the years, shoe by shoe, until one day he knew a lot about shoes. Shoes are never included on lists of top-ten inventions. It's always penicillin, contraceptives. The Internet. Shoes are a tragedy of ignorance.

His own shoes go primarily unconsidered. He looks at them now on the tiles. He turns them in so they fold together, a triangle. Solid black oxfords, wing-tipped, polished. The shoes do not reflect light the way he expects. The way spoons distort the world. A pinprick of light. No. The shoes are black, unshakably black, dense. They are *made* of black. They are his shoes.

They are things he owns, puts his feet into. The shoes are nouns. His feet become shoes or it's his shoes becoming feet. He will be laid off today. He knows this. There is no plan b. He cannot stomach his sandwich.

Snakeskin is on the move again, stops within cluster of other shoes. All black shoes, crow-like. A murder of shoes. They are shifting, portentous looking. They are down from the upper offices. He uses the back of one snakeskin boot to scratch his calf. A burst of laughter somewhere above. After lunch they will continue restructuring, rebranding, refinancing, transitioning, sustaining, synergizing. They will offer severance. They will offer no severance. They will have to let you go. They will assist you in this time of transition. It is a time reconsider your life and your values. It is time to evaluate who you are on a spiritual level. A pamphlet.

He throws his sandwich away. A long swill of water. His cold throat. When he was young Harold wondered how all his clothes would fit him when he got older. The future was unthinkable, unknowable. He'd be young and then, boom, he'd be old. Like a light switch coming on. It did kind of work out like that. Now the future again was unthinkable. The light was turned off again. He wonders where he'll be when it comes back on.

Snakeskin and the murder of oxfords depart together, a train of feet, Snakeskin at the helm, the financial gestapo. Their feet do not swing in unison. There is something more unsettling about this. An unorganized evil.

He checks the lamppost clock near his company's pedway entrance. He will use all of his lunch minutes today. He will not go back to work early, like he usually does, an apple in his

teeth while he types. He will not work through lunch. He will enjoy his last meal as an underwriter.

Harold Trimm is not let go.

He is not sent to recalculate who he is, his essence. He is not restructured, rebranded. He is promoted, in fact. He is praised for his work ethic, his morale. There is a laptop open in front of Snakeskin. His eyes above it. There is a jug of water on the table between them and a stack of plastic cups and a box of tissues. The heating system kicks in. He is told he is better suited for management. A slight bump in pay. They slide a blue duo-tang in front of him with the company logo embossed into the thin cardboard. He is offered company stock options, share plans. He is told to go home early. They shake hands. He cannot see Snakeskin's boots beneath the table.

Harold spends Saturday with a hangover. His Saturday goes relatively as planned. Only he does not search job postings. He buys new footwear instead. Toe-sneakers, Vibram five-fingers. He jogs two kilometers and the sneakers give him a migraine. He calls Sarah. He says things like, It's not you. It's me. Space is requested. It is the emotional equivalent of restructuring. They can still be friends during this period of transition. No pamphlet. On Monday morning he starts his new position one floor up.

A boardroom meeting:

A windowless room, a long table, soft commercial carpet. An overhead projector, a thin barrel of blue light. There are other managers here, new faces. Mostly women. Coffee mugs the

size of fire extinguishers. Coffee and perfume together. Everyone is taking notes, serious. Legal pads, leather binders, clipboards. Harold is not taking notes and he wonders if he should be taking notes. The Power Point will be available for download. Snakeskin says this and takes a swill of water. He sets the water down. No one puts their notebooks away. Dust in the barrel of light. He looks at Harold and shrugs. It is a long time before he sees him again.

He is given a tour of his new floor. The floor is not completely different from the floor below. It is a floor designed for work, for profit. Bottom-dollar Feng shui. The lunchroom is a replica, appliance for appliance, tile for tile. The coffee maker gargling. Harold is disappointed. A lone worker standing with a Styrofoam cup, chewing a popsicle stir stick. A television on the fridge, mid-morning soap operas. The room is imbued with unknowable smells, microwaved food, burnt tupperware, chamomile and cleaners. Already he hates the lunchroom again. There are magazines on the tables, television guides. The corpse of a birthday cake, hard icing, the lettering smeared. Harold is claustrophobic. The lunchroom disturbs him. He has not moved anywhere.

He expects resentment from below but there is none. He is given some time to clear out his old desk. They give him a banker's box to pack his belongings. No resentment is detected. His co-workers are now under him. They shake his hand, they wish him luck. There is Monday in their faces but no resentment, not resentment. He says he will miss them. He stands in the elevator with his banker's box, waiting. He checks himself in the tawny sheetmetal. He is a man with two faces. His left side is limp, impressionable. There is a circle of flesh where hair does not grow. His right side is angular, confident, evenly bristled. He speaks with his phone to his right ear only. He presents himself obliquely to superiors. Harold does not consider this a philosophical divide, of good and evil. His split is organic, genetic, left brain right brain stuff.

His faces are degrees of him, shades of Harold. He does not consider himself dishonest, cruel. The elevator opens. Another man with a banker's box. The elevator exchanges men with banker's boxes. The man is heading up, down, or out. Harold hears the ding of the elevator but does not look behind to see the man's fate in the numbers. He thinks he would have ended it with Sarah regardless. The promotion was irrelevant. It is his last thought on the matter.

The women here have furnished cubicles, domesticated office space. Picture frames, kitten calendars. October is a kitten in a jack-o-lantern. Crayon family portraits tacked to the cubicle felt. Dollar store mugs. These are women in it for the long haul. Two weeks' vacation, plus benefits, statutory holidays, authorized overtime. Harold does not decorate his cubicle. He considers progress to be detached from himself, set apart from, a going-along-with type thing. Boxcar hopping. Decoration suggests settling, resignation, hopelessness.

He recognizes more faces in the food court now. Promotions generate familiarity. He keeps his head down. He sits by himself again, eats his utilitarian sandwich. He installs Netflix on his smartphone and watches television with his headphones in. He forgets about shoes for a little while.

Two weeks. Novelty has a shelf life of two weeks. Harold is routine again, depressed. His workload doubled. The doctor offers him a prescription for incessant migraines. It started with the Vibrams. He finds migraines in all things: fluorescent lighting, coffee, neck strain, the muscles in the eyes contracting like fists, his vision going, not completely but glasses are taken under serious consideration. He works again with an apple in his mouth. Sometimes he doesn't

get to eat the apple. Just keeps it bitten there until he forgets about it. The medication does not work.

Seasons passing, blurring. Life is late night news networks now, a slight touch of insomnia, mottled topography on the weather maps, systems of high and low, dragon's tail arrows and sandblasting snow on the high rise window. His mother's voice, somewhere in the topography, Hello, Are you eating, you have to eat. A DeWalt drill for Christmas. He has no need for a drill. Spring melt, digital billboards with pixels the size of televisions, cell phone packages, zero down vehicles, financing options, o.a.c, bad credit, good credit. His cubicle overlooking the prism court. Stalks of sunlight through the glass panes. Summertime next, sauna-heat, short-sleeves and then fall, imperceptibly, turning over again. Loose friendships, mild ones, transitory, secret Santas with a corporate-mandated twenty-five dollar limit, gag gifts and cheap sincerity. Leather gloves and gift cards. An unceremonious New Year's: the alarm clock buzzing, mandated overtime, an uncorked wine bottle at his desk, sipping, chugging, drunk, a plastic cup hanging in his teeth while he works. Her eyes above the cubicle. A party hat. Long eyelashes. Unrushed oral sex in the lunchroom, fucking in the underground garage, puffs of breath, Do they have cameras, you think?

They do not have cameras.

How do you know?

I pay attention.

One year. More promotions, transitions. The architecture is changing again. The company is building toward self-actualization. Deeply impersonal, economic actualization. Oil is added to the mechanics of it, steroidal advancement, pistons chugging profit. Snakeskin

returns, finally. New shoes: oil-black Toloni's. Impenetrable. Bullet-proof, possibly. He says, We meet again. He remembers Harold. Harold swivels perceptibly right-ways in the chair, his good side. The box of tissues. The sweating water jug. He is promoted. Handshaking, glass-cold hands. Another floor up.

He has somehow managed to impress again. He has made the cut. He is the right genetic mutation. She helps him pack his bankers box. There is not much to pack. She says, Will you come down to visit me?

He will not.

He checks he teeth in the tawny sheetmetal on the way up.

The floor at this level is not domesticated. There is a small square of cubicles in the center for assistants but that is all. The perimeter is private office space. Women here are scarce, beautiful, asexual. They are unofficially, officially off limits. They are appendages, executive extensions, property thereof. You do not fuck your boss's secretary. Harold will fuck the boss's secretary. Harold is given a small office with venetian blinds. He pulls the string, open, close, open, close. Slats of sunlight, the food court again, but higher now. His banker's box. There is less to take each time. A miniaturised golf bag and the clubs are pens. A stapler. A sticky note pad with an unknown telephone number in red ink. He is an approximating asymptote, a tangent slope approaching zero forever.

There are less women at this boardroom meeting. One women. She is burley, ridged. Strangely familiar. Harold has not seen her before. She may not be real. This is Diane,

Snakeskin, says. She is real. She has a short-haired business cut and a haggard face. It has not been an easy ride for her. Someone dims the lights. The beam of the projector, data in this short tube of light, fiscal figures, losses, gains, words like actuaries and liabilities, mountainous graphs, terrains of graphs, pie charts and staircase bar charts. Snakeskin's shadow on the whiteboard. He has dreams about a woman like her. Diane is a breed of Deja-vu. He's driving and he tries to brake at an intersection but the weight of the car. The weight is monstrous, indefinable, and the brakes are not strong enough. The bulk of his calf, compressed. The car sliding irreversibly forward into a black Yukon. The woman gets out, is inconsolable, burly, ridged.

More layoffs are coming, says Snakeskin. This is merely phase two, says Snakeskin. In this economy, says Snakeskin. Economy, economy, economy, economy.

December again, a different Christmas party. The lounge bar of a hotel, scarcely decorated. Decorations here would be unnecessary, chintzy. Open bar. Snakeskin orders him a scotch. Harold does not like scotch. He drinks the scotch. Then he orders a beer and goes outside. The secretary is wearing a pale green frock and someone else's blazer. She says, I have no idea who owns this. He fucks her remorselessly, condomlessly, for one year. He does not get women pregnant. He has decided this. It is either a gift or a genetic defect. He is a solidier crossing no man's land who makes it all the way across and back again.

His parents send him more power tools. His parents have an idea of him. He will not work to correct this idea. He says, Thanks. Are you eating enough, Hal? Yes, mom. Jesus. She passes the phone to dad. Mom says you're not eating?

He rarely eats. The new migraine medication also doubles as an anti-depressant. A cross-legged doctor: Experimental, he says. Suppresses appetite. There are brief spells of intense detachment. Detachment from all things, an other-worldliness, a coherent confusion. The slosh of voices, clerical noises, landlines, text-message bleeps, the throb of a heating vent, vast networks of unseen tubing, industrial boilers somewhere deep in the gut of building making steam heat. His name stenciled backwards on plate glass. She brings a paper into his office for him to sign. She knocks first. She is polite. They do not know each other here. She waits while he signs it, smirking. He can pump away for hours without coming. He slumps on the bed, cold laminate under his feet, slick of sweat down his back. Birdcage chest. She touches his elbow, lightly, consolably. I get migraines, he says.

He stays later now. The migraines become part of him. Who he is. Ingrained migraines. He only notices their absence, brief spells of euphoria, drunkenness altogether but not a buzz. A buzz only exacerbates. All or nothing. He keeps airline shots of scotch in his desk. He likes scotch.

There is another dream. He is sitting at his desk and he presses the lever to raise the chair. The chair rises but does not stop rising. He is through the floors, up, the roof. The point passes where it is safe to jump off. There is no coming back. The glass food court below, the four high rises.

Snakeskin e-mails him a roster of employees. A second later and he's in his doorway, leaning. Did you get the e-mail? Give it a chance, man. They are familiar now. They are jokey.

They have jogged together, golfed. Harold smoked methamphetamine with him, once, at a retirement party.

They walk together to the lunch room. More cuts coming down. Phase three in affect. Snakeskin speaking into his right ear. He's wearing Hush Puppy boots now, high tops, vaguely feminine, pig-skin dull and the soles are a sharp red. Unknown material. The boots are a lateral transition from the Toloni's. The Toloni's were a step up from the snakeskin high tops but this is a step sideways. Harold is disappointed. Snakeskin has peaked.

Snakeskin eats leftover Chinese food. Harold finishes his apple, puts the kettle on. He has given up on coffee. Coffee mimics the effects of a panic attack. Or induces them. He drinks steeped tea instead. Fresh milk. Two 15mg pills, daily, with food. Breakfast and bedtime. The pills are buoyant and float to the back of his throat. He can shake them and they sound like an anti-depressant should sound. Like little maracas. She enters. An empty mug, an excuse. They eye each other, polite smiles. Snakeskin with his back to them, invested heavily in his lunch. She mouths, We need to talk. Her serious face. She pours her coffee and leaves. Snakeskin sucks a noodle into his mouth, loudly.

The company occupies an integral bloc of floors in a high-rise office tower. From twenty-nine to thirty-four. They are a substantial chunk of tower, strategically positioned. If a plane strikes there's a chance it will hit above or below. Harold can make it down the stairwell in seven minutes. He has timed himself. But a clogged stairwell? There is a due date of mid-April. He tries not to think of himself in a clogged stairwell. Or of himself sitting in his office

on the thirty-fourth floor, sandwiched, trapped. He thinks about an open field, waves of barley, herring-bone clouds. An ultrasound on Wednesday. Deep breaths.

Snakeskin's tapping on his glass again. A zoo exhibit. He taps his watch. The conference room: they go through mug shots of employees, their credentials, employment status, salary. They are considered like suspects. He recognizes most of these people. Kevin is gray-haired, mild. He has earned forced-retirement. Diane asks, How did we not catch him sooner? They are closing down the thirty-fourth and thirty-third and twenty-ninth floors. Consolidating, compressing, top-down, bottom-up. Pamphlets are ordered. When it is all said and done Harold will be have moved down to the thirty-second floor but he will still be on top. Everyone on the thirty-second floor will at the top. More faces are considered, a slideshow of smiling, hopeful things. It is ambition up there, hunger. They will receive a small severance, a letter of reference. A booby prize.

Her face is the last slide. She has a compressed look, contained. He recognises the look. She is trying not to laugh in this photo. She is happy.

Snakeskin makes a point to look at Harold. Harold is also contained but he's containing something else entirely. He sees Snakeskin now for the first time. He steps slightly into the projector light, a ghoulish sideshow, a thick grin, tectonic slats of white teeth, two arcs of pale bristled cheek. A corrugated brow, lagoon blue eyes, crystalline, perfect. He knows. His sideburns are angular, precise. Professionally trimmed. He is the man in the barber stool with a beard of white cream, his chin stretched high, the neck confidently exposed. He has known all along.

He stays behind while Snakeskin collects his papers. His stainless steel mug. You're on point with me tomorrow. It is Thursday. They cut people loose on Fridays.

Something Harold has not noticed before: pigeons. Pigeons on the edge of windows. How long have they been watching him? They are new pigeons or they are unnoticed pigeons. Harold Trimm looks at feet, shoes. He turns obliquely to his secure side. He does not own a briefcase. He is the man in a business suit with a bookbag. He owns various types power tools in a mid-rise condominium. He does not have a gift. There is no defect. He has been caught in no man's land with his pants down, a Bluetooth in his ear.

Missed calls on his phone. Three voicemails. He will avoid her today. He has not read her texts. They take care of matters in the afternoon. They want a full day's work out of the castaways.

He eats lunch with Snakeskin, in the lunchroom. Green tea and anti-depressants. Snakeskin is back in the original high-tops. The rattlesnake tan. A three-piece, royal blue suit, faintly pinned striped. Harold is wearing his own high-tops, patent leather, military, curb stomping. Snakeskin says, Nice kicks man. Sucks a noodle.

They take the elevator two floors down and set up shop in the old conference room. Snakeskin fills the ice water jug, sets the box of tissues down. Have them facing the window, he says. So they see the horizon. They see opportunity. Make sure all the lights are on. There is hope in a bright room. Never cut someone loose in an enclosed space. Give them room to breathe.

Harold has never seen out of this side of the building before. The parking lot, the top level of the parking garage. The lot is never still, always morphing, cars coming and going, flux, upheaval, transition.

In this time of transition, etc.

In this economy, etc.

He slides her a pamphlet.

She stands.

She is demure, confused. Unready. Something beyond anger in those pupils. Snakeskin with his back to them, hands in his pinstriped pockets, staring into the parking lot. There is the sense of an intense smirk on the back of his head. She leaves. All afternoon he does this. Restructures people. Rebrands them, synergises, refinances. Spiritual enlightenment. There are no tears, only denial, defeat, acceptance, Kaleidoscope flashes of emotion, grief stages in fast-forward.

She has forgotten her pamphlet. Harold does not go after her.

He orders Snakeskin a scotch and they drink together. The scotch is delicious. Diane laughs somewhere behind them. He still has not returned her calls, her texts. She gives up. This is a matter for lawyers now. Snakeskin is wearing a camel pea-coat, unbuttoned, collar ridged. Harold Trimm will forget about shoes again for a little while. He will learn about jackets, suits, vests, upper-level clothing. The light has come on again. The knowledge will trickle in over the years. The knowledge will trickle in until one day he knows a lot about jackets.