

## Boomtown

By LIESL SCHILLINGER  
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How do you keep suspense alive when you open a story with an atomic blast? It's something that addicts of the high-tension television series "24" asked themselves earlier this year when, on the second night of the new season, a suitcase nuke exploded in California, releasing a mushroom cloud over Valencia. As the next episodes unfolded, the audience wrestled with an uneasy concept: a nuclear strike isn't the end of the world — that is, not for its survivors. For the purposes of dramatic fiction, at least, the bomb was just a starting shot that set off a mad dash for security and compromise, a race no human would want to run, given the choice.



Alex Robbins

**RIGHT LIVELIHOODS**
**Three Novellas.**

By Rick Moody.  
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(such as they are) to avoiding thinking about the catastrophe. Both the small screen of "24" and the printed page of Moody's fiction confound expectations by showing that the most potent fallout is emotional, not atomic. What holds the audience hostage is the rubbernecking impulse: curiosity about how these characters will fare in the aftermath of the blow.

As always, the battlefield that interests Moody is interior. Barely possessing the fight to make a fist, his disheartened survivors sedate themselves with a drug called Albertine (a just-for-the-sake-of-it nod to Proust). For 25 bucks a pop, Albertine sinks its users into a consoling stupor, allowing them to relive visions of life before the blast — a first kiss, a concert, even a moment of sexual betrayal — that had been searing, perhaps, but not radioactive.

At the story's outset, Albertine abuse has reached epidemic proportions. As in "The Plague," the novella takes the form of a record kept by a man who observes the epidemic at first hand. Kevin Lee, a gifted, upper-middle-class Chinese-American touchily introduces himself by saying that he's "third generation, which doesn't mean my dad worked in a delicatessen to get me into [M.I.T.](#) It means my father was an I.T. venture capitalist and my mother was a microbiologist." Kevin didn't go to M.I.T.; he went to (and dropped out of) Fordham. And as he attempts to retrace the origins of Albertine for the reader, his hunt for the woman who gave it her name veers into a surreal maze of conspiracies linked to identity, memory and time.

Like the narrator of a segment of "This American Life," Kevin builds empathy with sauntering stealth. The Albertine fiends aren't losers, he argues; they're people very much like you. "When you're used to living a comfortable middle-class life, when you're used to going to the organic farmers' market on the weekend, maybe a couple of dinners out at that new Indian place, you're bound to become very uncomfortable when 50 square blocks of your city suddenly look like a [NASA](#) photo of Mars. You're bound to look for some relief when you're camped in a school gymnasium pouring condensed milk over government-issued cornflakes." It's Moody's genius to know that the horror of a nuclear blast is hardly conceivable — but condensed milk? Now there's something to cry over.

Moody wrote "The Albertine Notes" as an experiment in genre fiction at the behest of Dave Eggers and Michael Chabon, who edited the edition of Eggers's magazine that became the anthology "McSweeney's Mammoth Treasury of Thrilling Tales." The fact that these three writers would not only support one another but set one another tasks is a heartening sign of artistic altruism. Their cooperative impulse is a stroke of luck for readers.

The first novella in "Right Livelihoods," a dark comic fugue called "The Omega Force," owes a debt to yet another literary friendship. Written in memory of the late Paris Review editor George Plimpton at the request of some of his former colleagues, it's set on a resort island in Long Island Sound and tells the story of a cantankerous retired government official named Dr. Van Deusen, who (to be blunt) is losing his marbles. Dignified, stubborn and screwy, Van Deusen scours the skies and the beach plum for evidence of terrorist attack, obsessed by delusions that "dark-complected" assailants will soon be invading. Aware that others (including his wife) consider his behavior erratic and may deprive of him of his freedom, he stubbornly persists in his manic explorations, like a dog that lunges into alien yards even as he senses the warden's approach.

Reconnoitering at a beach barbecue, Dr. Van Deusen encounters a J. Crew-ready group of "grown children of privilege" whose "hair was perfect, whether combed or disarranged, from the moment they were expelled from the womb, and who seemed to know, even then, exactly how to ski." They tell him that dark-complected guys had indeed gone on a spree through their village, taking hostages and stealing clothes from a Lilly Pulitzer trunk show. The scene conjures visions of the parties Plimpton threw for decades at his East River town house (then also the home of The Paris Review), where countless young (and old) poets, journalists and novelists trod his zebra rug, ate his canapés and whetted their irony. Still, there's heartbreak in this humor: Van Deusen isn't foolish, he's a "once proud" man who has been betrayed by boobytrapped genes, drink and the times, and is too stoic either to rue them or to pity himself. Moody makes sure we know when the laughs should hurt.

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While "The Omega Force" and "The Albertine Notes" swell with allegory, the middle novella in "Right Livelihoods," "K&K," is a spare fable that courts the current craze for dry send-ups of the American workplace. In it, Ellie Knight-Cameron, the office manager at an insurance brokerage firm called Kolodny & Kolodny, goes on the trail of a co-worker who's been dropping anonymous, nasty notes in the suggestion box. Lacking the three-dimensional misery of Moody's Benjamin Hood, of "The Ice Storm" (who endured the torture of a thousand one-upmanships at his Wall Street firm), Ellie calls to mind a temp whose name nobody manages to catch.

"K&K" may lack the pathos that would make it bloom, but it's still rich in arid humor and has the indestructible, if potted, vitality of a cactus on a receptionist's desk. Even here, Moody never puts a foot wrong; he just sends his character down a path that's too well worn. It's his own fault — and accomplishment — that we've come to expect him to break a new path every time he invites us on a journey.

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