

A photograph of a bonfire burning in a dark, wooded area at night. The fire is bright orange and yellow, casting a warm glow on the surrounding trees and ground. The trees are bare, suggesting autumn or winter. The overall atmosphere is mysterious and somewhat somber.

echoes of a wasted silence

a voiceHOUSE experience

WINTER

dhanaani bhuumau pashavashcha goshthe

naari gruhadware sakhaa smashaane

dehashchitaayaaam paraloka maarge

dharmaanugo gachhati jiva ekaha

Wealth will remain buried, cattle will remain in the pen, his wife will accompany him to the doorway, friends will accompany him to the crematorium, the body will come to the funeral pyre, but on the path to the next world, the soul goes alone with its karma.

-O-

Donahue Funeral Home swelled quiet and quieter the more crowded it became. Cars piled up in a lot across the street. People entered reverent- muffled, conscientious- adult attendees who paid careful attention to how their hands opened the dark oak doors, how their posture changed between rooms, how their neckties tucked underneath their suit coats, how the other attendees acknowledged one another. Slowly the parlor bustled with whispers. Heads were pointed downwards in reverence as lips took on furtive designs. The few children on site mimicked their parents' solemnity, but inside their heartminds those curious youngsters in attendance held their own secret anticipations, anxious for the opportunity to inspect the body of a boy not too different than them- anxious then disappointed to find a decorated urn waiting at the end of the line of mourners. Confused- they asked mommy and daddy where the boy was. Their parents avoided any explanations. This was not the setting to discuss cremation- tiny bones and unblemished skin and baby teeth like feeble headstones, burnt to ashes. Instead, the adults issued stern looks, admonishing their sons' and daughters' curiosity, hushed, "We'll explain it later, when you're older and you can understand."

For the most part everyone (both children and adults) wandered aimless with their lips sealed and eyes open, imbued and entangled in the contradictions that come with any kind of modern human scene that involves a confrontation with death- perhaps slightly amplified because of the deceased's age.

A service was scheduled to commence in the next hour or so. A few words, prayers, a reflection by the presider. A final blessing. Then a procession to the ocean, to release the young boy's physical form to the waters, *asti visarjan*, back to the holy source, back for another incarnation, another turn around the wheel.

Undermined by the loss of his son, October Tierney glanced at his sister. "What did you say?"

The pair of them had found a moment of space, a private area reserved for family members. Here they were. October's sister reaffirmed her previous statement, "Namdev is- I said he's in a better place."

October considered her declaration. Better than here, where they sat? What could be better than an Irish funeral parlor hosting a Hindu wake next door to a mattress warehouse positioned anonymous and desultory, no-place-in-particular within the eternal suburbs of Philadelphia? What could be better? A wooden response, "A better place? Like where?"

Nin took in a breath of hot air, sorting through the logic of her previous interjection. She staggered. October's image didn't help her focus: his white dress shirt, paisley tie, blue shoes, no black, surrounded by flowers, life, celebration- a Hindu wake in an Irish funeral home. Finally, focused, she refused to retreat. Affirming, "Like, a place where he isn't suffering anymore. Like his next life, a better life, whatever you want to call it. It doesn't matter."

October mused playful, "Like heaven..."

Images streaming, back to the hospice care center, images in his mind- Tika and her mother who sprinkled holy water divined and collected from the mighty Ganges River over the fragile, bony body of the child, who blessed his forehead and hands, still warm- chanting hallowed chants like *Hare Rama Hare Rama Rama Rama Hare Hare Hare Krishna* and *Shiva Shivaya Nama Om Hara* incessantly, low and secretive only meant for the ears of God. Chanted one hundred eight times for the attendants of Shiva, for the sacred sites in India, for the body's energy centers, for the mala beads- one for Brahman the mind of God, the overmind- zero for the void, the null- eight for the infinite, the never ending sign of continuation- one hundred eight. One-oh-eight, a damned number, an unlucky and evil

number to October. No more numbers. No more cures. No more magic. October stood up from the chair next to his sister, quiet, remembering these things within himself.

Nin did her best to maintain contact with her younger brother, watching him, asking for his eyes to connect with hers.

October refused to accept her supplication. Eyes closed, then darting away. A wall. The floor. Pacing. Superstitions had cored into the heart of October Tierney little by little over the previous twenty-six months. Eroding bit by bit, a hollow pit, the center of which echoed empty where his heart once beat, his cardiac breastbone worthless and ballooning... from the depth of his pain, October cleared his throat, and calmly remarked to his sister with a far-off tone, "Do you realize Nin that absolutely nothing you say is going to help me right now? Nothing you do is going to make me feel any better."

Nin began to respond, but October continued- "See, the problem is that no one has ever told you to shut up. You're like everyone else here. You talk and talk and expound on all this bullshit, but your totally unqualified to speak to any of it. Because you went to graduate school? Because you have kids? What makes you qualified to tell me where my son is right now, besides burnt to a crisp and poured into a ceramic vase?"

His sister remained quiet, trembling.

October turned his body completely away from her but continued, "It's pretty funny, actually. You've been allowed to prattle on over the course of your entire life, all your ideas and words and valuable opinions, talking and talking and talking. People let you talk and pretended to listen, because you let them talk and did the same. Everyone rambling on, he's in heaven now October, he's in a better place, blah blah blah. It's a huge joke, really. It's a big fucking joke."

Nin hadn't cried in years, but she was close. October, grinning now to himself, went on with, "Everyone blah blah blah, talking their bullshit. Blah blah blah. Hoping to take somebody's money, earn their sympathy, hell, get laid- to gain something from them." He chuckled, satisfied, then continued, "I was guilty of it too. We let each other babble like idiots. We used each other. That's all anyone does anyways."

Nin pulled up the collar of her coat. Chilled. "October..."

Musing, his hand on his chin, "No. Not anymore. Not for me. I don't want your platitudes. I want nothing you have. Your heaven, your angels, your ideas- keep them. Keep them to yourself."

Nin whispered, "Why do you have to be like this, October?"

Nin had been seated on a taut, ornate chair- a red velvet cushion that had been brushed by one of the staff so that all the fibers pointed in a uniform direction, inviting. Nin leaned forward, looking up at her brother who finalized his viewpoint- watching the back of his head. "Because I'm tired of the elephant in the room. I am done dancing around it. You know nothing. Nobody does. And I can't stand to pretend anymore. There is no heaven. No angels. Nothing matters, nothing will. Ever. There is no God, there is no Hindu Jesus, there is no point. To anything. There never has been, there never will be."

Nin had expected as much- a nihilism, a denial of life- it was a well-documented response to death. She waited a moment, then "Well, there's not much to say then."

October continued, scratching his chin, his neck, "Not particularly. Maybe I would say this, to you- before you offer up your next psychological assessment, before you give out your next bit of advice, remember this- all of it is useless."

Like a shadow, descended from October onto his sister, the shroud of her brother's sorrow extending and darkening whatever it touched. Nin shook her head, tears welling in her cerulean eyes but not crying, refusing to cry- bawling in her own heart, doleful- a terrible wailing, inside of her- hurt- confused- her hands extended, open, empty, "Does this- does acting like this really make you feel better?"

October considered his response. A silence hung in a mist of tension. The former-father shifted his focus out the window of the door separating this side room from the rest of the funeral parlor- down the industrial carpeted hallway, grey- faces blurred, black suits and skin and hair, amorphous. Then, confident, matter of fact, "No. I don't believe anything will make me feel better." He slowly turned back to face his sister but did not meet her eyes

with his own. "Feel better- what does that even mean? I don't want to feel anything."

"Listen October, I'm..."

Finally, October locked onto Nin. His eyes pierced into her. And with a dismissive, but unequivocal tone he spoke through his sister- across her and over her entire being, onto her in a blitzkrieg of indifferent, splenetic causticity fueled by his resolute despair- "I don't owe anything to this world, or anybody in it. I owe nothing to you, to any of those people out there. I'm done listening, pretending like angels are real and Jesus is our savior and little boys are reincarnated as kings. Mom was wrong. Everybody is wrong. Nobody knows a thing. *Nothing*, not anything." Almost relieved, his apostasy complete, he raised his arms and then with a force lowered them, a weight lifted, "I'm done with it."

Nin tried her best- the condensed blackness of her brother's pupils- she nearly gagged trying to hold back her emotions. She was extremely disturbed to see October in such a state, in such a fix- her baby brother, her kid brother- her little brother on his bicycle, at his high school graduation, taking him out for a birthday dinner- her little brother calling up to check in on her and the kids, sending them a candy basket on Valentine's Day, walking down the aisle with him at his wedding. She felt her eyelids tighten together. "What about your wife?"

October shook his head, "We can't look at each other without casting our blames." His glare again receded away from his sister's. "What we had... is completely broken. She is no more my wife than you are the President of the United States." Off into the distance, occupied by a cold, hard truth that surrounded him.

Nin shifted her energy. She was more angry than upset now. "Well here's my truth for you October, you don't wear sarcasm well. In fact, this whole look is pretty shitty on you. And listen, everything you're saying right now- this Nietzsche shit, this life is meaningless shit- it's a total cop-out. You know it, too."

October, remotely, "Am I supposed to react to that?"

"Listen, you've asked me for plenty advice before..."

Still hardly acknowledging his sister- rationalized, complete- "I just told you I don't care what you think or believe or know, or what anybody thinks or believes or knows. In terms of my marriage, there's nothing left to salvage. It's none of your business anyways. You're anything but an expert."

Defensive, tense, Nin interjected, "Listen, what happened in my marriage has nothing to do with..."

Shouting now, October disarmed his sister, "It's important to stop at the right time, Nin!" Snide, back to glaring at her, sarcastic and hushed, "Don't you think so? That's the problem. That's the issue Nin! Nobody teaches you anything about stopping. Life is all go, go, go- nobody says- stop! Until you're dead! Right? Dead as a doornail. Dead as a two-year old boy. Dead!"

Nin was mortified. The outburst, the insanity, his mannerisms- her brother had been changed by this experience. She was unfamiliar with this character in the room with her. "So you're giving up on her?"

Her brother chuckled. That fetid chuckle, "We're giving up on each other. Mutually, in agreement."

"And that's the best thing to do?"

"Best, worst," he shrugged, "it's what's happening. I don't care about the best thing to do. I don't care about the right thing to do anymore. I don't care about what you think is best or worst, or what anybody thinks. I told you. I'm done with all of that."

"Well I'm sorry you feel that way. But I think you're acting and talking like a damn fool right now."

Faint, resigned- "There's no reason for any sorrow on my account." One last look, one last acknowledgement- Nin did not recognize October's gaze, and barely made out his voice, "Especially on my account."

Then October departed his older sister. He simply took a step out the door without acknowledgment or warning. A terse exit. Their exchange echoed briefly in the room and followed him out into the corridor, intimate, away from the rest of Tika's family and friends, the rest of the Tierney clan- a milieu of cousins, coworkers, aunts and uncles. Instead of taking the door towards

the urn, towards the attendees, towards more support, October chose to exit the building.

Nin had taken her younger brother by the arm for a talk... she had waited for the ideal circumstances, the best moment... this is how it ended.

And so October walked out of the parlor down a set of back stairs and put his hands on his hips, stopping on a concrete driveway next to a garage, a building extension, where corpses were prepared by the Donahue family. He looked up, overcast. He couldn't handle another trip around the wheel. He couldn't handle the smell of flowers. He couldn't accept the kind words, the prayers, the condolences. He stared into the clouds, his heart eager to join them- diffused, unassuming, disappearing.

Flashing back again- Tika, the priest, his son's head facing southward, the prescribed mixture of milk and yogurt and ghee, the big toes, tiny and tied together, the garland of flowers- rituals, rites- who was it for? Was it for Namdev? Was it for Tika? Was it for October? The hole inside of October grew, the futility, the uselessness... he couldn't ignore himself, his feelings. Clouds. Grey. A chill in the air. He didn't want to get high, he didn't want to get even, he didn't want to yell. He was dejected, but at the same time consoled by the pervasive incompleteness which pressed against him, an incompleteness that would never be resolved, that could never be made whole. This was all October knew, now. His son was dead. His son- no matter how many mantras, how many prayer beads, how many names of god- there was no hope, no determination, no sense of direction left for October to hold on to.

His boy was gone.

He stood there, lost to the void- the zero- consumed by emptiness, untethered, blankly looking up.

Sounds like a door opening, footsteps, a door closing, a deep breath- then Tika's father rested a large palm on October's shoulder. "It's time, October."

Without turning back, "For what?"

Fortified, prepared, Mr. Vasudevan said in an affirming tone, "Tika needs you. You have to stand beside my daughter. It is your duty."

October remained, head tilted upwards, "My duty?"

Assertive, Mr. Vasudevan studied the vapors of his breath- between winter and spring, cold but no longer frozen- the elder man replied, "Yes. Your duty. Your dharma. It is not easy, but you must accept it. You must accept this terrible situation. You must live in accordance with your character. It is your challenge from God. We have no choice in how we are challenged. But you can rise to the challenge, I know this." He had been planning his words carefully. This was his first opportunity, alone with his son-in-law, to offer some encouragement, to impart some wisdom.

The younger man, the son-in-law, the Westerner, he grinned a terrible grin of pride, contemptuous at the thought of God- the Almighty One- placing a challenge on his mortal plate. October turned to face Mr. Vasudevan, "You don't know anything. Nobody does."

October brought his hands to his mouth, cupped, blew out an exhalation of warmth, then walked back up the stairs. He left Tika's father, tears falling from each of the old man's dark brown eyes.

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"Our little prince. Feel him daddy. Our prince is kicking about."

Tika reached for her husband's hand and set it, palm down and fingers stretched, underneath her navel. A large thump, a series of flutters- October smiled, "He's performing his karate routine. Baby Bruce Lee."

"Yes, he enjoys it when I sit like this on the couch. He is practicing his moves."

October grinned, full. His attention was fixed, his imagination churning... beyond this veil of flesh, of womb and skin and fat and muscle... innervated, fixed with blood vessels and flowing nutrients, life. The father-to-be contemplated out-loud, "It's wild, isn't it? Isn't it crazy to think he's in there, inside you! Hanging out, kicking around. Growing. Getting bigger and bigger. It's incredible."

Tika took a deep breath, "Even crazier is to imagine when he will be out here, kicking and moving in our arms, with us, as part of our family."

October's grey-blue eyes elevated up from his wife's exposed belly and onto her face. A maternal tranquility shrouded her... her eyebrows relaxed, a hidden grin barely noticeable... an unassuming happiness... her caramel colored skin, her full upper lip, her tiny ears and the wispy strands of black hair that hung down her cheeks... her own eyes directed at her hand, at October's hand, their son... a sense of wonder, feeling herself nourishing their son, concentrating on a presence inside of her, a presence soon to be a part of their lives. October leaned and kissed her forehead. "I love you so much."

She whispered back, focused, "Do you hear that peanut? Daddy loves me. I love Daddy very much. And we love you, so much, already. Yes. You are coming into a world of love my little one. This is very good." Her attention remained steadfast on her stomach, on a life force entirely wrapped up and entwined and entombed within her own. October bent forward and pulled up Tika's blouse- he moistened the area just above her navel with his lips. She narrated, thoughtful, delighted, "Daddy is the first person to kiss you little peanut. Think of this? Our peanut can live inside of me, but I cannot kiss him until after he is born. But Daddy can give you a kiss... give Daddy a kiss back, my peanut. Your first kiss. First of many."

October watched Tika's skin blush back from a lighter, leaner brown- from where his lips had applied pressure- a ghostly mark, now darkening. Evidence of his love, fading against the natural color of her flesh, a spectral kiss for an unseen visitor... a ghost, alive, underneath him, Tika's flesh separating them, his child- he glanced up to his wife. In his heart, a song of love- in her heart, prayers of thanksgiving- the heart between them suspended umbilical on a journey between suns, beating between lives, budding forth from a matrix of dreams. A heart beyond their imagination, beyond mind, beyond words or concepts or ideas or form, the formless premonitory slumber perfect and eternal- occupying a sacred unknown, before the first thought before the big-bang before the eruption before the chaos before the order before the experience before time, unified within and without. Unfated, unaffected, unadulterated and pure.

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Tika parked her car in the structure adjacent to the medical offices. Another appointment, a weigh-in. Week 36. A thirty-six-week voyage from a single cell, fused together and begotten from an act of love, formed from the formless and on his way, a multi-organ'd nearly fully developed fetus. Tika sat buckled into the seat. The young woman did not open the door. She pressed her hands as close as they could come to her stomach- her mittens onto her oversized maternity jacket- a December chill, uninviting, it forced her to find comfort in her thoughts like Christmas lights glowing under a blanket of snow.

Musing: he will be born unknowing, empty- he will not be full of self-hatred, of preconceptions, of fears or judgements or ideas on how the world ought to be run how life ought to unfold- he will be unable to harbor precious resentments- he will be free from having to contend with the unrelenting energy of habits- he will not have experienced disappointment or guilt, he will house no concept or fear of death- snowflake pure, snowflake unique- perfectly unwritten, screaming out from the womb- the sinners and the forgotten, the saints and gurus, we all began this way and gasped our first breath out into the world from the safety of our mother's body, inhaling the limitless and infinite potential of existence- every person, ever, began this way, naked and helpless but full of hope- his beginning will be no different.

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A shout crossed between walls, from across their apartment, "Do you know what a woman at work said to me today?"

From the kitchen counter, setting down his backpack. "No Teek, what did she say?"

Tika, glad her husband was home from work, happy so he could understand her frustrations, announced, "This is a young girl, a new assistant hired maybe not three, four months ago. She is fixing paperwork for something or other, and I was speaking with Lorraine about the baby, about being sixteen weeks along, about finding out the gender. Just talking. But the young girl she hears this, and she interrupts our conversation to say 'You do not even look pregnant.' And she walks away. Like that. Can you believe this?"

Tika had pulled her shirt up to expose her stomach, rolled up under her bosom. She peered into the bathroom mirror, turned sideways- an inspection of her profile. October could tell by her tone she was upset, so he approached her slowly from the kitchen. He made his way into view and took station behind her. This was the tableau he came home to- his wife in the bathroom, distraught over the size of her stomach. October battled back a wide smile as he put his arms around her from behind.

He spoke to her reflection in the glass, "What are you worried about? It's only sixteen weeks. And you do look pregnant. Don't worry. Who cares what some little girl has to say about anything?"

Tika opened up her hips and leaned back towards her husband, the two of them pressed together. Her elbows locked, her physiognomy tense- unflinching, searching- her neck tilted, poised, locked in- her voice, soft, "Is our peanut in there? Maybe the girl at work is right. I do not hardly see anything."

October smiled. "Teek, of course our little one is in there! Where else could it be? Don't worry. I can see, right here." October placed his hand, fingers extended, onto his wife's belly. Her skin was warm, glowing, glistening and smooth and beautiful. He patted gently, "This is our peanut, right here."

Her high cheeks tightened, pondering "Maybe I should be showing more?"

"Trust me, in another sixteen weeks, you won't be thinking about showing more. Enjoy it. Enjoy today, right? Like you always say, right?"

Tika wandered past the image in the mirror, her husband standing there with her, an arm on her shoulder- her mind's eye, the third eye, the magic portal illumined and projected a vision of their dinner table, the prayer bowl and the wood mallet and a dulcet hum vibrating between October and their child in a high-chair, hands clasped together 'It's good to be here, now, with you', her family of the future. She sighed, "I know, I simply, I wish I could see more. But I know, you are right. Sometimes the difficulty is to take your own advice."

October bent down and kissed his wife's neck. He turned her away from the mirror and into his arms. "I know."

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"Are you asleep?"

"No. Are you?"

"How can I? He kicks at me all night, like this." A fist jolted into the air above Tika. October restrained his laughter. Tika could tell, "No, it is not funny. Directly into my bladder, at my kidney. He punches. It hurts."

"I'm sorry, Teek."

Tika exhaled, exasperated, "Officially now I am ready for this to be over. I am so tired, so big- my God, I am looking like a whale. The anxiety, the worries- I could care less right now. Physically, it is too much. I need him to leave my body, October."

"We're close. It's the home stretch. He'll be here. Soon."

"I am not even scared right now, of him coming. To keep going like this is more painful."

"One day at a time. Remember? You always say to enjoy the day. Once he's here, there's no going back. He'll never be our little peanut, living inside of you."

"It is easy for you to think this way, but..."

October sensed her frustration and despair. "You're doing great, Teek." He put his arms around his wife's body- her hips, her legs- wider, fuller- aroused, October nuzzled his mouth under her cheek, upon her neck. A kiss... then a second...

"I am not even doing anything. Other than worrying, other than losing my mind, my focus. I have been a nightmare. The only thing I am doing well is ballooning up."

"What do you mean, you're feeding him, keeping him alive. You're doing everything. And you're doing an awesome job. I'm so proud of you."

"Really?"

"Really."

Tika turned over to her husband- she put her arms over him and pulled her forehead into his neck- their son between them, "I am trying. I really am."

October reached his arm above his wife's head, tender, fingertips massaging her scalp, working his hand through her jet-black hair, "I know you are. And we appreciate it. Me and him."

"What if he does not love me October? What if I do not love him?"

Confident, reassuring, he stroked his wife's hair, "That's a complete impossibility. Complete. He'll love you more than anyone else in his life. And you'll love him the same."

A look of doubt snuck over Tika, invisible in the dark bedroom.

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A long day in front of his computer, crunching numbers, taking conference calls- October scanned his badge and plodded out into the Northwest Business Park carport, tired underneath its solar panels. He backed out from between a pair of yellow lines, soporific, then gingerly entered the fray behind a trail of cars out onto the main road- the garish start and stop of traffic lights, brake lights and street lamps- within the last five years the area had exploded, and now a swarm of commuters choked off access in and out, both ways, morning and night. His car radio OFF, windshield wipers intermittent to fight off an evening mist-rain tonight according to the forecast. A typical day, a typical commute, a typical night ahead.

He returned home in full of expectations, full of hurts, full of tiny bits of wrinkled human pain and sundry fears and harbored sadnesses. He checked the mail at the box, locked his car, engaged the door fob, and walked into their condo and up the flight of stairs. He paid no attention to the pictures framed and hung on the hallway up. He greeted his wife, on their couch unwinding from her day. They exchanged pleasantries. Tika talked about work. Then the baby. Then dinner- a special birthday dinner, chicken and yellow curry- they ate, she cleared the plates. A pumpkin pie from the refrigerator... but something was wrong. Tika asked, assiduously scrubbing at a cast iron skillet, "What's wrong?"

October couldn't help himself, blurting out, "It's... well, I was hoping for a birthday present. I don't know. I... I appreciate the

dinner, I do, it was fantastic... but I hoped you might have got me something, you know? Everyone gets a present on their birthday. What about me?"

A typical narrative, a typical hurt, a typical selfishness- *Why doesn't anybody ever do anything for me? Why can't I get a break? Why can't things turn out for me? Why do I have to face so many issues? Why am I the only one dealing with this? Why? What about me? Where's mine?*- a typical neurosis. Self-absorbed and fearful, a pyrotechnic of internal nonsense, of noise, and believing every word. The drama of the individual. *If only Tika had bought me a present, if only she had been waiting for me in heels and lingerie-* a typical infantile delusion. Children masquerading as adults, demanding the universe to operate under their direction- years upon years unchecked, one thing after another: *if only I had a different job... if only I hadn't married the wrong girl... if only I made more money... if only my parents loved me... if only I had this microwave oven... if only I wasn't sick... if only people could understand me.* Typical, conditional equations that were never met, that never equated to happiness. A zero-sum game, always lost.

Tika thought to remind October that they had decided not to give any material gifts for birthdays or anniversaries or Christmas holidays- that they had agreed to go beyond commercial nonsense. She considered reminding him of their pact, a decision made together years ago. But then an emphatic response of truth, of her truth, bubbled up her diaphragm, into her vocal cords, "I am carrying our son. Will this be enough?"

A bullet to the head- October received the brunt of his wife's response cognitively, like a tree limb crashing down across his psychic windshield. Abrupt. Jarring. Shattered. Immediately then an emotional resonance settled within him. Tika, the way she annunciated the word 'son,' the brusque tone, a hint of extra bass in her voice... a son... the pot in her hands, the sweat on her brow. 'Remember him?' October thought to himself. 'Remember that twenty-seven-week-old packet of life developing in your wife's body? Remember that part of you, stowed away inside of Tika for safe-keeping?' He realized his error. 'Remember how that baby boy is going to need your help, your love? Remember that he is going to need you to put him at the forefront of your mind, all the time?' October's heart contracted, his energy diverted away from his mind,

hauled away from his contrived insecurities by the light of reality.

Tika could sense her words had arrived upon October's ears with a brute force. He had been shaken- shook, bronze autumn winds blowing curtains of leaves across tarry riparian asphalt, leaves falling like piles of ambers and yellows, like the piles outside, raked into mounds and bagged off for the garbage man to burn. Heat for the winter.

The young wife, the soon to be mother, she bit her lip, concerned. October had frozen at their table. She didn't intend to hurt her husband. She set a dishrag over her shoulder while simultaneously blowing a strand of hair from off her face, brilliant and pastoral like Grant Wood meets the East, "I am sorry. I did not mean it to come through like that. I am so grateful to do this, you know that? He is our child. Our son. Ours, that we made. I did not mean for that to sound so harsh, I... we had agreed previously, I thought, that we would not buy presents and we would do other nice things for each other, for special occasions? No?"

October spoke to the hardwood floor panels. "No Tika, it wasn't harsh, it was perfect. I totally..." An unconscious hand drawn through his hair, embarrassed- his head down, then up, confronted by his own humanity, "I lose sight, sometimes, I forget. You're right. You're protecting our son right now. You're going through so much... I just, I get wrapped up in my own stuff. Birthdays are weird, you know? I'm sorry."

"I promise I did not intend to fill you with bad feelings."

"Don't worry." He picked up a spoon. "I don't feel bad. It's more, I feel more clarified. That just cleared me up. No. I needed it. That's why I love you."

Tika set the pie down on the table, and a pint of vanilla ice cream emerged from the freezer- a surprise.

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Tika grew up familiar with the litany of unfair biases programmed into American culture. Her best friend in grade-school, Noelle Lanoire, ended up a statistic: unintended suicide at the age of fourteen. A fourteen-year-old girl slumped into a corner of a bathroom, purple and lifeless, blood running down her arm from a

needle-spike. Noelle's funeral procession began as far back as fifth grade when the boys in class, abetted by internet search engines and fueled by an adolescent crush, uncovered a cold fact: Noelle shared both the first and last name of an actress whose talents were displayed in pornographic films. Those crushing boys began to whisper behind Noelle's back, which is hardly unbecoming of pre-pubescent in the company of girls, but then their whispers became audible, and words like "ass slut" and "cum shot" leaked from out of their circles, leaked into the ears of Tika and Noelle and other classmates. Noelle became the center of great controversy. The boys' murmurs crescendo'd further, into the ears of parents, teachers, and eventually a vice-principal. Suddenly Noelle became the agenda item of a PTA meeting. Noelle was like Tika, a shy, quiet girl, but by the end of the year the pair of them had been called into the principal's office more than any of their classmates. Several expulsions, a visit from multiple psychologists, and a teacher's forced retirement- these were only a few of the happenings of their fifth-grade year. Tika was forced into conversations with her parents about topics that any full-grown, adult daughter would cringe over. Mortifying debriefings. Tika was in trouble, and she didn't know why. Tika's mother had to verify what a "bukake party" was. Tika's father was dismayed. Tika tried to explain it wasn't her fault, but she didn't want to blame her best friend. Her mother prayed. Her father forbade her to speak with Noelle, then spent more hours at the hospital. Noelle receded further and further from social circles, avoiding birthday parties and dances, as she had voluntarily left Jefferson Junior High- volunteered by her parents. Tika made a few attempts, secret phone calls mostly, and tried to stay in touch, but her friend became more and more complicated. Grunge music. Button necklaces, leather. Marijuana. The last Tika heard about Noelle, she had been taken to the emergency room to have her stomach pumped for a potential alcohol overdose. In their freshman year of high school, while Tika worried about Advanced Placement credits, Noelle experimented with oxycodone, then was introduced to heroin. She died shortly after her introduction. It made the papers, local and statewide. Tika remembered her picture, the article, the obituary. The reporter didn't mention that Noelle had been found with a needle in her arm, collapsed in a miniskirt without underwear, slumped over herself and exposed. It didn't mention her blue lips. It said 'accident.' Tika thought about those boys in fifth grade.

Maybe it was an accident. Maybe it wasn't. She didn't want to blame anybody, but she was upset. She often thought about Noelle long after the young girl's passing.

Tika also was subject to the unfair biases of her family's native Indian culture. She grew up a tiny, unnoticeable girl by design-by conditioning. Most of her classmates were white until college. Expectation required her to be quiet and quaint, proper, happy and agreeable. Her mother cooked a family dinner every single night of the week, and on Sundays she prepared a feast. Tika watched her father come home from work in a huff'n puff mood night after night expecting a hot meal ready and waiting for him on the table. Tika couldn't remember a single instance of a plate not being prepared. Her father asserted his dominion over family life, which meant the lives of his daughter and wife. He demanded perfection in Tika's grades, her behavior at school, her behavior at home. He expected Tika to study to become a doctor, a lawyer. He almost took ill when she decided to pursue a master's degree in nursing. He said it was a waste of Tika's talents. "Your mother was a simple LPN, so you could become a doctor."

Tika explained why she wanted to be of service, to serve patients. She wanted to comfort them, to be present by their side. She didn't prefer the emotional distance required of a physician. She didn't care for the pomp, the stuffiness. She couldn't stand the hierarchical baggage. "You must understand Mama? A nurse is so often more important than a doctor, to the patient. The doctor hands out the diagnosis and leaves the room. The nurse stands beside the patient, before and afterwards. The nurse helps the patient begin to heal, in mind, body and spirit. I will not be able to fully practice kindness and charity as a doctor, but I can as a nurse."

Tika's mother didn't disagree with her, but couldn't agree outright. It would have been disrespectful. It would not have been proper. As a dutiful wife she remained mute while Mr. Vasudevan retorted, "Don't patronize your mother. She has been in the profession much longer than you. And lest you forget, it was a doctor, a doctor, who saved your mother's life after her stroke."

Tika's father arrived in America at the age of 24. His passage and education were paid for through a state grant, a highly competitive and coveted position. His marks at school in India were perfect.

He studied as a child by candlelight in a hut. He taught himself Calculus by age eleven. He was one of the first students without any relatives in the government or bureaucratic offices to be awarded such a prestigious grant. He was accepted into an engineering school in Hoboken, NJ, after he had completed medical school in India. Upon arrival, Mr. Vasudevan spoke no English. He studied, grappled, learned and lived outside of New York for two years. It was a harsh introduction to the West. But he pressed on. He was determined to make good on the opportunity. He had made a sacred promise, an oath, to his family back home. He had received special blessings. He was hyperconscious of the stakes. So Kumar Vasudevan completed a master's degree, wrote an academic paper of high-estem, validated a research project, taught himself English, saved money working as a laundry delivery man on the weekends, enjoyed gameshow television programming in the school lounge, and after two years found himself in Philadelphia knee-deep in his doctoral studies. It was in Philadelphia where he met his wife, Tika's mother, Bhumika, who herself was hyperconscious of expectation, of history, of family honor and hard work and dedication. She had come to live with her aunt and uncle in Philadelphia, leaving behind her family in Chennai for opportunity. The language barrier proved to be difficult for her, but she completed her GED and nursing certification within a few years and was working rotations at the hospital. Kumar was lonely. Bhumika was beautiful. They spotted each other in a hallway. Kumar missed his mother's cooking back home. Bhumika knew an array of family recipes by heart and prepared them with love and exactness. Both had left their home, immigrants, on a dream, on a mission. America, the land of opportunity... here they were, together. United. Hard working. Soon they were married. There was no arrangement, which was incredibly rare given their cultural backgrounds... but Bhumika had left her mother and brothers, her father was dead, and Kumar was not bound by any familial ties. Neither the bride nor the groom had come from an upper caste, and neither of them had any concern for the financial aspects of the agreement- two paupers, together. They married for love- even more rare, no matter what culture or time or place.

When Tika was seven her parents drove into downtown Philadelphia to show her their former apartment. It was a pathetic, one-bedroom studio in a terrible neighborhood. Tika remembered the gangsters, the glaring hip-hop music, unfriendly faces that the Vasudevan's

received outside of their car on the street. But it was important for Mr. and Mrs. Vasudevan to make Tika aware of their path, their struggle. It was important for themselves to be reminded of what they had come from. They believed you couldn't understand where you were headed until you appreciated where you had been.

Tika was an only child- after giving birth, Mrs. Vasudevan was brought into an emergency operation. Pratika would not flip head-first and because of the risk of a breach delivery, the doctor had decided to perform an emergency C-section... after delivery, the bleeding would not stop, and Mr. Vasudevan provided the doctors consent to perform a hysterectomy in order to save his wife's life. He was ashamed to make the decision without her permission, and hid from her after she regained consciousness. But Mrs. Vasudevan was overjoyed. She was alive. A baby daughter had entered their lives. Three of them... a strong number. That's what turned Kumar's attitude around, a couple of weeks out of the hospital, Bhumika had whispered to him while they rested on a couch, her head met his shoulder, their child in their arms- sweetly, but concerted- "Three is a holy number. We are three. We are strong. We are blessed. You have blessed me. I have blessed you. She will bless us."

--

"Can you help me with these?"

Tika stood at the foot of the bed. October was propped up on a few decorative pillows reading a magazine article about blockchain technology. He set the periodical down on a nightstand and quickly hopped down by his wife's side.

"I miss doing my little trick. I cannot do it anymore. My feet have disappeared." Tika was fixated on the carpeted floor, down past the horizon of her engorged stomach, full of child, a barrier blocking her vision. The 'little trick' Tika was referring to involved a nightly ritual before bed- she would pull her heel against the carpet and undo each ankle-high sock from off her foot, then pick each sock up between her big toe and second toe, and flip it up into her hands before depositing them into the laundry basket. One and then the other, one two- October immensely enjoyed watching her perform her trick.

A husband noticed his wife's lighthouse beaming eyes sweeping amidst waves of unease, calling out like only a distressed goddess can and so he knelt and assisted his lover out of her cotton socks. He rubbed her toes, her legs. He kissed her thigh, bare and smooth, available thanks to her high athletic shorts. "They'll be back. It won't be too long before you can do it again." He stood up and kissed her on the forehead.

Earlier that evening October had arrived home to find his wife immobilized on their couch, wrapped in a fleece blanket and surrounded by moistened tissues. Such scenes were becoming a sort of new normal around the Tierney residence. For weeks now a wave of anxiety had been eroding Tika. Her usual self had disappeared without warning. One day, it left.

But this particular evening, before he entered the bedroom- in the kitchen arranging clean dishes back into their respective cabinets- October couldn't help but think *What about me? Where's the fun in this? Where's my support?* He felt selfish harboring such ideas, but he was growing tired. Annoyed. The estrogen, the insanity- he didn't have any reserves to handle Tika's continuing emotional turmoil. To continue to reassure his wife, to listen to her fears, doubts, paranoia, to assuage her concerns, to acknowledge the value of her feelings- for weeks this had gone on. *What about me?* October had prioritized his wife's well-being from day one. The couple had relocated to be closer to Tika's parents. He made sure he was available. He was present. He worked, he paid the bills, he didn't harbor ideas about other women. He didn't gamble. He didn't drink. He was a good husband. But still, Tika cried and cried and wept and moaned and laid stationary, debilitated for weeks now. *What about me?* He searched for love but could not find any. Resources depleted. Hoodoo rock formations left standing tall after millennia of erosion, a testament to the forces of destruction- he was down to his final pillar, like St. Stephen upright and stoic admiring the badlands, salted over, dried up and lifeless long after nature's tidal rivers had flooded and laid waste to the region.

Back in their room- as he walked to the laundry basket, he reaffirmed himself and resolved to continue. He set her socks in the hamper. He committed. Instead of *What about me?* his mind let out a fierce mantra of simplicity- *Whatever your best is, now is the time to give it.* The friction between what he wanted and what

was needed had ignited a spark within October- *Now is the time to give it. To her. For her. For your son.* After the words came, an image- his own father. There he was. Laboring. Pressing on. A wife buried, a family to care for. October was inspired.

He went back to her side and kissed Tika again. "Everything will be okay, I promise."

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Like a flash flood, an arroyo after a thunderstorm: what if I can't take care of him, what if I hurt him, what if I'm a child molester, what if a child molester kidnaps him, what if he doesn't love me, what if I can't love him, what if I fail, what if October leaves us, what if October gets sick, what if I get sick, what if I die, what if October dies, what if this was all a mistake, a cursed mistake that will end terribly and tragically, what if..

--

"Brahman is everything. It has no second. It is one. It is unified. It engulfs all concepts, all forms- good and bad, light and dark, love and hate- there is no distinction or judgement to be made. We are part of the expression of Brahman. Our life in this world, this is the expression of Brahman, outward. Out, then in. For an infinite number of cycles Brahman has been moving in and out and will continue to do so for all time. Brahman's expression cannot be stopped. We experience it, we are it."

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Interrupted, an industrial pulse of melody with a haunted voice in the background...

What would I do?

What would I do?

If I did not have you?

October turned down the volume then pressed a cellphone to his ear. "Arnie! Give me some good news. It's been a bullshit day."

A bullshit day- a day that hadn't gone according to plan, that hadn't met the expectations of how October wanted the universe to unfold- people not doing what they were supposed to- packages not arriving as scheduled, checks not cashing, repairmen cancelling

appointments, traffic jams and SOLD OUT stickers, BACK AT 12:30 signs- if only.

"Tober, I can't make it out next week, I have to cancel the flight. I can't go to Chicago."

"What? What are you talking about? Why not?" October stood up from his desk chair. "We're about to land our second biggest client we've ever had. You're the face for the deal. Tell Alex it will only be a couple days. I know the baby is little, but daddy needs to bring home the bacon!"

Arnold faked a chuckle, then stopped. "I, I..."

"What is it man? Speak."

"It's Alex. She's... we just got a diagnosis... she has ovarian cancer. It's..."

October was stunned. "Cancer? Jesus Arnie, well... I didn't even know... you never said anything to me, how long, how long has she been sick for? She just had the baby, she just..."

"A couple of months. They thought it was related to the pregnancy, but... they ran tests... it's stage four. It's in her liver too."

October crashed back into his chair. "Shhhhit. Shit. Arnold, Jesus... I'm sorry, I didn't mean... mean to... well, of course. No. You have to take care of your family. You have to... how is she doing? I mean..."

"Alex is, she's... she's incredible. You know her. She's determined. All she cares about is the baby, that's it. She wants to get enough time... she's determined that Stacy will know her, as her mother. It's... I really..."

October gulped, audible across the fiber-optic lines and cell-towers and aether particles connecting the two friends, the business partners- "What about you? Are you okay?"

"I'm alright, I... I'm, I'm pissed off. I'm scared. I'm exhausted. I'm..." A silence passed between them like an express train, busy and full of passengers late staring at their watches, between them and dividing them. "The whole thing is surreal. Stage four. It's... I don't know. My head is everywhere and nowhere, if that makes any sense."

October grasped for something to offer his friend. "Arnie, I mean, if you need... you take the time... take whatever you need. How can I help? What can I do?"

Arnold had navigated through various iterations of the same conversation for days, friends and family- "what can we do," "how can we help," "let us know," "we're so sorry." Arnold was Catholic, raised in the church and stayed in the church. And for the most part he asked for prayers when people asked what they could do to help. He wanted prayers, he knew prayers worked- when Arnold was eleven he witnessed the power of prayers acting on behalf of his nineteen year-old older brother who had flown over the front of a motorcycle struck head on by a drunk driver hurled over fifty-yards from the site of the accident pronounced dead pronounced irretrievable encased in a coma on life support for days for weeks until a miracle occurred and he woke up with all his faculties and memories and the doctors couldn't believe it- Arnold still remembered the look on their faces- but Arnold couldn't ask for prayers from October. It would be too uncomfortable. October the materialist atheist wouldn't be able to conjure up any meaningful prayers, and Arnold knew it. October was not a man of faith. October, the chief executive master-and-commander make-it-or-break-it would be bothered by the request, and Arnold didn't want to upset his friend. If Arnold asked for 'Hail Mary' and 'Our Father' petitions, then October would be forced to lie and say "Sure, sure. Whatever you need. I will pray for Alex, of course." But there would be no prayers said. He would force his business partner, his college friend, his confidante, and best-man-at-the-wedding into a fabrication. Arnold detested lying more than he needed prayers. "I'll let you know. I'm still processing everything, we're still figuring it all out. I'll let you know though."

There weren't enough pray-er's in the world anymore.

October squirmed on the other end of the phone. He knew Arnold wanted prayers. October wanted to say he would be thinking about Alex, sending her 'good thoughts,' but it sounded trite. Good thoughts didn't do any good. And he couldn't say he would be praying for them, because he wouldn't be. Tober didn't say prayers. He didn't believe in miracles. He didn't beg unknown powers for outcomes to go his way. It wasn't logical. It didn't work out. A young October Tierney had watched his mother die of a bacterial

infection, abruptly and unexpected. He laid his eyes on her lifeless, bloated, bruised and discolored body, uncovered on a sterile operating table, after Mr. Tierney the elder allowed his children a moment, a private moment, to find their peace and say goodbye to his wife, their mother. Many years later Tober's father admitted to his son that he regretted granting his children permission to see Grace in such a state. Tober put his arm on his father's shoulder and admitted it was the most important thing he's ever seen in his entire life. He learned the truth of death.

Prayers. Death. Hope. Finality. Fate. Faith. Thoughts like these words treaded over both friends' minds like baleful clouds, like apocalyptic horsemen. "I wish you would have told me sooner Arnie. I'm sorry. I'm sorry you have to go through this, but she'll pull through. She will. She's a tough woman, and you're the toughest sonovabitch I've ever known. You will, both of you, I know it."

"Thanks, Tober. I appreciate you saying that."

"It's the goddamn truth. I'll take care of Chicago. Take whatever time you need, alright. Spend some time with your wife, your baby. Do that. I'll take care of Chicago, and I'll push your bonus ahead a quarter, to help with the bills and everything. We can make that work on the books. I want you to focus on what's important, alright?"

Arnold always could tell when October was trying to pump him up- an emphatic curse word, a 'goddamn' or 'horseshit' with gusto. The longtime goodbuddy businesspartner smiled on the other end of the line, a smile of surrender- consumed by the uncontrollable elements of his situation, asphyxiated by the obstacles at hand- "Thanks, Tober."

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Transactional emptiness- it surrounded him. Polite handshakes, itemized receipts- tawdry fussing like great aunties in department stores diving into their purses- worthless gestures, the perfunctory. Another day spent in a useless, perfunctory world. October has been ablated- a hollow gulp in his throat, a gulp beyond apathy, gone beyond sadness or hatred or loneliness or frustration or desperation- a void immeasurable and unknowable- months and months and here we are. October crumbles up a telephone bill left on the kitchen island. He reads an email on a computer

in his leather seat. He listlessly pulls at hangers for an outfit in his closet. Overcome. He can't decide over a button down, a sweater, which pressed pair of pants- unraveling, thread by thread. He stops, immobilized at the foot of the bed, only dressed in his socks and underwear.

Empty.

For a couple of nights he had considered whether or not to take his own life, but had decided once and for all the act of suicide, in it of itself, would have offered too much credence, too much import on his own existence. It would have been too life-affirming an act, by his measure. Too much effort. Too much exaltation.

Every conception, every action, every thought was laid bare in front of October.

Empty.

He could not be bothered, unable to be stirred into passion-dispassionate, dispossessed- there was no fiber of soul left to coil or flex. October is motionless, alone, under the blades of a frozen ceiling fan collecting dust. *I did it the right way-* hard work, diligence, a successful business, a wife, a family- an American dream dreamt and dreaming but now awoken. Cored from the inside out. Left with nothing- no faith, no impulse to continue, no meaning to ascribe. It was all supposed to work out, but it didn't. Now what? Lingering- a singular notion- there is nothing left to do. *None of it matters. None of it ever did.*

Past the point of being overcome by regrets, no longer capable of thinking in strings like a person in his shoes might think- thoughts like "I miss him so much, I'd do anything for one more minute with him" or "How did we let him slip away" or "Why did I ever stop paying attention to my family so I could take a phone call for work" or "How much opportunity I wasted reading sports scores and memorizing batting averages and checking stock prices" or "How silly were your little games, the vanity" or "I should have taken better care of Tika"- not even a vessel of a mind for such thoughts to occupy. The radio antennae within his cortical apparatus ceased to register any signal. Not even noise. Nothing remained in place to collect the wavelengths, to parse out and make sense the flux- autonomic, every bit of his position at the end of that bed. Seated. Reptilian. Breath. Blink. Subconscious.

There was no match for the gulf of darkness which had formed between October and the world around him, between October and his own heart beating within his chest.

Untethered, birthday balloon goodbye and make a wish- have you ever encountered such despair? Hunched over, his hands on his knees hunched and forlorn, drooling, his jaw hung like a paint-chipped lantern- watch closely our sunken hero- because here comes the question, the confrontation, the last question and the first question- the motivation of Kierkegaard, the plague of Camus, the crux of Sartre, the glory of Dostoevsky- the final resting place- out loud- it emerges- he hears himself in the register of his mind then whispers out loud, an acknowledgement- the impasse, "What is the fucking point?"

He does not respond.

It is five thirty. The dusk gives way to night- falling- petals, white lilies on top of a gunmetal casket- through the window. An autumn sun hangs, tired, about to be swept away. Tika is still at work, she'll be home soon. Then a drawer opens, a handful of essentials, cotton, wool- a backpack, his hiking gear- waterproof boots from the storage bin, no keys, no phone, only a wallet. He leaves the front door unlocked. Automatic. Without premeditation- can you see his unchanging expression? Do you see him, winnowed away depositing heavy footsteps on the sidewalk?

--

"Not a single mark."

Tika wanted to be certain- "Not one?"

"Not one. This stuff is really dynamite." October examined the bottle. The foreign letters and characters mesmerized him. "Where did you find this anyways?"

"A coworker recommended it. She swore by it."

October washed his hands in the sink. Tika kept looking for discolored lines of skin on her stomach, her hips, her breasts- there were no stretch marks to be found. She set down her sleeping gown.

"You look beautiful. Especially in your pajamas, you look elegant."

Tika put her arms around her husband's shoulders. "I am your queen, yes?"

He winked, pressing his cheek to her cheek, "I am your king," then coyly with his head down, "and he is our prince."

--

October shut the television OFF. "When's the last time we fucked? Huh? When's the last time we were intimate? I literally don't remember. I can't even remember what it's like." October's exclamation escaped before he could retract or edit the details. Snapping at his wife, who to her credit was concerned for her husband, who asked 'What's wrong?' like any good wife would after nervously tip-toeing in silence at the kitchen table eating dinner, after being disarmed by the distant expression on her husband's face, watching him land on the sofa only to collapse into an unbreakable muteness.

"So this is the true source of your frustration?"

October turned away from the screen, "Yes."

"You want to fuck more?"

"Oh, it's the word now. Fuck. I can't say fuck? Why can't I express it how I want to?"

Tika took precautions to communicate in an even tone and volume. Calm. "I am not telling you what to say or how to say it. I asked you what is bothering you, and this is what you said. I am not..."

Interrupting his wife, "No, you're sitting there judging me. Because I have a physical need, a physical desire to have sex. To feel it in my body- and you sit there with your judgements about how all men want to do is fuck, all men are shallow. Like you have some divine take on having sex because it is (quoting with his hands) intimate or emotional or meaningful. Here's some news: the most meaningful fuck of my life was the most physical one. Period. And I don't care. I want to fuck."

Tika, blinking her eyes wide open, her eyebrows thin and raised... wow... "Alright. I understand this. You want to fuck. Okay."

"Just because we have a sick son, now we can't have sex. Now we can't enjoy that part of our relationship?"

Tika, her arms akimbo, "Well do you want to have sex, or fuck? And I am assuming you want to fuck me? Or anybody?"

October could not outmaneuver this miscalculation. He was outmatched. "Of course you. Stop it."

"Of course. I wanted to make sure, because I thought we used to make love, that was my impression at least. But now you are saying to me you want to fuck. I want to make sure I understand."

"Tika, honestly..."

Tika clasped her palms behind her head and sighed. Namdev was suspended between in a swing, silent, asleep in the hallway thanks to the lullaby tunes playing from a tiny speaker built into the rocker. "Now I have to be honest. If this is what you want, you are going about it in a strange way October. I must say, I do not believe your strategy is going to work. To fuck me more."

Embarrassed, deflecting, without an inkling of contrition- "No kidding?"

"Say what you truly feel October. You have already started. Say it all."

Sitting up, disjointed and resigned. "This whole marriage, this whole thing was a mistake. A total mistake."

"What?"

"You heard me. A mistake. I married a woman who can't make me happy."

Tika walked away from the living room. She checked her son. She returned, in front of her husband, and took a deep breath. "I married a fool who cannot see what is right in front of him! I want to make love October! I want to feel love! I used to love when your body was on top of mine! I used to love feeling you all over me, inside of me. How strong you were. I loved how much you loved me! That is precisely what made me feel sexy, sexy to you! You idiot! And now, after what you have said, how can I possibly want to even look at you, much less sleep with you?"

"Whatever. It's typical. You're right. I'm wrong." Losing sense of his identity- an identity founded not in himself as an individual, but in his relationship, in the interaction and affection of a

woman he loved, a woman he had committed to loving for a lifetime ahead, a son. Hurt, wounded, and now disengaged. He darted away into the kitchen, retrieved his dishes and set his plate in the sink on top of his wife's. Speaking with his back towards her, "Why should a husband want to have sex with his wife? You're right. Why did you even ask me how I felt? Why should it matter?"

Tika moved to the sink and pushed her husband aside. She turned the water on, then faced him. "You think I no longer have physical needs? You think I have forgotten we are man and woman? You think I do not look at you and want to be close to you, to share my body with you? But how you say things October, the way you approach- first off, you have to understand with how everything in our life has been, I do not exactly feel up to sex all the time. I am tired. I do not feel sexy. I am tired. You are tired. You work late. You try to stay out of the house. All of this is true, correct?"

No response.

"I will take that as yes. And yes, I am focused on Namdev, I know this, but who else would be?" A woman with expectations, who expected her husband to be the man he had always been- the man she married, the man she knew he was- a woman fortified in her identity because of her relationship with Namdev, waiting for October to play catch-up, to keep pace. "I am his mother. This time in our life is not about us, or our needs. And I want to return, yes, to a place where the physical aspect of our love is a priority. But now is not the time. This has to make some sense to you, what I am saying?"

"Of course. You're right and I'm wrong." October shook his arms odd and uncoordinated, apoplectic, then walked away.

Tika couldn't help but hide her frustration under a twisted smile, and in a calm voice, "Well this is a development- I married a boy who does not know how to grow up and be a man. A boy who cannot articulate his real emotions. A boy who cannot show his wife or son affection. A boy who only cares about where he is sticking his penis. This is the boy I married. Excellent decision, Tika. Very wise. It must be your Hinduism, with its rich tradition and wisdom. Yes..." elaborating, continuing, further and deeper more sarcastic and facetiously comical.

Mumbling... the crunch of his black leather boots... keys... a lock... clicking his tongue from inside of his cheek... October didn't wait for the end to Tika's analysis. He didn't care to. He didn't care.

Tika didn't care to follow her husband down the stairs to make sure he heard her. She didn't care whether she was heard or not- why give him the benefit of the doubt while he explained his feelings, when she never even had the chance to express hers to him without feeling the barb of "Stop crying for Chrissakes" or "Do we have to go over this again?"

He had left, and she remained.

--

October was all too familiar with the constrictions and trappings of 21st Century American disillusionment, particularly its impact on the family structure. He watched his best friend growing up, Shawn 'Rat Tail' Rawlings, marry, become a father, and divorce over the course of a decade. Shawn was neutered inch by inch. His wife was a virile thing, she started off all legs and blonde hair and dancing on bar tables. Kayleigh was fun. She was hip. The pair of young lovers attended concerts, booked expensive vacations, travelled and dined well. They (presumably) made impassioned love. Shawn was happy. He loved Kayleigh. October could see it. But after college, after they moved in together, then her demands began to weigh on Shawn. First, a better apartment. New furniture. A dog. Then a ring on her finger. Shawn was forced to gun for promotions- eventually a new job, for more money- a career change. He abandoned his hobbies and interests- non-profit work wouldn't cut it. Pro bono budgets couldn't afford matching suitcases with stitched initials. Pro bono didn't cover the organic food delivery services. Even the clothes on his back- she picked out what he could wear, threw away what she didn't approve of. A ceremony. A honeymoon, to a destination of her choosing. A new car. A house. After six months of marriage, Kayleigh's sister became pregnant, so the race was on. In a year, they welcomed home their first child.

But the more 'mature' Kayleigh became, the more she assaulted the universe's workings around her- the weather was always off, the money was never enough, Shawn's family was too annoying, his midsection stored too much fat, her boss was too overbearing, her back bothered her, his snoring kept her up at night, the television always reported the wrong news- little by little, she transformed

into a hoarse victim, a martyr, an unlucky saint. Kayleigh never received any credit, any benefit of the doubt. No one ever helped her out. No one ever gave her a break. And the more she suffered, the more she could assess other peoples' problems. She knew what ought to be done. Why the waiter at the restaurant came off as a weirdo, why her cousin dated the wrong men- why this was unfair, why that was unfair, and what ought to be different. October would visit them, she would regale him with her opinions. She wasn't shy. But Shawn was. Another child, a remodeled kitchen, a golden retriever- Shawn sunk downwards, inch by inch, marked faintly by a trail of bubbles accumulating at the surface. October remembered one night he had been invited to their house for dinner, and Shawn spent a half hour in the bathroom- probably on his phone, distracting himself- tired of Kayleigh, tired of the kids, tired of pretending. Tired. October couldn't help but take notice of his friend's lack of vitality. Shawn's moxy had been sapped from his once blushed cheeks. Pallid. Sickly almost. October's conversations with Shawn withered as Shawn dedicated more and more time on the road for work, consumed and absorbed by the office by the sales by the clients by the bonuses. October's relationship with Shawn decayed.

Simultaneously, October watched his sister's marriage disintegrate. A cheating husband. An explosive revelation. A villain. Alimony, child support, litigation, restraining orders, attorney's fees- October watched Nin transform from a kind, somewhat naïve girl into a calculated, leery, hardened woman. Acrid. Tough. Pressure treated. And once their father died, shortly after, Nin lost faith in all men.

October watched. He was a natural observer, a Libra. On more than one occasion he had promised himself that he wouldn't become a casualty of the program- the apparatus of family, expectation, success. It was too much to go up against. He watched a lifestyle fueled by good intentions defrag too many men and women, men and women with good hearts and simple dreams- one by one, castrated and bleeding out. Pretending. Self-destructing. October pledged never to follow that path. Where it led- sleeping in bedrooms at opposite ends of the house, together for breakfast both parties gobbling down an arsenal of prescription pills amidst the ruffle of newspaper pages to argue over vacation destinations and wallpaper patterns, connected only by the rare Sunday agreeing on

a crossword answer or after a holiday acknowledging meekly the oyster Rockefeller had been prepared exquisitely and paired well with the Chamblaise- two people living together in body but in heart and mind occupants of completely separate universes, united in a futile purpose- a purpose aimed at grinding it out a little bit longer to arrive back at next Christmas' dinner table crunching mouthfuls of Romano cheese and spinach and *Mollusca*.

No. October had quit college at nineteen and decided to follow his dreams of starting a business. An upstart software programmer. A hustler. A white washer of fences. He never felt compelled to participate in a prescribed routine or program or activity because 'everyone else was doing it.' He cleared his own path. Clever. He dated. He dabbled. He got laid. He had fun. Into his 30's, he was very comfortable with the idea of a permanent state of bachelorhood. Yes, that would suit him fine, fine indeed. Time for industry seminars, 5K charity runs, art museums, brewery tours, popcorn and movies- he enjoyed his life. He enjoyed his time. He enjoyed not having to pretend.

But then the universe brought him face to face with Tika. It wasn't long after his father had died, a month or two- that fateful afternoon, a coffee shop- her beauty stopped him dead in his tracks. The tattoo on her left wrist, he asked her what it meant... a symbol... Sanskrit, for 'peace'... shanti. He asked her to repeat the word. Shanti. Then he asked to sit down with her. Not long after they were sitting down to their first dinner out together. Then their first dinner in, at a table in an apartment they shared. They read books together. They ran trails. They talked. They went to see films then discussed plots and themes and style. She took an interest in his work, in cyber security, and he respected her for her dedication to her patients in the ICU. There was something different about her. She didn't want to swallow him up, transform him into her little pet. There was no signal that she would plop down all her expectations and neuroses on him- she was grounded, spiritual, connected, actualized. She wasn't daddy's little girl, she wasn't a victim of the American machismo dominator culture, she didn't care about what kind of car October drove or what sort of diamond would sit in her engagement ring. She didn't act entitled. She was smart, kind, considerate, solid. He could be relatively honest with her, and she only spoke the truth to him. October didn't care that she wasn't comfortable sleeping with him

right off. Tika didn't mind that October rarely tidied up his apartment.

After a couple of years, after living together, after entwining their cycles, their rhythms, they decided they wanted to have a child. October never once considered being a father, and it wasn't the idea of fatherhood that attracted him to raising a child- it was the idea of watching Tika become a mother. He loved Tika, and knew she possessed all the essential maternal qualities- it was that knowledge which ultimately won him over. So, before a child, before starting a family, marriage seemed to be an appropriate step. They expressed their plans to Tika's parents. Since Mr. and Mrs. Vasudevan didn't possess the ancestral clout to arrange a marriage for Tika, they were smitten with the idea that a Western man, a successful businessman, would take their daughter on. Tika couldn't have been more excited- she yearned to be joined by sacrament to the man she loved. Much more than a trip to the courthouse- a proper ceremony, with rites and ritual. Though it was a modest ceremony- a traditional Hindu affair followed by a nice meal with Tika's parents, a few friends, Nin and her daughter, October's business partner Arnold and his wife- unpretentious, straightforward. Within a month they were pregnant. They were doing it their way. October was doing it his way- it wouldn't be like everybody else, he wouldn't abandon his wife, he wouldn't become a work-a-holic, she wouldn't change into a cold-hearted bitch- they would love each other, do things their way. It would all be alright.

They worked hard. They did the right thing. It would all be alright.

--

Snowplows outside grate their steel mouths along the asphalt. A storm dubbed a 'polar vortex' by national media outlets... a fight. Tika and October, both of them groggy with eyes nearly shut, weary with bones creaking at such an early hour, everything frozen shut in the morning. A heavy sky eclipsed by white sheet after white sheet- roofs collapsed, car windshields ruined by frost, icicles born stalactite ominous and hung foreboding from off aluminum gutters. Ms. Diedrich next door resetting her microwave clock; Mr. Reynolds taking out the dog; a young Lawrence Anderson clicking open a frozen car door handle, inwardly quite pleased by the

storm's performance and anticipating an expeditious commute into his downtown office; dreams of school day cancellations percolate within tiny bedrooms. A hushed, veiled earth- aside from the grating metal.

October jerked his forearms, flexed his biceps. Namdev was plucked from a bassinet, and October abandoned his son over to Tika. He more or less dropped the boy on the bed near her arms while his wife freed her right breast. Terse. Discontent. A new parent.

Don't cast your judgements on the young father, our poor fool! Let ye cast the first stone ye who have not committed sin! Poor October, who hadn't stopped to cradle his boy, to honor his son with attention, to consecrate the infant's presence. October who had made grand promises of commitment and consecration, who had felt his spirit fill like a thousand suns radiating nuclear, who had touched the miracle of life the first time he held his boy. October who had found the eternal then lost it, a man like other men like me and you a fallen angel trying his best to recover a tenuous birthright- let him alone! Leave him be! A moment of weakness had descended upon the man. In this late evening, in this red-eye'd early morning, October had failed to remember. Sleep deprived. Frustrated. Confused. Taxed. Told.

Because the real tragedy was October's to bear. The weight of which, the loss- he suffered alone. This morning, October willfully denied himself the pleasure of Namdev's mystery- a transcendent joy, to be in the presence of an incipient lifetime- a newborn's face, the first face in a lifetime of faces, a face to be loved, beloved, a liminal face to be revered, worshiped over- a face so ghostly new and full of energy, morphing and contorting, hardly solid or physical, astral in most respects- in every respect other than location, respective of the earth, a spirit's face on our condensed physical plane- yet, a face that had not been captured, a face almost faceless, untainted, untouched, a face to become so many other faces, a holon morphing anew moment to moment, a face which contained so many yet to become faces like those of a boy, a teenager, a man, an elder- faces of joy of sorrow of pity of silliness of tragedy faces lost and faces found faces sacred and faces profane a lifetime of eyes and ears and lips and cheek bones held together all at once in a father's palm. October hadn't afforded himself the opportunity to delight in his son. He also hadn't afforded himself the respect he deserved, on account of the

honor intrinsic to his responsibilities as a father- he was a protector of a dream, a steward of limitless teeming potentiality, a shepherd, a creator. October had forgotten to be a father, glancing down at his son with contempt. October hadn't granted himself his well-earned privilege. A father who forgot. A man who was exhausted. A grown-up with a child's mind. A make-believer who was hungry. An animal who was wounded. Two-faced, like Janus, like all of us.

Surrounded, but alone.

Not even two months old, Namdev cried, then stopped. Murmurs... gulping... sucking... swallowing. A lamplight cascaded a yellow glow from one corner of their bedroom, giving their confines a diseased, eroded aura- confined to this room, this challenge. A full bin of dirty diapers, breast pads, piss covered pajamas, bottles and pacifiers and strollers and blankets and appendages- the steel grating outside. October, arms crossed at the foot of their bed, he knew Tika was upset with him and rebuked her, "Listen, I'm trying to help. Don't give me that look."

Tika sighed, Namdev continued to drink his mother's milk- the boy, born to both woman and man, though his imperfection was handed down from his father like Cain's mark. Born without sin but an inheritor of sin, a benefactor of his father's sin, rooted from a seed planted in the first man, insuperable and comorbid with our humanness. Tika whispered with her head cocked sideways, downward, watching her son, "This attitude October, your energy. I know it is early. I am sorry but we are both awake. And I am the one here, feeding him from my body." Then she closed her eyes. "It could not be more apparent that you do not want to be here with us. With the words you use. So go." She looked down at her son, then up in disgust- a loud whisper, "I said go!"

There was no recourse. He was caught. In only his boxer-brief underwear, October sulked out of the bedroom into the hallway. A framed picture created by an anonymous street artist- a thumbnail crescent of moon, electronic silvers and haunting fuchsias and gelid blues, dimpled white star lights, executed using only spray-cans and Styrofoam plates- a dazzling scimitar up above a city skyline, a lunar adumbration foreboding and ruling over the 30th Street Station and Independence Hall. A picture they purchased one afternoon walking through Rittenhouse Square- October met the

image with his eyes and was struck cold by the passage of time. So many years ago- who would have predicted?

Four weeks ago, the couple had rejoiced after calming down a particularly gruesome session of fussiness and discomfort. High-fives, a kiss- Namdev had worked himself into a frenzy and there was no end in sight. The new parents tried ASMR (autonomous sensory meridian response) videos, hide and seek melodrama, rocking, bouncing, lullabies- troubleshooting the problem. They worked as one, a team, and celebrated once the boy had calmed and fallen back into the ocean of subconscious thanks to the abrasive warbles of a vacuum cleaner. Success. New parents. Their relationship growing, father and mother, stronger.

Three weeks ago, Tika noticed the swelling.

Two weeks ago, a pediatrician dismissed Namdev's abdominal girth as nothing more than "extra gas."

A week ago, they decided to acquire a second opinion. Then the kitchen disposal broke. Broken... breaking down... falling apart... waiting... more tests, more symptoms, more consultations... more issues... so much to confront, so much to fix... parts on back order... additional screenings required... shrouded in doubt.

Tika fed their infant son while October stared into the framed glass reflection of himself, like a mirror, confronted. Confronted by a face. A face that belonged to a psyche which not long before had been spurred on by an epiphany, an insight into a sacred interconnectedness with Namdev:

At the gym late at night no sleep so a run on the treadmill, on his way out the door- a flash- fluorescent light shimmers from a glass panel- October notices Namdev within his own aspect, his son's face emerging from the reflection- clear to October- inside of October, the boy is there. Not merged. Not mixed. Not blended. Rather, contained- contained in a way like it was a fundamental element of October's own face, like a building block hidden in the architecture of his nose and brow. October stops, amazed. After thousands of mornings, thousands of shaves and tooth brushings, hand washings, October had never been so amazed by the sight of himself- because that image which he had grown accustomed to now contained Namdev's features. Can you see October at the **EXIT**, awestruck, processing this realization at various intellectual and

emotional levels? Can you see the sweat beads drip, his furrowed brow, fixated on his son, through himself- through him, in him, with him- 'He's been inside of me this whole time- it hasn't been only me in him- I didn't create him, as much as he's already been a part of me- he's been with me all along- unseen, but present- a part of me before I even knew of him- the best part of me, probably- my son.' In that moment, time unwound itself from her usual linear constraints for October. Instead of understanding the present as a state of being pushed forward into the future, leaving the past behind- instead the future became a great attractor pulling on the present to come along. The attractor had been Namdev. His whole life, October sensed, had been urged towards the arrival of his boy. Beauty fills his spirit with truth that cannot be expressed in words. A truth that can only be experienced. A truth felt, not in the mind but in the heart. October rushed home to explain the movements of his heart to Tika. She too is stirred by the profound truth of her husband's analysis, touched deeply by his astute observation. Later that evening she would peer at her own reflection in their bathroom, and lo, there will be her son.

But this evening, now- here we are, back to the night of grated steel- tightened by the cold, October's reflection brought no joy, no insight. He could not peer into Namdev's image through his own angry pupils. He could not unshackle the binds of time or space. He could not unlock the mystery. He stood before himself, a prisoner to confusion and fear.

A silenced heart.

Soon the boy would finish eating, then would become disgruntled. Wailing away with his bottom lip full of quiver and tremulous between tightened breaths between red cheeks- Tika would rock Namdev side to side across her body then up and down over her shoulder, trying her best to calm his nerves. October would stand in a dark hallway- impatient, hurt, upset. No control. A man whose son was sick. A man who did not know why, or how, or with what ailment- but he knew the boy was sick. Tika had been right. Tika had seen it, and October had missed it. Maybe she had brought it on- maybe it was her fault... all the anxiety, leading up to the boy's birth- an overabundance of stress hormones... maybe that was it. October would sneer at himself. He wanted a scapegoat. He wanted a target. He wanted a direction to point his hate. He felt

the wound split, the knife tear. But he did not understand why it was happening, who had caused it.

The three of them in the apartment- vexed, angry, helpless.

Eventually Namdev will fall back asleep. Then Tika. But October would continue to pace the hallways into the morning, chilled, moored alone in a desperate silence broken only by the rusted teeth of a backhoe bucket fatuously moving around piles of dirt stained snow.

--

"You savin' white men now Latcho?" Kenny Friese pulled the mug of coffee to his thin lips. Black, no cream or sugar.

Latcholassie mimicked his friend, unconscious, and blew for a moment over the surface of the hot liquid drawn near to his lips, "Can't always stick to y'r guns I suppose."

Kenny scrunched his eyebrows, his narrow eyes locked on October through the window. "I guess. Looks like you dragged him out of your compost pile."

"Worse. A Greyhound bus-stop."

The worn-faced backwoods logger planted a ceramic mug on Latcho's table. The two men chuckled. "Honest?"

"Honest Injun."

Kenny deposited his pinky finger into his right ear, twirling, satisfied- "Why'd you do a damn silly thing like that? Must be your name."

Latcho turned and added a bill from a pile of mail onto his refrigerator via a magnet- a plastic miniature signpost that read 'Sequoia National Park'- "What are you mumbling about, you old crank?"

"I wondered why give this poor bastard the time of day? What the heck is he going to do for you? He's probably a dope fiend. Look at him."

Latcho followed Kenny's glare out through a greasy windowpane.

"No, his heart has been stolen by something else."

"Booze?"

October kicked rocks, aimless- Latcho responded to his neighbor, "A child. Dead. A boy. His boy."

"Geesh. Well- I guess everyone's got their pain. You believe him though, his story? Seems like an easy way to get some sympathy. He could be anybody."

"I could be anybody. You could be anybody. Don't matter. Everybody is the same. Everybody is hurt. Keeping their secret hurts locked inside- he's no different than either of us. He needs help."

"Yeah yeah. That's nice and all but don't say I didn't tell you so when you end up knife'd."

"I won't be able to say anything if that happens."

Onto the left ear... picking, itching... "Well, what are you gonna do? Let him live here? Kiss him goodnight before bed and tell him it'll all be okay?"

"Not planning it. No. I'll beat the drums for him though, sing the old songs. Tonight maybe."

"I thought you told me you was givin' that up- the ceremonies, right? That's what you call 'em?"

Latcho shrugged, "If you say so."

"Well, what the hell are they called?"

"I don't call it anything. My grandmother never called it anything special. She would look somebody up and down, and she knew. That's how I was taught. So when I looked him up and down, I knew. When you know, you know."

"You're the boss. You got the eye." Kenny moved his mug from the counter into Latcholassie's sink. Grey hair'd, peppered with reds and auburns- a short man, stocky, suspenders and a belt, a Carhart coat and black jeans he'd been wearing for twenty-seven years- he spoke matter of fact. "I'll be at The Stray Dog if you need me. Drunk. Chasin' Arlene. Maybe tonight will be lucky for both of us, eh?"

"Maybe. Glad to know I have y'r support either way."

"Anytime, Mr. Sillyass. Doubt you'll need it. Like I said, you got the eye, partner."

"Eagle clan. Ch'aak. Eyes are our specialty."

Kenny stuck out his hand. "You sure it ain't birdshit?"

Latcho turned to Kenny, accepted his palm, and blinked deliberately at his old friend, "Birdshit too. But eyes first."

--

October was nervous. The train station, the landscape moving past him, trees and houses and cars through dirty plastic windows- he hadn't been to the city before. He hadn't been around so many people. Different kinds of people- old, ugly, colorful, strange- their clothes, earrings, tattoos, hairstyles- he wished his sister had gone with him and his mother.

Mrs. Tierney kept one hand on her son for the entirety of the trip. A long trip. But a worthy trip, with a final destination guaranteed to bring pleasure and delight to any five-year-old boy: The Museum of Science and History. Dinosaur bones assembled and arranged in life-like postures from ceiling cables, display cases recreating ancient times, ancient peoples, samples and specimens, exhibits, placards covered in facts, dates- mysteries, illuminations. It was a birthday surprise. A treat on her first day off in months.

But October couldn't envision the destination. He was hesitant. He clasped his grip onto his mother's wrist. He scooted close by as the train pulled into the station, as people lined up in the aisles. The doors opened. Mrs. Tierney waited, purposeful, and they took their time. Down a concrete path, a jungle- trains, smoke, briefcases and newspapers.

Once outside of the station, past the Fast Food stands, the glass windows, the revolving door- onto the street- walking, more people- too concerned to ask any questions. Too nervous. This strange place was so different than home. October wondered, fearing the worst, 'Where was the sky?'

After a couple of blocks, a couple of leading questions from his mother like "What do you think, buddy?" and "Isn't it a gorgeous day?", Mrs. Tierney brought October to a stop. But it wasn't at an intersection cross-walk. She moved closer to one of the steel

buildings, across the sidewalk- a man was laying on the ground. He looked horrifying to October. A broken face. Clothes in shambles, like the rags dad kept in the utility closet. Fingernails covered in dirt. Why were they stopping? What was she doing?

Mrs. Tierney reached into her purse, pulled out her wallet, and set a \$5 bill into the cup stationed next to the homeless man. She closed her wallet, adjusted her purse strap, and they continued forward. After another half-block or so, a lifetime to a young boy- finally, a question.

"Why did you do that mommy?"

"Do what?"

"Give that man your money."

"Do you know what homelessness is, October?"

"No."

Mrs. Tierney knelt down in the middle of the sidewalk to be closer with her son. She didn't care about the board meetings, the hair appointments, the lunch dates- she wasn't a tourist or a local- she was a mother teaching her son a lesson about life, about love. She pulled October close to her face, eye-level.

"Some people aren't as lucky as me or you. They aren't bad people. They just have hard luck, and life treats them rotten. So whenever you can, you have to help those people."

"Why?"

Ready for her son, practiced at the art of explaining the unexplainable- the eternal why of childhood- she held her boy's shoulders and whispered, "I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me." She smiled, then kissed her son on the forehead. "Do you know who said that?"

"No."

"Jesus. He taught us that- we need to be kind to everyone. To help strangers we don't know. To be good to people who the world treats rotten. Never forget that October, okay?"

"Okay."

--

"The way he pulls at the index finger of his left hand with his right hand, do you see this?"

"Yeah, he's so into figuring out his hands, isn't he? Aren't you Dev?" October gently poked his son.

"We are literally watching his brain develop. It is as if he in understanding he has one finger. Two fingers. Three, four, five- mapping his hand into his consciousness. Discovering his body. It is amazing to see this. I can almost picture it happening in his mind."

"That's a crazy way of looking at it, Teek."

"He changes so much every day. When you come home I hardly can wait to tell you what I have seen. He is better even than yesterday in following me with the rattle. Here, come look at this."

October had taken off his shoes, his socks- he was hoping to hit the gym, to finish a proposal write-up, maybe catch some of the game. He watched Tika dangle the sea turtle toy, covered in exotic fabrics and plastic rings, a squeaky midsection- one squeak, two squeaks- October's entire world disappeared. He beamed as Namdev's head turned in the direction of his wife.

"You see?"

"Yeah it's wild. He's really- he can't really go up and down though, can he? The vertical- it's weird- when you're above him..."

Tika assured, "Oh he will. We have to allow him the time. The world is still so new. We cannot learn it in one day, can we? Tell daddy, Namdev. Say 'Give me time, I will learn this too.'"

"There you go buddy! There you go Dev! Teek, I'll tell you what- it's great to see you- you seem like you're feeling better, yeah? With the anxiety? The worry? It's- I just love you. I want you to feel good. You're a great mom."

"Thank you, October, I..."

Namdev interrupted- one squeak, two squeaks- the parents laughed together. October's imagination took his son to the moon and back-

crawling, walking, talking, singing, dancing, playing sports, driving a car, going off to school, meeting a girl, a family of his own- thirty years in a flash. But Tika stayed with her boy in the present, walking around his swing, willing Namdev's eyes to follow her about.

A hidden place inside of her collapsed- worried. Afraid.

--

October... daydreaming... a memory, a friend, Joe Denning... old smoking Joe with his tremendous shoulders, a natural second basemen forced into the outfield by politics by the coach's best-buddy's kid gunning for the same position on the team... wild Joe who grew up burnt by the outskirts of town blistered by the state highways and interstate commerce and a no-good father of his own who never buddied up to any coach or did a goddamn for Joe... never cheered during one of Joe's at-bats, too busy drinking up a paycheck inside a dusty barroom... unfair happenings of life forced onto Joe Denning... forced to grow up quick to quit being a kid to forget about the prom to forego all the egoic charades of high school... October imagined himself into Joe Denning's baseball cleats, imagined himself into Joe Denning's life... a burly youth, now a full grown man... October then imagined his own son, unborn still squirming Pisces-like in Tika's fishbowl belly, into his own teenage years as a boy under the roof of Joe Denning, played still by October... actors, the stage... a forgotten future, unreal... a fight breaks out in an imaginary basement next to washing machines and cleaning supplies, here it goes the inputs computed the simulation humming along- October (as Joe Denning) 'You know why I hated my father, cuz he was a do-nothing lazy piece-of-shit never worked an honest day picked on my mother and sister whooped my ass for no reason hated his life hated us left us dragging his heels drinking away our food money pretending to be a big shot that old hypocrite asshole, that's why I hated my old man. So why do you hate me boy? What's your good reason? What's your problem besides your own selfishness?' The thought, the care, the mental energy, detailing entire lifetimes out of his unborn son... incipience... omnipotence... becoming a God, deified, by becoming a father... mythologized, eulogized one day so long as the natural order holds... a parent, playing the role supreme of love supreme in the life of another person... an immortal... October considered his own mortality, the man that he was, that he is... he wonders, solemn, 'Are you ready to

become immortal?' Driving home from a business meeting, precipitated by the hypnogogic traffic surrounding him, all of this unfolds across October's mental mindscape... the reality of the present is that Namdev is twenty weeks old, unborn... simulations, scenery... October draws up the outlines of a picture he will never be able to paint, drafts plans for a building that will never be built... hoping for memories like wishing-well nickels... daydreams... October quietly lost inside of his mind, a fantasy world of his own construction. Just like everyone else.

--

Hepatosplenomegaly- an enlarged liver and spleen.

The doctor, white-coat'd with stethoscope in-hand places the instrument below the xiphoid. She, the examiner, gently scratches superiorly, starting in from the right lower quadrant, and listens for sound enhancement as the finger passes over the liver edge- an enlarged liver. Dark urine, pruritus- itchiness. Namdev kept clawing at himself, helpless, disturbed, uncomfortable- jaundice. Yellow like an old alcoholic with liver disease, like a hepatitis needle junkie. A string of empty words... "we're not sure yet"... "we need to run more tests"... "biopsy"... "typically when we see cholestasis coupled with splenomegaly in infants." An order for a fibroblast culture. Fibroblast- a connective tissue cell. A Filipin Test, a different doctor explains the premises, "Based on the reaction of unesterified cholesterol with fluorescent antibiotic Filipin, cells with a large amount of cholesterol present will give a strongly fluorescent, stable cholesterol-filipin complex suitable for in situ detection, useful for the evaluation of impaired cholesterol esterification." Tika signs off and waits. She tries to relay the procedure to October that night at dinner, her computer out and humming on the table, but October had lost his patience- he can't keep all of the terminology straight, he keeps asking for a prognosis, a prediction. He leaves the table and retreats to the living room. Tika reads more about the test. She recalls an ophthalmological exam for Namdev, the presence of "saccadic eye movements." Another test- low HDL cholesterol levels in his blood. Niemann-Pick disease.

Days later, the Filipin test has come back "highly positive"- "That's a good thing, right?" October asks the doctor, his final moment of hope or optimism, up in the air like a fly ball the

bottom of the ninth two outs the season on the line. "Not entirely." More cells, more instruments, a genetic analysis- another test is ordered, sequencing- unraveling the boy's code, their son's genes, his DNA.

Weeks passed. Namdev slept, ate- his liver did not enlarge further, the jaundice didn't grow worse. Tika remained optimistic, while October spent more time at the office.

They didn't speak much on the ride to the hospital. Namdev is peaceful, asleep in his car seat. October is anguished. Tika is steeped in prayer, pouring the whole of her heart into the back seat of the car.

A cramped office full of paperwork, binders, journals and folders- cabinets, shelves- scattered, wild. A genetic counselor in the hospital's Division of Genetics and Genomics- a middle-age'd woman, no ring on her finger who wore a wrinkled blouse, a long, black skirt, hair tied in a bun. The counselor is slightly overweight, serious, stressed- explaining the results of their son's genetic sequencing test. Exons and introns, genes of interest, NP-C1 and NP-C2, polymorphic nature, nucleotide base-pairs... a positive result- positive, for a negative outcome.

October's hands cross, workman-like with his shirt-buttons buttoned up to the top, collar tight but loose- losing weight, not sleeping, not eating- a new father responsible for a new life. He blurts out, "What exactly does 'autosomal recessive' mean?"

The counselor clears her throat, privately considering whether or not to reach for her ceramic lobster paperweight as a means of defense if things with dad shift out of control- "It means that you and your wife are both carriers of a defective form, or mutation, of the NPC1 gene, and your son inherited a defective copy of the gene from each of you. In order for an autosomal recessive disease to be expressed, an individual must receive two defective copies of the genes, one from each parent."

Tika yearns for more details, to wrap her cognition around the problem- "So if we both carry an NPC defective gene, why have either of us not become sick like Namdev?" Tika could examine a wound, assist in emergency surgery, set a bone, remove stitches- her training and practice as an ER nurse had educated her about the human body, as a machine. But the invisible mechanisms of

genetics and chromosomes and expression factors were not in her ken.

"That is a really good question Mrs. Tierney. The reason is because each of us has two copies of every gene, one we inherit from our mother, one from our father. Both of you have one good copy of the gene, and one defective copy. The cells in your body are able to use your one good copy, and so you are unaffected. There is no presentation of Niemann-Pick because of your good copy. This is also the reason why we use the term 'carrier.'"

Tika is concerned. "Does this mean all of our children would have this disease?"

"No, not necessarily. From a very simplistic standpoint, it means that there is a 1 in 4 chance that a child of yours would end up receiving both defective copies, one from mom and one from dad. The odds are 25% that any of your children would express the disease. As long as one of you passes the regular copy of the gene, there would be no presentation of the illness."

"Lucky us," October huffs. His fists dig in underneath his armpits. All he can focus on are words like 'defective' and 'carrier'- *is this woman blaming us for Namdev's illness?*

Tika asks, "What does this gene perform in the body?"

"Well, the gene itself, NP-C1, is involved with building proteins that move large molecules through the vesicle system within the body's cells. The gene builds what's called a large membrane glycoprotein. And what happens in Niemann-Pick Type C is that the glycoprotein doesn't operate correctly. A faulty gene encodes a faulty protein. And because the protein isn't working properly, the cell cannot facilitate the metabolism of large molecules, especially cholesterol. And because cholesterol can't be moved and processed correctly in the cell, an accumulation, a build-up, of cholesterol occurs. And that build-up occurs in the liver, the spleen, the lymph nodes. That is why your son is presenting with an enlarged liver and spleen, it is due to the build-up of cholesterol in his tissues. And jaundice occurs due to liver failure- well, not complete failure, but when the liver is under distress."

October makes his best effort to picture the molecules, the genes, the proteins and pathways- his frustration grows proportionally with his effort. He needs to see a map, to have the process step-by-step in front of him. "Are there any diagrams? I am a visual guy, I have to see it, you know?"

"Of course. In the packets, if you look at the second page..."

Tika and October open the packets, concerted, reading and interpreting the information in silence with foreheads stretched tight. Tika looks up at the counselor. "It says the brain is affected here. You did not mention the brain."

The counselor clears her throat. Then, unconsciously, she pinches between her thumb and index finger a dollop of fat under her chin. Squeezing while she responds, "Well, in the brain, the large molecule at play seems to be sphingomyelin, and not cholesterol. I know I said cholesterol before, but the gene works a little differently in the brain than in the body. The truth is that the exact mechanism of how the NP-C1 gene affects the development and functioning of a neuron, or brain cell, is not as well understood. Scientists know that the gene impacts lipid cellular transport, but they don't know how exactly."

October forces out, "When are they going to know? Is there, are they researching this? Aren't people studying this stuff?" He wants answers. Now.

"Yes, Mr. Tierney, there is a great deal of research taking place."

Tika stares at the handout, overwhelmed. She is a smart woman, well-studied- a nurse, remember- but the bevy of charts, diagrams, definitions, "So is Namdev is going to have liver problems or brain problems?"

"Well, with Niemann-Pick, there are many downstream consequences. Like I said, the cells of the liver, spleen, and lymph nodes can be impacted, as well as the brain, eventually. Typically there is a progression, with symptoms related to the spleen and the body, and then neurological symptoms."

Pressing for an answer, for at least an estimation, Tika implores gravely, "How long until neurological symptoms?"

"It's impossible to say. It is a case-by-case basis."

October tries to follow Tika's questions- "What exactly do the neurological symptoms look like? How are we supposed to know if they are happening or not?"

"The symptoms manifest in a variety of ways, again, on a case-by-case basis." The counselor understands she won't be off the hook with her answer, so she continues, "What ends up happening, eventually, is a gradual loss of neurons will occur in the brain. Lipids, cholesterol, fatty acids, the molecules impacted by Niemann-Pick, they play an important role in how neurons develop, how they form connections in the brain, how they maintain their shape. So as brain cells are affected, as neurons die, symptoms will present."

October presses, "Wait, they die? How many neurons die?"

"It's hard to say."

Reddening, "Why the hell didn't you mention his brain cells would die? Brain cells don't grow back!"

Pinching her chin, the counselor, "Well, degeneration doesn't occur right away. And again, every patient has a unique pathology, or disease course. It may not, there may not be degeneration of any kind for quite some time."

October, ready to bolt up from his seat- Tika glances over to him. Those dark eyes, sad, defeated- a moment of calm before she interjects, "How, exactly, will we know when and if the cells do degenerate?"

The counselor's pace increases. Her speech whizzes on, a checklist-racing, "Well, the symptoms can begin with abnormal eye movements, as in patients can't move their eyes upwards. Then, typically, there are issues related to balance, cognitive skills, speech problems, epilepsy- in some cases, a cognitive dementia progresses."

Tika replies, "How quickly does this happen?"

Before she responds, with her eyes in supplication towards Tika, begging for mercy, "It's a case-by-case basis."

October searches, "You used the word 'typically.' So there's a typical progression. Right? And if that's the case- he will have dementia? Is that the last stage?"

The counselor coughs. She closes her eyes, then addresses both Tika and October simultaneously, "Eventually, a terminal phase occurs in which the patient can no longer feed themselves."

A silence. Then an explosion- muffled at first, internal. The word resonates, it builds tidal and destroys everything in its path-terminal. October cannot focus, disarmed, unable to materialize a response or a movement- imploding. Tika regains a sliver of composure, after she allows the words to strike her down- a harsh clarification followed by even more confusion. She reacts first. "Terminal stages?"

"I am sorry to inform you both of this, but at this point, there is no medical cure available for patients with Niemann-Pick."

October finally cuts through the chaos of his mind, the debris ejecting sideways and fire raging, snarling, "Hold on. Just hold on. There has to be something, right? I watch *60 Minutes*- there has to be somebody doing clinic trials, right? Scientists are always figuring this kind of thing out."

"Absolutely Mr. Tierney. There are several clinical trials in flight, and many others that have already completed. There have been no cures discovered, but researchers have certainly found treatments, and are exploring new ones. And participation in such trials is absolutely something we can discuss. I certainly recommend it. I know this must be very difficult..." the counselor presses on, but neither of Namdev's parents can understand her words, neither of them could hear anything but the echoes inside each of their minds, weeping. A deafening silence of grief... terminal... death.

Tika listens to her own heartbeat- a dampened thud, underwater almost. She reaches down to the carrier and rubs Namdev's wrist. She unbuckles one of the straps.

October boils.

Then the counselor stops. She decides to wait after peeking up at the Tierneys- her head having been pointed downwards, deskwards, in an angle of self-preservation. Noticing the tension of their facial muscles, she aligns herself in her chair and takes a deep breath. It came with the territory- frequently the bad news she

had to deliver to her clients was often imputed back to her, as if she herself were the cause, as if she controlled the fates.

More diamond-pure silence... besides the hum of the hospital, beds moving outside, orders being shouted, announcements... the wind brushing up against the windowpane in the counselor's office... terminal. Tika questions, calmly, "Can you please explain the difference, for treatments and cures? When I hear treatment, I think of cure, in my mind."

"Well, a treatment isn't going to remove or alter the cause of Niemann-Pick, but it will alleviate and help with the progression of the disease and the presentation of the symptoms."

October, on a quest for answers, "Wait a second, let's hold on. Hold on. I don't want to be rushed here. Alright?" Neither of the women respond, but both acknowledge October in their own way. "The terminal phase. Ok. Terminal as in he's dying terminal? That's what we mean by terminal?"

"Well Mr. Tierney..."

"Yes or no!"

"Yes."

A gulp, then, "Alright. Well- thank you- I appreciate the honesty. Now. How does the terminal phase happen? What triggers it? And with medicine- alright- there has to be some way- can we stop the trigger?"

Her ring finger joins her middle finger, adding to the pain across her throat, the counselor looks at October briefly but then focuses on Tika, "I am sorry to be blunt, but it seems like you would prefer me to speak directly. The terminal phase- it is not a question of *if*. It is a question of *when*. There is no way to prevent it. It depends on the patient, case by case, when it occurs. Sometimes early, sometimes late in adulthood. It all depends on the defective gene, and the initial onset. I am sorry I can't..."

October, searching for peace, "I bet you're sorry. Sorry- I'm fucking sorry too, lady! Real fucking..."

"October, enough!" As loud as she could muster. Tika's eyes closed- every part of her being focused and determined to hold it together,

to not fall apart and unravel. She breathes deeply, then a whisper, "But we have gotten an early diagnosis. Yes? So there is a better chance? I am under the presumption that it is always better to find a disease early. Correct?"

Tika lifts her son up and into her arms. She kisses the top of his head, again and again and again.

"Absolutely, identifying it early is critical. And like I said, there are treatments available. I can review some of them right now with you, but any decisions we make going forward will involve the department head and the neurologist. But a few I know of include Miglustat, which is an iminosugar inhibitor of glucosylceramide synthase. Basically, what that means is that is the drug works on enzymes which are a part of the chemical pathway that Niemann-Pick impacts. Miglustat, however, is only indicated once neurological affects take place, so it is not used to treat systemic disease manifestations. There has been a lot of promise with Cyclodextrin, another drug, which is very effective at removing cholesterol from cells. Arimoclomol is an experimental drug which stimulates production of heat shock proteins and counteract downstream consequences of the disease. I know this is a lot of information, and I have hand-outs and articles available for you."

Tika, one hand rubbing Namdev's earlobe, the other applying pressure to her own temple, urging on more options, "Please, continue."

The counselor checks her list. "Vorinostat, which is an HDAC inhibitor, can counteract downstream effects of the genetic mutation associated with Niemann-Pick. There are also many dietary ideas and research that has been conducted, the most promising of those being a low cholesterol diet for patients."

October doesn't attempt to follow, to synthesize the information. Unconsciously he avoids any reason to be optimistic. Tika, on the other hand, wants to engage the obstacles- she hears glimmers of a course, the next steps- "Okay, you have all of this laid out? For us to reference?"

"Yes, it's all in the packet. And we will work together, with the entire team of doctors and experts, and come up with the best plan for your son."

October alights from his careening roll of anger- to clarify, to state the goal- "So we can treat this, technically? There is a chance he won't get too bad, he won't go to the terminal phase for a long time?"

"There is limited data, but there are several treatment options. I- I promise, your son will receive the best care available in the country. I promise you we will come up with a really good plan for your son. I promise you both that. I know this must be difficult for both of you. I want to..."

Tika wraps her arms tighter around her darling prince- tears pooling like full moons. She nods at the counselor. October's mind has jettisoned asunder, back into orbit as diverging thought patterns launch onto unknown trajectories, navigating out from the desert of his being- desperate to find an oasis, a star to hold as true north. He responds to the counselor with, "Hold on. Let's go back to the diagnosis. You said how well Namdev does, it depends on the treatments and when we catch it. Okay. We caught it early, right?"

"Yes, you absolutely did. And, as we talk about *prognosis*, it's important to note here that the onset of systemic symptoms is not related to the onset of the neurological disease. So even though your son is having liver issues, and some other difficulties, it doesn't necessarily mean that he will experience the neurological deficits right away. It may take years. It may take decades. And yes, treatment may help."

October is renewed- he is finally starting to hear some of the answers he wants. "Okay. Right. So it might take twenty or thirty years before he is really impacted, brain-wise, right? He could be alright for a while. A long time?"

"It is possible, but I cannot say anything for certain. There's a lot we know, but there's also a lot we don't know with Niemann-Pick."

Tika is settled with the truth, her thumb on her boy's earlobe, but she permits her husband to continue. He will understand, eventually. October, defiant- "But there has to be other kids with this Niemann-Pick. There has to be some information available. Can't you tell, can't you... make some kind of prediction?" October

looks over to Tika, who is kissing Namdev, placid and warm with his mother's care.

"Well, we do, but we don't. The brain is a very complicated organ. The genetics, the chemistry, we know a good deal about how it works, but we still have a lot to learn. The mechanisms of how this gene impacts neuronal development and functioning, we don't have a clear picture. But based on a few..."

'We' as in 'all of science', as if this woman represented and spoke on behalf of the entire scientific community, every neurologist and geneticist and cellular biologist on the planet. October's patience is dwindling. "Who is this 'we' you're referring to? 'We' as in?"

"I apologize, I mean the scientific community. Doctors, researchers..."

Bitting- a wounded soul, hurt, desperate for company, interrupting the woman- "So not puny little genetic counselors, right?"

The woman stops, offended. Tika pulls on her husband's leg, imperceptible to the hospital employee, out of the nervous woman's sight line, behind the desk.

Nobody says a word.

The counselor examines her paper weight.

October can no longer bear the weight of his frustration. He lashes out again, almost laughing with, "Listen, I just want some answers. Is that so hard to ask? I mean, what the hell are we looking at here? Can you actually tell me anything? Other than my son is going to die. That part I caught loud and fucking clear."

"October!"

More silence passes. The counselor inhales a deep breath, grabs on to her lobster paperweight, holding it in her hands, then, in a positive, warm tone, "Well, I wanted to wait until the time was appropriate, but I have had some conversations with our medical team. And based on the fact your son's jaundice didn't worsen, and because your son hasn't displayed any acute respiratory issues, we can confidently say this isn't an aggressive neonatal acute form of the disease. He does not seem to be at risk for liver failure. I spoke with your pediatrician, Doctor Hunter, about this, as well

as the chief neurologist, Doctor Webb, and after doing some epidemiological research, we are comfortable saying that your son does not seem to have a severe presentation. We are going to refer you to the Lysosomal Storage Disease Program, out of the Genomics department, and connect you with them. They are the leading center in the country when it comes to treating and understanding Niemann-Pick. Namdev will be in very good hands with them. They will be able to monitor Namdev and provide both of you better answers about the prognosis. Like I said- we will make sure he is under the care and supervision of the best in the world."

October is upset. He isn't registering the answers to his questions. He refuses to hear the counselor. The new father realizes his teeth are clenched into themselves- tense. Questions... words... lysosomal... acute... aggressive... unable to keep up... a notion enters his mind and he clamors, "How many people are even affected by this disease?"

Prepared with the data, "It's difficult to say exactly, but estimates come out around, about 1 in 120,000 children born are affected with Niemann-Pick."

Tika is rocking her son back and forth, her eyes are focused on the empty convertible bassinet. She can sense when his eyelids shut- she is connected to every part of him, to the delicate black hairs on his forehead, his tiny nose. Over three months old, one hundred and eight days alive and here he is- here they are, the Tierney family. Then Tika cuts through the room, washes over the psychic turmoil of her husband and the counselor like a wave. She looks up from the boy. Tika is scared- but her fear does not induce paralysis. Instead, she reaches into her nightmare and uses the energy- it acts as a catalyst- she turns towards the pain. She acknowledges its presence. It fills her with conviction, forceful. She wipes a tear from her eye. She announces, "I want to start today. Whatever it is. Clinical trials. Holistic medicine. I want to know every approach. And I want to start today. No more talking. No more questions, October. No more statistics (Tika glared at the woman across the desk from her). I want to take actions, and I want the actions to be the best of possibilities. We need specifics. We need this, Doctor Webb? We need the other doctors in here, now. Let us talk about the clinical trials. Let us go to the Lysosomal Center, the Disease Program, and we will make decisions with them. Today. I want to start treating Namdev immediately."

SPRING

jaatasya hi dhruvo mrutyurdhruvam janma mrutasya cha

tasmaadaparihaaryerthe na tvam shochitumarhasi

For to that which is born, death is certain, and to that which is dead, birth is certain. Therefore, you should not grieve over the unavoidable.

-O-

"Come in."

October tilted his neck up. Perched out the driver's window, a tan forearm, a straw cap- extended out, an invitation. Sent from a light-blue, under-belly-rusted Chevy truck, wooden rails rigged up along the bed, a hauler, a junker, a tarpaulin covering the whole mess, equipment like rakes like weed-whackers like pickaxes jutting criss-cross and assorted. A Native American, an Indigenous survivor of the Earth and of the Pacific Northwest, a coastal Tlingit- an artist maybe a wood worker probably a medicine man definitely a warrior- that forearm.

October glanced up. Hours had passed, half a day with his chin on his chest. Crouched on a Greyhound bench, a bus station, a bright asphalt melting sun at war against the ground- forcing October out from underneath a plastic overhead, out onto a curbside bench- exposed, uncomfortable. He was raw to the comings and goings, people and vehicles and iron and flesh, rubber tread scarred onto the road- tires rolling, tires at a stop.

The stranger banged on the outside of his door. "Throw y'r bag in the bed. Come in."

Come in... if you are a dreamer, a pretender... Shel Silverstein... October recited 'Invitation' to himself, his favorite poem... a poem he had read to Namdev... Nin used to read 'Where the Sidewalk Ends' to October when they were kids... a poem that had traveled with him through his life. October examined the stranger, half asleep and half dreaming. Synchronous.

Pills might have provided October with a natural starting point. Opiates befell him and beset his teenage years, a semi-serious habit. Kicked after a friend's overdose and a semi-serious intervention thanks to his sister. And like every former dabbler,

every once in a while, that dramatic and fuzzy cocoon of analgesia still whooshed into the theaters of his mind. But he couldn't bring himself to score, to connect, to rejoin the game. He was too old for that kind of running and gunning. It was hardly a passing thought. He never was one for heavy drinking, for promiscuous sex or a cohort of paramours, for gambling or torture or petty crime. There was no escape. After the funeral, after the tense evenings, after the terror and discomfort and hatred and remorse, after he left his wife and his home- he was unnerved by a stark, cold fact: none of the stereotypical escapes represented a viable anodyne. He faced an impossibly infinite emptiness that could never be made whole. And even though he considered an escape from himself, he could not carry out a suicide. He refused to lend credence to life, to his life. His obstinate nature precluded him from that course. So here he was. Hollowed.

Here he was. After absconding from the condominium complex, parking his car in the back of a grocery lot listening to a mother cajole her two children along with promises of chocolate, after hitching a bag onto his back and emptying out an ATM, after leaving his credit cards and cellphone behind in the glove compartment, after his first thought final thought that deciding thought the notion to head out, to evacuate, to egress, on the lam. An admission- he couldn't fill the void, so his next best option was to run, to travel, to peregrinate and amble through bramble and bush like a runaway boy scout. It started off with one bus ticket. Then another. Romantic notions of monasticism, ascetic fare thee wells, of mountain Zen monks, of lonely hermits hiding out uninterrupted for decades for eons repeating mantras in caves carving rockface poems- these images filled October's despondent mind. He would leave the world on the false premises that it was of no further use to him. Yes. That made sense. Head to the woods, to be one of Bosch's triptych subjects? Head to the coast, to be a subsistence fisherman? Head nowhere, to be a nameless starbody nobody? It was a start. The start of a lie, the start of his running- his turning away from the pain. He gained some traction. He crossed Westward, the dreams of his forefathers alive and at work coursing affectatious through his own veins... go West... live simple... be free... renounce... repent... hide.

So off the man went- catapulted from off the great Eastern seaboard, the port cities and their metropolitan savvy imported

from European opera houses and spiced by Barbary Coasts, out of the New England autumn out of the Turnpike junctions out of the Pittsburgh foothills and sagging Appalachia, past his midwestern prairie flowers, past the soy and corn, the alloy-wind winters and fearsome Mississippi flood plains- West. Initially the prospect brought a great relief to October, and it could be said a few dewdrops of purpose speckled his ravaged heart while he spurred forward in a brave and strange direction. But three weeks on the road had left him confronted by the same dilemma: he could not escape the emptiness. Indelible. Persistent. It didn't matter where he went or what he did. Exhausted. Defeated. Everywhere he went, there he was, there his pain remained. Resigned. Indifferent.

And now, confronted by another choice- he made his best effort to analyze the beckoning stranger but soon lost the strength or patience to inspect for long. A simple rationalization nudged him- what was there to lose? October rubbed his eye-sockets with closed fists. He took a moment to lift his body up, to unwind his spine, having been slouching for unknown hours with his feet extended, bowed like a drunk- a week since his last shower, days since a full meal. Languishing, restive but static- imprisoned but free. And now this stranger, here before him. 'What does he want with me? And why do I feel compelled to find out?'

A hand tapping on a hollow, steel door.

Bag over shoulder, feet on the ground, walking methodical towards the battered truck.

October paused, his motion halted- where the sidewalk ended, where the earth began, he asked plainly, "Where are you headed?"

The stranger, coolly, "Got a job. Need y'r help." Now what our driver wanted to say was 'I'm going exactly where you need to go' but such a response would have put October off. Too cryptic, too new-age, too aggressive- our driver was a man of tact, a descendent of graceful people who suffered with grace who anguished and toiled long and hard and tough at the hands of a conqueror, a conquered, decent, beautiful people built from the silt and clay washed out of mighty riverbeds built to abhor what evil lurks in vanity, in greed, in domination and dominion. A steward, our driver, a patient keeper of the past- he who thought it better to make a man useful by putting him to use, putting him up with a job. Give a man work-like Franklin Delano with alphabet soup, feed him and let him sweat

who cares what the nature of his work is so long as his feet are moving and a soreness builds in his shoulders.

October offered no indication of a reaction. He hung on the words of our driver... y'r... like how old timey loggerman locals pronounced 'Oregon' like the second 'o' poses an inconvenience... Ore-g'n... y'r help... October shook his head, "Doubt I'd be of much help."

So our driver started the car, about to kick the clutch forward into gear, but before fate could pull them apart October re-targeted his line and resumed striding to the opposite side, the passenger side. Without another thought he deposited his backpack in the bed, underneath the tarpaulin, then he clicked a door handle and took position on a seat of torn fabric and dust.

Our driver- Latcholassie Syliboy- enchanted syllabic twists of sounds like an incredible lost boy story of adventure, a Peter Pan sidekick covered in Autumnal reds and yellows and garlands of holly and juniper laurels, a magic Arthurian sword ready to fight off the pirates and marauders and villains, poised to win the maiden- a lost boy grown to a man of trapezoids and neck and twin black-braids down each shoulder, covered in leather hide tanned and done proper according to custom in his workshop- this was our driver.

October shut the door. The transmission shifted from **PARK** to **1st** to **2nd** and off the pair of them went headed down mineral rich highways of pine and granite and brook gurgling. Little John and Robin Hood, walking through the forest... *oodeelaalee, oodeelaadee golly what a day*. Already it's making sense- think- the deeper a man goes into the woods, the closer he comes to the elements, the real material of the world, the chlorophylls and agate quartzes and cool spring tidepools, the closer he attunes to those elements which are truly *real*- in fact, the more real a man becomes. Attenuating modernity- a pixilated world filled with vaporous outlines, empty plastic bags, a world of simulation and falsehoods, shadows and light. Latcholassie had learned to understand this truth. He had learned to understand many truths of the Earth, forgotten truths not to be found printed in newspapers or broadcasted in an evening television program.

This was our driver- a lost boy keeper of precious treasures.

Ah, our driver- he who could identify spirits thanks to hand-me-down lessons passed on by the calloused fingertips of his

grandmother, Wendy 'Big Owl Perched' Syliboy. Latcholassie's grandmother was like a bowl of candy that could not be emptied- he reached into her and she offered tantalizing richness lesson after lesson. She knew how to teach, when to teach. Her secret was to allow her students' own particular and peculiar lives to inform universal lessons, the material. Then 'Big Owl Perched' would merely have to reconvey the message, expand on a few details, and reinforce the basics. Messages and lessons, subtle and perfectly unobtrusive, nothing to it- lessons about hard work, trust, faith then more advanced lessons about the hauteur of white men (men who wear hats), the hypocrisy of white women (women of the Big Knives), their ruthless contradictions and broken promises and lusty avarice and unquenchable thirst for more. Latcholassie learned how to concentrate on a task, whom to call friend, how to love... he also learned to stand at a distance from white folk, to respect them like you would respect an animal blind with desires like a dog with rabies like a cornered wolverine like a starved bear in Springtime.

But one of the most important lessons she taught her grandson was how to point out a ghost- how they moved, where they hid, why they appeared. October had an ephemeral quality Latcholassie hadn't seen in many years. Tenuous, floating, loosened like he might be carried away by a heavy gust o' wind. Latcholassie had been studying October for several minutes before calling the specter over to his truck.

And before calling October over, always mindful of the lunar cycle, Latcholassie couldn't help but curl his lip tickled by the fact that the evening would bring a new moon. The first new moon of spring. Across the lands ancient spirits would emerge to dance, they would appear and share stories under the cover of darkness. See, most spirits avoid moonlight with particular discretion. The moon's beams wreak unpredictable havoc on a traveling spirit; they can alter an entire transmigration, a soul's astral journey. But under the cover of starlight liminal entities can enjoy a few moments of freedom until sun-up haiku goodbye.

*dawn rekindles the earth,
alone, the coyote sleeps quiet
dreaming paradise*

New moons meant an abundance of subtle energies, and those energies were only available for an evening. And with the moon of water being ushered in- the moon of new life, of making ready the sowing and planting- Latcholassie would light a fire and smoke tobacco and burn herbs and stare into the flames. He would make the offerings on behalf his own deceased father, his grandfather, his grandmother, his brother and his mother- gone before him, travelling, gone to dance with the ancestors under the blessing of the Creator.

Latcholassie, a man of no woman, no child, no reason for carrying on but nevertheless refusing to snuff himself out. Onward, a stubborn priest defiant until the last day when the temple is ransacked and the statues are defiled and one sword remains to defend the sacred texts, the anointed blade of our hero which he draws from its sheath accompanied by a howl a yawp an act of total commitment to his duties, an act of *pietas*- Latcholassie out for a drive along concrete riverways out for diesel fuel for dog food and other sundry items like a tube of toothpaste and four Double-AA batteries. Our driver, here he is, found his ghost. Wandering. Curious.

'Ghosts never remember their own names, poor creatures'- her voice, clear as the tractor trailers rumbling next to him. Ghosts are forgotten, aimless with arms outstretched who knows what they're looking for- ravenous, starved but never satisfied. So in the car, quite naturally, Latcholassie didn't bother asking October for any identification. There was no need for mindless pleasantries like 'What's y'r name buddy?' or 'Where you from?' He didn't bother looking for any explanations, a back story. Our driver knew better. Perfect hospitality was a trademark of his people- perfection in the sense of a host knowing precisely what his guest requires. And when in doubt, feed them. Feed a stranger, feed your family feed your enemy feed them and bless them like Christ himself like "When I was hungry, you gave me something to eat"- perfect charity done only for charity's sake, not for good karma not for accrual not for scorecards not for credit but bestowed in a diamond heartfelt fashion not hung up on expectations or return of investment not waiting for repayment not calculating interest- an ancient tradition like Buddhism launched on the other side of the world at the same time without all the bodhi tree fanfare done in the

privacy of clans and tribes and families, done to do right because what else would there be to do?

After ten minutes of soundless driving between the driver and the passenger, winding twisted around back roads to nowhere, a conversation was born ironic but pure from Latcholassie's mouth- "Hungry?"

October hadn't taken his haunted stare from off the windshield, hypnotized by the road passing from the horizon underfoot-changing, unstable, reflecting- the yellow lines running under the course of his own life, the exits, the rest stops, the long stretches... old strung-out dope-sick Utica, NY and her lonely back-alleys and besot public parks, her shattered bottles... collegiate New England with her white churches center of the square middle of the commons Established 1648 built to last backdropped by curved apple orchard hillsides and crescendo'd above stone walls built no higher than your waist partitioning off quaint colonial plots of farmland home to bands of lulling oaks... an abbreviated silicon valley foray, the California smoggy express lanes magazine clippings blowing about blustered words and pictures and paper and press... entrepreneurial Colorado mountain sweeps where the ground contends with the sky and nearly conquers it, jagged and snow covered... and now these pine nursery Northwestern runs building higher and higher trunks thick cut straight up like fortresses menacing and ubiquitous, playing the role of guardian guarding the mysteries of the woods the unknown beyond... train whistles in the Midwest, foghorns along the Eastern seaboard, snowflakes falling in the North... October turned, finally, to Latcholassie and grunted, "You're not taking me out in the backwoods to kill me or something?"

Latcholassie turned, stern, eye to eye with October. A harsh look. A frightening look. Then he brought his eyes back to the road. Holding his breath, his composure- then a laugh. A violent laugh. Punctuated through the chuckles, "No sir. No killing today." He turned to October, a shift back to solemnity, "I only do my murdering on Wednesdays." Then he pivoted, continued on laughing-thoroughly pleased with himself.

October absorbed the face of his new friend: a middle-age'd face, worn, rough but not wrinkled, not old, almost young, almost like an application of ointment, a glow, a Native face, but not a red

face or a brown face, not the face of an Indian on television or in a movie, but at the same time an ancient face, a thousand-years-before face on the Incan highways whistling birdsongs and trading maize, an august face, an intriguing face highlighted in its contradictions. Torn by a scar under his chin that curved up slightly, breaching across a square, powerful jaw, up like a tributary onto his right cheek thin and delicate. But Latcholassie didn't wear the face of a warrior, he didn't look outwards with the eyes of one who had taken great bounties, who had taken life-his eyes, they navigated over the world with kindness, hazel eyes so light you could discern the oranges and yellows still mixing and swirling in a hand-carved wooden bowl, the paint not quite ready for the hides.

October found himself fixated and preoccupied by the scar. "Well what kind of job is it you need help with?"

Latcholassie had calmed down. "My grandmother used to say people are like avocados. When they're nice and green, healthy, they're no good for eating. No sir. But when an avocado turns black, mushy-what my grandmother meant was that when you think y'r ruined, really, y'r most ripe."

"How's that got to do with a job? Or being hungry?"

Latcholassie breathed out through his nose, deliberate. A habit of his, like a taunted bullring torro ready to charge. "She used to say my grandfather had been ripe for most his life. She was funny like that." The rascal- he was baiting October, testing him, waiting to see how patient this ghost was.

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"What am I talking about, or what was she talking about?"

"Either."

Another deep breath, a grunt, "When y'r ready, you'll know."

October hadn't really spoken to another person for weeks. He was growing frustrated. "What are you, Yoda or something? I asked you what kind of job you need help with. It's not polite to ignore somebody's question, especially somebody who gets in your car to help you with something."

Latcholassie replied- "It's you that don't listen well. I asked if you were hungry. You don't answer. Instead, you respond with a question of y'r own."

"Is that what all the avocados were about? Are you offering to take me out to lunch?"

The car turned left, abrupt, off a mainline state route towards a backwoods corridor. Latcholassie forced another bellow of air from out his nostrils. He adjusted a straw cap, pulling the brim low to block out the sun in front of them, "You really ought to ask y'rself why did you accept a ride from a stranger? Or why were you sitting at a bus stop with no ticket or a plan of where to go? Yes sir. And even my question, 'Are you hungry?' even that's a cover for another question I really have, which is why do you act like a midnight ghost when it's the middle of the day and y'r a man with a body here on this Earth?"

Eyes squinted, October let out, "To hell with this. Pull over. Let me out of here."

Latcholassie grinned, jerked his heels into the brakes, and swerved onto the opposite shoulder of the road in an efficient flip of the steering wheel. Both his front and rear driver side tires toe'd the inside of the white line, snug- a deft maneuver. Parked on the shoulder. Gravel flung up, dusted, a clear blue sky- October let out "Jesus! What are you, nuts?"

Shrugging, amused- "Trying to do you a favor. I figure y'r better off pointed this way, headed back to Route 20, then I-5. Trying my best to help, yes sir."

October shook his head, unamused, bemused, bemoaning his position, his placement on the map, so far Northwest and out of sight almost into Canada almost across the border, chasing the Aurora the Arctic Circle the end of the world the end of latitude of direction or maybe the beginning of it... Bellinghams and Everrets and Gilberts and Skykomishes and Verlots and Tonaskets... desolation in Skagit county, desolation in America, desolation everywhere blossom'd across a scorched earth so anywhere is as good a place to be since no place is worth a goddamn and burns, burns. October wanted nothing more than to melt like a heretic- he screamed inside. He sighed, opening the door, the clanky handle making its signature clank- swinging- groaning- pain- desperation.

October labored himself out of the car, one hand still on the handle, standing, facing Latcholassie.

Another adjustment of our driver's straw cap before, "Good luck out there. It's too bad about the job. Could've put you up for a night or two, feed you, some money. I got a dog, she just had a litter. Could offer you a pup. Trying to get rid of them, else I'll have to drown 'em. Yes sir." Adjusting his head, his braids dancing on either side of his chest, his indigo earrings in perfect contrast against his black hair, "That's the way it works, coming and going."

"Do I look like I need a dog?" October humphed the door shut and moved to the rear of the vehicle, yanking his rucksack over the gate of the truck bed. He tapped on the bumper, a signal- he was ready- ready to be left behind, ready to be left alone. Alone- the impossibility of it- across the country to the opposite coast, even with the mileage and the running between Tika and him, he could not slough off her memory, the memory of Namdev, his son's lifeless body, the tears, the anger, the regret. A hostile sky hanging, forever overhead- no matter that there wasn't a cloud in sight.

October paid no mind to the old growth forests.

But Latcholassie did not pull away. He cleared a piece of food out between his front teeth with his tongue, tugged his braids behind his shoulders, and extended his neck across the cab to the passenger side window, chin over his elbow, "You look like you could use a friend. A dog makes a good friend. Man's best friend. So yes, to answer y'r question. You look like you could use a dog, because you look like you could use a friend. And I have a whole litter." Polite. Disarming October- heavy bag on heavy shoulder on clomp clomp boots trudging for so long so tired almost untied the worn laces, thorns and boulders and beat it on down the line beat it on down- beaten down.

October walked back to the flank of the truck. "Who the hell are you?" he mused out loud.

"Latcholassie Syliboy. Son of Alexander 'Hoofprint Left Behind,' himself the son of Allen 'Little Bear.' Both dead. Learned all my good lessons from my grandmother, Wendy 'Big Owl Perched.' My family line hails from Chief Comcomly, and the great chiefs before

him. My people have lived in these forests, fished these rivers, prayed to these skies for generations. My grandmother was a medicine woman who taught me the old ways. But I am not only an Indian, I am not only a shaman, I am not only a son, I am not only a brother- I am large, I contain multitudes."

"Multitudes?"

"That's Whitman. You know Whitman?"

October, mouth open, perplexed. "Whitman?"

"Whitman was the most beautiful poet of y'r people. Yes sir. He knew a piece of the truth. He knew he was really the Great Spirit in disguise. We are all the Great Spirit. You too."

October did not move, his eyes clouded by the brake lights. A laugh, then a supercilious smile. Ready for loneliness, death, erosion- he forced our driver to continue to lean sideways, then he barked sarcastically, "Oh really? I wish someone would have told me sooner." October's mocking remark was not typical for his nature, but nothing was typical at this point in the man's life. Everything had been upended. He had been changed. And after his remark, an unease had crept into him, a chill- realizing how different he sounded, how remote and vengeful he had been acting. Once a lover and a friend, now a grumbly curmudgeon.

In a lilting, sing-songy response, "Better late than never."

"What are you trying to get at?"

Latcholassie adjusted his hat, singing back, in rhythm, unphased by the rudeness of his new companion- our esteemed driver, "I see you on the road, and based on what I see, I decided to help you. Haven't planned any further than that."

"You don't even know my name."

"No need to ask y'r name, you wouldn't know it y'rself. No sir. Hungry ghosts forget everything, including their names."

October peered inside, facing Latcholassie. He wanted an explanation. "Hungry ghosts?"

"Yes sir, hungry ghosts. They wander, searching. They're so hungry they forget what they're looking for."

"And you peg me as a hungry ghost?"

"You aren't from ar'nd here, are you?"

October scratched at an unshaved cheek, "No, I'm not."

"And you don't know exactly where y'r headed, do you?"

"Well, I haven't decided on where... no, I don't."

Latcholassie slapped the side panel of his door, delighted. He gazed past October's shoulder and into the woodlands. "And I bet y'r looking for something, something to help redefine y'rself. But you can't quite put your finger on it, can you?" At that Latcholassie held up his index finger and pushed it into the palm of his opposite hand- a gesture- crystalizing his argument- an argument made not for the sake of his own winning, but for the sake of his new companion, to understand, to see.

"Well, I remember my name at least."

"Good. What is it?"

"October."

"October. A fine name. Now you planning on getting back in the car, October? My house is still 10 miles off, and I need to be attending to those puppy dogs I told you about."

Like a small child convinced to wait until Christmas morning to open his presents, vexed, but slowly approving- slow and steady- October scratched a bit more then retraced his steps. His backpack in the truck bed. The rusty door handle, the passenger seat- changing directions, back down the road.

And so they were off again.

Feeling less anxious, less defiant, disarmed... about a mile or so later, October quipped, "You go hunting for ghosts often?"

Waiting, allowing the right words to move into himself... "Once you get used to the darkness, you realize all the ghosts are really old friends in disguise. Yes sir."

--

You fell in love with her dark eyes- a darkness that shined, it always suited you- your spirit awoke in the night, it wasn't

difficult to remain awake- but it was never easy to awaken. Her eyes- they nearly stung you, that deep shimmering brown that hinted at a blackish purple- primal- sweetened in contrast to those obsidian pupils which beckoned you forward- those warm, cavernous eyes. Windows to mystery, to refuge- greeting you from above a sink full of dirty dishes, a towel over her shoulder, her fellaheen beauty scrubbing away grease and char from a cast-iron skillet- welcoming you to join her from across a dinner party- screaming up to you, lying on a mattress, wide open then shut tight- beckoning you in the morning, asking for forgiveness. Eyes that sounded like an owl's echoing 'hoot' jettisoned out from a pine-needle forest, eyes that felt like a winter solstice under red flannel blankets another log into the fireplace, eyes that tasted like salty ocean air reflecting foggy its presence revealed only by boardwalk streetlamps. You saw the excitement in her eyes when she announced, "We're pregnant!" clutching onto a plastic test kit, two blue lines. Positive. You saw the joy in her eyes when the ultrasound technician revealed "It's a boy," hand in hand, a cool jelly spread out across her stomach. You felt safe in her joy, you felt electrified by her eyes. You wanted those eyes to last forever reflecting back onto you, alive, in love.

--

"About oh, six or seven years ago, I had made my way out to Glacier National Park, Montana. A buddy of mine, Lyle Zickafoose, he used to tell me about this trail up there in Glacier called 'Road to the Sun.' Every time I tell him about a trail I'd hit, he'd egg me on, say 'Buddy you ain't seen nothin' compared to the 'Road' out in Montana.' The Road! So I says to Lyle, finally, 'Well take me out to y'r Road and let's see it then.' And Lyle- Lyle was too crazy even for the Marines, honest Injun. He was honorably discharged, a wild one that Lyle- it's been a while since I've seen him now, but- see, Lyle knew this boy back from basic trainin' down in Ft. Briggs, Texas. He couldn't remember how, but he had helped this kid out, maybe lent him a couple bucks for a candy bar, who knows- but this kid felt indebted to Lyle, and told him that his pops had built a place up in Glacier National where he grows some real strong indica, off grid or something, and the kid promises Lyle 'You're welcome to come anytime, anytime.' So Lyle, after basic, during furlough or somethin', he heads out there with the kid and he swears by it, comes back and says 'There ain't

nothin' like it in the continental USA.' Best trails he ever hit. Best homegrown smoke he ever tasted. On and on. And the pops says to Lyle, 'Come back, anytime.' So after enough of listenin' to Lyle, good old Lyle with those madman bushy eyebrows- now he hadn't kept in touch with the kid or the kid's pops, and he didn't think to write ahead to say we was headed out that way, but he figured an offer was an offer and that we could stay out there again. So Lyle and I head out, I says 'Fine, take me there', and after a couple days in the bed of a truck, a couple trucks, and we finally get to where Lyle had marked on his Rand McNally Atlas, out in the middle of this park in Montana. I figured maybe the government or some authorities had gotten wind of this place- Lyle kept saying it was a hidden place, beautiful, probably illegal- but wait. So here's the other part of this story. I had been hauling a bike with me. Now I had recently, at the time, gotten a mountain bike, intending to fix it up and put it to work on the 'Road to the Sun.' I hadn't had a good mountain bike in a long time, and I was real excited about getting some work in. Now before I leave with Lyle and my bike, I had left it in the hands of Jon Kooter. I'll never forget his name neither. Jon Kooter was a drifter type, was only in town for a season or so, worn out and woebegone hustlin' here and there for a buck or two, you know the type? I remember though, even underneath the leather of his cheeks, you could tell he once had this Hollywood look to him- blonde hair, blue eyes, probably a hit with the dames in his day- he had a quarterback feel to him underneath all the grime. But he had turned into an old man, weathered by life, like young men will do. And old man Jon Kooter was regalin' me about an apprenticeship at a bike shop for a number of years he held as a kid, wanted to open up his own shop, make enough money and settle down- that was his plan all along, but never got around to it. And it so happened that I had bought this used mountain bike, with the intention of using it on my trip with Lyle, and needed to get it in shape- so I says to Kooter, 'Well fix this up for me and I'll pay you to help get that shop started.' And Kooter took my offer up. You know, I would rather give the money to a guy like that, rather than a sportin' goods chain or something the like. I didn't know much about bicycles myself, and I needed some help. Figured Providence was at work, introducin' me to old Kooter. Anyways, Kooter worked and worked, and the day was coming I was to take off with Lyle, so I keep hasslin' him 'Hey Jon, where's the bike' and he keeps pleadin' with me 'One more

day, one more day' until finally I'm leavin' and at the last-minute Jon brings me the bike and says 'She's all set. It'll run like a dream.' I'll never forget that, 'run like a dream.' So I don't test the bike out. Didn't even get on the seat. No time. Had to set off for Glacier National. So I haul it a couple thousand miles, luggin' it around with me it's a heavy bike mind you, not a racer, a mountain bike- and finally we get to Lyle's friend's father's place, and lo and behold it's still there. The man's a bit greyer, but he's still growing his herb, still enjoyin' his solitude. His son, the father said he hadn't seen his boy in fifteen years, probably dead in the Iraqi War considerin' the boy went into Special Forces or something of the like, but the father he didn't know. Never got word. Never got a letter. Lyle was bent up about that, said he'd contact some of his old Marine buddies and see if he could dig up any information. That did the father well, to hear that. So anyways, we're at the father's place- the old man goes by 'Klondike Dean'- so we're unpackin' our gear, gonna get ready for the trail and days ahead, and I finally take my bike for a test run. I don't make it a hundred yards until it all goes wrong. Gears fallin' out. Jammin' up. Can't sync up with the bike, pedalin' and pedalin' goin' nowhere, the chain undone. It's a disaster. And Klondike Dean, he takes notice of me out there on the dirt road, strugglin', and he comes down and asks if I need a hand. I give the bike over to him, say I don't know much about bikes myself, not the mechanic type. Dean gives it a look, shakes his head. He says to me 'This is one of the worst jobs I've ever seen on a rig. I haven't seen anything as bad as this since back in Dayton, Ohio, and that was the handiwork of a real sonovabitch named Jon Kooter.' I couldn't believe what I heard. I said 'Who?' And old Dean he proceeds to lay down this story about Jon Kooter who liked to make it with chicks who were married or had boyfriends, who got by on his looks and pretended to know about bicycles and cars but didn't know a goddamn about any of that, finally got found out and run out of town after being caught in bed with a politician's wife or alderman's or something the like, and Dean hadn't seen or heard of Jon Kooter for thirty years, the old saboteur, borne from the land of the Wright Brothers of all places. And of course I'm blown away listening to Klondike Dean tell me all this. I can't believe it. But I don't let on. I wait for him to finish. And finally I says to Dean I says that it was in fact the work of none other than Jon Kooter, notorious bike

wrecker, who made it all the way out past Seattle with his evil ways and tricks and fooled me into payin' him to set up my rig. He thought I was putting him on. Neither of us could believe it. Most folks would say 'Ain't that something, hell of a coincidence' but Klondike Dean, after I describe Kooter to him and convince him I ain't pullin' his leg, he settles his hand on my shoulder and says in a solemn voice 'Thank you for being here with this bike. Let's me know I'm set up in the right place. I was worried about my boy, that I'd never see him again. I been close to leaving, taking off-honest, about taking my own life. But this- of all people, Jon Kooter. I'm still doing God's work here.' Dean says it real serious. Solemn almost. Felt it in his voice, I did. And of course old Klondike had his own mountain bike which he leant me, far better than the one I'd hauled out to Montana, and I rode the trail the Road to the Sun and Lyle and I enjoyed the hell out of it. Lyle was right, of course, and liked to remind me of how right he had been- the most beautiful stretch of land I ever saw with my own eyes. Up there in Montana, with Jon Kooter's busted bike sittin' in Dean's lawn. Right where I was supposed to be."

--

Parked stationary in the apartment complex lot- back home from work- a conversation, to decompress, before rejoining Tika and Namdev. "Why didn't you tell me Nin?"

Nin set a casserole dish in her oven at home, changed the phone in her hands, and smiled coy far from her brother's eyes, "What would it have mattered? You guys still would have done it. Everybody does it. Think of it as the biggest secret in the business. Bigger than Santa. Bigger than the Easter Bunny."

"Why though? Why doesn't anybody talk about it?"

"I don't know. Because it's not easy to swallow. Listen, it's easier to pretend that babies are great, that they are cute and cuddly and they sleep whenever they need to and eat whenever they need to and it's all fine and dandy. It's probably some 1950's residual nonsense. It's hard to lay it out for somebody who hasn't experienced it. Nobody would believe it, anyways. You would say, 'Well, why did you have another kid then?'"

"Why did you have another kid?"

Nin looked over at her kitchen table. Her son Ryan was scrupulous, pouring over a math book. "Because you forget what it was like! Even as a parent. You develop this weird amnesia, and you forget how difficult it was. You only remember the good times. It'll happen to you too, just wait. I'll be reminding you about this conversation in a couple of years, when Tika is pregnant again."

October scratched at his neck. Sleep deprived, wearing the same pair of jeans for days on end, fatigued by the constant vigilance required to properly watch after a newborn, he admitted to his sister, "This is literally the hardest thing I've ever experienced. There's no way I'm forgetting this."

"Listen, it's normal. It should be the hardest thing you've ever experienced. Nothing worthwhile is easy."

October chuckled, "This is beyond anything- this is a form of torture! And I hate who I'm becoming. I get so angry, Nin. I get so short tempered, impatient. Tika and I are fighting. We're yelling at each other at four in the morning. It's nuts. Everything I thought about having a baby, being a new parent- I had no idea. All those baby books, they're nonsense. All they need to tell you is: you're screwed!"

They laughed together on the phone. "Listen, I don't know what you want me to tell you, bud. You are f'd." Nin made sure to whisper so her son wouldn't be able to hear her. "But listen, it'll get better. Time improves everything. Yes, your old life is gone. The old 'you' is gone. And that's what you signed up for! Don't forget that. There's no sense in feeling sorry for yourself- you're a big boy. You put yourself here."

"I know, I know."

A pause, then, "But you put yourself here for a reason. You made the right choice. Trust me. Because there is this transformation that is going to happen, and you're going to come out so much better for it. Being a parent is- it's tremendous."

October wanted to believe his sister, but he couldn't see her position. "I hope so, because this version I'm currently stuck on is not sustainable. I kind of hate who I am, Nin. I hate how our relationship is suffering."

From a thousand miles away, "It's a test, October. But you guys are good for each other. You will stick by her side, and she'll always be there for you. You'll make it."

October usually avoided references to Nin's ex-husband, but his filter was temporarily turned off. "Do you think that having kids broke up things with you and..."

Nin was adamant in her response. "Absolutely not. Listen, things ended between me and that idiot because he was a cheating, lying, selfish (whispering) bastard. You're none of those things. The fact you are talking to me, trying to understand how to be better, how you want to be better- that is evidence enough you aren't anything like him. And in terms of the kids, my kids are the best thing that ever happened to me. And little Dev will be the best thing that ever happened to you. Trust me."

October decided to take another lap around the block. Spring was breaking the icy grip of winter- the snow had melted, the days were longer. October needed the air. He needed a break. "It's just so ridiculously hard right now. I had no idea. No clue. First it was Tika recovering. All the physical issues she's had to go through. Then it was Dev's jaundice. Then the pukiness. And honestly, Teek's still got her anxiety. It doesn't stop. It's relentless. I give you so much more credit than... I just didn't know, you know?"

In perfect clinical assuredness Nin asserted, "Listen, don't worry about it. We all have our path. And Dev will get bigger. He'll sleep better. He'll get less fussy. And Tika will get better too. Nothing lasts forever, bud. It'll get easier. It will. Wasn't his last check-up good?"

"Yeah, I mean these random jaundice flare-ups are still a concern, but he seems to be doing better. He's gaining weight. Almost two months... it seems like two years. I just- I had no concept of what all this would require..."

Nin remained positive. "How could you? This is life bud. It's not easy. But it will get better. Even if you can't see it, or say it for yourself, I'm going to keep telling you. It will get better."

"If you insist."

"I do. I'll stand by it. And listen- try not to focus on all the work. Focus on the joy. Don't you just look at him sometimes and go 'wow'? I know you do."

"Yeah, he's amazing..."

"Right?"

October's mind pivoted- the warmth, the beauty, the joy of Namdev's pudgy wrinkled knees and wrists, the tiny hairs on his back and neck, his delicate eyelashes- "It is incredible. I never- it's like a new kind of happiness."

"Exactly. It's without comparison- it's better than your best day could ever be times about a million. And that warmth, that joy- it'll get you through anything. Trust me. Listen, when do you want me to come visit you guys? I can bring Ryan and Rosie. We can get a hotel for a weekend. Tell me when."

"Let me talk to Tika. Soon, I guess... but it's not going to be fun!"

"Don't tell me I can't have some fun with my precious little baby boy nephew! We'll have plenty of fun. And the kids want to meet their new cousin. It'll be great. It'll break things up for you. Listen, ask Tika and get back to me. I'll get the arrangements sorted out. Alright?"

"Alright, I will."

"Keep your chin up October."

October looked up to the horizon, captivated by a sunset pastiche of oranges and vibrant reds... summertime purples still absent from the Western sky... but a fine sight... a good sight... he stopped moving, stopped thinking... he couldn't remember taking time to watch the sky in a while... there it was, still... everywhere... "I will."

Their phone call ended, the stereo-system and its music resumed:

*I used to think
Start again begin again
Let's go down the waterfall
Think about the good times and never go back
Never go back*

--

"What are you most excited about?"

Tika was painting her toenails, silvery, *Champaign for Breakfast* labeled on the bottle. Adroit with her application of polish as she leaned over- she was surprised by October's inquiry. Sunday afternoon, on the couch, the television on silent, a book folded over in her husband's lap- watching her.

"Well," she capped the brush, admiring her precision, "saying what is most exciting is difficult. I know- I am excited to help him."

Surprised, somewhat- not that Tika wasn't one for an unexpected response, but- "How do you mean?"

Formulating her explanation on the fly, October watched her eyes focus, "Help him understand his unfinished karma, the part of him coming from his previous lives, the part of him independent of our genetics, our influences. I am excited to help him understand who he used to be, to resolve those parts of his past, and to help him find where he should be going. To help. To fulfill my duty."

October hadn't considered karma. He knew the word as a concept, but was unfamiliar with the force of karma, the waves of habit and energy, the linkages across time and space, cause and effect conversing with each other interchangeably across lifetimes, across the valley of death. He hadn't considered where his son's soul had been, what sort of a past life his son had lived, what sort of person he had looked like, how those past lives those past desires those unfinished deeds would shape his future, how it all would impact Tika and October as his parents. How their own karma tied into their son's- "Yeah, wow. I haven't thought about that. That's kind of scary, isn't it? I mean, it could be- he could have been so many things."

Tika reflected, staring at a framed portrait hung in their living room, a watercolor sunset- or sunrise. "Scary, yes. Beautiful, yes. All these things- but you must remember, I believe that when he was conceived, when we created him, together, he chose us. He chose to come into me, to come into our lives. It is all meant to be. I have faith. I feel honored to be chosen. If he has a difficult karma to sort out, we can help him. He chose us. We have a great deal of responsibility, but I believe we are the right parents for him. I believe this."

October's eyes followed his wife's gaze to the framed print. "I have to think, in a way, we chose him, too. Our karma, right? He'll be a good fit for us, hopefully."

Tika turned to her husband. "Of course. Everything is right as it should be."

The page open in front of him, but no longer reading the words, thinking to himself- then out loud, unpretentious, natural. "And whoever he is, we will love him."

Tika smiled, assured, "Of course we will. I love him so much, already! Our little coconut."

October mused, "First a lentil bean, then a peanut, now a coconut... maybe his karma will be to open a farm stand!"

The parents to be both warmed with delight, with wonder. Tika uncapped the bottle of polish, taking notice of an uneven patch on her big toe that required attention. "We brought him from the other side, from another world, to come join us. Our love was his portal to return to this plane of reality."

October closed his book and slapped the cover against his thigh, "Now that's something!"

--

"How late did you stay up?"

"Until six. He settled down around two, three. I kept reading though, I couldn't stop. I just read to him, watching him. I wanted to get to where Odysseus outsmarts the Cyclops, in the story... I..." October yawned.

Tired herself, but aware and engaged with her husband, "Tell it to me, this tale of Odysseus."

October grinned, surprised by her request, and quickly he began: "Well, Odysseus, he is a Greek hero, and the story is about his journey back home to Ithaca after fighting in the Trojan War. And the Trojan War, it's the greatest war in all history."

Tika, joking, "Greater than the Mahabharata?"

"Twice as big. Easily. But that's another story. The story of Odysseus, on his way home, starts with him and his men sailing

back on their ships, and on the way, they stop at this remote island. And they decide to go out exploring. They find a bunch of food, goats, wine, then they end up in a cave where they find even more supplies. But what happens is this monster, this one-eyed cyclops, Polyphemus, he comes back from tending to his flock of rams. He's a giant, and he rolls a massive boulder in front of the door, and Odysseus and his men are trapped. Once the cyclops notices they are in his home, he ends up eating a few of Odysseus' men. Tears their heads off, their limbs- it's bad."

"That sounds horrible."

"Well, it is- but in a way, they had it coming. They broke the code- the ancient code of hospitality. They weren't good guests. So they got their karma, right?"

Tika reconsidered, "I suppose so, when you put it this way."

October continued, "Right. So back to the story- Odysseus wants to kill the monster in revenge, but he knows the stone blocking the door is too massive for his men to move, so he can't. They wait through the night. The next day, the cyclops leaves, locks them in, and finally he comes back after tending to his flocks. But while the cyclops was gone, Odysseus hatches this plan. He figures he can get the monster drunk on wine, then make his move with a sharpened spear. Classic strategy, right? So Polyphemus returns, eats a few more men, then drinks the wine that Odysseus offers. While the monster is drunk, he asks Odysseus what his name is. And Odysseus says his name is 'Nobody.' It's all part of the plan, to get out. Because when the monster passes out, Odysseus stabs him in the eye and blinds him. Polyphemus is screaming, and when his cyclops buddies come by, they ask, 'Who is in there with you?' and Polyphemus answers 'Nobody is in here.' The monster's friends think everything is alright, and they leave. The cyclops wants to get out of the cave, but he can't see Odysseus, so when he rolls away the boulder, he stands guard above the exit so only his rams and sheep can leave. Polyphemus rubs them to check their fur as they pass between his feet, out to the pastures. But Odysseus and his men put the animals on their backs and run between his legs under cover. Odysseus was clever, a trickster. And he outsmarts the monster."

Tika had been listening with rapt attention. "That cave sounds horrible."

"It was. But the thing is- it was Odysseus' fault to begin with, you know? Because he trespassed in the monster's home and stole all his food and drank his wine."

Tika put her arms around her husband. She whispered to him, "This is a good story. You need to rest, though. You need sleep. We both do. Come lie with me."

"It's alright, it's already morning. I just- I, I hope I can finish the story."

Tika yawned, "You will. There will be more time. There will be more stories to tell."

"How do we know that, Tika? How can we..." October began to tense up and pulled his face away from his wife's shoulder. She rubbed his back. Her hand reached behind his neck, and she squeezed. He moved away. He did not want to be touched, or comforted, or consoled- a pain stirred inside of him, bit at his nerve endings and engorged his joints, it itched and burned and ached simultaneously- standing next to her, but so distant.

October picked his head up, facing his wife, "I read an article, online, about a little girl, with the same disease as Dev, and she's three years old now... I know you told me not to go down the rabbit-hole on the internet, but... this girl, she used to say 'Mama' and 'Dada,' but the disease, the progression... she can't speak anymore. She can't communicate with her parents. There was a picture of her, slouching in a little stroller... this blank look on her face... I can't deal with it, Tika. I hate myself for thinking about this, but I hope he goes peacefully, before any of that kind of stuff... I just couldn't deal with..."

Tika rubbed her temples, sighed, contemplating- centering herself, settling her hands at her hips. She rested deeply with her words- the phrasing- then she moved her hands back up to her face, clasped in supplication, covering her mouth- "You must never stop believing. You must tune your mind to positive energy. Namdev is here, right now. He is sleeping, in the crib, in our bedroom. He is not gone. Do not wish anything except health for your son, do you understand me? You need to control your mind, and your mental forces. You must pray. You must be positive. You cannot bury him before he dies. No. I will not stand for this from my husband, from his father. Be firm with your mind, strengthen it."

October plead, useless, "There's no medicine for him... we saw that video on the cyclodextrin. It doesn't stop anything. There's nothing we can do. He's going to die, Tika. I'm living in reality."

Tika reacted, she sought to cut the head from the snake. "Reality? What you see, what you read on the internet, you think this is reality? You mistake your conceptions of reality for what is real. Our reality is Namdev, in this room, right now. This is reality. The future is nobody's business but God's. We have no idea what Namdev's fate is, we have no idea. And nobody can say when a miracle will happen or will not happen. Nobody. There is plenty we can do, for Namdev. Stop this. I cannot have you thinking as if he is already gone."

October exhaled. "This is pointless. I'm trying to be a realist about the whole situation, and you're off on some delusional religious trip."

Tika put her thumb to her chin, desperate, but firm, "So then tell me, what would you have me do? How would you have me think? Like you? Kill our son off?"

"Admit what is happening to him!"

Tika admonished her husband in a rumbling whisper, at first, "Stop saying 'him!' Stop saying 'he!' Say his name! Namdev! Admit what is happening to Namdev? What does this mean?" Then shouting, full, unrestrained, "Admit that I have no faith? Admit that I have given up? That is what you would have me do? I refuse! I will not! Not for you, and not for Namdev!"

A baby's cry could be heard echoing from the main bedroom into the hallway- a few bursts, whelps, then a dissonant wailing. It grew, monolithic- an echo chamber, an insular perspective, reinforced and feeding a circular loop of negative thoughts, of self-rationalized 'facts.' October's gelid heart was consumed by a silence that was not silent but deafening, in a feedback reverberation fed by his own internal noise and discontent- a fractious mind, alone- silent to the light of his wife's consciousness, his son- unable to extend anywhere beyond his own perspective. Constricted. Garroted by self. Feedback building, negating external signal, extinguishing the light- alone.

Tika at once felt remorse for raising her voice, for letting her frustrations distract the best of her- but her regrets ablated at the sound of her son's voice. Her duties to him resumed. She left her husband in the cold living room, the early morning light of another day reflecting off the blank television screen and across the kitchen- the jars of spices, the copper pots. A dutiful hostess cooing behind a closed door.

October's heart- wounded- he regretted ever marrying Tika, ever having a child. He regretted approaching her that night in April, on the main avenue of university campus... striking up a conversation in a coffee shop... their first date, Indian food, at her recommendation... it was snowing, November... an early snow that year... the first time they made love, their first vacation together, moving into an apartment... the wedding, the decision to make a baby... he wanted nothing more than to be the occupant of another body, of another life. He wanted no visitors. He wanted no empires. He wanted a cave, a hole- so he did the next best thing. He strode to the front closet, reached for coat, jammed on his shoes, then exited through the door to seek out his own repose.

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"You must name him, October."

It might have been the power of naming- once you name something, you own it. You are responsible for it. It is yours to care for, yours to screw up- your duty. A disquieting undercurrent ran through October's unconscious. The magnitude of having a son, of taking care of a human life. That's why the father-to-be preferred 'beansprout' and 'peanut' and 'coconut,' nicknames, euphemisms when speaking about their son- sobriquets employed at a distance. As if naming the boy would initiate a chain reaction that could never be taken back. Better, October thought, to keep his name buried in the ground, like a treasure.

Abruptly, October countered, "Why? You're the one carrying him, you're doing all the work. I think you have more of a right to name him than I do."

Tika could sense her husband's reluctance. His unease. She sensed her intervention was required to assist him through his dilemma, to guide him *X-marks-the-spot* so he would be able unearth the actuality of their son- an actuator, a catalyst - a guide, bringing

their child from blastocyst to embryo to fetus to newborn, nourishing him so he could differentiate and grow. She set her hands on her thighs, thick, clasped onto her flesh below her pajama shorts. Bottom heavy, solid, built to move and to lead- short and stout. There she is next to her husband in bed above their lavender sheets. She understands the importance of October needing to commit, she understands why her husband must undertake this risk, with her- together- to rely on faith.

Grave, Tika rebuked her husband. "But you are his father. His father is who will teach him how to become a man. You will be his example. He is your son to name, not mine. This is the old way. It is the right way."

October scratched at a shadow of hair across his cheeks, left then right, mulling it over. Lying down, his wiry frame, a farm-boy corn-fed frame into his third decade of life and his metabolism remained dialed on HIGH- six feet tall, all legs- that's what his sister always said. A runner, a decent mile time. His legs and his fingers- lanky fingers, one broken a long time ago and bent in a weird turn never corrected- his ring finger, a finger of memories, of the past and of the present. A wife looking at her husband, waiting for him to respond with, "I never was one to name somebody after me. October is a great name and all, but... I don't know. I like your culture's names. There's plenty of Mike's and Tom's and Bob's out there. Let's name him after your people. That's what I want. But I can't just pick it out of thin air, you know? We should do it together."

"I am honored to have you ask for my help. I am. A name is very important. But as much as a name is chosen, a name chooses, you understand?"

October clicked his bedside lamp OFF. "Sure, that makes sense."

Tika adjusted the body pillow, turning towards her husband. "Let us do this: I will read about some saints, some history, some great heroes of prior generations, and I will come up with a list. Then, I want you to select the name you think is right, the name that calls you. After this I will explain to you the significance of the name. Then we will decide, together. Is this good?"

October considered her offer, and quickly consented. "Perfect. I think that's a great idea."

Alone- a rocking chair creaking on a hidden back porch in the corner of her heart listening to crickets fiddle in a midsummer night- Tika smiled. She preferred to be forthright, to avoid any actions that might be construed as duplicitous or contrived- her methods rarely involved employing wits or knavery or artifice to fulfill her wishes. She wasn't that kind of woman. She was uncomfortable acting as Penelope, undoing stitches hunkered in unspoken conspiracy with the gods- but she was more uncomfortable not taking the right course of action. And Tika knew what had to be done. She already had a sense, an intuition- a name from her past, from a lesson passed down from her mother. After a few weeks allowing the ideas to fester, a dream, a premonition, several prayers- she was given the decision: her son was to be called Namdev. Named after a poet, a holy warrior of love singing and chanting kirtans in the north of India during the 13th Century- a revolutionary, like his 13th Century Italian poet counterpart. *Dwell on Ram, brother, like a caterpillar meditating in a cocoon-* the cocoon of her womb, Tika, she felt her son and knew. He was a pilgrim, a seeker, a worshipper, born into the lower classes but limitless, unbound and unchained by his ardent pursuit of God- a devotee, one who would never wander lost keeping his sight on the truth.

Namdev.

Over the course of the next few days Tika built a list of names to present to her husband. Finally the time came and she read them off to October in their living room, the television muted, after a long day. October removed his socks and leaned back into the cushions of the couch. He listened to his wife. He enjoyed her voice, the slight bass tone, the coarse, grainy rasp of her throat, like a tart mustard. When she whispered, "Namdev," he stopped her.

"Say that one again."

"Namdev."

October sat up, activated. He repeated after her, "Namdev. Namdev. I like that. I really like that. Tell me about Namdev."

She coyly replied, folding the list on her lap, her feet propped up on a pillow, "Well, I cannot tell you yet. He is not born. But we will learn about him together."

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Tika reads- for months reading and researching and poring over materials. Voracious- technical articles, medical journals, university presses, reference materials, academy presentations. She filled notebooks, computer files- her mind focused on lipid rafts, myelination, neurotrophins, BDNF, MAP kinase activation, basal ganglia, microtubule depolymerization, GD2 and GD3, GT1b and p75, pleiotropic effects, ApoE and ApoD, Purkinje cells, complex gangliosides, neurosteroids, LDL cholesterol, signal-transduction proteins, voltage-gated ion channels. She learned that two isolates of NP-C1 had been identified- French Acadians from Normandy who migrated to Nova Scotia, and Hispanics from New Mexico and Colorado with roots in the Upper Rio Grande valley of the United States. Since meeting with the genetic counselor she had applied herself entirely. A leave of absence from work, complete disengagement from her social circles- a clinical focus, sharp, pointed. Single minded, singular, one-point. She was dedicated to preventing "central hypotonia."

This evening- there had been no dinner, no shower, no laundry, no dishes, no sitcoms. Instead, a stack of papers, highlighter markers, Stick-It pads, plastic clips- Namdev asleep in a Play'N'Swing. She pauses at a statement in the *Journal of Molecular Genetics and Metabolism*, 'The most effective treatments might be those that are early enough to rescue or correct an aspect of brain development otherwise adversely affected, moving the treatment approach from symptomatic to disease modification or disease prevention.' Tika gulps. Then her folder closes after 'All patients will develop a progressive and fatal neurological disease.' She is alone in the apartment loft.

Tika is crying.

She cries.

A long run of tears, a river of sorrow that would rush and overwhelm her, immobilizing her in the ceramic bathtub, the car, the grocery store, watering a succulent on a kitchen window ledge- yesterday, falling to her hands and knees in a parking lot- sometimes alone, in private, sometimes in public and without warning. But after her lamentations and cursed feelings, her complex emotions about being doomed and damned and sorry for herself, pitiful, sorry for her son- after all of that, she regains her composure with a guttural

clearing. A growl. Then Tika writes down a sentence in her notebook, a firm conclusion she has landed on after hours, after days, after weeks of synthesizing and analyzing, asking questions and calling doctors and emailing professionals, after consultations and follow-ups and more tests and diagnostics, more charts and blood serum levels:

KEY: The longer Namdev can make it without presenting neurological symptoms, the better his prognosis is going to be. We need to inhibit the onset of neurological symptoms, or delay them as long as possible.

A statement of purpose.

An intention.

A place to begin her prayer.

She continues to write:

PROGNOSIS CHECKPOINTS

1. EARLY INFANTILE NEUROLOGIC ONSET

She is transfixed by one phrase she continued to find and underline: "central hypotonia." It first appeared in the packed from the genetic counselor. She had spotted it again, now, in one of the medical journals while she hunched over the family desk. Central hypotonia: a characteristic of 'early infantile neurologic onset form.' Namdev had escaped the 'acute neonatal cholestatic rapidly fatal form,' but her son was not out of the woods, not by a longshot. "Hypotonia." One of the many thousands of words she had to research, to look up and write down and memorize and understand. An underdeveloped musculature, a delay or deficiency in muscle development, a lack of muscle- feeble, weak, boney, fragile. Hypo- from the Greek, below. Underwater... murky... holding her breath... cold, running out of air... drowning... no. Not yet. She persisted. Tika refused. There was hope, there were options. She had consulted Vedic physicians, alternative medicine practitioners- she rubbed oils on Namdev's legs, on his arms, his stomach and shoulders, his back and neck- she scheduled her son for weekly acupuncture sessions, purchased homeopathic tinctures, decorated his room with crystals, burnt sage. Of course she sent her mother to temples, to churches, to rectories and prayer circles. More immediately, she encouraged Namdev to move, to kick,

to touch and grasp. A regiment developed. Four times a day she would put him through exercises, mini-workouts. All in the name of preventing hypotonia, avoiding the baleful portend. Hypotonia, then dysphagia, dysarthria. Can't move... can't swallow... can't breathe... can't live. Death.

2. *LATE INFANTILE ONSET*

Tika is determined for Namdev to avoid any sort of language delay. She has been reading out loud constantly to her boy, producing long speeches to him, reciting poetry, songs in the car, lullabies at night. She exposed him as often as possible to language. Music is played constantly. Even rap music, because of all the words—well, Hindu rap music. Regardless, she knew that language impairment or regression would be part of the 'late infantile form.' That would be the second milestone. Late infantile—adjusting her spine, reading the word "Cataplexy." A sudden collapse after strong emotions or laughter. Gait problems, seizures, then ataxia. Ataxia leads to dysphagia, dysarthria, and dementia. Finally, death.

3. *JUVENILE ONSET*

The juvenile form of Niemann-Pick is marked with school problems, particularly writing and impaired attention. Clumsiness. "Dyspraxia"—a difficulty in planning and coordinating physical movement. Can't walk, can't sit, can't sleep... can't stand still... can't stand to look at October, can't cry... can't stop... eventually the juvenile form would worsen, leading to dysphagia, dysarthria, and dementia. And again, death.

4. *NON-NEURONOPATHIC ONSET*

But after the juvenile period— the miracle. The rare 'non-neuronopathic form.' Sure, there might be psychosis, paranoid delusions, auditory or visual hallucinations, interpretative thoughts— psychiatric disturbances like depressive syndrome, aggressiveness, bipolar or obsessive-compulsive tendencies— movement disorders, like dystonia and Parkinsonism, chorea— sure, but he will have lived. He will have lived a life. He will have lived a full life. And that was her dream. That was her miracle. That was Tika's the conclusion of every prayer— 'non-neuronopathic form.'

Let this be, Lord- please, I beg of you

Begging God, imploring the universe, calling on every angel every protector every Savior and being of light, Shiva and Vishnu and Brahma, all of their multitudinous manifestations, every avatar, every astral guardian, every ounce of love energy- she supplicated to them at night before bed on her knees, kneeling devoted and devotional prostrated before the expanse, the distance between men and gods, her prayers bellowing forth.

Please, let my son have a 'rare non-neuronopathic form' of this disease

A mouthful. A tongue-twister. Repeating the plea again and again. In her humility, she refused to even ask for a cure. Her respect towards Vishnu prevented such a request. She didn't want to seem unreasonable with her Creator. She remained contrite. She asked only for an outcome which other sufferers of Niemann-Pick had experienced, which medical journals had documented- rare, but possible.

Please

Namdev wakes up. A mother breastfeeds her son at the family desk while collating various sections of research papers, aggregating ideas, organizing notecards. Can you feel her insatiable appetite to serve her boy?

Meanwhile, October can't tell the difference between Type A or Type C, sphingomyelinase activity as opposed to endocytosed cholesterol storage, NP-C1 or NP-C2, cerebellar ataxia or vertical supranuclear gaze palsy, lysosomes or the endoplasmic reticulum. But Tika didn't have the mental currency to pay any concern over her husband's commitment, or lack thereof. Single minded, singular, one-point. She absorbed herself in the numbers, the literature, the biological underpinnings, the animal models.

After six months of fatherhood, fathering a sick child, October has been overcome by frustration and exhaustion. Myriads of progress reports, reviews of doctor appointments, health checks, blood test results, Namdev's daily updates- tonight, this evening, Wednesday, he parks the car in their apartment complex, opens their front door, walks up the flight of stairs onto the main floor, turns on the television, and kicks his shoes off of his feet. He

doesn't call up to Tika. He doesn't think to make dinner or clean up. He oozes himself away from his family. There is no "Hi darling," no kiss no friendly greeting. His intention is simple: he wants only to become a ghost.

Tika's ears register October entering, but she doesn't react. She doesn't have any energy left to resent her husband with. Her last bits of fuel, the totality of her being, are dedicated to her son. She has already disappeared completely.

She petitions- seeking out, on Namdev's behalf. Her hands are his hands, her mind his mind, her hope is his hope for a future. On a pilgrimage, engrossed in ritual- a seeker. Hopeful. Singular.

Namdev finishes his meal, coos, and is ready for more sleep. His mother gently sets him down and resumes her work. Reviewing notes, organizing binders, verifying scores and searching for answers- searching, seeking, scanning- phone numbers for clinical research groups, descriptions of various approaches, support groups and counseling hotlines, detailed schedules and action plans calculated with one goal in mind: to keep her son alive.

After an hour consumed by the stasis of automobile commercials and football highlights, October arises. He sets a record on the turntable.

I used to think

I used to think

There was no future left at all

He tip-toes up the carpeted stairs to the loft. Deciding on a position, he sets himself down on a loveseat couch. A quiet glance. Examining Tika, yawning- she is hunched over, scribbling away. He acknowledges his son, asleep in a bassinet, a mobile of fluffy whales and dolphins rotating above the child's body. He sighs. Tika finds it unnecessary, even wasteful, to acknowledge her husband's presence. Finally, October asks, aloof, "Did you eat?"

Nothing.

"Tika?"

"What is it?"

"Did you eat anything?"

"No, I do not. What time is it?"

"Nine-thirty."

"It's late then."

"Do you want me to get some food?"

Tika checks Namdev, wipes her brows, then firmly presses her fingertips into her eyeballs- a relaxing pressure, a rejuvenating pressure, a pressure with purpose. Her anxiety and depression, pre- and post-partum, eliminated. Compressed then annihilated by the task at hand. Tika turns, passes over the sight of her husband, and she inspects an assortment of items on her puja table- a Buddhist prayer bowl (she had moved it there several months prior, since family dinner time had all but ceased- three times a day, chanting, nearby to strike with the mallet, convinced the warming hum of the bell reverberated healing power into the body of her son), prayer cards, sacred images of the gods and goddesses, a list of intentions, a rosary, a small bottle of holy water from the Jordan River, beads and incense and blessed trinkets. Her spiritual weapons, honed and ready. Single minded, singular, one-point.

Then she pauses, thinks to herself- *When is the last time October and I were able to speak to each other, without ending in argument?* - she can't remember. She wants to remember.

"Tika?"

Her eyes meeting his from across the room- impromptu, from her heart, "October, I want you to hold you son. Pick Namdev up and hold him. Please."

October reorients. An unexpected request. He shifts his tired gaze downwards, into the bundle at Tika's feet. Namdev was silent, asleep, a blanket pulled up to his chin. Peaceful. "He's quiet. I don't want to disrupt him."

She waves her hands, invisibly coaxing the boy towards his father. "It is alright, you are his father. You do not disturb him. Please. Hold him. Talk to him. Say a prayer with him."

October's lips purse, pinched, subconscious and automatic. A progression of uneasiness. Then his lips pull tight across his teeth, a tourniquet constricted by his fear, his hidden scorn and

contempt and disdain and confusion- watch him- soon the acrid look will disappear, so be alert, catch it while you can- a rare bird phoenix'd in suffering and displeasure. Finished. Back to normal (normalcy for the sake of appearance of course, but there he is, considering his wife's request- trying to act normal), he sets his hand on the edge of the bassinet. "He's sleeping."

No time to waste. "If you are worried about losing him, then why waste any more time?"

October does not answer.

Tika leaves the desk seat and moves herself next to October. She latches onto his shoulder. Whispering, "Give him your love while you have the chance." She wants action, she wants motion, she wants to move forward. "He is right here, in front of you. Hold your son, please."

Hesitating, stuck... static... buried into the couch, leaning forward, his arms crossed... frozen... debilitated by fear, paralyzed... hypotonic... ataxic... lifeless.

"October, he is your son."

Nostrils flare, they spout compact puffs- the breaths of a sleeping boy. October listens closely. Left foot patting on the ground, nervous. He fights against himself. He cannot reconcile the expectations he once held- having a son, a boy to play catch with, to grow up and grow strong and grow smart, report card accomplishments, exploits on the athletic fields, a college scholarship, fishing trips, vacations South during the winter- friction, abrasive against the sedimented reality of what October is faced with, their familial situation- a sick boy, a dying boy, a rare genetic disease without cure or hope, wasting away. At odds with himself, with his wife, with his son, with his duty- October resigns himself in the knowledge he is not equipped to handle this. He had resigned himself, time and again. He can't do this. He can't acquiesce to Tika's request. He can't connect any further with Namdev because any more love, affection, interaction he has with his son- the more pain it will bring, later on.

Tika has been resigned in her own way, relegated to an observer- unable to influence the conflict raging within her husband- her resources are committed elsewhere. The fight is October's alone.

Namdev is her priority. She cannot help October. If he must walk this journey alone, then so be it.

A final attempt. She knows the outcome, but even so, she has become a dogged woman on all fronts. "October, please. This is your son, to love. And he loves you. We created him. You named him. Please."

One drop of saline, then another- welling under his eyelids, droplets, spheres of torment. He is quiet. Not weeping or moaning- unobtrusive, muted tears fall off October's overcast face, locked like a statue, fixed. "I... I can't." He stands up- lean, but really losing weight and malnourished- restless, but really exhausted and deprived- present, but hardly accounted for, unmoored- his clothes are pressed, but don't be fooled. Tika absorbs the sight of her husband and knows she is slowly losing him.

October stops, hardens- these will be the last tears he will cry for nearly two years. He walks away. Away from his wife and son, back down the stairs. His appetite disappears. His craving is for solitude, a clamshell, a desert, an abyss to fall into... falling.. face still locked, grotesque... a cave.

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How to disappear completely:

in the most gentle tone you can muster begin to coo and shush while lying next to an infant child, gaze at him, nudge up to him, caress his stomach and rub his cheek with the faintest of fingertips coaxing the babe with rhythm, keep a short distance between your noses... next, key into the reflection of your own image on his eyes, his dark grey almost black irises slowly fading to blue... flower petals peeling like the corona of an eclipse... a haunted cloud around the circumference of his sun spot pupils... between grey and black and blue, brushed with holy and delicate brushstrokes... watch yourself watching him... dutifully, soothing the boy... shhhh... and as he falls into restful slumber, and his eyelids close... bit by bit like the moon on her voyage across a clear night sky... shut... now you have left yourself behind... extinguished... gone...

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North of Yellowstone National Park, west of the Crow Reservation: October's eyes anesthetized by green mile markers, grey concrete medians, yellow lines descending towards him. For a while he tilts

his chin upwards off to the big sky which contained all the upper atmospheres of Earth's wilderness- the datum of his perceptions, the back-forth of his eyes and ears, the random fluctuations of his attention had ceased. An empty space, an open space, for reflection:

(I think what hurt most was losing so much potential, losing him- wait, say his name- Namdev- at such a young age before he could be somebody- stolen away- years and lifetimes, loves lost and gained, dreams dreamt and achieved and buried, destroyed and rebuilt, lessons learned, lessons forgotten, battles waged and peace achieved- before he could touch the world, before he could form relationships, before he could change lives like miraculous blood-stained tears rolling down the marble face of Mother Mary at an altar in a tiny, forgotten village. Lost. Stolen. Namdev's legacy as it stood, as it would forever stand, would never amount to anything more than him being a sick child, a dead child, a tulip bloomed too early and ruined by a late frost- the boy would be remembered only for what could have been, never being afforded the chance to be, to become. A coiled spring of possibility, a multitude of neuronal connections of decisions of paths of wavelengths collapsing of bifurcations of possibility- a future ahead of him, so much time that should have been allotted him- taken, wrestled away- and once I knew that he would never be able to become what he deserved to be- the pain of that, of losing his truth, coupled with losing our investment of love, of what could have been, our family- failing on that, I lost hope. I lost purpose. I lost my connection to life. And after the initial highs, those first days being with him at the hospital- transfixed on his image, that psychedelic glow of his newborn face like a nebulous galaxy cloudy and ethereal poised to condense into a nursery of stars to burn and explode forth- what could have been- the excitement of those first days. I was a father. I had a son. He had a life ahead of him, an incredible life that I would provide for and take care of. But once I knew it would not be, when I realized what had robbed from us, cheated from us- stolen from me- moments that should have been- moments like my boy crawling out of his bedroom across a carpeted hallway his knees and fists thudding my way with mommy behind wearing a smile, he's off with a shriek of delight in a frenzied dash to meet me at the front door of the apartment, now opened, dad home from work, up into my arms he kisses me and I kiss him because in that moment he's happier than

anybody's ever been to see me in my entire lifetime, a pure joy of gladness that I never dreamt I could catalyze in the soul of another but lo and behold it was as simple as being me in my worn shoes appearing at the door- here I am, loved by my son. Moments- nothing more perfect than that moment- never to happen, never to occur, never to be experienced, no joy exchanged- moments like that which could have protected me whenever I was tired or upset, which I could have carried all the way to my own white lily deathbed my last mortal thought remembering that little boy running my way in ecstatic purity- I shut down. I couldn't forgive the world. My expectations forged my anger, my discontent- I forbid any joy from entering my heart, and I sought to destroy it wherever it existed outside of me- I had hated everyone else's children, I had hated everyone else's family- I hated that their seeds would grow and blossom and mine would die off in a premature harvest- my sister's kids, children in department stores, pictures on a television- hatred. And I had hated Tika, because she was so alright with it- she was okay, she accepted it and moved on the only way she knew how- like a mother, a caregiver, she took care of him and loved him in spite of his illness in spite of our curse despite the gods casting their evil on our home- she was able to adjust, to make the best of it, to venerate our son at the front of her mind in the center of her heart- but I couldn't. I hated her for her strength. I was too hurt to do anything but feel sorry for myself, feel cheated, feel bloated and overcome by hopelessness- but I was the one cheating them. I cheated my boy out of having a father, even for the short time he was here- and I cheated my wife out of having a partner, because I had become so focused on my own self and my own feelings and my own pain there was no part of me left to portion off with her, to walk through Dev's life with her at my side- to be parents, together, of a dying child- and to do it gracefully- she suffered with her graces, with beauty- but mine was an ugly display- I was the sick child, really- I was the sick little boy hurt on the playground bullied and bruised and crying out for mommy- goddamnit- goddamn me- I could offer no forbearance to her, or to him- I had forsaken an opportunity, I had acted as a bad host, I had missed out and shirked my responsibilities. Goddamnit. But you can't take the visions backwards, only forwards- this is what it took for (me) to learn- the pain has come, taught, and passed- it's not even about seeing him again, about knowing he is alright- he is alright- we are all alright- we are here for a

little while, here for a moment, disguised- then we go- we return, back home- because our form in this world, of being a person, an entity, an individual atomized out of the dust storms is only one phase of a much larger development, and underlying this development is a connection- connected (growing) together as a unified organism. I believe that now. We will carry him forward, I can carry him forward- to emerge in new forms, in new ways, to experience more- the vision will go forward, his eyes seeing through mine, so I must go forward and I will go forward henceforth from here go thou therefore into the land ahead- go back home.)

--

"Well maybe I'm just not cut out for this, alright? Maybe I'm no good at being a father. Is that what you want me to say?"

He peeked down, then up. A jolt across his mien. October smiled at his wife- not the smile of love, or happiness, but a wry smile of deceit, of contempt. A guilty smile like he had erased a thousand years' worth of spiritual tradition, smashed it into a thousand pieces like an exploding chunk of granite. A pernicious smile uncurled between the corners of his lips. The smile of the hangman, a smile underneath the cloth mask hidden from view, covered and safe from betrayal. A smile born from a wounded heart never healed never resolved continually bleeding into the echoes of an empty room where loneliness hadn't been a choice so much as it had been an execution- his pain symbolized by his disguise.

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"What did you call your son?"

"Namdev. His name was Namdev."

"What did you call him before he was born?"

"How do you mean?"

"What did you call him when he was still an idea? Before he arrived in this world."

October considered the question. He replayed scenes in his mind, with Tika at his side- when it was only the two of them, before everything changed. "We- it's kind of funny actually- we had a bunch of nicknames for him. There was a calendar that my wife had, a calendar that showed how big he was growing while she was

pregnant. Each week it was a new fruit or vegetable. So we would joke around, call him names like 'lentil' or 'coconut'. In the beginning we called him 'sprout.' I think that was our first name for him. 'Sprout.'"

Latcholassie crossed his arms, sat up. He cleared his throat. "What do you think has become of the young and old men?/ And what do you think has become of the women and children?/ They are alive and well somewhere/ The smallest sprout shows there is really no death/ And if ever there was it led forward life, and does not wait at the end to arrest it/ And ceas'd the moment life appear'd./ All goes onward and outward, nothing collapses/ And to die is different from what any one supposed, and luckier." When Latcholassie recited the word 'sprout,' he looked into October's eyes. After he finished, he waited a moment. "Walt Whitman. Yes sir. 'Song of Myself.' Whitman is the only white-man poet I know, the only worth knowing."

October ignored the politics behind Latcholassie's final statement- he felt moved, almost, a moment of peace, of- of something he had been searching for. Then a humble request, a genuine response came out of the traveler's mouth. "Can you say it again?"

Latcholassie sensed a change in October's tone. He complied, repeating the verses eagerly but maintaining a perfect rhythm and metered-time like a bible-belt preacher who actually understood and felt and lived the psalm-thundering words he was reading, like a man of integrity who used the words to create reality.

The breathing of pine trees, the stirring noises of critters hung between the two men after Latcholassie had finished. October yearned to cry. He wanted dearly to seize the opportunity, to erupt and wipe the remnants of his hoard of suffering from off his cheek and hug his new friend and call his wife and apologize for everything. He did. He wanted to mourn. He wanted to connect with what he was feeling inside of himself. But he couldn't will himself into the act, he couldn't bleed tears from out of his body. They simply would not come. So instead October cracked a joke- "I better be careful, maybe you are the Great Spirit."

"It takes spirit to recognize itself, hungry ghost. I am no more the Great Spirit than you are. We are all spirit. So is y'r dead

son, and your wife, everyone you have ever known who has gone before and will come after."

October rubbed his hands together. He cleared his throat. "That's a nice thought, isn't it?"

"Thoughts are for thinking, truth is for living. Yes sir. My people used to live in longhouses. They used to flatten babies' heads, to mark their status in the tribe. They used to call on the shaman for answers, for help when a member of the tribe needed aid. The shamans would go beyond this world, to the spirits who protect us. Our ancestors. My grandmother helped me find my own guides, when I was a boy about to become a man. My father, he did not believe in the old ways. He drank. He loved money, women. He loved what he could see and feel. Before he left, he made sure I knew he thought the old ways were superstitions, silly thoughts. But my grandmother, she showed me the old way. She told me that spirit lives in bones like a squirrel in a tree- when a man has pain in his bones, his spirit hurts. It wasn't superstitions, it wasn't thoughts. I learned truths."

October picked up a handful of black pebbles. Latcholassie adjusted his braids forward. A grey wool cap had taken the place of his straw flat-brim. The two of them shared opposite ends of a bench, five or six feet from a circle of jagged stones demarcating the fire's territory. October sighed, "Well, that makes you a lucky man. You've got something to believe in."

"Have you never been given something to believe in? You have never seen truth?"

The fire crackled warmth in front of October. "Sure, I've had plenty to believe in. My mother- she was a devout woman, a Christian. She loved God, she taught me about Jesus, about the bible stories, Moses and Noah. She used to love reciting bible verses. I haven't thought about her in a long time. She would always find the right one. She had perfect timing. But one day, she started up with a cough. She was a totally healthy woman, beautiful, full of life. It was harmless at first. But this cough got worse, and within a week she was dead from pneumonia. Like that," snapping his fingers, "dead for good. They put her in a medically induced coma. A doctor told my father that she would be alright. And my father told us, my sister and me. She'll be alright. He assured us. And I don't blame him, you know? He didn't

know. Nobody did. I was eleven years old, had no idea it was coming."

The fire crackled. Latcholassie sensed his footsteps treaded upon a fertile landscape. His hunch from earlier in the day was correct. Avocadoes. He waited for October to continue, "And after she died, my father took us into the room, in the hospital, and we were able to see her body. It was all bloated, distended. She looked terrible, unrecognizable. The disease had destroyed her. And after I saw her, I knew there was no soul in her, no spirit. She was gone. There was no Jesus to save her, or me. All kinds of people told me she was an angel in heaven, about where she had gone, that I would see her again- but I knew they were lying. She was dead, and that was it. We are alive, then we die, and that's it. There's nothing special about us. There's no point. So I stopped believing. Once I was old enough to decide, I never went to church again. Until at least I met my wife, Tika. She is a Hindu. But I- I don't know, I figure let everyone have their beliefs. I just choose not to have any of my own these days."

"Then what is y'r story, the story of y'r life?" Latcholassie pointed at his visitor.

Confused, October required further clarification. "Story of my life?"

Still pointing, direct- "Yes sir! What are you doing here, in this world? What is y'r story? If you are no Christian disciple, trying to be like Christ, or a Hindu, working on his karma, or an Indian with his spirit guides- then what are you doing?"

October released the stone from his hands, back to the dirt. "I don't know. I'm just trying to do the right thing. I tried to work hard, provide for my family. I tried to do what's right."

"Then why did you leave them?"

October's instinct was to fume, to resort to anger. *Who the hell does this guy think he is? Some backwater Indian who has known me for all of six hours, criticizing my life?*

But the way Latcholassie beckoned- the inquiry did not come from a place of judgment, it did not come with an air of arrogance or superiority- Latcholassie sought from a place of love, of understanding, of genuine curiosity. So the anger subsided in

October. He was almost faced with having to answer- *Why did you leave? Truly?* But first- "How do you know that I left them?"

Deadpan, "We've been through this. I am the Great Spirit."

October shook his head, smiling- hurt- "There is no 'them' anymore. There's only her." October almost chuckled, but the collapsing density of his reflections pulled his attention back to the question at hand- the velocity of the moment struck him. "I didn't leave my son. He left me. Dead. And I left my wife because I couldn't stand to look at her- I kept seeing my son."

"To leave a wife because of her resemblance to your children is a strange reason."

October spit it out, stammering- "I couldn't stand the pain! Alright, I... I wanted to pretend his death never happened. I want to pretend. I can't deal with it. I didn't want to. I don't want to."

Latcholassie plucked a cut of wood from off his stockpile and gently set it amongst the embers, cautious. He watched the fire react, made a minor adjustment to the angle of the log, then, "I am confused. You told me that you don't believe in spirit. You told me that there is no point to any of this," spreading his arms out, across the earth, "and nothing matters. You tell me you have no story. But then you tell me y'r son's death brings you so much pain you cannot bear it, you have to leave y'r wife?"

A new fury boiled within October, and this time he did not make any attempt to repress its expression. Molten, volcanic. It intensified. "So you mean to tell me I can't grieve over my dead son? I can't have any feelings of loss? Unless I have some magic story behind it?"

"If what you explain to me is true, then no, you are not entitled to feeling loss."

October erupted, bursting up from his seat. "Who the hell do you think you are? My son died! Dead! Two years old... don't fucking tell me what I can and can't feel!"

Quietly, "But it means nothing. He means nothing. None of this means anything. Who cares about y'r dead son? He was worthless."

October lunged to grab Latcholassie, to collar him, to force him down and unleash a barrage of fists- lefts and rights- to wage hell over the Indian's face, to curse him and destroy him and inflict a brutal pain. But within a single movement, Latcholassie had October's strong hand pinned behind his back, at the point of breaking, and was leaning above his guest, face to face, on the cold ground.

"Get off of me you sonofabitch!"

"You came to strike me down. I am protecting myself."

"Get off!"

"No."

"Get the hell off of me!"

"You give y'r word not to attack me again?"

"Yes!"

"What do you swear to? A man who believes in nothing cannot be trusted."

"I promise, just get off!"

Latcholassie released October and deftly moved back to his seat on the wooden bench. October unraveled his hand, free, dusted himself off, and stood up. "I want to leave."

Latcholassie squinted, then calmly "No one keeps you here. You are free to go."

October, panting, then, "I need a ride, back to the bus station."

"Then I will take you in the morning, if you ask politely."

"Take me now!"

Pondering, then, "No."

"Why the hell not?"

"Because even if you wish to keep running, this time, you will not do so at your own whim. I am home for the evening. You are my guest. You can leave, but I am not obligated to drive you anywhere, not tonight. No sir. Now, we can continue our conversation, that I will do for you. We can continue to sit by the fire."

October felt the dampness of sweat under his coat, on his chest, "So you can tell me that I can't grieve over my dead child? What the hell do you know anyways?"

Latcholassie paused. He took a deliberate breath. Then he looked October straight- eye to eye- "I know I can help you. I know you were brought here to me, tonight, so I can show you how to grieve over the boy; so I can show you why he is not yours, but is born to the earth, the stars, and why grieving must become gratitude; so I can show you that your child is not dead and gone in the way you think; so I can show you why he is with your people going back to the beginning, one of the protectors, he is at peace and in you at all times; so I can show you how to stop running from your pain; so I can show you how to face that pain, and transform it; so I can show you how to you heal."

October took notice of Latcholassie's dogs barking in the distance, around the other side of the house, tied up next to one of the many makeshift shacks that littered the property. They must have become unnerved after the men's fracas. October, hands on his side, leaning over- firm, obstinate- stubborn, like his father- at least that's what his aunts and uncles always said about him, growing up. A stubborn child, a stubborn man. He had a choice. To sit here, and listen, or pick up his backpack and head back on the road- in the cold, at night, through a land he was unacquainted with. He stood upright, "What makes you think you can do all of that for me?"

"Do you not remember, hungry ghost?" October's host turned his gaze back to the fire, the coals glowing hot, purples and blues golden orange and reddening. In earnest, "I am trained by my grandmother 'Big Owl Perched.' She taught me the traditional ways. She taught me how to heal. I know the secrets of my people, the secrets of the shaman. I took no family of my own as part of a sacred oath, that is why I am here by myself. But I am not alone. The earth is my mother. The sky is my father. The spirits are my children. The moon is my wife. I am a traveler between worlds, a healer." Latcholassie turned again, eyes to his guest, "We have been brought together because there is work to do between us."

October spun around, full circle, filled with disbelief. "This can't be real. I'm standing here in front of a lunatic, in the middle of the night, a thousand miles away from home, who thinks

I am a ghost he can save... I mean... so even if you could do all of this, why me? Why are you helping me?"

Latcholassie's cheeks rose, amused. "The spirits brought you to me. I don't ask these questions. I do what I am told."

"The spirits brought me to you... alright... well, here I am. Here I am!" October sat down, dramatic, making his point. "Heal me oh great one! Oh mighty Latcho! I'm ready!"

Latcholassie stood up and strode away abrupt and perfect into an inky blackness beyond the reach of the flames.

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Surrounded by fossils, tortured in a museum dedicated to the memory of their young boy's life- relics, vestiges- remains. Beset by tragedy, by loss- crippled- an adjustable stroller, a convertible car seat, a rocker, a swing, diapers and wipes and formula bottles, rattles and playpens and a toy piano festooned in electric colors, children's books like Shel Silverstein like Maurice Sendak like *Goodnight Moon* and *The Story of Ferdinand*, exotic blankets of green paisley and orange swirling with fractal patterns and designs purple and geometric, bibs and sippy cups and utensils, pacifiers, body suits and carrying satchels, mushy vegetables and fruits canned organic, stuffed animals like giraffes and blue whales and zebras. A stockpile of items which, long ago in forgotten cultures dedicated to forgotten gods, would have been buried alongside with the little prince, entombed alongside canopic jars to accompany the child on his journey into the afterlife. Entombed sepulchral, the womb of the earth, dust to dust- dust born from the womb of the sky, the Immaculate womb of Marian incarnation, the empty womb of formlessness, the womb of the beginning like a blink then we're awake underneath a starless sky, the expanding cavern of the sky blue then black stretched forever galactic across the dusk into the nighttime of constellations. Not that the stars hold preference or concern over our frivolous lives, not that we do anything but live and die on a mound of misfortune and misgivings and sins, the sin of spiders fanged and biting each other, one another, nothing gained and nothing lost- only a weepy left foot right foot along our path, from four legs to two to three, a baby to a boy to a man to a corpse, head down, trepidatious- to be eaten and torn apart and eviscerated by Kali. A man born a baby born between the thighs

of his mother, the tomb of the womb into the tomb of the world, a life inevitable driven towards death, an advent towards the ground.

Namdev, dead and gone, never to grow old. October, a man born a child, grown to a boy, a husband, then a father, now only a husband. Tika, a woman, the wife of a man who birthed a son, a son who would not become a man- forever a child- suspended, dead, back to the earth before his time, back to the ruthless earth, stolen from Tika after standing at his bedside nursing him from her bosom changing his diapers caressing him in her arms reading little flip-books with him in her lap. No longer a mother, no longer a father- the Tierney house, robbed. Not by grave robbers or thieves out for riches, but robbed by Shiva, out for life. Left with an emptiness that besmirched every inch within their home, every thought within their minds, every emotion within their hearts- life, to death..

Tika stood in the room which once belonged to Namdev. Now it was a room that belonged to the boy's things. She had been gaping for some time at a wooden rocking horse, so finally she pushed it, nudged the playful apparatus into motion- leaning fore, leaning aft. October would not help her decide what ought to be done with the myriad items- he "didn't care." Should they be donated to a family in need, a disadvantaged child? Should they be saved, if Tika and October tried again, for another child of their own? Should they be thrown out, useless, trash? The boy's crib, his clothes, the spinning mobiles- October would leave for work early and return late. The couple had stopped sharing meals. They had stopped talking. October had taken to sleeping on the couch- night after night, a refusal to join his wife in their bedroom.

Tika's sadness had become colored by a supreme disappointment.

She sat on the ground with one of Namdev's pillows. She clutched the turquoise rectangle in both of her arms, twisting at the cloth- it had been two days. Two days, no phone call, no indication- he had left her. Gone. Without notice. Without a note. Her husband, her companion- the man who dedicated himself to her and consecrated their bond before the face of God at an altar built by men- vanished. At such a critical juncture, when she needed him most, October had checked out. And the nature of her disappointment was refined by her inability to understand why. October was a resilient man. A strong man. She fell in love with him because of his commitment, his dedication to his work, to her, to building up

their life brick by brick. He was dependable. He was punctual. A man raised on a dairy farm who was accustomed to chores and to labor. A man who possessed the example of his own father, a father who persevered in the face of his wife's death, who kept the family together, who raised his son and his daughter on his own. Tika continued to search for an answer.

Why had he left? Why does he abandon me? After everything he knows and has seen?

And now- during the mourning period, during the *adya shraddha*, when Tika and October should have been assisting Namdev's spirit with prayer, with sacrifice, aiding their son's astral body to obtain a new physical body for reincarnation- she sat alone.

Her feelings moved backwards in time. Weeks before Namdev arrived Tika had begun to experience perinatal depression- prepartum, postpartum. Anxiety eroded her ability to control her own mind. Her hormones and nerves fabricated detailed and disturbing simulations- death, murder, molestation- a conversation they shared:

"I cannot relax October- my mind... these thoughts..."

"Are you worried about the delivery? I mean, you have every right to be..."

"No, it is not that. That part, actually, it does not scare me. What scares me is after. I am terrified once he arrives, I will drown him in the bath, or drop him, and kill him. I can no longer trust myself. There is a voice inside of me, saying *You will do this, you will suffocate your son, look at what you can do.*"

October shook his head. He folded another t-shirt. "Tika you are going to be a wonderful mother. Forget about that garbage."

"No, you do not understand. I am obsessing, these thoughts- it is as if I am losing control of my mind, October- now that he is so close. I cannot believe this is happening. I only want so much to feel good, I want to be happy, to be excited..."

Tika wept, she cried and remained in bed for almost two weeks leading up to Namdev's birth. Her mother visited her and cooked meals. Mr. Vasudevan called October on his business phone, they chatted in secret. A doctor was consulted. Medication was

considered. October, every night, would come and lie beside his wife, listening to her, validating her worries, watching her emotions explode and retract. A storm- a terrible storm, a horrible storm approaching accompanied by lightning and wind and red clay whipped up from the ground- but October remained. He remained like a dustbowl survivor determined to take one last stubborn look out his window, his brow pointed to the apocalyptic horizon, before hammering in the last nail. October persisted, with valor, with brinksmanship. He brought tissues. He constantly offered Tika water. He researched the symptoms. He paid special attention to her. He sacrificed to her his complete heart and worked with her to move past the intensity of her torments. He helped bring her back to shanti- a shanti that was fully restored, ironically, in conjunction with the appearance of Namdev's health problems. A shanti which blossomed only after Tika was forced to move outside of herself, prompted by exigent circumstances to jettison her own selfish concerns and fears and concentrate her mind wholly onto the care and concern of her son, the light of her heart, the essence of her being. A shanti that emerged from sickness, and eventually death.

A death Tika faced alone.

A shanti holding unsteady beneath her.

Why now, Tika thought, did he leave? Where is that man?

--

Into the receiver, concerned: "Do you think it's some kind of sign?"

Perplexed: "Sign of what, October?"

October Tierney: "Like there's something wrong. Like there is something bad coming. She's never acted like this. I've never seen her like this."

Nin Tierney: "She hasn't been pregnant before. It's a whole new ball of wax."

Nin drew at a straw with her mouth, slurping- moments before it had been stabbed into a plastic lid, puttering along in her car, pulling out of a drive-thru window- an iced tea, no sweetener, two lemons. Her lunch break- speakerphone- October had called. It was

out of the ordinary- a school social worker trained in the art of observing and understanding human behavior- normal versus abnormal- treatment plans, action items, scattered distributions and test scores- diagnose, assess, monitor. And on the weekends an amateur candlemaker, booths at local farmers' markets, a small digital presence for small orders- a small amount of cash on the side. "It never happened to me, with Ryan or Reese, but I studied post-partum a fair amount in grad school. It happens to a lot of women. It's not an omen. Don't read into it. Mostly it's hormones, to be honest."

"Tika's always had this serenity to her, this calmness- she's losing her mind. I can see it in her face, Nin... the desperation, like she's drowning... I'm worried."

"You're doing exactly what you're supposed to do. You called the doctor, right?"

"Right."

"And she sat down with a psychiatrist, a specialist, right?"

"Right."

"And you are cooking, you are cleaning, you are letting her rest, right?"

"Right."

"And you are validating her emotions, not telling her to feel this way or that way, right?"

"Damnit Nin! I get it, alright."

A gulp, then, "No! Listen! You need to hear it. Listen to me. You are doing a great job. Your wife is lucky to have you. Jesus, Tommy could have never been available for me for something like this... listen, it will pass. There's nothing wrong with you, or her, or the baby. It will pass. This stuff happens. Depression and anxiety disorders occur very often in new mothers. It's very common. Trust me. She will be alright. And so will you."

October, picking small hairs from out of his eyebrows, "How do you just say that, like it's a matter of fact?"

"Because I have faith October. Your child isn't cursed. Neither are you, neither is she..." Inspiration for a new candle- *Cure All*

Curse Remover- it would have to pack a strong scent, like myrrh or chili pepper, something with authority- a kick.

Unconvinced- "But the way she looks at me Nin, last night, her eyes were so scared, like nothing before. She had this tormented look, pleading for help... it... I've never seen that. I'm worried."

"It's, unfortunately, mostly out of your control. All you can do is step up, and you have. Patience and praise. Be patient and give her positive feedback. That's exactly what you're doing." *Patient Praise*- lilac and melon, maybe?

"But it's not enough, she's still..."

"Listen, sometimes she needs more, so you give more until she evens out. Sometimes you need more, so she gives more until you even out. That's the way a healthy relationship works. You think with me saying that, I could have picked a man who had the slightest idea of balance... listen, have some faith. Your best is good enough. Trust that and keep bringing your A-game."

"Have some faith in what?"

"That it will turn out."

"But I don't know it will."

Nin laughed at her little brother's stubborn discontent, palpable through the phone, "Welcome to adulthood, bud! You don't know how anything will turn out. Story of my life, my marriage for sure... listen, you do your best, have some faith, and keep moving your feet. You make it work. Remember Dad always saying that? *We'll make it work.*"

October paused. He thought back to a specific image of their father: calloused hands, overalls, rubber boots and the noxious clouds of rust, of manure, of cows and milk and grass and hay. A man married to the seasons, linked indelibly to the cycle of grass, the prairie staple- burying his wife, then back to his farm and flock the next day. October never considered his father to be a man of faith. "Nin, dad was addicted to work. He wasn't a religious guy."

Nin responded full of wisdom, understanding... four years at university, another three in graduate school, two years of externships- "Dad's faith was in his work. He had a more practical

sense of faith, but that didn't make it any less meaningful. He could have given up as easily as anybody after mom. Living out his faith was putting in an honest day's work. He might have had more faith than anyone I've ever known."

"What?"

"You know he told me that he prayed all the time while he worked. Constantly. He prayed for me and you. That was it. He told me, he said everything he did he did for us and did it as a prayer. He made it all sacred. Can you- I mean, I cried when he told me that..."

Dismissive- "This isn't about him though Nin, it's about my wife... I'm losing her. I can feel it."

Regaining Composure- sandalwood, lemon- "It's hard to see now, but this is going to bring you two closer together. I know it is. Keep being there for her. It'll turn around, I promise. I tell you what, I'll try to get a referral in your area, or see if I can't network somebody who is more familiar with this type of anxiety. Let me make some phone calls tonight, and we'll talk more tomorrow. Call me again during lunch."

Relieved, somewhat- a usual roleplay played out and the roles familiar, October seeking counsel from his older sister, Nin freely giving advice to her younger brother happy to help- October fighting, Nin unwavering in her support. Finally, October conceded, "Alright."

"Keep doing what you're doing. You're a good man, October. It'll work out. I bet that once the little guy is born, all of this will pass. I really do. Her hormones will stabilize, it'll get better."
Centered Stability- ginger and honeysuckle, maybe violet undertones?

"You really think so?"

"I do. You'll make it work."

"Thanks Nin, I appreciate it. Love you."

"Love you too bud, we'll talk soon."

--

It occurred in the shower, her thumb and forefinger massaging passionfruit-fortified conditioner into her black hair. Tika

closed her eyelids under streams of hot water. She breathed a deep breath. She realized not a single one of her anxious, barbarous thoughts had materialized into her psychic atmosphere for several days- no sexual molestations, no losing control of her body and stabbing the boy to death or throwing him from the patio balcony, no car accidents, no feelings of discomfort, unnerved like the boy was a stranger, no premonitions or sinister intuitions or doomstruck forecasts- no dread, no pit in the gut of her stomach, no helplessness or aching- her attention had been captured by other matters.

It was over.

Ruminating on Namdev's predicament, Tika didn't feel sorry for herself. She didn't feel sorry for her situation with October. A calming acceptance had flushed over her. Accepting that they wanted a child, they had a child, and this is what God had provided them: a sick boy who needed good parents to provide care and comfort.

Yes, a simplicity entered her heart in the form of a clear realization: this boy needs me to survive, and I must do everything I can to take care of him, to help him.

What more purpose could she possibly require?

Namdev's birth was her funeral, she realized- *skwelpchh*- another palmful of ointment. The beginning of his life was the end of her own. By entering the world, he ushered in the end of her concerns, her cares, her futile selfishness masquerading as concern or charity. To put it simply: Namdev destroyed the woman who waddled into Pennsylvania Hospital worried about her make-up, whether or not her son would love her, what kind of mother she would be, who would end up on top in the next election cycle, what shoes were on sale at DSW. Tika massaged her scalp... any death or birth involves trauma- maybe her anxiety, her uneasiness, was part of that trauma, or an anticipation of it? Something subconscious? Tika played back the voices of her work colleagues, a few of her close friends, women who explained in no uncertain terms how life radically changes once the baby is born- all your priorities, all of your interests and hobbies, everything you believed to be important is rearranged. For the better, to be sure. But still, a loss. Vestigial remnants at this point- pointless to hold on.

She turned off the stream of water. She caught sight of herself, peering over her body. A towel, a footstep out onto the rug- she listened- Namdev, still asleep in the basinet.

It had taken weeks, months, but the depression and anxiety had finally passed.

It was important to her that she state her intent- locked into her own reflection in the mirror- noticing herself, her body a little more buoyant, an extra bounce to her hips, her fulsome breasts, but her hips and abdomen had nearly shrunk down to how they looked before pregnancy. She nodded at herself.

It appeared so obvious. Tika would focus her entire on Namdev- a prayer, a dedication. She had discovered newfound purpose in caring for her son. A resolution. A recompense. Stated simply. What would become of her didn't matter. What would become of him didn't matter. Her sole aim was to provide for Namdev and leave the rest up to God. Outcomes weren't for her to decide and weren't for her to interpret. Her duty was all that mattered. Her purpose was simple.

Love- it brought a new orientation on her outlook, on her life, on her priorities and decisions and thoughts. Finally, she returned to love. "I have come home now, and I will not leave," she whispered to herself, cue-tips in each of her ears. *I have found my duty again. I have found my place. To be a mother- this is what my soul is called to do. To act as his mother, to act as his arms, his legs, his source of nutrition, his protector, his caretaker- called to love. Called to action.* And this is the truth of love- it is an undertaking, it is a sacrifice, it is a duty, it is kinetic. Love was not romance at the cinema, bites of popcorn and refills of Coca Cola- love was not passionate sex, orgiastic and orgasmic fluid and vibrations, feeling good- love was not words from off a pair of moist lips. Love is an action, love is the fulfillment of duty, it is a disabling of selfish needs and focusing on the needs of another. This was the place.

She dried beads of water from off her body, patting one side then another, wrapped up her hair, and opened a container of deodorant.

SUMMER

na jaayate mriyate vaa kadachin naayam

bhutvaa bhavita vaa na bhuya:

ajo nitya: shaashvatoyam puraano

na hanyate hanyamaane sharire

The Self is never born, nor does it ever die, nor, having once been, does it again cease to be. Unborn, eternal, permanent and primeval, it is not slain when the body is slain.

-O-

October hovered beside his son. The tiny creature was asleep in a hospital crib. A glass case, a sterile binky, a swaddling blanket- a new life, capable only of breath, breathing first breaths of tenuous micro-puffs in and out through infant nostrils. Tika was asleep in a mechanical bed, reclined and at rest. A day and a half of labor. Hours of intense pushing. Overnight and uncomfortable and perspiring and screaming and here was the result of a mother's efforts. Namdev's chest rising ever so slightly- October stood over his son, arms crossed, in awe. In awe of his son. In awe of his wife. He couldn't believe it.

Faraway thoughts far-out like thoughts of a stranger but now not so strange, thoughts of a man who October knew he would become but now was becoming, thoughts moving like circular waves of water lulling out from a pebble thrown into the center, thoughts emanated from the core of his being released after a fusion after a synthesis after an explosion from a source beyond time but only witnessed now in this moment with his son:

(Namdev's life started as one cell in the womb of my wife, protected, nourished, growing safely over the last nine months- one cell, a precious singularity- a sacred potency stored nitrogenous and paired A-T C-G, a cell which multiplied and flourished within Tika beside me, present with us, a third person to our two- the three of us- he developed alongside us hidden from view- forming like an entire cosmos right under our noses, an incredible miracle- organs, appendages, tissues, bones- this life this subtle beauty this immense effort this being, here, now, born and asleep before me, October, his father, breathing and alive and

bound up by flesh destined to live out a human experience like the one I have lived like the one my fathers before me lived back to the beginning- this infant who would grow into a boy, learn to talk to read to write to smile to frown to crawl to walk to run to play to emulate and absorb all that we would and could teach him- this boy who would one day grow into a man, a man riddled with contradictions a man who will love and will hate a man who will experience the fullness of life who will experience the limitations of himself, a man who will one day bury me and take responsibility for my wife as the oldest son and eldest child of the Tierney clan- that man who might one day have his own son and gaze down in awe with his mind filled by these same thoughts I am having- completing this circle started here, started with my own father, started much further back than I can imagine)

From the abstract to the concrete, an essential transformation had taken place in the heart of October Tierney. An alchemical emergence- a psychic alteration- from the first frost to the last freeze, quiescent, a woolly moth caterpillar waiting patient and patient and patient. A husband entered the hospital doors, the West Entrance, checking in on the 8th floor with a front desk assistant at the Maternity Ward, holding his wife's coat, helping her fill out blank lines on unnecessary forms required upon patient intake- now, a father standing guard over the tiny, helpless, innocent body of his first-born son.

A sense of purpose had invigorated every empty nook of October's soul. A feeling of destiny. A heart filled with love. A reason for living, for life- alive, in front of him, breathing:

(My life has a purpose- you are the reason why October Tierney is alive)

October had been guilty of selfishness, as all men are prone to. He had entertained existential crises at various junctures in his life, he had suffered bouts of ennui, doom-dread angst and despair, self-centered preoccupations mirroring clinical states such as depression or loneliness or discontent- but now how far away did those days seem? Gone. There were no more questions to wrestle with. No more arguments to consider. No more debates to unravel and dissect. Nothing to interpret or believe in. The answer to every question rested before him: a scalp covered by silky black hair, thin and matted to a perfectly round head, fontanelles,

ethereal eyelashes, blonde eyebrows, pudgy cheeks, untarnished skin with a brown complexion lighter than Tika's but darker than October's glowing hemoglobin red and thriving, closed lips delicate and moist, precious earlobes. The physical presence of his son- a fact, indisputable before October's very eyes. And beyond the physical another layer emerged, a spiritual dimension: a fierce yet tender purity, a white light, vulnerability, a dynamo of potential, a universe on the verge of explosion and expansion and unfolding as unique and complex and beautiful and ugly as any lifetime ever lived, a fusion reactor of invisible power initiated and engaged- a soul. A presence that October could feel like the heartbeats in his own chest.

October the creator.

October the protector.

October the father.

Without any sense of anxiety or despair or fear, he had left the chrysalis behind. October stood over his son, actualized and transformed into a new role, as a new form, endowed with a new purpose and mission.

October considered his own mother and father, now passed on. He felt their spirit, deeply. He felt the lines of his people, of men and women, of children, of survivors and fighters and caregivers, the miracles and the triumphs and the defeats- each generation before him, each evolution leading up to this point- the cascade of *Homo Sapiens*, the grit of cellular life sprung from the seas onto the Earth's surface, the birth of the solar system catalyzed by the ignition of the Sun, the spiral of the galaxy, the cosmic wick lit and bang- time, space, mind, heart- an ingression of creativity, a procession of time of change of history to arrive here at this point. Present, in the presence of so much gone before, in awe of so much to come.

A father and his son.

And in the midnight hour of their hospital room, Postpartum 855, the West Wing of the McCarthy Building, October Tierney made a solemn oath to his boy. In the tranquility of his own heart, in the quiet of his vigil amidst the fluctuating blood pressure monitors and slow drip of an IV bag- fluctuations like ice melting,

like animals emerging from their roosts- October touched the cheek of his newborn son and promised to love and support and protect and place Namdev above everything and everybody else. He made a commitment, a vow, not unlike those he promised to Tika at their wedding ceremony. Out loud. "As long as I breathe, it will be for you Namdev. And whatever my best is, I now give it to you."

Precious breaths continued to punctuate the calm atmosphere of their hospital room.

Their shared silence was not really a silence, and it was not wasted.

--

"Why do you let him walk all over you like that?"

Tika's mother stirred a cup of tea. "You are young, Pratika. You are not married. You do not understand."

A senior in college. An elective course in Women's Liberation. A first-generation daughter of immigrant parents, fighting the past, fighting for the future. A tattoo on Spring Break- another one planned for after graduation. Upset over a dinner-table exchange she had witnessed her last time at home, bringing it up now, wanting to state her opinion, so, "Amma, I am not stupid. You have the right to be treated fairly. He does not rule over you. You should..."

"Tika, enough."

"No! I feel bad for you. Nobody told you these things, when you were my age. You are supposed to..."

"Tika. Listen to me. Listen once. I am not repeating myself, and I am not speaking of this again. Your father is an honorable man. For years I watched him work so hard for you, for me, for our family. He was beat up by thugs. He was made fun of by his peers. But he worked harder than anybody else, he made sure of this. Always. He did his duty. He has given to you and me a good life. And my duty to him, as a wife, is to honor him. I love him without condition. To love is to serve. To love is to accept. No, he is not a perfect man, but none is. I accept him for who he is. I serve him as his wife, because this is my dharma. That is what I am required to do."

"Required by who?"

Tika's mother took a sip of her warm drink. "By God. By my ancestors. By my mother, dead in the slums, and her mother before her. By countless children dead. For everyone who had to suffer for us to be here. You do not see this way Pratika because you are young, you grew up in this country. We look at this differently. I am not mistreated. I am every day grateful to be with your father, to be here with him in America. This is a blessing beyond my dreams. You will never be able to truly understand."

Tika sighed, unsatisfied, "Why can I not understand?"

"Because you have been spoiled too much by this world, and you cannot see beyond what is in front of you."

--

"He is the light of my eyes."

--

Arnold had been reserving himself, but the compulsion to ask at last won out. "Have you thought about the cost, Tober?"

"How do you mean?"

"I hate to bring this up, but- after Alex- there's just so much- everything that comes with it. The plans. The bills- have you thought about a term policy?"

"Life insurance?"

"I know you don't want to hear this October, but it will help, it's... it's a smart thing to do."

"The medical insurance covers the hospital bills, for the most part. What costs?"

Clearing his throat- Arnold spoke in a rapid staccato, "Funeral, burial, the service- all the end of life- I'm sorry, I know you don't want to talk about this- but like I said, after Alex died- I've been through it. I can help you- I wish someone would have told me. It's something you should do. I can get you the information."

Disgusted, "You think I care about the money?"

Arnold paused. Retreating, "No. It's not like that. I'm just trying to offer some advice- I went through this, there's a right way to do it and I had no idea how-"

Erupting, "You still don't have a fucking idea!"

"Tober, come on, I'm only..."

"No. You buried an adult. You buried your wife. You buried someone who had a chance to live, at least, to make a mark on the world. You have a healthy daughter. You still have hope, when you see your daughter, a part of your wife is still with you. I don't have anything!"

"Listen Tober, I'm sorry..." Trailing off.

October slammed his fist on the desk in front of him. "Fuck sorry. Fuck everything. I'm burying my son. My son is dying, a child. A two-year-old fucking boy. You don't have a clue! Nobody does." A hellish tension rushed over October- he wanted to cry, but he couldn't. He bemoaned his entire existence. Sickened- a diseased welp croaked out from his throat. The call disconnected. Arnold rang back. October didn't answer. Instead he put his face into his hands, his elbows locked onto his desk. Sickened with anger, fear, sadness, envy- sick. Namdev. Sick. Dying. Soon to die. Dead.

--

Perky, squeaky, a young nurse's voice: "Ready to cut the cord, dad?"

October inspected the whitish membrane before him. The nurse, in bright purple latex gloves, held out a tiny rope which connected his son's belly to his mother, their lifeline- an offering in front of him, presented. The infant's entire world over the last forty weeks had predicated on the functioning of this flimsy tissue. Blood. Nutrients. Oxygen. The nurse had clamped one end of the umbilical near Namdev's stomach and applied a second clamp a few inches away. No ceremony. No ritual. Despite the act being one of critical importance- a symbolic gesture, a father releasing his son into the world to face it alone, ejected onward as an individual, an untethered atom in the swirl of the flux of existence. A termination of the maternal bond- severing the ties to safety, security, home. October took the medical scissors from

the nurse's latex-glove'd hand and in one snip finalized the gesture.

Almost with a shriek, "Nice job, dad!"

Namdev had been released.

Tika watched October quietly while a midwife finished stitching up the torn fibers of her womb- attuned to the significance of her husband's act.

October fell silent.

The nurse brought Namdev back to his mother's chest, the boy crying. A blue cap was placed on the child's head.

The young nurse announced, "Alright, he can rest here, and in another minute or so we'll move over to the table so we can weigh the little guy and get some tests out of the way. Sound good?"

October couldn't help but instinctively react. Already, a label-little guy? Was his son especially small? He retreated inside the house of his mind after the nurse's interjection- he replayed Tika's voice from months prior- "October, he will be an entire cosmos, from the first moment of his life, the entirety of the universe"- hardly a little guy. October touched the back of his son's neck, feeling the wet black hairs escaping out from his blue cap. He's a booming, immeasurable wonder of nature- this little guy. October felt the boy's shoulder noticing tiny blonde furs covering his skin- delicate, precious- gazing at Tika, her teary eyes- October's own tears swelling and swollen his vision cloudy. He touched the lobe of the boy's ear. What magic! To form that lobe, to grow that skin and configure it with such precision- cellular differentiation- what a miracle of life, life, what a miracle, a miracle- a symphony of coordination between parts and processes, each directive set forth from a single strand of DNA from a single cell- ears, nose, Namdev's dark grey irises reflecting like a gunmetal casket like perfect nautical twilight- the last evidence of the day before total darkness- or- the first sign of the dawn's approach. A living fusion of mom and dad, man and woman, yin and yang, Tika and October, a blend of their bodies and minds and souls, their hearts- awestruck. Little guy?

October fell into an annihilating samadhi of bliss, consumed by a sense of perfect love and fulfillment- his heart full, glad- at

peace- devoted- silent- shanti. He fell and fell and disappeared for an eternity until the assistant nurse bounced over to Tika and plucked Namdev up from out of her arms. October nearly took the boy back from the woman. Why? Why must he go? Watching the woman with his son, over to the portable scale, laid out- October wondered- who cares about his weight? Why is a newborn's weight obsessed over, reported like a batting average or a market index? Why can't the boy rest with his mother? Who cares about pounds and ounces at a tender moment like this? 'How much does he weigh?' followed by 'That's a mighty big boy' or 'What a little guy'- publicized on birth announcements, proudly displayed on bumper stickers. Why doesn't the paperwork ask what season the color his eyes reflect, whether or not his parents broke into tears, what their first moments as a family were like? Instead, a number. Pounds and ounces. Silver and gold. For thousands of years babies were born without their weight being measured- why did our culture, our medical professionals, our status-obsessed establishments and competition-addicted society become so concentrated on documenting the pounds and ounces of its new members? A meaningless number. Why? Upset now, distracted- October, internally- because we want a label! As a society, we want to put you on the bell-curve and plot your course. 'He'll be a linebacker!' or 'She's such a little squirt!' Judged, scaled, then sent forth loaded with expectations and agendas. Right from the get-go, quantified immediately. A numerical value assigned, ready for shipment into modernity, ready for placement in the consumer/producer system, another party to the insensitive greed of our age- another ocean polluter, another plastic aggregator, another oil burner, another electronics buyer, another lay-away shopper, another garbage piler, another internet article reader, another victim of media conglomerates, another American wound up in dumbstupid hoopteedoo horseshit, another destroyer of life, another slave to the apparatus- another sad, unhappy, discontent, desperate cog in the mass machine. 7lbs 13 ounces. Within the normal distribution, an average baby boy- plucked from off his mother's chest and placed naked onto a scale, his first score. Recorded. Documented. Judged. Launched into this world. Cold and screaming, limbs flailing, while numbers are analyzed, forms filled out. Abandoned to a steel gadget then digitized- while mommy and daddy watch, they themselves helplessly integrated with this imperfect, blind machinery at work in nearly

all of our lives. Pre-meditated in every sense- how can we expunge or deny our culpability?

After the excitable nurse had separated Namdev from Tika, October followed behind her, moving to the other wall of the delivery room. A heat lamp. A table. The nurse tested Namdev's reflexes. October cringed, he desperately wanted his son to be placed back on Tika's chest. Angry. He didn't care about stepping, tonic, Moro, grasp, or rooting- October wanted his son to feel his mother's love. October remembered the article he read on attachment theory, about skin-to-skin contact, about Harlowe's monkeys- enough of the APGAR scores, the check-boxes. "Do you want to hold your son?" The nurse looked back over her shoulder.

"Can we put him back on his mother?"

"Sure, we can do that. We just need to be moved out of this room by 3:45."

"3:45?"

"Yep." The nurse looked away and explained, "Hospital policy. You are allowed to stay in labor and delivery for up to an hour and a half after birth, then we need to transfer the three of you to postpartum."

"Let's just put him back on Tika. Can I bring him back to her?"

"Sure. Just be careful, he's still a little slippery." The nurse smiled- a joke she'd told a thousand times. The midwife had finished her repairs. Tika was entirely silent, a granite figure- astonished by the moment, stunned by the intensity, the magnitude- brutally exhausted from two hours of pushing, of bearing down, of October holding up one leg and a nurse holding the other- dried sweat, fluids, blood- a catheter collecting urine. Almost thirty-six hours in the hospital already- Pitocin, IV fluids, epidural medication- blood pressure monitors, a uterine contraction monitor, vitals, charts- tired, but alert. Aware. Present.

Her son was placed back on her bosom.

October whispered to her, "You did an amazing job, so amazing. I'm so proud of you."

"Is he healthy?"

"He is. She scored him a 9 out of 10 on the APGAR rating. Everything looks good." As he listened to his own words, October cursed himself. He cursed the scores, the ratings, the nurse and her scale- no. Cognitive dissonance, then a correction- his tone changed, "I mean, my God Tika, he is beautiful. He's incredible. You did- you were incredible. I love you so much."

Tika's chin was pressed to her neck, gazing. "Look, his eyes are wide open. He is here."

With a full heart, October responded, "He's perfect. You're perfect. You brought him here. You did it."

Tika relaxed her facial muscles, sighed, and let out, "We did it. Together."

--

The cosmos is never silent. Our universe is constituted of raging infinitudes- microwaves, gravitational ripples, neutrinos, gamma particles, anti-matter fluctuations, photon ejections- ceaseless noise. Constant flux. Even our bodies, each heartbeat, each inhalation and exhalation- pulsing. But between the ascent and descent, there is a space, there is point of transition. A demarcation between phases. And our human brains have developed a tuning mechanism which is able to identify and reside within this space. We evolved and developed the capability to filter out the excess, the relentless signal. Not inhaling, not exhaling- between worlds, between motions. This is no accident! If we were look out upon the night sky with the ability to detect electromagnetic pulses, infrared, x-ray, radio waves, etc. the picture would be a chaotic horror due to the sheer quantity of activity present within the frame.

Some say a big freeze is due, ten to the thirtieth years away- that's 1,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000 years. What an unfathomable number! Our final silence isn't exactly impending. In fact, silence is an illusion, stasis an impossibility. Yet our cerebral apparatuses can nonetheless manufacture an eternity of crystalline perfection, they can carve out a pocket of sunshine so wide and vast and forever filled with more 0's than could ever be imagined that one might easily confuse it for a vast, glowing emptiness.

Tika presses a button. The epidural kicks in. More medicine. A pump, a tube. Anesthetic. Analgesic. Pain relief. Her body relaxes, the tension releases. Contracting- contractions- she has been induced. Induction- to succeed in persuading or influencing (somebody) to do something; bring about or give rise to. The doctors have decided to urge her son to leave the comfort of her womb, to abandon the uterus, to join his mother and father and the rest of mankind in the dance. Forcibly. Medically evicted.

Despite the numbing sensation Tika is burdened by a sense of guilt. Guilty. Her mind remains tense. The medicine cannot induce its effects across the interstices of her psyche, no matter how many times the pump injects solution into her. Her boy doesn't want to leave his home in the amnion. And no wonder- with his mother's anxiety, Tika's worries and doubts and neuroses over the last month- it's no surprise to her that Namdev wants to stay hidden, stay protected from her madness. She is a bad mother.

Induce. The word permeates her mind. October holds her hand. An exercise ball, pillows- the temperature has been turned down on the thermostat. The sound of a fetal heartrate tracker in the background... ka thump ka thump kerplucka ker thump ka thump ka thump kerplucka ker thump ka thump ka thump kerplucka ker ker thump ka thump ka thump kerplucka ker thump. It is past midnight, the early morning. October is silent. He offers a thermos of water, extends his arm towards her, holding the mug under her nose, a straw- ice cold. She sips. Even the sleepy, cardiac rhythm cannot soothe her. She is besieged by her own thoughts. She isn't in the hospital antenatal room. Even as a nurse enters, as vitals are checked- it is too late in the evening for small talk- in and out.

Induce. Vacuum extraction. Tika doesn't know what a vacuum extractor is, but she remembers hearing about its function in one of the several New Parent classes she and October attended. She is afraid of the word. The concept, whatever it is, seems unnatural. 'C-section.' Caesarian- named after Caesar, the Roman emperor, stabbed to death, gutted by his own friends. October offers her another drink, she quietly sips. Induced. C-section. Vacuum extractors. She is afraid.

But then a noise commands her attention in the dark room. From unconscious perception to real-time reality, she catches the

heartrate tracker. That rhythm- she takes note of her son's time signature. The biologic percussion, the pattern of his blood flowing from her to him- from her heart to his heart- beating inside of her, inside of him. She closes her eyes. Caesar and his vacuum extractors be damned. Focused now. Her son, alive... ka thump ka thump kerplucka ker ker thump ka thump ka thump kerplucka ka thump ka thump ka thump kerplucka ka ker thump ka thump ka thump kerplucka ker ka thump... her mind relaxes with her body. She is freed from anxiety over the future, regret over the past, existing only in the present time. Time- the interval between contractions, between sonic heartbeats, the millimeters and spikes and valleys painted across a scroll of paper rolling out from the machine... ka thump ka thump kerplucka ker ker thump ka thump ka thump kerplucka ka thump ka thump ka thump kerplucka ka ker thump ka thump ka thump kerplucka ker ka thump... Tika falls asleep. October follows shortly after.

Tomorrow will be an important day.

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October... daydreaming... Rick Balideau... Ranger Rick... Right-Hook Rick... nicknames October hadn't shared with his friend, a friend he acquired riding along on the Express Train at 4:30PM on Fridays... years ago, the same vestibule, every Friday... Big Rick the union ironworker, the man who walked the tightrope, who toted around a faded red IGL00 cooler each week, who first offered October a beer and October figured 'What the hell' and they exchanged pleasantries until Rick got off, two stops before October... the next Friday, October presented a twin pair of Budweiser cans, unearthed from his backpack, the same vestibule... "This week's on me"... for months, exchanging aluminum back and forth, Rick and October became Friday good-time good buddies on that Express Train out of the city... Rick was divorced, never should have gotten married... ten years older than October, maybe more... "October? That's a great fuckin' name!"... his speckled hair dotted with greys and whites and blacks and browns matched an overgrown mustache... his gnarly skin, a tobacco-smoke stain'd hand, the dirt under his fingernails... fingers like holiday sausages, gamey and spiced, cracked skin and worn knuckles... October remembers those hands, the hands of a killer... but Rick was a gentle man, a giant of a man... a killer of reservation maybe, a destroyer of the silly fears which prevent men from connecting with their fellows... yes, Rick the Righteous Brother of the

Railways... his son had a severe form of autism... Rick always smiled when he talked about Danny... he never lamented Danny's disability and bragged like any father would... one afternoon Rick volunteered a picture of his boy, extracted from his wallet with gusto... October admired the pride which radiated from a proud father... a cold beer, a story or two, a gripe about the government or taxes or the weather or bosses... then one day Rick didn't walk into the vestibule. October decided to keep the cold beer in his backpack. It didn't feel right to drink alone, and there wasn't anyone on board who seemed worth sharing with. The next week- nothing. Another went by, and another. Rick was gone. October never saw his friend again. Rick... on another train, another job, drinking with another compadre bringing good tidings down some other run of track... but here this afternoon many years later October is imagining himself as Rick... not imagining like October is wearing Rick's work boots holding the red IGL00 with Rick's hands but rather Rick's personality and lionhearted spirit is walking along in October's own shoes, an infusion of Rick's psychic qualities and life story into October's own physical body... and the scene goes like this: at the station, waiting on a Northbound, October is buying a newspaper, three rusty quarters into the slot, and while he bends over his son (Rick's) Danny has run out of sight and ended up in front of a tight-buttoned business man, pulling at the man's overcoat... a beige overcoat, a Wall Street flowing overcoat... and Danny tugs and laughs with a "Hey mister!" and the pudgy passenger waiting there misty next to the steel tracks with the other passengers lingering about minding their own business he pushes Danny's hand away and gruffs "What the hell is wrong with you boy?" because the business man doesn't realize the boy has a developmental disability... October happens to glance up and witnesses the man touch his son... quick, assertive steel-toe footsteps like thunder clap-clap-clap on the rainy asphalt... "Hey buddy, uh, can you tell me something?"... "Sure"... "What exactly is your malfunction?"... the middle-age'd titan of industry gulps, exposed for what truly existed underneath the neckties and platinum watches... an insecure, sexless, balding, egoic-shell of posturing ballooned up with the hot air of vapid self-absorbed rationalizations... the epitome of the American Dream, the last rung of the company ladder built on a scaffold of lies and nonsense... the businessman cannot respond... "You know this boy has autism? He's a disabled kid. And you're puttin' your hand on him? Like you

fuckin' know somethin'?" and October pushes the man's shoulder first... the shoulder with an umbrella underneath it, a hand hanging down holding a briefcase... the black umbrella falls to the ground... a puddle, the asphalt... black and glistening like an oil slick arctic ice sheet at first freeze... frozen, the executive club member hears, "You don't talk much, do you? Huh?"... October propels both hands against the man's chest, shoving him off balance... the leather briefcase drops... the man is sent backwards, nearly off balance... years of pent up anger and frustration erupt pyroclastic from October and furious and another push sends the suit-wearing executive to the ground... shaking with fear, he eeks out a puny "Somebody help me!" before October silences him finally with a right hook across the jaw... the global account leader pinned... SkyMiles and RewardPoints were of no use now... October poised over his body... Danny watching nearby... another punch lands, another... blood... but then a voice, his son's voice... a sweet, disarming voice whispers, "Daddy, let's go, I want a cheeseburger"... daddy... October gets up from off the man and takes Danny into his arms, close, he kisses the boy's forehead and they leave the platform... from a diner across the street they watch the trains go by, Northbound, Southbound, relishing the smell of a warm plate of French fries between mouthfuls of double-cheeseburger.

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October had departed early for work, as was becoming his custom. Lots of business. New contracts, projects, client relationships to maintain and develop. Money. More money. More bills, more costs, Tika working less and less staying home more and more- October is gone.

Namdev had stirred, again, to feed and fuss, and Tika found herself alone with the boy rocking back and forth in their upstairs loft... shhhh... back and forth. Five months old. Tika, being wise and keen and in tune with her son, growing into her role as a new mother more and more with each moment, she notices a particular arrangement of light striking her and Namdev through the blinds. Hmm? Curious. She ponders the physicality of light, a particle packet of wavelength bulked together and cutting through the midday air of their apartment loft. Tika sits and wonders in eternity. Light. The only particle for that which there is no anti-particle, no counter force or element- itself self-evident and eminent in creation. Photons, boundless and unrivaled, traveling at the speed

limit of time in a timeless state, the light of the universe. The light of God. The light of consciousness, the light of love- a universe unified and bound by love, a universe unified and bound by consciousness. So if there is thought, there is love- the first thought is the loving thought. Undivided, that which for there is no other.

She traces their photonic origins eight minutes back to their release at the surface of the sun then another million years to their fission at the core- pouring into the den like sand, travelers across an immense expanse to make holy contact with her retinae- to marry neuronal partners activating cortical miracles. Light... spirit... love.

The beams fall across a blanket covering Namdev's lower half up to his face, a face now calm and slackened, relaxed.

Tika forgets the diagnoses and specialists, the pharmaceutical options- she gazes down upon Namdev, doting, enamored by her boy's features. Her beautiful boy, the cynosure of her being, is pressed safely to her body. She inspects him, is delighted by him like a wealthy banker's child might confront a worn-down Frisco Chinatown Marketplace in the 1920's while being towed down the street by her nanny- a glimpse of magic.

A trance-like scene, she takes note of his mouth, the callous patch at the very front of his top lip like a miniature beak- his elbows, the folds of skin into his arms, soft and brown- thumbs the size of her thumbnails- his faint eyebrows, woven by silkworms, nearly invisible like a daytime moon blending amongst a sky of cloudtops- his widow's peak hairline, the dark black hair thin and not covering his scalp entirely, fine and precious but also a touch greasy from her hands supporting his head- his tiny, thin legs, his chubby thighs, his playful gripping toes- his butterfly ears- the tiny red marks on his full cheeks, at the base of his neck, stork bites- his scrunched nose, inhaling then exhaling each nostril flared left and right and the thin wrinkle at the bridge of his brow.

A moment of silence between a mother and her son.

She is not taking care of a sick boy. She is not waiting for a disease to kill him. She is not making funeral arrangements. She is not planning his medical regimen, dietary programs. The beams

of light fell upon her, and him- together. A yoga, a union- formed in love and light. A mother and her son- she continues to rock, back and forth.

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"I'm- I'm not in it, Tober. I can't explain it, but I can't focus I'm so- pissed. I'm so angry- it's like... I just want to punch these people in the face. I know it doesn't make any sense but... you can't let me go back in that room. I'm going to say something. I'm sorry. I- I can't control myself."

October glared, in disbelief. "What do you mean? I need you. This is where you hammer the forecast evaluation and reel them in. What are you talking about? You want to punch them? Come on. You're the most relaxed cat I know, Arnold. You're fine. You're good."

His eyes said more than his words, "I'm really not, Tober. I'm not in a good place."

"Alright." An acceptance. "Okay. Here's what we do. I'll tell them you caught sick or something. Get out of here. Take some time, alright?"

"I'm sorry Tober, I- I don't know what else I can do."

"Go. It's fine. I'll take care of it. Take some time off. I'll call you after the weekend. Tuesday, alright? Take off until Tuesday. I know everything is crazy. I'm sorry. I really am."

"Thanks, Tober- I wish I-," but instead of finishing Arnold turned away and walked towards the lobby. There was nothing else to explain.

October had forgotten- he hadn't thought about Alex since the funeral, since Arnold came back to work. He had forgotten to order the flowers. He was too concerned about Chicago, then Phoenix, then Baton Rouge and St. Louis. He had forgotten to ask Arnold how his seven-month old child was doing. He forgot to ask Arnold how he was holding up.

It had been two months since Arnold's wife died. October figured it was time to move on. He forgot to invite his friend over for dinner- Tika had sent over several meals, wasn't that enough? Summer was busy for everyone. Everyone had their commitments. Everyone has their problems. That's life, right? And now that Tika

was pregnant- the business- busy-ness- October was busier than ever. It was too much to keep track of. He gave Arnold time off, wasn't that enough? The end of the quarter was coming- he was pushing to meet a projection, a quota, for the numbers- wouldn't a nice bonus make up for everything? New contracts, the latest market space opportunity- money fixed everything. And now that October was having a child of his own, starting a family, he thought he understood where Arnold's priorities were at. They needed money, and October was helping cast as many nets and pipelines as possible.

But at what cost?

Arnold stepped into the elevator in luxury office building with his face reddening, his eyes closed- defeated. He walked into an empty compartment. He did not hit a button. He did not care about up or down. Arnold leaned against the wall and slid to the ground. He sat on the floor of the elevator. People stepped on, people stepped off. They looked down at him, ignored him- despite sharing the same elevator, they did their best to quarantine themselves from Arnold- their eyes and minds and hearts avoided him as they rode down to the Ground Floor, then back up. In clandestine lunch tables they would regale coworkers over their encounter with such a defective.

Arnold kept his face in his hands.

Important people with important agendas watched their cellphone screens and pretended Arnold didn't exist- until a global finance strategist became deeply alarmed and alerted the building's security team (he would ride a commuter train home and shout to his wife over a cellphone about the whole ordeal, embellishing his role in disarming a potential terrorist threat to make sure his fellow train car passengers knew they were safer than ever thanks to his company). While Arnold was escorted out of the building, his arms being carried by two men larger than himself, he was thinking about October, about how he wished his friend would have said "I'm so sorry for your wife, I'm sorry for Alex. I really am, Arnold. But it'll be alright. We're here for you." Arnold wished October had remembered to be a friend.

But October had forgotten to be a friend, he had forgotten to be gentle. October adjusted his necktie and strolled back into a well-furnished boardroom without realizing any of Arnold's truth- back

to the presentation, the slides, the numbers- he didn't even watch Arnold walk down the hallway to make sure he was alright, towards the elevator, descending. By the time Arnold made it to the sidewalk outside, escorted by guards, October had forgotten everything.

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October wants out. He is eager to forfeit his existence, to end this trip around the wheel as October Tierney and come back as one of them. Anyone- so long as it wasn't himself, so long as he no longer existed. Vying for a different set of feet and a different pair of shoes to slip into- coveting their morning coffee, their showers at the end of the day- anything but his own.

Pushing a shopping cart past the produce racks- he would have gladly traded places with the Girl Scout Troop leader outside the storefront, the middle-age woman wearing a green vest documenting orders and collecting checks. One of the girls- maybe the shrumpy redhead dawned in freckles, or the overweight pig-tail'd blonde. To sell cookies in the morning and have mom pick you up at noon- how seductive childhood seemed. Straightforward. Regimented. Predictable. Safe.

Maybe he could assume the role of a foreign checkout bagger- underpaid, overworked, downing a nip of cheap vodka in the driver's seat of a rustbucket'd 1998 Chevy Cavalier before a trip back home to a two-bedroom apartment with seven people occupying it. To live the life of an assistant manager- stocking rice pilaf boxes in Aisle 7, saving paychecks and cutting coupons for an engagement ring to present to a high school sweetheart. October longed to switch places with them. Any of them. How about the old man desultory and puttering out in the asphalt parking lot smoking a burnt-wind cigarette in 12-degree freeze, reeking of tar and urine and regret- perfect. That would do fine. Give me your tired, your poor- so long as I don't have to be me.

Pushing his cart down another aisle, October hadn't made much ground on his list of groceries. He continued to search the crowd- an old woman examining a yellow pepper for bruises, an Asian man wearing headphones, an infant strapped into a backpack carrier gazing across loaves of bread and sugar cookies in the bakery, bound up in the care of his mother.

Of course October didn't consider the pain of his fellows, their sufferings, their own private tortures and fettered hang-ups of habit. He didn't consider maybe they too would be happy to trade places. He couldn't imagine why- none of them could be hurting to the degree in which October did. Anything, any amount of pain or grief or turmoil would have been paltry compared to his own blight. His eyes looked upon the world with a festering jealousy.

These people don't know how good they have it.

Because they weren't October Tierney, a cursed child reared from the house of Oedipus- forlorn and anguishing and star-crossed without any hope for redemption. They didn't father sick children, dying children. They didn't have a failed marriage barely holding on, like a scab petrified on a kneecap- ready to fall. Sexless. Loveless. Cold. Hopeless. Silent. Woe to him! A nuptial outcome he had watched transpire for so many other couples, one he once vowed to avoid. A conscious determination- thwarted by the hands of the fates. His and Tika's relationship had dissolved into nothing more than a contractual agreement. A business partnership- held intact by the laws of the state. A sheet of paper, their license, signed and notarized, represented the depth of their relationship- thin, tenuous, all too easy to ball up and trash and dismiss forgotten into the wastebins of the void.

While he sorted through packages of Insta-Quik Rice, October realized he hated Tika. He loathed her. His disdain had calcified. Anything she said, anything she did- a cancer had grown into his heart, had infected his memories and his affection and his attraction for his wife. And why? Where did the infection originate? October wanted to excise the tumor, he wanted to treat the sickness, but there was no cure for his resentment. And resentment was the cause- October resented her for being the source of Namdev's illness, for contributing the fatal gene (unproven, but believed). He resented her for relishing in her role as caretaker. He resented her because she was the reason for all of this pain, all of this suffering. He couldn't bring himself to kiss her, let alone hold her around those perfectly wide hips, those slender legs. In fact, their last kiss had been the final wound- months ago, unprompted, Tika had leaned over in their bedroom, a rare night October beside her instead of alone on the living room couch- she thought a simple display of intimacy, a kiss, might do it, might bring him back- lying under the sheets,

she nestled up to him, arms over his back- he couldn't have been further away. Lifetimes apart, a gulf between them, a tectonic ruff accelerating red-shift'd and impossible to return. He could not kiss her back. He could not move his mouth to hers. Frozen. As Namdev aged through his second year of life, October's coldness towards Tika approached a temperature that might freeze every atom in the ever-expanding universe some hundred billion million years from now. So far away. Lifetimes from those first moments- when they trembled in joy over finding out Tika was pregnant, when he was moved by love the first time October watched Tika feed Namdev from her breast, the young boy in her arms, nearly asleep, a smile-lifetimes gone and dead, forgotten. He no longer dreamt of her body, he no longer held onto her with ardor in secret, passionate scenes of his imagination- he no longer revered her motherhood, he no longer worshipped her soul. Everything they had built, this cancer inside of him now had annulled.

And now considering their marriage, considering the state of the union, his predicament- sorting through fresh apples, mindless- October couldn't help but feel cheated. He hadn't been afforded the opportunity to discover whether or not they could have made it under 'normal' circumstances. An asterisk clung to their deterioration. An illness- their son was sick. And that illness denied Tika and him the ability to pursue the American dream.

The last hopeful thought in his mind- maybe we could have made it?

He approached the Fresh Deli Counter. Convinced he would be far better wearing an apron, a hair net, slicing roast beef day in and day out asking "Is this too thick?"- unaware of the gentleman across from him, unaware of the man's battle with addiction, loss of jobs, an infection, the dissolution of trust, the agony of a habit- it never crossed October's mind that all mankind was born to suffer, that life was suffering, that nobody escaped. Golden truths spluttering- to suffer with grace is the true test, to suffer with dignity. Notions of that sort did not cross October's conscience as he moved his cart to the check-out line.

He only considered the pain waiting for him back home. The pain in his bones, where his spirit once lived but had since been evicted and left to die out in the chaos of the world. Whatever joys, whatever pleasures, whatever happiness October had collected and cultivated and protected in his life suddenly washed up on the

shores of the riverbank like dead frogs. Graveyards and boneyards and crawling things- the horror. Suffering. In self. Lost in a darkness- *How did I let it get so far gone? What had I done to deserve this? Why can't I escape?*

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"I can't believe how well you are holding together, Pratika."

Tika's eyelids shut, partially in disbelief and partially in exhaustion. "How well I am holding together?"

"You come to work. You finish your shift. You treat the patients the same as you did before your son... you... I guess... I don't think I would be able to get out of bed if something happened to my baby. I don't mean to overstep, I... you really are frieking amazing. I guess that's what I am trying to say. I admire your courage. You're amazing."

Caught off guard, Tika could have responded with 'You don't even know the half of it' and explained October's recent departure- but instead she responded with humility, unfiltered and honest and insightful, "It is different than how you think. I am lucky in some way, because I did not have to lose Namdev all together at once. Instead it was piece by piece, the last year, two years. He slowly disappeared from me. I grieved a little each day, a little more the next day. If it happened all of a sudden, unexpectedly, I think it would be much more difficult."

Processing her coworker's comment- Lorraine, mother of three, fifty-six years old, a son in college- "I would never be able to look at things that way. It's amazing you have that perspective."

"You would be surprised what you can do when you are forced to do something. You are just as capable as me, I am sure. Your mother is sick, you take care of her, you know how these things go." She smiled at Lorraine. "You really have no choice."

"But you did, Pratika. You do. You could have quit. You could be pissed off at the world. That's the choice I would have made. I promise you. I would be in my bedroom with a bottle of wine. It takes courage, what you're doing."

Tika had finished cleaning out her plastic Tupperware container. She noticed her upset stomach had not dissipated. She packed up a

tote-bag, acknowledging the nausea. Lorraine had her coat buttoned but she waited for Tika to join her. The employee closet, open, closed. The two paired up and started out of the clinic, walking past the exam rooms, the x-ray units, the supply closet- the front desk and courteous 'Good byes' to the young girl at her computer. Perfunctory. Lorraine continued, outside the building, on the sidewalk, "I can't imagine your pain, what you're going through. You have a choice. And your choice is frieking amazing. I admire it. I really do."

"Thank you."

"I've been meaning to say something to you for a while. What you.. I wanted to make sure it was the right time, and I said the right thing."

"Thank you, Lorraine."

Tika didn't want to upset Lorraine. She didn't want to describe the extent of her wounds, to explain how the scars hadn't finished soldering and infected blood and maggots were still festering. She didn't want to explain the person who showed up to work, who drank the morning coffee, who sat in traffic on the way home with the radio turned off and the windows rolled up- that person was a shell. A casing. An emptiness existed within Tika, an aching void so bottomless and expansive that it could never be filled again. How can you explain to somebody that you are losing yourself, while standing in front of them? It wasn't worth upsetting or confusing Lorraine. Instead a simple 'thank you,' humble, easy. Because in the core of her being, Tika had departed. What belied her resignation was her ability to keep functioning in the world of the everyday. She released herself in a way that could not be discernable to a casual observer. She had abandoned herself. She was gone. Her soul had been taken from her, burnt up in the crematorium with the bones of her son. She stood invisible- in plain sight.

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Tika was packing up a third suitcase. Her books, her clothes, her relics and remnants of a daughter's time imprisoned in her father's house- packed away- down to personal hygiene and hair care products and various lotions- the final traces of her existence in the Vasudevan household on the bathroom countertop.

Her mother came home to find her daughter in a frenzy. She set her bag by the door, removed her shoes, carried the groceries into their tight kitchen and then waited. She paused. She prayed. A mantra from her childhood that had carried her through to adulthood to motherhood that allowed her to face whatever God might be putting before her- Mrs. Vasudevan, whispering inside the cave of her heart, 'Be silent, know I am here.' Be silent. I am. In all things, in all people, in all times and spaces- silence- presence.

Up the stairs, opening the door- "Tika, what is this?"

Hunched over on the carpeted floor, the dark purple walls reflecting a glow from the fluorescent ceiling light, the spinning fan, "I cannot do it anymore, Amma."

"Cannot do what?"

"Suffer under this roof, under his roof. I will not do it anymore."

Mrs. Vasudevan had sensed this moment. It had been building for years. Threats had been uttered by her daughter, like bits of buckshot here and there, but were never acted upon- at least not until now. An escalation fueled by arguments, screaming matches, debates at the dinner table- Tika's father had pushed his daughter to the end of her patience. He had become a tyrannical overlord who patronized Tika in every interaction that occurred between them- the only thing to do was run.

"Tika, your father..."

"How can you sit there and defend him? You should be packing up too. Everything he does is..." Tika stood up, slightly taller than her mother, and stepped towards the older woman who wore a turquoise shawl and a traditional red bindi on her forehead. The third-eye, seeing through the veil of maya- listening to Tika shout and complain from behind her fortress of rationalizations. Mrs. Vasudevan inspected her daughter's words, filtered them for truth- the truth of a child, a hurt child, a wounded animal reactive and unsettled- "...and that is why I'm never coming back. Never!"

"This is what you have decided, then?"

"Yes! I refuse to stay any longer. I refuse to subject myself to him any longer. I will not- I do not have to subject myself to him any longer. I cannot do it anymore. I was not made to suffer!"

Before confronting the logistics of her daughter's decision- where she would live, how she would afford it- "Yes, you are right. We are not made to suffer. Suffering is something we do on our own- it is done by us- we decide to suffer when we decide to exist outside of Brahman. When we decide to be a woman or man with desires, when we decide to be separate from the flow of creation, the whole that is Brahman. We make the decision. We suffer and say we are hurt. You are correct when you say this. Suffering is a human creation. It is not God's intent for us. God did not will it for us."

"I don't have time for this..."

"Of course, I can tell you are in a great hurry to do this."

"You know what I mean..."

"I know you are frustrated with your father, Tika. You are frustrated by his rules, by his decisions, by what he says. But examine what he does. What he has done for you, and for me. For our family. You lose sight in your rush."

Tika wanted to pull out her own hair. She wanted to stomp, to curse, the hurl insults at her mother and destroy her equanimity- to make her understand that they weren't living in 7th Century India, that the old ways had died, that Tika was a progressive woman living in an era of progress who was subjected to the authority of a dominant male, a masochistic male, an unsympathetic unwavering despot- what good was that bindi? What could this old woman see? Amma would never understand. She would never know- a submissive, meek woman. Scoffing, "You sound like a robot when you talk about him, do you know that?"

Mrs. Vasudevan mused, "Because I do not become upset like you? Because I keep control of my emotions?"

"Because you are blind! You are blind and weak."

"The girl who quits on her family duty calls another weak? The girl who cannot see what gratitude she should possess, she calls me blind? No Tika. No." Mrs. Vasudevan grabbed her daughter's wrist- a point was to be made and made completely- "You are blinded by your passions. You are blinded by your desires, by your thoughts. You do not see the truth. You are an upset child running away from a problem, instead of confronting it. You would renounce

your duty as a daughter, as a member of this household. No," she pointed at her daughter, a gesture which stunned Tika, "do not confuse us. I am not the blind one. I am not the weak one."

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"A super wolf blood moon?"

October nodded. Namdev slept in the rocker next to their kitchen table. The Tierney's were enjoying a pizza together, half **Meat Lovers Supreme** and half **Vegetable Extra-Special**, whispering back and forth. "That's what the news is calling it. Let's see if I can remember- alright, it's a super moon because the moon is closest to the earth relative to the rest of its orbit, wolf because it's the full moon of January, and blood because it's a total eclipse. A super wolf blood moon. And who said new parents experience brain damage?"

Tika giggled quietly with her husband.

They watched Namdev rock back and forth in a Swing N' Sing.

Tika deliberately chewed at a slice of vegetable. October could tell she was lost in thought, in the past somewhere- a story, a lesson, something her mother had taught her. He waited in anticipation before she swallowed and went on with, "For a Hindu, an eclipse is a bad omen. Tradition calls for a fast, cleansing, then an offering. I remember my mother teaching me how to prepare tarpana with cow's milk, sugar, saffron, cardamom. My father would gawk at her like she was mad." Tika swallowed a gulp of diet soda, a faraway look about her. "But I believed it. She told me the story of why the moon and sun turn dark for an eclipse. I was a little girl, I cannot forget. She taught me an eclipse happens because Rahu, one of the evil gods who fought against Vishnu in the great war, continues to hold ill will against the moon and sun. A grudge. Because during this great war between the forces of good and evil, it so happened that Rahu disguised himself as one of the good gods in order to steal an important healing nectar from Vishnu. But the moon, with her light, saw through Rahu's disguise and reported the trick to Vishnu. Vishnu chopped off the head of Rahu. So because Rahu has no body, when he gobbles up the sun or the moon in an eclipse, it does not last for long, and safely returns."

October enjoyed the myth. A good story. A fun idea. Something to be toyed with- a playful image of a man eating the moon- a moon

made of cheese- October was satisfied, wiping away grease from his lips with a napkin. "Isn't it incredible how different cultures come up with different meanings, different explanations for the same event?"

"It is. But there is a science behind the Vedas. Rahu is more than.. Rahu is not only a make-believe image. Rahu is a symbol for something real. Ancient astronomers observed his position in the sky with much diligence. They would watch the night sky, night after night, for generations."

October picked off a pepperoni, nervous that he upset his wife. Joking, he offered, "That's discipline. I can't even stick to a diet for a week."

Tika continued, "It paid off. Those astronomers determined that Rahu has an orbital cycle of 18 years. And now modern science has confirmed this number, 18 years, is the same as the precessional orbit of the moon. Eighteen years also is the length of a saros, which is a cycle that is used to predict eclipses of the Sun and moon."

"Really?"

"Really. I have studied this. And what always fascinated me is that most astronomers study stars, lights in the sky, planets. Objects that can be seen. But Rahu was a void, a darkness. I was impressed by this for some reason- to understand a darkness in the night sky." Tika flexed her forearm, examining her right wrist- a blue inked image danced, Vishnu- a conch and a discus, a battle cry and the biting edge of dharma- a mudra for protection, a lotus flower for enlightenment. Tika's mother read her the Gita, taught her the wisdom of the Vedas while Tika's father subscribed to research magazines, *Scientific American* and *Discover*. Vishnu stood upright, in perfect balance- modernity and magic, particle accelerators and astrological charts- centered between two worlds, her upbringing informed her perspective on life. Tika worked through both perspectives. Eventually she no longer found it troublesome to live between two truths in a state of paradox. Eventually she became amused by her parents' arguments over whether witch doctor incantations or doctoral theses held more weight. Mr. and Mrs. Vasudevan rarely came to terms with their disparate world views, and they preferred not to discuss such matters, so the discussions were rare. But as a young woman Tika began to relish

in exploring these unknown spaces. She became comfortable taking bits and pieces of both sides to better understand the whole.

October could tell she was deep in reflection. He offered, "So those ancient astronomers had their facts right, they just added some flavor, with the myths. Which I actually prefer, to be honest. I love how you know this stuff. It's so much more interesting than what I read on that internet article."

"Indians... we enjoy things spicy."

She winked at October, and his heart inflated. He reached over and took his wife's arm. "You're incredible."

Tika cracked her neck slightly, a nervous habit whenever she received a compliment she was unsure she deserved. "I do not think I know too much. Especially about this little one."

They turned to Namdev, simultaneously.

Muffled, subconscious, "Yeah, he is still a mystery, isn't he?"

Agreeing with her husband, "Very much so. Yes. A complete mystery. It will take many nights of watching his sky..." Her voice wandered away.

October clenched his wife tighter. "Can you believe we created him, Tika?"

The previous evening, Tika had lit a candle next to the bassinet, on her nightstand, to perform the *chhathi pooja*- to guide Vidhaata, the goddess of destiny, to the boy. She searched for a sweet mantra soft inside her heart. She struggled. She searched and sought to bless her son, understanding she was blessed by him in return. And now, with October's words echoing in her secret cavern of thought, stirring her heart- they had created him, she had housed him and been his temple for over nine months- what had she done, what defilements, what impurities...

A shift occurred.

Abrupt.

Fear grew within Tika. She was terrified by an awful guilt. She had not been a worthy host, and she would not become a good mother. In an instant, she remembered it... a dream, a vision before Namdev's birth... never to be shared... she became unnerved in an

instant. A life force endowed to her for protection. Tenuous. Fated. She was unprepared. She would fail. Tika shuttered, watching her son like a gazelle watches a sleeping lion- the reality of their family, the reality of his existence, the reality of her inadequacy crashed across her consciousness as a violent wave. Images from the dream... images in front of her.

She excused herself to the bathroom.

She wiped a tear from off her cheek before it could fall off her chin.

She changed another absorbent pad from her underwear. Urine. Blood. Ibuprofen.

Hobbling back to the kitchen, standing at the faux-granite island covered in vases of flowers, "October, I am going to get some rest, before he wakes up again to feed. Do you mind, to watch him?"

"That's a good idea. Get some sleep."

"Thank you."

As she approached the door to their bedroom, his voice called after her, "I love you Tika. You're doing an amazing job with him, you really are."

Tika turned to her husband and smiled weakly. Then the door shut. She hobbled to her side of the king mattress. Alone. On their bed- the eclipse, Rahu's head- she considered preparing an offering, but was too worn down to act on her superstitions, to propitiate. She was too weary to consider herself a visage of Kali, a matron of the blessed Mother, an extension of the Gaian life force, a Creator, a giver of breath. No- cold, hard, rationalistic science would win tonight with its atoms and molecules and crude physics, Kepler and Dawkins and Dennett- alone, Tika nodded off to sleep.

--

Cradling Namdev in the bathroom- cold water runs, soothing- her son had been fussing with the babysitter, so Tika took him in her arms and began experimenting with various toys, a myriad of white noises, different positions in her arms. After tinkering with little success, she reverted to a tried-and-true method: seated on the edge of the tub, the boy tight in her arms turned sideways, the water running. The effect took hold. Namdev quieted, and his

mother's thoughts wandered backwards to a moment earlier in the night through a set of car speakers, a narrator, a program on the air: Tika's ears tuned half/way watching traffic watching pedestrians watching lights, finished with another 12-hour shift at the clinic- two voices discussing the birth of the universe, the Big Bang, begun with a singularity an explosion a heat infinite and immeasurable KABOOM- wonderous over whether or not the cosmos will expand forever with her galaxies running away and away, or will death crunch and collapse particles of matter and energy back into another singularity? Tremendous equations, critical masses- with a British accent, one of the voices provides an explanation about Stephen Hawking's ingenious elimination of certain nasty mathematical problems related to singularities by employing the help of a concept called 'imaginary time'- an alternative viewpoint to think about the progression of 'ordinary' space-time as we experience it- since real time includes the past, present and future running along one axis, imaginary time would be perpendicular to the present, allowing for a closed surface to form instead of a singularities- three dimensions in space, one dimension in imaginary time, yielding a Euclidean sphere- the voice advises the listeners to forego one of the spatial dimensions for the moment to simplify the four dimensional framework, as its easier to think in three-so think- imagining- imaginary time- a globe, a model, finite in extent, but without boundary- bound, but boundaryless- the key point- in this model, the inception of the universe begins and is born at one pole, expanding until the equator then running down to the other end, to the opposite pole, where death waits- obviating the need for outside intervention, the implications enormous on how the cosmos are understood- can you picture the sphere? Can you feel your own existence tracking along a similar course? Birth, life, the midpoint equatorial high-water-mark glory days wide and fat and sunny, then accelerating scaling down and down the wrinkled lines of longitude towards the final hours- onward- no difference between north and south poles, the Big Bang and the Big Crunch- imaginary time.

Tika adjusts her spinal column, tucks in her knee, and is now leaning against the ceramic tub, one of her legs outstretched, her backside resting on a comfy lavender rug. Life, death- Namdev asleep in her arms- at peace.

Namdev's babysitter driving home, cursing traffic down the highway determined because she has really earned her bottle of wine tonight...

Tika continues wandering: one of the voices proposes it may be possible, then, to quantum tunnel from the beginning to the end, the end to the beginning, from one pole to another- jettisoned across, the moment of death back to the moment of birth- cycling and recycling, *ad infinitum*. Tika's thoughts shift, thinking not in the cosmological but in human terms, extrapolated thanks to a strange mathematical model- consider it- for a man or woman to relive an entire lifetime endlessly confined to his or her existence, over and over and over again, born-living-dying-reborn. *How many times have I lived this life? How many times have I sat in this bathroom with my son? Will I do it over and over and over again? Is it a nightmare? A blessing? Is it the same every time? Can nirvana be understood as an escape outside of the 'sphere'? Or what if the universe expands infinite, what if the Hawking's models are incorrect? What is the correlate for us as mortal mankind then? A soul, a life after death? Unbound? Infinite?*

Namdev coos in his slumber. The tub, the drain, the water- Tika drops one elbow, then another on the rug- supported, relaxed. Her mind is self-catalyzing and branching new trails of network. And here is where it happens, her eyes pointed up at the ceiling lights, then down to a used towel stuffed underneath the vanity- a moment of *déjà vu*- like she had been there before. Been here before. A parallel between cosmology and spirituality, clear and intuitive, she lands her thoughts:

If Namdev will have to relive this short life of his, then I will make it as comfortable as possible. I will be with him for each iteration. Each replication- here I will be. With him. Protecting him. Caring for him. And if his soul is to carry on, if this moment is a singularity that cannot be avoided but will pass forever unique and never to be seen again- then my soul will carry on as well. I will see him again under different auspices. Maybe even better auspices. So here is my affirmation- if Namdev has to live his short life over and over, I will make it as enjoyable and as beautiful and as perfect as I can.

The babysitter is at home, on her couch- the bottle, the glass, she blurts out, "Thank God today is over, for good."

Tika with her ear pressed to the speaker, her earring puncturing her neck- a second time, a third time- again and again- "Hey Teek, just wanted to tell you how much I love you, I can't wait to get home and be with you and our little bean." Replaying voicemails... the oven timer buzzes... rain against the windows... snow on the ground sublimating into a fog... not a single vestige of summer, of autumn's memorial service. An eternal winter- grey, cold- March, and the spring is late. The darkness runs overdue.

Our heroine is feeling particularly disappointed in herself. Disappointed because she is in hiding. Because she is whimpering helpless under a fleece blanket in the bedroom out-of-breath like a prey animal about to be devoured. Tika selects another message. Voicemails left behind- the wake of the flood. She listens. She sighs. There was no sense dwelling in the unbearable past. Wishing for her relationship with October to return to its incipience was as silly as wishing for Namdev's infancy, was as silly as wishing back her own innocence- passed, gone. Those days had been lived. To hang on was toxic, and Tika believed today was the moment, now was the time, and in the present was where the heavens operated, where forever dwelt. But still- his voice brings her comfort. Even as a recorded message, October's words relieve her weary heart. Maybe now was not the time to be resolute. Maybe she should take it easy on herself. Maybe whimpering was alright. Afterall, she had lost a son. Two years of fighting, of believing, two years at her boy's side, two years of empathy and compassion, subsuming his pain and agony and ill health, taking on his burden- Tika acknowledges her wounds. She needs consolation, a chance to recover. Fortification. And she craves her partner, her husband, her lover, her best friend- the resentment of months, the hatred and contempt had left her.

Why had she pushed him away? What had she done to force him to abandon her? Why hadn't she waited, committed? Penelope- desperate, searching- but she couldn't understand the reasons behind October's departure. Why had he left? Why that day? Guilt clings to her like cheap perfume, like cigarette smoke- how could he know, how could she know? Should she have recognized it, a hint, a giveaway? She wraps herself tighter in the blanket. She listens to the rain, her breath- even the silence between intervals sounded grey. Then a memory fills her imagination- a trip back to Mumbai,

a trip to homeland to India, harmonic scales of red and oranges and saffron golds, sounds like colors like smells like an assault on her senses, wonderful kaleidoscopic beep-beep traffic and people shouting prices from opposite ends of a train station market... so distant, passed. Her auditory world is frozen, muddled like the dirty snow in the parking lot outside.

Tika replays voicemail message after voicemail message, each one an attempt to battle her gloom. Several hours slipped by, evading the present, searching through the past, a past which contained everything unbearably over with and gone- her son, her husband- moments, joyful and haunted- time erodes, slowly- mourning- एक हजार मील चौड़े, हजार मील ऊंचे पहाड़ की कल्पना करो। अब कल्पना कीजिए कि एक बार हर सौ साल, एक पक्षी पहाड़ पर उड़ता है, अपनी चोंच में एक रेशम का दुपट्टा पकड़े होता है, जिसकी सतह के पार वह ब्रश करता है पहाड़ की चोटी। दुपट्टे को पहाड़ से नीचे उतारने में लगने वाले समय की कल्पना कीजिए- blues and blacks, charcoals and violets, colors drip across the canvas, her third eye acting as a brush and her vision the pallet... her senses heightened under the patiently rotating zodiac... the heat of the city penetrating, unable to sleep, rolling over... her fingers make contact with an unexpected surface, skin... flesh... firm, muscled and wiry and her hand is drawn around his body, down his chest and torso... on her side, facing him, her other hand solicits a response... two bodies recognizing the vitality in each other, her own skin excited, both of them in their underwear above cotton sheets damp with perspiration... sweat drops off the moon in an open window, peering in, a witness to the kinetic celebration poised to ensue... the goddess Rati reborn, fingertips dipped into the pool of life of lust of passion... experiencing, fullness... Tika moves onto the figure, her lace bra and a black thong tossed off her body in two quick motions... their lips exchanging tender, then violent messages... firm, bulging underneath her... she controls the flow of their connection, fused, her breasts tender and nipples fleshy, her brown skin full of heat, pulsing... a search for rhythm, for purpose... breathing deep, long, inhaling the ceaseless noise of the avenues winding outside, the peasants drunk with exhaustion their goats tied to lamp posts their children asleep row by row entombed in the same bed, an ancient city filled with ancient pains and victories, hope for tomorrow represented by their piles of earthen-wares and crafts stored in carts and boxes hopeful for the next sale, the next handful of rupees... a city dreaming of tomorrow... for Tika, her ghost... tonight,

tonight... Tika exiled from her worries, her complications and fears, fused in spiritual elevation elevated beyond her own egoic thoughts and relations to the world around her... the man underneath her now a part of her... a familiar beard, a familiar face... kissing, violent then relaxed... controlling the pace, negotiating the torrent... one hand around his neck, the other wet and dedicated to the creation of friction against her clitoris... rubbing, vibrating... moaning, hunching... her back arches, seated upright her eyes locked onto the ceiling but not seeing the fan or the cracked plaster, her vision full of understanding consumed by the room by his body by her body... encompassed by the entire scene, every detail... extending and expanding further outside of the room across the entirety of the city... she is close, closer... rubbing herself, her breasts... finding the moment, an embrace... exhaling audibly, turgid... collapsing onto the body underneath her, the figure wrapped inside and around her body, close... secure, safe... fulfilled... alive... life... birds, a song... morning.

Awake before her alarm could sound.

A shower.

Her nursing scrubs.

A cup of coffee.

Monday.

Tika had returned back to work within a couple of days after the funeral. Half-shifts to start, but within a week clocking a full schedule. Tika's manager plead with her, demanding her to "take more time." Her mother and father were worried, her friends were concerned. She had lost a child. Now her husband was on the lam- what else was there to do? More time for what? To think about quitting, giving up?

The front door locks and the car door opens. She sets her coffee mug inside the cup holder. Was there any other option? This was her role, her dharma. Rain continued to drizzle from a grey sky. It must have rained all night. The ignition, the radio... this was her character, her part to play. Quitting was not an option. She accepts her duty. **PARK** to **REVERSE**. **REVERSE** to **DRIVE**. Outward. Onward into the haze.

--

Tika, over her husband's shoulder, "Does he look bloated to you?"

October kissed his son's feet, his thighs. "Bloated?"

"His belly, he looks- is it swollen, or- do you see it?"

A standard diaper change- unbutton, undo, cover, wipe, swipe, cover, replace, rebutton- October had knelt down and was enjoying some 'play time' with Namdev who laid on his infant changing table.

October inspected his son. In a dismissive tone, "I mean- he, he looks like he has a little old man pot-belly or something, but he just ate, right? I don't know. It doesn't seem out of the ordinary to me."

At Namdev's one-month pediatrician appointment, Dr. Karabekenski didn't seem too concerned that Namdev had regressed on the weight chart. They had been to the pediatrician's several times since bringing Namdev home from the hospital. A mild case of jaundice. Sleepiness. Spit-up. Dr. Karabekenski thought it was typical for first-time parents. Paranoia. Anxiety. By the second or third child they would relax. October secretly contended that Tika was projecting her anxiety and depression onto their son. But Tika began to sense something, something beyond the fact that her boy was not gaining the 'average' ounce a day that was expected of an infant his age. Her boy didn't seem right. Her mind stirred- despite her incontinence, her extra pounds, her stitched perineum- there was something going on with Namdev. Tonight she decided to share her previously guarded concerns with October.

Tika placed her hand with careful presence on her husband's shoulder. "October, I have noticed he has not been eating as much. He only spent two minutes on the left breast tonight, before you returned home. And only seven minutes on the right. His times have decreased, over maybe the last week. I try to coax him, but it does not work. I do not feel him eating as much. I am still full."

October continued to rub his hands and press his lips against the soft, blemish-free skin of his son. A father kissing his boy's arms, legs. He partially buttoned up Namdev's onesie underwear. His mind reoriented to Tika's comments. "What did the pediatrician say?"

Tika responded, "I feel something, October. Forget the doctors and nurses for now. Something that is not right. He looks to me in

pain, sometimes. He is trying to tell me something, something inside of him that- it is difficult to explain."

A refusal to believe- a refusal to entertain the idea that his son- his world, his finest accomplishment, his own life's culmination, his joy, his love- could be sick. Immediately October obliterated even the thought of the thought from out his psyche. He sought to wield the same hammer inside of Tika's mind. His mood shifted. "There's nothing wrong with him, Tika. Don't put your own issues on him. He's fine. Look at him."

October rubbed his son's thighs. He kissed his toes and feet, uncovered by the lime green dinosaur-print pajamas. The boy looked up at his father from the changing table- not in a state of joy, or fear, of pleasure or pain- blank.

Tika rubbed her eyes, exhausted. This wasn't about picking a fight, winning a battle. Her concern emanated from within her, responding like a warning bell had been alarmed. A portion of her internal wiring, a place that resided in her heart but was intimately connected to her surroundings, it sensed a disturbance. She had never experienced such a distinct signal before, but she knew the message was accurate. The source was powerful, true. It prevented her from succumbing to fatigue. It compelled her. She was a mother, and this was a mother's intuition. "I have separated my issues from his. This has nothing to do with me. I sense something, something that is not right. Please." She pulled her husband's attention to her face, whispering, "Hear me."

October buttoned the final buttons then picked his son up. He wrapped Namdev's body in a plush elephant-theme'd blanket and began to rock left-foot right-foot- he pivoted to face Tika. "There's nothing wrong with him, Tika. He's happy. He's fine. He's been to the doctor. If Bekenski doesn't say anything is wrong, then why should you or me? You're not a doctor."

Impatient, October delivered the last sentence with a bite.

Tika did not take the bait. "I know I am not October, that is not my point..."

October changed his approach. His voice shifted, easier. Lilted. He wanted to convince her, for good. "It's too much time in the clinic, Teek. Too much time around sick people, you know, with

your job? I didn't mean that you were projecting... I just... I think the fact you are used to being around people with illnesses, you know, just out of habit. Does that make sense?"

She rested her arm onto October's shoulder. Intimacy- a word that had virtually lost its meaning in the Tierney household- physical contact, tenderness, sensuality- dead for months, for a lifetime in October's mind. He felt his wife's touch. It stirred October. She captured him with her touch. Then her voice- Orpheus plucking his lyre for Cerberus- desperate, "October, please. Hear me."

--

"Enough of this talking. We are like blind men inspecting an elephant. You think it is a snake, you think it is a tree trunk- you have no perspective. You have no faith! Vishnu has sent my husband away. It is the will of God. I have faith, and I have humility. I cannot understand His will. But I married myself to October. You were there Amma, you were there Father. I committed myself to him. So please, no more talking of divorce. Please. It is my duty to wait, and this I will do, patient."

--

Another fever. Another seizure. The failing of major organ systems- the toddler's fourth hospitalization in two months- this is where we are.

Tika is sweetly singing Namdev a lullaby- a pendulum of stability back and forth with her son in a wooden chair (a donation made by the 'Fricke Family', identified by a plaque) next to the boy's empty medical-grade crib. Cords, lines, plastic tubes run in all directions and connect Namdev to various machines. A g-tube, for feeding. A suction tube to remove the build-up of saliva. An abdominal drain for his ascites, to remove fluid. An IV drip to balance his electrolytes, to provide fluids. A nasal cannula delivering oxygen. A web of plastics and solutions extended and routing in every direction. Tika's harmonies are woven amongst a rhythmic percussion of click-clicks and pneumatic whirrs which putter like an old jalopy, an infusion pump... the ubiquitous fuzz of ventilated air, a low-frequency bassline forming the bedrock... the occasional punctuation of beeps and error messages during the hourly 'vitals check'... cymbals... a choir composed of doctors, nurses... an orchestral movement set to the final moments of their

son's life, performed in the pediatric ICU ward, conducted by an invisible designer.

A mother singing her son to sleep.

October had stepped out, gone for a walk. Tika's parents had left for the night, visiting hours over. Namdev lies in his mother's arms, fitted with sensors and monitors, their relationship mediated by machines and apparatuses, alive.

Alive, but lifeless.

Her boy had stopped growing. He had stopped thriving. His muscle fibers had failed to thread around his arms and legs. Limp. Weak. A body pumped with antibiotics, corticosteroids. Normal developmental milestones which healthy children achieve- coordinated head movements, walking, interactive play, social smiles, eye tracking- they had failed to present on time, if at all with Namdev. A failure by most measures. But as Tika hums to her son, her mind is not occupied by failure. Her thoughts do not waiver by comparisons like 'Why couldn't Namdev be normal? Why is he so weak?' Instead- inspired- she gazes down upon her boy, her treasure- strong, unique, a warrior, a spirit. Her heart weeps for her son, to be certain, but her heart is simultaneously overcome with gratitude- the ability to be here for him, the ability to take care of him, the ability to join him with a smile, to cheer for him as he crawls (albeit feebly), the knowledge that he knows who she is. She is here to make everything as comfortable as possible, and to bring peace to his life no matter how brief. She is grateful to God to be a mother. She joins in the hymn. She contributes her verse.

There they are, in a small room on the 6th floor. Can you see them? Peer in through the door. Listen.

Meanwhile, October is in the hospital cafeteria. The Children's Hospital of Philadelphia- a food court- tables, chairs- all the restaurants are closed except for a **24 Hour Café**. He sips lukewarm coffee out of a Styrofoam cup. He waits. He can't gaze at his phone any longer. He can't distract himself. He is alone. A few other adults, presumably parents or caretakers of other sick children, scatter the area. Their presence doesn't register to October- his isolation is all-consuming. His disgust, sickness over Namdev's sickness- fed up with antibacterial soap, antiseptic measures-

sterilized- October is angry. He is furious with everything. This place, the hospital- "How much time have I wasted in this fucking place?" he barks to himself, biting the rim of the cup. Hospitals, the complete antithesis to what a child's life ought to encompass- colors, games, imagination, a carnival of psychedelia- not sterility, not wires and tubes, not steel elevators and neutral tile hallways, Nurse Stations and check-ins. "Goddamn it all." Goddamn this place. A kid ought to be allowed to explore, create adventure- not be tabulated up at the end of each stay in an insurance EOB, accounted for by clinical assistants and scheduled for surgeries and procedures.

October fumes, pestiferous. Can you hear him? "None of this is meant to be. This is all a fucking mistake. What sort of God could allow this? God? Please! Fuck God. Fuck God, Jesus, all the Hindus and Greeks and Christians and Jews, all their saints and saviors. And fuck Tika for her beliefs. Fuck her prayers and miracles. Wasting her time up there, wishing things were better to some imaginary being, to some Mickey Mouse horseshit. If I see her rub one more set of beads, light one more fucking candle... say one more goddamn prayer... what an idiot. For a smart woman, she's a dupe. Idiotic. Foolish. Fooled by religion. Fooled by empty promises, by bedtime stories, by feel-good nonsense. Doesn't she know? Doesn't she get it? Life is shit. This is fucking bullshit. It's meaningless bullshit. This planet, all of us- a meaningless shit speck of nothing flushing about our local galactic toilet, a night sky of roundabout swirling stupid without purpose, all of us barely able to catch a glimpse beyond the brown water... the Milky Way... one bowl in one stall out of a hundred billion stalls occupying a universal Grand Central Station of scum and shit and worthlessness. It's an absolute fucking waste. A total nothing waste. At least Namdev will be able to escape without suffering for much longer. This long trudge of shit. We're going to be left behind in the wake of this shit. We'll have to deal with people telling us they're sorry, that he's in a better place, all sorts of fairy tale crap. Living, for what? Fuck life. Fuck being alive. Fuck that couple over there. Fuck our nurse. Fuck our doctor. Fuck them all, fuck their beliefs, fuck their happiness, fuck their optimism, fuck their diagnoses and fuck their hearts for beating. My son ought to be enjoying life, being a kid, living. Not these fucking worthless assholes, useless pricks. Fuck them. And fuck me too."

A counterpoint plays nearby- a child's dulcet giggles accompanied by the rattling of a wheelchair- a man pushes his daughter past October. The man offers himself, looks to make eye-contact with October, to say 'Hello, I am a father of a sick child too, I wish you the best and give you my prayers and ask for yours in return and maybe we can all make it out somehow,' but October is consumed in his anger, deafened and blinded. Instead, October's poisonous glare focused on the Styrofoam, the marks from his teeth- October cannot hear the girl, he cannot see them- he hadn't seen anyone in days. Weeks. Blinded by defeat.

Despite his many visits to Philadelphia Children's, October had failed to identify the other sick children and suffering families around him. He could not look into the eyes of another father or mother and empathize with them. Instead of finding community, he had retreated into despair, into self. Self-righteous misery, convinced life was 'unfair'- swelling self-pity swollen like his young boy, distended into a storm of misery- a black cloud, dark, consuming, omnipresent like a stain covering the entire sky. Wheelchairs and giddiness, not even that curious juxtaposition could break through the madness within October's distorted mind.

With each ID-badge swipe... with each bedside visit, with each nurse checking vitals... with each progression, from the physician assistants to the residents, from the fellows up to the chief of medicine... further and further ascending the hierarchy of specialists and researchers as Namdev's health declined... with each 'Get Well' card, each conversation with a friend or family member... the negativity inside October had grown to a critical mass and now it had fallen inward. For months the distortion had grown. Lensing, warping his perception of reality- the gravity of his pain, his hurt, his vexation- it had collapsed into an infinite density. An event horizon formed: October's entire perspective and outlook on life warbled around the edge of a sinking abyss. He had lost sense of his surroundings. He had lost interest. He had lost the desire to be in contact with others. He had lost a sense that there existed in his fellows a consciousness, a light, eternity- instead every person he interacted with became a vampire, or a robot. His field of view was swallowed whole with shadow. Lifeless. Untouchable. His communion with humanity had ended. Falling deeper and deeper- past photon spheres of self-absorption, absorbed in self, in self-pity and anger and that sick feeling of doom, of

being cheated and made plaything of the gods- deeper, falling, Namdev growing sicker and sicker. No escape. October's friends and family could only watch on helpless as he faded away, the October they knew, the October they grew up with as a child or loved as a husband... gone- dematerialized- spaghettified. And to him, they sped up, sped away and out of sight with time dilating and relativity enforced- a gap unbroachable- a divide.

And here, tonight in the cafeteria, October's demise reaches a singularity. The moment, the point, the breakdown- he has fallen into a place where nothing applies, where every law, every lesson, every fact he once held true became irrelevant. Reduced, then destroyed. Unrecognizable. A singularity which represents the awful culmination, the collapse infinite in which every particle comprising his being condenses into complete hatred.

The awful cadenza continues. Muttering, "It's going to take a year to sort out and see through these goddamn bills, waiting on all of the healthcare providers, the HRAs and the PPOs and the payment plans, all the fucking money it's going to cost to clean all of this up. I'll be on the phone with the insurance company right after he goes. On hold probably. Trying to figure all of this shit out- it's like sorting through fucking Chinese. And then we'll have to bury him, or burn him up. Whatever Tika wants, whatever she decides. For her stupid parents, their stupid fucking traditions. Wake. Service. Funeral. I'll have to dress up, stand there, put my arm around her. Be strong. Fucking bullshit. Fucking pretend bullshit. I'm done pretending. I'm so fucking sick of pretending. I'm done. I'm done with it all."

--

"How is my vagina supposed to do this October?" Tika yelled from the bathroom. "A bagel? October, do you understand this?"

October set his backpack underneath the coffee table. He sifted through a pile of junk mail. "What put you on to thinking about this, Teek?"

"Debbie. She has two children. And she told me, today"- a toilet, flushing- "that when I give birth, my vagina is going to need to open up large enough so a bagel, cross wise, could fit. Cervical dilation of ten centimeters. Ten!"

October tried not to picture the image in his mind- his wife's vagina, bakery goods. "It'll be okay. I'll be there with you. And they have medication, to help with everything..."

"I know this October! All of this is easy to say. But it does not make it better! It will not change the fact that my vagina will have to go through all of this!"

"I guess there's always a C-section."

"Absolutely not. At least not unless the obstetrician requires it. I am not getting cut open to have my boy pulled out of me. Anyways, it does not seem natural. Do you think so?"

"I don't really know much about it, Teek, I mean if you have to get it done, we'll cross that bridge..."

Washing her hands, Tika continued, "I was reading about the procedure. And what I read that was concerning, about C-section babies, is there are psychological implications. They have low self-esteem. They do not find fulfillment easily. Not many people talk about this, but there might be implications, psychic trauma at the newborn stage- it can reverberate through a person's life."

"Well..."

"Well what? Why can you not say it?"

October was confused. "Say what, Teek?"

"Say to me 'I am sorry honey, this totally sucks!'"

October chuckled, then, "I am sorry honey, this totally sucks!"

--

"October, we need to talk."

"About?"

Tika replied, "About hospice care."

"Hospice care?"

"While you were out, one of the social workers came in. I spoke with her about hospice care."

October noticed the red, inflamed cheeks on his wife. Light twinkled off her eyelashes- moistened. He looked at her for the

first time that day- really looked, really cared to see her, really took a moment to acknowledge her. "What did the social worker say?"

"We can make arrangements, for Namdev, so he can pass more comfortably." Tika had been praying before October entered the hospital room- she prayed for strength to continue, she prayed for forgiveness for she had made the admission, the final admission- admitted to herself the possibility of defeat and the reality of her son's death. Faced with the inevitability of losing her son- "They can remove the tubes, all of the drains and tubes. They can give him medicine to make him peaceful. And we can say goodbye to him, on our time. In our own way. I told her that I would talk to you."

Off guard, autonomic, October responded, "I don't... what... how, how does it work?"

"They would help us. They would help us decide. And they would make Namdev rest, and be at peace."

Engrossed in self, selfish, numbers and metrics and not thinking- not thinking from his heart, from the center of himself, the person he really was, the love he was, the love he had meant to give but lost sight up and bogged down by selfish concern by ego by the constructions of the unreal- an American adult, following the program- "I mean with insurance and everything, how- how does it work?"

Disgusted, the final brick in the dam broke open, "Your concern is the cost?"

October gulped. He didn't answer his wife's rhetorical question.

Tika walked around the hospital bed, drew the patient-divider curtain, and took a breath. She didn't want to shout in front of Namdev, asleep, straining. In front of her husband, before him, "How can you ask of this October? Cost? How on earth can this be where your mind is occupied? Cost? Look at me. October? We are here, talking about losing our son, about saying goodbye to him, about making his last days in peace, and you ask me of the cost? Who are you? What has happened to you? I cannot... I will not even discuss this further with you. I wanted to include you, but you have shown me you are not capable. You are not here anymore. I will take care of this. I am going to perform the arrangements.

And if money is all your concern is, then I will pay for it. I will make sure you have no cost. None. Do you understand me, October?"

October scratched against the grey-patched-strawberry-blond beard on his face. Hunched over in a chair, he stared down at the tile floor. Silent. Nothing.

"October?" She walked in front of her husband. She grabbed his hair and forced his eyes to meet hers. Blank. Empty. Unable to mute her anger, Tika snarled, "October, say something!"

He gripped Tika's hand by the wrist and threw it away from his head. "What is there to say? What the fuck do you want me to say? Huh? What do you fucking want from me?"

Tika was horrified. She was hurt. She was disgusted. But she made a decision. She decided to remove October from her heart. Maybe for now- maybe for good- inevitably he would determine the final verdict. But not now. Composed, she drew her line with, "Go. Just go, leave us. Go home. We do not want you here. Not like this. So go." She turned away from her husband and put her hands on Namdev, one on his head, another on the boy's chest.

October stood up. He paused... he thought to reach for her back... to put an arm on her shoulder... but the weight... the gravity between them... instead he felt the keys in his pocket, then his wallet, and moved to where the curtain could be opened. He didn't say a word. He walked out and left.

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Tika grinned down at Namdev. The boy's head was tilted, his eyes drooping and his lips closed shut- into the distance- beyond. Beyond her attention, beyond interaction, beyond any help she could provide- beyond the help of doctors or physical therapists or clinical trials- a second round of experimental drugs, and no sign of improvement. But not beyond her love.

She spoke clear to him, "Let us clean up my darling." She fastened the sticky ends of the diaper, rubbing his smooth belly, then his shoulders, his legs- degenerating, skinny, lifeless. She tickled his heels, his toes- unresponsive. But for Tika, his mother, her tenderness wasn't about generating a reaction. She didn't need a sign. Her faith didn't require any feedback, physical or

supernatural. She didn't need data or glimmers of hope to dance before her eyes. Her faith was locked. Sight unseen- she was fortified in the truth of her love for her son. Her love was committed. "Soon my beautiful boy, soon the medicine will work. Soon. I promise." She bent forward and kissed her boy on his forehead.

Two months short of his second birthday- Namdev had lost the ability to smile. It had been almost six months since his last bit of laughter. Tika gently massaged his palms, his sides of his abdomen- she prayed while she touched him. She prayed steadfast. Namdev appeared withered, sallow. She kissed her son again. She blessed him with her warmth. She grinned down at him, then announced proud, "It is alright, my angel. It is alright. Yes. If you cannot smile, I will smile for you. I know you are my happy boy. I know you are blessed. And you bless me, my angel."

Suddenly, her son's limbs stiffened two-by-four rigid- a jolt, a paroxysm. His arms glued themselves down to his sides and his feet pointed outwards, a military ballet- the whites in his eyes, rolling. Tika reacted in turn. She called out to him, gently rubbing then patting the side of his cheek- "Namdev... Namdev... Namdev!" His skin color went from brown to a sickly beige- his face nearly pale white- his lips hinting at shades of blue.

"Namdev!" She pressed her hands to his cheeks and screamed. "Namdev!" She couldn't discern whether the boy was breathing or not. She reached for her cell phone in her pocket and dialed 9-1-1. The toddler's fit continued.

"My son is having a seizure. He may have stopped breathing... the address is 211 Silko Drive... yes, I will stay on the line... yes, I know CPR... I will put you on speaker..." Chest compressions. Emergency breaths. Tika's clinical training put her motions in an efficient autopilot. The operator followed her through a series of first aid exercises, a series she had memorized and knew well herself. Compressions and breaths. A minute passed, then another. Finally, Namdev gasped for air. "He is breathing!" Tika brought her head to his and kissed her son. His color gradually returned. "Can I pick him up?"

"No, just in case of a spinal injury, leave him on the bed. The paramedics are on their way."

"My boy is breathing! You are breathing, yes. Breathe my sweetheart. Breathe. Yes. In and out. Good boy." Namdev didn't provide any indication of discomfort; he seemed almost unaffected by the episode.

The operator kept Tika on the line, "Is he still breathing?"

"Yes, yes he is." Crying, elated- terrified- "The paramedics are not far away?"

"Yes, they will be there shortly. Keep him calm, monitor his breaths. Please stay on the line. You did a great job. You probably saved your son's life."

Tika held Namdev tighter, her palm against the back of his head. "My boy, my precious angel..."

The door opened. October set his bag down by the door, shoes off... Tika cried out from their bedroom upstairs, "October!"

He shouted back, "Tika?"

"Come here October! Now! Hurry!"

Tika explained the situation to her husband. "All of a sudden, his body went tight, like it was wound up, and he stopped breathing. I called 9-1-1. The woman is on the line, she helped me perform CPR..." October did not bend over to kiss his son, or tickle his thighs, or shed a tear with his wife- he stood behind her, inspecting the boy. Confused. Annoyed.

The operator's voice- robotic, distant- "Sir, the paramedics are on their way to evaluate your son."

"But he's okay, right? He's breathing now."

Through the wireless receiver, static and speakerphone amplified, "Yes sir, but we still need to evaluate him and determine why his breathing stopped."

October was hoping to catch a basketball game... order a pizza... drink a beer... recover from a long day. Bills to pay. Cards to charge. Projects to wrap up. He paused, "Right. Yeah. Of course." He stood above his family, his wife and his son. He felt like an observer. He felt left out.

Tika whispered to Namdev, "We will find out what happened my sweetheart, we will make sure it does not happen again. I promise. We will get you help."

October wanted to chime in, to say something to his boy, but no words came. He put his index finger on the top of his son's ear. A stranger.

Sadness replaced with commotion- the doorbell brought in three men, a firefighter and two paramedics- a fire engine outside- Tika repeating the story, over and over. October watching the scene unfold, leaning up against the wall of their bedroom like one of their framed pictures. Tika rode with Namdev in the ambulance. An oxygen cannula was positioned under the boy's nose, and shortly afterwards he fell asleep. Peaceful. October followed behind in his car. He tried to remember the deductible, the percentages- calculating. Once they arrived at the hospital, they were given a room. Tests were performed. Namdev's medical history was explained. Niemann Pick Syndrome. A rare disorder. Doctors came and went. October decided to return home to sleep while Tika stayed behind on a pull-out cot next to Namdev's bed. "Call me if anything happens." Tika's parents came the next morning to visit their only grandson- a balloon, a stuffed giraffe- finally, a medical chief brought several hand-outs on seizures. The physician went through a brochure. He discussed pharmaceutical solutions, options. He wasn't familiar with Niemann Pick but had done some research and sought outside consultation. Namdev's primary doctors from the Lysosomal Storage Disease Unit were brought in to examine the boy. It wasn't uncommon for seizures to occur further along in the progression. Perfectly normal. Unfortunately, the boy would now require supplemental oxygen, as a precaution. Another bill. Another cost. The prescription medication should help, but Namdev might become more lethargic, more tired, possibly some digestive reactions- Tika scribbled notes on the hand-outs while October listened to words, words and numbers and more numbers and words.

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"Pratika, your mother and I have been thinking. We want to take a vacation with you. Go away for a little while, to put all of this out of your mind. You have undergone so much, and we- we want to do a thing that is nice for you. With your husband's behavior as

of late, I cannot- we think it is best for you. To take some time, yes? Where would you like to go?"

Sunday evening. Dinner at home. Sambhar, roti, lime juice- a blessing, given by Tika's mother- at the table, hand in hand, the three Vasudevans. "We offer this food to God; we offer the vital energy which comes of this food to God; we offer our good works to God; we offer everything to God, who in turn provides everything to us."

Tika took a bite of flatbread- buttery, hot, fresh from her mother's skillet. She did not respond to her father's question. Mrs. Vasudevan cut through the tension, "We love you very much, Pratika. Your father is right, some time will be a good thing. Time away. Time to heal. And your father will take care of all the arrangements. Perhaps we can go back to India. I know you have wanted to return. So we would like to take you."

Tika broke eye contact with her mother. She took a deep breath. She waited. "I am very appreciative, I am. But it is not the right thing to do. October will come back soon, and I need to settle things..."

Tika's father, who drank tiny snifters of single-malt whiskey despite his wife's protests, plastered his tongue to the roof of his mouth, let the smokiness of the drink fill his head, and interrupted his daughter, "That man is a dog. He is a scoundrel. You do not owe him anything. He is to be divorced from you and left to rot, the bastard. Do you hear me?"

Tika's mother was silent.

A napkin to her lips, then folded over her lap- Tika responded, "Father, my relationship with him is for me to determine. Not you. This is not the old times, you do not own me. I respect your opinion, but the decision is mine. And while he is still my husband, I would appreciate if you do not speak of him this way."

"This is my table. I will speak about whomever I choose, however I choose. Do you understand..."

It was a dangerous gesture to interrupt her father, and it was not an act to be taken lightly. Nevertheless- "I am sorry, but I was under the impression we were talking about what I needed, what would be good for me. No? But see, even that- you have your ideas

for me, what I need. I am still a little girl in your eyes. I am still a child. You think you know what is best for me, am I correct?"

"You are still my daughter, yes. And I am your father. So yes, I do know what is best for you."

A breeze from outside blew against the Vasudevan's windows... a washing machine in the basement spun through an extra cycle... the quiet hum of gasoline burning, keeping the vegetable stew warm on the stovetop- Tika sighed, "I will always be your daughter. But I am a mother now. A mother that has lost her son. I have gone through something neither of you ever had to go through. And thank God you did not. I have a pain in my heart incomprehensible to you. A pain you will never know. You are a parent who has their child, and I am a parent who has lost mine. Who in the eyes of God has suffered more? Who has more knowledge of suffering? Myself, or you and mother? Who has the greater loss?"

Mr. Vasudevan took an elegantly small sip from his crystal glass. He did not swallow the liquor, but let it dissolve on his tongue. "Pratika, what happened to you, to Namdev..."

"Do you know what I sit at home and wonder about? Do you?" Tika turned her attention to her mother. "The night we discovered we were pregnant, October and I... it was raining, all day, grey clouds and cold... a dreary storm... but that evening we walked under an umbrella to the pharmacy, and bought a pregnancy test... and we acted as if we knew the results, because we were so happy walking home together... the weather did not bother us one bit. And we stayed up together very late after we found out we were to be expecting a child. We spoke many things about our blessing, about our future. We were so in love.

"But then the strangest dream came to me that night. Do you know what I dreamt? When I went to sleep, in my dream, there I was, watching myself, much like an out of body experience, pushing at an empty stroller. I was frantic. Up and down the streets, city streets. I was asking people if they had seen my child. Searching. And I kept watching, from outside of my body, down at myself. My appearance in the dream, the only difference was that my hair was grey, I was a wrinkled old woman. It was as if I saw into the future. And in this vision, I returned home, and I found October at the table, a knife and fork in his hand. I remember the image

so clearly. And on his plate, the head of a baby, a baby boy. He was eating the child's head. It was so terrifying. I woke up in a panic. The vision ended, and I woke up in sweat, covered. I never told October. I never told another soul, except you, right now. But it is all I think about now. If I am cursed, yes? If my karma is so terrible, if I did something so horrible, that this is my repayment from God? What sins have I committed? What sins October committed?" Then back towards her father, "These are my thoughts when I am alone, relaxing. No. I do not want a vacation. Thank you, but no. I do not want to leave. I want to work, I want to keep myself occupied. I need to outrun these thoughts, in a way. Because these thoughts want nothing more than to haunt me and ruin me. Do you understand?"

Mrs. Vasudevan excused herself and wept furtively washing dishes at the kitchen sink, the faucet rushing.

Mr. Vasudevan had lost his appetite. He didn't know how to respond. He took another drink, a mouthful. The whiskey burned.

--

October resumed their conversation. "Where was your father?"

"Well, he was around- but even for being around, let's say that he did his best to not be there."

"And your mother?"

Matter of fact, Latcholassie responded, "Young. Confused. Wounded. She had my uncle and my grandmother help her, she couldn't do it on her own. And she ended up getting sick, getting sick bad when I was little. I remember her some, but not much. My grandmother called her Mayfly. Came and went quick."

"I'm sorry."

"Everyone comes and goes in their own way. That was hers. I still had a good woman to raise me. My grandmother saved me, she gave me all the love you could ever ask for. She kept the old traditions, she kept them alive in me. I was lucky. My way has been a good one."

Latcho was genuine- and that struck October. The man meant what he said. October realized what had unnerved him initially upon making his host's acquaintance... there was no underlying motive, no game,

no confusion. Straight. There was no dressing-up, no need to add filigree or embellish details or distort the image- Latcho came from an integral self.

October reflected on his own upbringing, "They say it takes a good woman to raise a good man. Maybe that's what did me in?"

"Well, there's many ways to raise a good man. That was mine. At the end, though, a man has to account for his own goodness."

October paused, "More or less."

Latcho interrupted October's dilemma- "I'll tell you about my grandmother. Yes sir. She was something. She had a family, was a woman of the village, was living a typical post-colonial Indian life..." Latcho stopped, chuckled, satisfied with the irony of his analysis. "But one day, she had a vision. She was carried into the dreamlands, taken there, abducted in a way. It scared her. Scared her family. Medicine had been fading in their tribe- times had changed. White people changed everything. In Alaska, it was Russians who came over. They brought disease with them. And the shamans, the old medicine couldn't help anymore. It couldn't save our people. But my grandmother's experience- she was called to be the clan's seer, like the old times. Spirit called her. Thousands of years my people followed the animals, followed the seasons- and the shaman guided them. The shaman went into dreamlands and came back to tell the people where to go, what to do. They found spirits to help them, used their spirits as a guide. And it was rare for a woman to go to the dreamlands, to have the spirits call- my grandmother, she was a special woman, yes sir."

"And she gave her gift to you."

"Well, she gave me her sacred tools. Her bone sculptures, her club. She tried to help me find my vision, but- I haven't had much chance to practice lately."

October, half-joking, "So that's why you picked me up? A crash-test dummy, to sharpen your skills?"

"Maybe. I will say, there is an important rule of my people, that worked to y'r benefit- you can't be cured by a shaman of your own clan to be treated for harm to y'r spirit. You couldn't be cured by anyone or anything in y'r clan- there was no white medicine to help you. No sir. You had to find me."

An aura like Bob Dylan or Paul Bunyon- a frontiersman of the rolling thunder- October couldn't help but be enamored and absorbed by Latcho's appearance, his faded button-down shirt and bone bracelet and worn jeans, changed after the ceremony. Then a thought bubbled up inside of him- "Maybe you had to find me?"

Latcho, full-bellied, let out a howl into the midnight. "Listen to you! Yes sir, I did have to find you. Yes sir. You know you are smarter than y'r skin says!"

October took offense to Latcho's remark. He knew he had no right to, that the joke shouldn't matter- but it reminded him of other digs against his persona- a confluence of small wounds from grade school on- so he asked, firm, "Why do you keep bringing that up? What does my skin or your skin have to do with it?"

"Everything, if you talk to most of my people. You drove us from our land, you..." While Latcholassie spoke October felt the guilt of an exquisite violence which he knew only from books, tangentially- Latcho had lived it, had been produced by it. For a long time Latcholassie listed off grievances, atrocities. Old pain. Diseased, infected pain. But then, sensing the unease, our shaman changed directions. The animals were migrating in different patterns. Latcholassie did not want to distort the lesson. He did not want to undo his work. He had to overcome his biases, his own resentments. Latcho realized there was a lesson here for him to be learned. So he followed the truth and stopped himself, then he spoke, "Well- we are a people of the tides- coming and going- even when it seems like the water will disappear from the shore for good, it always comes back. Yes sir. Somewhere. Somehow. Maybe not where you would imagine. But it is never gone. So here I am. And here you are. Yes sir. We needed each other. Regardless of skin. I am sorry for what I said to you, October Tierney. You are a good man. Spirit has no color."

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"We should throw Namdev a birthday party."

His face unconsciously pursed- acidic- October responded, "A birthday party?"

"Yes. A one-year-old birthday party. It will be fun. We can invite your sister, my parents. My cousin Raga, her family. Your friend Sean. We can order pizzas, have a cake made. We should celebrate."

October considered the idea. Balloons. Green frosting. Ribbons. Those ridiculous cone hats- to celebrate what? That Namdev couldn't speak, and would probably never utter his 'first word'? That the boy had already begun to regress physically? That they had only spent a total of eight full weeks of that first year in hospitals, emergency rooms, waiting on doctors? That the medical bills hadn't brought the family to file bankruptcy yet? That there was no cure, no real course of treatment, no real plan except to watch their boy die?

He didn't respond to his wife.

Tika waited, then, "What is the matter with this idea?"

Gruff, laconic, "Nothing. It's... nothing."

Tika pressed. "You know October, you cannot expect everyone to be as miserable as you. That is not fair."

"That's too bad, I'm really enjoying it."

"He is a baby boy October! Your son! My son!"

"I was kidding Tika, I..."

"No. No kidding. This is his first birthday. He deserves it, he has been through so much."

Contemplating, October thought to widen the scope. "What about what we've been through, what we deserve?"

Tika peered through her husband, uncovering the ploy. She was direct. "No October. What you mean to say is 'What about what I have been through, what I deserve?' That is really what you want to say. Am I wrong?"

There was an October who despised convention, who never accepted social agreements like small talk, who never said 'I'm so tired' because he believed in the power of his mind and the objects it focused upon- the same went for 'I'm so stressed out' or 'I'm so pissed off'- the minute you said it, you gave it power over you. You bought into the fiction. It was obvious to him even at an early age. There was a similar October who rode the wave with verve, considerate and deliberate and in control, who enjoyed engaging conversation and ruminating over a film after walking out of a movie theater. There was an October who adored his wife, who craved

her body at odd hours and bought her thousand-dollar earrings on a whim and enjoyed preparing homemade fried chicken for her on rainy Sunday evenings in the autumn. There was an October who loved peacefulness, who still felt like a coward after backing out a fight as a fourteen-year-old boy, who couldn't bring himself to swing, who couldn't flex his wiry, runner's body against a fellow man. There was an October who enjoyed a cold beer on a vacation beachfront, an October who relaxed on wicker furniture in open-air porches. There was an October... there were Octobers... but those Octobers had left, in a timid procession, one by one. A new October had taken their place, replaced them, emerging monolithic in Tika's eyes- one phrase- words he had never spoken to her before. "Fuck you, Tika." In front of his son- the new October had announced his dominion, had staked his claim.

An announcement followed by a terrible silence. A wife looked at her husband- saddened and heartbroken and furious. Shocked. Quiet.

Tika shook her head, from left to right and pivoted, glaring at her husband. "Excuse me?"

"You know how to really make a guy feel..."

"And what do you know how to make your wife feel? Always about how you feel, where you are with everything... do you not see? I am right here with you. We are going through this together! But you refuse to be with me. You only want to be alone."

"You're right! I want to be alone. I never wanted..."

"Never wanted what?"

"To be here! Doing this! A sick kid! A lousy marriage! I never signed up for any of this! I was happy, I had my life, I..."

"So life did not work according to plan? Too bad October! You signed up to be with us, to participate and walk through this. You are an adult! I am sorry you cannot accept this situation. I am sorry you are hurt. But this is too bad." Tika untied the bun of hair on her head, and pulled the loose strands back, tight. Methodical. Not to be misunderstood. "Either you are in this, or you are not. I cannot take it anymore. You want to feel sorry for yourself because it was not what you expected. This is the behavior of a child! A child! I need a husband, not a pouting child!"

"Oh come on, Tika!" October laughed, then abruptly slammed his palms on the faux-granite countertop island. Screaming, "I go to work! I support this family! I do exactly what the fuck I signed up for!"

"And staying home with Namdev is a vacation? Working part-time and then taking care of him is my vacation? Is that what you are insinuating? That I am not contributing? If you want to stay home with him then please, by all means! Or better yet, you can pump your breastmilk so we can use it to feed him with the boluses. How about that?"

"I never asked you to keep breastfeeding him. That is your decision. And work... I never..."

"I never asked you to be a victim October. To act like you are the sole breadwinner, in a thankless, terrible position. That was not one of our marriage vows. Your perception is so off, for this whole situation, do you know that?"

"What does that even mean? My perception?"

"We brought him in for the surgery, October, and you did not even care to research what a feeding tube was. You did not care. You do not care. You are checked out of everything." Tika turned around, she had to walk- dismayed, restive- she didn't want to be right. She didn't want to cut to the core of the issue, but here it was. She was confronted by it. "We are a hassle for you. Everything you have to do for him, or for me. This is all a burden. That is your perception." She stopped at a window in the living room, looking out over the parking lot- grocery bags, a woman walking her child in a stroller, an old beat up car pulling into a spot. A whole world- out there- "You are not difficult to interpret, you know this?"

"So you have me figured out then, huh?"

Since Namdev would eventually lose the ability to swallow, they had decided with their primary physician to schedule their boy for surgery- the installation of a G-tube- three weeks earlier. A major surgery, and an adjustment for the family. Namdev had stopped taking the bottle. But he kept at the pacifier, and by the surgeon's measure the procedure had been a success. The boy still wasn't gaining much weight, or developmentally proceeding beyond

where he was at four or five months- but Namdev could smile, he could coo and babble. He could participate. He was alive. Tika saw it. That's all she could feel. That's all she could say. "Namdev is here with us, present, and you ignore him. You take no pleasure in him, or me, anymore. In us."

Another slap against the countertop. Stinging. Stung. "That isn't true!"

"It is!" Tika turned away from the plastic blinds, the sunlight, the weekend chores and carefree normal happy lives- she snatched her keys from off a ceramic dish- *Live and Love*- "I have to go. I have to pick up my scrubs, groceries... I have so much to do. I cannot waste any more time doing this with you. Are you alright to watch Namdev?"

October nodded.

Tika walked down the stairs to the mudroom, put on her boots, and left.

A couple of hours later, Namdev on October's lap, the couch- Tika came home to her boys. "You do not have to love me October, but your son, you must. Please. Please. He is alive, right in your arms."

"I know he's alive! I'm trying, okay. I'm sorry. I don't want to hurt you, I don't want to keep doing this... I'm just so..." It had been a gradual, methodical poisoning of his own spirit, at his own hands- October couldn't shake it.

Tika sensed the struggle. She forgot about the insults, about the arguing- she took a step towards her husband.

There was nothing he could say other than "I'm trying my best."

She dropped her hand on top of his. Disarming. Their wedding bands touched, their skin- October was gazing downward, but an impulse hurled his arm out- he reached and pulled her by the waist in towards himself- nuzzling up to his wife, "I'm sorry."

At last, a connection. Tika forgave everything. "I know you are. I know this. This ordeal has been tough on us, on you, on me, and on him. I do not disagree with you. We deserve a good time October. So why not host a party? Why not enjoy a celebration with friends and family? Celebrate his life. He is our first-born son. We can

make a fun go of it. Why not? Let him be a normal boy for once, a normal happy little boy."

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Tika's mother found a crumpled list in her pants, weeks after the funeral. It read:

1. Plain Rice (2 lb)
2. Sesame seed (1/4 lb)
3. Sandal paste (1 cup)
4. Garland (1 regular)
5. Traditional new clothes to decorate the body (Dhoti, kurta, sari etc.)
6. A piece of string to tie the big toes of the feet and thumb fingers of the hands of the body together
7. Sandal wood stick(s)
8. Ghee (2 Lbs), a copper container for ghee with a metal/wood spoon. The ghee should be made into a liquid form immediately prior to the commencement of the rituals
9. Coins (Quarters or half-dollars, about 30)
10. Containers (2) and metal spoons (2) to dispense water (pancha patram)
11. A small kalash (container to hold water)
12. Ganga Jal
13. Match box
14. A packet of sand
15. Dry coconut kernels (6) to break into small pieces, no more than 2 inches long
16. Camphor (1 packet)
17. A picture of Ishta Devataa
18. Decorative flower garland

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"At the end, I just... I couldn't handle it, you know? I checked out. I couldn't even be there. I didn't want to be there. I don't even remember being in control of any of it, it's not like I consciously said to myself... I, it was like I fell into it. Like I was sucked into this pain, this anger. We had gone to the hospital for pneumonia. He had pneumonia three or four times at the end, his feeding tube ended up bleeding pretty badly another time. All this was happening- and by then, he couldn't smile anymore. He couldn't speak. He could hardly move. And when we came home- when

he and Tika came home, because I was home already... she had told me to leave the hospital, because I was being such a piece of shit, you know? I was a bastard. A total bastard. I just- I was so angry. I'm still so angry. Even thinking about that, the last time in the hospital, in that cafeteria, stewing... it makes me want to throw up. I walked out on her, really, right there. My anger had taken over, and I had shut down."

October reflected through the emotional journey- the rage, the sadness, the desperation, the immovable anger- he was left explaining to Latcholassie, filled only with regret. "And over the next two weeks, it- Namdev spiked a fever at home, so we decided to take him in to hospice care. Well, Tika decided. She set the whole thing up, did the research and everything- we took him there, his organs were failing, he was sick. He was so sick at the end. And he was there for a few days- he died in her arms after a couple days." He couldn't cry. October wanted to, he felt the need to, recalling the events, the sensations, but an emptiness held onto him, "It was best- it was the best way, for him to go. She loved him so much. She took such incredible care of him. At the end she was constantly with him day and night. Her mom and her- they prayed, they stood watch with him- and I worked." October smiled, the grin of guilt, "I fucking worked. I was at work when he died, in the afternoon. I couldn't even be there with him, to say goodbye to him." Stuttering, "I- I feel like I should cry. I didn't even cry. I can't cry now. I haven't fucking cried. And I- it's so..." unable to focus.

Latcholassie provided the space, the quiet, for October to continue.

It took some time before his guest went on, "I did it purposefully. I didn't want to be there when he died. I just couldn't watch that. After everything. After all of the doctors, the hospital stays, after watching him deteriorate- I couldn't be there when he left. I couldn't watch him go. I- I really wish I could tell you that it was because I was so sad, that I didn't want to believe he was dying- like denial or something- but it wasn't that. It wasn't. I was so angry. It was my way of getting back. I- I- I hate myself for it. I'll never forgive myself. I took it out on him, on her- at- in those last moments. Who does that? What kind of monster?"

The fire continued on. Midnight was approaching, nearly solidified. Latcholassie had fed the dogs. October had been provided a hot shower, a wool coat from a living room closet. A meal. A place to sit, to talk, then be quiet.

October rubbed his hands together, exhaled into his palms- "I was cut off, or, I cut myself off. I don't know, you know? The funeral, when he died, it was all about her family, her religious customs- I didn't feel a part of any of it. I read off a bunch of words that I couldn't pronounce, that didn't mean anything to me. I was going through the motions, but I wasn't there- I was done. I wanted out of my own life. Because what I hate the most is myself. I hated me. I hate me right now. I literally can't stand the fact of being me, and that's what really- that's why I left. I am trying to outrun myself. Which makes no sense but- here I am."

October waited. Latcholassie could almost see the tangled thoughts condense and aggregate in his visitor's mind. It had been a long time since October had allowed himself the space to process the complex emotions, impressions- more silence. More grappling. Finally, a conclusion. "All I'm left with is hatred for myself. I direct it at everyone else- at Tika, at my sister and her healthy kids, at God for letting this happen, at my son for dying- but it's all about me in the end. It always has been. I hate who I am. What I did. I hate that- I hate that I wasn't strong enough to face the pain."

Latcholassie had been listening intently to October. He nodded his head. It was difficult at points- an interjection crept onto the end of his tongue, a thought in Latcholassie bounced around like 'Of course God let you down! Yes sir, your God is a father- and every father is a failure- every father fails at love. This is the reason for mothers! Fathers are children themselves- selfish, needy, full of insecurities and secret fears, maintaining appearances and facades- imperfect and impatient. Yahweh in the desert, tired of his whining children- Allah in the moonlight, sighing after his name is cited as justification by another lunatic. Of course God taught us a lesson- he reserved his love and punished as he saw fit- set fire to our cities, killed our children, released bombs from the sky, infected multitudes with plagues, starved the poor, pillaged the weak, cracked the foundations of our homes- we deserved it. Didn't we?' But our hero of the Northwestern forests did not rebuke October. He did not

interrupt a ghost in pain, a ghost offering a confession. Latcholassie waited, wearing a ceremonial shroud, a leather bracelet and belt, a vest adorned in feathers and bones and beads- a deer skin drum with an elaborate set of painted figures on the hide- a rattle made from a dried gourd. The tools of his craft.

Once October finished, Latcholassie pointed to a tree stump, a seat. "Sit here. Look into the fire." October had been seated opposite Latcholassie, and without hesitation he moved to where the shaman indicated- peering into the flames. Waiting. Curious. Absolved, in a way, from being honest with another man.

Latcholassie then leapt behind October, a jarring bound. October was surprised by his athleticism. He thought to crack a sarcastic remark, but instead he returned his gaze to the burning logs. Somewhat afraid- he waited.

A silent prayer was uttered in the heart of Latcholassie. Explanations were unnecessary- spirit guides, ritual songs, sacred protection, an exorcism of unclean lower energy which had been accumulating inside and around October for months, almost years- the orca, the raven- spiders, snakes- narrow membranes between this world and those others, the upper and lower kingdoms of the spirit- ancestors, offerings- no introduction was provided to October. No background details were reviewed. October admired the heat, the presence of the mystery. Absorbed by the warmth, absorbed by a power which can on the one hand be so comforting, but on the other so destructive if not granted respect, if not properly attended to or taken care of. Waiting... wind in the trees... crickets in the bush... a long shake from Latcholassie's rattle... another... a third... then a silence.

A silence- until the drumming began.

Deer skin tremolos... pulsing, short, rapid bursts like a snare followed by precisely timed bass whomps... tika-tika-tom-tika, tika-tom-tika, tika-tika-tom-tika, tika-tom-tika... the drumming resonated with a call to arms, a song of combatants and the road to war rather than a hymn of thanksgiving or a sonnet for a lover... a steady, hypnotic beat... a dozen or so measures, to establish a foundation before the chanting. At once October was surprised by the feminine softness of Latcholassie's song, a tone otherworldly and from a time long since forgotten, revealed, vulnerable and imploring- October didn't recognize the voice at first, he nearly

turned around to verify... *Kel-i-Pi-Sagh-il-lie-il-la-Hie-Kel-i-Pi-O-Lo-Lum-O-Lo-Lum-Mahsh-Mahsh-Kel-i-Pi-Klata-Wa-Chuck-Klata-Wa-Chuck... Yah-Wah, Ah-Ha! Ah-Ha, Yah-Wah! Klata-Wa! Yah-Wah, Ah-Ha! Ah-Ha, Yah-Wah! Klata-Wa!*

Latcholassie's song grew in intensity, a steady build... the beat grew outwards... harsh and then melodic, extending... his voice providing counterpoint, vocalizing ancient syllables above the trees, whispering others amongst the flames... a power began to creep between the synapses of October's mind, between the interstices of his cells... a current... weightless, unburdening the load... a deep breath... eyes closed...

And in an instant the sounds of Latcholassie's drumming evaporated. The chants muted. Zapped like an electric shock like a bug zapper hung from the gutters charring an unlucky mosquito- upright, on his feet, the sudden stop jerked October. A signal shorted, an amplifier burnt out- the rhythm had been escalating, rising and growing for what seemed like hours- an intensification of volume, a build, a climb, and then a stop. A full stop.

October's eyelids shut and then opened.

He found himself in the thick of a horrifying landscape, a realm of darkness- a dark so black it overcame his other senses, like staring into a lightbulb for hours on end then flipping the OFF switch, instantaneously swept into an impossible inky surge, opaque and confusing and unable to adjust. The shadows of Tenebrae. The circumference of death.

The backyard, the fire, the trees, the sheds and rubbish in the lawn- gone was Latcholassie's house. Gone were any familiar landmarks. October rubbed his eye sockets. He blinked, again and again.

He gasped. A horror- a certainty- of being gone from the world. Gone. And this place- a geometric void- a closed box- a Gomorrah unknown. October sensed a distance vast and outwards in every direction but could not confirm it. He sensed a space extending above him, but could not find any objects to delineate even the slightest hint of perspective. He could only see his own hands, arms and body, as if a spotlight were pointed on his figure. Strangely, he turned his palms upward. He examined his fingers. No, his own body was not the source of the radiation- the

fluorescence did not emanate from within. He wasn't glowing in the dark. But there was no source for the light. He looked about for a source, beamed down from above spotlight-Broadway, perfect and locked in on his person. No point above, or beyond, from which it came- it took October several seconds before he yelled out, "Latcho! Latcho! Where are you?"

Like the vacuum of space- his vocal chords vibrated, his lungs took in the air and expelled it forth, he flexed his diaphragm- but there was no sound. There was no medium to carry his yell. He couldn't hear himself. He couldn't hear anything outside from the voice in his mind. A deafening, hollow, empty place- he quickly grew more and more alarmed.

Where the hell am I?

Everything about the familiar world was gone. The physical place where he had spent his entire life, objects and foreground and background and this and that- gone. October stepped each foot hesitantly on the ground. Flat. Firm. Smooth. But there was no echo or noise, no thump or pat- he looked over his shoulder- then back again. Otherworldly, transported- he tried to call out again, "Latcho! Come on! Latcho!"

There was no volume to his plea.

Inaudible.

There was no acknowledgement of his call.

Nowhere to be found- no horizon, no sky, no landscape- only an interminable blizzard of nighttime which surrounded him, trapped him and his senses. His body froze in place. Should he run? Should he sit? Should he keep trying to yell? "Latcho! Help me!" He rotated around and turned, scanning- nothing. Nothing to hear. Nothing to see. There was no help, no aid. He was alone. His petitions were muted. By now he was beyond frightened.

He kept scanning, nervous- nerve endings on fire, a cold emptiness everywhere- one direction, then another- black. But then- then a flicker. An orange spark, somewhere out in the void- there it is, to the left- yes, that was something. He saw it, he must have- he rubbed his eyes. Again, a faint glimmer. He called out to the light, "Latcho! Is that you?" He wanted to reach down into his throat and force out the words. But there was nothing.

Instead of waiting around, October began to bound off in the direction of the flickering signal. He took a few steps, stopped, looking down, inspecting his body as he walked- wearing the same clothes, the same arms and hands, the same feeling- nothing was distorted or abnormal. Could this be a dream? How had he fallen asleep so suddenly? The beacon flared up again. October picked up his pace. A silent march- what was happening?

He slapped his leg. He snapped his fingers. Nothing. No sound.

He exhaled into his palms, cupped up to his face, he rubbed his arms and shoulders, pulled his sweater up around his neck, adjusted the grey wool cap on his head- freezing cold- deaf- alone. He kept walking. One step, another- another, and another.

As he approached the light, he began to make out a tear in the black shroud- a gash in the midnight pall, a tiny rip in the continuum like a gash across a segment of cheap wallpaper. Closer, he focused in on the spot- it resembled a caldera, an oozing orange, lava- a gap, concealing a fiery substance. The ground would tear apart, a wound, and for an instant October was granted a sight of a molten core. October stopped a good distance away from the opening- fifty yards, or so he judged. A periodic glimpse into an oozing river underneath- he stood and watched. Unsure, bemused- an orange, magma like substance would appear and disappear- yet he felt so cold? How could this be? Would there be an eruption? Would another opening lead to a way out?

Willing his voice to be heard, his mouth twisted, "Latcho! This isn't funny Latcho!"

But no sound emitted from him. No voice to be heard. Nothing.

October had never experienced a dream so vivid. It couldn't be a dream. He never lucid dreamt. In fact it was rare for him to remember anything from the astral hours- it had been so long- it couldn't be. Let's figure this out, he thought- I was sitting by the campfire, where Latcho had pointed to, and the drum was playing, and the fire was dancing- I was relaxed- I didn't drink anything, I didn't smoke anything- he couldn't have poisoned me, drugged me- there's no way I could have fallen asleep. Impossible. But then where, how- a night terror maybe? A hallucination? Was he dead? He shouted again, desperate, yelling forth into the abyss, "Latcho, where am I? Where are you? This isn't funny!"

Empty.

Hollow.

Stifled.

October clawed into his mouth, searching for his voice- panicking. He glanced back to where the tear had been. The plasmatic liquid hadn't been uncovered for over for a minute- blackness. But then where the tear had been, the ground began to glow. Instead of a river, a static light, a deep red, a violent angry red like an infection, like a furnace- it intensified for another minute or so and then began to pulse- flashing. October could only watch. Stationary. But the more it throbbed, the more it resembled a warning- October mouthed "What the hell?" and then the unthinkable happened. Spiders. Hundreds, thousands of spiders- gunmetal black with pointed yellow marks on their sinister abdomens- he watched in horror as the insects poured out from the tear. Warped and nightmarish- but real- a legion of spiders moved aggressively towards him. It took a second or two to register, but once he did- a fight or flight signal, ancient and evolutionary, all along the nerves of his spine circling back to his brain.

Run. Run... run... run...

But he couldn't run. His body remained fixed. It wouldn't budge. He couldn't even scream. October fought against the inertia, straining- determined, urging himself, begging for motion- but nothing happened. Upright. Solidified. Immobilized. The spiders began to pool around him, a circle- waiting. North, south, east, west- every side, in every direction. A damn horrible scene. October locked in rigor mortis, suspended and hardened by fear- only his eyeballs could move, left and right and evaluating his surroundings- tears clouding his vision. A man who now found himself upended across dimensions, terrified beyond any measure he had ever experienced. Hell. A terminal thought- this is hell- I've died, I had a massive heart attack- I'm dead, and now I'm in hell- this is the end- I must have missed the gate, the entryway to eternal death, endless torture- Lasciate ogne speranza, voi ch'intrate- the hell in Bible stories, the hell at the end of a sinful life. His judgement had ended, and begun, here in this wretched place.

He begged for an end, for unconsciousness, to black out- but his awareness remained. He could not hide. He couldn't run. He couldn't move.

This can't be happening...

Faced with the inevitable, a prayer entered his mind- the voice of his thoughts, this voice he could still hear, and it whimpered and plead forth, "Please God, please oh Jesus Christ and Mother Mary, please forgive me, please help me... help me please, please." The glowing red had discontinued. Maybe the spiders were covering it as they flooded through, as they continued to amass around him. Maybe it had closed. Maybe he would be alright. "Please, anybody, please" his mind fumbled about, unlike his body, begging the invisible deity of his ancestors to shepherd him some form of aid, some rescue- but the fact that he had been reduced to prayer only confirmed his hopelessness. Doomed.

And thus the inevitable unfolded. His worst fear, realized- the spiders moved in, closing their distance between him. The moment they reached his shoes his motor abilities returned- as if it were some futile, cosmic joke being played at his expense. He bounded a few strides, let out an unheard shout, a scream so forlorn and defeated- and completely silenced- if it could have been heard, the trembles- "Nooooo!" But it was too late. And the creatures were too fast. October whacked and kicked and desperately knocked the creatures away, misdirecting and throwing off a few, but his resistance was handily defeated. The insects overcame him.

An army of arachnids, battalion after battalion- those first soldiers of evil, when they bit into October's flesh- the stinging pain. They gnawed on him. They tore into his body. They filled his lungs. They crucified October with incredible agony and horror... puncturing, ripping... tearing, burrowing... in and out of his eyes, his ears... across his field of vision, their pointed legs, their fangs... he felt them crawl into his ears, inside of his brain cavity... ripping off fingernails, tunneling underneath his skin and between muscle fibers... horrible.

October waited for death. He begged in his heart for death. He was more than ready to surrender his life. This was it- time to let go. 'Let it come, please.' But death paid him no concern. The onslaught only continued. And incredibly, despite the damage inflicted on his body, October remained conscious, he remained

aware, connected to the pain- a torture unlike anything of the world from whence he had come, a torment worse than a generation of sectarian violence with deaths and dying and more dead over who knows what only to be reborn and reborn again for more suffering and wailing. Worse than any interrogation backroom imaginable, worse than any homicide or genocide or suicide ever recorded- the maidens beating their breasts.

He had long since stopped trying to swat back or beat the eight-legged monsters away. Motionless. Defeated. The hideous beasts continued. A terrible ritual, a ceremony overseen by Kali himself- presiding with his immortal sword, his garland of human skulls, a pair of cold, gaunt eyes, a coy smile- October underwent a slow, excruciating dismemberment. The spiders shred apart October's limbs, his shoulders unsocketed, his fingers and feet, his genitals- bitten and torn and shredded off, stingers and pincers and fangs- eviscerating October- devouring him from within- asunder- blood everywhere, the taste of iron on his tongue and in his nose. Bits and pieces of sinew, of cartilage, of soft tissue and bone- sprawled out across that opaque surface, covered by the spiders- overcome by the entirety and enormity of the creatures' evil.

What was left of it... what was left of him... and still, he was conscious. Still, he registered their assaults. Nerve endings continued to fire. Every conceivable pain, every fiber breaking apart, every interstice being burrowed into, every tissue shredded- eaten alive- he felt it *in tota*. A scene incomprehensible on the surface level- and at the perceptual? He could feel his skull cracked open from within, his cerebral folds cannibalized by an inexorable plague.

A scene so terrible, so indescribable that not even the most visionary of Avila's Therasas could concoct a sufficient report. Putrid vermin, muddy waters, souls on fire- a small irritation when compared to October's reckoning. A minor discomfort. Condemned unlike any man who had ever gone before and crossed between worlds- experiencing every moment, an eternity of pain in each second passing. Lifetimes of woe, of suffering, one after another. Surely he had walked across Dante's rings. Surely this was the warning of the prophets, the admonition of the Christ. He had descended into the underworld. His soul was property of the

Deceiver, the Master of Darkness, Lucifer, Moloch, Satan- those forces of evil far stronger than he.

Unable to shout, unable to be heard... unable to move, unable to fight back... alone in a dark wood... *What we were you are- what we are you will be...* abandoned and alone without recourse or hope or a chance at redemption... doomed... forlorn... this was the outcome of his life... the outcome of every life, death... the final equalizer without discrimination or preference... this was his finality... his tongue ripped out from his mouth now... his eyes dragged separate ways... pulled apart to the four corners of the underworld, a feast for these infernal beasts... stranded on a horrible threshold. There were no more thoughts in his mind... no more fears... no more desires, no memories, nothing... all that remained of October Tierney, the man and the life, was suffering... at the mercy of a merciless evil, a continuous affliction that would never cease... the mercy of death unavailable, withheld... October resigned what was left of himself to this fate.

And at this his desperate nadir- October's dark night- hope sprung. A power greater than him, greater than the enemy creatures, greater than the evil of his own life that had brought him here, the evil which kept him here- there entered a feeling of love. A sensation of warmth. A recollection of his being, of well-being... being cared for, being loved... his mother, in her arms, she is holding him... her presence, her energy, her imprint upon his being that was more real than any memory or image... the love of his mother, the creator of his own life, his first caretaker and the craftswoman of his dreams, his life... she was there... making him whole... she brought his scattered bits together, united. He felt her. He felt a beam of sunlight on his cheeks. Her love given to him given to her by her mother given back again and again through the children and women and people of the world back to the beginning to the first act the first breath the eruption out of nothing the first thought from the first mind the first form from formlessness... love, the driver. October knew it to be love, the force without any counterpoint, the prime substance of reality. It was not a vision, but a fullness... beyond his senses... beyond this wretched darkness...

Thump tikka-thump thump pow, thump tikka-thump, thump tikka-thump thump pow, thump tikka-thump tikka, pow, thump tikka-tikka-thump tikka-pow, thump tikka-thump thump pow... a drum... his sight... the campfire...

October, seated upright, seated on the tree stump where Latcholassie had pointed to- he fell to his knees. He covered his face, prostrated, and he bawled. A grown man crying the cries of a newborn, of a child awoken from a nightmare. A grown man bolstered by modernity, scaffolded by technology, assured in himself and in his society, a master of the land and the sea, a tamer of animals and an inheritor of resources- a lord, a dominator, a king- cloaked in knowledge, in reason, in rational thought- pockets full of money, a head full of plans- a car buyer, a taxpayer, a cable programming subscriber- reduced, completely. Denuded. Left bare- tears streaming, escaping from the depths of his pain. Months, years- pent up, and released.

In Latcholassie's backyard, the barking dogs remained silent, out of respect for the poor creature. October's relief watered the ground, his knees covered in dirt- wailing.

Latcholassie continued to beat the deer skin drum.

October could not see it, but a smile curled across Latcholassie's face. It was not a smile of delight, or a smile of deceit. It was not the smile of happiness or satisfaction. It was the smile of knowing. The smile of guardian angels, of great avatars and perfect saints, of shamans and healers gone before.

The ceremony had worked.

AUTUMN

*om krtva tu puskaram karma janata vapyajanatam
mrtyuh kalavasam prapya naram pancatvamagatam
dharmaadharma samayuktam lobhamohasamavrtam
deheyam sarvagotrani divyan lokan sa gacchatu*

Having performed known and unknown actions for attaining prosperity; having gained timely death and resolved the physical body into the five elements; having concluded a life of desires and performed Dharma and Adharma, may you proceed to your next abode.

-O-

OGHHMMPPHH... ohhhh... aghhh... shshhhh... ahahemmmmah...
whap! Pharoomhmp! PHHHLAUMMMMMANNNNANNANNNNNN! Whawp! Shhh...
shhh... shhh... WHOOOAMMAM MAAAAPPHHHHHH >>>AGHH<<<OOOOH>>>>
AGHHH>>>OOOHHHH>>>> ROOOPPHHA HAHAHMMMM...shhhhh... AGHH,
OHHHH... pssskkkk... pssskkkk... PHARMPHHHHH>>>> YOOPPHHH...
pharamppphhh... shhh... aghhh... ooohh... aghhh... pssskkkk...
ohhh... WHAMP!!!! PHARPPPHHHHH... PHRWAPPPPHHHH...shhhkkkkk...
pssskkkk... aghhhh... PHRAMPPPHHHHHH... ohhhhhh...
WHAPHMPH>>>> ohhhhh... pssskkkk
warbled hissing... warming... warmth... crash, chaos purling...
warming... across... outside <things> outside <inside> this
<inside>... lines, surfaces, borders (threshold)... parts of this,
this is... there- go- overtake (CHANGE) stillness gone (GOING) and
<different>... moving so quickly- IMPULSE... exploding...
unfocused... no, don't GOING... (gone) ... lost portions where
did- HAZY- SHADOWS- a difference (between this and that) light and
DARK- but it, IT- all of this is everything <outside>... this is,
forever <inside>... there it is... this new (GO), wonderful
(GOING)... so much (MORE)
breathing lighter, lilting, hello... <inside> warmth... <so much>
where did that, am... being -breathing- inputs/ outputs... inside,
(between, space) but seeing this part of it outside, brings the
inside out <CHANGING.... OUTSIDE, IN (where does) how are...
inside, outside... meeting- together- a difference? from within,
without... <inside, out> change, across- crossing- more...
<warmth> in, and out... <outside, in> cold

whahhhah... hurting... a hurt, a wave rushing frozen hurt over the (outside & inside), everything- surrounded- caving- it sees it hurts and it smells and it touches the touching brings pain (outside), stinging... stung... RED... a difference >>contort<< tight, heavy and pulled sharp like ouch like screaming (inside)... too much! too little! no! not this! erupting, like the warmth but too warm now, or not warm enough... cold and sharp... hot(MORE)... spills <muscle spasms, tension> wet, too wet... (LESS)no! not-wait - there is the soft, the softest part of this... brown silk, this sheer and clean white light, different (the REDNESS is gone)- yes- unlike any other part of it <outside>, it draws over everything becomes everything close closed <inside> and brings out a beautiful squirt~ pink... <relaxing> suck, suck... automatic, the only thing to do is drink like this for on and one ~ wet, relaxed... desirous - desire... woken, awake not for long, forever a drunk satisfied drinking sweet, warmth... not too hot anymore... calm... quiet~loose, coo's, cooing, ahhh favorite part of this... mhhmm... perfection. EXISTING HERE. no more outside/inside. desire passed. achieved. needs- met- this is the place... arriving, satisfaction... loosening... in then out, easy <(AHHH)> further, farther off it goes... from other parts... parts are close, inside, but others... those parts (outside) are not part of <inside>... <i>- inside... the place where the other places meet? (switches ON then <OFF> space expands, between the outside) and the inside... a gap forms... a space between the outside and the inside... a space where the hurt comes, where the warmth comes... in between, is <i>... a space where other spaces end (FULL)-(EMPTY)... a space of screams, for more... a space of peace, back to the beginning... gone... <Shadow/Light> and then returned... returning- who? what? my parts make parts of their own, things of their own... (i) am... AM <me, the (i) of this place space here where it happens> HAPPENING (a point), they are them (changing, going)... the outside, the inside- a split. a difference... interacting, feeling with touch, with these goings... controlling... reach out... extend, beyond- between the two, the fulcrum... boundaries- each breath, each emotion, another brick... constructing the walls, [fences between] what is there - here (i) AM (being <becoming> is). and what is not <outside going gone to go again> here-here is this thing- my thing- me... (SILENCE-NOISE) lining up between these worlds, these storms... space recedes, gravity pulling... a center- (i) am - the center

some of the light burns and some of it attracts, it changes... it starts off slow, GOING one color turns to MORE GOING to <yes inside> then (warmth), then back around the other way (outside) until the colors are no more (inside) GONE, outside of the (SPACE)> (i) am... feelings <inside> GO with the light <outside>... when the other, the source brings (i) close when the colors turn away, when they fade to a solid burnt glow... when the pain is close and (i) face twists before (i) make it stop it, when it is hard to stay attached to the motions and comings and goings... the colors disappear... (source) holding <inside, dry, empty> close warmth feeds sweetness which fills inside <full>, (i) disappear for a while, to go- when (i) return the colors have come back to cover over everything, (i) (emptiness) but (i) moving parts are restored back to where there is no pain and the moving is easy, the moving happens... colors fill up and slowly glow... close to the source, the other... OTHER... HER... SOURCE <peace, quiet, warm, wet> OUTSIDE she brings colors... she makes the pain disappear before it can overtake (i). she is the (source)... warmth, ease, peace... (outside=inside)

-condensing, (i) (watching) her more and more- appearing- LIGHT-becoming <being>

before and after... an order... a sequence... the colors first, then next... one, then another... again and again... (outside=inside)

GOING

she creates the world. she creates the images, she moves and her lips crescent and (i) fill up inside even when (i) am not attached to her river of love, of nourishment... her waters run into (i), from the outside into me from her... a gift. she will awake with (i), (i) will come out of my disappearing land into her beside her. she will move (i), clean (i), hold (i) close when the feelings take over, the hot coals. she does everything for (i). every new morning when (i) return she is there. sometimes the returning is long, and (i) fear i will lose her, but even in the place of no more parts of me remain to stay to be with her... she is everywhere, inside and around (i). she must see into (i) as (i) see into her, warmth, where <outside> and <inside> meet

moon... its white glowfire alone in the sky... (i) have seen it before, with the source, with her... and her other half, her second piece... they rolled (i) along outside of the safety boxes outside of the flat surfaces and the mirror hall... (i) floated with them

like the floating white fire, up above... it was close, close to touch... why do we not catch it, hold it... (i) reach out for it... (SO FAR AWAY)- a distance... something between all of this... marking points, here, there... <this> then that... moon... (i) move underneath the light... but now (i) am not close, (i) could tell... there was so much space, above me... (i) being with there, the circle... alone... flickering bugs dance around the light... good bye moon

GOING

one night when the colors were gone the creator returned with her OTHER part, her OTHER (dark/half) spirit- the hard part of her the loud part of her, but it was quiet and even it kissed (i), the other part of her (i) am sometimes afraid of but do not see as much as her, the half of (warmth). the two parts wore silver threads. (i) reached out to them, to him, but (i) wanted her. (i) watched them, let THE OTHER near, but (i) wanted her. so after she placed (i) on her, brought the warmth to my lips to my front to my opening, that night in the dark (i) found it amazing to see to discover that beautiful whitefire moon plucked out from the sky hanging from off her chest, right in front of (i) so (i) could reach for it with my side with my grasp and (i) held the moon reflecting off of her... (i) caught it's glow... she brings it to (i) like all other things, she is the bringer the creator the giver... holding it, the same ball in the sky i had seen long, long ago. attached to her chest, she brought me the moon one night and fed me and (i) knew she controlled the stars as well as the earth, all of it was hers and all of it she shared with me.

the starwoman moves across the darkness and even in the darkness she is there, she holds the moon and the sky around her... she protects (i), she keeps order over everything (outside) and (inside). (i) am under her protection, her power is everywhere. the source <she> lets me see across the rocky surface of the black earth and the smoothness of the dark sky...

GOING

she is a flame, a wing flapping across the sky, a song triumphant... where she goes, there is light and there are tender feelings... (SHE) the source, all beauty all happiness all warmth... her sight is fortunate, to see her for me it is good, an omen... the starwoman, thank you... she is near, near to me when i need her, when i pray, when (tears) and (REDNESS) there she

arrives to grant me safety and warmth, a <coolness> to balance me... she loves me (even the OTHER part of her loves me too)

-the starwoman loves me and has created the world for me- but i think her other half might want to take it away- that cannot be a part of her- the other half, she <the starwoman source of all> (is not) he <the man of fire>

the warmth comes and goes, so does the REDNESS... she promises to take it away. she tells me to be brave. she whispers perfect to me, <brave, beautiful, love, patience> but the man of fire comes and spews hot lava everywhere echoing into the hallways, the walls shake when he comes. he never plays with the animals like <my starwoman> does. but she promises me not to be afraid, <do not worry> not to let the red pain overtake me. a pain in my solid places, rocks deep inside me, stuck... aching... my bones

-what happened before (i) came here-

when the world began there were no colors, there was no night and day- for only the night existed. it had no opposite. but the starwoman created the moon and the firelights, she created the waters and the cool waves of blue, she created the earth and the hard rocks, the greens and the pinks... then she dipped her fingers into the waters and the fish were born. she patted the earth, and the animals emerged. free to roam, free to eat and sleep and live. she gave life a place to be alive. she held the moon against her breast, she blew kisses to her creatures. she told us not to worry, not to be afraid, that her creation was good and beautiful, and even in the darkness even when the colors disappeared, not to worry. to have hope. hope is a feeling about coming back from the cloudy disappearing place where nothing is certain, it's about coming back and knowing she will be there. mama is the starwoman. dada is her enemy, her other part that left the peace of her creation <but she even loves him> her close enemy, a friend from the time before her reign but now committed to the destruction of her kingdom. he is unhappy she changed the way things were, for them and for him- he used to be happy, at peace. but mama created the world and he doesn't like the way it has turned out, so he fights against her. he doesn't want me around- he is the bell ringer whose ferociousness signals the end of my days. but i know she will win.

-Namdev is my name-

she tells me a perfect angel will always watch over me, protect me, never let anything bad happen. why doesn't she just say she is

my angel? if i go back to the disappearing land, if i never return... i hope she will be there, wherever i go.

-i (am) Namdev-

my dreams have been gifts- i am granted precious truths like the moon on the seafloor whenever i am in the dark. i am returned to the ground of being, beyond this life or this body. my soul identifies itself in truth, not in images pastiche'd by an ego construct, by a personality- i am liberated from being Namdev, from being confined by my parents and other people who are unable to help themselves- they have done the same to everyone they have ever met, as was done to them. but maybe the gift is returning each night, and remembering- inside of this shell, unable to speak, barely able to move- under the knife, liquids like rivers and lakes pool together in my belly, fish swim, strange waves erase parts of my body like a cloud surrounding my bones- i still remember the truth. i still remember the stories. my body in one place, my bones, but my heart in another... i yearn to sleep the night to peace.

mommy cries from behind the door. the noises get loud, then they stop and all i can hear is her faint crying. sometimes during the day when she sets me down in my playpen or the movement machine or back-forth place she turns her back to me, and i hear the same sounds. i wish she didn't turn away from me. i wish she would face me so i could hug her and kiss her. i don't want her to cry alone like her moon, lonely- even though she cries more and more, but she never shows me her tears. i wish i could tell her what i know. this is not the first time we have met. i have met the starwoman- i have been born as other boys, as other girls, and mommy has been born before as my friends and my enemies and now as my mother. the starwoman goes back forever and forward forever, the creator. i will return again, and so will she. our story will twist on (BEING) forever, in and out. i want to let her know that despite her worries, nothing will end. and everyone is the same- the same soul, the same creation of the starwoman, woven together, and we dance in her song. she smiles at us. she cries, but i know she is happy of what she has spun together- and even when the bell ringer appears to win, and all is destroyed- she smiles. whatever he destroys, or anyone destroys, she will create again... but i cannot tell her, so i smile in my way to make her happy, to stop her crying... i have some power too, power she gave me i am certain

the disappearing place- i've come back again with more messages. my great-grandmother, from three lifetimes back, of many lifetimes before (where outside=inside)... she told me i have come into this body of a baby boy to teach great lessons very simply. i do not have to confuse myself with what i truly am, she explained, because i have already done that work in other bodies, across other lifetimes. so in this body, i am only to be a source of love and creation, created and creating simultaneously, and this may be my last lifetime before i can stay longer with the ancestors- she says i will be able to stay with her and protect more of our people, protect their souls from reverting after all the good work which has been done. she told me i once brought medicine to the people, but i doubted my abilities and worried about my training. i wanted new spells, new powers and potions- i chased that which was unobtainable. she smiled with insight, whispering this lifetime was to be a final lesson- my days as this boy were meant to instruct me, so i could learn an important lesson: the only tool required is love. great-grandmother spoke like a raven to me, she wore lightbeams and rainbow earrings and her torso contorted like a tree trunk, branches pulsing. she was more alive than anyone i have encountered on the earth plane. she hugged me, beckoned me sit with her. she offered tea to warm my belly before i returned back. sipping from cups of birdwing doves, we spoke quietly together in a moon crater filled with diamond sands. she kissed my forehead before i left. i cannot remember what i looked like, but i moved and spoke light with an astral glow, my thoughts flowed between my grandmother between the planets flowing in an ocean... beautiful. i imagine death will be like this- the center will dissolve, space will emerge- where it all comes together now where I am no longer will be, but everything will still- what will emerge, maybe- somehow, i am not afraid.

a sting infected and pulsing, the red- heat- my arms, my legs, my chest to breathe- it hurts. mommy can't make it go away. she tries, she does- but even her own pain she cannot leave. suffering- she doesn't want me to suffer. i hear her whisper this. i whisper it back in my heart. she has her own pain- i see it surround her. i see it hurt her too. it makes me sad. i don't want my pain to spread into her, both of us - it is always spilling over onto daddy- daddy is yelling again. i have to cry for mommy to hold me. daddy leaves us. she tries her best, but it hurts. my insides all hurt, i can't move them. i can't say anything, but i tell her i

love her with her eyes. i know she is trying her best. but it hurts. it will be better when it ends. this life has been going on forever, i have been here so long- it cannot continue- this will not go on- there was a beginning, yes. a beginning. a start. i remember it now- she created me. she created the sky. she created the places and the other people and brought them to me. and if this started somewhere, i know too there will be an end. i hope it is on its way, to finish this- but i will miss mommy- i wish i could kiss her, pull her ear to my lips and whisper my secrets... so she is not afraid. i would do the same for daddy, he is very scared. he suffers too. but there is no need to be afraid. the pain will end- ending- then i can sleep, rest, before i come back again- stronger, healthier. i will come back and mommy will not cry and daddy will not hurt so badly and maybe the starwoman will let us- maybe we can try this all over again. maybe- anything is possible with the starwoman- her love holds all things. i am her starchild, her protection and care. anything.

-a last thought-

when I go, will these bones continue to cry out, beseeching for a reprieve? will they remain, haunted, containers for my tortured spirit?

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Imagine the internal world of a newborn. It cannot even be called a psychic world, or emotional world- it is hardly an internal world, because the boundaries between inside and outside are so tenuous. Imagine it- the experience of being an infant, alive but without the restriction of time- born without any circadian rhythm, without defined cycles like sleep and activity- never having seen the sun. Unregulated. Free. An existence of complete presence, an existence devoid of reference. Liberated from ego- no me or you, no this or that- no sense of possession, no sense of right or wrongness, no distinction between spirit and matter. Untainted by thought, by judgment. Without even the very notion of time passing from one event to the other. Boundary-less, without barriers or classifications, without distinction between self and Self, a complete lack of separation from the sea of mind. Take a moment. Give the exercise an honest effort. Isn't it difficult? It's an incomprehensible simulation. We have no ability to even begin to infer that state of being. We are incapable of even imagining such an existence, yet we all experienced it. We lived it. At the core of our person- from which everything else emerges. Can you

appreciate the peace, living without any pernicious thoughts in your head, without the voice of your inner self, the nagging commentary? Existing without your identity segregated and parsed out from the Tao of the world? Without language or culture, without cause and effect- only *being*. Only *am*.

Namdev hadn't been pinned down by time. He hadn't been able to integrate into our human culture, into the construct of linear existence- he had not been consumed by the past-present-future stream of becoming that we as adults occupy. There were no expectations. There was no fear. Nothing to anchor him into a limited, referential world. Namdev had never found harbor for his ship. Rules of society, constructs of industry or propriety- he sailed untouched by the lashings and knots, unstuck by the glue which fabricates your entire existence. The boy never packed his backpack for a first day of school. He never found a woman, felt the tidal forces of love. He didn't bury anyone near him, he experienced not a single catastrophe. There was no defining stressor, no incendiary event, no devastating fulcrum from which to measure the rest of his life from- a life outside of time. A life outside of construct. A life embedded in love. The love of Tika. The love of his grandmother, who would kiss his toes and thighs with every diaper change. The love of October, of his grandfather, of his cousins and his parents' friends- an unbound existence marked by the lips and embraces, built by smiles and kindness, nourishment and comfort, blankets and rock-a-bye lullaby tenderness.

Not too bad, when you consider the truth?

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Tika was handed a clinical trial pamphlet after a brief explanation from Namdev's physician. Another brochure, another protocol, another set of tables and figures, another company logo- another montage of shiny pictures of healthy children, happy parents, satisfied doctors. She didn't have to inspect the laminated pamphlet to know what was inside. She did open up the pages, more so as an act of courtesy, but did not read any of the details. She formulated a thought in her head.

The physician waited, anxious.

When Tika was ready- "It occurred to me- in the beginning, I believed in my heart because Namdev received a diagnosis so early, relative to other children who suffered Niemann Pick- other families I had learned about, the parents- their childrens' diagnosis came so late. There was much confusion for them about what disease their children suffered from. It made me sad to hear this. I read case study after case study online. I went to visit the foundation website, as you suggested, and reached out to other mothers. I felt in the beginning we were lucky, because we were able to get a diagnosis quickly."

It took the physician a moment to respond, "Absolutely Mrs. Tierney. It can take years sometimes. You did remarkably well."

"But this is my point. You see? The early diagnosis does not really make a difference, does it?"

"Well, I- I don't necessarily think that's true. There's- well, there a benefit for you and your husband, once you knew exactly what was affecting Namdev. There's mental energy freed up, right there. Because you're not searching. The problem of getting a diagnosis is solved. So I think that is a very valuable thing right there."

"It means nothing for our son though." Tika inhaled and exhaled deliberately. "And it means nothing for me. We are at the mercy of this disease. He is at the mercy of this thing that is consuming him, that is coded into him."

Trying to sell a product, to recruit another potential patient-white coat, expensive leather shoes- "Well, not necessarily. The early diagnosis... you've been able to have the opportunity to register him in several clinical trials. And this next one, in your hands there... there is the potential for real benefits, right there. And I think the more open to options you are with his treatment, you can continue to try experimental... it gives you more flexibility, and a better chance. I hope you can stay positive Mrs. Tierney. I think there are some definite positives that can come from exploring the options."

"Stay positive?" Assertive, her eyes like sharpened weapons from the Gita- concise. Tika was electrified by her own intuition, firm and emboldened at the conclusion she had arrived at. Battle hardened. A cosmic warrior- she declared, balanced and from deep

in her being, "My son is going die. This disease will kill him because there is no cure. You say treatment, but, this is not the right word." She shook her finger at the man. "From the beginning, this word, treatment. What we are doing for Namdev is not treatment. We are not helping my baby improve."

"Well..."

"No. Listen to me. I wish that it would have been clearer to me sooner. I do not want to keep forcing experimental medicine down the throat of my son, do you understand? You have no clue what you are giving him. It is unproven, with side effects. I see them. You pretend there is hope, but really all you want is for my baby to be a number in a trial study. No. I will not support it any longer. My baby is dying. We should be focusing on making his death as comfortable as possible. I do not want to hear about any more treatments, or trials from you. Is this clear?"

Dr. Richmann didn't say a word.

"My son deteriorates before my eyes. He cannot move anymore. He cannot speak or giggle or babble. He cannot acknowledge me. Between the feeding tube, the oxygen- my wish for him is to be allowed to die in peace. For him to move on to a better life. My baby has done enough suffering here, in this life, without having to take any more of these medicines, endure more side effects. No. No more."

She handed the brochure back and left the stuffy consultation room.

--

After hugging his wife, "Teek, you smell like smoke babe."

Scanning the walls for an answer- they pulled apart- "I know. We had a patient who was in today, it was his second hip replacement. The smoking has caused osteoporosis, and still, he smokes two packs a day. Fifty-three years old."

"That's young for two hips. Jesus. It's a tough habit to kick but... you figure after the first surgery, right? It might help motivate you."

A sigh, then, "Well it did not work, and now there are no hips left for him. I hate being around it, with our little one inside me."

"Oh I'm sure beansprout is fine. You can't do anything about that anyways. It's fine. Don't worry about it, some stinky guy with no hips isn't going to hurt our baby."

Tika unzipped her coat and tossed it on the ground. "I will have to wash everything. I could smell him down the hallway. Of course, the last patient of the day."

Music in the background, between them...

*Open up, let me in
Let's go down the waterfall
Have ourselves a good time
It's nothing at all
Nothing at all
Nothing at all*

October chuckled. "It's always that last patient. Here, give it to me. I'll go put a load in." October collected her coat, her socks, and added them to the collection of dirty clothes in the laundry hamper. Her scrubs were sent for dry cleaning, a separate bag in the corner of their room. Before her shower- a kiss on his wife's stomach- stripped down, their child in utero. Then October, on the stairs heading up to the loft, a bottle of detergent on top of the hamper, before Tika could start the water, "Have you ever even smoked a cigarette? Like in your life?"

Tika seductively upwards, at her husband, wearing only her underwear- quickly responding, "Once. One time. A friend, after some drinks. I was very young. Maybe twenty?"

"What did you think?"

"I hated it." A nervous laugh.

"That's funny Teek, I can't imagine you puffing away. I would pay to have seen that." October continued up the stairs. Tika stayed behind, standing half-naked in their living room, a glance down to her fingernails inspecting them for nicotine residue, for flecks of tar or yellow stains.

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October... daydreaming... Dwayne Alvarez... south by southwest... sipping mezcal, polishing his side arm... Dwayne the rogue trader, an

acquaintance made from a contract job October had put together for a trading firm near San Diego... an account gone bad, a run for the roses... a self-professed 'bullshit artist' that October knew only from telephone calls, from weekly check-ins before the project delivery... Dwayne's voice conjured a mental image of rattlesnake boots and a slim-fit light-gray suit, a nouveau Texas Ranger... October remembered his final conversation with Dwayne... like others before, always personal, never business... "You know what October, I told that bitch off. I did man! Listen to this shit! I said 'I don't think that daughter of yours could wash a dish if her hand turned into a scrub brush and she slept in a kitchen sink!' And her mama's face went white, ghost white, fuckin' a. And she squirrels back at me (coughing, intimating a British accent) 'Well I raised her to be a self-sufficient woman, a modern woman, not a workhorse, not a piece of property to serve a man.' Oh man, and I jabbed right back at mama! Right back! I says 'Listen, I've never met a girl more trapped by her own thoughts, her own anxieties and self-concern than your girl. She's penned up like a pig.' Oh boy! That knocked her fat ass out boy, fuckin' a. She barely got out, 'Beg your pardon?' So I begged her pardon! Shit. I go, 'You heard me. I said your daughter is nothin' more than a neurotic little ball. She's afraid of everything. She takes everything personally. And her warped sense of reality don't look to be changin' any time soon.' I figured that might be it, but there mama kept on goin' with some shit like 'How am I the one to blame?' And I laughed! I had to. I laughed right there. Because there was my ace in the hole man! I had the nuts! I laid it down with 'You catered to damn near every single one of her psychodramas, you validated every twisted scene she made about the world around her. You fostered her thought patterns! You never told her to shut up and be grateful, or God forbid, look at things in a different way. Because you don't have none of those skills yourself!' I thought the old bird was about to wind up and swing man! Whoo boy! But now it's over, you know? No sense in trying to fix it, it's been over for a while. Kind of feels good, you know? To let it go. So now I'm down the road at the motel and figured I might as well make a little bread since my marriage is cooked." Dwayne had called October late at night to request assistance with accessing his firm's account for a trade on the Mexican exchange... Dwayne had forgotten a password key... but before explaining this to October he ended up detailing a fight that occurred the previous weekend

between himself and his mother-in-law... Dwayne's wife was audibly crying somewhere in the background. The whole thing had been a ruse. See, Dwayne had been fired by his employer, but had neglected to mention that to October... so October provided the access code, and Dwayne traded nearly \$4 million dollars that next week until another phone call came to October. A chief financial officer... audibly stressed... 'Disable everything, immediately.' 'If that sonovabitch calls you again, alert us, so we can alert the authorities.' 'You'll be receiving a call from our attorney.' Fast talking Dwayne... his last words to October went something like "There's no fucking adventure left in this lame ass country! Fuckin' a!" A sense of adventure... the Wild West... the great unknown lawless land of freedom that our forefathers hitched their wagons towards, a land that drove them to starvation and murder and unspeakable horrors, driven by freedom by the hope to live free to exist unencumbered, rugged and untouched... a land of intestinal fortitude so wild that boys like Joe Brown and Bill Smith and Tom Johnson in their boardrooms and luxury vehicles cannot and will not ever comprehend... we the people of the modern age simply deny the possibility of a place so free... but not boys like J.B. Moody and Enoch Browne sitting in Griffith Foo's Tavern debating windjammer sails grousing over imperial restrictions and tariffs hundreds of years before... no, they saw it looming on the horizons of time. But back to the vision- in his vision, October is in high-gear loping on down a desert highway, the trunk of a Chevy El Camino full of Mexican brick weed duct-taped under a panel, a leather duffle bag underneath his shotgun passenger seat fat with American dollars... a girlfriend caked in adobe dust and corn flour, left behind with say-good-bye promises out the side of his mouth and her legs long and sunbaked tan, crossed in front of her mother's house waving a twilight hand through thick desert air... a luminous vision of Sonoran peasantry... himself, the antithesis, headed home to a four-car garage and a wife who wanted new diamonds added to her wedding ring to celebrate their 15 year anniversary, a wife who spent thousands of dollars on clothes and make-up and perfumes and wax jobs and salons but couldn't approach that ancient doorstep beauty... no amount of money could fabricate that Pacific moisture, that red clay, thousands of years working a tough land... two ungrateful children, three mortgages... headed home, October as Dwayne as a robber baron as a dope smuggler as a business man as an adventurer... desperate to turn back, to fall between those legs

coursing with dark Indian blood, the legs of his priestess wrapped around the altar of his being... but unable to do so, obligated to keep up the appearance keep up with the Jones' keep up his duty, an inheritor of a life unreflected and unwanted passed down from a failed line of lying progenitors who offered their sons those same imprecations which had haunted their own lives... October, musing as Dwayne, a pasty desert heat embalming him, yearning for a cervesa, putting miles between himself and his love... we are inheritors of neurotic suspicion and anxiety like the sons of Alcibiades, our fathers haunted by the specter of the Cold War our grandfathers haunted by the bomb, apocalypse junkies addicted to the finale... businessmen haunted by outsourcing, a market collapse... physicians haunted by super-bug plagues... housewives haunted by molesters and predators... governments haunted by terrorists... xenophobes by immigrants, homophobes by gay marriage, right-to-lifers by abortion, conservatives by liberals, atheists by God, racists by color... a world wide web of foreboding impending unconquerable imminent menacing doom mapped out and assembled via our collective obsession with the eschaton... Mayans petrified of changing baktums, Christians with their eyes tilted up to the heavens lusting for Christ's spaceship, mankind with her saviors and messiahs and judgement days and great floods and eternal fire... the end of days accessible right here, right now just click a button... paralyzed by fear, everywhere, everybody participating in this 'modern' experience... wanting to feel safer, feel protected, feel a alright... buckled-up waiting for good news... guilty, waiting for punishment... waiting, afraid... lifetimes and generations frozen without any sense of adventure. October is dreaming all this up with his hand on his chin, lost in another time another place as another person... transposed, addressing his own dissatisfaction... headed down the road but simultaneously parked in front of a television set, gone.

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Levity. There had been a release- a density had been diffused. The person who remained behind in October's body exhibited buoyancy- there was a looseness to the world around him, a weightlessness to his hands and his head when October picked himself up from off the dirt. He had stopped weeping. Wind blew dry leaves across the ground. He felt the pressure of pebbles on his kneecaps. The rhythm, the pulse continued. Latcholassie made his way opposite

October's prostration, the burning logs whispering between them. October did not look directly, but in the periphery of his focus he felt his guide continue to orbit around until finally a last shake of the rattle, a final crescendo.

Rap-ah-pah-thump.

It had ended.

An integration experience. A miracle. A conversion process. The holy ghost. A transformation. October's first thought- sprung from the clarity, sprung from the cleansing Latcholassie had performed- wiping his eyes, 'She's here.' The spirit of his mother, Anne Marie Tierney, dead for over twenty years, dead and gone, hardly considered by October hardly remembered, never honored or commemorated or spoken about (early on in their relationship, Tika had once shared her own beliefs regarding reincarnation with October, the balance between Atman and Brahman, the lila dance of life, the illusory misconception of death, the both of them drinking wine, too far and too much and October snapped back at Tika explaining why processing his own mother's death was his business and why he didn't want to talk about it anymore, so Tika never made the same mistake again). October had lost sight of her. No memories, no nostalgia- nostalgic like freight train whistles in the dark under the covers rolling along through the distance towards your dreams- nothing. Until now.

October floated up onto his feet. He looked down, focusing on his hands- the hands of his father, long, firm fingers- bulbous knuckles- the veins across his wrists- his father's hands. But- his mother's hands too- the anima, the forgotten half- he had heard her voice. Inside of that place- he realized he had heard his story. Not the sound of words, not a newspaper reading at hearty breakfast tables, not a hallway speaker between classrooms, not a phone call or a radio signal- he heard the song of his heart, of her heart impressed upon her son, October, him, the young boy. Impressed with love, surrounded by love- the birth of the cosmos, the birth of his spirit, the warmth of her nurturing. In faint tones his truth whispered sincere, purely it filled his stomach then his limbs- ballooned, blossoming in her work- his life, the art of her hand. "My mother, she," October stopped himself.

The drums had reorganized his rhythm, from levels cellular up through the astral and countless interstices between.

Latcholassie took a seat. A deep breath. He pulled a cigarette out, hidden from within one of his braids. Then another. He offered one to October. He pointed at the space next to him on the worn cedar bench. "Sit. We must smoke tobacco, to end it properly."

A burning stick, removed from the embers- from the edge of the firepit, passed between the men- lighting, inhaling, exhaling.

"How did you do that?"

"I did nothing. It was y'r vision. I only opened the window for you to look through."

"It was so real."

Latcholassie smiled, satisfied. "That's because it was real. Yes sir. Weren't you there? Or do you need more proof?"

"No, but, where was that place?"

Latcholassie deliberately cocked his neck towards the stars. It was a new moon, the first new moon of spring. Soon to be recycled by the moon of the rains, the full moon of April. But tonight the absence of moonlight allowed a resplendent brilliance of the galaxy to shine- hundreds of billions of stars, twinkling- the milk of the great Mother ululating across the night, a ferocious stream. The moon of the rivers. In a tone of respect, humbled, Latcholassie replied, "Think of this world as a place we all share, we all create. But it is only one world. And it does not exist on its own. There are other worlds. Our mind has to obscure them, in order for us to get along. We call this world reality. What our eyes tell us is there. What is in front of us. But there are ways to access other worlds, other realities. Other worlds where other parts of you live, other parts of you create, that impact this world. Those other worlds- that is where you were."

"How did I get to it? Or how did you access it for me?"

In a plume of smoke, "That is for my business only. I am not in a position to teach this to you, and you are not in one to learn it. And I am not in a position to tell you how to interpret what you saw. Everyone has their own vision, for them. Y'r spirit created the vision. The spirit of y'r ancestors, y'r family, of y'r line

of people. We all work together, the living and the dead. You saw what you needed to see. Yes sir. From here, it is all up to you."

"So you didn't see where I was?"

"I did not. But I know that whatever it was, it was supposed to be. Whatever you saw, it was supposed to be seen. Yes sir. That much I know."

"So the spiders, the darkness- you weren't there for any of that?"

"A medicine man opens the door. He does not walk through it. I guided you to the vision you needed to see. I only gave you the chance to peer through, to allow a part of y'r spirit to communicate with the rest of y'r being, the rest of y'r people. To hear y'r story."

"They definitely communicated." October was shaken. He was without pretense. He was unwrapped from all his mental conventions, defenseless without charm or devices. He was aware, fully, of how things had become- awakened to how he had neglected his mind, allowed it to twist into a coiled snake of anger, a sickness of self-pity, hatred and resentment. He confused Namdev to be a burden, an ordeal to endure and suffer. He confused Tika for the same. He had lost sight of truth. He had lost the ability to recognize the light in his child, in his wife- in himself- in his own mother and father, in everyone. He had been fooled by his senses. He had been fooled for a long time, and over the last two years his foolishness had solidified. But now, October knew. Latcholassie had shown him- or at least allowed him to see.

A jet of smoke, then, "The story is y'rs to own. Yes sir. My people used to pay the storyteller, they used to hire him and pay good money for the story. It was worth more to them than a good hide, or a basket of crops. A good story can feed the soul, can save the soul. Y'r story can save you, can change you, can be y'r source of power. You remember that, yes sir. Especially y'r first stories."

October picked up a hatchet from off of nearby woodpile. He studied the handle. "First stories?"

"Original stories. Y'r myths about the world before you knew anything of myths or the world."

October considered feeling the blade with his finger, but he balked. He pulled his hand back and set the handle down on the chopped lumber. "I'm not sure I follow."

"Every baby, every little one, creates their own story of the world. That's why our parents are so important. They are our first creators, our first givers. Or, they can be our first devils and evil spirits. It all depends on what happened to you growing up. You have to uncover the first stories you ever told y'rself. They're important, because all y'r other stories come out of them. Every new story you tell has your first story as its frame. And the frame speaks, it tells your new stories how to grow."

October tapped some ash of the cigarette end. "I lost touch with my story."

Latcholassie filled himself with a long drag from off the cigarette. "Of course you did. This world today, the world of the white man, it is built to disconnect man from nature, from our stories. Many men forget. They forget their story and are lost. You were lost, hungry ghost. Maybe now you have found something true, something to believe in."

After a moment, muttering, "They killed me. Again and again. They tore me apart- but I didn't die. I couldn't die."

"Y'r vision is for you." Careful to offer any opinion on the issue, Latcholassie affirmed, "How you interpret what happened, I cannot say. I do not know y'r story. I do not know y'r people. No sir."

"But there's more to it than that."

Latcholassie had been focused on the fire, but he reacted and turned abruptly towards October. "Explain to me what you mean."

"Something inside me got removed, or reoriented. Like a surgery. Like the person I am now is radically, completely different than who I was this morning. If that even, can that make sense? Am I delusional?"

Latcholassie reaffirmed his sights on the fire. He shook his head back and forth.

October halted their conversation. He didn't want to speak anymore. He didn't have any questions. He wanted to exist in the moment of

his freedom- his return from death. That levity- the love and deliverance. He sat within himself for several minutes.

The two men finished their cigarettes while the fire crackled.

October began to explain the stirring of his soul, honest and unprompted, whispering, "There is a deep sense of relief I feel right now, of, of... like I'm protected. I'm being watched over."

"Who does the watching?" A wise teacher- Latcholassie knew the answer, but it was time for October to reach the conclusion on his own.

"My mother. It's my mother." An understanding erupted like a fountain within his heart, it sprayed perpendicular to real time and carried him into the past- it occurred to him- he had been protected all along. The whole way through. Not only then, with Latcholassie, but in every moment since his mother's death- she had been there, with him. She walked beside him. Remembering lucky breaks, close calls- retroactively he sensed her presence. He sensed her working on his behalf. He had been blessed by her. She had been watching over him. She had been grieving with him for Namdev. And now she would help him continue on. "She's protecting me, she's been protecting me, and- I know everything is alright. It's alright. I don't know how else- my son is alright. I feel it so, deeply. I feel him- like he never really left me, like she never really left me. I was blind to it, for so long. But she's here. She's with him, and she's here and he's here, and- wow."

Eyes closed, pushing his student further, "How do you know this is her?"

"I just know. I mean- I guess it's- I have faith. I have faith it's her. I can't see her, and she's- I know she's dead, she's not here, in a body- I just, I can feel her. There's no way to prove it, but- I just know." October rose to his feet. Planted on firm ground. Rooted in the earth, a new earth, a new breath in his lungs, "I know she's never really left me. And neither will Dev. I've never really left him. It's like Tika used to explain- I remember her explaining it to me- nothing really dies, because nothing is on its own. We're not on our own. There's like an appearance of death, a body stops working- it looks like death- but, even- because his body isn't here, I can't see Dev like I used to- but I know we're together. And we will be together.

Because we always were that way. Like everything- it comes from the same place and goes back to the same place. Together. You know what I mean?"

Nodding, quiet- Latcholassie understood.

October sighed, "This is going to sound weird, but it's almost like- I feel like I've been saved. And everything ahead of me, it's going to be alright."

Our honorable guide, our friend and resolute hero, our rascal and keeper of secrets, Latcholassie bent down, grabbed a handful of dirt- sifting through pebbles- he found a single stone and pinched it between his thumb and index finger. Latcholassie, advising his new friend, "Remember y'r vision. Remember y'r story. Carry them forward with you. Honor them. What you have been given is a sacred gift."

October nodded, "A part of me can't help but wish it had been sooner. For all I wasted, for..."

Stern, pinching the stone then dropping it back to the ground, "Visions can only be taken forward. Y'r story is not over. Everything that happened is exactly how it should be."

--

"What are the names October? What are the names of the medications your son is prescribed?"

October waited- buying time before he glared up from his computer monitor. Up from the bank statements, the credit card confirmation, the health insurance portal, stock charts and presentations slides- gloves off. "What is me answering that question supposed to prove?"

"What medications did I give him tonight before he went to bed? What is he taking for seizures? What about for fatty acid build-up? What trial therapy is he participating in?"

"So I'm not involved?"

Tika bit her tongue, but it won out in the end- the angst, the frustration, the cold looks and the nights spent on the couch alone and consumed with television blissfully tuned out, the mornings

without a 'how did you sleep' or 'hello' or 'what are you two up to today'- she couldn't resist. "Are you? You tell me."

"You obviously don't think so, so I must not be. I don't care about our son? I swear Tika, if you try to pull this nonsense, right now..."

In front of her husband, a foot shorter but towering- toe to toe- "What will you do? Hit me? Beat me? Beat him? What will you do with your anger? It is going to explode somewhere! Come on! Hit me."

October smirked, "You're an idiot."

"No October. I am right. You are turning black inside. Mean. And when your ugliness ignites, I do not want to be present for it. And I do not want Namdev to be around either. You hate us. You do. You sit there and pay bills and believe this is support. This is support? No October, it is not support. You come home and want nothing to do with me or him."

October gulped. He broke eye contact. He scratched the side of his head, near the temple, sideburns tight and clean- "Fine. What medicine is he taking for the trial? I know the seizure medicine is Loo-nin-all."

"Luminal."

Smirking again, "Okay, Luminal. Luminal. What trial is he in right now?"

Tika inspected her fingernails, fed up. "I thought you know it already, you pay for everything, remember? You are taking care of all of it? Why do I need to explain when you have the receipts organized?"

Shouting at his wife, accelerating away, "What the fuck do you want from me?"

She broke into tears. "To love your son!" It had been weeks, the dam burst- the emotional pressure, increasing and piling on and finally- her voice gurgled, flooded, "Why can you not love him? Why? I do not care about me. I do not care about us. You can hate me forever. You can leave me. Fine! Go! But him? He is only a sick boy, a little boy, and you give him nothing!" She pointed towards

their closed bedroom door where Namdev was resting, "Why can you not be with him? You rob him of a father! Why? Why?!"

Tika had broken down, hunched over onto the floor, October watching her collapse from the kitchen table... a car locked in the parking lot, beeping... Namdev asleep in his crib dreaming of a Learn-N-Play learning center, the piano at his feet, purple monkeys and blue lions and happy songs made for childhood... dark urine filling a diaper... a steady pshhhhh... October quiet, speechless... Tika gasping for air.

--

"Are you certain?"

"Yes Mrs. Tierney. You can't blame yourself for what happened to your son. You're going through enough."

"So you can guarantee it to me? I have searched all over the internet for an answer. There's nothing about it."

A liberty- a professional courtesy- a white lie meant to help a woman struggling, to help a mother consumed with guilt whose mind ought to be relieved, eased- a primary care doctor taking care of a patient. "Yes, I can guarantee it. The two are unrelated. Completely. It had nothing to do with your son."

Tika leaned back on the medical table. Paper crumpled underneath her tiny frame, her legs crossing. "And you are sure?"

"I am certain, Mrs. Tierney. I am absolutely certain. There is no scientific evidence for it. For a rare disorder like the one your son had, the mechanism behind it- your husband's and your cells, your egg and his sperm, contained this single nucleotide- it was one nucleotide in billions and billions. The mutation was not caused by anything you did. Neither of you did anything wrong. Neither of you had any control over it. Nothing you did contributed to your son's disease. I am sure of that, and I would put my entire career on the line. One hundred percent."

Tika breathed a sigh of relief. Then she began to cry. She brought her hands to her temples on either side of her head, pressing firm. She could taste the Virginia Slims, menthol. She remembered sneaking down an alley next to the orthopedic practice where she worked after a particularly long shift, furtive, then checking in

to a motel that charged by the hour to take a shower and diffuse the smell of smoke before coming home to October. She remembered business trip weekends while her husband travelled and left her to own devices- the middle of the night huffing in a quick one. Promising herself again and again, 'This is the last one'... and again... and again. She promised herself, and their nascent child- a secret kept hidden from October, her family, for years and years- a shameful thing, a pregnant woman smoking, exposing her helpless child to carcinogens and tar and sickness- her blood, Namdev's blood. A whimper then a flow of more tears- a gasp.

Dr. Wright made a decision and moved next to her patient. In her white coat, her stethoscope hanging in front of her, she put her hand on Tika's shoulder. "It's okay. Mrs. Tierney, you are a brave woman. Braver than me. But you need to talk to somebody. You need to be able to talk to somebody about your emotions, about everything you're going through. Building a support system is critical. That's how people make it through these kinds of things. You have to protect yourself."

Tika sobbed for another couple of seconds then steadied herself. "I know. I will."

"I can provide some referrals. I know some great female therapists. You aren't alone. There are support groups, one on one, different options- I'll email you some follow up information."

--

"How do you know this is going to work?"

Latcholassie cracked his knuckles, "Know?"

"Yeah, *know*. Like how are you sure of this? I wish I had my phone- I've never even heard of this sort of- ritual."

Deliberate, a pause, "Knowledge is a funny thing. Yes sir. People today, white people, they think they can *know* something by opening their phone and typing up a question for the internet to answer. They say, 'Here, let me look this up.'" Latcholassie made a charade out of October's tepidity- a performance, pressing invisible buttons on his palm- a one-man one-act play. Then Latcholassie continued, "They search for the answer. They do not even wait for the results. Hmm? 'Okay, here it is! I like this one!'" Index finger pointed upright in eureka-fashion, dramatic. Then, after a

second pause, a longer pause done without making eye-contact with October, Latcholassie put his hands on his knees and laughed, full-bellied and satisfied- the laugh of being in on the joke. Not a laugh of scorn, contempt, not a laugh like laughing at the handicapped boy in back of the classroom, not private laughter, not closed-door laughter or after-dinner laughter, not the laugh of malice or schadenfreude or duplicity- a robust, satisfied laugh. Content.

October sat on the worn wooden bench next to the fire unsure how to react, unsure of the punchline. Tapping his feet, nervous.

Latcholassie continued, "See, this is what so many people think by *knowing*. But it is not knowledge, no sir. No way. No how. You understand me? A man says he knows something- a carpenter knows his hands, knows the wood, the knots in a piece of timber- a lover knows the body of his beloved, her hips, her neck- a hunter knows the deer, knows its prints, knows its smell and habits. That is *knowing*."

October was surprised to feel ashamed. What Latcho had explained rang true. Plangent. October realized that what he wanted 'to know' really consisted of wanting to generate predictions, guarantees- the weather forecast, market indices, Namdev's health, Saturday's dinner, movie times. There was a subtle but profound difference in meaning- 'to know,' for October, was really to require assurance. A warranty- security- secure. And considering this, insecure- October felt it necessary to defend himself. He put his hands up, "Okay, I get it. Technology is evil. The white man doesn't know anything. Alright? You win Latcho. What do you want me to do about it? Sorry I have a phone. Sorry I want some assurance. Sorry I'm a white guy in twenty-first century America..."

Latcholassie waved his hands criss-cross out in front of his chest, palms out, signaling October to cease- shadows of fingers like spiders across the bonfire heat. "The internet will only justify what you type into it. Y'r assurance is created by y'r own self, you understand? It is a justification engine. It agrees with whatever you need it to. The worst kind of friend."

"A justification engine?"

"Yes sir. You type '*Is so and so bad for you*' you find twenty reasons explaining the negative. You type the same '*Is so and so good for you*' and twenty more reasons explaining the positive."

October considered the man's words. "Why are you..."

Latcholassie continued. "I'm trying to show you. Understand? Knowledge comes from experience, yes sir, bet on that. You must do something to know something. And over time, over experiences, y'r knowledge turns into wisdom. Wisdom lives in the heart, in the cave of your soul. It cannot be wired up and text messaged."

October hated being patronized. He resented being lectured- memories of junior high English class, memories of his father next to a tractor- Tom Sawyer, the importance of changing diesel oil- things he loved, ruined by instruction. "Okay! I get it! It was a bad question, alright?"

"No sir. It was a good question. Phrased bad. But good intention. You really want to ask what my intuition says, what my wisdom says. Because nobody can predict the future. I cannot *know* like how you ask- but I can say I know my heart tells me that the Great Mother brought you to me to perform this. There is no certainty though, no sir. There is only intuition. That right there is my search engine."

October decided he wasn't done grouching, "You have to understand where I'm coming from. I have no idea about what this is, this ritual. And this is my life, I have to..."

Another interruption, more hands waving, back and forth, halting- Latcholassie spoke with a grave tone, "This is y'r misunderstanding. It is not y'r life. You don't own anything."

--

"Why don't you two go out? Take a break- you deserve it. Your mother and I are more than capable. Perhaps some time away- you can go to a nice dinner. What do you think?" Mr. Vasudevan was gently caressing his grandson's cheek while he spoke to his daughter and October. Skin to skin- one side perfect and soft untainted by age, perfected by the wisdom of unknowing by the wisdom of completeness- the other side wise and covered in lines and the lies of reason, cracked by the stress of self-justification the erosion of time the callous of hard work.

October pulled the collar of a sweatshirt up past his neck, to his cheek. He scratched at his thinning hair, long and disheveled but in the style- *a la mode*. "Well that's really, it's..." he glanced at Tika.

Tika's mother tried to coax them together, "Yes. We can spend time with the baby. You two deserve it."

Tika picked up a tiny decorative pumpkin from off their kitchen table. She inspected it, set it back down, and walked to the other side of the table. Striding, she kissed Namdev on the forehead, then sat on the short end of their L-shaped couch- next to her father, her son and his grandson in between. As Tika had matured into adulthood, the more adept she had become at protecting her parents from certain truths that would upset and confuse them. "Thank you both for offering, but we wanted to spend time together tonight, the five of us, yes?" She glanced over to October. Their eyes didn't connect, passing by each other, of fated enemies before a battlefield advance.

"Yeah, that's right... we were talking about it... it would nice to all be together, to visit. We were going to order some food, from the Chinese place you guys like?"

Neither of them wanted to be alone with the other. Tika couldn't have felt less attracted to her husband, couldn't have felt less interested in his negative energy, his constant shadow. October wanted to avoid speaking about Namdev as much as possible, speaking about the medications and routines and treatments, their failure to produce a child who would grow up, their failure to live a normal life together. Neither of them wanted to face the reality of their marriage disintegrating. Neither of them wanted to order a round of appetizers and pretend everything was alright.

Mrs. Vasudevan, excited, said "Oh- the fried rice is wonderful there."

--

October's mind like a caterpillar in pupation fat after a long summer of green leaves ready to molt and take flight... thoughts silvery, glisten... emerge... hand to elbow to chin pointed down at right-angles, a chair in the living room in the dark in a Tuesday pre-dawn funk unable to sleep or rest, rocking Namdev back to

sleep, giving Tika a break... sitting there... rain... he notices rain... how long had it been raining outside? A steady flow... waves of echoed kisses between the tiniest of lips and the supplest of cheeks... an orchestra of paper pieces torn on perforated seams continuous from one end to the other miles and miles long... *chhckskshckshckshchs*... can you hear the whimpering clouds? What does the rain sound like? October listens. A sky weeps onto parking lots, into gutters stuffed with dead foliage, across car hoods metallic and tiled rooftops, into meadowy fields of grass and abandoned junkyards and tarpaulin construction sites. He hears the sound. Truly. October tunes his attention toward the gentle flow... it occurs to him he is listening... that he had not been listening, but it had been raining... how did he miss it? How could he be so consumed within his own melodrama to prohibit the nerve endings from his ears from firing into his cortex? The sound of rain... he is aware of the sound... the sound occurs to him... occurring from outside of him? Inside of him? Are perceptions perceived from an 'outside' place, perceived by a discrete, atomistic entity like October with thoughts and emotions which are generated 'within'? Two matrices of mind- one outside and one within? A bridge across mediums? Is there a physical raindrop falling somewhere outside of October, striking him? Does his own brain manufacture the sound, culled from a miasma of electromagnetic quantum species boiling about mathematical and by their inherent nature directly unknowable? Is the lachrymose quality of the rain, the sadness with each landing drop, the melancholy, the pensive front porch watching clouds roll by lazy- is that quality comprised by nothing more than electrical activity within our brain? Our own fine tuning? Random oscillations? Or are those sensations and feelings, those colors and qualities, vibrations across a kind of landscape? A landscape which October's mind itself is tied into, has been tied into... October's mind a territory of an extended mind of one medium where the sound of rain or thunder or a lover's whisper are excitations of a membrane extending and unifying all minds all things all space and time? A dream within a collective dream emanated by the godhead of impossible realities, asleep for an afternoon nap, himself embedded within the reverie of another godhead, ad infinitum? And will the rain continue to fall without us there to hear it? Will radioactive cats survive our glare? Without our mortal attention focused and conscious attending to individual drops dripping down heaven sent heaven exiled fallen

like angels to the earth to ripple melodic, collections of pools- will they disappear? Are they real? When the bum is asleep in a South Philly alleyway, will his clothes still soak wet? Abstract to the concrete... lachrymose... October's internal voice wins in the end and drowns out the storm.

--

"His eyes are changing color October, can you see? Yes they are, my sweet! Yes they are!" Tika has each of Namdev's legs in her grasp, her fingers clasped around his chubby ankles, the boy smiling and cooing up at his mother. Tika's voice is excited, light, a heightened pitch to match her spirits- "Mommy is hungry! She is going to take a bite. Okay? Okay!" Nibbling at his thighs, his belly.

October stands watch over his wife and Namdev. A powerful rush of fullness, of joy- a man of accomplishment without any self-pride- joyful. Joyous. He beams, radiating. Sure enough Namdev's eyes were lightening. An eclipse in the sky fading- from gunmetal grey to light blue, an electric ethereal blue incipient and barely noticeable- revealed by the sun. Only a few weeks old and already growing, changing. Namdev's ankles wrinkling further and further up his calf, his pudgy forearms and elbows- layers of love.

Happiness colors the Tierney's bedroom. A wedding picture on the nightstand, a small polka-dot blue-box hamper stuffed full of baby clothes, a column of diapers on a changing table- Namdev continues to kick and smile, resting on his changing mat, the changing mat resting on a towel, resting on their queen bed. Tika kisses relentlessly, planting and smacking her lips against her boy's skin. "Daddy, are you hungry?"

"Now that you mention it..." October bends down, natural, and joins his wife. A display of affection. A family, enjoying themselves. A simple act like drawing a bath for their son, testing the temperature of the water and mixing bubbles, bathing then drying the boy's perfect skin- a simple joy permeated everything in their home.

October relishes the grin of his infant son. Amazed. Illuminated. He kisses the boy all over.

Namdev responds with "cawwww" like a baby bird, a budding personality perfect and enamored by his parents, a helpless creature basked in the warmth of his caretakers. At that moment Namdev is a blessed boy. Tika is a blessed woman. October, a blessed man. And to affirm it- "You two are everything to me."

"And you are everything to us."

--

"October, where is your sister?"

Reluctant, in his bedroom- headphones- a book- winding down after a day filled with grade school dramas. Homework done. Plates cleared. Milk drank. "I don't know."

"You don't have to lie for her. Tell me."

Lying to his mother, "I don't know, I really don't know."

Mrs. Tierney sat down next to her son. "I know you love her. I love her too. That's why I'm worried about her, about this boy she is seeing."

A favorite bed-time t-shirt, long brown hair, lean and freckled- a liar- "Mom, I don't know anything about it."

"October, just stop. I know you think you are doing her a favor. I know you think you are protecting her. But you shouldn't lie to me, you shouldn't lie to anyone. At least have the courage to tell me it's none of my business."

October was only nine years old. He knew Nin was good to him. He knew Nin was on his side- she shared her music, her books- she told October the truth behind things. She explained the world to him.

Nin was sixteen and experimenting, mapping the limits of her influence, the boundaries of who she thought she was, who she could be, and what her parents wanted.

Mrs. Tierney continued. "Being a good brother doesn't mean you have to be a disobedient son."

"Why do I have to be in the middle of this? I was asleep. My homework is done. I didn't do anything wrong. Why does it feel like I'm in trouble?"

"Because you are in the middle of it. This is a family. We are all connected to each other, whether you like it or not. You might not like it right now, but some day your relationships will save you. That's part of being in a family- there is give and take."

Rolling his eyes, *a la mode*- "Can I go to bed?"

"You promise me you don't know?"

His voice punctuated, raised, frustrated with a lip curl, "Yes."

"Well you must really love her, I'll give you that. I know you're not being honest, but... I'm sorry for waking you up, I..." Mrs. Tierney began to tear up, her eyes heavy, drowning in concern and worry. "Someday when you're a parent, you'll understand."

--

Tika's late-night meditation: Namdev restless and unable to sleep, demanding Tika's shoulder, her warmth- what could have been a frustrating moment but instead transformed into a sacred act- *What if this is my last opportunity at easing my son to sleep? What if tonight I lay to sleep and fail to wake up, to greet the dawn, never lay my hands on him, never hold him in my arms with his backside pressed to my chest rocking forth and back? Worse yet- if his breath halts? This is not a chore. This is not hard work. This is a ceremony of awareness, a sacred act of gratitude, a consecration. If instead of worrying about the hours wasted, the hours spent on the balls of my feet transferring his weight side to side, the pressure in my elbow, in my arm holding him- if instead I focus on the beauty of this moment, here with him, my boy- brought here into this world to make it a better place, to make me a better woman, to move me further than I could have on my own, to go beyond the boundaries I placed on myself- unlimited potential, holding a future here in my arms- I am transformed! I am not a tired mother, I am a steward of love practicing faith into the dawn hours. There is no room in my mind for complaining or wishing things were easier or hoping his eyes close- there is only appreciation. There is only space for humility, humbled by the responsibility and the opportunity. Humbled by the gift. Thank you.*

--

A mid-morning heat, from hydrogen bonds fused to helium photonic and nuclear, fused from millions of miles away and deposited into the asphalt underneath October's boots. Sweating already- a healthy sweat, a sweat of life, of vitality. Purpose. Not much had been said between himself and Latcholassie on their inevitable drive back to the Greyhound stop. Neither of them had slept. A quick breakfast, a few chores- it was the next thing to do, to set October's compass pointed back home. And as the rusted truck pulled into a parking space, neither of them seemed to know what to say to the other. October offered an awkward handshake. A 'thank you for everything.' There was so much to be grateful for, so much he owed.

Latcholassie grunted, "Now it is my confession. I was going to stop, for good. I had decided. To forget my st'ry, forget my people. I intended to let the moon of the spring pass. To put away the drum, the rattle. To forge. But it is not over, and now I have not missed the ceremony. Yes sir. So I must thank you, hungry ghost."

October smiled, full of joy. Purposeful- he jumped out from the passenger seat- a backpack from the truck-bed. There was no exchange of phone numbers, no pen-pal commitments or plans for a reunion- only tentative footsteps, a cranky gear shift. But then a brake grinding like metal on metal like the pad wearing thin- another gear shift- back to **PARK**. And out from the driver side window, a reminder. "Hungry ghost! Now you have been fed, and you have fed me in return. If I do not see you again in this world, remember me in the next." A smile. A bang on the side door, fist to metal. A departure.

There October stood, wiping his brow. His friend's words echoed in his heart. A woman prattled noisy into her cellphone... the air lock of the bus activated... a current of air swept comfortably onto October's cheek.

He approached the ticket agent window. Soft-spoken, light on his feet, working with the texture of his own voice in a way like it was tender, still new to the world and ought to be carefully managed, "Hey there."

"How can I help you sir?"

"I need a one way, Philadelphia as my final."

"Sure is a long ways. We're going to have to route you a couple times. Can I see a photo ID?"

"Of course. Thank you." He set down his driver's license.

Despite her arthritic fingers, their bony appearance with skin sagging and joints inflamed, she deftly scooped up the plastic card and began to input data. "Okie dokie Mr. Tierney. Now let me see here. We can go Seattle to Spokane, Spokane to Minneapolis, then Minneapolis to Chicago, then we'll get you pointed at Philly. Not too many people going to Philadelphia out from this way."

October half-smiled, unsure of how to respond. "Will this cover it?" October unfolded three hundred-dollar bills from out of his backpack's side pocket.

"Should be enough. Let me get you mapped out here in the system. Rarely see anything over that amount. I think Los Angeles to New York might be around \$350, and that's about as far as you travel distance wise."

October sighed. "I really appreciate it." Waiting. Pretending to be engaged with the ticket attendant's work, but not too engaged to the point where he seemed overbearing. Judging the appropriate level of interaction. Aloof. Participating. But within the moments of his exercise, he was confronted by what would be waiting for him after three days on the road, after several thousand miles peppered with restroom breaks, junk-food binges, sweat and more sweat... the woman's fingers clicked rapidly at her keyboard... glasses hanging off her nose, an old face, a face that ought to be retired and babysitting her grandchildren... grandchildren... children... Tika... Namdev.

Tika would be waiting for him. The end of the line. Almost forgetting- almost forgotten- lifetimes ago, lifetimes apart- or one life, between them, separating and dividing them- their son. October was headed into a conflict. A fear welled up in his bones. He had done her wrong. He knew he had betrayed her trust. He had broken their agreement. And it had amounted to more than his exodus- it had been the nights avoiding her, the days escaping off to work, the lack of engagement and empathy, the inability to face reality with her alongside her as her partner and friend and husband. Noticing a newspaper headline from the *Seattle Times*- THOUSANDS LEFT WITHOUT HOPE. Hopeless- how could he confront her?

What would he say? What would he do? A million questions flooded his mind.

"Okie dokie, that ought to do it. You're all squared away. I was able to avoid the weekend rate in Chicago, and we have you booked for \$287.45. Change to spare." The attendant took the bills from off the counter and traded them for a series of tickets with October's name printed on them.

"Thanks." Holding the tickets, waiting for the remainder- October felt the weight of an invisible gravity begin to reassert itself over his shoulders, in his thighs and ankles- heavier. Sinking. Sadness. Webs of sadness, trapped like a fly- he stared through the woman, past the money and the tickets- a mirror, everywhere, which reflected back to himself and left him faced only with his own shamefulness, his own regret.

Noticing the change in October's demeanor- from calm and serene to forlorn and nervous- from a faint smile to a dreary frown- the attendant offered, "You still have an hour or so before your bus boards. There's a nice diner around the corner, try the apple pie. Best I know of around here."

"Thanks."

"When I'm really needing a lift, I ask for a slice of American cheese melted on it. Imagine that- apple pie and cheese. My dad used to eat it that way. I never thought anything strange about it growing up. Funny. I still don't."

"Thanks, maybe... I'll give it a shot."

"You do what works for you. That's the only way to do it. Have a safe trip there, Mr. Tierney."

Footsteps, concrete... faint voices... the echoes and smell of travelers, of decay, of strangers and strange places, plastic and vending machines dropping chocolate bars... antiseptic soap dispensers foaming in communal bathrooms... advertisements plastered onto walls by janitors... a digital timetable clicking updates ON TIME and DELAYED and CANCELLED... a small station, a typical station. Tika's shadow followed October back outside. Her voice. Her eyes. Her disappointment. Her anger. It dug into the sides of October, set a mile-deep pit inside his gut, itched up and down his shins. He could not escape her, or the consequences of his decision to

abandon ship. He would have to pay his due. Reconciliation was an impossible thought. But what was possible?

In a few minutes, October would find himself at the diner, ordering a slice of apple pie. "And could you add- this might seem like a strange request- could you add a slice of melted cheese on top, if you don't mind?"

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Bus ride reflections oozed out of October, a forehead filmy and glued to plastic windows, his mirror image inescapable, fuzzed polymer like a distant wraith but simultaneously tattoo'd back onto his person- see him leaning there? Bus after bus- transfer after transfer- a bag of almonds, can of juice, a stick of jerky- a song in his head:

I might be wrong

I might be wrong

I could have sworn I saw a light coming on

Grease and sweat- a nearly six-day ride across the country with nothing to do but listen to ghosts singing hymns.

(The funny thing is I never wanted to be a father. I hated my father. I never told him to his face, but then again after my mother died, we never communicated in emotional terms. After my mom died, he might as well have gone right with her. Committed to the farm and the business- I hated him. Smoking his Marlboro Reds, never saying anything about what I should do, what I should be. He refused to talk about what happened to mom, how hard it was. He never spoke out about anything abstract. It was the weather. The baseball team. Feed orders. Grocery lists. He expected me to be a man but never taught me how to become one in my own way. It was his way. And that's why I hated him so much towards the end of my son's life, much more so even than when my father was alive. Because I became him exactly. What I did with my own wife and dying son, how I retreated from them emotionally. I followed the pattern. I refused to open up about how I was feeling, I didn't talk about how we would handle it, I didn't allow myself to be vulnerable. I shut down. I did exactly what he did. I followed his lead. And each day, the more and more I felt like I was becoming him, the more and more I subconsciously hated myself. Until the day I realized I had become him. I remember it. That rainy afternoon in

November. I hated my blood, because it was his blood. I hated my hands because they were his hands. I remember thinking I always wanted to be happy, I wanted to love life- to be positive- I considered myself a happy guy, an upbeat, fun- I wanted to be a guy everyone saw as someone who got the most out of life. I woke up that November day in the early morning, listening to the rain, my mind was open, it was free- but then, as the day went on, as Tika and Namdev woke up- I shifted completely once they were awake. My energy shifted, and I noticed it- like an out of body- and realized I was miserable with them, and I wanted to be alone. I wanted to be by myself. I noticed the tension, flexed across my face, the wrinkled grimace, the contraction, the anger- angry. Constantly. And from then on- I couldn't continue to think of myself as a good dad, a good husband, a good man- I wasn't happy, upbeat, fun- I had let it go too far, bit by bit (an image inside October's mind: a stalactite building up, a fissure, water dripping from the top of a cave, a few atoms of calcium, a couple atoms of magnesium piling up over a hundred-thousand years), my tower of frustration, doubt, fear- piling up- self-justifications and rationalizations and interpretations and expectations let down- one on top of the other- there I was, this tower of hate, solid, stone, this configuration of negativity- something I never wanted to become- someone I never wanted to be- upbeat, happy- yet there I was, with nowhere to turn or hide. Faced with myself- I had gone too far, beyond the point of redemption, a solid mass of malcontent grown too high, my dis-ease has grown too firm- an angry man, an unhappy man. This is who I am. Is this who I am? Am I who this is? This is I, am who? Who is this I am? There was no escape. It was like an alter had taken over, but the alter ended up being the real me. I had been the alter all along. It was all I knew. It was all I had. Everyone has a self-destructive impulse, and becoming this bastion of hatred, this ugly and angry man, that was my own way of imploding the situation with our son. Becoming that person, it was my way to avoid pain. But at least now I can reframe it. I can see it for what it is. I can understand how hard it must have been for my old man to lose his wife, the mother of his children. He was a country kid, a good old boy. He loved her, real deal. That must have hurt him beyond measure. Just like losing Namdev, day by day, was like an extended crucifixion for me. How he reacted to the situation, it makes sense to me. It was too difficult for him to confront it. Just like how I couldn't confront my own

situation. That's why I have to go back. I have to stand in front of it, and start. I have to. Before, I couldn't let anything be on the line. I couldn't let myself get hurt. I protected myself for years. Insulation from the next tragedy- I knew I wasn't immune, that catastrophe would strike again. That's why being with Tika wasn't part of my plan. My plan was to make money, be with plenty of women, never have a family. Basically, to live selfishly. I am a selfish person. I wanted to protect myself from ever being hurt again, hurt in the same way as when my mother died. I didn't want to have any real stock in the game, so when the cards fell, it wouldn't be that bad. The reality was my selfishness never went away. Even after Tika came along- I held onto it. Tika. Oh Tika. You disarmed me. You gave me a chance, an opportunity- you tried to save me from myself by opening me up to others, opening me up to your love, opening me up to the idea of starting a family. You made me so much better than what I set out to be. And at the end, my mind was so obscured, so dense, I figured I didn't owe you anything- I decided that you had tricked me and had ruined my plan, my defenses. It was your fault. You made me forget- you forced me to lay it on the line- you pulled back my armor and opened me up to being hurt again. And I figured because I went to work, I paid the bills, I played my role, that I didn't owe you any affection, I didn't owe you an apology, I didn't owe it to you to not stick around. How could I have been more wrong? Tika, I'm sorry. I missed the mark entirely. I was your husband, and I left you long before I packed up and walked out the door without telling you. You are such a beautiful woman, you gave me such a beautiful son. In the hopelessness of my own pain, I forgot. I missed it. I missed it all. So misguided. I hated Tika for making me a father. I hated her for being a great mother. I hated her for bringing him into my life. I blamed her for our situation, as if it were her doing, as if she was responsible for Namdev's illness. How did I become so warped? The pain. It had to have been the pain)

At night with LED lights and screens glowing like radioactive campfires, thinking through a sunrise across the high plains- Spring dew drops ecstatic and kissing soy fields and wheat fields, cattle lands and pastures. Ice melting- a new beginning, the great renewal- water- over bridges that crossed rivers one side to the other like the Columbia, the Spokane, the Couer d'Alene, the Clark Fork, the Jefferson and the Madison, the Gallatin, the Yellowstone- cleansed by the fire, cooled by the waters. Rolling on four wheels,

brought into a state of acute intimacy with his own mind, a humming silence forged from the vibrations of car engines, the squalls of wind and howling of an immense beyond- an arrival. A return. A flood of honesty washed itself over October's heart:

(And once I had the family, the wife, I was okay. It was alright, because it was all going my way. But the moment when it stopped going my way, I blamed the world. I even blamed a God who I hadn't ever once said 'thank you' to for the rest of my blessings, I blamed Him for taking away all my expectations of what my son was supposed to be, what my marriage was supposed to look like, what my life was supposed to turn into. I blamed Tika. I blamed everyone. None of it was how I wanted, so it had to be somebody's fault. What really disappointed me inside I think was that I went into the whole endeavor with every intention of becoming a better father than my old man. My son was supposed to grow up and be a better man than me. Improving upon the past- those expectations, too, they were completely annihilated. Washed away. I should have seen Tika for what a great mother she was, but instead I resented her and hated her for making me go through what we had to go through. I fought like a child. I fought it in my own emotionally immature way. Again, the boy who never grew up. The hurt little boy. That was me. That is me. Looking back, honestly, I can see now that I've been a scared little child. I've had no perspective on life, and I didn't develop any tools for dealing with life when it didn't go my way. My mom died on me, my dad abandoned me. I was a victim. I'm the same nineteen-year-old who ran away and popped pills to feel better, to ease the pain. I can't cope. I want everything to go my way. I have a total inability to accept things for how they are. Forget being spiritual, I couldn't even apply a practical philosophy to the way I lived. I couldn't see my problems as opportunities, I couldn't see my sick son, my poor wife, for who they really were. I looked upon them like they were burdens for me to carry, so I complained every step of the way. A scared, spoiled little child, pretending to be an adult. Shiny shoes. The costume. The career. Just a child. That's all I am. That's the truth laid bare. Right here. The costume. My interactions with other people, putting on the front, the veneers, the façade-pretending. Pretending like 'Oh I have a baby isn't this a blessing everything is great' or 'I have a sick son but thanks for asking everything is alright we're getting by we're a strong family no no no it's alright I'm sure we'll make it through,' with the job and

the leased car and the pretending. All the posturing. Fabricating this character caricature of how I was supposed to appear. If I could hold it together at work, generate business, then I would be okay. If I stayed in shape, dressed well, I would be okay. If I still had the nice car, the apartment, I would be okay. Fussing over the external presentation. And now I realize all those hollow interactions were programmed by arbitrary human institutions and society norms which I valued- because I played the game! I was supposed to reap the benefits for playing! I wanted the rewards for following instructions from society, instructions about how a strong husband and a good provider and a dad who had his act together is supposed to present himself. I was mad because I did everything I thought I was supposed to do, I said what I was supposed to say, said it how I was supposed to say it. What nonsense. I hate who I was pretending to be. I hate that person. I was miserable. I was suffering. I was terrified. I was terrified by death, again, for a second time in my life, except now I was supposed to be an adult and know how to cope with it. At some point I should have grown up and evolved my own strategy. But I didn't. I banked on useless norms that abandoned me the instant things turned bad, turned ugly, turned real. I was alone, left with myself. I was the same scared little boy)

Rivers like the mighty twins, the Missouri and the Mississippi, the Beaver, the Allegheny- at night a faint lunar crescent hanging off in the distance with her dusky skirt dangling far and wide across the horizon as if it were painted by the hands of a graffiti artist, wearing gloves with the fingers cut off, stained in nickel blues and alloy blacks and twilight pastels, posted up on a sidewalk street with a sign **SMALL PRINTS \$15 LARGE PRINTS \$20:**

(I remember in the kitchen, with Tika, cooking dinner. The radio was on, and a tribal kind of rhythm came on the speakers, in a song, drumming. Namdev perked up, he was so alert, he really responded to it. And Tika noticed him right away. She started talking to me about a place inside of the human psyche, an elemental part of every person, and she said something about how the music was touching something primordial, something from the African plains, something ancestral that we all share which echoes in the collective mind. Then she said, "a collective mind we slowly poison away with our egos," that's how Tika described it. Which is so beautiful, thinking about that now. What a perfect description!

But I missed it. I brushed it off. She was so excited to explain to me that since Namdev was so young, he had no walls built up, it struck him deeply. I remember Tika being so excited. She loves Karl Jung. She didn't even start reading him, or studying Western psychology, until she was twenty-five. That's so her. Curious, engaging, so many different facets to her person- her astronomy, her cooking. Interests, talents. And there she was in the kitchen that afternoon with the cherry blossoms flowering, white and pink petals strewn across the concrete sidewalks, she told me to look at him. I was on my computer, preparing some work. I barely glanced at him. I barely gave him a second, or her. I completely dismissed them. I did that a lot- I know I can only take the vision forward, but I regret the wasted silence with my boy. I can remember these moments of calm, when Namdev would lie in my arms, rocking him to sleep. Him lying on my belly. When I wasn't upset or thinking about his illness, only a boy and his father, me and him. Us. A family. The three of us together with my wife. What a gift he was. I'll never be able to forgive myself or let go of that regret. I miss not being more present for those moments, for sucking those moments in like deep breaths. I didn't savor them enough. I wasted that time- but I wasn't totally lost. It wasn't always that way. I remember putting my face up to his, a month or two old. Tika must have been asleep, and it was just me and him. I was home early from work. He was laying down in his little baby basket we had. Picturing him there. I was so in love with him. Watching him coo and laugh, being filled up with joy and happiness. It was such a simple equation- being with him filled me up with love. I watched him for an hour straight, leaning over him, playing with him. I put my face right in front of his, so he occupied my entire field of vision. And it was like he changed my whole perspective, kissing his legs and belly, his cheeks. I remember that moment well. I remember smelling him, loving his smell. The smell of baby detergent on his clothes. The smell of his skin. I remember thinking that he smelled almost like after a chlorine pool. He was so beautiful. I couldn't believe what was in front of my eyes. This beautiful, handsome boy, a boy that I had helped bring into the world. A world he left- a world we all leave. And I regret wasting all that time with my son, with my wife, being angry and upset. I'll never get those moments back. But I have to make this right. However I can. I have to make this right)

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Tika stood outside the front entrance of their apartment building. She was smoking a cigarette, a blank expression on her face. A man stood next to her, maybe a neighbor. He finalized his own cigarette, a deep exhalation, leaving Tika and headed towards the building across the street. Tika watched him walk away. Then she reached into her pocket, her pack. Another. She was staving off dinner. She didn't want to think anymore. She yearned for a bath, her bed. Sleep.

October caught her off guard. He appeared, stalking from behind as brought the filter off her lips.

"Tika?"

She didn't bother to hide her tar stain'd butt. She plumed a thick cloud of smoke. Her eyes were alert, but her body hung tired.

It wasn't the way October envisioned it. On his train ride from the city- he figured he would ring the doorbell, she would open it, and his temperature would elevate, heated, stressed and itching and confronted by his own lack of courage. That's how it would happen. A coward. A deserter. A mutineer. He would stand before her and wait- at the mercy of Tika, at the mercy of the fates. Five weeks without a phone-call, without a letter or message- Tika buried a son, then lost a husband. And whatever he received, he deserved. He would be sitting in front of a locked door, waiting, remembering Latcho's ritual- fortifying himself- you can do this. Maybe she would unlock the latch and take off up the stairs before their eyes could meet- maybe the door wouldn't open.

"October." She assessed her husband. He was dwindling, worn down. Skinny. A full beard. Hair unkempt, overgrown, curly and shaggy- the neat partition along the left side of his skull nowhere to be found. A huge backpack looming behind his head- a vagabond. Her husband had become a prophet, a wanderer, a homeless man. She took another drag. She didn't know what to say.

Impulsive, October figured now there was nothing to lose, "You mind? If I have one with you?"

She stared down at a husk of ash between her middle finger and pointer. She flipped the useless filter into a patch of new grass. A pack emerged from her pocket, one cigarette- then a second. She didn't respond, but extended her hand. October had halted about

ten feet away from her on his initial approach, so he took the necessary steps to close the gap. He accepted her gift. She sparked a white Bic lighter. He inhaled. She lit her own.

"Thanks."

She turned her eyes away from him. Distant, "How long has it been October?"

"I really don't know. A month maybe. I don't know."

Silence. Tension. A car pulled into a parking spot nearby. A man dressed in a suit-and-tie emerged from the driver's side, a pearls-and-flats woman from the passenger side- a couple, commuting home. Normal, talking about dinner, about weekend plans- Tika watched them closely.

The couple sauntered to their unit and unlocked their door, entering a quaint and comfortable domesticity together.

Time dragged on, inhaling, exhaling, cloudy- neither October nor Tika was certain as to what protocol demanded of them.

October couldn't bear the space between them. He broke, "Teek, I'm- I know it's empty- I know it doesn't matter what I say because what I did was so- but- I'm..."

Tika had grown so accustomed to his coldness that she could only confront him now with a frost of her own. "You did not allow me to grieve, October. You did not allow me that courtesy, do you know this? I went from burying my son to losing my husband. And defending you, in front of my family, my friends. You forced me to stick up for you. I had to defend you for leaving. During a time when I should have been given the choice to do what I needed to do. Do you understand this? You forced me into more. More. You are a bastard for this. A bastard."

"I know Tika. I'm..."

"No. Sorry does not matter. Do not say this. You knew before you left what it would mean. You decided this. You forced me into more pain, into another situation, because that was your choosing. You left me no choice. Did you consider this? All I wanted to do was to grieve together. You were my husband. He was our son. As much yours as mine, mine as yours. We owed that to each other, I thought. But you made no such concession. You took it into your own hands."

Her words- 'were my husband'- they pierced October. Wounded worse than any multitude of flesh-eating spiders, worse than his son's ashes- he fought back tears. The past tense. Passed. Gone.

Tika continued, a longing in her voice tragic and dissatisfied, "I wanted to grieve together. To grieve with my husband. To stand by his side. But you did not care what I wanted. Did you know you were going to leave, the day you left? That morning, when you saw me leave for work, did you know?"

Begging for compassion, for an opportunity to explain himself, "No. I didn't. It's like I was taken, almost, by something outside of me. I know that doesn't make sense, and it's a cop-out, but that's how it felt. An impulse, a force came over me..."

Tika squinted, "A force?"

October was earnest, "It was like an alarm went off, and I couldn't stay around any longer. I had to go, or something terrible would happen. I didn't plan it, or scheme it up. I didn't do it to hurt you. And I know that it's not enough, the way I'm explaining it..."

"No, I understand it. I do. Because a force came over me. To be alive. I stepped out on you October. I had to- I had to put you out of my mind, put Namdev out of my mind. I do not know how else to explain it, but a force- this is what came over me."

Without a moment of delay, without the mental images and the rage and the pain, without any of the egoic baggage, back from his journey- committed- dead reckoning towards an unknown and unseen shoreline- October put hope into the words which escaped his lips, "I understand."

Direct eye-contact. Extinguishing the cigarette. Exhaling. "No. You do not. I am pregnant October."

October reflexively shut his eyes. It was as if he had spent an afternoon in a dark room then walked abruptly outside, radiated in the sun's light- rods and cones adjusting, a desperate search for contour, for edge, for discernable form- his cortical centers designed to fabricate meaning were now at a loss, confronted by a lack of information, a sea of shapeless black. "What?"

"Yes. Pregnant. I have been sick the last week. And yesterday, I walked to the store and bought a test. And I went back to the store

after the blue 'plus' sign appeared on the first one. I bought eight more. I took nine tests, all nine, 'plus' signs. I bought eight more." Her voice lost itself.

Cud, up and down his esophagus, a drop in his stomach- a burn in his throat, in his chest. He let go of the cigarette. October whispered, "How is that even possible?"

"They are in the bathroom. In the trash. You can see them for yourself. It is funny though. Do you remember, when we found out about Namdev, how I saved the test in the little baggie, and we kept it on our dresser? We kept it there for nine months, to remind ourselves. But these tests from last night I threw them in the garbage. It is funny, in a sad way. I did not even consider this until now."

"It could be mine. That morning, before he died?"

"Yes. It could be. But it also could not be."

October hoped, he prayed deeply but he understood his prayer would only be answered if he framed it correctly- if he asked for what he deserved- if he asked for what he needed- he thought back to his wife, her body, that morning "I thought it was a dream, you know? I didn't even... it was so early, and I was so tired... it didn't seem real. And then the next day, you didn't say anything. I figured..."

"You were asleep. Namdev was asleep. I was starting at you. it had been so long. And I felt like I used to feel, I craved you. I stared at you for over an hour. Finally, I could not help it any longer, so I came onto you. I made you ready for me. Yes. I did it... I wanted to feel you again. I wanted to feel life. All I had felt for so long was death, Namdev dying. I wanted to feel alive. It had been so long, so long since you had been inside of me. It was a dream. And so was what happened- after you left. I want life October. I wanted life with you. But I left- I lost myself. I lost sight of you. And now..."

"Now you have to decide."

Surrounded by cars, garage ports, the paneled buildings- the bitter wind turned our scene industrial, like a Soviet neighborhood, brick-chipped and grey, merciless and constructed at right-angles. Tika shivered. Her words didn't matter- they served merely as the

scaffolding for her tone. Frozen. Committed. "There is no decision. It was a mistake."

"I deserved it Tika. I deserved everything. And you deserved- you were justified in leaving, in your... your odyssey."

"No. Not that October."

Almost shocked by her admission, a woman who loved life, who loved her child and cherished her motherhood- to confirm his dismay- October asked, "A mistake that you're pregnant?"

"Yes. I cannot go through with it. I have already decided. This thing... it is not real. It is still a dream. I am going to take care of it. And what happens to us, I still..."

"An abortion?"

"There is a pill that can be taken if you are early enough in the pregnancy, which I am. I can have the pill prescribed, and it will be as if it never happened. It is not real. There is no child. And I am afraid now there is no future for us."

"But there is a child."

Tika shook her head, "No October, there is not. I was not going to tell you. Do not make me regret this."

"So you've decided, just like that?"

"No October, you decided."

"I decided?"

"Yes, a long, painful decision. Over these last two years, you have given me your decision. You do not want to continue on with me. You do not want to be a father, or a husband. You did not want to endure what we had to endure, and I understand this. I do. I understand it. And I understand that what we had was taken from us, in many ways. It was taken from us and I do not blame you for it. These things happen. This is life, our karma. Sometimes bad things happen, and what you hope, what you want, what you dream... it is taken from you. I feel this strongly."

"But you can fight back, right? You can make a stand."

Tika shook her head. "This is not the point. The point is... when it is taken from you, it teaches you that pain comes from desire, from expectation, from seeking permanence."

"Seeking permanence?"

"Pretending that everything will go on forever the way it is supposed to. In the way we want it to. But this is not the case. Everything dies. Nothing goes as we wish."

"So what? Then you just give up?"

Tika flipped her extinguished cigarette onto the asphalt of the parking lot. "No. You appreciate what you have when you have it, because sooner or later it is gone."

"But what if you're the reason that it goes?"

"There is no reason, no ownership."

"But you're making a decision. You're deciding not to have this child."

"It is not a child. There is no child to have. It is a mass of cells in my body that a pill will harmlessly cause my body to reject. There is no child."

"So that's why you aren't taking ownership? That's your rationale?"

"Do you know the meaning of a paradox?"

"Yes."

"It is a paradox. On one hand, there is nobody responsible for this, it has been fated by karma. It is the working of the universe, of God, in us and around us. We do not control this, or anything. It has been set into motion since long before we existed. Yet, on the other hand, you are right. I have to take ownership of my part. And as I explained, you have to accept your part as well in this decision. I have accepted mine."

"That doesn't make any sense. There is a choice here, that we can make together. Right?"

"October, please. Accept this from me. I know in my heart none of this was what you intended. We did not meet, become husband and wife, you did not decide for any of this to happen. For Namdev to die. For our monsoons of pain. I do not blame you for it."

Activated- don't let his appearance belie his enthusiasm- October is fighting, he is convinced beyond doubt or fear- he emphatically declared, "But this is a second chance! Another child... we are supposed to have this child Tika. I know it, in my heart."

"It is not a child. It is nothing. I should not have ever told you."

Lost inside himself, their memories, Namdev's ghost nearby- "It's funny, but sad at the same time- it's- you used to become upset with me because I wouldn't call Namdev by his name. I couldn't bring myself to say it, because of how much it hurt, how much I wanted to lock our problems up in a closet and never look at them again. But now you refuse to call what is growing inside of you a child... an *it*... Tika, *it* is a child. Our child, inside of you. A second chance."

"This is not for you to decide."

"And neither is it for you! You just said we don't get to take ownership of it. It's not our decision. Tika, you believe in reincarnation for Chrissakes. You do. What if this is him, reborn, in a healthy body? What if he has come back to be with us? What if there really is no death? We just keep being born, again and again, and what you believe, what your faith tells you, is right? Wouldn't that be something, something to risk, to go for it? What if that is what God has in store for us? What if that is our true karma?"

"Now all of a sudden you wish to become a Hindu?"

"No. I want you to keep being one. And I want to be your husband. I want a second chance. To serve you. To perform my duty to our family. I want to try this again. I want our story to continue."

"It might not be yours October. Our, this *parivaar*- it may not be yours."

Assured and firm, October had received the message, he had learned the lesson- he was prepared- "I don't care. It's not about me, or mine, anymore."

Silence. The two of them anchored out on the sidewalk, a tempest churning while the everyday hum-dee-dum hum-dee-dummed in a khaki grid around them... dinners cooking in kitchens, televisions being turned on, typical conversations, clean clothes being folded...

regular evenings for regular people living regular lives.. oblivious. "I cannot October. I cannot walk along this path again. After what happened to Namdev I simply cannot. I will not be able to look at another child, another baby, without seeing his face. Without thinking about him. Missing him. I- I feel so empty, but so full of pain. My heart has been torn from my chest, and now it is gone. I cannot go on October, not like this. I have no more love to give. I fulfilled what I had to. My heart is burned, spread out now, ashes- like him. I cannot."

Stranded in the wind, the cold, the two of them cored out by sorrow, a child dead and cremated and gone- October caught a glimpse of a scene in his mind's eye- his eyes are pointed downwards, then up to his wife. "Do you remember that nurse at the hospital, in the delivery unit? You were worried, you were so worried you weren't going to be a good mother, and that nurse said to you 'You have been taking care of this boy for nine months! You are a wonderful mother!' That was beautiful. She was right. I was the one who should have been worried about being a bad parent. Because I was. I was wrong, and I did wrong by you, and by him. By Namdev. And it is the regret of my life."

Tika wiped a tear from off her cheek.

October continued, a step closer, leaning towards her- almost within arm's reach- "You taught me what it means to give love. I didn't realize it then, but I do now. I have had my vision. And I beg you, I beg you from the bottom of my heart- please, grant me this chance to be the man I was meant to be. For this child, inside of you. To be the husband I was meant to be, for you. Please. We can do this together. This can be our story."

Another tear.

A canyon of silence revealed by creeping bands of light, a new dawn- or a dusk?