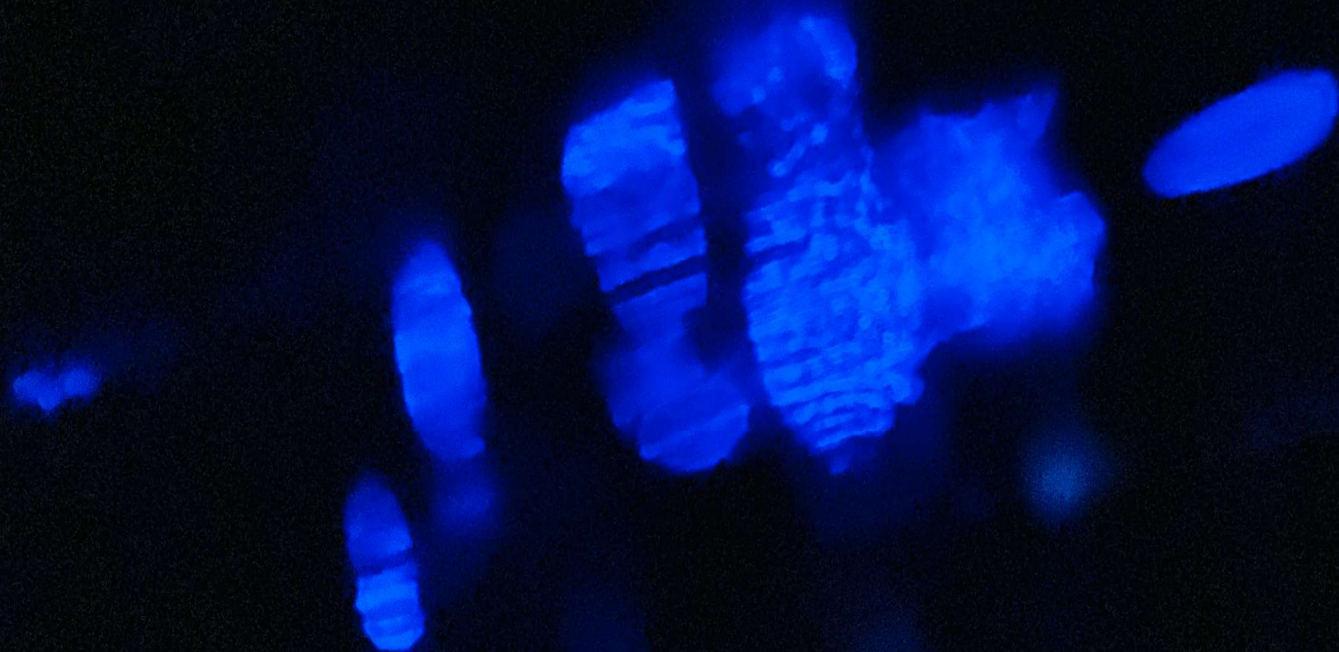


a voiceHOUSE experience



LOCUS

If the flowers of human kindness and gentility are sustained by the roots of mutual understanding- where our imagination and our heart interact to create the capacity first to acknowledge then to consider the inner world of another person, to draw parallels with our own inner experience- if this is how virtues like compassion, empathy, sympathy blossom- is there, then, an inherent limit to our love?

What I mean to ask is- how can we truly appreciate the inner life of another person? Fully, comprehensively?

Can our own conscious experience ever be relayed, conveyed, translated and felt? What would it require to communicate, exactly, the experience of our conscious life?

If we cannot, and will not, ever- then what is our recourse? What to do with those impenetrable divides which surround us, which bar us from perfect contact with each other?

Will these barriers always, inevitably, cause us to fall short? To set limits to our love?

Advocates of technology might propose virtual simulations. Goggles, synaptic electroshocks, a reconfiguration of the auditory and parietal lobes- perhaps in the future we will be able to 'plug in' to another person's subjective world. Life according to _____. But is that necessary?

Can we be so different and mysterious? To our neighbors, to our family, to the woman in front of us at the Town Clerk's Office, the man at the Gas Station, to our children, to a stranger across from our seat on the Commuter Rail?

Can we be so isolated and remote? Aren't the fluctuations of our emotions, our thoughts, the vicissitudes of life and the events unfolding around us- don't we have a sense that we are connected to the world, these people, nearby and far? Are we not influenced by them, influencing them in turn?

Still, the question- how do we cultivate more understanding? A kinder, gentler, more tender world?

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So far as I see it, in this spectral era of technological stimulation, instant notification and gratification, of propaganda and pornography, of relativistic internet avatar individualism- where no fact is true, where every falsehood can be converted to fact, and the only truth is the untruth of the opposing party- there is a need to move away from 'intellectual' spheres.

In moving away from the spirit, and the heart, we have backed ourselves into a corner. We laud our politics, our science, our post-modern sensibilities, ironic and unaffected, but at its core ours is a world devoid of truth. A world without meaning. A world where the barriers between us are amplified, albeit simulated.

As we are filled up with so many vague ideas and opinions- we recede further into embittered corners.

The Information Age.

The Disintegration Age.

Broken down to bits...

Prince Myshkin, in Dostoevsky's The Idiot, presents the crux rather succinctly, "Back then people were driven by a single idea somehow.. the man of today has a wider apprehension, and believe me, that prevents him from being harmoniously integrated as they were in those days."

Dithering between mindsets, a Sisyphus of absurdity, a Gabriel of purity, a Promethean explorer, a courtly lover, a nihilist, a murderer, an anointed bishop, a godless dopefiend- in the course of any given day, here I am and there I go. My wife is a goddess nurturer, then a cold-hearted bitch. I profess love in one breath, and vow revenge in the next. Dynamism between these extremes- there is no organizing principle. There is no focal signal which maintains coherence. There are emotions, reactions, thoughts, bewilderment, confusion- chaos.

Unmoored.

And to move directionally, towards a purpose or an outcome- if anything is ever achieved, it is mostly on account of pure dumb luck.

What underlays our vacillations, our inconsistency? How can we be swayed so easily by so many different, divergent positions? What actually drives us, then? What marks our central purpose? Our single idea?

Lust. Greed. Comfort.

Our birth is predicated by desire, our very existence is contingent upon it- there is no escape. But our modern life is marked by an asymmetry between our wants and our needs, which leads to an excess in consumption. We are denizens of a hyperconvenient, hypermodern, hyperactive state. We want the next thing. Now. Better than the last. And look- there it is, available to us, on sale, at our fingertips, shipped tomorrow.

It's the gap between possibility and reality, that's where our desires grow their teeth. In that space, where personal fulfillment is lacking- this is where the imagination dominates. An imagination, inculcated by a culture of individual achievement, unbridled consumption, a culture rooted in progress, more and more and more. Where the woman you gaze at through pollen dusted windows is a perfect lover, asks all the right questions, gladly cooks your favorite meals. Where the bottle of wine or the bag of candy satisfies your craving, relaxes your nerves, tastes incredible. Craving and fantasy are forever intertwined.

It is why the object of our desire becomes so alluring.

It is decorated, dressed up- it is not 'Real.'

It's the expectation that our emptiness will be made whole.

But what do we find, when we follow the woman out of the room towards a furtive motel parking lot, when the empty bag of chocolates is thrown in a wastebin?

Are we made whole?

We are tortured by our imaginations, the unreasonable expectations we place on life, the incessant messages to buy more to find something better and faster and sexier.

If only...

--

In those harmonious yesterdays, yes there was war, starvation, suffering- but there was acceptance. There was a sense of 'This is my life. This is who I am.'

There was truth.

Each person carried an inner truth.

A simple truth.

An obvious truth.

A truth that didn't require expounding, was in no need of treatises or doctoral studies, that wasn't open for discussion- undoubtedly and intrinsically, true.

A truth that anchored a person.

A truth that made a person whole.

No matter what they were confronted by, no matter the circumstances or the situation, their truth prevailed. Their "single idea" was marked by depth, a place fortified in their heart. It could not be shaken. It could not be undone.

By working from a "single idea," their psychic framework could coalesce and function as a whole. They saw the world through the

lens of that idea. They understood each other as people, as representatives of a central truth.

Even though the internal, conscious, subjective worlds of people were then, as they are now, impossible to completely understand, and impossible to breach- people, I suspect, could relate to each other on this level of individual truth.

Maybe if we stood for something?

Maybe if we grounded ourselves in a single idea, a truth? If we organized ourselves around something other than our blind needs and wants? If we pursued something beyond our own comfort?

And I'm not speaking from a utopian perspective, where each of us adheres to one idea. A world where truth is dictated, mandated- ascribed to. Totalitarian notions of control- no, no, no. Freedom is the critical element- freedom allows the individual to experience then harmonize, to express creatively and form a concrescence, informed by their personal truth, in their own time and in their own way.

How might the world change?

If I was actually somebody that meant something, to me?

A TOAST
JINGLE BELLS
BEAR PAW
EXPLOSION
GIIWAS
RED LIGHT
A BOOK
FORLORN
CHECK, PLEASE
A THREE HUNDRED HOUR LONG TUESDAY AFTERNOON IN THE SIXTEENTH WEEK
OF JULY, A DAY MOSTLY FULL OF NIGHT
REGRET
SCROLL
ALIGHT
TIPPET
EVICTED
MURDER
SALLY GARDENS
DOORBELL
GUESS GAME
WANDERLUST
AT THE SOURCE OF THE LONGEST RIVER
QUIET

A TOAST

She plucked a flute of champagne from off one of the server's trays. Almost blushing, "I'm afraid I might not be the best conversation partner."

He brushed a few rogue snowflakes off the shoulder of his black blazer, and followed her example.

"What makes you say that?"

She didn't hesitate. "If I'm being honest, I hated going to church. As long as I could remember- the only good thing was if we behaved, our father would take us out for donuts afterwards."

He raised his glass to hers, and she tipped hers back to his.

A ping cracked between them.

"Do you mind if I ask why you hated it?"

With her tone shifting, affectatious, "For one, it was boring. The Catholic Mass isn't exactly designed to entertain, is it? The songs were dull. The readings were practically in a different language." Then, she became grave. "And, on top of that, the whole business of heaven and hell terrified me. It scared the daylights me. Devils, fire, torture- gruesome images fed to an impressionable mind, it was not a good pairing. I can recall being seven, maybe eight years old, and being fixated on the fact that I would be mutilated in hell. Can you imagine that? An innocent child, afraid each and every night she wouldn't wake up in her bedroom, but she would die in her sleep, and find herself face to face with Satan?"

"I'm so sorry to hear that."

"Meat hooks and shrieking. It's almost funny now, but it wasn't then. No. Now, I realize... I hate to say this, but I know what happened to me as a child is exactly... well, the effect that was produced on me, that fear... that fear is what the church preys on. Not you, not that I, but... well, you know what I mean, don't you? The psychological mechanism, that sustains the church, that keeps people coming through the doors... it's based on there being a crisis in a person's psyche. And the church creates this impossible crisis for people to wrestle with. We are all sinners, doomed, and hell waits for us. And the only way you, a wretched sinner, are going to escape hell is if you play by the church's rules. And even that doesn't guarantee things, because you'll have to be lucky enough to receive the right combination of sacraments and graces and such and such. I'm sorry. I'm being blunt because I've had a few drinks already. My husband always abandons me at these kinds of things. I don't want to ruin your evening. I hope I'm not... it's just, when

you lay such heavy stakes onto a young person's mind.. it's not fair, it's exploitation."

He nodded, then took a sip from his glass. He glanced casually around the ballroom.

She pulled a white shawl up around her neck, around her shoulders. Brusquely, "I'm sorry if I've offended you."

He chuckled. "Not at all. Not in the least. I'm sorry for what happened to you as a little girl. Can I ask- if you hadn't ever been exposed to church, to Jesus, the sacraments- whatever aspect you want- do you think you would be a different person today?"

Without a doubt in her mind, "I'd be free! Well, I would have been free. I would have grown up less scared. I'd have been more confident in who I was, despite my personality defects and faults and what have you. Now, well, I suppose age helps, to some extent. I don't have the same worries I did twenty years ago, forty years ago. But twenty years ago, forty years ago, when I lost sleep over those worries- if I had never gone to church, yes, I think I would have been happier."

A server approached them. "Appetizer?"

"No thank you," in unison.

The server turned away to the next clot of party goers.

The priest coughed into his hand, almost imperceptibly. "So, if I can draw a logical argument from this- the idea is freedom comes as a result of an unencumbered psyche. And freedom, in turn, lends itself to happiness?"

Considering his logic, "More or less. I think maybe, maybe freedom leads to authenticity, and an authentic life leads to happiness." He wanted to continue, started to, but stopped. Then he grinned, embarrassed- this was supposed to be a party.

She insisted, "Go ahead. If I'm allowed the opportunity to press you, I should expect some in return."

He pushed their dialogue forward. "What do you think drew your parents to the church?"

"They followed what they grew up with, what they were told. I think the church has had such a stranglehold on peoples' lives, across so many cultures, for so long. Only now, with my generation, with our kids' generation- people aren't mimicking the way they were brought up. They're asking more questions. They're being more, authentic."

He nodded at his newfound partner in didactics. "It's true. Many are questioning their faith. They are rejecting their parents' faith."

She couldn't help herself. Her black eyes flashed. "And I haven't even mentioned any of the other reasons. There are history books full of reasons, but most recently, the scandals around pedophilia. People feel strongly about not having to carry that sort of baggage. I didn't want any part of it."

He nodded again. "Every human organization is fallible, fraught, and the Catholic Church, or any church, is no exception. Those things are all despicable. They are. I know many people who feel similarly, and they describe the baggage in the same manner as you did. I myself have found it difficult to reconcile. You would be surprised, maybe, to hear that I've had several of my own crises of faith. It's no wonder to see the fallout, like you mentioned, occur."

He paused.

She waited, until finally, "There's a *but* coming, isn't there?"

A woman next to them let out an affectatious sigh.

He smiled. "No, not a *but*. There's an alternative, I suppose. A different way of thinking about your experience, and the effect it has had on your life. It's not my place, though, to suggest it, unless you ask me to."

She gestured with her free hand. "You have my permission. I like to think I'm an open-minded person."

One of the bartenders shook up a gin martini, dirty.

"I would start by saying it is important to consider the difference between religion and spirituality. One points to the other. Religion is a human system, a structure, a prayer or a meditation or scripture, some form of tradition- that points to the spiritual. That points to mysterious, unknowable, but nevertheless vital aspects of life. And ultimately, you can't have one without the other. Religion sits on top of spirituality, as a sort of interface. When people tell me they aren't religious, but are spiritual- I ask them how? If you don't limit religion to a specific creed or denomination, and think of it more in terms of a set of tools- then how can you be spiritual without being religious? Some tell me they want to be good, and send good energy out to the world, and try to act through their heart- but all of those aims require a practice of some sort, an interface to plug into. Let's take this example- you say, 'I try to always do what's

right.' Well, how can you know if you're successful or not? What is right, wrong? There's a moral system you have to ascribe to. And even if it is your own, it's inevitably copied from a template. It's informed by a prior tradition. Or let's take- well, 'I send good energy out to people.' That's prayer. Even if the words are different, the practice is informed. And, pardon me for being long winded here, but the point I'm driving towards is that exposure to religion, ideally many kinds of religions, is essential in the formation of a spiritual life."

She paused. His collar was spotless. Starched, white- pristine. "What about converting people to the faith? You're a priest. Isn't there some aspect of your duty, as a priest, to also be a missionary?"

"For me, personally- no. Like I said, I think people ought to open themselves up to many different faith traditions. When we have our RCIA candidates, every year, the first meeting I have with them, the first thing I ask, is have you looked into other options. I'm not selling cars. I want men and women to be informed before they commit. There are lots of other models out there, and our model isn't for everybody. Trust me. I'm not naive enough to believe that."

She smiled. "So my parents exposed me to spirituality, is that what you're saying?"

In her mind's eye- a picture of her father, in the garage, a rag in one hand and a wrench in the other.

He shrugged. "Perhaps. You could say, maybe they opened you up to exploring some challenging questions. Challenging, but fundamental. The most important questions you can ask. What is my life about? Why am I here? What is my central axiom? Where do I act from, and what don't I violate under any conditions? What is my home, in terms of what I believe about myself and the world around me? To me, that's the ballgame. Those questions, and the confrontation with answering those questions, that is what a spiritual life involves. And a spiritual life is truly the only one worth living. We are inherently spiritual creatures. If we didn't engage on that level- we would no longer be human beings." She waited.

He waited, too.

She bit her upper lip, coyly almost, then, "Explain that part to me- without spiritual engagement, why would we lose our humanity?"

"Well, it's the spiritual aspect- that's what separates us from animals, from robots. If you were to lose contact with that aspect, or never experience it, in this mechanistic rationalistic atheistic capitalistic world of ours- what could you be? Who could you be? Our world would disintegrate, with everyone a big Nietzsche, or Machiavelli. Psychopathy would be tolerated, justified- exemplified. What it would mean to be a human would fundamentally change if we lost contact with spiritual dimensions. If you put it in historical terms, since the first conscious humans arose from the plains of Africa, since we assembled tools and huddled around bonfires and told stories- the issue has been a spiritual one. We learned to think, to act, to create, to imagine- all along spiritual lines. We buried our dead. We said prayers. We considered our place in the universe, our relation to creation- and to a Creator. To lose that directional force, that vector of, of longing and searching- we would, in essence, become a different species than our ancestors. And the consequences, I believe, would be frightening- a world where anything is permissible. I'm terrified of how it would turn out. I'm afraid we wouldn't be around for very long." He wanted to continue, but checked himself. She took a delicate drink from her champagne flute. "How do you define God?"

He smiled again. "I'm flattered you want my opinion."

She smiled back. "Really, I do."

His lips pursed, then relaxed. "God seems to me to be undefinable. Beyond comprehension, beyond the limited scope of my individual mind. But I suppose, for my own purposes, I have a conception of what God is. And God is responsible for the fact that love can transcend the apparent limitations of this world. God is the potentiality for miracles, for the power of love to do amazing things."

She nodded at him. "Have you seen any miracles?"

"Too many to count."

"Seriously."

"Seriously. I've been blessed- I've seen that power at work in so many peoples' lives."

She pressed. "Genuine miracles?"

"I know a man who was a heroin junkie in the darkness of disease and addiction, lost, ready for death, practically begging for death- I met him in that state. He was at a soup kitchen, nodding off- or sometimes he would be manic and searching for his next

fix, scheming on how to acquire it. His clothes were rags. He had left his wife and child. He had sold his car. He lived on the streets. Talk about a nadir. His existence had been completely flattened. His world had shrunk into something so small and self-contained. He was so wrapped up in himself, in his habit, his drama- desperate, lonely. It breaks my heart to recall him in that state. But that was ten years ago. Now he owns a business. He has a wonderful relationship with his daughter. He wears suits. He runs a Step Study group in our church basement, for men in recovery. He has one of the most purpose-filled lives I know of. That transformation, from what he was to who he is today- to me, in my mind, that is a miracle. And the power behind that miracle speaks to me of the nature of God. There was no reason to bet on him ten years ago- no one in their right mind would have. Yet, he made it. Now, you could call it luck. You could call it random chance. But I think if you personalize it, down to the person- the person I knew, the state of desperation he was in- I call the force behind that transformation God."

She brought her pointer finger to her lips, then felt the skin around her chin, up her jawline. Rationalizing. "But why did your friend make it, while others don't? Why doesn't everyone have their miracle?"

A microphone turned on at the front of the hall. An amplifier echoed.

Her husband waved to her, then shouted "Susan" from back at their table. She turned her head, waved back to him, and said, "I'm sorry, I have to go. It was nice meeting you."

The priest reached out and held her wrist. "It's a very good question you asked."

She offered a courteous but abrupt, "I don't expect an answer, don't worry. And I'm sorry to be so brusque. You're a lovely person. Don't mind me."

He let go of her.

She darted away.

A young man in a navy suit began to address the crowd.

Banners and pictures decorated the hall.

A golden wedding anniversary.

"Before the meal is served, we've asked Father John to come up and say the blessing."

The priest walked up from the back of the room with the champagne glass in his hand. During the introduction, a bible verse had come

to mind: *Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.*

He held the microphone after a cordial handshake with the young man.

"It's such a privilege to be here, to be celebrating with all of you, the wonderful life of Maureen and Tom. Six children. Thirteen grandchildren. One great-grandchild, with a second on the way. Fifty years! What a legacy of love. Their dedication, and their commitment to each other, through good times and bad, through sickness and health, through the years- here they are, Surrounded by love." He paused. The skin on his neck began to warm, faintly. His cheeks glowed. He closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them. "We must acknowledge Maureen and Tom, and also, acknowledge their gift, a gift they have received, and share with us tonight. And it truly is a gift. Truly." He took a drink from his champagne, unconsciously, for courage. "The truth is, not every couple receives it. Not every couple makes it. I wish their night, tonight, could be celebrated by every couple I have the honor of uniting in matrimony. I do. But that's not the case. Many separate in divorce as a marriage disintegrates. Or a spouse is lost. Life happens. Maureen and Tom are an exception, not a norm. We like to believe there are reasons behind why- why Tom and Maureen made it. Their special characteristics. Certainly they have many wonderful qualities, but there is so much beyond our control. They are benefactors of a wonderful gift, but we don't have answers, we don't have explanations, as to why they received it, and why others here in this room will not." He stopped again. The room choked with silence. Even the waitstaff had ceased with their routines and duties so they could listen. "Let's face it, we all know people, family and friends, who desperately needed a gift, a miracle, yet none came. Our sibling who suffered from mental health issues. Our uncle with the failing business franchise that never took flight. Our wife and her procession of miscarriages, unable to bring a child into the world. A little boy with cancer. A victim of abuse. A car accident, then a permanent disability. As much beauty as there is in our world, there are equal parts horror, confusion, sadness. Why does God turn his back to these unfortunates?" By this point, a look of utter confusion washed over Maureen and Tom, their children, their friends and family- everyone in the room began to boil, uncomfortable. How could this

torture come upon us? Betrayed- everyone, consumed in a ballooning vacuum of awkward silence, trying to understand what went wrong- except the woman seated next to her husband. Her attention rapt, her mouth slightly agape- she hadn't been more impressed by anybody in her entire life. Meanwhile, the priest made a decision, inside of himself, and then he finished off the contents of his glass, "I have no answers. Nobody does. The root of suffering is a deep, inaccessible mystery. The heart of God. Our business, our task, is to live- to live out the life in front of us, to participate with the world we find ourselves in. To be lucky, fortunate. Or, to suffer. To go up on that cross, even though there's no explanation for why it's you going up there and not the other guy or gal." The priest's voice took on an extra tinge of bass as his tone shifted, harsher, fuller. "You've got to bleed and break and find yourself in the shadows of the Valley of Death. Our faith tells us Christ is with us, suffering alongside us. Feeling our pain. Wearing our scars. Connected to us by his own suffering- his own crucifixion, the day of his death, as he wailed in those same shadows and fell on that same road which we find ourselves on." In a low murmur, the priest's voice shifted again, matter of fact, relatable, "But it still feels lonely, hanging up on that cross. It feels damn lonely sometimes. It certainly doesn't feel like He's with you. But let me tell you, He is. He's there." A tear fell down the priest's cheek, then another, as he continued, sincere and heartfelt, "Because if you can suffer up there, walk through that Valley of Hell, and come out the other side with even the smallest part of your heart, the smallest part- that's the stuff of miracles. That's His work- and you are a living testament to His power. That's the stuff that changes the world. If you can transform suffering, if you can emerge from it, broken, but intact- do you understand? I'm not here to tell you it's easy. I'm not here to tell you there's an end in sight. I'm not here to sell you any fluff. But I will tell you, from experience, from different men and women, children even, that I have had the privilege to know in this life of mine- it is possible to make it out the other side."

The young man in the navy suit who had introduced Father John had been slowly meandering back towards the priest. By now, they were shoulder to shoulder. The young man clapped, awkwardly, twice, then put an arm around Father John with one hand, and with the other he reached for the microphone.

Father John did not notice as the device was removed out of his grip.

The priest had locked eyes with the woman.

Her vision of him was cloudy with tears, too.

"Thank you, Father. Lots to think about. It's an emotional night, isn't it? Alright. Let's all raise our glasses now..."

JINGLE BELLS

A quick reply. "To be honest with you, I'm not in any rush to find a job. I've done nothing but study for four years. I'm not interested in tying myself down to a desk, locked away in an office, for sixty hours a week. I want to weigh my options. Maybe I'll go to graduate school, maybe I'll start my own streaming channel. I haven't decided yet. After the new year I'll work on some more concrete plans."

I gulped. "It's a position of luxury, to be able to act so, so deliberately. Don't get too used to it!"

He plastered a wry grin onto his face. "Luxury? To have almost fifty thousand dollars in student loans? To have been fooled by the whole college program, the lie of the American dream? I've been following a plan that wasn't laid out in my best interest, and now I finally have a chance to stop and evaluate it for what it is, and figure out things, for me." From sarcasm to iciness, "It doesn't feel like a luxury. It feels like an insurmountable obstacle, actually."

I could only nod.

Another beer.

"Do you want anything to drink? I'm going for a refill."

A smile beamed across his face, smiling the way people smile who think they know more than the person they are speaking with. "No thank you."

On my way to the cooler outside on the porch.

Where does he come up with this crap? 'Insurmountable obstacle'? He fancies himself a victim? A victim of his parents, the government, society? My God!

This sorry boy has done nothing! He's like everyone else his age- he lives on the internet. They don't live in reality! They posture, at best. My God! How many women has he made love to? When's the last time he went for a walk outside, looked up at the stars? Has he ever taken the time to build something with his hands?

They're all like this. They spit on tradition. They spit on the church. They spit on their elders. They spit on the importance of family.

No appreciation, no concept of the sacrifice his parents or those gone before him have had to make. He has no idea the prayers, the lifetimes worth of struggle- his great grandfather scraping by as a ditch digger for the city, saving every penny, forcing his children to study to earn good marks in school to join in the war effort to marry smart to work hard. My God! Or his grandmother, my mother- raising six children in an apartment, dutifully teaching us lessons about honesty, about discipline, about humility- food on the table every night, clean clothes in our dresser drawers.

No. They spit on the importance of family. They spit on responsibility, accountability. They throw eggs and spit and complain.

I can't bear to look at him another minute! He sits on a couch, watching television, in a house his father and mother have paid for. The cable bill, the electricity, the heat for the living room in the middle of winter- paid for by somebody else! The clothes on his back. The computer in his bedroom he gazes into hour after hour. Where's the gratitude? He has no respect for his benefactors! His only frame of reference is entitlement- he thinks he deserves everything. He deserves the nice house, the couch, the television, the clothes- the world owes it to him. His parents owe it to him, because of all the 'expectations' they have put on him. Because of how much they have 'screwed him up.' Because of how terrible his childhood had been.

My God!

He knows nothing of suffering.

And this is the irony! When they have not been confronted by actual despair, by real frustration or tragedy, yet they contain such bitterness and cynicism- what is going to happen when life actually *happens* to them?

No wonder there are so many depressives amongst these young people. So many suicides.

There is nothing tough about them. There is no endurance. There is no perseverance. If it isn't instantaneous...

Agh. I won't let him ruin another holiday. But there are so many words in my head... graceless, petulant, importunate, spoiled, greedy, sarcastic, treacherous, ungrateful, divisive.

His litany of excuses...

I can guarantee not once, not one single time, has the consideration occurred to him, 'Maybe my perspective is wrong.' No. These kids are absolutely correct, because they are backed up by an entire website of reasons. They have all the answers memorized. They have everything filtered and laid out. These liberal progressives who feel the need to rewrite all of history. These rich white kids who have decided, amidst this era of identity politics, of #MeToo, that they are somehow a marginalized cohort. These kids who arbitrate retrospectively, who attack previous generations, whose inspection and critiques know no bounds. Why *our* music is awful. Why *our* films were offensive. Why *our* worldview is harsh and unfair.

Remember him lambasting *The Godfather* movies last Easter?

They need to be right about everything. It's their view that matters, their opinion. It's not about kindness or gentility. God forbid it might be better to be kind, than to be right.

Now I'm beyond frustrated.

It's maddening!

They have no desire to create a sense of community with the people around them. They purportedly 'belong' to an abstract affiliation, online- but what is that, in actuality? In reality? There's nothing at stake. There's no pulling your weight, contributing to the greater good, being a part of something, doing something for somebody else.

Maybe that's the only word I need: selfish.

His smug grin.

Cold, skeptical, ironic- what sort of a life is that?

If I was his father- my God!

In truth, though, he's no different than a lot of folks I knew growing up, kids who were in dire need of a good kick in the ass. In dire need for somebody to hold them by the collar and tell them to shut their mouth, that they don't know what they are talking about.

I'm grateful to my father and mother for that.

They set us straight when we needed to be set straight.

That's why I set my daughters straight, so they never turn out this way.

No, I would never allow it.

I would never allow them to look at me like he does. He looks on us as pitiful. His own father- I've seen it.

When it's him, he who ought to be pitied! Where does he exist, but on a webpage? What does he know, unless Google provides an answer, tells him how to feel, how to react? He can't listen to a song or read a book or look upon a beautiful piece of art and experience it for himself. Another person has to tell him what it means, or why it doesn't mean anything. My God! Could it be more pitiful? Where does his self-righteous individuality lead him, but to an abyss, to a place where nobody can communicate without being clarified or corrected, where no common ground or sense of brotherhood can be shared.

It's he who ought to be pitied.

All of them.

Twist open the bottle cap.

A glug of beer.

A winter sunset in the west.

Purple, dark blues.

It's beautiful, my God.

--

Another Christmas party. Another garish display of tawdry blouses and stiff blazers, sweatshop manufactured and overpriced. Another dinner table to fuss over, place settings and crystal glasses and expensive cutlery. Another round of drinks, for courage, to fuel their self-righteous conversations.

Imagine if they tried to force you to go to church, like they used to?

Bless us oh Lord...

None of them even believe! They all pretend. Santa Claus- what a perfect symbol, for everything. They don't believe in heaven or hell, the soul, the risen Christ- none of it. But they show up in the pew, sing the songs, year after year.

All for show.

All to maintain some sense of control.

Good little girls and boys receive presents, the bad ones are snuffed with coal.

The only way to be good is to follow a fundamentally flawed program.

But if you fake it well enough, you'll reap the rewards.

It's a perfect irony!

My uncle and his beer belly.

His unhappy marriage.

His lake house renovations.

His spoiled, sheltered daughters.
His season tickets.
His 401k account that has blown up with dot.com surges.
Definitely someone to look up to.
'Don't get too used to it.'
Thanks for the advice.
Too bad I never asked for it.
Too bad I'd rather starve on a naked street corner than be another middling nobody of nowhere with nothing to show for it other than chronic hypertension and erectile dysfunction, two cups of coffee then up against another round of rush hour traffic trying to do the best job I can do..
Definitely something to aspire to.
An arrogant, sheltered, self-indulgent boor who never risked anything.
Change the channel.
Three more hours. Three hours, then I don't have to put up with this for another year. I don't have to talk about how unseasonably warm it was this December. I don't have to pretend to care about the home team's record. I don't have to listen to any political hot takes. I don't have to explain why I don't have a job, why I haven't acquired my fetters, why I haven't signed my life away like the rest of them.
Maybe next year I'll be too busy at work to come to the party?
But even that would upset them! I still wouldn't be a 'good boy.'
I still wouldn't be doing it the 'right way.'
All these demands, all these conditions..
All to save face.
All to pretend they're holding it together.
A few more hours..
They look at me like I'm confused, inexperienced, like I know nothing, like I've never done anything- and they're right! I am confused. I am scared. I don't feel like I know anything. But not one of them would ever allow for that kind of vulnerability. They can never relate to me, because they can't be honest with themselves. They can't admit they're scared. They can only reproach my opinions, my attitudes. Pretend they're better. Like they know something. Like they've done something.
Why can't any of them come clean?
Why can't any of them admit what we're all up against?

We're all sitting here, supposedly a family- and we care more about the football bowl games than being able to emotionally relate to one another. What does that say about us?
Why would I ever ascribe to any of this?

--

Katie knelt down with the dustpan, "I feel sorry for him."
"You feel sorry for everyone!" Her sister, Kathleen, amassed a pile of crumbs and sundry debris. She shook her head. "He's not worth your sympathy. I mean, talk about self-absorbed.. did he ask you one question tonight about your life? One detail?"
Katie pointed, "Here, you missed this spot."
Her sister swept once more, then again. "Well? Did he?" Kathleen pushed the pile into the dustpan.
Katie stood up and opened the top of the garbage can. "No. But I didn't talk to him for that long."
Kathleen took the dustpan from her sister and opened the pantry door. "We're lucky we only have to see him once a year."
Katie rebuked her older sister, "Who knows, he might be depressed. That age is tough, right after graduation, with these huge unknowns in front of you. No more classes. No more living with your friends. No more boxes to check. I don't know- I had a tough time with that transition."
"He's twenty-two and lives in a mansion, by himself, in peace and quiet. Aunt Carol and Uncle Victor don't bother him. He has a car. Money. Clothes. He's had it like that his whole life." Kathleen closed the pantry door.
"I've always thought how hard that would be, to have no siblings, no brothers or sisters? Imagine if we never had each other."
Kathleen chuckled, "When you don't have siblings, you don't know what you're missing. You get whatever you want. You never have to fight over anything. It has its perks, I'm sure."
The younger of the two girls sat down at the kitchen table. "You're only saying that to be stubborn."
"Who cares? Will you have a glass of wine with me?"
Katie considered, then, "Only one."
The older of the girls found two glasses in a cabinet and a bottle on the wine rack. "Dad says he's an arrogant little shit. I can't help but agree."
"He's scared and confused. And he doesn't know how to let anyone in. The arrogance is a front. I think it's dreadful."

Concentrated, pouring the purple, syrupy liquid, "Whatever the reason, it's not an excuse for being rude."

The younger girl took hold of one of the glasses, the lighter of the two. "Do you remember how much dad loved him, as a little kid? I think dad is upset to see him so out of sorts, in a way where he can't connect with him. He considered Rory a kind of son. He always wanted a boy. Rory was as close as he came."

"That's a stretch."

"Did you know both of mom's miscarriages were boys?"

"She told you that?"

Katie replied, matter of fact, "I asked."

The older sister took a long sip from her glass. "I don't know why, but knowing they were boys makes it so much more depressing."

The lights of the kitchen hummed imperceptibly, dampened in the recessed fixtures and set to the lowest intensity.

Kathleen broke out from her thoughts. "They look old, don't they?"

"Who?"

"Everyone. All the adults. Mom and dad. Aunt Carol. Uncle Victor."

Katie swirled her glass. "It's too bad there aren't any little kids in the family right now. It would make Christmas more fun. Our family is in this weird transition state, where the youngest aren't old enough to have kids, but the next generation is old enough to have grandchildren."

Musing, "Grandma was probably dad's age, now, when I was born."

"Younger. But nobody has kids in their twenties anymore. The age gap between generations is wider."

The older sister put her chin in her palm. "How many children do you want?"

Katie chuckled, "It's a ridiculous question, isn't it?"

Kathleen reached into her sister's eyes, a most distinct shade of emerald blue, glowing- eyes that had caused Kathleen more than one pang of jealousy over the years- "Humor me."

Kathleen had always been more poised than Katie. She was reserved and deliberate, insistent upon using both a knife and a fork as a three-year-old child. When the family traveled, complete strangers would approach Mr. and Mrs. Palatine in Airport Gates with comments like 'She's so mature.' It was as if childhood fancies didn't interest her- she had made up her mind to be an adult as soon as her mind had developed to the point where she could decide on such a course.

The younger sister took her glass of wine and swirled it again. "Four. Two boys, two girls."

Katie's personality, with respect to emotions, first emerged as gaudy and mawkish, as it does in most toddlers. An affectatious "I love you Dada" might be mistaken as insincere, but it was only the beginning of a complex development. She became very sensitive to the emotional states of others, and eventually would refer to herself as an 'empath.' Her level of compassion was rarely matched in social settings.

Kathleen smirked, "You're crazy."

"Did I humor you?"

The older girl poured herself another glass of wine. "Yes, you did."

"You're the one with a boyfriend, how many children are you going to have?"

"Two at the most. And not until I make it to the executive level. And not until I've paid off my student loans. And not until I own a home. And not until I'm actually married."

"Do you think he'll propose soon?"

"I hope not."

"Why?"

Kathleen, confidently, "We haven't even lived together. We need to move in, cohabitate for a year or two. And then he can propose. How I answer depends on a lot of things that happen between now and then."

Katie continued, "Do you think you'll invite him to Christmas next year?"

"I don't know. Maybe. It depends on what happens between now and then."

"I like him."

Kathleen, embarrassed by her sister's naivete, replied quickly, "I like him too. But you don't marry somebody because you like them." She paused, and decide to explore an often overlooked subject- her sister's romantic life. "What about you?"

"What about me?"

"Boys. Do you like any of your own?"

Katie finished her glass. "No. Not at the moment. I don't have any interest in making a connection with somebody who happened to swipe right for me."

"That's fair. What about at work?"

"Most people work remote. I haven't met half of my team."

"It's tough."

Katie shrugged. "It's fine. I'm happy to be on my own for now."

Kathleen took another drink. "Enjoy it. Relationships aren't as great as they seem."

"That's easy to say when you're in one."

"I know."

The girls could hear their father moving around in the upstairs bedroom.

Katie glanced at her watch. "I think I'll head to bed. Merry Christmas."

Kathleen watched her sister rise up, tuck in her chair, and turn for the banister. She whispered, loudly, just before Katie took the first step up the flight, "Katie!"

Katie turned. "What?"

"I love you!"

BEAR PAW

Coughing into his fist, then, "How many toes do you have, little fella?"

The boy looked up at his father, but remained silent.

The young father knelt down, eye level with the child. "Let's count them, Chase." He pointed at the boy's open toed sandals. "One, two, three, four, five."

The toddler was disconcerted- a firm clasp onto his father's wrist. The tall, drooping man in the beige field shirt with a name tag that read DAVE held out a replica paw in front of the boy. "A bear has five toes, too! Ain't that something! Do you want to feel the foot pad? It's calloused and flat, and it helps a bear walk through different kinds of terrain. Did you know every winter, when they den, they shed their foot pads?"

DAVE searched for any signs of excitement on the face of the boy's father.

The boy's mother was enraptured by her cellphone.

The boy did not respond.

The young father grinned, awkwardly, and acquiesced to rub his fingers on the rubbery object, "Wow, that's so cool!"

The zoo employee held onto the prop in his hand. "The black bears in our zoo are named Smoky and Bubba. They are brothers. They were recovered as cubs in Georgia and have lived in captivity since. Because they became acclimated to being in captivity, we can't

release them. They were found alone, without their mother, so it ain't likely they would have survived long in the wild."

The young mother, behind the handles of the umbrella stroller, stuffed her phone into her pocket. She responded, "That's so sad." The old man with the grey mustache buttoned his breast pocket where he kept the paw. "Well, they love it here, so at least their story had a happy ending."

The young boy's mother considered DAVE's interpretation, then said to her husband, "Okay Tyler, let's go."

The toddler and the husband wobbled away.

Those two are so young, thought DAVE. Teenagers. Tattoos, cellphones- I hope they know what they are getting themselves into. He looked around for more guests.

--

"Dave?"

She sighed.

"Great. I've been talking to myself for the last five minutes." Her mother. The baby. The weather. A new job prospect. A movie night date, for their anniversary. A lingering cough.

Three empty beer cans on the floor next to the couch.

The television picture suddenly began to jostle in static.

She stood up from the kitchen table and flipped the switch.

A pile of fresh laundry in a blue, plastic basket; a cold plate of food, covered with aluminum foil, in the refrigerator; one baby asleep in a pink crib, another baby inside her uterus, bouncing back and forth, stretching and contorting.

Meanwhile- snoring. Violent snores. His car outside, rusted with the bumper nearly fallen off. His overtime shift, then a stop off at Nick's Tap before landing at home.

Her mother's voice in her head, "It's been longer than five minutes, honey."

She shook her head.

"He'll bury me and leave me to suffocate." In her own voice...

Dave continued snoring.

She walked to their bedroom, checked in on the toddler asleep in her crib, then changed into a nightgown.

A languid night- rainy, bleak, enervating.

Tomorrow the weather was supposed to clear up.

There would be more dishes. More laundry. Another scampering of breakfast cereal and orange juice, brown bag sandwiches. A full workday. Picking up the baby from her mother's house. Rushing home.

A quick taco dinner. There would be no appreciation. There would be no support.

There would be Dave, on the couch.

His three beers.

Half his paycheck, drunk down at Nick's.

Asleep.

"I quit fighting, didn't I? I quit hard liquor?" That's what he would say to her, when she brought up his drinking. Yes, he had quit fighting. His last black eye, his last skirmish outside a pub- an antiphony between two groups of men, shouts of insults followed by equivalent recriminations, back and forth volleys, an employee and a bartender with their arms spread wide, trying desperately to halt the conversion of potential energy to kinetic, Dave in the middle of it all shouting 'Let me at 'em!' before a left hook put him on the gray concrete. From the concrete into an ambulance, soon to be flooded with hospital bills to fix a broken jaw.

She should have left him then.

"I'll never touch the stuff again."

What about beer?

"Beer never hurt anyone."

A quizzical look flashed over her face as she inspected her own body in the nightgown. Her nail polish was chipped, faded chinks of ruby red she had painted on a couple weeks back. She was so early in her term, there was no bump visible. But her ankles were swollen. The nausea was pervasive. Her breasts felt saggy. She turned into the bathroom, went to the mirror, and pushed them together. She turned, facing her rear end to the glass.

Could another man love her?

After two children...

She could love another man, that she knew for certain.

Her hand went through her blonde hair.

A deep snore choked out from the living room.

She walked back into the bedroom and plucked the phone off the receiver.

--

"How did you get my number?"

"The computer."

"The computer?" Her voice was sharp.

He flinched before he responded. "I looked you up. On your company website, I..."

"I'm working right now, you know that, right? I have a job. I have responsibilities. I actually do something with my life. Do you know that?"

"I'm sorry, I didn't... I thought..."

"You didn't what? I'll tell you what you didn't do. You didn't think of me when you picked the phone up. You never do, you never have. You felt guilty, and called me. Right? You thought maybe this would turn out like some kind of movie. Like we'd plan a lunch date and I'd meet you at the restaurant and you'd have a bouquet of flowers and I'd forgive you for not being a part of my childhood. Right? We'd start over. Is that what you thought?"

"I'm sorry, Julia. I only wanted to hear your voice, to hear you..." His words trailed off.

She shook her head. "No. It's not about what you want. It's about what I want. What's healthy for me. If you love me, you'll leave me alone. Don't ever call this number again."

The phone disconnected.

Dave closed his eyes.

The breeze was cold against his cheeks, his hands.

He tucked the phone back in his pocket.

A woman rushed past him, into one of the shops, with a small child in her arms.

He didn't see her.

He didn't see anything except black.

EXPLOSION

Across the lawn, people lifted up their cell phones to record the fireworks show.

He turned to his daughter, his granddaughter- both were watching the display through a screen.

Videos, pictures, posts...

He took a sip from his bottle of beer.

He felt the cool grass under his feet.

He muttered, silent to himself. Booms and shimmers of color flooded the horizon in front of him.

Islands of families, groups of childhood friends, pockets of townsfolk clumped together on blankets, reaching their hands into coolers and digging through bags of potato chips- cell phones, everywhere.

He muttered again to himself.

Nobody heard him.

After the last rocket exploded, they would all drift out together, a huddled mass- toddlers holding glow sticks, teenagers lighting furtive cigarettes. The show would end, he would drive home in the front passenger seat with his son in law, his daughter, their little girl. Abby would cry, indignant because she wasn't allowed another rainbow popsicle. Abby's father would promise one tomorrow. Abby's mother would sigh, then reorient her attention down at a phone screen.

The old man would sit quietly.

His son in law would inquire, "Did you have a good time, Russel?" He would respond, "Fourth of July fireworks, nothing to do but have a good time. Thanks for taking me along."

There would be silence, the road under their feet.

Then, his daughter's anxiety would grip her, suddenly- worried about drunk drivers on the road. About her shift at work the following day. About the upcoming presidential election.

Simultaneously, his granddaughter's whines would grow to wails, and finally, after a few minutes of failed negotiations, a cell phone would be passed into the little girl's hands.

Russel would turn back to see her, buckled into a car seat, her face glowing blue.

Nursery rhymes.

Cartoon characters.

"Turn the volume down on the radio so she can hear it."

Rubbing the sleep from out of her small, black eyes.

A left turn, off the main road.

They would drop grandpa off at **Senior Living Gardens**. His daughter would shift her attention, from outside of herself, for a moment, and offer, "It was good to see you, dad. I'll call you this week." "Alright."

The door would close.

His son in law would wave through the window, but the old man wouldn't look back to see it.

A sliding door, a receptionist- "How was your night, Russel?" "Fine."

He would scan an electronic keycard and amble down a sterilized hallway.

He would open the door to his room and grimace as he bent down to take off his shoes.

He would untuck his shirt.

Drop his pants.

He would sit on a chair and sigh deeply.
Before they had picked him up for the barbecue and the fireworks show at the village green, Russel had remembered a vision of his daughter as a little girl, bouncing on his lap with a blonde shadow of down above her thin upper lip. Her nose, the tiny hairs, her blue eyes- he had meant to look at his granddaughter, at Abby, to really fix a good look upon the young girl and decide whether or not she had a similar feature. Russel was excited by the memory. He was excited by the little girl, Abby, his granddaughter. But he had forgotten.

Somewhere between the argument his daughter and son in law cooked up over how small to cut the food for his grandchild, between being chastised by his daughter for "never having to take out a second mortgage for daycare," between being quizzed about whether or not char marks on the ribs and chicken were considered carcinogens, between the rush to find a parking spot on a side street by the village green, between the pictures and the videos and the posts, between the exploding flowers of red and blue ember and color- Russel had lost his sense of curiosity.

He would never confirm his suspicion.

He would gaze across his tiny room at a picture of his wife..

Ten minutes later, several of the residents at the **Senior Living Gardens** were awoken by a horrible shock, a violent noise from the south wing of the facility. It wasn't a Roman candle or a bottle rocket from one of the nearby cul-de-sac neighborhoods. The nurse on duty and the night watchmen reacted instantly. One room after another, a knock, "Is everything alright in here?" Down the hallway, until they reached the old man's room.

GIIWAS

He tied off a ridgeline between two hearty red firs. He pulled the orange paracord taut, then threw the slack end next to a pine sapling, one of several around the site.

It wasn't likely he would be able to dry out his clothes in this weather, but tying the ridgeline was old habit.

He dug out the fire pit, wiped off the steel grate, and set to producing a flame.

A truck was parked behind him, chains on all the tires.

In a clearing- he let his eyes glide across a layer of snow between the trunks and stumps and stones which glowed like a milky veneer thanks to the moonlight. The ridge line cast a crisp shadow.

In the spring the saplings would rise up another couple of feet.
There would be wildflowers.

There would be birdsong.

There would be new constellations in the sky above him.

For now, he was accompanied by Cygnus and Draco- he tilted his neck upwards, for a moment, but then settled back to his work.

The flame caught.

Huddled next to the iron stove which demarcated the fire pit from the rest of the site, he exhaled a series of shallow, tender breaths. He added another pile of kindling, a few splinters of kiln dried wood. Another series of breaths- more fuel, more wood, larger shavings and then segments. His exhalations widened into vast billowing ahouoghs- then, a log went in.

A gray squirrel bounded at the edge of his periphery. By the time he had turned to apprehend the creature, it disappeared. It was uncharacteristic for a squirrel to be bustling about this late in the evening, this late in the year. But he was hardly disconcerted. Off it went, into the forest and away from the campsite, warm in its gray fur, fur that would shift in honor of the changing seasons back to a reddish tint. Unlike the pine marten, with its defiant brown coat worn year-round.

It was quiet, the flames crackling.

He stoked the fire and coughed from inhaling the harsh smoke.

Annie Spring, nearby, was frozen.

He was the only occupant amidst a hundred and fifty demarcated plots.

Silent as he imagined it would be..

Another few chunks of wood found their place in the fire, shaved off the edge of his bush knife. He arranged the chunks as they caught flames, working deftly with his bare hands, then added one final log.

He glanced above the fire, then bent forward and continued to blow. There were three or four, maybe five inches of snow on the ground- the first of the season.

Late October.

The Camp Store was closed. There were no provisions, no water bottles or sunblock for sale. The custodians had locked up their cabin, driven home in their RV. At the Ranger Station, his acquaintance, Tom Dreiser, leaned against a chair with his boots on a desk, asleep in a brief nap.

He had let Tom know before he made camp that today, early, he would be going up.

"You can prep in the station if you want, before you leave."

Appreciate the offer, but no thanks.

"Can I give you one of the radios, in case you run into any trouble? In case of an avalanche?"

I'll take the necessary precautions. I've laid out my route on the map here.

"Can you check in then, when you're back down?"

No problem.

"Well, good luck then."

Alright.

"And Nick?"

Yep.

"I'm sorry, again, about everything."

Nick had nodded his head towards Tom and offered only his black eyes. Nick's lips were bound together- the stolid, expressionless facade he wore nearly erased the distinguishing features of his face.

The exchange with Tom came as no surprise.

There had been so many, similar exchanges...

Tom shivered at his desk as Nick opened then shut the door behind him.

There was no weather on the forecast. It would be cold, a touch of wind- but not so much as a flurry appeared likely, let alone a blizzard. Sure, an unforeseen squall might blow through, Nick might shatter his leg on the trail- but he would have his kindling, his lighter, plenty of calories to eat, enough snow on the ground to burrow up back to the breeze and negotiate it out in a ravine.

He hadn't come up here with any thoughts about death.

Not this morning.

Not as the kettle boiled, as he zipped open a Peanut Butter Oatmeal MRE packet.

He poured in a cup or so of steaming water, sealed the bag, then shook the contents around. His hands were warm. The bag expanded, pushing against the walls of plastic, desperate to go further.

He unsealed the bag, dipped a wooden spoon inside, and the mixture tasted as he expected it would.

The trees in the clearing...

It would all change with the elevation. Nearly three thousand vertical feet would be gained, then returned. A long run up the

side of ancient Mount Mazama, trudging to acquire a vantage into her flooded caldera- from the stands of white fir, Douglas fir, and Ponderosa pines, towards the hardy whitebark. Up to the rim, then to Garfield Peak, then Applegate Peak, then on along to Mount Scott. The highest summit in the area. Nearly thirty miles, round-trip.

He'd only mentioned the details to his wife, and most recently Tom.

His wife hadn't made any remarks, neither approving nor disapproving. His trek wasn't her concern.

"I'll be back in a couple of days."

He told her because he had to.

He didn't expect she wouldn't have anything to do with it.

In the silence of his private hollow, he paid particular interest in the silhouette of the tree crowns against the stars.

Ever since he was a young boy, whenever he entered a forest, Nick's mind relished in the distinguishing features of different tree species. He wouldn't deign to look upon a single one and generalize it at the level of "tree." For most people, one tree looks the same as any other. But when Nick stepped into the wilderness, he was confronted with neighbors both recognizable and distinct. He knew of western white pines with their long, soft, feathery needles. He knew of sugar pines with their massive cones as big as a pot roast. He knew of lodgepole pines, with their scaly bark, their rigid trunks at full attention pointed up to the heavens. Then there was Ponderosa- her bark, that wonderful aroma of butterscotch, emitted from platy red slabs that linked together like puzzle pieces. There were lugubrious drooping mountain hemlocks. There were subalpine firs, narrowed and spiraling as you moved your sight skywards from the base of the trunk. He knew well of the ubiquitous and towering Douglas firs, with their cones marked three-pointed bract, their gray bark cut by deep furrows, scarred. And he especially considered the whitebark pine, a gritty survivor of higher elevations, anchoring soils and slowing erosion- home to the Clark's nutcracker, a bird species which stored whitebark seeds in hideaway caches, rationed to survive the winter in Klamath County.

Nick hadn't memorized a table of pictures and descriptions from a field guide.

He found comfort in the wonderful details of nature, inhaled them, allowed them to occupy his presence.

Individuals, creatures that were alive and worthy of reverence, patience, attention.

He finished his meal, then deliberately checked his gear for a third time. Water. Food. First Aid. A couple of knives. A tinder bundle.

He noticed the black soot under his fingernails. More was stained onto his fingertips.

Then he re-tied his boots, pulled on his gloves, and disembarked out from the campsite.

The moonglow permeated the woods as he cut off the road, to the extent that he didn't need to switch on his headlamp. He felt good about starting. A glance at his digital watch. 3AM. On schedule.

As it goes with climbing, any progress came in spurts and the advances were often taken right back.

The trail was conspicuous and intuitive. He stayed on course without trouble. He wound his way up an incline, edged along a ridge, then dipped into a meadow.

His breath hung out in front of his nose like a cloud.

After a mile, he took off his trapper's cap and stopped for a drink in a small meadow. The meadow featured a lonesome tree, in the middle of the clearing, nearly bent in half from the snow and wind, forming an arch above the ground. Turned down like an archer's bow, thanks to gravity's tension...

Lazy Tree Meadow.

He would look for this on the way back down, he decided.

He unscrewed a green canteen lid.

Another couple of miles until the rim.

Maybe a thousand feet or so, he figured.

Then, about a hundred yards away, suddenly, something caught his eye.

He held the cap in one hand, the canteen in the other.

A deer at the edge of the meadow.

He could taste the white smoke from the campfire on his bushy auburn eyebrows, in his nostrils.

Nick slowly twisted the lid back onto the canteen and scratched at his beard while he studied the animal.

The deer hadn't caught wind of him. It sauntered along, then stopped to nip at a low hanging branch, then another. Browsing at twigs. Then it perked its head upright, glanced in both directions, and began to groom itself.

A doe, a young female.

No mother or siblings in view.

Alone.

Nick realized he had been holding his own breath.

He inhaled deeply.

The doe's ears pricked up, towards Nick, and she bolted into the obscurity of the forest, out of view.

The snow glistened, sparkling in the moonlight around a series of divots, where she left her hoofprints.

He raised an eyebrow and thought to himself, A young girl never wanders around alone like that.

After he was done thinking, Nick peeled off his gloves and rubbed his hands together.

The moon, the shadows, the snow, the vapors of his breath- he couldn't help but feel like he might have walked into a strange, ethereal dream. A feeling like being in a cavern, a frozen cave- the pitched branches and bent tree limbs weighted by the snow, luminous struggles against the inevitable, frozen in their decline and suspended above him, torqued up- tunnels, passageways- icicles like stalactites.

He slipped his gloves back on.

More bootsteps, the crunch underfoot.

He felt good that he had started.

After another half mile or so, past a frozen creek, then a second, directly front of him in the middle of the trail, as if it were waiting for him- a spruce candle. He muttered out loud to himself, "I'll be." A marker of spring growth- when the thaw had finished, when the equinox passed and daylight overtook the nighttime, a tree would pull in beams of sunshine, nutrients from the soil, and the spring rains, all together, to weld them in a secret formula, resulting in golden candles around its branches and limbs.

He picked up the candle, brought it to his nose, and inhaled deeply.

The scent permeated his consciousness.

A singular focus.

He stuck the candle in one of the pockets on his jacket and continued upwards.

White clots of snow decorated the overstory looming above him- occasionally, a clump would fall from off a precarious limb and drop to the ground.

Nick became accustomed to the thumps that fell around him as he continued.

After another hour or so he had reached the main road- Rim Drive. Soon he would be up near the Visitors Center, and the Park Station. Tourists would flock here next summer to buy stuffed animals, keychains, magnets. They would snap pictures at sunset of sarape horizons. They would eat hotdogs at picnic tables, debate which trail to take on next.

But Nick wasn't mindful of those other people.

He walked past a parking lot, a series of buildings with stone facades and gable ends made of brown painted logs. A few chimneys poked up amidst the roof edges.

It was still quite dark, the sky a bruised purple, blues of interminable depths. But the stars had faded, one by one, snuffed out, memories from a past life.

Remembering...

He made it to the edge of the rim where the sidewalk linked up with a paved walkway, alongside it a small stone wall acting as a barrier to the precipitous edge. For a moment, he considered finding a promontory stone, seating himself on it, and waiting. But his eyes caught hold of Garfield peak. He followed the pedestrian trail counterclockwise along the lake, past the Lodge, and then to the trailhead.

His attention shifted out onto the water, a dark pool of sorrow, rippling faintly, a nearly pristine and unwrinkled surface- a 'scrying bowl,' the word that came to his mind.

The moon hung at his back, in the southwest.

He continued to plod forward, looking out...

In the next hour, dawn would break over the eastern rim.

Once Nick arrived at the Garfield trailhead, he removed his gloves and again rubbed his hands together.

His feet were numb.

A fire would do him good, but he decided to warm up an extra pair of wool socks by sticking them into his shirt, against his abdomen. His plan was, after he summited the peak, he would change this pair of socks out with the pair he was wearing.

A gelid breeze cracked against his face, a whip, lashing his cheeks and nose, his eyelids, the lobes of his ears.

His mind pictured the kettle on the boil, back at the campsite. Then, molten lava, a magma chamber under intense pressure miles underneath his feet- the word 'stratovolcano.'

He realized he had been holding his breath, and inhaled.

Suffocating, thanks to an icy gust of wind...

He licked his chapped lips and glanced up at Venus, burning through the cloak of predawn. It shone lonely out amidst a foreground of crags and treetops.

After the wind subsided, an arresting calm.

He stood, unmoving, with his eyes pointed up the path for a moment. Then Nick unzipped his pack, removed a small baggie from one of the front pouches, and set the bulk at the trailhead. He loosened his canteen from a side pocket, stuffed the baggie into his coat, and began to ascend.

Despite the arresting views, Nick's eyes were locked on the ground immediately in front of him. Focused, one bootstep at a time. He was mindful of ice, uneven rocks and boulders, any pitfalls or slippery patches that could lead to a sprained ankle, a broken foot, an unprotected tumble.

Pumping his arms, churning his thighs, flowing up the trail- the movements kept him warm, alert. In less than an hour, after a final series of switchbacks, he arrived at the pinnacle.

He looked up, eye-level, finally, and gazed out over the view.

His neck turned, unconscious, creeping from east to west.

The color of the heavens had melted from a midnight purple to a warm, Alice blue in the east, with bands of orange, amber, and a faint yellow, emerging at the bottom layers. In the west, a striking, crystalline navy blue.

There wasn't a cloud to be accounted for.

Back to the east- Venus beamed on.

His hands at his sides, he shut his eyes closed- a confrontation with another blast of gelid air on the exposed summit. The bevel of his senses had been reset, a new edge, sharpened by the darkness, the bite of cold, the discomfort of the proceeding hours. He opened his eyelids at the first sign of calm.

He looked out at the peaks, the lake.

Indeed, the world around him had been transforming, imperceptibly- soon, it would reach a crescendo.

Melting of colors, shifts of tone- this field of vision before him suddenly reminded Nick of her face, the moment she was born. Blue to red to pink to a glowing porcelain- what precious seconds, her first breaths. Reminded of the joy, with her in his arms for the first time, enchanted, gently bringing her face up to his own, their noses nearly touching. He'd blink and she would change. She was so fluid, mercurial, more so than anything he had ever seen before- she seemed to be coated in stardust.

A burning solar fire loomed behind Mount Scott, a few miles away, which drove the transformations forward.

His footsteps on the top of Garfield Peak would mark an inflection point.

Now, the remainder of his journey would be informed by daylight, snow melt, runnels of crisp, freezing water- bombarded from more snow clumps above, tracks of slush below, branches cracking and mists of powdered iridescence, a few birds and squirrels to scamper out from their hidden dens.

More change.

Always changing...

Nick walked out to the end of the overlook and bent down to the rock, a flat summit about twenty yards long and twenty wide. He balanced on his knee, then amassed a pile of snow together in the shape of a half-dome. He reached into his coat and removed the plastic baggie. Inside were birthday candles, several dozen of sundry colors and designs. He decided on six different ones, a purple, a pink, some reds. He positioned the candles in a circular formation on the miniature snow pile.

"Well sweetheart, I think you would have liked this."

He reached for a lighter inside a breast pocket stitched onto his wool sweater.

The air was calm, still.

He depressed his thumb, once, then again- he lit the candles, and rose back onto his feet.

About halfway up the ascent, he had tied his jacket around his waist, as soon as he began to feel beads of sweat against his thigh and armpits. Now, he untied the jacket and zipped it back to his chin, his beard tucked inside the collar.

"I love you."

Behind the ridgeline of Mount Scott, exploding across the horizon and nearly forcing him to turn away, the sun rose for Klamath County.

A birthday celebration on a stone giant, its patient lifetime of rocky mountain face, of pinecone festoon, of tectonic millennia coupled in warm embrace with the sky- facing northeast, the lake out in front of him, blue, glistening, and deep.

A part of him sunk to the bottom of the water, a stone.

A part of him took flight forever across the sky, a beam of light.

The rest of him remained on the mountain, holding his breath as he witnessed a gust of wind extinguish the candles, all six, in a single blow.

The smoke lingered, hovering, then vanished in an instant.

A tear welled in the corner of his windward eye.

The warmth of the sun touched his cheeks, his nose.

Nick turned to the leeward, put his hand to his face, and smiled the smile of a dream well accomplished.

He had expected this.

And then, he hadn't.

RED LIGHT

Renee woke up on the couch to a crash- a plate of ice shearing off from the apartment building's roof. A rainstorm, two days after a blizzard had ambushed the area- she refused to open her eyes.

"That sounded promising."

After a few minutes, the pain in her side, the acid reflux in her throat, the headache, the swollen joints, the stiff neck- she propped herself upright in the bed, resting against the headboard.

Her partner, Leo, was snoring next to her.

The baby was asleep in the crib.

She reached over to her phone and checked the time. 4:15 AM. "Jesus Christ," she muttered.

Without a thought or a moment of reflection, she wrestled herself out from the tangled sheets and the comforter and walked away from the bedroom. Down a hallway, into the kitchen- the pantry door opened, she reached in and lifted out a half-drunk quart of vodka. In the refrigerator, a gallon container of orange juice- she poured a glass. Then, with both hands ready, she unscrewed the cap from off the plastic bottle, sent down a massive glug of liquor, and chased away the burn in her throat with a swig from the glass of cool orange juice.

A grimace on her face- she coughed, felt her body trying to expel what it had consumed, and finally forced the liquid down further into her stomach past her throat. Willing it, then exhaling.

She slapped herself on the cheek.

Before her partner Leo's solemn voice 'You're pickling yourself in this stuff,' before her defaulted credit card payments, before her seizures, before the dirty laundry piled up in the corner, before the car repairs after her last accident, before her lost jobs, before the anxiety and burning sweats, before the sneaking off to

the package store, before her regiments of depression medication, before her embarrassing tirade last Thanksgiving, before any of that reached the horizon of her consciousness...

Another pull from the bottle.

Another chaser of orange juice.

Another grimace.

Another, "Jesus Christ."

The clock on the microwave- 4:19 AM.

Her only chance of sleep rested on whether or not she could drink enough, quickly enough, to pass out. Leo would be up at 7:00. He would feed the baby a bottle, change the tiny girl's diaper, make a pot of coffee and a couple of English muffins, and head out for work. Right before he left, he would check in on her, "Renee, I'm leaving. You have to get up." Then she'd be alone with the baby, for eight hours, until Leo came home. He'd ask her how the day went. He'd make her promise she hadn't been drinking. She'd be lying, and he would know it- but that's how it would go.

Leo was nervous when they first found out about the baby. Renee had been promising to stop drinking for a long time, years and years, but it never quite happened. It was always "too complicated." That's what she would tell him. It's not as simple as stopping drinking. "Stop trying to make this about me. It's not that simple."

But when she found out she was pregnant, she went cold turkey. She had made it all the way through the duration of the pregnancy. She only cheated once.

Well, twice...

But the baby was fine. Everything was fine. Renee felt good. She loved the little girl, she did- that wasn't it. It wasn't a question of love.

Once she picked up the bottle again...

She had to get drunk.

Quick.

She was caught off guard by her reflection in the microwave door, so she turned away, abruptly.

With her head hanging off her neck, "Jesus Christ."

--

"Hey, what do you think you're doing?" Before she knew it Renee had pushed the stroller off the sidewalk, into the street, and was approaching the driver of the more expensive car.

The driver looked at her, standing outside of his car, puzzled.

Renee shouted, pressed on by an internal mania, by a compulsion she couldn't control, "I said what do you think you're doing?" The driver turned. He sized Renee up, as was his habit with every stranger he met, and straightened up his back, as he was similarly wont to do when preparing himself for a confrontation. "Who are you?"

"I saw what happened. I saw everything. This accident isn't her fault," Renee pointed to the young woman in the dented Honda, still buckled in her seatbelt, crying. "She didn't do anything wrong." He guffawed, then, "What are you talking about?"

"The light turned red! She had the right of way! The turn was hers to make, and you blew the light and hit her!"

The man, older, in his fifties, a beige canvas overcoat, a suit underneath, he squinted at Renee and dismissed her, "You don't know what you're talking about. Take your baby and leave."

"Like hell I will." Renee couldn't restrain herself. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself, yelling at this woman like how you were. I saw that too. Shouting at her, when, when it was your fault! I'll be the first to tell the cops when they show up."

"Get out of here."

"Or what?"

The man glared. He was tall, fit. He adjusted the collar of his overcoat and walked within a couple feet of Renee. "Mind your own goddamn business and get out of here."

Renee shouted back at the man, "Or what?"

The smell of booze was undeniable. The man picked up on the caustic fumes oozing out from Renee's lungs, her stomach, her brain and her blood vessels- her entire body permeated and pulsing with alcohol. "Have you been drinking? It's ten thirty in the morning. What do you think the cops will have to say about that? And with a baby, no less. It's time you left."

Renee cracked a smile. "I saw everything. I'm not going anywhere." The man flipped his hand at Renee, a motion of disgust, of disinterest, and walked away from their engagement. He moved next to the Honda, the driver's side, and knocked on the glass window with his knuckle. The young woman, still crying in her seat, had not moved. "Come on. Let's see your insurance, your papers."

The young woman was Hispanic.

Renee didn't appreciate the tone of the man's question, or the way it had been phrased.

"Hey!"

The man ignored Renee and continued knocking.

"Leave her alone!"

The man growled, "Get out of here, you drunk!"

Renee, with the baby carriage in front of her, walked over to the man's black Mercedes. She opened the driver's side door, which was unlocked, and turned towards the man. She rolled up the sleeves on her coat. The man looked at her in disbelief.

Renee growled, "I'm going to ask you, or I'm going to make you. Have it your way. But you're going back in this car."

"You'll go to jail for this."

Renee took a deep breath. "Get in your car."

The man's face turned red, splotchy with embarrassment and rage. His lip curled. His hand turned into a fist. But after a moment, he began to walk towards his car. He pulled his phone out of his pocket. "I'm calling my attorney. You're going to pay for this."

Renee glared at him.

The door shut closed.

--

"Where's my baby?"

We called your husband.

"We're not married, he's my partner."

My apologies. We called your partner. He came to the station and picked the baby up. But DCFS will be paying a visit to him. The child may need to enter a temporary foster program, depending on how things move forward.

"So Leo has the baby?"

Yes.

"He was here?"

Yes.

"Why didn't he ask to see me?"

These aren't visiting hours, ma'am.

"Why didn't he bail me out?"

I'm not sure, ma'am.

"How much is bail?"

Ten thousand dollars.

"That's why he didn't bail me out. We don't have that kind of money."

You'll have an opportunity to talk to a bondsman on Monday.

"What about a lawyer?"

Monday.

"So I have to go to court?"

Yes, in the afternoon most likely.
"So I'm here all weekend?"
Unless you can post bail.
"What about the girl?"
What girl?
"In the accident. The guy tried to blame her. I saw the accident. It wasn't her fault."
Did you issue a statement with the officer?
"I did."
We can't provide information about an incident that you weren't involved in. It's not allowed. I can't tell you whether or not a ticket was issued, or who it was issued to.
"But they took my name down, and what I saw."
If you are called on to testify, or provide any further clarification, they will let you know.
Renee looked at the officer through the glass barrier.
The officer did not make any eye contact with her.
"Is that everything?"
Yes, ma'am. That's everything.
Renee turned from the window and was escorted by a guard back to her temporary cell. The cell was empty except for her.
She heard the steel door clang shut.
She felt good.
There was no anxiety.
There were no cravings.
She did the right thing.
She could keep doing that, the right thing- again, and again.
That's all there is to it.
Simple.

A BOOK

One of the covers caught the young woman's attention. A yellow, faded border around a charcoal sketch of a man- shadowy, his eye sockets set far back into his head almost hidden away under a looming promontory of a brow; a full mustache; wisps of angelic, soft hair. Gibran's *The Prophet*.
She adjusted the strap of her bag and lifted the book from the top of the pile. She opened to the first page.
There was a date: JUNE 1992.
There was a dedication: "I know you are confused right now, and nothing seems clear, but you continue to search onwards. I admire

your questioning, it is vital to who you are, and understanding where you are going. I hope you continue to question, to seek. I know you will find the answers. Never forget that I love you. No matter what. You are because you were meant to be! Love always, Mama"

She flipped forward through the dusty pages. Sections, sentences, words were underlined, like:

The deeper that sorrow carves into your being,
the more joy you can contain.

The words were beautiful, and touching, but as the young woman continued thumbing through the pages, she felt more and more uncomfortable. Like she had walked in on a situation she wasn't meant to see. Like a voyeur.

Obviously the book had been a present. A mother had written her son a note, a personal note, a way to show him encouragement, and handed it over to him as a gift. The mother reaffirmed her love for the boy, despite any differences between them, with this act. She offered her love, and Gibran's words, as a refuge, a form of solace.

The boy had clearly read the book, with the passages underlined. Maybe he had read it immediately, then never picked it up again. Maybe he referred to it over the years, like a trusted companion. Maybe things worked out, and he found his answers.

Maybe they didn't, and he fell apart.

The young woman shut the book tight. The purple sticker on the spine meant it was discount priced, \$2.

She thought to buy it, for a moment.

Then she gently set it back on the pile.

--

The boy couldn't help himself. "I would have been fine with pizza." His mother placed the final dish of the procession, a plate of creamed spinach, on top of a cotton terry potholder. Settling into her seat, she looked up at him, "No. It's a special occasion. You deserve a good, home cooked meal."

He couldn't help but thinking to himself- *What a waste of time and money. All this effort. I never asked for this. She's been hovering over that oven all day checking the meat, at the board mincing garlic and slicing onions, mashing potatoes, measuring out butter and cream. It's not about making it special for me. It's because*

she likes to do it. She likes the distraction. She likes being harried while I relax, so she can hang it over me! Go sit down and relax, she says. What she means is, 'Look at all the trouble I went through. And you didn't even bring a bottle of wine for dinner.' It's a guilt trip. That's all it's ever been!

The look on his face told her everything.

The mother drew a pensive breath.

It struck her as an obvious thing to do, so she asked him, "Would you mind saying grace with me?"

He offered her his hand, like he had done so many times. It fell on the table, limpid, next to her plate. She took it and squeezed. "Heavenly Father, thank You for this food in front of us, this table for us to sit at, for my beautiful son, for us to be able to celebrate his life, together, his life that You blessed me with as his mother. Thank You for giving me something so beautiful, and special. For everything we have, for everything we are, it is through Your blessing. Amen."

He chuckled to himself.

"What is it?"

He let go of her hand. "The prayer. It was directed at me, wasn't it?"

"Directed at you?"

"Don't play stupid, mom. You're a smart lady."

Her appetite vanished. "I don't understand."

A paroxysm, violent and unexpected, "All I've done is disappoint you!"

There was a silence.

The humble kitchen seemed to darken, overcast.

She struggled out the words, "You've done nothing to disappoint... how on earth... you're the most important thing in the world to me. I thank God for you every..."

"Dad left you because of me. You lost your friends at church because of me. You are stuck here, slaving away in the kitchen, for an ungrateful, loser of a son who you can barely stand to look at. You hate my lifestyle. You hate that I'm yours. Admit it!"

She could only hang her head.

He stood up from the table, walked to the door, and removed his coat from off a meager hook.

She moved up from her place and grabbed something from off the countertop. All the woman could spit out, as her son fixed his zippers and buttons, was, "What about your present?"

"Keep it."

She held the wrapped package in her hands. Tears filled her eyes.

"It's for you. Please take it."

He flipped a scarf across his neck. "Give it to somebody who deserves it."

FORLORN

"My heart is full of death."

There was no beginning to find the appropriate words, how to respond, how to reconcile...

She remains quiet.

Muting her breath, even...

"Sadness is all I'll leave behind."

Her empty eyes find their equivalent outside the car windshield- a vacant side street, frozen in stillness, not far off the main drag. A streetlight, a swarm of rain droplets like fireflies- vague shadows, pools of dirt and melted snow. A fog that erases distance. Somewhere, up there behind the pall, obscured, a gin drunk moon oozes out its stolen light, for nobody.

A part of her reacts: a stimulus, conditioned to offer, "I'm so sorry."

But another part of her halts the reaction. Sorry won't do. It wouldn't cut it. It would have been like a line from a script, practiced, heard once then put to memory- glib in one way, nefarious in another, disembodied more than anything.

It won't make the grade.

She finally breathes, a terse pull through her nostrils... holding tight... then a terse puff outward.

The time for condolences, for "I'm so sorry," for hugs and encouragement... it had passed them by.

There was nothing to do but listen.

"All of my... it's... it's gone... it's... you know, when she was two years old, on Christmas morning, I'll never forget the moment... she was on my lap, opening presents, me and her, and we made a wish, together. It's stuck with me, this moment, all through her life, and... her eyelash, one of her angel eyelashes, it had landed on her cheek, so I gently collected it, and put it in my hand... we made a wish together, and she blew the eyelash away. It was so tender, I... I'll never forget it. I'll never forget her smile after that eyelash flew away. She was so beautiful, so... I'll never forget the wish I held in my heart, what thoughts entered my mind. I didn't

say it out loud. It's against the rules, right? But I remember it. I remember it exactly. And now I can tell it to you, because it won't come true. I wished... I wished she would have a Christmas one day with a little girl of her own. A beautiful daughter. I wished she would be as happy as I was, with her, in that moment."

The car engine, running- it had been almost an hour.

What could she possibly do for him?

"That would be twenty-two years ago, this Christmas. Twenty-four years old. Two, to twenty-four... it wasn't supposed to end up this way. It wasn't supposed to... you know, I can't help but feel like I'm trapped in a nightmare. Like this is an actual nightmare. Right now. Like the normal world got swallowed up, and I fell asleep into this nightmare... and I'll never... I'll never get back. I'll never wake up from this. Not until the day I die. I'll be stuck, for the rest of my life, in this... this hell. When she died, I died. And I went to hell. I came here, into this world. Right now. This world where I'm alive, and she isn't. Hell is real, and it's right here. But the funny thing is, you're here, with me, and it's not hell for you. It's not hell for the people at work. The kid behind the counter at the coffee shop. It's not hell for any of you. And I shouldn't... I'm sorry. All I can do now is ramble and depress whomever I'm talking to. I'm sorry... I..."

There is an extreme tension in her neck, her arms, "Hank, it's okay. If you need to talk, you deserve somebody to listen. And I'm here for that. I'm here for you."

A car drives past- red brake lights, a STOP sign.

She blinks, registering the scene through the windshield.

His eyes are fixed on the steering wheel.

"I appreciate it, I do." The mood shifts, his tone- acerbic. "You can't... I don't know why I expect anybody to... nobody can help me. Everybody thinks they... but nobody has any idea what..."

She gulps.

It had been over a year since the accident.

Hank had uprooted each of the blue hydrangeas around his cottage that previous summer, because he realized one afternoon they were their flowers reflected the same color of Maddy's irises. Her eyes... her eyes were like a dawn morning, with those flowers in view, a July bloom... he couldn't bear to see the color anymore. He retrieved a spade from the garage and dug and dug and continued digging.

Hank's ex-wife hadn't spoken to him since the funeral home. The woman refused to discuss their daughter, anything to do with the pain or their loss.

His friends had mostly forgotten.

Meals stopped arriving.

The sympathy had dried up.

Everything had become so frivolous. A folly.

Church didn't work.

He was never one to drink.

He'd become angry. Then heartbroken. Then lonely. Then angry again.

Right back to where he started...

Something jolts Hank. He doesn't mean to denigrate Marie. He doesn't want his pain to contaminate her life, her emotions. Reflecting, his voice softens, somber, "I'm sorry, Marie. It's not... it's not your fault. I appreciate you taking the time, I do. I'm sorry. Go ahead." He nods towards her side, then cements his gaze back, unblinking, onto his clenched knuckles and the wheel. "Thank you for dinner. I'm sorry I couldn't... thanks for your company. I..."

Marie gathers up her purse from the floor, next to her feet. "Any time you need to talk, anything- whatever you need. You can always call me. I've known you a long time, Hank, and I'm- I'm here for you. Any time." She grabs his wrist, squeezes it, while simultaneously opening the handle to the car door.

Hank doesn't flinch.

They hadn't made it past a drink and a plate of appetizers before he asked her if it would be alright to leave. Marie paid the bill. She made up an excuse for the waiter. Hank was brooding as they walked back to his car. He drove back and parked outside of her brownstone then started talking.

He cried, for a little, in the beginning.

Then his eyes fixed on the steering wheel, unwavering. He barely looked up at Marie for the rest of their conversation.

Marie was surprised by his phone call. She attended the funeral, with her older brother who was Hank's age- they had grown up with Hank, played on the same playgrounds, attended St. Peter and Paul's School. Marie had stayed in the neighborhood, married a local boy, and Hank too hadn't moved far.

But she wasn't surprised that she was of no avail to him.

What could she offer?

Her kids were grown up.

Her husband was near retirement.
Her life had gone according to plan, for the most part.
She felt terrible for Hank.
But what could she do?

Marie felt so inadequate, turning the key to her door. Later that night she would talk to her husband, and he would encourage her she had done everything right. He would reassure her that listening to Hank was most important, letting the man have an ear to speak to. Her husband would plant a kiss on Marie's cheek, and he would thank God in the secrecy of his heart he hadn't been forced to bury a child like that poor unlucky bastard, Hank.

--

A young man, barely a footstep inside the door of their new apartment, excited to report what had happened to his lovely bride, "You're not going to believe this."

"What?"

"Driving home, right around the Belleville exit, like 10 minutes from where I get off, this bastard starts flipping his high beams at me from behind. And I was in the middle lane!"

"Are you serious?"

"I was dumbfounded. The middle lane. How psychotic do you have to be?"

"So what did you do?"

"I slowed down, and then he passed me on the right, I gave him the finger."

"Did you get a look at them?"

"Exactly who you would expect. A cranky old bastard."

His young wife, with a smile that people smile when they are proven correct, "It's always an old man in his car trying to get to somewhere important, and everybody else is in the way."

"Don't ever let me get like that, will you?"

She shook her head, the smile still on her face, "That's the last thing we'll be, is miserable. I don't even understand how people let themselves get like that."

"Me neither."

CHECK, PLEASE

This would have to be the last time.

His eyes opened. His arm had gone numb, hung off the couch with his knuckles rubbing against the floor. An array of empty beer

bottles. An overflowing ashtray. Crumpled receipts. A greasy paper plate. A stained rug. A dartboard hanging crooked on the wall. He focused his attention towards the red digits on the clock across the room.

The alarm was buzzing.

It had been for the last three hours.

9:15AM

His feet on the ground, his neck resting over the back of the couch- he coughed.

He put his hands to his eyes and rubbed his palms into his sockets. Rain patted against the windowpane. The room was humid, stuffy. An L car grumbled past in the distance.

Doppler 5 Weather Team- the television ON in the background, muted, a dishwashing detergent commercial.

There wasn't time for a shower. He lurched himself forward, checked each of the bottles, then his cigarette pack- empty.

His bank account.

His energy levels.

His stomach.

Up on his feet to the sink, glugging from the tap- he gagged, forced down a wave of nausea, then cupped a handful of water and splashed it against his face. He spit into the sink.

He gagged, then spit again.

A full trash bin, with three bags leaning next to it against the kitchen island. He went back to the other end of the room and looked in the closet- no clean shirts, no clean pants. A laundry hamper overflowing.

Another wave of nausea.

This is your life, he thought to himself.

This is where the bed had been, until I threw it away.

This is where the recliner had been, until I sold it.

This is where the desk had been, until I broke it apart.

He pulled a black leather belt from off the floor and tightened it around his waist.

He put a heavy foot up onto the kitchen counter, tied the laces on one of his worn black shoes, and then repeated with the other.

He checked his pocket- his keys, and his wallet. His badge for work was still clipped to a belt loop in front of him. He went back to the coffee table, checked another empty pack of cigarettes, shook a few more empty bottles, then headed for the door.

He opened it then shut it behind him.

There was no point in turning the lock.
There was no point in trying to find an umbrella.
There was no point in calling in sick from the pay phone at the corner, outside the convenience store.
He was out of options.
Out of credit at Larry's Tavern.
Out of second chances with his boss.
Out of excuses for the landlord.
You'll have to take it on the chin, he thought to himself. He hobbled down the three flights of stairs, opened the front door to the street, and headed southbound. The rain began to dampen his shirt. Two blocks to the station. A red light. He stopped walking and waited. Hands in his pockets- there was an opening in the flow of traffic, but he couldn't motivate himself to dart across the pedestrian walkway. Eventually the signal changed and he continued down the street.
But he wasn't paying attention and stepped into a deep puddle before reaching the curb. His sock was instantly drenched.
Right on the chin, he thought to himself.
Under the cover of the L station, he approached the vestibule and pulled his wallet out from his pocket. It wasn't difficult to locate his CTA pass. A few random business cards. An expired driver's license. A useless bank card.
He scanned the pass at the vestibule.
A red light flashed.
INSUFFICIENT FUNDS
He glanced up at a Transit Authority guard on duty. The guard was a young man, Hispanic, and was clearly watching him.
You're too old for that, he thought to himself. It's the last thing you need.
The red light disappeared.
He scanned the pass.
The red light appeared.
There was an ATM terminal, but to insert his bank card and enter his PIN number would only be for show. So he drifted away from the vestibule, back towards the entrance and exit doors. He could feel the guard's eyes but didn't look back.
People filtered in and out, around him, moving briskly, shaking out their umbrellas, tucking newspapers into their back pockets. None of them had any faces.
None of them had any features.

He stared outside at the rain, the traffic backed up in a street full of drivers hungry for a green light.

By chance, thanks to wandering eyes and an uneven focus, he caught his own reflection in the glass door. His hair, thin and greasy, was plastered against his forehead in jagged clumps. There was a pouch of fat under his chin, stubble on his cheeks and neck. Red and purple dots smattered around his eyes- their drooping lids, and dull, black irises. Even his eyebrows seemed languid.

He shifted focus, back outside. There was a breakfast joint on the west end of the street, opposite him. Corned beef hash, two eggs over easy, and a Bloody Mary- that would be something, he thought to himself.

Kiko loved to drink Bloody Marys in the morning. He would drink six or seven at a Greek diner before football started at noon. Remember Super Bowl Sunday? That was a breakfast.

His stomach growled.

Stop daydreaming, he thought to himself.

You ought to make up your mind.

If you go back to the apartment, there's nothing to do. No one to call. Nowhere to drink. No money. No prospects. No degree. No car. No family. No friends. You could start to look for another job, but how far would it go?

If you go down to CBOT, when Rick fires you, he might cut you a check. The pay cycle is two weeks in arrears, so at least you would be due for a full boat, plus four extra days. You would be flush. Yes. That's the decision. You have to go in. Take it on the chin, collect what you're owed, shake hands and leave quietly.

I'll go, he thought to himself.

But how?

You could head for the Metra stop, pretend like you lost your ticket? Maybe the conductor would pass you by, or you could say you already had a punch? No. Too much hassle. There could be a scene. Those union guys are too serious. No, you'll have to hoof it. Straight down Milwaukee. Kimball to Milwaukee, Milwaukee to Des Plaines, Des Plaines to Jackson. Six, seven miles maybe? Three hours? It's a hike, but you could do it.

It's the only way.

It'll do you good, he thought to himself. You can sweat it out. You could use the exercise. Listen. You get there, find Rick, take your lumps, then you pick up your check, cash it at one of the banks in the Loop, and head over to Miller's. No, he thought, you

owe a few bucks at Miller's. No. It'll have to be Cal's. That's it. You pay a visit to Cal's Liquors for a few cold ones. Pick up a burger at Billy Goat, a pack of smokes at the 711, saddle up to the counter, dry out. Maybe there's a ballgame on this afternoon. You can eat, catch a buzz, share a few smokes with Chris the bartender. He's alright. Settle down. Listen to a few stories about Chris' old lady, maybe a laugh. Ride the L back and figure things out. If you fork over a couple hundred to the landlord, feed him a sob story, maybe he'll let you stay until you find a new gig. The man caught another glimpse of his reflection. It might work, he thought- but as he thought it, he refused to look into his own eyes. It might work and it might not. It'll never work. But if it does, first you've got to take it on the chin. He pushed open the door then headed south towards Milwaukee. He made way for an older woman, Eastern European, dragging a utility cart behind her stuffed with groceries. The rain made a distinct noise as it plinked onto her plastic bags. She wore a shawl, black nylons, and a beige raincoat. As they passed by one another, she glanced up at him and clicked her tongue. He continued walking. The next block he noticed two cabbies parked in an alley, outside their cars, conversing in a foreign language and sharing a cigarette. They drew quick, tense hits from off the butt while passing it back and forth. He wiped the rain from off his brow. He remembered Kiko, one night in a February blizzard, outside the Liar's Club, after they had finished sharing a cigarette- Kiko glared at the butt and gulped it down his throat. Hysterical laughter. Stumbling. The flurries pouring down. Kiko couldn't remember it the next day. "You pull my leg, man. But I tell you what, my stomach sure feels something terrible this morning." He continued walking. His hands stuffed into his pockets, his head pointed at the sidewalk- past one intersection, then another, waiting for the lights to change. Six corners.

Southeast, down Milwaukee- a bus ambled by, then another. Foggy windows. The pneumatic door swinging open, letting a few passengers off then letting a few more on.

Past the Logan Theatre- that's where we saw Jurassic Park, he thought to himself. Right after the Bulls had finished off the Suns. "Here's Paxson for three... yes!"

That was a fine summer.

Now Jordan was gone, for good. Pippen, Jackson. The dynasty had ended. Dismantled.

Who would've guessed?

It never works out the way you hope.

By now his shirt was drenched. So were his pants. So were both socks, to the point he couldn't tell which foot he had dropped into the puddle. But the air was warm. There was a nice breeze off the lake. No sign of thunder, lightning- you just keep going, he thought to himself.

Another bus rolled past him, splashing water up onto the sidewalk. "Sonovabitch," he muttered under his breath.

Red neons up ahead. Same as the sign at Larry's Tavern. That last night, with Kiko, staggering out of the bar and onto a midnight street, parting ways.

Kiko's family was mostly in the Dominican. A mother, a few sisters, lots of cousins. They didn't have the money to ship Kiko's remains back home. They settled things with the Cook County coroner's office. An unmarked pauper's grave. A closed casket. Boy was he relieved to find the lid sealed shut at the funeral home. That mutilated body underneath- no, he wanted to remember Kiko in his own way, punching jukebox requests at the opposite end of the bar, trying to make it with a chubby woman after last call, stacking up empty shot glasses and flicking his Zippo out from a breast pocket in effortless aplomb. He wanted to remember Kiko's style. He wanted to remember his laughter. His gamble.

You don't have a friend in the world, he thought to himself.

A woman from the coroner's office had called him up the following morning, after it happened. Kiko had a list of names on a scrap of paper, with corresponding telephone numbers, folded into his wallet. JERRY was the first name written on Kiko's handwritten list.

Back when Jerry could afford a landline.

Back when Jerry tried to make it with the chubby woman's friend.

Back when Jerry sang the songs playing on the jukebox.

You don't have a pot to piss in or a friend in the world or two nickels to rub together, he thought to himself. Can't make it with a woman. Can't hold down a job. Can't stop drinking. Can't keep an apartment.

"Sonovabitch," he muttered.

The individual squares of sidewalk concrete gave way to city blocks. Then, the city blocks gave way to miles. The miles passed underneath, in front of him, around him- time, converted to space, to distance- his hands mostly stuffed into his pockets, head down. A rusted Toyota Corolla caught his eye- green, a dent in the rear fender- could that be it? Could it still be running? I caught the better end of that deal, he thought to himself. At the lot, the car keys in the ignition, the engine in idle- the sales rep couldn't be bothered to drive it around the block. "Does it turn on?" They must have overpaid three or four hundred dollars for it. Jerry had decided to sell it after a wave of parking tickets, to pay off a bar tab, to 'simplify' things. Kiko agreed with him. "Best public transpo in the world, might as well use it."

Kiko had never owned a car.

Kiko didn't mind walking.

He'd be here with me right now, Jerry thought to himself.

Quit it. No sense in thinking that way. Only few more blocks to Des Plaines. Get to CBOT. Take it on the chin. Get your check. Head over to Cal's. Get things sorted.

He seemed to only notice liquor stores and dive bars.

Sure can't wait for that first beer, he thought to himself. A shot and a beer. Three shots, and six beers. A half pack of cigarettes. I hope there's a game on this afternoon. If the rain clears up- maybe they won't have to postpone it.

He remembered the Red Line, the L stop at Addison, drunk men with their guts bulging out, piss and vomit in alleyways. He remembered his first hot dog with mustard and relish. The smell of peanut shells in the bleachers, a day game in July. He'd go with his buddy Phil, and sometimes his younger brother Pete. They'd show up early for batting practice, dreams in their head about catching fly balls that cleared the outfield basket. He'd managed a few, scrambling under the aluminum benches.

Pete loved baseball. He loved it with all his heart.

The only thing he loved more than baseball was heroin.

Pete's casket had been left opened. A cold, waxy face. The body inside, it didn't resemble his kid brother. It didn't resemble anything alive. Lifeless. Useless. Twenty years old. What a waste. "Sonovabitch," he muttered.

Dad died from liver cancer. Mom died of heart failure. Pete died from an overdose. Kiko- he would never know for sure.

The driver on the route claimed Kiko had flung himself into street. But Jerry knew Kiko better than anyone in the world. He'd never fix up a thing like that. Kiko was a Catholic. Kiko loved his mother. He also loved big, shy girls and glam rock. He never once talked about killing himself. Not like that.

The union protected their driver.

The case was closed.

The coroner's report read: SUICIDE.

"Sonovafuckingbitch," he muttered.

That was enough thinking about that. No sense in thinking. Walk. Just walk, take it on the chin, and get your hands on that check. Up amidst the fire escapes, the black, steel landings, the masonry and the wrought iron, the patina and the pigeon droppings:

INJURED? 25 YEARS OF EXPERIENCE. 10,000 CLIENTS. HUNDREDS OF
MILLIONS IN SETTLEMENTS. WHY WAIT? CALL NOW. DYNOLYAK & PARTNERS
LAW 312-888-DLAW

Out of one corner of his eye, the Sears Tower. The other, the John Hancock. Not much further. Des Plaines will be up ahead.

DESPAINES ST/ MILWAUKEE AVE 630 W.- a green street sign, fixed onto a lamp pole, with the traffic light hung from off an arm support directly above the intersection. Opposite, one of the other six corners, another post- KINZIE ST/ MILWAUKEE AVE 400 N.

An L car shook along the tracks behind him.

At least it isn't February, he thought to himself. At least there isn't a skin of ice against the brown and yellow bricks. At least there aren't icicles leering down from the overpasses. A steel wind that cuts through your jacket, eats at your skin. Slush and dirt and salt piled up in mounds along the curbs. At least it's warm. And the breeze, the rain- you can hardly smell the exhaust, the pollution, the sweat and the decay, the dumpsters and the filmy river.

There's not much further to go.

The rain had been a steady drizzle, ever since Belmont.

An unending, flat, gray sky.

The light phased to green and he crossed the street.

A messenger on a bicycle.

A man in a suit running to his car, his briefcase like a shield over his head.

Another bar, another liquor store- another wall covered in graffiti, another line of construction barricades, orange cones. A team of workers loitered around an open manhole. Four or five of them. He was surprised to see them out, with the weather and all. Another overpass up ahead, another L car grumbling along.

He could hear car horns, engines- the Kennedy Expressway was nearby, 90/94. Another traffic jam, another tow truck, another insurance claim.

He continued southbound down Des Plaines.

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There were trees in planter boxes as far as he could see. They seemed impossible, fake. Each one was the same height. Each one had the same green leaves, the same trunk. Who put these here? They were out of place, and it bothered him. He thought to himself, what is the mayor trying to do? Make up for all the sewage and trash? How much did this all cost?

He had never noticed any trees before today.

There had been a news report, something about an ash beetle- the pest was killing off trees across the city.

Another waste of tax dollars.

W JACKSON BLVD 300 S. The John Hancock building directly in front of him. Only a few more blocks to go.

He hadn't paid any thought about what he might say to Rick. It was a relief, not having to concoct an excuse as to why he was late to the trading desk. The trading session ran from 9:30 until 4:00. But he was supposed to check in with the floor traders at 7:30, then connect with Rick and the other two brokers in Rick's outfit at 8:30. Then, once the octagonal pit opened, anything could happen.

The derivatives marketplace.

141 W JACKSON BLVD

Rick had afforded Jerry second chance after second chance. But to Jerry's credit, when he showed up to work he performed admirably. Jerry had never missed an order, or communicated it improperly. He learned the signs and signals quickly- buying palms in, selling palms out. He was always alert. He hustled to retrieve his cards.

He picked up on the basics of commodities trading, why more farmers should protect themselves by hedging, what signals indicated a push to buy, or when it was time to sell. He asked Rick good questions. Rick saw potential in him.

Jerry was keenly aware how the other runners, most of them college age kids, looked down on him because of his age and appearance. He didn't go out with them to Ceres Lounge for pitchers of beer after the floor closed. He didn't ask them about their weekend plans. He didn't make small talk. He didn't care who they were sleeping with. He didn't care if they climbed up the ranks from runner to apprentice broker, from an apprentice to a house broker. Jerry did his job, to the best of his abilities, and left.

They'll be glad to see me go, he thought to himself as he walked up the steps and through the revolving doors.

The elevator up to the fifth floor.

I will miss the opening bell, he decided, as the elevator doors opened. It was an incredible roar, and the frenzy of activity which followed- no one could forget it.

It was a good job.

It could have turned into something.

Jerry made his way past men, and a few women, most of them in colorful trading jackets. He shouldered his way towards the observation booth. From there he would be able to scan the entire pit and pick out where Rick was positioned.

Jerry looked down on the commotion.

There he was.

A pencil behind his ear, his cards in one hand, his eyes darting between other traders, brokers- next to a phone, ready for the next call, the next client order to fulfill. Rick was a short man, balding, with thick rimmed glasses. But he was honest. He was considerate. He cared about the other folks in his outfit. He cared about his clients. He was a good boss.

I blew it.

Again.

Rick took one look at him, approaching head on at the bow, and the red-faced man shook his head. "You're done here. I don't know what made you think- you look terrible, you know that?"

"I've been walking in the rain."

Several other folks had assaulted Jerry with sideways glances after he had entered the building.

"The trains shut down?"

"No."

"Then what gives?"

"No money for a ticket. Look, I don't want to waste your time."

Curtly, Rick snapped back, "Good, because I don't have any to waste. I told you the next one would be it. And this is the next one."

"I know."

Rick paused for a second, a rare moment of calm. "I'll need your credentials."

Jerry unclipped his badge and handed it over.

"That should do it then."

Mustering what little courage he had, "I hate to ask, Rick, but I need my last paycheck. Can you help me get that sorted out, maybe at the end of the session? I'll wait around for you if that's convenient enough?"

"Go talk to Janice back at the office, you know I don't deal with that kind of stuff."

"Right. Of course. Well, thanks again for everything, for the opportunity and..."

"Cut the crap, Jerry. I got work to do."

Jerry figured it inappropriate to extend his hand, so he nodded and turned around.

After a few steps, amidst the din, he heard, "Hey, Jerry!"

"Yeah?"

"Clean yourself up. Seriously. Get some help."

"Thanks, Rick. I'll do that." Jerry waved his hand in an awkward salute and left the bustling octagon.

Back at the office, with Rick's secretary- "I'd love to Jerry, but I'm not authorized. Our payroll service takes care of all the billing. If I cut you a check, it would technically be an advance. And Rick doesn't, well, it's against his policy. I'm sorry, but you understand, don't you? You know how these things go."

"There's nothing you can do?"

Janice looked over his shoulder, the door opened- "It would technically be an advance, and I'm not authorized. I'm sorry."

"Alright."

"Don't worry. It will be mailed out on the fifteenth. I'll make sure of it. Hang tight until then."

"Thanks, Janice. Take care."

"You too, Jerry."

That was it.

It hadn't worked.

I knew it, he thought to himself.

Kiko would have smiled, told him a joke, bought him a drink- Kiko was the kind of guy who could appreciate the comedy embedded in every serious tragedy.

He thought about Kiko, alone in a crowded elevator.

Back on the street, the rain had stopped. Maybe they would squeeze nine innings in after all, he thought to himself. The tarp. The grounds crew. The beer vendors.

Jerry's feet began moving again. He didn't walk past Cal's or 711 or Billy Goat. He didn't need any more of Milwaukee Avenue. He headed east, towards the lakefront. He walked around the Art Institute, the fountain, and then up through Grant Park. He sat on a bench and closed his eyes. It might have been an optical illusion, it might have been a faint optimism welling inside him, but he could swear the sky was bluing up. The gray seemed to be relinquishing its hold on the sky- that unending, dismal blanket. Next, his feet took him north, on Dearborn, up to Lincoln Park. It was summer and there would be plenty of light left in the day. He reached the lagoon, floated slowly around the park, and decided to cross through the zoo. By the time his tour had finished, the clouds had broken up.

Hardly a thought entered his mind as he gazed up at the blue sky. He didn't think about his feet, the blisters on his heel and instep.

He didn't think about good luck or shit luck.

He stopped thinking about Kiko, even.

Suddenly he found himself westbound, down North Avenue. It seemed as good a direction as any. Traffic, pedestrians, cyclists, baseball caps and suit jackets. There were children, old men.

He looked at them.

He admired their features.

On the sidewalk, laughing, full of vitality- a cluster of guys, different ages, smoking cigarettes. They seemed to all be familiar. It was nearly happy hour, and Jerry's impulses for once got the best of him. He couldn't help himself. He stopped at the man closest to him, at the edge of the gang, "I hate to ask, but can you spare a cigarette?"

The guy smiled and handed his pack over to Jerry. A quick glance, "Been a rough one, huh?"

Jerry took a cigarette from out of the pack, put it to his lips, and without asking for it the guy had pulled out a lighter and put the flame in front of Jerry. All he had to do was inhale.

Jerry handed the pack back to the stranger. "What gave it away?" The stranger exhaled a cloud of smoke. "I know a rough one better than most, trust me. It wasn't anything on the surface. It's subtle. Real subtle. I'm Nick."

The stranger extended his hand. Jerry extended his, "Jerry."

Nick looked directly into Jerry's eyes and kept the smile on his face. "Where you from, Jerry?"

"Northwest side. Irving and Petersen is where I grew up. I'm on Belmont now, a small place, apartment. It's not much, but it's home. For now at least. End of the month, who knows."

"Rent past due?"

Jerry didn't hesitate and nodded.

Nick was older than Jerry, but Jerry couldn't make out his age. He could have been thirty-five, forty, even fifty. There was a glow about the stranger, his skin, his teeth. He was clean. He stood out from everything else on the street.

Jerry glanced over the man's shoulder. The other guys who had been with him had disappeared back into an unmarked door. The windows were tinted. There was some kind of blue triangle pasted on the front panel- "What is this place? A bar?"

Nick responded, "You looking for one?"

Jerry chuckled. "Yeah. One where the drinks are free and they don't give you a hangover the next morning."

"I know a bar like that. But the only problem is, once you get there, they never let you leave."

Jerry didn't quite make out the reference. "How's that?"

"That's the great big happy hour in the sky, Jerry. All the angels swilling gin and tonics, talking about the good old days. Yep. That will be the next barroom I enter. God willing."

"So it's not a bar?" Nodding in the direction of the door.

"Nope. Quite the opposite."

Jerry paused.

Nick decided on explaining himself. "It's a club. It's called the Mustard Seed. It's a meeting house, twelve-step meetings. They host meetings all day, different kinds of meetings, for folks to come drop in on."

"The Mustard Seed?"

Nick cleared his throat, "If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain 'move from here to there' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you."

"Religious?"

The stranger dropped his cigarette onto the asphalt and dug his shoe onto the butt. "Not especially. Not at all, actually. But there's a quote printed up in the hallway. I've walked past it a couple thousand times, seems to have worn off on me."

"You're an alcoholic?"

Nick smiled, "I am. Been clean for sixteen years. I started coming here in the beginning, when I first needed help, and I've stuck around ever since."

Jerry took a long pull off his cigarette. "Sixteen years?"

"One day at a time. Each day it's a simple choice. Drink or don't drink. And each day I stay out of my own way just enough to get the right answer."

Honest, without any reservation, Jerry admitted, "I haven't gone a day without a drink for five years probably." He smiled the smile of a man confronted by an obvious truth and looked up at the stranger, his blue eyes- "But you know what, I don't have a dollar to my name or a bartender who will serve me off the cuff, so today I might just break my record."

"Ain't that something," Nick replied.

"Ain't that something," Jerry agreed.

"You want to come in?"

"What's that?"

"To a meeting. There's a meeting, right now. You can see for yourself. Afterwards we can grab a bite if you like, and I'll give you a lift back home."

Jerry couldn't believe what he was hearing. Taken aback, a skeptical look swept across his face, "You don't even know me."

"Sure I do. I was you. I was exactly like you. I lost apartments. I lost money. I bet you lost a job, too. Maybe even lost somebody you cared about, that you'll never get back. Lost your confidence. Lost your fire. That's what this disease does- it takes. It takes and takes and takes some more until eventually it takes you. Booze took a lot from me. I lost and lost and lost some more. Until I realized, all along, I'd been the one giving it away."

Jerry squinted at Nick. "How much does it cost? What's the angle?"

"No cost, no angle. Nowhere to sign up. No names. No phone numbers. Don't even have to talk to anyone unless you want to. All you need to bring is an open mind."

"An open mind?"

"That's it."

Jerry hesitated. There was only a drag or two left on the cigarette. He stared apprehensively at the burning tobacco between his fingers.

Nick sighed, "What more have you got to lose?"

Jerry flicked the butt past the curb, into a drain grate. The sun glared from the west. There was hardly any evidence left of the rain from the morning.

A THREE HUNDRED HOUR LONG TUESDAY AFTERNOON IN THE SIXTEENTH WEEK OF JULY, A DAY MOSTLY FULL OF NIGHT

Admiring herself in the rearview mirror, a white convertible downshifted and idle at a red light- fulsome lips covered in a dark, purple shade of gloss; bleached blonde hair, curly, over her shoulders, the root tips a stark contrast of jet black; a wad of bubblegum in the back corner of her mouth; her petite nose, a diamond stud in her right nostril.

She kissed at her reflection and sped onward as the light changed. Her pants were white cotton, loose at the bottom but tight around her waist and hips. She wore a white tank top, simple but elegant, cut low to reveal a gulch of cleavage on her buxom chest- two firm, silicon breasts, slightly out of proportion with the rest of her figure, pressed together by a lace bra.

She was twenty-two years old.

A model.

Making six figures every year- enough to easily satisfy all her needs, and most of her caprices.

Living alone in a luxury apartment complex.

Sleeping with men who bought her presents, like the car she was driving.

She was alive.

She pushed ahead, and felt like nothing could stand in her way.

The RPMs shot up, and she shifted gears.

The road was open.

The sun was at her back, in the east.

The car drove on, the road open, the sunshine, her reflection- her thoughts orbited around sundry plans for the weekend, the evening,

details of her business and personal life. Packages that might be at the main office. Messages that might be in her inbox. Figures that might be in her bank account. Requests from fans. Posts to make. Marketing decisions.

She waited for the top to crawl back over her car in the garage, taking a moment to check herself in the rearview. Then she entered the building on her clicking heels, scanned her key fob and took the elevator up to the seventh floor.

She would hit the gym in an hour.

Shower, paint her nails, dinner with friends.

Maybe a night out, the clubs, dancing- maybe not.

She had a flight on Friday- Miami.

She would see how she felt.

It was if her life had always been this way. There was no sense of distant past, or distant future. It was if this sort of day had repeated itself, forever, and would continue to repeat for her. The horizon of time was entirely clouded. She was happy. She was beautiful. She had money. Life was easy.

Inside her apartment, her purse on a white leather couch, she walked into her bedroom. Her phone was in front of her face as she plucked a black spandex outfit from one of the drawers.

A new message- an email.

From: Walter Crosby

She clicked the message open.

Uncle Walter? What could he want? How did he even get my contact information? I haven't seen him in years, since Grandma Irene's funeral- I must have been eleven, twelve maybe?

Friends and family,

It has been a difficult couple of weeks for us. As you probably know, Eileen was hospitalized for pneumonia, and unfortunately the infection continued to spread and worsened. She was intubated, and put under a medically induced coma. As it became clear she was not going to make it, Jeanne and I decided that we wanted to wake her back up, from the coma, so she could receive Last Rites. So we could say Good Bye to her. Jeanne's sister, Marie, took this video in the hospital. I wanted to share it with all of you. We are stunned, we are saddened, we are lost. But we have our faith. And we have Eileen's eyes, full of peace, as she left us and went to join God in heaven.

Once we finalize arrangements for Eileen's wake and funeral, we will inform all of you. Thank you for the outpouring of love and

support, it has been more than we could have ever expected. And we need every bit of it. Be grateful, every day is a blessing. Hug your children. Enjoy the sunshine. Show each other love.

-Walt

Oh my God, she thought to herself. Eileen was my age. The same grade. She's dead? Oh my God.

The young woman clicked on the video.

A window with the shades drawn up. An alarm beeping- a nurse, adjusting one of the monitors next to the bed, blocking the view from the camera, then clearing the scene. In the center of the frame, a young girl lying prone on a hospital bed, at a slight incline. An apparatus shoved into her mouth. Tubes from different directions. A pulse oximeter. An IV pump. Uncle Walt and Aunt Jeanne with their heads bowed down, on one side of the bed, facing the camera- their eyes closed, wearing surgical masks. At the foot of the bed is a priest. He too wears a surgical mask, but is dressed in a green and white cassock. He clutches a small book in one of his hands. The other hand is clasped onto Eileen's ankle. Eileen appears worn out- her face is gaunt, pale. Her hair is parted down the middle, a mousey brown, matted with sweat, grease. But her eyes are shining. She is gazing upwards at the priest as if in a trance. A pair of light blue irises, almost an agate quartz, cracks of white and gray and green- they glow, wide open. Walt is holding Jeanne's right hand. Jeanne's other hand is joined onto Eileen, her shoulder. The priest makes the sign of the cross. His voice is dulcet, calm. "Heavenly Father, I come to bring you a sacrament of serenity and peace, of forgiveness and healing, to your daughter Eileen... through this healing... may the Lord free you from sin... may the power of divine grace... grant you the vision of glory... may the Lord Jesus Christ absolve you of all your sins... may the merits of the Blessed Mary... an increase of sanctifying life in your soul... full remission of all temporal punishment... I bless you, dear daughter... Our father, who art in heaven..." Jeanne's and Walt's voices join in faintly with the priest. The prayer ends. The priest walks to the opposite side of the bed from Walt and Jeanne. He leans towards Eileen. Her eyes haven't shut, not a blink. Not a twitch. "You are perfectly well now Eileen, you haven't a thing to worry about. You are free to go, and to go in peace. The glory of God awaits you, my dear. And when you get there, say a prayer for us, Eileen, say a prayer for your mother and father." Jeanne and

Walt break out into tears, simultaneously, sobbing. The priest turns to leave. The image is frozen.

Maggie drooped down to the floor of her bedroom.

She pulled her knees up into her chest, her arms crossed.

She closed her eyes.

Margaret Nancy McKiernan hadn't spoken with her mother or father for several years. They disapproved of her lifestyle. They disapproved of her friends, her clothes. She was more than happy to let them go. The youngest of three. Her brothers were blue collar workers, union- just like her father. They toiled in back breaking work, drinking down what little they made. Their families were poor. Their homes were cheap, messy. She wanted nothing to do with the Pennsylvania town she grew up in. She had left, and never came back.

She was Maggie Price now.

She had built herself into something.

Into a person who was confident, who dressed sexy, who kept her body in peak physical condition, who knew what to say at parties, who knew how to make money, buy nice things, take nice trips, eat at nice restaurants. She was somebody people wanted to have around- an elegant, sophisticated adornment at parties, in social circles. And she was happy to adorn those parties and circles.

She had become something totally impossible, given her personal history, her family, her upbringing- an awkward adolescent, a poor girl from a poor town, a backwards mother, a simple father.

But for a moment, everything had become undone.

Unwound.

For a moment, her skin was just skin. Her bones were just bones. Her eyelashes, her fingernails, her hair- cells that would die, and turn to dust. She would decay, like everyone else. Like her cousin Eileen. She would find herself breathing in her last breath, then go. Goodbye forever. And none of the cars or earrings or cocktail dresses would go with her. None of it would matter.

She wouldn't be Maggie Price.

She wouldn't even be Margaret Nancy.

She would be nothing- disconnected from everything, and everyone, and whatever might remain would enter a deep, impenetrable darkness, alone, and forever.

A wave of nausea rushed through her stomach.

It condensed into a pit, an ache, at the center of her chest.

Dread.

Confusion.
Sharp.
Everything, all of this...
She opened her eyes.
She played the video, again and again.
The sun fell below a skyscraper horizon and her room turned dark.
The blue light of the phone, shining on her face- again, and again,
and again.
All Margaret could think about as she replayed the video was that
she hoped there was a heaven, and that Eileen had made it there
somehow.
And someday, when her time came, she would make it too.

REGRET

I belong to yesterday.
I am feeble, dying.
I'll likely be through in a few days, a week or two at most.
When the nurse comes in, after dinner, to brush my teeth, I can't
help but chuckle. What's the use? I'm a city conquered by an enemy
army- I've been infiltrated, occupied. Who cares if you cut your
grass? Who cares if the milk is delivered? There are soldiers,
with guns, hungry for your wives and daughters.
Life changes when you see it through the lens of death.
For most of our lives, it's the other way around. We look at death
through the lens of our life. It's something out there, remote. We
push it away whenever it comes near us. We do our best to avoid
it. We protect ourselves from it. Because when you start to look
at your life through the lens of death...
Anyways, I let the nurse brush my teeth and try to make it easy on
her.
The morphine helps.
Most things...
Unfortunately, there is one thing that cannot be helped. That is
the object of my thoughts, an obsession, which entered my mind the
first night I checked in here. I am prisoner to a single act, one
which occurred a long time ago and was carried out by a version of
myself I have long since lost contact with. It must have been
forty-seven years ago, this past spring. I was a different person
then. I was somebody who could have never conceived of where I
would end up- immobilized, sick, anxious, broken. I can look back
on that younger man, but he could have never looked forward.

It was an act of pure treachery.
I was a disgusting creature, for a moment- the most horrible creature that ever rose to wake with the sun.
I suppose it's like how professional card players describe it- they only remember their bad beats. They only remember the losses, the devastating knife of fate jerked into their side.
My entire lifetime, sixty some odd years- it's as if this one act were the only thing I ever did.
By all appearances I was a good man.
I lived a good life.
I worked hard, I loved one woman, we had a family, I helped raise the children, I never drank or smoked or gambled or messed around- I provided all I could to her, and the kids.
Life is a series of moments. Moments that blend in with all the others, that disappear more or less, as if they never happened. But there are a few moments that you hold on to, that distinguish themselves, for whatever reason, and become markers for all the others.
This moment is one of those markers.
In fact, it stands out and suffocates all the others.
I tried to forget. I tried to forgive myself. I even tried to convince myself it never happened.
This is a moment covered in claw marks. Unfortunately, I've never been able to let it go, to allow it to blend in with the rest.
I think about him often.
I wished many times for an opportunity to make it right. I've even said prayers on it.
I never hurt another person like that, so directly, so...
I can't see his face.
I don't remember how tall he was, or what color his eyes were.
I don't remember what he said exactly.
There are plenty of missing details. My imagination doesn't even bother to color them in. That's because the essentials, the feeling of my fist against his jaw, the sound it made, his limp body on the sidewalk...
I hated fighting my entire life. I never picked a fight. I never joined in a fight. I never raised my fist at another person, except this once.
And I hate myself for it.
Forty-seven years ago...

I'm haunted by that drunken night, out with the boys, bar after bar- being a tough guy, taking the first shot. I've worried over it, dreaded how it might come back around. But it wasn't about me- no, if that punch found me, in whatever way it saw fit, that would settle the score. I could accept that. I'd be happy to take one across the face, right now, if I could. No. I've worried that punch would find its way back to one of my boys, one night when they never had a chance to see it coming. It'll snap their neck. It'll paralyze them. It'll drown them in blood. It'll orphan one of their children. It'll widow one of their wives. That punch is out there, waiting.

Goddamn me.

I was a stupid, cowardly boy.

To spare that moment, that vile act- it would have been better to have never been born. I know that's not the truth, but that's how it makes me feel.

I've never told anyone else about it.

I've locked it inside of me all these years.

I've made it this far, so I figure I might as well go all the way.

SCROLL

Worse than anything, it was how their mornings together had changed.

When they were dating, engaged, first married- they would awaken, turn to face each other, and passionately kiss. He would ask her about her dreams. She would wrap her legs around him. They would laugh, happy to keep the rest of the world waiting behind their bedroom door.

Then a daughter came, a newborn with her flailing limbs on the changing table- then another pregnancy, toddler nightmares, potty training, more and more sleepless nights- a new job, a promotion- a workout regimen- activities and sports practices, errands and grocery lists and dry cleaning.

Everything had changed, and the mornings- the mornings hurt him the most.

Her eyes drawn to pinpricks, reflecting a blue light, locked into her cell phone screen. Silence. A concentrated glare across her brow. Occasionally she would grimace, like a growl- confined in her own world. Isolated. She didn't acknowledge him when he turned over, looking at her.

Once it started happening...

If he would have had the words, he would have described her as "utterly insular." But the words never came. Instead of trying to find them, he would retreat into his own world, his own cell phone screen.

Once it started happening...

Out of bed, the bathroom, a shower, hungry children to feed, an appointment.

Their tender moments became fewer, further between. Their promises of love, their devotion- worse than unrequited love, a conditional love emerged between them.

It was expectations.

Externals.

The rain, the gray skies- today was the kind of morning which felt like a late afternoon. It was as if the day itself, only having started up a few hours, already wanted to be over and done with. In the car on the drive over, after they had dropped Kasey off at grandma's house, he made a comment, "If it cools down a few degrees, maybe it will all change to snow."

She didn't budge to reply.

It seemed to him that even at the level of a murmur, his voice engulfed her, strident and abusive- even at the level of whisper, she cringed.

So much had changed...

At first he had liked it, the way she laughed. The way she danced after a few drinks. The shape of her blouse as it rested against her chest, her hips. He had liked it how she kissed him back, how she wasn't afraid of his passions, his force.

But that was years ago.

A lifetime ago- a life that had been lived and was now deceased. Dead and gone and forgotten, with no connection- like the morning of his daughter's birth had never happened, the beach house weekends those summers at the shore, dinners bathed in glowing candlelight, holiday laughter, excitement about their future- the joy of their past had escaped beyond the horizon of their awareness. It flew away faster than they could ever manage, and no matter what they did, they would never catch up to it.

This was their last chance.

Today.

It had been his idea.

Their health insurance covered it.

When they walked out of the office complex, out from the windowless conference room and down the fluorescent hallway and into the concrete stairwell, the alleyway door opening and locked shut behind them- it was snowing.

They sat down together and buckled up their seatbelts.

The counselor spent most of the session complaining about the City Council, the wave of immigrants, the road improvements and a proposal for a new high school cafeteria.

She hadn't said much.

Neither had he.

He put the keys in the ignition. Before he turned the engine over, "What did you think?"

"Of what?"

He didn't press the conversation any further.

This would be their only visit to this building, this parking lot. Stupid.

It was pointless.

What they once had, even though it had been theirs and no one else's, was gone. It belonged to the realm of the dead, an amorphous mist that surrounded them but could never be touched- looming, but ultimately irrelevant.

He signaled a left-hand turn and hit the accelerator.

To dissect his decisions, her words, their conversations and thoughts, fights and arguments and bitter silences- what was the difference?

Talking wasn't going to save them.

They reached the top of a hill, past the intersection with Old Post Drive. His vision wandered out along the road, down a straight line cut into the forest of pine and oaks. Most of the branches were denuded, some wore crowns green dusted by the snow.

A swirl.

He alternated his depth of focus, from near to far- a shoal of flakes descending in front of the car, a blur of white pasted against the landscape below. It felt comforting to shift back and forth, near and far.

"It's snowing."

She didn't move her eyes from her phone. "Mmhmm."

The snow would make everything clean- the plastic bottles and food wrappers littering the shoulders of the road, the piles of dead leaves, the empty cigarette packs- all of it would be covered up. Shrouded in purity.

Focusing on the individual flakes splashing against the windshield, focusing on the white haze in the distance.

He turned the wipers off.

He watched the crystals melt, then join together and stream towards the bottom corners of the glass windshield.

She noticed the obstructed view and jostled out, "What are you doing? Put the wipers on."

He had forgotten she was there.

The wipers clicked on.

There weren't any other cars nearby.

He asked again, "What did you think of it?"

She put her phone in her purse. "I think it will end up being a waste of time, and money."

He exhaled. "So what do we do?"

Flustered, she replied, "I don't know what you expect me to say."

"I don't expect anything. I just wish..."

She pulled her phone out of her purse. "Wish? Wish what? You hadn't slept with your partner's slut of a wife? That would be a good thing to wish for, wouldn't it? Let me know how that goes."

He clicked the windshield wipers off.

The snow had changed back to rain.

The road curved down off of the hillside, wound past a few acres of forest, and then transformed into a landbridge across a small lake. Steam hovered over the water, especially in the parts of the lake that had frozen.

There wasn't another car in sight.

The mist hung across the road.

The wipers clicked off.

The woman next to him, this wasn't the woman he loved. It wasn't the woman he had fallen in love with. She wasn't his friend. She wasn't his supporter. She was an angry, hurt, self-centered person, which didn't make her any different than most anyone else.

The fog thickened, and then the road disappeared off the lakes, back into another shroud of forest. They were past the lake.

"I'll start packing when we get home. You can go over to your mother's. When you get back I'll be gone."

"What are we going to tell Clara?"

"The truth."

"She's eleven."

"She's going to find out one way or another. Tell her whatever you want. We can split drop off and pick up. You guys can have the

house, the car. I'll transfer the savings to you. It will make it easier when the lawyers get involved, we might as well not waste any more time or money than we have to."

She didn't respond.

ALIGHT

It was all the lies.

It was everything I had believed in.

A broken phone charger plugged into my desk.

Vexed.

I didn't accomplish much that afternoon.

A tree, out in the parking lot through the atrium window- a gray, desolate island alone and surrounded by concrete, the boughs stripped bare, and a flock of sparrows- dusk. The birds were silent on the branches. A damning silence.

I nodded at the Security Guard. "Have a great weekend."

"You too."

This is all it had ever been.

This is all it would ever be.

Car radio dials, searching for a cure.

Electricity wires humming- poles dotted up the street, cockeyed and flimsy.

Driving.

A pond off the side of the road- ducks who, hungry for dinner, with heads buried underneath the filmy surface, pointed their tails upwards.

Dinner.

We must have talked about something...

A shower.

Television.

I set my hand on her belly. Firm, smooth- the baby inside kicked, near my palm.

"Did you feel that?"

I nodded.

I felt it.

But I lied.

Because I didn't feel anything.

I didn't feel excited or amazed, I didn't feel hopeful, blessed, overwhelmed.

I felt skin.

I felt an itch on my ankle.

What was wrong with me?

"Did you feel that?"

I blinked. I forgot I had left my hand on her. "Yeah. It's great." Despite our physical connection, at that moment- I felt disarmed by a vast space between us. A gulf. A gulch. She was out there somewhere, far away, on the other side. And this child- even further.

A stack of boxes, next to our clothes dresser- newborn diapers, wipes.

I wanted to be alone, so desperately.

But in the same moment, I wanted the space to disappear between us, between all three of us.

There was something terribly wrong with me.

There had to be...

The thought crossed my mind- this poor child.

We had decided to wait, until we checked in at the hospital, until the birth plan was reviewed by a Maternity Ward nurse, until the hours of torment and waves of debilitating contractions, until her cervix had dilated ten centimeters, until complete effacement, until the head appeared, until my wife pushed out the rest of the baby's body- then we would find out if it was a boy or girl.

After all that, then we would finally know.

Countless times, countless people- 'Is it a boy or a girl?'

We wouldn't know until the end.

Until the beginning.

This poor, innocent...

Me, for a father.

Me.

What a swirling vortex of humanity...

"It's great."

I moved my hand back into a desultory pocket, embarrassed.

A thin hand. A nothing hand.

I was relieved to bring it back into my possession.

She was lying on her side.

The room was dark.

Her eyelids were half-shut.

My wife sighed, and pulled the comforter over her stomach, level with her chin.

"Are you tired?"

I lied. "Yes. Are you?"

"I am, but I'm restless. My sleep is so interrupted. It's hard to get comfortable, with everything, with how big I am."

"I know. I'm sorry. It will be soon, though. Only a couple of weeks. Maybe less. You're doing a great job."

The words might as well have been played off a recording device, a phone message.

Stimulus and response.

Stultified.

She sighed again.

Where was she?

Where was I?

How had we become so displaced?

Maybe the hospital, the baby- maybe it would help change things. Being there, with her, holding her leg for support while she pushed, helping the nurse position a fetal heart rate monitor, supplications like a cold glass of water to her lips- I wanted to be hopeful.

I wanted to believe we could recover the ground lost between us.

That I could recover... something.

I told myself to be hopeful. Hold out hope.

But I didn't feel anything.

Blank.

Suspended, amidst this infinite horizon, in every direction.

My eyes were closed.

Black.

Blank.

Are you alright?

They wanted to know if the baby was a boy or girl. They wanted to know if we had picked out names. They wanted to know if we had bought enough diapers. They wanted to know how my wife was doing. It had been a relief, to not have to face that question.

I didn't have to lie.

I didn't have to tell the truth.

"As long as the baby is healthy, and Kate is healthy, I don't care if it's a boy or girl."

Stimulus and response.

Concrete.

Those sparrows...

I don't know why, but I smiled.

I could hear her snoring, slightly. Drifting away.

I kept my eyes shut.

Smiling.

TIPPET

Jake figured the client would have no idea what a chukar was. The young man in the front seat, with one hand on the wheel and the other on a coffee mug, waited for a question, a comment, something dumb like 'Is that a kind of pheasant or something?'

But there was nothing.

Jake talked to Randy a little more about his hunting trip in Idaho. The client didn't say a word.

Jake had been urinating next to the woodshed when the client drove up along the dirt road, up to Randy's main lodge, before the pond and the split trails and the three smaller cabin bunkhouses. A black Mercedes. The headlights blaring, garish. Jake first noticed his thin wrists as the middle-aged, nondescript character stepped out of the car.

By the looks of the man, a typical client.

Randy had told him the man had booked it last minute. He was in town from New York or Boston or somewhere far off on the opposite end of the country. No friends. No family. A solo, single day trip. From first glance, Jake's suspicions were confirmed.

An opportunist.

A decadent imperialist.

That's what his brother, Denny, would call them, before the accident. "I know you love to fish, but how do you stand the company? All that forced conversation with a bunch of capitalist pigs?"

Capitalist pigs.

Vultures for hire.

Bourgeoisie sheep.

Denny had read a lot of Marx. He had spent a lot of time in coffee houses in Portland. He had lived on a commune. Eaten plenty of acid.

Before the accident.

Denny and Jake used to fish every morning together, all through their grammar school years. They'd wake up early to fish the dawn. They'd stay out late to fish the dusk. They had simple casting rigs. Spinners. Live bait. Then they bought their first fly rods. But Jake was always a year behind Denny. A few inches shorter. A few pounds lighter. A few more books to read. A few more girls to make. A few more fish to unhook. A few more.

Until he caught up to Denny, for good.
Randy wanted to clean his shotgun, with all this talk of grouse hunting. "Well if you get invited again this fall, you know who to take along. I'd love to get a few of my dogs out there."
"Will do." Jake answered with a serious voice, a voice to match his soft, young facial features, desperate to be more serious.
Randy coughed. "I bet it's a long day flushing them uphill. Might be too much of a young man's game."
"We have the 4x4s. You'd be alright. It wasn't too rough."
Jake glanced in the mirror.
The client wore an absentminded look on his loose brow and cheeks, his black eyes pointed out the window.
Open grazing land, hay bails, the valley- steers, bulls, cows, mountains drifting- foggy dreams along the horizon.
A sky choking with haze. Recent droughts had caused the air to be dusty. Plus, there was all the smoke from the wildfires. These factors multiplied together and created a natural filter, so the client was able to point his eyes directly at the ball of the sun.
Jake glanced at the client and then back to the road in front of him. He hated the look on the client's face.
He hated the new fishing vest the client was wearing.
He hated the client's bucket brim hat.
Jake cleared his throat, "You have your phone handy sir?"
The client, barely audible, "I do."
"Get it pointed to the east there. Pack of black eagles. Native to this region. Willamette valley. They're endangered. Won't be many around for much longer."
Randy spit a dollop of chew into a styrofoam coffee cup and had to bite into his inner lip with his teeth to keep from letting a chuckle escape.
The client pointed his phone out the window.
"Here, I'll get you set up here. Don't want to miss these."
The window in the back seat crept down.
A murder of crows cutting above one of the pastures.
The client didn't ask any questions. A few pictures were snapped. He didn't act excited or nervous. He was listless, disinterested. The man put his phone away.
Jake continued, his voice concerned, his tone contrived- "You said you've never fly fished before?"
"No. I haven't. But the woman who booked my reservation said that wouldn't be a problem."

The young man itched at the stubble of his chin.

The older man, in the passenger seat of the dusty truck, replied, "That was Agnes, my wife. And she's right. It's no sweat. Jake here can walk you through the basics, as they say, and he'll help get the casts out to the honey holes whenever it's needed. Ain't that right Jake?"

Jake could tell Randy wanted to quit the ribbing. The customer was always right.

Even if he was a brainwashed suit..

Jake adjusted the sunglasses from off the brim of his cap and placed them over his eyes, responding with a perfunctory, "That's right."

The client didn't say a word- his eyes, empty, pointed out the window at the ball of the sun.

It was early still.

An hour or so since dawn had broke.

They had loitered around Randy's porch, drinking coffee, sorting out the gear. Agnes had made a pair of packed lunches. "Turkey alright?"

The client had given her a thumbs up.

Isn't much for talking, Jake thought to himself.

From the big city, no kids, no buddies- alone. The client wore a wedding band, but never mentioned his wife. Jake didn't notice or make anything of it, but Randy waited and waited for some mention of her. Guys always complain about their old lady, always talk about how nice it is to get away from the demands of home, come out to the country and fish. But the client never mentioned any of that.

In another half an hour, the truck was parked at the boat launch. Randy tipped his cap to the men as they found their places in the untied skiff. "We'll see you all back at the ranch this afternoon. Rip some lip."

Jake pointed to where he wanted the client to sit. "We'll get up the river a bit, to a spot that's wide. Easy to do some practicing. I'll have to walk you through the gear, the technique, and then we can start hitting some holes. Gray House is a good one this time of morning. Then we can go downriver to Indian Run, and then Power Line."

The client pinched his lips together and nodded.

Randy drove away in the pickup truck.

No questions.

No concerns.

Not much for talking...

The river ran smooth, tender almost. There were no other boats.

Sundays were quiet usually. Most guides didn't work on Sundays.

The client must have paid Randy extra.

Jake would only see a little of it.

He was still working his way up.

Randy yanked the engine cord and the motor kicked over. He trolled slowly, around different eddies, patches of rocks.

The client didn't say anything as the boat moved upstream.

"Did you get any sunscreen?"

"No."

"Do you want some?"

"I'll be alright."

A know-it-all from New York. His nose and cheeks would be bright red by the end of the day.

Jake set down the anchor.

He set the line on one rod, after clicking in the reel, and then did the same with another. Then he tied on the leader, and a nymph fly.

He handed one of the rigs to the client.

Jake proceeded through a standard tutorial. Ten o'clock to two o'clock. Load the line. Left hand stripping. Send and mend.

The client was green. After ten or fifteen minutes, he could build up a fifteen- or twenty-foot cast, but anything further was too much. The line would tangle up behind him. He couldn't quite change the rhythm between the backcast and the frontcast. It was typical for a beginner.

Jake explained they would fish two lines, and that Jake would land flies in the tougher spots to help improve their chances generating hits. The client could then fish the lines and do the legwork on any fish that took a hook.

Jake began to think about rainbow trout.

He began to think about porkers.

The mottled backs.

The mucous on their flanks and fins.

The fight.

Jake handed both rods to the client and pointed the boat downstream to Gray House. It was an excellent spot. There was a pool behind several large boulders that contained a downed tree. On the opposite side there was fast riffle water flushing past. The trout

would hang out in the structure of the deep, calm water and wait for the current to bring them lunch. They'd dart out, snatch it, then dart back for cover. If you kept your line out of the tree limbs, you were almost certain to entice a bite.

The outboard motor cut- a silence of anticipation, the gurgles of ripple water, its calming effect.

Jake sent out the first cast and handed the rod to the client.

"So when you fish it, let it swing for a count of twenty-one before you start to strip."

"Why twenty-one?"

"Seems to be a lucky number for me in this hole."

Jake watched the client's rod tip. There was a good amount of tension on the line. The client had remembered to mend it.

Their day had begun.

"If you feel a hit, you don't need to set the line, like you would if you were spinning or bobbing. Just get the line pointed upwards, but you don't have to jerk it. Just get it up and create tension. And when the fish runs, you let him. We'll work through it, but you want to make sure you let him run when he wants to. It'll be a good fight. You'll be surprised."

The client was standing in the boat next to Jake. He didn't say a word. He had the rod pointed to the water and was slowly following the swinging line with the current.

They fished Gray House for twenty minutes.

There was nothing biting.

"Let's head over to Indian Run."

"Why do you call it Indian Run?"

The sun was beating down through the haze, too bright now for any direct apprehension.

Jake sighed. There were two answers he could provide. He considered his options as he inserted a fresh wad of tobacco into his front lip. "Well, one of the other guides, he was out here fishing one afternoon, maybe five or six years ago, and all of a sudden, a big guy wearing no clothes, carrying an AR-15, came up out of nowhere, and dove into the river, swam over to the other bank, and kept running."

"And the guy was an Indian?"

Jake chuckled, "That's affirmative." He pulled the anchor up out from the riverbed and set it into the boat.

A kingfisher swooped in overhead and found a small oak maybe twenty feet off the shore to alight upon. The bird was a good size and had a prominent blue hood.

The client pointed at the tree. "A kingfisher."

Jake gulped. "Yeah, that's right. Nice crest on that one." The tobacco juice burned in his throat.

"Wonder if we'll see any more of those endangered black hawks?"

Jake's face went bright red.

The client smiled at him. "Don't sweat it. I thought it was funny."

Jake had his hand on the pull cord but didn't budge on it. "It's just a little fun the guides have. I didn't mean anything by it."

The client was relaxed. "Don't sweat it."

Jake started the engine.

They trolled slowly down the river. The haze had begun to clear out in the east, and the sky was a bursting, radiant blue. Climbing, puffy clouds littered across the dome above. A nice breeze, a splash of water on your face- it was shaping up to be a perfect day on the water.

Jake killed the engine upriver from the next hole and began to lower the anchor.

"Who's Denny?"

Jake turned to the client, seated on the stern bench. The New Yorker motioned to a cooler, with the letters DENNY in permanent black marker.

A look on Jake's face made itself impossible to remove. He felt pried into. He felt exposed. The gall of some big shot city slicker who knew the difference between a crow and a make-believe black hawk...

"My brother."

"Does he guide fishing trips too?"

"No. He's... he was a student. He was up in Eugene, studying, when he passed."

Jake went silent. The client looked up, and they caught each other's eyes.

"What was he like?"

Jake felt a wave of pain in his chest. He turned his head away, downstream on the river. "He was a good guy."

"How long ago was it?"

"Almost a year."

"That's a shitty hand. A real shitty hand."

Jake, with his back to the client. "Shit happens, right?"

There was a breath shared between them, a pause of inhalation- a deep breath that was one part fir needle and another part alpine lake, pastureland and swamp, mountain and river. It had everything the country could give them. They shared it, and then the client spoke, "I lost my wife and son last year. A drunk driver. They were on their way back from daycare. I was at work. Guy blew a red light, hit them driver's side going seventy. My son's car seat was ejected out the opposite window. Dead instantly. Closed casket funeral. His casket, my boy's, it was so small. So small. Now they're buried next to each other. My wife's family, her hometown, upstate- people told me all sorts of things. They told me to take a vacation. To get my mind off things. But you know what nobody said, that I could've done well to hear? Shit happens. Shit happens, Jake. It sure does. And it hurts. It hurts like hell. And that's all there is to say."

Jake turned back upriver and looked at the client.

He was about to say something, but a shadow that flashed out in the corner of his vision distracted him.

There was a stand of birch trees along the edge of the bank closest to them.

The kingfisher had returned.

EVICTED

4:53 AM

A headache for three days. Damp, a subtle pressure- punctuated by waves of intense heat. Like tidal aggravations, in and out. Out, then back in. Tugged at by some invisible body outside of his person, much larger than him.

Moonbeams leak through openings between slats in the bedroom blinds.

Awake. I must have fallen asleep, he thinks to himself. Then he grimaces, his cheeks pinched up into the corners of his eyes. It had changed, the quality of his headache. Suddenly, everything- he notices it had become, what's the right word? Porous, somehow. As if tracks of his brain matter had been eaten away by an industrial grade acid- runnels and tunnels and tubes carved out inside his skull. A sensation he had never experienced before. Tiny passageways. A brain like a sponge, he thinks. Porous, like a sponge. He chuckles silently to himself while considering the irony of the analogy- full of holes, dead echoes where no synapses could survive.

"What are you two doing to me?" he whispers.
Two weeks. In only a span of two weeks- look at what they've done, he thinks.
Isn't it amazing...
Would he be restored to integrity?
Would he continue to decay?
Empty. Yet, open. Wider. More space for..
He isn't sure how long he had been sleeping before the smile broke out across his face. An hour or two?
Glancing over at the crib- stuttered breathing, a coo.
His heart expands in his chest.
Damien's zip-up outfit: a pattern of pine trees and racoons- pointed crowns- triangles, blue against a green background- three sides- pyramidal structures, resurrection engines on the Western banks of the Nile, a sarcophagus closed shut in a silent room, a room surrounded by walls inscribed with mystic symbols and spells, passwords to navigate awaiting dimensions- pointed heavenly but rooted in a bedrock below the desert sands, literally dug into the Underworld, a network of shafts- virginal, fulsome with air, space, portals- arranged to ensure safe passage across thresholds, corridors brimming with treasures and weapons and food and wives and children, to carry what had been reaped in this life over and into the next- over time, segments collapsed, filled with sand- raided by tomb robbers- desecrated, amulets ripped out from a bandaged thoracic cavity.
Evalynne's zip-up outfit: a pattern of swirling galaxies and comets, pink and purple- our home amongst an eternal and ever expansive cosmos- a journey back to the stars, by way of the earth, from the Underworld to the sky, to the heavens, where the Sun God Ra draws his chariot across dayblue horizons only to rest each evening in the bowels of death- our lifetime, this life, spent, from birth, preparing for the calcification and singularity of death- where the night begins- and once deceased, transformed into monuments against time- statues, stone- mummified, preserved as artifacts, no longer subject to decay and decomposition but fixed, exalted- consecrated, these totems across eons, across generations, engraved with names, with deeds, with sacred incantations to prevent the inevitable recession towards memoryless, empty, black goodbye.
Moonglow gently kisses their foreheads, between the bars of the crib- his twins.

In preparation... so unprepared..
He stands up, out from the sheets, and tiptoes quietly to the bedroom window. He peers outside.
Blinking balls of gas. Swirling nebulae. Out there, suspended in oblivion.
A mother birthing her children, a voyage across worlds- only to be swallowed up in death.
Life requires death.
Death is impossible, but life even more so.
A documentary program on ancient Egypt, when her contractions began... we had to rush to the hospital. I drove as fast as I could. It happened so quickly. I knew I had forgotten something- the clothes, the blanket, the water bottle- "Did you remember to buy film for the camera?"
Outside, in the bright milky light, tiny islands of snow mottled the lawn. Tufts of grass coated in hoarfrost.
We haven't turned the television on in weeks.
Two weeks since the hospital.
In that moment, opening up, a portal- a sacred entryway across space, time- your mother was more a woman than I had ever seen or known her to be. Pushing you two out. One, and then another.
A boy.
Then a girl.
He returns back to their crib. Absorbed, concentrated on their faces, he rubs his temples..
I remember the Labor & Delivery room, snowflakes on the windowpane, melting. A bridge into this world, from where..
Beads of sweat, steam, rolling down the glass shower door- water pelted her suntanned back, her neck, clandestine freckles and moles- one stream falls downward, then another- collecting in fits and starts, rivulets condense and build then escape down to the ceramic floor. Our feet pointed at each other. We made love that May evening, a Saturday, first in the shower, then again on top of our bed. I filled the temple of her being with my potency. Thrust into her. An act of violence. An act of tender submission. She accepted my offering within the altar of her open body.
Filled spaces... shafts, collapsed... Isis, her thunderbolt moans of conception.
She kissed me, rolled off, put her hand on my chest and sighed "I hope that makes us a baby." All of my senses resided within her black hair between my fingers. Tomb of the earth, womb of woman-

a sanctuary, filled with secrets- a simple mantra, a prayer to the heavens that brought us two babies.
Some of us begin as dreams.
We begin as prayers of hope.
But others are unwanted- we begin as a curse.
A curse to my mother and father. A curse which dissolved their union, that sent my old man off from our home to abdicate into a labyrinth of barrooms and nightclubs, divorced, alcoholic and dead from liver cancer at forty-three. A curse that left my mother alone and unprepared, too young, too caught up in her plans for her life, too self-absorbed.
She was the oldest of seven siblings.
She wanted to become a judge on the Supreme Court.
She dropped out of law school after I was born.
I blessed the poor woman as best I could..
Ice packs, stained liner pads and gauze caked in brown blood, sore breasts.
Despite the pain..
Snow continued melting on the windowpanes.
Brought into contact with something beyond myself, greater than myself or my mundane conceptions of reality- the miraculous- watching my son's head, his skin covered in fluid, gray and bluish and then suddenly his shoulders and his torso and his legs, a breath, a scream- the flood of color washing over him, activating him with life- his first breath.
She told me she had been watching my face the whole time.
A look of terror, then sheer excitement.
Panic and dread.
Hope, and joy.
"I don't want to be a cow." I gulped when she declared her position to the nurse- when my wife refused to feed our children. When she forgot about her magic spells.
Gray and blue and purple, then to red and pink... emerging, him and then her.
The eye of Horus, smothered in erythromycin.
Waking up, crying.
I must have fallen back asleep..
First light of dawn. Gray. An overcast sky.
Damian finishes his bottle before Evalynne. A father waits for his daughter to empty her portion, then changes both their diapers,

swaddles them in their thin blankets, exactly as the nurse had taught him, and sets them side by side in their crib.

Binkies in their mouths, gently suckling.

An image lingers: a son's eyes, in his father's arms for the first time- hopelessly searching, adrift, confronted by an abyss, by tempest seas, the chaos of this world, naked before an insane universe- those eyes, they spoke out, a whimper, 'Help me.'

A newborn child's eyes can reorient a man.

Transform him... into a father.

Everything had changed in those moments, with his son's eyes.

Some of us are brought here under the assistance and care of another.

Some of us arrive completely alone.

But in order to remain, to persevere- love is required. For each and every one of us. If we are to grow, and continue on- love is the only way.

In the hospital, witness to a battery of tests, notes scratched onto charts, vitamin injections- they are so dependent on us, their vital signs- the nurse with her thermometer, her measuring tape, the weight scale.

"Did you want to take a picture, Dad?"

The look on his wife's face...

Damien's middle name is Frances, a name that my wife preferred, a name that I didn't mind so much until I remembered Uncle Frank, my mom's brother who ran away from home at sixteen, who hated being stuck in a family with so many children, so much religion, so much discipline and hard work and coupon cutting and leftovers for dinner and hand me down bicycle helmets. Frank joined the army to soon go missing in Vietnam.

Never seen or heard from again.

Maybe our lives pick up where others left off, and we are all a continuation of a journey that began here on earth?

Maybe we don't have to travel so far as the stars?

Wrapped up with their tiny arms pressed against their bodies, a pair of sarcophagi.

The black frame of the window... ice crystals, streams of water... synthetic heat, a steel gust of February wind...

It looks like rain this morning.

He thought to himself, silently, *If she doesn't feed them, who will?*

Dried up.

Mummified.

Statues, lifeless, for all eternity. Until...

Rooting- it's that action you see in their mouths, their tongues moving in and out, pursed lips in perfect circles. Groping about with their gums, helpless. "They're programmed to do it. It's in their biology." A nurse had conferred that information to me. She mentioned it so casually, checking my wife's blood pressure. Programmed into us. Innate. Growing in a dark uterus, in the wet, secluded warmth of her care- how could they have learned anything? How could they have known what to do?

We must arrive from somewhere else...

Formula makes Evalynne gassy. Before I set her down to sleep, I sit her up to burp her on my lap.

One night the pacifier works.

One night it doesn't.

One night they sleep for four hours between feedings.

One night they cluster feed every half hour.

There is no rhythm to our life. There is no time signature- desultory cymbal crashes, bass drum thumps.

Two weeks old.

Seth has killed Osiris, dismembered the king's body, organs and tendons and hunks of flesh sent down the Nile to float aimless amidst the reeds.

My wife is sleeping in the other room tonight. She needs the rest. A night off. I can handle it. I'll take care of them. Tomorrow is Saturday and I don't have to work.

What sorts of dreams have filled up her night?

CAT scans- a new technology, a university building in Cairo, doctoral students and government permits.

"I'm picking up two heartbeats on the monitor."

The look in her eyes...

I exhausted my vacation time for the year. Two weeks, paid. I confirmed the paperwork with my union rep. Two weeks out of the truck, out of the station. No Igloo cooler with my sandwich and potato chips. No thermos of black coffee.

Timecard punches. Radio static. It felt good to be back to work.

Even though I hadn't slept in weeks.

Even though I had been assigned 'night duty.'

The guys congratulated me, but nobody mentioned it again.

Baseball.

Dirty jokes.

Spruce bough shadows on the wall of their living room- the branches and needles jutted off the trunk like arthritic limbs dictating obscure curses against a neutral eggshell paint. Her husband had been dozing on the sofa. He didn't have the energy to cook dinner. Neither did she. She had spent most of the day overwhelmed, weeping.

Their bathroom had been converted into a hospital storage closet, full of adult diapers, absorbent pads, peri bottles and Epsom salts. Blood clots, deep crimson - "Is this the size of a golf ball?" Eyes of a wounded animal- helpless, sensing the proximity of death.

He had seen those eyes before.

Somewhere...

"I'll pick up a pizza."

"No. Please don't go."

A setting sun, level with the tree line, piercing a dying light through the swaying needles and the bitter cold. Chariot horses... One of the babies wakes up.

Then the other.

"Maybe we should call your mother, to come help?" It came out unconscious, unthinking- but he was desperate.

She was crying. Shaking her head. "No, we can't. It's out of the question."

"It's your mom."

"Exactly."

None of the spells were working.

Snakes pressed against her breast...

Car headlights intruded through the glass pane of their front door, streaks across the wall.

She kept crying and crying.

The babies were napping.

I told her to take the night off. I can handle it. I'll feed them. You get some sleep. I know I have work in the morning. It doesn't matter. I can handle it.

He walks out from the bedroom- the house is quiet, except for a noise from the living room. He decides to investigate. Past the kitchen sink where he set down a pair of bottles. His eyes closed. A pile of gifts. There it is again. He reaches down. A package. A battery powered airplane, a present from his younger sister. "It isn't exactly age appropriate," his wife had remarked after the wrapping paper was torn off.

'Fasten your seatbelts, passengers! We're ready for takeoff!'

He chuckles.

How long has it been?

Before you were anybody, you were my special somebody...

Awake- he would be asleep on the living room couch. His wife would be standing over him. Rubbing at his eye sockets, "What time is it?" She would be crying, weary with more tears. The babies in their crib- how much more of this can you take? That's what he would think to himself. On the way to work in the morning, a seagull up in the sky- a damned gull with that evil squawk of death like the noise at the end of life like the reaper cackling like he's made his mark.

In a couple of weeks everything would change.

"Can you feed them tonight?"

Old Kingdom pharaohs...

New Kingdom queens...

When she woke up, the white noise machine was blotted out by the sound of actual raindrops outside, raindrops like rattling train cars, rickety and wooden, splattering on their roof and against the windows, with occasional swells of wind. Apparently, the machine was supposed to help with newborn sleep. Another baby shower gift, purchased by one of her friends. They said thank you, they looked upon their cache with accomplishment, like they would be well prepared. Like they would be ready. An accumulation of wealth- piles of wipes and diapers, cards and cute outfits.

She was groggy, but she hit the button to turn the machine off.

She waited a few minutes, listening to the water kiss the world outside.

She hit the button again.

She turned the volume up.

It hadn't been enough sleep.

It was too much...

The first nurse who checked them in believed the change in barometric pressure had sent the woman into labor. "Probably was the snowstorm that did it." But the woman hadn't been able to hear on account of the nurse had made the remark in the middle of a contraction. The woman's pain had made it impossible to connect with anyone- the nurses, her husband. She was stranded. Alone. Being eaten alive- wave after wave.

The new father looks for an OFF switch on the noisy airplane and clicks it. He walks back to the bedroom. The babies are both quiet.

He sets his head on the pillow. He closes his eyes. The tunnels, caverns- his headache had changed.
What remained, in those spaces...

MURDER

Ed woke up before Dorothy. He had been surprised by the songbirds. One in particular- a pattern of five shrill rolls, da da derrup, a pause, and then five more. The bird had started up and Ed began counting out the pattern. Something about it reminded him of the machine shop.

An unseasonably warm Friday morning- the ground had thawed quite a bit over the past two days, mud.

His boots weren't in their usual place by the door.

He squinted his way across the room. The new wallpaper they had saved up for- he didn't feel anything towards it. Dorothy had felt so much about that decorative material. Pussy willows, pheasants, wildflowers- she was so elated once the glue had dried. It reminded her of her childhood home.

It didn't remind him of anything.

That's how it was with women, he supposed. Their feelings never match up with a man's.

Never mind what made him excited.

It had been ruined for some time.

Never mind that.

He didn't look over at her. He got up and walked into the kitchen in his underwear, then lit a cigarette.

He fixed his red eyes at the clock on the oven.

Dorothy heard him open the refrigerator door and put her feet on the bedroom floor, then into her slippers. A night gown. A glance in the mirror. An adjustment of her hair.

She put her hands on her waist, akimbo, and watched him exhale a cloud of smoke. "You're barely decent."

"Can't a man walk around in his own house however he sees fit?"

She shook her head. "Do you want me to fix you something before work?"

"Maybe some toast?"

She set a kettle on the stove and opened the bread box.

Ed extinguished the cigarette in an ashtray on the table. Then he walked past her and back into their bedroom.

It was 1947.

Two years since the war ended.

Four years married.

Six months since her brother, Woody, had moved into the guest bedroom.

Ed managed the second shift at the factory. Steel fabrication, molded parts, custom finishes- he didn't have to report at shift changeover until 10AM, but he made a habit of clocking in early and helping with the line preparation and new material orders. He didn't trust his counterpart in the shipping and receiving department. Plus, he was due for a promotion. He wanted to make sure his boss wouldn't forget him when the opportunity came.

The kettle squealed.

Dorothy had quit bothering him about the GI Bill, going to college. They needed the money, now. He didn't have time for classes. So what if there was night school? When was he supposed to go to the poolhall? When was he supposed to go hunting with his buddies?

She quit bothering him about lots of things.

Dorothy put a spoonful of Instant Coffee into the steaming mug, then another. She set out two more mugs.

Their father died when she was six and Woody was four. Their mother died right before the war broke out. Woody was her responsibility. She moved him in while Ed was overseas. A quaint kitchen table, a new microwave appliance, thick carpets- a bungalow, out in the suburbs, not far from the factory.

Dorothy plucked two pieces of bread from out of the toaster. She turned to the hallway, next to the kitchen, and looked at the closed door. Woody was usually up by now. He slept so poorly. He was never at ease. Considering this, a feeling of pity, of sadness, crept into her mind.

It was important to be cheery and bright for Ed in the morning, so she pushed it away as soon as it came.

For years it had been different things. The doctors had no idea what was causing it. The low mood. The lack of focus. The twitching and the muscle stiffness. Woody had been so full of life in high school, but something had changed.

Better not to think about it...

Ed came out of their bedroom, having changed into his work slacks, his white short-sleeve button-down. "I think I'll stop by the bank, before work." He picked up the coffee mug.

Dorothy spread a second piece of toast with strawberry jam and went to set the plate in front of Ed, but she stumbled and one of the pieces of toast fell to the ground.

Ed noticed a red stain on the couch nearby.

"Here, let me help."

That's strange, Dorothy thought to herself. She paused, "No, it's alright. I was clumsy."

Ed had taken the towel from her and began wiping away at the jam.

"Look, some made it on to the new couch. Can you fetch me some club soda? I'll scrub it out."

Dorothy peered at him, "I'll take care of it, Ed."

"No. Get the club soda. I'm already bent over here."

Ed finished scrubbing out the stain. Dorothy watched him, curious how the jam had splashed all the way into the living room, more curious as to why Ed was all of a sudden interested in cleaning up messes in the kitchen- but she didn't say anything. She took the dishtowel from him and went back to the breadbox.

As she pulled the lever of the toaster, "I wonder what's keeping Woody this morning?"

Dorothy regretted asking the question. It was meant to stay in her head. Sometimes that happened, where something that meant to stay in her head slipped out from her mouth. She winced, her back turned to Ed.

"You'll have to ask him when he comes out for breakfast."

Ed was tired of Woody. They didn't see eye to eye. Ed didn't understand that Woody was sick. Ed figured he needed motivation, needed a job, needed to stop being afraid of using some elbow grease. Ed resented Woody because Woody didn't serve in the war. He had been medically rejected from service. Ed thought he was a phony, a faker.

The moment passed, and Dorothy turned back to Ed at the table.

"Well, since we have a minute to talk, alone, do you think you would want to try tonight, Ed?"

"Try what?"

She gave him a look.

"Oh, that. Hard to say. Tonight is Friday, league play. I'll be late at the poolhall, after work. Why don't you go on to bed without me. We'll try again some other time."

Dorothy considered whether or not to press it any further.

Two years.

She had seen her doctor. She had tried various methods. She tried to relax. She tried homemade remedies. She even had them try different positions.

It was embarrassing, but she tried anyways.

"How's Frank and Stella's new baby?"

Frank worked at the factory with Ed. They ate lunch together, went to the same bar together, shot with the same brand of cue, hunted the same forests for deer. He had grown up with Frank. Frank didn't talk much about the new baby. Frank didn't tell Ed about Stella's tears, the cold and withdrawn behavior, the odd scene one Friday afternoon in the kitchen and with knives pulled out from the drawers and arranged around the counters, the baby crying naked on the floor. Ed didn't hear anything about any of that.

Stella's mother had come to live with them. It had been a couple of months now.

They stopped bringing the baby to church.

Frank's drinking had picked up.

Eventually she would snap out of it...

A case of hysterics and melancholia.

A woman's condition.

Ed didn't know about any of that. But he knew what Dorothy was getting at by asking him. "Fine, just fine. But we ought to mind our own business. They've got nothing to do with us, just like nobody else has anything to do with us. Our baby will come whenever it is supposed to."

Ed didn't give the matter anymore thought.

He was focused on the promotion.

He was thinking of other things.

Dorothy couldn't help herself, "Is there something wrong?"

Ed tensed. "What makes you ask?"

"Why do you have to go to the bank?"

"Oh. I want to see about a savings account. Ted had mentioned it to me, a better interest rate. I want to see about it."

She nodded and decided not to ask any more questions. Ed usually sent her to the bank while he was at work.

Cleaning... errands...

"I wonder what's keeping Woody."

Flustered, in a flash, up from the table and his coffee finished, "How the hell should I know? I'm off. Don't wait up for me tonight, alright?"

"Alright."

He nodded at her and left the kitchen, headed for the front door.

"Ed?"

He turned over his shoulder.

Faintly, "Have a good day, honey."

Brusque, "Yup."

SALLY GARDENS

John Michael finished his prayers, made the sign of the cross, and set his hands on the edge of the bed to hoist himself off his knees. His room at the Bed & Breakfast was especially cold, with February's dry air leeching in through the windows, invading through the tiniest of cracks. His body shuddered as he inspected his pillow, then his wallet and his Passport adjacent and arranged on a humble nightstand. Then it struck him, sharply, those fatal last words of the Hail Mary- *pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death.*

The hour of our death.

An hour which awaits every man and woman who has ever walked on this earth.

A profoundly intimate moment, a precious moment that marks passage from the physical to the spiritual, from the known world of sensations and perceptions and quick-witted answers to the world beyond, the unknown, the mysterious, from where we emanate from and must finally return to. Our final breath- their final breath, my mother, my father, my brother. Their kiss goodbye to the sunrise, to their family and friends, their favorite meals, their favorite songs. It struck John Michael that by asking Our Lady for peace in that hour, for all those prayers he had offered, in every church and at every bedside through the years, it had been for them.

He hadn't been there to see to their care, but she had.

She had seen to it, and ensured it was a blessed hour.

A sense of calm, and warmth, washed over the man.

He set himself down and tucked the sheets of bed around his legs. Earlier that day, he had visited their graves to pay his respects. He had laid down on the frozen earth and wept tears of different sorts, of sadness, regret, relief. He had kept a promise to himself whispered long ago.

An old man with his memories...

His worn brown shoe, the laces frayed and the tongue flapping, tapped out a rhythm and upset a thin coat of ashes that covered the barroom floor underfoot. A face like one of the Skellig Islands- out there, a dream born from the Atlantic. Pat Cohan Bar. Two copies of yesterday's *Irish American* on a lacquered countertop.

A short, stout barman and a fleet-footed barmaid. A circle of players- bodhrans, coyote 'whoops', a fiddle and a mandolin.

Looking back from some faraway tomorrow, he would recollect the details, unsure of whether or not any of it happened- a scene belonging to a black and white film.

Smoke born of hand-rolled cigarettes, cheap tobacco, it permeated the space inside him where his thoughts would well up.

Every night, to the back of the pub- past the tables, the quiet customers, the regular boys saddled up with their pints and their whiskies. Every night a katabasis, a journey across worlds. Shadowless nights, skyscrapers blotting out the stars- past the forbidden doorway with the slanted frame, ducking his head, the lamplight, the music.

His foot kept the rhythm against the cobbled stone.

He made his sacrifices through the course of each day- a longshoreman, a grunt, a body on a shift doomed to sweat, to torment. He spilled his blood.

His body on the docks- his mind, back home, barefoot along familiar hillsides. Cleaning up the barnyard, their enormous pig aptly named King George. Fishing the brook. His mother's smile.

But it was a haunted, guilty thought that sometimes clung to him.

"Did you hear what they laid on McMahon, John Michael?"

Hushed tones, "Laid it on himself, he did."

"How's that? He was forced to submit to the designs of the quarterdeck!"

"He ought never to have resigned his position on the forecastle."

"Ach!"

McMahon had confirmed an inspector's suspicions. The company had been putting pressure on account of receipts being inconsistent, inventory disappearing. Somebody was skimming, and everyone knew who. They called McMahon in, threatened him. Poor bastard choked out a name. Now, the union would blacklist him. A hungry home, empty bellies for his three children, his harried wife with her stubborn curl of auburn hair which refused to leave the comfort of her cheek.

A pause in the music.

A gulp of porter from the brim of his glass.

John Michael didn't care to adjudicate whether or not McMahon deserved his fate, whether or not the Spillane widow ought to take a new man, whether or not the cops were too harsh in the district, whether or not the councilman was a crook- in the back room, where

the music played, at the end of a day's work, he was wont to sing a few tunes and forbear his mind to roam freely, peaceful, nothing more.

His younger brother...

The pages of the *Irish American* were chalk full of opinions and gossip. Lots of folks had lots of judgments to deliver. John Michael had never laid a penny down for a copy of print, nor would he ever.

"Let's have another, Pat. Sally Gardens?"

Pat cracked his red knuckles together. "Slow things down a bit?"

John Michael nodded back.

Pat could barely catch the glint of candlelight on John Michael's eyes, set back under his brow, cavernous, "On your count then."

Despite their plans, the money he sent home, the letters and the promise of a grand future- it wasn't meant to be. Fever, then an early grave. A string of rosary beads. Heartbreak, then another wooden crucifix. Three markers in the family plot, dug into the rocky ground. A father, a mother, a brother- never to be seen again.

An orphan. Alone in a land of loneliness, dogged and beleaguered, nobody to call family, only a few to call 'friend.'

He didn't care for the way too much drink caused him to feel.

He didn't have enough money to waste on the motion pictures.

His foot, tapping.

His eyes on the hillside.

*She bid me take life easy
As the grass grows on the weirs
But I was young and foolish
And now am full of tears*

The song finished, and John Michael's gaze was shut to black.

A voice in his heart, faintly- "Someday, you'll say goodbye properly. You'll set down a pile of blossoms on their graves and set it right."

He would have never been able to guess how he'd remember these nights, those first years in New York where the wind blew through folks, cut them down into pieces, whole families, neighborhoods, where the quitting bell never rang, where the shiny cars never stopped to let you cross, where everything was at your fingertips but still escaped your grasp, worlds away- how he'd reminisce as

an old man, how he'd forget about the wind and the starved babies, about the rich bankers and their aloof wives, terminally bored and secretly bilious, hating everything- how he'd think back on the music, Pat on his fiddle- how his foot would tap, and a subtle grin would adorn his face.

The lights off, tears in his eyes..

He couldn't have known it then.

There was so much in front of him.

But there was so much more behind.

DOORBELL

Poolside, a net attached to an extension pole- he drags the basket from one end to the next, collecting leaves and acorns and dandelion seeds blown free by neighborhood children waiting along curbs at the end of driveways for their morning exodus via school bus to commence.

A Tuesday in early June.

Before he opens the sliding door into the four-bedroom Colonial and unconsciously finds himself at the coffee pot, he stops on the patio and inhales deeply through his nostrils. A breeze sweeps across the yard. Several weeks ago, in the noon hour, on a day like today with only few clouds in the sky and heat radiating up from the sidewalks and walkway stones, he caught the smell of cranberry sauce, the same kind his mother used to fix for Thanksgiving, enhanced with both the zest and juice of several oranges- he figured it must have been the cherry blossoms and the plum blossoms at the south and west corners of the property. The odor and the memory brought a smile to his face, the first in some time.

But the smell has disappeared.

So he closes the slider behind himself and pours a cup and firmly plants his hands on the gray granite counter. Between the humidity and a couple of chores to start the day, he is already sweating.

The school year will be over soon.

Summer vacation.

Three cars are parked in the driveway, waxed and glossy, reflecting harsh sunlight at drivers making their passage up Maple Leaf Way- commuters who cut between Rt. 123 and Rt. 30 in their mad rushes to office complexes, to doctors' offices, to grocery stores and shopping malls.

He takes a sip.

The living room pops with a fresh coat of paint, and the floors are spotless. At one time, when the kids were younger, they paid a cleaning woman to vacuum the carpets and scrub the grates above the stove, but he cancelled the arrangement and started performing the tasks himself.

It filled the time.

It gave him something to do.

A Christmas card stuck to the stainless steel refrigerator by a magnet- eggnog, snowmen, Santa Claus- his sister, complaining about the sleepless nights breastfeeding her newborn, about the peanut butter sandwiches in the morning, about the practices across town. She asked him absentmindedly, "Sean, what did you get the kids for Christmas?" He had excused himself from the table. He declined a slice of pie. He drove back home and fell asleep on the long end of an L-shaped sofa, the gas fireplace snuffed out. There was a pink hair bow on the mantle. While he slept that night, his sister remarked to her husband, "He acts like a zombie, doesn't he? I'm worried about him."

Most of the people he knew, didn't know.

The ones that did... there had been bewilderment, concern, tears, phone calls. Then there were questions, suggestions, advice.

By now, he kept almost entirely to himself.

The doorbell rings.

He clutches the handle of his coffee mug and weaves through the hallway, out of the kitchen and past the stair landing, into the foyer. A chandelier hangs above him. He doesn't check through the glass panels next to the door, he simply opens it and confronts whatever or whoever awaits.

Nothing resembling anticipation.

"Good morning, I'm sorry to bother you." Her speech is clear, her tone pleasing. Each of the words she uses has been considered, scripted, vetted by her campaign manager. She dutifully follows her introduction with a handshake. After their hands touch, a revelation. For the remainder of her pitch, she cannot help but ruminate in her secret heart. The man has made an impression on her. He is different than the other faces she has encountered the last few weeks. His eyes- a melancholy, dark brown, with an obvious and jarring remoteness which reflects back at her from his gaze. She could tell almost immediately.

A terrible loss had shrunk him into an island- scars, like dormant volcanoes. Drifting, stranded in the Pacific, eroding away, wave by wave, storm after storm.

Her intonations dampen- less enthusiastic, more intimate.

He listens politely.

She arrives at her conclusion, "Would you consider signing this petition, to support my candidacy?"

He feels the coffee on his tongue while he acknowledges an aggressive, radiating blue sky looming over the woman's shoulder. There isn't a cloud to be accounted for.

He has forgotten her name already.

"I would, but I don't think you'd want it."

Startled, she can't help an unconscious reaction- her eyelids pinch, her chin turns, a corner of her mouth raises. She waits for her response to manifest, a second or two before "Why on earth wouldn't I want your support? I would love to have you in my corner."

He blinks slowly.

Then, "Because I'm a wife beater."

Jerking to face the moment in front of her- the impossible permutation she could have never accounted for, could have never discussed or planned with her campaign manager- after thousands of handshakes and countless photo opportunities and town hall debates and Q&A sessions, she is flustered. She barely leaks out a simple, "Excuse me?"

"A wife beater. Domestic assault. My wife, three kids- they're all gone. There's a restraining order- I can't see them anymore. I'll probably never see them again."

She is silent.

A clipboard adjusts itself under her arm.

"It's alright. Like I said, I didn't expect you would want my name on your list. And if I were you, I wouldn't want it either. Good luck with the race. I don't care much for politicians, but you seem nice enough. Really, best of luck."

He reaches for the handle of the door, but is interrupted.

"Wait."

A fallow stretch of acreage, ploughed, fertilized- left to sit, left to wait. Patience. Humility. Forgiveness. Her father had been a farmer, a livestock owner, and a Christian. It had been years since he had entered her mind, without premeditation. Losing him, a twelve-year old girl, a daughter in love with her daddy- she

could only reflect on his ghostly image in a controlled manner, within safe confines- when she was seated, when she was ready to cry, when his anniversary came around, when she needed a moment to be alone. But here he was, or at least the idea of him, his voice inside of her heart, whispering.

The same voice that had told her to run for office.

The same voice that had encouraged her to make a difference.

The man is surprised. "Wait?"

"Wait."

"For what?"

She considers him, this man and his three-acre plot, his vinyl sidings, his tiki bar on the pool deck, his iron fences, his manicured lawn, his shiny cars- "I want to know what happened."

The man rests his hand three-quarters of the way up the vertical post of the door frame, leaning slightly- "What happened was I made a mistake, and I let my anger get the best of me. But I'm glad you asked. Because most people don't care to ask, or want to ask, so they don't understand that I didn't actually touch her. I didn't touch a hair on her. I never have. Not that it matters- she's filed a court case, a divorce- she's tarnished my name, forever."

"But how..."

"I threatened her. One night, last October- I was tired, burnt out from work, the busy season and all. She was pushing my buttons. I don't know exactly- but I reached a tipping point. And I raised my hand to her. I made a fist, put the fist above my head, and told her I was going to break her apart. Smash her to pieces. That's when she ran. She grabbed the kids, buckled them into her car, and headed off to her folks' place in Maine. She had an attorney working the next day. I received a summons. I was served papers. It happened overnight."

The woman is relieved. "If you're innocent, if you didn't- why do you refer to yourself in that way?"

"Because once your accused of something like that, it doesn't matter whether or not you did it."

"Of course it matters."

He shakes his head at her, "It's not your name."

She adjusts, "The courts should settle it though, shouldn't they? Your wife didn't have any bruises, any proof. You had a difficult moment, but you held back."

"It's not about proof. It's about perception. And either way- all of that is secondary. My children are gone. I'm in an empty house. There's- I don't have anything. I lost everything." His eyes are pointed downward as he finishes his thought. He takes his right hand and connects it back to his left, secure around the handle of the coffee mug.

She offers him the clipboard. "Please, will you sign this? I would be very grateful to have your support, and to have your name on my petition."

He grins, slightly. "Alright. But you have to promise me something when you win."

She grins, slightly. "Of course. Each signature comes with a promise- that's standard politics."

"Put a STOP sign over at Ironwood Drive and Catalpa. My kids play in the park there at the corner, and cars are always speeding by."

"I'll do my best."

"I'm sure you will."

GUESS GAME

It was a day for pairs of crows in naked ash trees, perched next to each other, looming and solid despite the fog. March- a third day of rain. At first menacing, portends of doom, evil spirits- but then the springtime comes to mind.

They've made their choice to be mates, he thought to himself.

We all make our choices...

Finished with his coffee, done admiring the birds- he sets off. Pine needles matted down, gray and fixed and clumped together, alongside the reservoir and into the town forest- driving past the stands of trees, he is reminded of the head of a toddler after bath time.

The windshield wipers brush away swollen dollops of rain brought down from the sky. A day for pairs of animals, two by two- an ark, a flood, survivors.

Surviving...

A STOP sign.

Another thought, this time in his heart...

"It lives in the sky."

The voice of his son.

Animal guessing games in the car, on their way home from somewhere or another.

"Where does it live, Jacob?"

It had been four years ago, today.

March 23rd.

"What color is it?"

A phone call.

A coroner's office.

"Black."

A needle.

A boy's arm.

"Alright daddy, it's your turn to think of the next one."

Who could've guessed it, back then? Who would've believed it? How could anyone have known?

Finished with his business in town and back at the apartment, the old man's eyes are cloudy, reflecting the view from out the window... His last conversation with Jacob fit a pattern of several conversations prior to it. Broke. Jobless. Asking for money. Pleading. Chaotic. The counselor recommended to stop accepting Jacob's calls. "You have to define boundaries. It's the only way to break the cycle of enabling." But the man kept answering the phone. He stopped giving the boy money, but he wanted to hear Jacob's voice. He wanted to know his son was alive, at least.

"We can get you back into treatment."

He never gave up on his boy.

At the recommendation of the counselor, the man had attended an Al-Anon meeting. One of the speakers at the podium made a speech and said, "Your job isn't to save them. Your job is to never give up on them." After that, the man remembered how Sunday morning pancakes had served as a kind of armistice through Jacob's teenage years- there, the boy and the father found themselves amidst blueberries and butter, a cup of hot coffee. No matter how bad it had got the previous night, the shouts, the tears, tired and overrun- somehow, it would all be erased.

But the years passed by.

There were no more pancakes.

There were broken promises, lies, stolen money.

I never turned my back on my boy, the man thought to himself. I kept him in my prayers. I kept him close to my heart. It would have been easy to cast the boy off as dead weight, as he was by so many others, friends and employers. Discarded. A torn-up ticket dropped in the gutter, rainwater rivers of sorrow- headed to the drain with the other losers.

"Why don't you come by for breakfast this Sunday?"

"I'll think about it, dad. I'll let you know."

The boy passed away that Saturday night.

A motel bathroom.

A pool of blood.

The crows had abandoned their post. The branches were empty. It was the early afternoon, but it felt close to evening, to another night alone in his bedroom. The old man turned his view inside, the simple apartment, the blank television screen and the digital clock on the microwave.

Who would've guessed?

Parts of it had been so beautiful.

So beautiful...

WANDERLUST

I couldn't help but notice her.

I had expected a middle-school child to be uniformed in the white robe, attending to the priest.

But there she was, a gold belt around her waist- an escort to the pulpit for the Gospel reading. Long past the age for lunchboxes and jump rope- she might have been in her thirties? I have never been any good at guessing a woman's age. Regardless, her career as an altar server ought to have finished.

Besides her age, what struck me about her features was that her entire being seemed to be pointed upwards, towards a final aim, a dramatic finale in the heavens. This updraft caused me a brief anxiety. The corners of her lips were drooping, the skin around her eyes baggy, but her forehead was sharp, headed into the empyrean. Her eyebrows were raised. Her hands were pressed together, with the fingertips pointed celestial. It was if she was secretly willing herself to fly, or at least float up amongst the beams of the vaulted ceiling. Practically up on her tippy toes.

A holy fool, perhaps. A true believer. She radiated equal parts deference and reverence. Never a question or a doubt, never a thought of condescension- her eyes seemed longing, almost, desperate, stationed besides the pulpit. Then, suddenly, alive with song, she proclaimed a vigorous 'Hallelujah' with the rest of the congregation during the Gospel refrain.

Simply put, the woman was odd.

She struck me as quite odd.

Amidst the well-to-do housewives, their black and gold dresses, their red blouses, their hair styled and their makeup applied

thoughtfully, prinking in mirrors- cossetted women with humanities degrees from East Coast liberal arts colleges- there she was.

This woman with her mousy brown tresses, disheveled and falling over her shoulders- enraptured, in complete service to the priest and to the Mass, to the Lord Most High.

From off the side of the altar, now in full view- the priest began to deliver the good news, but I couldn't take my eyes off of her. What was she doing up there?

How had she been appointed this role?

I thought and wondered until our pastor Father Tim concluded with a perfunctory, "The word of the Lord." We all fell back into our seats. The woman carefully secured the gold-plated book and, raising it above her head, walked it back to the altar. I watched her carefully, only for her to disappear behind a wall of poinsettia flowers in an odd corner near the sacristy door.

In this house of worship, this temple of belief- surely she had taken things too far.

Could you have too much faith?

Before Arthur Dodd had set his mind upon the woman, he had been bemoaning the seemingly excessive temperatures inside of the church. A wool sweater, a button-down shirt, a couple of extra pounds thanks to the holiday festivities- the man was sweltering. The obnoxious smell of incense didn't help anything. Neither did the overcrowded pews. Arthur felt persecuted, like an early Christian, huddled in a bunker.

Who was that woman?

After the service I could casually ask my wife, but I knew the look her unloving eyes would cast on me. I glanced down the pew- my son, his chin pinched into his chest with his attention fixed onto his phone. My daughter, adjusting her skirt.

It was too short.

I didn't want to say anything to her- I was hoping my wife would. My baby girl- she'd be wearing a skimpy bikini on vacation next week. Thousands of dollars to watch her parade about like an exhibitionist on the beach. Costs upon costs, the rental car and the hotel reservation and the passport renewal fees- I thought about the collection basket. I thought about the mortgage, our retirement fund.

Goddamnit it was hot in that church.

An old man in a black suit, in the row in front of us, slumped forwards. The homily continued somewhere in the background of

everything. I heard words, sounds- but nothing connected to me. The man slumped further. The heat must be getting to him, I thought.

More desultory thoughts, thought about strokes, then about my dead mother. Mindless, disguised as melancholy but in truth constructed from self- pity, thoughts like *when will I die?* Pitiful. Self-concern, the root of every thought, I suppose. Almost every thought. *When would I die? Where would I die? Where would my family be?*

I wonder if my mother thought about how she would go.

I had driven her to church every Sunday for three years while she lived in the Nursing Home. I assumed she wanted me to drive her to church. She assumed I had wanted her to go to church with me. Neither of us wanted to be there, but neither of us said a word. I assumed it was important for her. She assumed it was important for me.

For nearly three years it went on like that until one morning she called me up and told me she wasn't feeling up to it, and asked why I couldn't go by myself. What do you mean, by myself? I had been picking her up so she had somebody to go with. I had only been going because she wanted a ride. She explained to me she never once asked a thing like that from me.

I couldn't remember if she had or she hadn't.

After we put her in the Nursing Home- maybe it was my own sense of guilt? I thought taking her to church might bring her some peace, and I could offer her some company.

From what I remember, she'd always insisted on going to church when we were growing up.

After my son was born, as she held him in her arms for the first time, her grandchild, she leaned over and whispered to me, "This is the face of God." I didn't know how to respond. To be honest, it was uncomfortable. My wife shot me a look. I didn't know what my mother meant by that remark until years later. After my children had grown up, after their faces changed, after the manner in which they looked at me changed, after the manner in which I looked at them changed- the eyes of God, if there is a God, are inside an innocent child, who finds you, behind your own eyes, as if the creative energy of the universe is acknowledging itself, the light reaffirming the light. Love beckoning love. To have an infant look at you, inside of you, like that- it is as close to God as I have ever been. My mother was right. A child's eyes invite only love,

require only love, elicit love in its purest form. To respond with love is to achieve your purpose. It was years later... after my son grew up, after school and television and video games had ruined him- I couldn't help but wonder, where had God escaped to?

My mother, she held onto secret wisdom like that.

I didn't appreciate it until it was too late.

That morning when I called, there was silence on the phone after we had stated our positions. I grew uncomfortable, so I told her I hoped she would start feeling better soon. Then she hung up. Two weeks later she died. A stroke. Late at night. Painless. Instantaneously. She was alone, in an anonymous room on Cherry Tree Lane, in western Michigan. A nurse found her and soon after she was buried.

I wonder if my mother had ever weighed those circumstances as a potential final outcome, for where things might end for her?

Either way- now I was back on a regular routine, in terms of church. Once for Christmas, and once for Easter.

Had it been this hot in April?

After Mr. Dodd had finished evaluating his body temperature, he fixed his attention back on the old man in the black suit. The gentleman had his hands folded, one on top of the other, resting on his thigh. It was an unexpected gesture, gentile, out of place with the general discomfort the old man had to be feeling internally. Delicate, august, a quiet repose like a sigh of death, like this old man was indicating he was ready to say goodbye to a world of egg nog and garland. It reminded Arthur of something. A feeling. A vision. A distant, far-off sensation- what was it? No. It wasn't death. Rather, it was a sigh of life, asleep at the breast of his wife, his newborn son, contended and peaceful beyond Arthur's imagination with thirty years of corruption and filth clogged into his brain. A peace inconceivable, but a peace we all experienced and knew and know is possible, craving it, living to die, living to sigh in perfect fulfillment- those old hands, those young hands.

A child shrieks. There is a family with small, bright-eyed children across the main aisle. One of the little girls makes a petulant face at her father. The mother is rocking an infant in her arms.

Can you believe you had ever been that small?

Can you believe Thomas and Anne were ever that small?

My wife and I looked at each other so differently then. We believed in what we were doing. We were committed to building our family,

doing things the right way, being in love, being there for each other. Now- with so many years gone by.

Who knows what happened.

What the hell did we believe in?

What did we stand for?

Our filet mignon dinners with potatoes au gratin and aged red wine, video game consoles, gift cards, all-inclusive sunshine beaches- did we really believe that would fix it? Fruity cocktails and my daughter being ogled at by some young brute? What were we after? What were we doing? Where were we going?

I needed some air.

All this goddamn incense.

AT THE SOURCE OF THE LONGEST RIVER

A Tuesday afternoon, rainy and lugubrious. A warning light appeared on the dashboard- LOW TIRE PRESSURE. I had been commuting between my daughter's school building and the office when the light flashed. LOW TIRE PRESSURE.

I pulled off at a gas station.

I didn't have an umbrella, so after I pressed my credit card to the reader, and while the air pressure machine charged, I methodically worked my way between the car tires.

None of the tires appeared flat.

The passenger rear was low, but I couldn't find a nail in it.

Maybe it was a slow decay, from the winter, and now with the temperature warming up thanks to the impending spring..

I couldn't remember the last time I filled my tires.

I couldn't remember much of anything from the winter, the previous fall or summer. I didn't know how to approach finding that information inside of my brain. Wherever it was, it wasn't accessible.

I finished with the tires, one by one, as the gauge confirmed they were inflated to the factory recommended settings.

My socks were soaked, and my shirt, and my pants, as I stepped back into the car. I turned the keys and checked the dashboard- the light had disappeared.

It wasn't quite spring. There were still patches of snow like jagged rocks, speckled brown and gray, lined along the road.

After I checked my badge at the security door and trudged up to the fourth floor of the building, after I parked my bag at my desk and hung my coat up, I walked demurely over to the kitchenette to

fix myself a cup of coffee. While waiting, I gazed out the windows, off into the distant suburban hillsides. I noticed faint shadows of color which crept out onto the horizon against a grey, uniform background- reds, greens- whispers on the tree lines. Spring wasn't quite here, but it was close.

The machine dispensed my serving.

I poured in a dash of dehydrated creamer.

Close, but not quite...

Back at my desk, aloof, a sense of relief- grateful the warning light had flashed in my car, and not my wife's. There would have been a phone call. I would have had to convince her not to call the Tow Company. Most people never become inured to the petty inconveniences of life, like rush hour traffic or poor service at a restaurant, like a shopping delay or an indicator light on a car dashboard. Most people, nowadays, have an unbearably low threshold for the activation of stress. My wife was one of them. One of us. You're no saint, I thought to myself.

No, you're not.

My socks were still damp, and I admitted to myself that I wasn't a saint. I was no different than any of the other television junkies of my generation. Convenience freaks. Stress addled and over-medicated. A peculiar avidity for updates, for tracking, for fact checking, for assurance and then additional reassurances.

I had taken an SSRI that morning, before my bowl of high fructose infused cereal.

You can almost smell it on us, the modern middle-class of hyper-convenience. People who spend their whole lives thinking about nothing but themselves. We stink of self-concern, self-obsession, self-centeredness.

My goddamn sock...

I turned the computer on and checked my phone.

It was nearly that time of the morning where I lament this sagging gut that nearly falls onto my lap. My oversized, puffy nipples. My jowls. I'm overweight. I'm drooping, but dense. Everywhere. And I can't seem to do anything about it.

Worse than that, nothing seems to make me feel better, except eating more. I don't know how to relax, to relieve stress. So I eat. I over-eat, and that's why I'm overweight. Being overweight causes me more anxiety, so on it goes.

A vicious cycle.

A pudgy ring finger, consuming a gold wedding band.

Devoid of pathos, the whole situation- entirely of my own creation.
And maybe that's why it depresses me so much.

An overhang of adipose, overshadowing a limp penis.

But before I could enter into a bout of self-loathing, an email notification appeared.

A message from beyond. We the people of automatic renewal and contact-less delivery, we the digital avatars who receive the holy spirit in the form of instant messages and alarm chimes, who interpret 'ORDER NOT RECEIVED' as an ill omen, who toggle over our search engine results as if they were deep mystic signals. Download errors, connection issues, card readers not functioning- signs and symbols of vast import. There it was. The voice of God, appearing in Calibri font.

SAVE THE DATE

I clicked the message.

Twenty-five years. The class of 2000. Y2K. Lakewater High School. Reconnect with old friends. Dancing, cocktails. Tickets through this link. Hosted by the Alumni Committee. Hope to see you there.

--

I woke up early. My wife was snoring quietly next to me. It was a pre-dawn hour, when that faint gray light opens up between the slats of the window blinds, when the monochromatic tide of night begins to recede, ever so faintly- a forbidden hour filled with forbidden thoughts.

And my mind filled with an image, a girl I had known but hadn't considered for some years- Cheryl Brewster. Red headed. Lithe. Green eyes. A smattering of freckles decorating her cheeks and nose. She had been my crush through high school, Freshman year all the way until graduation. I hadn't said more than a couple dozen words to her- she had barely known I existed.

Like an intruder in my consciousness, a naked drive, an upwelling of sexual energy- Chery Brewster's body, her eyes, above me, below me- a series of images followed by a ridiculous erection, caught in the loose folds of my underwear. I lost complete control over myself, my senses- like a collapsing star, everything pointed inwards, spinning and condensing.

Her breasts in my mouth, her sumptuous tongue.

My hand in my underwear.

Snoring, gently...

Possessed by a blind, impersonal necessity- an entire scene repurposed and fabricated from a faint memory nearly twenty-five

years old- a person long dead, long gone, changed and grown old and who knows where she is or who she is or what she looks like- frozen in my mind, her bubblegum blowing lips, her sunkissed thighs below a miniskirt, her long fingers twirling a pencil above a desktop.

I poured myself into her, overcome by this need.
Stroking, as my wife slept.
I couldn't be bothered to finish in the bathroom.
I didn't care.
I had to have her.

--

For all my regrets, I was happy to be gone.
Hometowns and their baggage...
You shouldn't be around the young women you fell in love with as a boy. Those maidens ought to remain pure, frozen in time. Unchanged. Untouched. Archetypes for beauty, transcendence. Not to mention, in terms of leaving alone the past, forgetful- that impossible, teenage embarrassment, those swollen, emotional midnights tumescent with swooning hearts, sophomore pangs. Elementary school heartbreak- a cataclysmic transition, when innocent girls swinging on their backyard swingsets, kicking their legs playful, golden and lean in the summer heat, magically transform into objects of desire, into fantasy, into an impossible solution for every inch of emptiness you'd eventually become surrounded by.
Hormonal impulse.
Movie theater midnights.
I had gone off to college one afternoon in August and never came home.
I didn't regret it for a second.
Puppy love- it was like VHS tapes. Obsolete, and replaced with a superior alternative.
Or was it?
What had it been replaced by?
More emptiness, confusion.
Less romance.
Fewer and fewer possibilities...

--

Marriage is a lie which tells us a great deal about life, about the nature of being a human. We accept, and reinforce, a myriad of illusions. Illusions are necessary. Illusions prevent us from

being torn asunder, in the confusion, the chaos of our life, the paradoxes and the inscrutable. This tenuous existence of ours bookended by endless infinity- death, that enormous monolith, a haunted unknown of inky black nothing, goodbye forever- faced with that, what else is at our disposal? How else are we supposed to make anything work?

This world of ours...

It's not that I despised my wife, Marie.

It's not that she hated me.

We both woke up one day, so far along, unable to turn back- only to realize we were no longer in love. An entire life, and lifetime, intertwined with another person, with each other- it was too horrible for either of us to consider. It was an obvious truth, but one that could not be considered, under any circumstances. We knew it, both of us- but we continued on, pretending, because it was easier than the alternative.

Out of love.

Out of touch.

It's not that I didn't want her- I did. She remained beautiful in my eyes. And that's what hurt the most, because it was so clear I could no longer have her. I had done the work, made the vows, toiled and suffered and here we were, after thirteen years of marriage- she couldn't be bothered to touch me.

Cold bottomed feet in bed.

She no longer fulfilled her duties.

Had I fulfilled mine?

--

"Are you telling the truth?"

Our son was becoming mendacious- a lie about brushing his teeth, then another about the books he picked out at the library, more lies about his friends and teachers- hopefully it was only a phase. The only way to navigate raising a child is to adopt an attitude of submission. I had grand delusions which were quickly obliterated once Matthew was born. My designs of who he was, who he would be, how we would relate to one another- deconstructed, then tossed aside.

He looked up at me, calm. "Yes."

Right to my face.

I sighed.

You're no saint either, remember?

His weaknesses, his idiosyncratic evils- where had they come from?

--

"Why don't you go?"

I was shocked by Marie's response.

"Really?"

"Really. You never go back home. You could visit your brother. When's the last time you saw him?"

I tried to remember. It was hard. "Before the old man died. Six years? He's probably still mad at me for not coming back for the funeral."

"Well, you can make peace. It would be good for Matthew and Susan to know your side of the family. Maybe one day we can all go back."

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves."

--

For months and months I had kept her in my secret, forbidden heart-controlled by a spectral energy- and now, at the door of the gymnasium, I was about to come face to face with her.

My heart was beating out from my chest.

My undershirt was drenched.

It was hot, too hot for a blazer, but I didn't have a choice. The blazer had a slimming effect on me. I had trimmed my eyebrow hair. I hadn't eaten for almost two days. On the flight into town, I couldn't do anything but play out scenes, of what I would say to her, what she would say to me.

Hotel card keys.

Ecstasy.

An unknown door opened.

Possibility.

The gymnasium wasn't like I remembered, different than what I had envisioned. There was music in the background. A buffet. A bar. Clots and clusters of people, talking. A Check-In table.

"Hi, what's your name?"

Before I could answer her, from across the room, "Steve Taylor!"

It was Rob Huznek. A fellow computer geek. A loser.

But a loser no more! Rob looked dapper. He wore a classy suit, custom tailored. I could tell- I knew good clothes. I hid behind my clothes. Sometimes a freshly pressed shirt and a pair of gold cufflinks could change the course of a bad week, could negate high cholesterol levels, could renew a lost sense of purpose.

"Rob! Great to see you."

He rushed over and we shook hands.

I finished checking in and caught up with Rob. He had done well. We both had earned degrees in engineering, collected our share of company stocks prior the Dot.Com bubble, secured Vice President positions- it was eerily similar. He had ventured out to the West coast, and I had turned East.

There was a key difference, however. Rob was fit. Trim. Good looking. Handsome and happily married. He showed me pictures of his wife and children- beautiful, and healthy. Robust. Their teeth were perfect, ceramic almost- fabricated.

I couldn't help but imagine him in the shower, gazing proudly at his cock.

I couldn't remember the last time looking down, being able to see mine...

We ordered a drink at the bar and talked and talked, a recital of sorts- repeating memorized stories we told ourselves again and again about who we were, what we stood for, what this all meant- the illusions. But soon he could tell I was distracted.

"Who are you looking for?"

"What do you mean?"

"You keep glancing around. There's somebody. You came back to see somebody, didn't you? Come on, we're old pals. It's a high school reunion, there's no shame in a little curiosity."

"Well..."

"Out with it!"

"Do you remember Cheryl Brewster?"

His demeanor changed instantly. It's as if the smile on his face had been a pile of crumbs, vacuumed up off a kitchen floor. Had I struck a nerve? He quickly made for his gin and tonic. Barely audible, he asked, "You didn't hear?"

"Hear what?"

"Cancer. Pancreatic. It must have been three or four years ago."

"Jesus."

He nodded, a grimace underneath his aquiline nose. "Way too young."

"I can't imagine... did she have a family?"

Rob, hushed and with the utmost discretion, "Three or four kids I think."

I didn't know what else to say. This had not been the apogee I envisioned. I tugged at my collar. The music, the people, the casual laughter- it all became sinister and off putting, like the naked head of a turkey vulture. I wanted to leave. I had to leave,

immediately. I'd have to break away from Rob and skulk off on my own. There was no reason, no point...

Dead?

I couldn't stand myself. I couldn't stand the index of maladjustments that represented my person, which comprised my being- my slovenly behavior, my lustful stupidity, my importunate outlook towards the world and what it owed me, everything. I'd learned nothing. I'd done nothing. Well, I had done something- and that was worst of all. What I had done to this poor woman, with my lascivious fantasies, what I had turned her into- I felt like a reptile, an idiotic teenager. And here I was, in a high school gymnasium, soaking a \$300 button down while I stood in place.

Rob sensed my discomfort. "Got to appreciate every day, right? Hey have you seen..."

I can't remember what else he said.

I can't remember the excuse I cooked up.

I remember the darkness of the night as I opened up the door from the gymnasium. The football stadium, at the other end of campus, unlit. A park across the street, and a pair of swings rocking meekly in the breeze.

I remembered Marie, my children.

I remembered.

QUIET

The damn thing had stalled again.

In an adjacent section of driveway, where she had managed to track some progress, the snowflakes were already building back up over the bare concrete. Sweat began to dampen her wool hat and mittens. She glanced down, then exhaled deeply.

With the motor cut, there was an extreme silence.

The noise of her nostrils wheezing in then out became immediately uncomfortable.

She loosened her grip on the handles.

Too wet, she thought- the snow was too wet and it must be clogging the chute. Or maybe it was something to do with the blades, the rotation?

She checked to make sure the gas line was open.

She verified the orientation of the choke.

Whatever the case, she was in no position to diagnose the machine's troubles.

I should have bought a new model in the summer, the Labor Day Sale- they were lined up outside of the store, a 5-year warranty.

What's the use now?

There were still another three or four hours of snow left on the forecast, more than a foot and a half total- maybe even two feet. The first blizzard of the season.

Another storm on the horizon, before the weekend.

It was in this moment, with everything in front of her, that her father entered her mind. He had been dead for only a few weeks. His last Christmas present to her- he had fixed up his old snowblower, replaced the engine and the auger, then driven the machine to her house as a present. He promised it would run like new. It would last another twenty years. "They don't make them like this anymore." When she thought of him, now, she didn't think of his funeral, or of his double chin, or the way he picked at his ears while reclined on his sofa chair. She didn't think of him clapping at her piano recitals, as a little girl. Instead, he appeared as a target, a bullseye- she wanted to call him and berate him, to demand him to come over and fix the problem. She wanted to interrogate him over the mechanics of the chute and the combustibility of diesel gasoline. This situation was his doing- he was responsible for her predicament, for the accumulating piles of snow, for the ice at the end of the gutter spouts, the heating bill last month. This was all his fault.

But he was gone.

And that's what bothered her most.

Not that he was gone, but that he wasn't there to assume responsibility.

She was indignant, and began to cry.

But she had never been the kind of woman who runs herself into a fit over the age of her kitchen cabinets, weeping hysterical at the bottom landing of the stairs with trembling lips. A petulant child. A spoiled brat.

That hadn't been her.

Maybe- a proud girl who never married, who never blossomed into a true woman.

Her father saw her as his daughter, nothing more and nothing less. He never considered it a shame.

He never considered her a failure.

With tears rolling down her firm cheeks, she retreated, back to the redoubt, back to her fortress. A barrier, constructed by her

psyche, similar to most other folks. An edifice maintained for years and years- a last line of defense, as to why things are stacked against us, why we were right and the world was wrong, why it wasn't our fault, why somebody else had to do something about it.

But a thought had broken through.

A thought, and then a feeling.

He was dead. Her father was gone. He had tried to do something nice for her, for her first winter in the new house, for her first time having to maintain driveways and clean gutters and adjust lawn sprinklers and argue with the gas company over the heating bill- he had tried to help her.

The thought grew, and so did the feeling.

He had spent his whole life helping her.

And now, it was obvious, that he ought to be granted amnesty.

A truck drove by with a plough attached to its front bumper. Yellow flashing lights. Chains on the wheels.

It wasn't his fault.

AFTERWORD

JINGLE BELLS: Though I maintain a severe distrust in dialectics, I wanted to explore a Hegelian line of construction in this story. Thesis- Antithesis- Synthesis. Between two subjective perspectives, perhaps a third, objective, underlying 'truth' would emerge. Our modern currents seem to be pushing against this activity, and it seems like we are becoming less concerned with contextualizing our personal views against a certain worldview or metaphysic. We are post-modern castaways. Our subjective experience is the only source of truth or meaning.

But how can we proceed to live this way?

I am fascinated by this dilemma, this inherent antagonism, within our social world.

It might be the crux of everything.

GIIWAS: Crater Lake holds a very special place in my heart. About six months after I had visited Oregon on a camping trip with my brothers, this story fell to me. Like a pocket of snow down from the tallest branches of an mountainside pine. Like a pebble tumbling off the slopes of Wizard Island. A man. A wound. A ceremony.

The native people of the region which includes Crater Lake, the Klamath Tribes, have a beautiful story regarding the lake's formation. It involves a war between spirits from different realms, a jealous admirer and a beautiful maiden, heroic self-sacrifice, imprisonment, and transformation. It's a story which has been preserved for thousands of years, back to the time of the last eruption of Mount Mazama, in which the mountain itself was transformed from the 'Big Mountain' to the 'Mountain with its Top Cut Off.' The Klamath tribes view Crater Lake as a conduit of immense power and energy, and refer to it as *giawas*, or the sacred place. Only those spiritually, physically, and mentally prepared are deemed fit to visit the site, a site which had been protected in secret for thousands of years by the Klamath people.

RED LIGHT: The ability to do the unexpected, the ability to completely shift focus and become a new person- that's what makes human beings exciting. We're dynamic. We're flawed, but we're malleable. We can adapt and turn on a dime.

In fact, it's what John the Baptist called his audience to, in order they might prepare the way. The Greek word is *metanoia*, which is translated as 'repent,' but literally means a change of mindset, a conversion to a new way of thinking.

However, when people try to will themselves to change, when we try to force a change in behavior or thought, we are met oftentimes with failure. That's because change is not something we can call forward. There's no secret recipe to inciting change. There's no mantra. There's no advice. It's not even a matter of our desperation or willingness.

What matters is this: we have to be presented with the right set of conditions. The universe has to present us with an opportunity. And the paradox is, when that opportunity is presented, we don't actually change too much. We remain true to the essence of who we are. But because of the particularities and peculiarities of the situation, we 'seemingly' transform. We appear to exhibit a new dimension, to ourselves. And this is the key point- once our perception of ourselves changes, then anything and everything is possible.

FORLORN: Pain is intensely personal, singular, and consuming- it erases contact with the 'other' and focuses our attention entirely inward. It binds us 'in self'; we cannot connect to anybody in any way. In fact, try to recollect back on a moment when you were in pain- even our personal memory of the feeling is inaccessible. We are unable to recreate the situation with any degree of accuracy, whereas our other memories, other instances in our life, we can make approximations and simulations which at least begin to 'feel' close.

Pain is so nuanced, and idiosyncratic, that we can only know it when it is present, eating away at us.

Suffering, however, is a shared experience. A community suffers. A family suffers. The idea of suffering, the act of suffering, the problem of suffering- the human condition is one of suffering. We are communal, social creatures that live- and in that lifetime, we suffer, love, and die.

The presence of suffering creates the primary iniquity we face as living, breathing human beings. Not everyone is dealt the same hand. Some are worse off than others. It's the cold fact of the matter- not everyone suffers equally. And the cause of this iniquity is a source of great consternation, and mystery, for

philosophers, theologians, and the like. How could a 'good' God allow for suffering?

My feelings around the iniquity of suffering often connect back to love. Love is a similarly inexplicable, similarly communal, and similarly powerful element of our condition. Love is a kind of counterpoint to suffering. Not everyone is loved, or loves, equivalently. The relationship and linkage between suffering and love, marks our human condition.

Since I cannot escape my Catholic upbringing, I often turn to religious symbolism when exploring these fundamental domains. Christianity's symbols are so charged, so multivalent, and so rich because of their ability to connect us to our suffering, and to provide hope in the power of love. The cross, specifically, seems to be the intersection point between the two.

A THREE HUNDRED HOUR LONG TUESDAY AFTERNOON IN THE SIXTEENTH WEEK OF JULY, A DAY MOSTLY FULL OF NIGHT: By definition, *surreal* means "marked by the intense irrational reality of a dream." This element of the irrational- it applies to trains zooming out of fireplaces, clocks melting across desert landscapes. Irrationality of this nature is at the conventional, collective level. As rational people, we can agree that if we saw a car driving along the road unexpectedly pop like a soap bubble and disappear into nothing, it would be highly unusual. It would not be an event expected to occur in our universe, considering the laws of physics, et cetera. There are preset norms that we observe and assume to be in effect, and a surreal event would be one which breaks those norms and expectations.

But if we consider the word *surreal* in a more personal context, what may appear as an "intense irrational reality" to one person may not necessarily appear the same way to another. Each of us constructs our version of reality. We build it around tenets, beliefs, structures that inform and guide our decisions, our sense of placement in the world, our sense of who we are and what our life is about. When that architecture is disrupted- is this not a surreal experience?

MURDER: Many of my stories originate from dreams. This is one such story. I awoke in a sweat, in the middle of the night. I had been in my grandparents' home, a home I hadn't visited in twenty-five years, and had witnessed a murder. It was the sort of dream where

the dreamer is disembodied, an unseen witness to an unfolding scene. There had been a pillow, smothered onto a man's face until his breathing ceased. There had been a body dragged out of a bedroom, into the garage, in the middle of the night. There had been a deafening silence.

What could it possibly mean?

How was I meant to interpret it?

I'm not sure why, but dreams have always given me hope that there will be a 'continuation' of our consciousness after physical death. It has something to do with the fact that each night we enter worlds entirely new, entirely self-existing and self-contained, and have experiences in those worlds. Then, the night ends, and those worlds are destroyed. The person we occupied in that dream 'dies.' But somehow, each morning, we awake, back into reality. Death, then, might be a permanent transition into the dreamspace. Or, away from it.

AT THE SOURCE OF THE LONGEST RIVER:

And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.
Through the unknown, remembered gate
When the last of earth left to discover
Is that which was the beginning

- TS Elliot