



PORTRAITS IN GRACE

a voiceHOUSE experience

"Andrew... do you hear that? What the hell is that?"

"Uh, I think it's the door."

A pair of God's chosen were whispering to each other in bed... Myra thought to reach over and turn off the nightstand lamp on her side, but she was paralyzed in fear, too afraid to move... she peeked at her phone on her chest... "I know it's the door, Andrew. No shit. Look at what time it is..."

A pair of alarm clocks on top of a pair of night-stands, flanking each side of a king bed, read 10:29 PM.

"What do you want me to do?"

"Nothing. Just stay here."

The knocks continued. Three or four at a time, a pause, then again... clickkkkph, clickkkph, cluphh...

"I'm going to see who it is."

Myra didn't respond. She thought to text her mother, but there wasn't enough time... brainwaves condensing and coagulating like chickpeas... mush... fear... Myra, the same trust-fund'd debutante who left a napkin underneath a pitch-black-rainy-night windshield wiper of an SUV parked on a city street, parked in her spot, parked out of place and parked in such a disturbing way it warranted her to write out 'WAY 2 TAKE UP 3 SPOTS!? REALLY? ASSHOLE!' on a flimsy piece of paper cloth, just to prove her point... checking her rearview as she scoured the next block for room... this is our Myra.

Out of bed, Andrew tightened the drawstring on his athletic shorts and inspected his chin stubble reflected back at him in the hallway mirror. He rubbed the abrasive facial hairs with his knuckles in satisfaction. Satisfied, he tiptoe'd to the door... all 6'4" of him, 210 pounds of lean muscle, the former college athlete and his physical prowess... Andrew, the soccer star who once forced a young, inebriated woman to continue to perform oral sex even after vomiting onto his crotch... our Andrew, peeking through the eye hole of the apartment door.

And there stood a woman... red hair (dyed), disheveled and patchy, slapdash like a last-minute going-away party... a cane bracing her left side, clutching tight... her right hand up to her mouth, half-covering a face contorted in displeasure... like she could feel the awkward, terrible echo of each knock rattling through every pore of her being... like she didn't want to be knocking

on the Burton's door at 10:30PM, but there was no alternative. She needed help, she was... out of options.

Andrew turned the handle. "Hello?"

A tiny voice, a children's book voice full of pictures and narration, details of castles, faraway lands, princesses and talking willow trees... a pure, even-toned lull... angelic... a voice that had never meant any harm, had never screamed out in anger or insulted with the intention to destroy, a sweet voice... "I'm so sorry to bother you dear."

Andrew poked further into the hallway, opening the sliver to his and Myra's apartment a little further. He looked down at the woman and then across, noticing the door on the other side of the hall was opened. This must be their neighbor.

"Oh, it's alright. It happens. What's up?" He stuck a finger into his ear canal, itching... the noise.

"My name is Sara."

"Okay?"

She reached out her free hand. "What's your name?"

"Oh, I'm Andrew."

Skin hung about the woman, fat gobbled around her cheeks and neck, and she was completely unable to remain still... a kinetic frenzy, despite her being practically immobile... shaking, she was clearly upset, frazzled, like she had been dealing with a particularly unsettling issue for a long time, to no conclusion... Sara who once lay on a sidewalk for twenty-seven minutes after her cane broke from under her, days after surgery, stranded and crying out for help on a residential street with cars passing by and no one in the world showing care or concern, no good Samaritans to be found... the woman's eyes constricted, strained in discomfort, barely letting out their emerald green light. "Can you help me Andrew? This fire alarm, it keeps going off in my kitchen. I can't get it to stop. Can you hear it?"

Andrew glanced up above the head of the woman who didn't hover much more than five feet tall. She couldn't help but be wide and stumpy there in the hallway, a single, bulbous mushroom sprouting out between the carpeted fibers... her cane under her left palm, her chin above her right... lugubrious... thick glasses, lenses made for the legally blind... a purple sweatshirt...

helpless... a helpless woman... then the buzz honed Andrew's concentration. It was faint. A siren. A muffled alarm.

"Yeah, I can hear it."

Speaking rapidly now, the woman continued to explain, "Oh it's awful, it is. It's plumb awful. And it's been going on for the past half an hour. I can't seem to shut the thing down. I tried opening a window. I tried pointing a fan at the smoke detector. I tried to point my cane up to the button, but I can't lift it over my head. I am so very sorry to bother you like this, but as you can plainly see, I don't know what else to do. Can you help me, maybe to reset the alarms on the ceiling, or unplug them? Anything would help at this point, I can't, I don't..."

"Um, yeah. Let me just tell my girlfriend. One second."

Andrew closed the door, locking it behind him out of habit. He perched himself between the ends of the doorway to their bedroom... arms up, muscles bulging, a pose... another habit... Myra looked up from her cell phone... "What is it?"

"Some old lady."

"What does she want?"

"Some dick." He pulled a t-shirt from out of their dresser.

"Andrew... that's fucking disturbing. Seriously. What does she want?"

"Her alarms are going off or some shit. I don't know. She wants me to reset her fire alarms."

"So what are you going to do?"

"I'm gonna go reset them, she's waiting for me in the hallway."

"What am I supposed to do?"

"Nothing. You're fine. I'll be back in a minute..."

"Don't you get it (whispering)... this is how people are killed by friekin' axe murderers. What if she..."

"Myra, she's a fat old woman, it's alright."

"How do you know for sure?"

"I'll be back in a minute."

Andrew left the bedroom and unlocked the front door. The woman hadn't moved from her position.

Cooing, turning to her apartment door leading him in, "Thank you so much Andrew. Thank you. Here we are."

The smell struck Andrew first. He immediately brought his hand to cover his nose, unconcerned with any offense the gesture might imply. The smell of litter, of woodchips and piss, of a pet shop, earthy but defecating, suffocating... he coughed. He nearly turned back. A pair of ceiling alarms alternated cacophonous between the kitchen and the woman's bedroom... a countertop covered in prescription pill bottles, a handicapped car sticker, empty bins of food, plastic and paper and junk... junk everywhere... and across the kitchen, across the living room by the windows looking onto the apartment parking lot, a cage... a fake tree limb... a bright green parrot, with a patch of yellow on top of its head... a black beak... unmoving like a statue, perched on the limb... but the smell.

The woman gazed up at the young man. She sensed his consternation, thought for a moment, then, "Well if you need a chair, you can use the one at the table right here, it should be enough. I just... this sound, it's overwhelming. Is there a button you can press up there? I was inspecting it, but from down here I can't tell... it looks like a button doesn't it? Can you press the button? There is a button, isn't there?"

Andrew untucked a chair out from under the kitchen table. He set it under the alarm, climbed up, and pressed the button on the gadget stuck to the ceiling. It continued to beep. He pressed again. He held the button with his thumb. Then he let it go. The noise blared into his ears, filled his head with a locomotive force... jarring... an instant headache... he continued to fidget with the device. He turned it clockwise and it came off from the ceiling. He removed the battery, but a pair of wires kept the alarm connected to the circuits in the wall. Andrew waited. The noise continued. He put the battery back in.

The woman looked up at him all the while. He glanced down to her, and her face was in pain. She shook her head. "Is there anything I can do?"

"I'm uh, I'm not sure... hold on. Let me try the other alarm. Can I go in this room?"

She waddled over to her bedroom, leading him in. Andrew brought the chair. The room was cluttered, a mess like the rest of the house... the bed unmade, a laundry basket overflowing. He set the chair up under the beeping siren. He pressed the RESET button. He pressed it again and again, until finally.

The noise ceased.

Silence.

Then the bird squawked.

"Oh my, what did you do? How did you do that?"

Andrew came down from the chair, he set his hands on its back and faced the woman... "I have, uh, I have no idea honestly. It just stopped."

"Thank goodness. I was, I thought it would go on forever. Thank goodness. Zack must be so happy. He's been such a trooper dealing with this. Did you see him over in the living room when you walked in?"

Andrew's attention alternated between the smell and the woman's words... he felt uncomfortable, he tugged at his t-shirt sleeve... "Uh, yeah. The bird?"

"Zack is an Amazon parrot. He's my rescue bird. I've had him for twenty years. He can live up to fifty or sixty years, isn't that remarkable? He's my partner in crime. He's such a trooper, isn't he?"

Andrew wanted to leave. "Uh, yeah." He wanted to put the chair back under the table and walk out. He wanted to go back to bed. But he was stuck. The woman blocked the doorway from the bedroom to the kitchen to the door out to the hallway to his apartment. She was smiling. She was happy. She continued talking.

Speeding up, "He's really a remarkable little guy. We've known each other so long. He's my buddy with the yellow toupee, that's our joke. You know, before I got sick the first time, Zack started warning me... weeks before my accident, he would fly over and rest on my head. He kept doing it. He would just perch right on my head. For about two weeks, two or three weeks, and I kept asking him to hop off and leave me alone. Can you imagine that? And he would just keep trying to perch up there. And do you know what happened? The doctors ended up finding a brain cyst on one of those scans, the size of a hard-boiled egg. Isn't that amazing? Then before my arthritis flared up, a couple years later, he would set himself on my knees, on my hands, and he would just go on resting there. I'd knock him off, but he'd come back. It's remarkable. He's my caretaker, my buddy. And before my mother passed last

year, it was really unbelievable... see, he would get on the phone, to talk with her... my mother loved talking with Zack. She would ask him questions, he would recite the weather report to her. They were two peas, I swear. But it was amazing. Right before she died, she asked to speak with him, so I set the phone where he could talk, and he told her a story. He went into this whole story, it must have been ten minutes long. I'd never heard him do anything like it before, and he's never done it since. And it wasn't in English. It was in Amazonian, or aborigine, an old language. He kept going and going. And when he was done, he let out this full laugh, a belly laugh like you wouldn't believe. Then he kicked the phone over to me, and I asked my mother, I said 'What was that all about?' And she said 'I'm not sure, but I needed to hear it.' Isn't that amazing? And a week later she passed away."

Andrew's focus delved into the withered folds of the woman's hands. Hands mangled, unnatural, curled and digging in on one another performing a kind of biologic mutiny. There was an awful fight going on between the fingers. Weak, but fierce. He glanced back up at the woman's face, but couldn't focus on her eyes. He felt awkward. He felt gross. He said, "Wow, that's uh, that's amazing. So the bird can read minds or something?"

The woman glowed, responding, "Well, I don't know about that. But we have a connection. He has some kind of ability, some kind of spirit... people don't realize the personality that a bird can take on. He has a really rich personality, an internal life of his own... it's remarkable."

Andrew noticed a pile of underwear on the woman's vanity. An unwrapped package of facial wipes. A jewelry box. More clothes. A shower cap. He felt like he was undressing the woman. He felt his temperature rising... hot... uncomfortable. "Yeah, uh... that's amazing."

The woman reached her free hand on Andrew's. "Thank you so much for getting these to shut off. I don't even know what I could do. There's no utility man in the building, no landlord. I would have to deal with it all night. It's really... they really should have a handy-man on the premises in case of emergency problems like this."

Andrew gulped, hard. A pulse of dread innervated from his palm to his entire body. Shivering almost... her hand... "No, yeah... definitely. No problem, uh. Hopefully it's all set now."

Sarah let go with a smile and slowly headed out towards the kitchen. Andrew set the chair back under the table. He offered an awkward wave and began to step towards the door... the woman whispered, "Well thank you again. You know

it's nice to meet you, to meet neighbors. I just love this building. It's so nice being on the second floor. And Zack can look by the window. It's lovely."

Inching, inching... "Yeah, uh, sure is nice."

"Take care then Andrew."

"You too, nice to meet you, uh..." He had forgotten her name, so he closed the woman's door. He shook off his own hand in disgust, walked across the hall, and unlocked the latch to his apartment. Myra had turned the lights off in their bedroom. Andrew walked in and took his shirt off before going to bed.

"What happened? You were over there for like twenty minutes..."

"The fucking alarm wouldn't like shut off. It was ridiculous. I was standing on chairs... what a nightmare. What a disgusting place too, Jesus. It was gross. She has a fucking bird in there, just shitting out in the open. The whole place smells like bird shit."

Myra rolled towards Andrew. A gasp before, "Are you kidding me?"

Andrew laid rigid, perturbed. He flexed his triceps, then his shoulders. "No, it was gross. She kept talking about the bird this and the bird that. I wanted to tell her to open the window and let the bird fucking fly away."

Myra put her hand on Andrew's chest. "I thought they did like background checks in this place? For the rent we pay, we shouldn't have to deal with psychos for neighbors. Two thousand a month for this? I am so pissed. Seriously. I am going to bitch out the management office tomorrow. What are we paying for?"

Humphing... "No kidding."

Myra and her questions... "Like why is she knocking on our door?"

"I have no idea."

"Have you met her before?"

"Hell no. I've never seen her before."

"What's her name?"

"Who knows... bird-lady. Fucking nasty, crazy bird-lady."

Myra giggled. "Like, where is her husband? Or her family? How do we... like, we're not the building maintenance crew. Doesn't she know to put in like the email request, you know? Like we did for the washing machine."

Andrew closed his eyes. "Yeah, I dunno. Probably not. She probably doesn't even know what the internet is. Fucking whacko bird lady."

Andrew turned away from Myra, facing the outside of the bed.

"Well, can you like wash your hands?"

Andrew turned back, face up towards the ceiling.. "What?"

"I'm sorry babe, but it's just, like, it sounds so gross... I don't want like any of her nasty bird germs getting into our bed."

"Are you serious?"

"Yes! Go wash your hands."

"Jesus fucking..." Andrew, disgruntled, shot up out from his side of their down comforter. Bathroom lights. Sink. Soap. A look of disgust into the mirror. He scrubbed. He washed his hands, his face... he admired his pectoral muscles, and slanted his neck in the mirror... his perfect stubble across a firm jaw-line... dried his hands... adjusted the wave of brown hair, pointed and perfect on top of his head... lights off.

"You happy now?"

"Yes. Thank you, babe."

Myra reached over to rub her boyfriend's sharp cheek bone, but Andrew remained facing the other direction. He propped up his pillow. He adjusted the sheets, then his crotch under the sheets, ready for sleep. Ready to relax...

Until the knocking... clickkkph, clickkkph, cluphh...

The pair tried their best to will the bedroom back into a state of silence.

Clickkkph, clickkkph, cluphh...

Both Myra and Andrew imagined the woman away, as close to prayer as either of them had ever reached... but the knocking continued... clickkkph, clickkkph, cluphh... their peace of mind shattered by the fragile knocks... then, simultaneously, they noticed the faint frequency, a faint buzzing, an alarm...

the fire alarm had returned... feeble, harmless in their bedroom, but in the woman's apartment it rang out awful, violent... WARNING, WARNING... at first Andrew refused to act, but now he was unsure of what to do. A moment of indecision. Myra whispered, "Just pretend you're asleep. Like, this is crazy."

Together they waited, a pair of sneak-thieves in their own home, nervous... guilty... impending doom arrived yet again, three, four more tender taps at the door... Andrew groaned... "What the fuck?"

"Don't go."

"She won't quit, she knows I'm not asleep. I have to get up."

"No you don't."

They waited again... and a faint voice, from beyond the bedroom... "Andrew, please, are you there?"

Myra whispered, "Oh my god, she's calling your name..."

"What the fuck?" Andrew stood up. He squeezed his t-shirt over his head. He stopped before the door, slipped his feet into a pair of sandals, unlocked the handle, and opened up right as the woman was knocking.

Her face read volumes upon volumes of pain. Discomfort. The corners of her lips pulled horizontally away from her pale, plump cheeks towards her ear lobes, like she was being wrestled apart limb by limb... her tiny nose didn't know where to go, twitching in the center of the mess... the faint hum of the alarm had escalated out in the hallway, now a palpable buzz... Andrew noticed the pattern of the rings... waaah waaah waaah (pause) waaah waaah waaah... three, one, three... "I'm sorry Andrew to bother you again, I really am, but... it's back."

The young man rubbed at his eyes, pretending to be more tired than he actually was. "Yeah, I can hear it."

Inside the woman's apartment, he grabbed the chair and went to work. Unsnapping the alarm in the kitchen first, removing the battery, then clicking it back into position... he moved to the bedroom, repeated the procedure... after a couple of minutes the ringing stopped. The woman remained in the living room while Andrew cleared the noise. She tended to Zack, doing her best to comfort the bird... rubbing his beak, his wings. She looked upon Andrew as he put the chair away.

"You don't think it's alarming for some other reason do you? This whole ordeal has got me thinking about carbon monoxide. Can you double-check to make sure the stove is off?"

Andrew glanced at the digital monitor above the countertop. It was blank. "Yep, the stove is off."

"It's so strange. I don't understand it. The complex really should have a number to call, or a handy-man..."

Andrew interrupted her. "Well there's an email you can send, through the main webpage."

"Really? Do you think they check it at night, this late?"

"Probably not... maybe though, who knows?"

"How long have you been living here, Andrew?"

Andrew glanced from the stove to the refrigerator, then back to the woman... he noticed her arms heavy with fat, a roll across her belly... he looked down at his feet... "Well, I've been here with my girlfriend for two years now. Yeah, two years."

Genuine, she asked, "Has anything like this ever happened before?"

"Nope. I mean, uh, when we've cooked a few times, and it was smoking, the alarm went off in the kitchen... but like this, nope. Never."

"You don't have any phone numbers to call by chance?"

A magnet on the refrigerator... **FOR EMERGENCY, CALL 757-213-3233**... the logo of the rental property... "Well, uh, right here, on this magnet... I bet if you dial this number."

"Oh my! You're a lifesaver, Andrew. Right under my nose! Thank you. Here, let me dial it." The woman unearthed her cellphone from a stack of papers, trash... Andrew watched her arthritic fingers poke at the buttons... more struggle... her grip, her concentration... 3-2-3-3... he began to inch towards the door, but a delicate turn of her head, a supplication from her eyes... she begged him to stay. Against his inclination, he fought the impulse to exit and listened in on her as she worked through a series of automated prompts... she tilted again over to him, "It says if there's an emergency to dial 9-1-1... no kidding, right." Andrew faked a grin... the woman continued, mumbling, staring into the void, dedicated to the task at hand... "Well, wait a second..."

here, we... Hello... yes, is this the maintenance number... well, yes, I live at the Archstone Apartments... yes... I'm in building 60... yes, apartment 24... well, I'm not sure... we have, my, my fire alarms keep going off... well, yes, I've tried, my neighbor from across the hall is here... there's no way to tell... no, there's no fire... of course I'm sure... can you send somebody... a ticket number... well, if this keeps up, I'm afraid I'll be up all night... it is 11:30 nearly... and it's bothering my neighbors, too... well yes, I'd say so... it's very important... alright... so you put the ticket in, and... alright... well, then I guess I'll have to wait... alright... well, yes... thank you."

Andrew contemptuously watched her set the phone back on the counter.

"So can they send somebody?"

"Well, apparently when the ticket is open... I opened a ticket, and then the woman said she would call the maintenance man, to see if he is available... I'm not sure. She didn't give me a definite answer. I do hope so. I can't imagine this going on all night. Zack will be ready to fly out the window."

Andrew looked back at the parrot, unmoved... unflinching... he yawned into, "I'm surprised he isn't flying around."

"Oh, well, I clipped his wings a couple years ago. He kept getting into trouble. Most people think it's cruel to clip a bird's wings, but they don't know. It's no different than neutering a dog. It was for Zack's own safety, you see, they get excited when they're domesticated, and they can run into windows. He can still bob around, he moves around all the time... he doesn't really mind it I don't think. I set him up on his branch and he's the king of the castle. You don't think it was cruel of me?"

"Uh, no, not really. I mean... I don't know anything about birds, you know?"

Silence... real silence... his temperature rising again... picture frames, a stack of books, a pile of dishes in the sink... that smell... Andrew wanted to leave... "So, I guess you did everything you can do, with the phone call and everything... I hope the maintenance man comes soon for you."

"Me too, me too. I just can't believe they don't have somebody here. I'm so sorry again, for all of this. You're a great help. Thank you so much. Thank you, Andrew."

Inching towards the door... "No problem, take care alright? Have a good night..." closing it behind him... across the hall... unlocking his own apartment... shirt off, back into bed... but then up again, out, into the bathroom... the lights,

the sink... soap, scrubbing... the hand towel... one last look in the mirror... his hands through his hair... a sigh... under the sheets.

Myra didn't move from her side. "So is this going to go on all night?"

"Who knows... she called maintenance... I think she said they are going to send someone."

"I'm going to send an email to the management office tomorrow, this is ridiculous."

"Why? You could be sleeping... I'm the one over there balancing on chairs and pressing buttons like an idiot."

"I can't sleep. What if like she's a psycho, and tries chopping you up? Sleeping... she's ruined both of our nights. I can't sleep. And now I'm like just waiting for the door to knock again. This is bullshit."

Andrew adjusted himself. Propped up the pillow. "I know. Crazy old bird ladies." All he wanted was to sleep, to get a good night's rest before another day of work... the office, the sales calls... but his ears wouldn't offer him the luxury of sleep yet. They waited, on guard... for the silent hum... for the knocking... high alert. Anticipating disaster. Disgusted. Itching his stubble, "What a gross apartment, too... if you complain tomorrow, tell them about the smell of that place. And the bird squeaking. Tell them the bird is always squeaking. So gross."

Myra waited, then, "It's like sad, almost... for somebody to live alone like that, in filth. I bet her family doesn't go over there because it's so gross. Like... I almost feel bad for her. What did she look like?"

Humphing... "Old and fat."

"Gross. Fat old crazy bird lady..." Myra giggled.

"The funny thing is now she thinks we're best friends..."

"If she knocks again Andrew, please..."

"She isn't knocking again."

Silence in the room, but in the spaces of their minds... the pair of young beauties ran through scenarios, drew up stories about the woman, her past, examined her sins... pity, not sympathy... disgust, not gratitude... but ultimately, they were right. They stood on the right side of the argument.

They stood bolstered by their own rightness. Affirmed. Bothered. Then relaxed. Then asleep.

A maintenance man stopped by and disconnected Apartment 24's alarm system for the evening.

Zack remained on his perch.

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Worried. Anxious. Annoyed. "Did you get my text?"

A gulp. "Not until I was on the train back... I was stuck in a meeting all afternoon. Come here Bailey... come here girl!"

Tom Watkin dropped a leather shoulder bag on a cold, granite kitchen counter and clasped his hands below his knees, a tight grip around the shins. Barking, then glancing black-eye'd towards him, a white, curl-perm'd dog (descended from expensive European breeding lines) approached cautiously. Finally, after enough coaxing, the animal licked the man's fingers several times. Tom moved his hands beneath the animal's neck, caressing its hair.

"Well, what did you think?" Roseanna Watkin sat on a leather sectional that had been custom fit to their apartment space (after hours of pricing and measuring and debating with the Pottery Barn sales associate. Her legs were crossed. Her head tilted down, no chin to be seen with her face almost dropping away from itself... she was ready for a fight. She had picked Bailey up from the dog-sitter's condo, then suffered in line for groceries for nearly fifteen minutes, all after a six hour day at the office... a disinterested, caustic gaze had replaced a gentle faraway sort of stare that she had worn on her face before Tom came through the door.

Tom's voice, lukewarm, unassuming... diffident... "I've never heard of it, to be honest."

"Of course you haven't, you haven't done any research on it. Don't you want to hear what the vet said?"

"I do. I didn't mean it like..."

"Well, Dr. Cooke told me that it's becoming very common, especially in puppies that are brought up with dog sitters, like Bailey has been. He said that because we took such good care of her, and made sure she was hardly alone the first six months of her life, it makes things more difficult for

her to be alone now. Which is totally crazy. It's like we did too good in taking care of her, and now we have to deal with this."

"We took too good care of her? I didn't even know... "

A puff of hot air between her lipstick red lips, "Dr. Cooke said Bailey is used to having her attention seeking behaviors met. So now, when we leave her at home on Tuesdays and Thursdays, because she isn't around anybody, she isn't adapted to it. She's developed a need for constant contact, so any time off... he said separation anxiety is very common for terriers."

"So that's the medical diagnosis?"

Roseanna shook her head in disgust. Disbelief. "What do you mean?"

"I mean... "

"If that's what Dr. Cooke said, and he's a doctor, then yes. It's the official medical diagnosis. What part of that is confusing?"

"I thought... separation anxiety, I thought it was more of a people... I didn't know if it would have a different name, because she's a dog..."

"That's stupid. No. It's separation anxiety. Dr. Cooke said between the study video the clinic took during our visits, and what we've told him, he can confidently say that's what is going on." An itch brought her hand to her nose, a nose usually so high she would have drowned in a rainstorm.

Scratching at the animal's fur, behind its ear... Tom, "So we should have trained Bailey differently?"

"I don't know Tom. I have no idea. From *all the reading* I was able to do between work and picking Bailey up and getting the groceries and everything else, I mean... I don't know. I think we may have rewarded some of her behaviors, with the crate, and with the whimpering early on... she hasn't learned how to adapt to being alone. Either way it's too late now. We've screwed ourselves."

"I don't feel like we treated her any differently than my parents trained our old dog Trigger, it's not like..."

"Bailey has a totally different personality than that dog Tom. Plus Trigger was a boy. It's totally different, but it's not even the point. The point is we need to call the therapist Dr. Cooke recommended so he can monitor Bailey as she starts taking the medicine as prescribed."

"Medicine?"

Rubbing her eyes, closed then open, "Yes, Tom. Medicine. You take it when you're sick, or there's a problem. We have to get Bailey's prescription filled. It's the only way to start addressing the issue."

Tom scratched the back of his neck, what little terrain of neck available... his head practically sat on his shoulders like a ball in a socket... "I know. I mean... so it's alright, for a dog to take anti-depressants?"

Roseanna turned from her position, tense with frustration, her face matching her red hair and lips and nailpolish... "Of course it is! Why else would the doctor write a prescription for Bailey?"

Bailey left Tom and scurried through the kitchen into the couple's living room, up Roseanna's seat onto the couch. Then the new bride picked the animal up and set it on her lap.

Tom walked away and poured a glass of water from the sink. "I know, I just didn't... okay, so will our insurance cover it?"

"No, I don't think so."

A moment, then, "Well that sucks."

Cradling the animal like a child, the young woman's voice raised... "Why does that even matter? Why is it always about the money? What about Bailey?"

"It's not, I just... listen, I want Bailey to get better too, alright? Please don't snap at me for asking a question."

Rose immediately snapped, "I'm not snapping at you. It's been a long day. And of course the *first thing* you ask has to be the insurance, the cost... it's always the money with you."

"We just spent a fortune on the condo Rose, okay? I'm sorry for being a bit concerned about the money. The other night you were talking about how saving needs to be our priority. That we need to cut expenses, that we need to stop spending on luxuries, that we need to..."

"Cutting costs on Bailey was not what I was talking about, and you know it. That's not at all fair Tom. Not at all." Humphf.

After pacing over a few tiles in the kitchen, head down, sunken, another gulp, a scramble... "I know it's not, I'm sorry." Tom slugged down a mouthful

of water, then refilled his glass. Tight, trendy pants. A beard with manicured stubble. His attire, his mannerisms- a carbon copy from most highway billboard advertisements. "So do we start giving her medication right away?"

"We can pick the prescription up in another hour or so. I dropped it off at the pharmacy. Dr. Cooke said it would take a couple weeks for the medicine to take effect, where we should start seeing a difference. And in the meantime, we need to schedule an appointment with Dr. Mazlo, a dog psychiatrist Dr. Cooke referred, so he can monitor the effectiveness of the medicine. Like, in a month, after it's started working. So he can compare the difference."

Tom nodded in silence, but Roseanna was not watching him. "Tom, do you understand what I'm saying?"

"Yes... I nodded my head. What is there not to understand?"

She brought her feet down to the area rug. She resented his doorknocker chin, hanging there... her friends had married men with cut chins, with rockface jawlines... "Well can you make the appointment?"

"Sure."

Her pudgy cheeks, her fat wrists with diamond bracelets dangling, "Tomorrow, first thing?"

"Tomorrow, first thing."

"Are you going to forget?"

"No, I'll put a reminder on my phone, right now, alright... Dr. Cooke..."

"No! Dr. Mazlo! Tom, I swear to God... you don't listen to me! You never listen! You sit there in your own world like an idiot- I need a partner Tom! How are we going to get through all of this? Huh? How is this ever going to work, with everything that we have to deal with- I'm not doing it alone! I'm not. It's not fair. I deserve a partner who listens. So I need you to listen! I can't stand you sometimes..." She clutched Bailey tight. The animal fidgeted and tail-wagged and wide-eyed black and blank across the room...

"That's what I meant, alright. Dr. Mazlo, one month..." In the secret heart of Tom's mindbody peppered a series of whispers, of simple criticism, pointed and mostly accurate, 'Why the hell does his name matter? Dr. Cooke, Dr. Mazlo, I'll call the friggin doctor alright. And why do doctors insist on

changing their name- why does completing medical school warrant such a distinction that it impacts your name- why doesn't a war hero have his surname updated, or a single mother who put her son through college- what makes Mazlo so friggin special?' Shortly after the pop-pop of rhetorical, Tom's secret heart went cold and silent and fearful that Roseanna had heard.

"Can you just go pick up the medicine?"

"Sure, I'll go in an hour, like you said." Activated, secretive, again... his voice inside whispering 'Remember those older coworkers who used to poke fun at you around the wedding, how they used to say 'JUST WAIT' like they knew you would soon be unhappy and miserable and forlorn and bitter exactly like them- remember how you promised to remain steadfast in your decision, to not become one of the many, to not fall into cliché or tragedy or trap- remember?'

Roseanna carried the dog from the couch to the kitchen table. The woman took a piece a paper from out of her purse on the table, and handed it to the man. She returned to the couch. The television **ON**, green like Gatsby's tantalizing light. "I'm exhausted Tom. I need to decompress for a little bit..."

Tom walked over and found a seat next to her. "Me too. It's not like you were the only one working today, alright? I'm tired too."

She flipped channels, not responding.

Tom swished the liquid in his glass. He looked outside the window... there were cars parking in the condominium lot... other people, back home from their long days. The sun was lengthening, stretching into the dusk while the days shortened, the night arriving earlier and earlier... the summer was over. The parties, the trips, the one-year anniversary, the birthday, the weekends at the shore... at least football season was underway. Tom discretely took his phone from his breast pocket, fidgeting through a roster of fantasy draft players... her gaze didn't break from the big screen pixilation, "Tom, who are you texting?"

"I'm not. I'm looking into this, canine separation anxiety..."

Another channel came, went... jetsam, flotsam...

--

Alone in a one-room studio crammed with fast-food wrappers and sketchbooks... a starving artist eats his final meal... he wipes his mouth. Simon has exhausted his money... depleted another month's dole, another government check. The only

valuables to his name are a pad of food stamps on his nightstand, two cigarettes, and three bites of a cold sandwich. He sits alone between four walls, one window, financed by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. He's unable to finish the 'Seafood Special' on wheat purchased from a convenience store. Bleach'd-white-faux-crab meat sprinkled with paprika, stuck between his teeth. He had spent his last three dollars. \$3.14-to be exact. He has the lights shut off, and the room is dark. Dusky. He listens to one of his neighbors shut the door, home from work. He thinks about work, about his job waiting tables for eight-years at a local family diner before his first breakdown. He remembers the day he quit. He remembers his therapist's words, "Don't get so down on yourself. You've come a long way the last couple of months. It will keep getting better." The depression. The loss of his father. The tenuous relationship with his ex-boyfriend. His inability to create any new work. Ripped up papers. Used charcoal. Wasted ideas. The prescription medication. It will be six days until he receives another check. He has two cigarettes left in his blue Parliament pack. A pair of cigarettes. Two. He toys with the idea of smoking one right now in the studio apartment room, laying down on his bed, then buttoning up his coat and walking down to the Terminal. He imagines himself smoking the second cigarette quickly before jumping off a platform in front of an outbound train. He pictures sundry passengers waiting behind the marked lines, seated on benches or leaning against concrete columns- backpacks, briefcases, grocery bags- he can see their faces warped in horror, unable to turn away from his desperate act. An outbound train, he decides, would be the more noble target because then at least he wouldn't ruin anybody's night headed into the city. At least with an outbound train, the passengers might be granted some extra time away from their homes or responsibilities or concerns. Simon figures the commuters might sit on the train, reading their books, listening to music, and enjoy their precious final moments alone away from the demands of children or spouses or bills or the bottle. It would be his masterpiece. It would be his perfect vision, realized. Simon examines the crust of his sandwich. He double knots the laces his shoes and goes back to the lonely seat next to his bed. A headlight crosses beyond the curtains of his window. He opens the pack of cigarettes. One. Two.

--

Traffic (ubiquitous) clotted up in the distance...

A pair of itinerant saints and their pooch, awoken from the nod.

Heat radiating upwards from the sidewalk, extirpated from the mantle and flowing volcanic- July had been one immovable pall of carbon. Cooked, they

didn't hurry their movements or motions, cold-blooded and resting like reptiles... sun and stone... heat. Hot. Then cold. The chills. The junk confusion. Eddie had begun to steer the wheelchair of his confined partner along a sidewalk. Their flat coat retriever blazed a trail- a pure bred flusher. Within a few minutes both men were profusely sweating, shivering.

Dusk approached.

Brusque. "We need to score Nanno some food."

They had been posted up on a brick wall all day, escapees into reprieve... the shade, a spot between buildings absconded from the glare of police squadron cars... late in the afternoon, or maybe early into the evening... the summer presented a confusing time for a junkee. Sunlight. Shade. Hot. Cold. Neither of them had noticed the rustling of trees in years.

"We could use another score ourselves."

From the rear, "We got ours today. Nanno hasn't eaten shit in a week."

"He gets the dumpsters every damn night... that dog is fine."

"I'm talkin' proper meal... and he's not fine. Take a look at him."

Stamp reached his half-shut eyes in front of the wheelchair. Nanno's ribs protruded outwards from each flank, visible despite his black coat... the fur, which once only feathered at his tail and legs, now splayed all over, thin. Nanno was once a sidekick who teemed with energy, with soul- now their dog languished awfully slow and deliberate as each paw struck the concrete... Stamp acknowledged Eddie's point in secrecy. Watching Nanno grope onwards like a retiree moves towards his wife in the house after spending an afternoon with his tools in the garage... bothered by the prospect of another step, the fun nearly exhausted... Stamp couldn't watch any longer. He closed his eyes.

In his dominant tone Eddie continued, "You see it, don't you?"

Delicately responding, half hearted, "I guess- yeah, I see it."

"Let's use some of that money and get him some chow."

"We only got six bucks, Eddie."

"I thought you said sixteen?"

"You done forgot the whole morning again, haven't you?"

"I wasn't even that fucked up, Stamp."

"Well I was! Shit!"

A pair of chortles ... a moment of relief.

Fleeting.

Summertime heat continued to press on them... heat that drove out frizzy haired, clinically obese, off-the-bus commuters head-down headed longday home trudging through crosswalks to their apartments with oversized purses tilting them angled and discombobulated lighting a cigarette stuck to their lips... a saline deluge underneath arms between thighs into palms down backsides... that heat... armpits like ink blots, pants like fly paper... the moon of blackberries, a blood moon eclipsing anyone's ability to enjoy a summer evening. Heat which denuded man to his most basic function: survival.

They had left the comfort of the shade, the abandoned parking lot. On their way. Surviving. Eddie pushed onward and Stamp held a faint grip on Nanno's leash. The trio cleared a couple of blocks, concrete underfoot, and approached a favorite spot- a patch of covered ground in an abbreviated parkway between mini-malls. Grass, a few trees... a rural retreat of sorts. No monkeybars or slides or woodchips, no fear of children or mothers who made quick calls to the authorities when local ruffians invaded with their graffiti and skateboards... no, it was worthless to the world, worthless to the economy... but it was there. Out of sight, unnoticed, but surrounded by traffic and easy to reach a main intersection. Worthless... full of litter from the drive-by drive-thru crowds that flew past from north, south, east, west... suburban commerce like outlet depots and chain restaurants in every direction... no see-saw or jungle gym... a favorite of hobo hangouts, a drifter's paradise. A place they broke bread, held court, waited for sunset. Worthless.

Once they landed, a thought and then a question, "Say, when you gonna take that off?"

Stamp examined his wrist. "This? Why would I?"

"It's been nearly four weeks."

Annoyed and assured, Stamp declared, "You getting thick in this heat? Don't you get it? This wristband makes us money! Cash money!"

Eddie was confused. "How you figure?"

"Figure? Because folks think I just got out of the hospital right down the road. Shit! They think you been pushing me right out the front door. They think we spent all our money on a cancer surgery and we're all down on our luck, like you're my brother helping me along. Shit. It's all part of the story."

"We've been in this town for weeks. People seen us. It doesn't matter anymore." A bead of sweat rolled off Eddie's forehead. "Nobody cares about our story anyways."

Stamp brushed off Eddie. "They might not ask it, but they making it up in their head. Folks come up with your whole story just based on how you look. Come on. You tell me who people going to give money to: a sick guy out of the hospital, in his wheelchair, being pushed by his brother or some queen with AIDS trying to hustle with his running partner? Which one? You tell me what story they like better Eddie."

Eddie glanced down on Stamp's balding head, adorned with fractals of hair like sporadic bushes of grey/black... his heart skipped a beat... his eyes confirmed that each section was thinner, more sporadic than when he last glanced with furtive eyes... "Ain't nobody think I'm your brother, Stamp. You black, and I'm white as a mountain snow cap."

"Agh, brother, cousin... whatever. You have no imagination Eddie. That was always your damn problem."

"How you mean?"

Stamp took a winded, laborious breath... inhaling, fighting... "Don't even get me started." He looked forward, the cars and the shoppers... a royal being chauffeured about his empire. "We can flag for a little bit. Get the sign out."

"What about Nanno?"

The middle-aged dog turned back to Eddie, attentive after hearing his name called... the white spotted eye, ribs expanding and collapsing like a speed-freak'd accordion... dreams of fetch, of chow bowls and hydrants and trees and groundhogs... though Nanno had never experienced a full meal, a fresh Frisbee... the creature had been claimed by Stamp and Eddie two years ago outside a Greyhound station in Philadelphia. Nanno fit right in with the pair.

"The sooner we flag some money down, the sooner he can eat. It's the same every day. And most importantly, the sooner we can eat. Shit. I know you love this dog, but, shit."

"I ain't even that hungry Stamp. I'd rather just score another bag, you know?"

"What do you think I meant by 'eatin' Eddie? Come on. Get out the sign and let's set up. You take the median, and I'll post on the corner so you can point to me... your sick brother, alright?"

Eddie took off his hat, a corduroy bucket-style shred of cloth, and wiped his long forehead. "What about Nanno?"

Stamp looked around the hobo park. He pinched a wrinkle of skin underneath his chin. "We'll tie him off on that tree right there. People can't be seeing we got a dog we're feeding too. Nobody needs money that bad if they're taking on the luxury of a dog."

Shadows extended their outlines as their figures moved about the park.

The Saturday hustle was slowing down- fathers towing oversaturated truck-beds of new tools and garden supplies thanks to SALE PRICES, kids with their crisp back-to-school clothes and glitter-tagged pencil cases, mommies with upgraded cellphones in compact leather cases. Economy, society... the summer was winding down, but dollars and credit cards continued to wield their power over the suburban plume.

Eddie and Stamp had been rummaging outside of Boston since June. It had been a fight or flight destination. Eddie's family kept calling the police on them, and there had been a warrant issued back in Syracuse. With legal consequences impending they assembled enough money for a train pass- a quick pimp, convincing a young businessman to trade them forty dollars for a 'winning' lottery ticket, a ticket that had been scrounged behind a **711 Convenience Mart** ripped in half then re-taped- invalid by state law- but appealing bait nevertheless for a middle-class guilt-ridden good-guy. For years the pair had played the part of military veterans on disability, long lost children rushing their way home to see mother before death found the poor woman helpless... the king and the duke... and those were benign plots compared to other exploits. Hard times obliged them to steal out of cars, out of apartments, out of basements and businesses, from construction sites and church parking structures... they had pawned jewelry, stereos... sold blood, semen, cashed in cans and bottles... the next hustle. That was the extent of

their plan. A pair of homeless, dopesick fags- or so they lovingly referred to themselves.

Nanno didn't put up a fight. The pooch curled up at the base of the tree and closed his eyes. He wasn't offended to be left out of the next chase.

Eddie wheeled Stamp towards the intersection through a path of dirt, a dead slab of earth where grass had once grown but now refused to breach the soil. "How's the foot feeling anyways babe?"

Stamp always warmed up to Eddie's sweet talk... the concern in Eddie's voice was genuine... lovers, partners, addicts... they had seen a lot together. They had spent many nights in lassitude, starving, withdrawing, winnowing... but never alone. Six years on the pavement. Six years running. Family.

"Agh it's fine, it's... I haven't looked at it yet today, but it feels fine. I mean, after that shot this morning, I could've walked on water. Shit."

They shared another chuckle. Eddie squeezed Stamp on his shoulder. Stamp brought his hand on top of Eddie's.

Naturally laconic, Eddie offered: "Let's get some money, I feel good about it."

"Me too Eddie. We'll get Nanno his food. Yessir. Saturdays... people got full wallets. Payday Fridays... they're looking to spend. Give 'em a story Eddie, I'll just sit over here... not like I need to pretend to look like death... with the bug, the tuberculosis... shit..."

Eddie turned over his shoulder as he crossed the street towards the concrete divider... "You look alright Stamp. Don't worry."

Stamp exhaled, truly, and clamped the brakes on his wheelchair. There was no urgency to go anywhere. It seemed to him like life had always been like this... the chase, the score, the highs followed by the lows... waiting for the next hit... childhood, memories, the past... had it been different? Or had things always been this way? There was no consideration to wonder.

And even if there had been time to consider, he would've reached the same conclusion...

--

"I was sitting in an AA meeting, a long time ago... I remember this old junkee, he had skin like wet construction paper, thin as a rail... his name was Alex..."

Alex the junkie... and I'll never forget Alex because he told the same story every time he spoke up... he told a story about getting released from his last treatment center, last detox or whatever it was, before he cleaned up for good... and the nurse at the desk, she handed him his discharge papers, and he looked down and saw this handwritten note, something jotted down by the doctor on staff, the last note on the page... and it said PATIENT IS WILLING... and Alex said that kept him from picking up a needle those first couple days, those important first-days of sobriety... he would think back to the note, then think to himself, 'That's me motherfucker! Willing! Willing patient!' He said it was the closest thing to a compliment he had received in decades. That note restarted his entire life. Three words. Patient. Is. Willing. You never know what your words can mean for somebody who needs them."

--

Memories like treetop sunlight, between the shadows under a bosky covering... you stare up, lost in ethereal interludes between light and dark, haze and form.

A crack in the asphalt driveway, oil leaking from underneath an old Chevrolet sedan... pooling.

Your head is quiet. The night is close at hand.

Back porch, a cotton sweatshirt, a glass bottle- the end of this day ending like each day with the sun's retreat sacred and into the earth, in her own way, unassuming but pervasive like Sunday crispness in the apple core'd heart of a primal October. The receding hairlines of summer have kissed nature farewell. October, a Carnival ebullience- scarlet sugar maples and burnt oranges and American elm honeys and ambers and wine stained sweetgum and sere'd oaks- blown in the wind across lawnmower America like beads like candies according to nature's excesses, raked up by old men who haven't thought to celebrate life for decades so they perspire and collect death into neat accounting firm piles- if mommy sees you jump into one she'll have to check you for ticks- one last hurrah then a canister of lighter fluid a match and good night, rest, rely on your fat reserves. Winter is all bone anyways. Spring is petrichor. October is the reason for eleven other months, a bowl of dried kinnikinic. October in hometown backyards- here you are, grilling steaks with your little sister. She unpacks the marinated tassels of beef from a plastic bag and set your left palm approximately four inches above the charcoal grill, adjusting the air damper deftly- the smell...

Memories hide-and-seek forgotten up in the attics of your subconscious... like your great-uncle of childhood Reverend Desmond Thomas Malone now dead thirty

some odd years but you can still taste that pipesmoke rectory office and funeral incense after rubbing your eyebrows, the immense mahogany desk where he let you take the envelop opener and liberate his collage of mail, his hands gripping your sides then a squeeze and a smile... another flurry of memories sluice'd out of you... like baseball doubleheaders caked in sweat and grass stains, alive yet reeking of death and dirt and microbial production... like boggy homework assignments resigned with your eyes out a window... like Ma's lotion-scented sunglasses reflecting backwards backseat so you can see through to her emerald almond eyes in the rearview mirror... ice cream July, frozen March... car keys and ignition and wild electric stupidity for mile after oblivious mile out beyond teenage horizons... back home though, always back home with your elbows on the kitchen countertop quartz your fingers under the cake platter within reach of a second then a third walnut chocolate-chip cookie.

You glide carefree across your childhood yard over the tops of oak trees and white pines, out of reach, ephemeral light hiding hidden from a shadowy earth cooling and dying in preparation for the winter solstice, from shadows to darkness... everyone ought to go home in October and root on their Sunday afternoon team together forever because it feels good even when we lose... feet up on the couch and pass a cold beer and fix an appetizer and remember the big one we all won together that one magic afternoon long ago so perfect and so faraway it must be a dream... everyone ought to go home and bustle over simple chores and laugh at old time jokes, listening intently to a voice with a harsh cough telling stories the same stories over and over because it's good to have at least one fine story to tell with elan, to know it front and back. Back home is where it starts. Back home is where it ends... like a pit in the hallowed center of your being, like haunted stomach aches sick outside of principal offices... nostalgic, weepy for the past... missing those long gone days, those simple bicycle helmet jaunts like schoolyard Friday's standing upright no more than three or four feet tall, a backpack child amongst bookbag children, kiddies weighed down by their studies their numbers and letters and shapes and dates to memorize, histories of English and multiplication tables of grammar piled in, but mostly weightless freedom a freedom to exist spindrift between worlds made of our own imaginations... our dreams and imaginations... lost... yet... a brightness in their eyes, your eyes, a twinkle, up those stairs quick-footed to fresh skinned granny-smiths and milk, to safety and love eternal.

You remember everything at once then nothing. You do it with a pining heart. You cherish and hurt in the same breath. Steel tongs in your hand... it is almost impossible to believe it existed. That it happened to you. Once upon a time- with no concern over clinical trials or boardmembers or prices rising

or falling, the market economy... no no no... why can't it last? You try to enjoy the cool air and Autumn's kiss on your rouge cheeks... enjoy it like children who worry only for Halloween costumes, hope only for fireflies, care only for their dear friends in Boyscout camping tents marked by flashlights decorated in melted marshmallow... simplicity, genuine... guaranteed like school bus arrivals waiting on tree stumps. How could you have known?

Here it is, here we are- the steaks are finished, the table is set so you walk inside and eat and try your awful best attempt at being present because: the present is slippery, the past is widening beyond the stretch of your hands, the future is decided. You have grown old and grown up.

TO CHILDREN AND THE INNOCENT IT'S ALL THE SAME

Autumn, another year gone and decaying and dying and soon dead, hanging on tenuous like the smoke of burnt leaves of flames and crackling across a New England countryside- dinner ends, your sister leaves, the dishes occupy a dirty sink- Mom in her apron, dancing to the Pointer Sisters- wishing she was here- wishing you were there- your friends age fat and old and tired, me too- you too- but you grin nevertheless amidst leftover fragments and gristle even though inevitably the void will win, death will win- the garbage disposal runs- an inevitable fall from grace to the midnight of solstice where nothing can escape the dark, the sun vanquished gone for an arctic circle holiday- why not try to enjoy it? Why not wash the dishes, pray for ignition in the front seat of the car, cruise away along stonewall roads with headlights activated high-beam and searching for one final adventure. Never to return. Never to regain the simplicity, the purity. Stranded from the past- your sister's face, your face, your mother's bones, changed. Those young man faces, those little kid faces, those happy faces- where had we left them? Why had we let them shed so easily? Molting to make way- make way for what? Success? Responsibility? Silly notions of control, of enjoyment?

Hardened.

Bones.

Memories blurry but static like old gamblers in turnstiles- racing forms at their sides, tickets between thumb and forefinger, greasy and black nail'd- the horses' names change, the odds shift, but that immobilized, molested loss remains... worn... rolled up and slapping our knees, crack, to will on the jockey... the shouts, the cries... then silence.

The engine, then the lights shut off- arrived- ready for Monday, the job, dreamless sleep. October and her perfect silence at the end of a Sunday night

back home, back at mom's house before the estate sale, before the attorneys' fees are paid, the deed is sold... before the land is cleared and a new family moves in. Before a new tragedy unfolds. Before a new triumph is realized.

Back home one last time, one last deep breath in your nostrils.

--

"What should we do about Paul?"

Mr. Kepner navigated a final dribble of whiskey in a circular motion, clockwise, around a SUSQUEHANNA NATIONAL coffee mug. Both elbows were planted firm on a coarse, hand-made table top. The sound warmed the ears of his son Dennis.

"We'll have to tell him. But there's no sense of risking him coming home now. If anybody is watching him, watching us- they'll be suspecting it."

"It's weird, isn't it? That he planned to come home this week, without knowing what happened to her."

A final sip, then Mr. Kepner's calloused hands positioned the ceramic glass down gently... he rotated his wedding band... a simple gold ring, unchanged in decades... so different from his marriage, evolving, complex... the thought brought him a satisfied grin. He was the rare breed of man who labored hard but thought even harder. A bricklaying philosopher king. "Life tends to work out that way- it makes you face what you don't want to. He just missed her. It will be hard for him. It's going to be... but now isn't the time. We can't add to our problems. Or his. He has to stay out of trouble, lay low."

A son protested, respectfully, to his father... "I know, but- it's not right. He should come back, to say goodbye. Forget the police. Do you think they're really watching us? They would bust him at her funeral?"

Understanding his son's concern, "Denny, I don't know. I don't know enough about his situation. But he can't risk it. And besides, funerals, they... Paul isn't wired for funerals. The whole premise behind a funeral... you know him. He'd protest. He'd rant about his Buddhism... there's... honestly, a part of me does want him home, just to hear him talk, hear him explain some of our pain away. He was always so good at that, giving us a new way to look at something... you remember the World Series, when you were kids?"

Dennis took a concerted sip from his Coca Cola bottle, an emulation of his father acted out subconsciously... that refreshing 'ahh' sound... acknowledgement broke across the face of the youngest of two sons, the one

who listened, the one who paid attention and never allowed himself to show disrespect... "He kept yelling 'The government is trying to brainwash us!' after that radio station was replaying that laundry detergent commercial, over and over. He went nuts. Yeah, I remember it. But you don't think we should even ask him, to make sure?"

"Sometimes when you love someone, you have to make a decision for them."

Both of them decided to allow for silence to take hold. In the kitchen- well past midnight- a quiet which allowed Dennis' mind-voice to re-enact Paul's childhood warnings, a quiet which allowed Mr. Kepner to relive the final moments of his wife's life... Mr. Kepner finished his remembering, then continued. "After the police interviews, it was bad enough you got wrapped into the whole mess because of the postcards. Paul needs to lay low. I don't need him locked up, not right now. It would be too much to deal with that, on top of everything else. Now's not the time."

Without deliberation Mr. Kepner poured himself a second glass of oak-barrel age'd rye. He capped the bottle. He began to tip-tap at a wooden plank, one of four that had supported so many family dinners, so many trays of lasagna and plates of beef roulade and bowls cinnamon apple pies... he tapped out a constant rhythm with his index finger, dum-dum-dum, as had become the habit of a singular mind locked in thought, discriminating a single right answer from a plague of wrongs... a man grown old from the ghost of a boy who paid careful attention to his father's disintegration at the mercy of booze, his family's disintegration at the mercy of his father's violence... "I'll call the airline. You said he was coming through Vancouver first, before San Francisco? If we can get him turned around while he's still in Canada... but the problem is what he was doing for an ID? If he's on a list, an FBI list... he would have changed it, for the flight manifest." Mr. Kepner ventured further into pointed, deep thought.

Denny was glad to contribute. Excitedly, "He said something about a fake passport, from Austria or Australia... the connection was fuzzy, it was hard to make it out."

"We'll get him turned around before he can get into the country. Then maybe you fly up there in a month or so, after all this is over, and see him, tell him about everything... that's our best option. He told you he was flying tomorrow, right?"

Dennis finished his soda with a gulp. "Yeah, the sixteenth."

Coincidences like this always elicited a sense of wonder out from the heart of Mr. Wallace Kepner... the weekend Paul had chosen to return home from his international wanderings, the same weekend as Mrs. Kepner's funeral... planned months ago, planned without any contact, planned in subterfuge thanks to the heightened police scrutiny that now fell on Paul's international wanderings... Mr. Kepner had no time to assess the morality of his oldest son's actions. All he knew for sure is that the authorities would be expecting Paul to return from the lam. But now was not the time.

Mr. Kepner, palms on the table, rose upwards, and slid his chair in. Deep in thought he walked over to the phone on the kitchen wall. He yawned, deliberate and for several seconds... the grandfather clock in their living room read '3' on the hour hand and a couple minutes past with the other... the darkest hour of the morning. Mr. Kepner dialed... first, the operator. Then the Vancouver Airport Information Desk... a scan of flights, airlines... eventually he was transferred to a Northwest Airlines desk. He prodded. He asked questions. He faked answers. He requested a list of names. An operator confirmed that a 'Leon Napo' was indicated on the manifest, headed for San Francisco at noon the next day. Leon Napo... Napoleon... a famous exile... Paul and his wordplay, his tactical sense of humor... but Denny wasn't amused watching his father manufacture a lie. The younger son grew reticent. In fact, the first lie Dennis had heard his father procure... explaining over the receiver to deliver strict instructions for 'Leon' that he should not board the flight because the family reunion had been cancelled. Mr. Kepner left their home number, and instructed the airline employee on the other end of the line that his 'nephew' should call immediately from the airport after checking in. Mr. Kepner thanked the anonymous voice and hung up.

Dennis ruminated as the conversation wrapped up... 'He must really love Paul, to lie like that for him. Dad never lied, ever. It was the golden rule in the house. Never lie. As long as you tell the truth, everything will work out. Always.' The teenager stood in disbelief... his internal dialogue continued... 'What was he supposed to do? Inform the airline that his son was wanted on a drug smuggling conspiracy by Interpol? That he was in danger of being busted for running hashish, from India to London? I can't believe Paul made him lie. Why can't Paul ever get his act together? Why does Dad always bail him out? Dad always comes to his rescue. Like when Paul dropped out of high school to finish in San Fran in his own apartment, when Paul faked the checking account numbers to buy that laboratory equipment... while mom passed away... why?'

Mr. Kepner could sense the unease brewing in his son. The broad-shouldered man walked over to the cabinet, reached in for another mug, and set a splash

of whiskey into the fresh glass. He deposited another helping into his own. He set the pair down at the table, one in front of Denny, one in front of himself... before any questions, before any second thoughts... "This one is for your mother, my wife." He clinked his son's glass and sent the liquid down his esophagus, burning and numb, the remnants of charred barrels and cast iron... Denny did the same, mimicking his father all the way down to his pursed lips.

After a brief but conscious pause, a deep breath, "We can't do anything else about Paul, Denny. There's no sense in being upset with him. The more I consider it- maybe it's for the better he didn't have to see your mother in the shape she was in. He isn't as strong as you. He... maybe he wouldn't have been able to think his way around it, to explain the pain away. Maybe he couldn't have handled seeing her like that. That's why he isn't here. There's a reason for it all. And there's a reason you're here, with me. You were strong enough to be here, and that's why you are. I love you son. I really do."

--

You (a twenty-four-year-old business consultant on the up and up on a flight back from an old childhood home now headed to your thousand-mile-away new-adulthood apartment of real-world participation) are seated tray table pouring Coca Cola from an aluminum can into a small plastic glass, belted in loosely. Tasked with firstsip gulps but unable to enjoy the brown saccharine liquid because your senses lie deranged and occupied thanks to a nose stuffed up by memories of a Chinese piano teacher from a thousand dynasty lifetimes ago on the worn G-clef bench of youth, goddamned and resurrected here in the middle seat next to you that same fetid cloud of clipped toenails and Vaseline and old newspapers, emitting from an adjacent passenger. You're stuck at the window... memories... nostrils... with your fingers wrapped around an aluminum can, the ice on your tongue frozen without any feedback other than an immovable olfactory inertia... that smell... frustrated, you think "Woe is me is my perdition I can't read my novel no further can't focus can't be satisfied only limited to furtive glances from my corner pocket side-eyed at the old oriental couple in **SEAT D** and **SEAT E**" contemplating in **SEAT F**, consumed by external circumstances, pierced by this sharp kneading doomdream of reality before you and in you, "This is hell this slow death of mine my god here I perish trapped in a knee-buckle airplane window seat!" you scream inside, so you take another television-promotion gulp and only the taste of old ghosts come through, old ghosts from your childhood home that linger... back-to-school carpool ghosts, basketball half-court ghosts, cigarette-in-the-woods ghosts, first-kiss ghosts... brushing them away in hangover Denver gone back

for three days to visit a family left behind for ambition, for freedom-transplanted- those ghosts who the previous night guided your eyes around an ancient bedroom where you had become a stranger to, a different nightstand and tacky floral wallpaper and the headboard rearranged now belonging to a younger step-sister of near ten years thanks to a father remarried. Intrepid ghosts- so you pry and sneak about because why the hell not indulge that harmless criminal tendency, you remember your hands in drawers opening-closing-examining 3AM restless you uncover skimpy woman's lingerie, a plastic penis dildo (presumably belonging to your younger step-sister) and thus fascinated you had to lie the items out on the desktop, an unlit cigarette in your mouth dangling like "Holy shit this has been in her vagina" not sure what to do next... the smells, the dilemmas, the delays. Here you are thirty-thousand-feet in the air cast in darkness save for a couple cabin lights and the stewardess is collecting trash before we land to launch ahead pushing along one more day... you will unbuckle and stand and walk down the aisle past empty seats bag hoisted abrupt over shoulder meeting a top button captain who wishes you farewell exiting the craft, and you will nod back in return, isolated in-self in confusion not entirely ready to let the angst fall away not smiling or thanking the captain, still delayed in your mind back at **DEPARTURES-DOMESTIC**... the piano teacher... there you will go. Going on, moaning on. Disturbed. Maybe tranquility will strike you down in the space between the **EXIT** door and the terminal, a yogic blast of sea air teeming with iodine, salt, crisp and earthy with life and death, eggs and bones and that primordial blast will whip into your head and ignite your lungs and erase your petty little misfortunes in one perfect halcyon breath of clarity... maybe you'll decide we're all humans having strange human experiences and sexual energy is a personal matter and that weird strangeness that lurks in all of us ought to be celebrated and relished, sanctified even- not dissected under a microscope on display by unknowing eyes- maybe that dream of the Atlantic will consume your body, buoyant and free on your feet heading out to the parking garage to start the car, pay the fee, complete the last leg of the trip ready for another... or maybe you'll give up breathing through your nose and miss the whole show, magnetically exchanging your credit card at the terminal parking lot gate just as oblivious as you were prior to ever leaving.

--

"He always knew how to express himself. But he definitely can't now, he can hardly spit out a few words ya know? All there is, is this expression, it's like a, like a, like this shrug... like a fed-up kind of 'humph' with his shoulders... when they ask him how he is... ya know?"

I had to laugh.

You don't understand... earlier in the day I had been thinking about the futility of life, the futility of the next big work promotion the next trip to San Diego the next next-thing to do on the infinity stretching checklist of making-your-life-meaningful to-do's of calendars of dates of goals of plans- headfirst and determined to end up one of those lucky old timers senescent with prescriptions filled with hoary locks committed by family members to die old and decrepit in a certified living community. The sadness of it all. The irony. And here is my friend- my close compadre great buddy describing his dying grandfather on a deathbed with curmudgeon expressions of clavicle up-down's like 'No shit it doesn't mean anything, nothing matters, let me take leave of this world in peace you bastards!' So after I catch my breath, I am satisfied and filled with wondrous ideas and lines of thought but revert to ask a plain question of my longtime accomplice.

"Does he look like he's in pain?"

Raindrops assault my four-wheel-drive windshield... lifetimes spent in our motor vehicles... shielded overhead from that one incandescent meteor bursting forth in a fierce neutronic zoom out from the void that might have changed everything... safety-first protected from enlightenment, never to be awoken, never to wonder out loud 'What the hell am I doing in here? What's going on out there?' Play witness, dear boy... regardless, there is no time between me and Marty (my best of times good buddy) for minced-talk of work or jobs or plans or expectations or the home team's record this season or any of that other home-team-identifying nonsense (that trivial dross that allows other people, people who are afraid to risk talking honest, to speak plain vulnerable truths).

Over the speed limit... Marty responds and I listen... "Pain? Well, I don't think he cares if he is or isn't! Sure, they think he is. They have him loaded on uh, uh, painkillers... loaded on these things. And he's a tough sonofabitch like that, ya know? He's not gonna ask for more painkillers but still they load him up... but um, no, he's not comfortable. He's agitated. It's mental anguish! He's ready to get out of there man! That's why I plead with my mom. And of course, uh, my brother, he uh, well Frank the know-it-all he yells at me when I bring it up... I want to unplug that poor old sonofabitch and bring him home and let him die in peace ya know? My grandpa, he looks at everyone he sees like 'Get me the fuck out of here! Stop keeping me here! I don't owe you shit! I've done all I can' ya know? And he has, he's lived his life, he's paid his dues, ya know? It's a conspiracy man, and he knows it. If he wants to go... then let him, that's what I say! And he looks at me, uh... and ya know, I say to him, well I don't say it but I say it with my expression like 'I can't! I wish I could, if it were up to me... I would take the IV out and

walk you out of here but I can't because if I do you'll die and they don't want you to die.' It's a tough, a tough situation."

Visceral, I reacted- "Man... at that point, after ninety years... you've earned the right to decide how you want to go out, you should be granted that at least..."

"Precisely what I'm saying! He was, he was, he was strapped in the bed so he wouldn't resist and when I got to the hospital I went to Frank and said 'What the fuck are you guys doing to him?' and Frank yells back at me 'Shut up Marty you don't know what the fuck you're talking about!' of course but I mean they don't have the right to strap the sonofabitch down, ya know? Like a prisoner."

"Exactly, that's..."

"And the breathing tube they strapped him down for, to get this thing down his throat, now he can't even... uh, the irony is now he can't even swallow because of this thing... I don't know, it's complicated, it's weird... he has to listen to all these people's ideas on how his life should go and he can't talk for himself ya know, he's strapped to this gurney bed and... which is another irony, though, because he always had something to say, he was the strong voice, ya know, uh... he always had an opinion about whatever it was that was going on... now he can't even talk..."

"That's some heavy, nuanced, full-circle karma, man..."

"It's all coming together, quite literally. If you could see it... it uh... you'd get a kick out of it... or maybe you'd cry..."

More laughter (on my part... a million things to list out the silly reasons here between parentheses why I'm laughing but anyways)... "I feel bad, I know your mom and Frank they probably want what they perceive to be best for him... I mean that's her dad... and that maternal instinct is to protect, to take care, to go to the doctor and resolve the issue... follow the procedure, if you will... but I don't know man, at the end of the day I don't want anyone to make me tarry about any longer than I want to, keeping me alive against my will, no thank you..."

"Yeah... yeah... yeah you're right... man, I was walking through the ICU, and this old lady I heard her screaming at this little Puerto Rican nurse 'Get me out of here, I don't want to die here! Get me out you little brown shit!'"

We cackle together... his impression of an old woman prisoner dying is spot on (though truly I can't verify it one way or another)... existential crises, nailed it...

"Jesus man, that's so heavy..."

Marty relived the moment, "Yeah she was old and suffering and scared man, I can't uh..."

"Intense."

"Senile and helpless, ya know? Like, where's the destination I'm going to, ya know?"

"Hospitals."

"Hospitals! I don't know if, uh- I might not be able to go back. Everyone knew it, you know- like, when I went to get a cup of coffee in the cafeteria, everyone in there had the same look. They all had it. And you'd think, alright, well at least I'm not alone. But you're alone. You're nothing but alone in a place like that."

--

Young man Justin Allen of near thirty-three-years-old, long since grown up from a boyhood lifetimes ago, whoever he is now, he finds himself caught between the margins of his life, oh his life: infant-child-breadwinner-invalid. A web of confusion... bemused by his own tendencies ululating between // Shiva the Lord of Death, archetypic outward-destroyer, the demolition specialist with a wick in one hand and a flame in the other // Vishnu the holy first aid, pure land Jesus Christ, forgiveness-granting, inward-meditating humm'r, divine lover of all-everything, diamond pure agapic lovebuzz// Two extremes... one body...

A body imprisoned in a chair at a desk for another hour of work. Mindless, rubbish work, endless with digital scripts copied and pasted across multiplex LCD screens, information in a hurry bustling about out front of his nose, swarming and impossible to swat away. Information overload, information like rainbow explosions fanned out and kinetic at every wavelength, more and more and more... a frantic 9-to-5 scene, unseen, but what is seen is our character tapping fingertip to computer mouse... stationary, that tree-stump of Friday afternoons planted there, cut down and disarmed of his vital spirit.

Justin Allen.

Headphones fill his ears with a lecture series on Sartre, a free video e-mail'd to him earlier in the day. He wishes a wish that years ago he would have heard such a lecture in a university classroom because now listening to the speaker, faceless, explaining concepts like bad faith, like terrifying freedom, like negative ecstasy. Dear oh dear, what poor Justin could have spared himself. But nothing can be spared and no plan is safe, every ploy of meatbody mankind is lost to the stars- unless you believe John Paul (which Justin is beginning to, and not only believe in a sense-making, subscribing way but also in a personal affronting sort of way where the old bastard all 5'3'' of him has Justin figured inside and out) who exclaims from across the Seine River "Ain't no stars mean a goddamn because ain't no nothing mean a goddamn, it's all *being* before essence which essentially means you are the maker the creator the king of your reality, so no complaints from your end old complainer of the lonely Friday 2PM computer screen, old complainer of the student loan balance, old complainer of no woman no cry who can't score a date who looks at his friends newly engaged with better halves that can't stop barking about finances or 'When are we buying up a house?' or 'When are we going to pump out those replica babies to deploy onward in rank and file from uterine starting lines to weep over this cold land?,' old complainer of the trapped capitalist society woven in expectation in tradition in unoriginality, old complainer born into all of this by no choice of his own!" Hah! John Paul continues, "You constructed every bit of it! You are responsible! You have the freedom! Go choose! Make choice! Express truth! You don't like it? Leave! Press the button! I see you, you coward of the midnight bedsheets who lays awake all hours before the alarm bell ignites! Look at you, trying to make sense of this! There is no meaning except what you make of it! Use your imagination! Be clever you lazy cur!"

The lecturer's voice hums through insulated wires. Justin Allen's discomfort marks this particular starting point vision of ours. It's easy to tell which sides are pitted against each other, what processes are unfolding... it's a chaotic mankindy vision not unlike that of any tortured starchild... a conflict I'm sure you've felt in your own bones, desperate for the weekend.

Bear with me.

This afternoon is molasses thick with each moment extending beyond the moment itself so time does not pass it only bleeds, each click, each file, each Ctrl + V, each Ctrl + X... Justin cannot go any further. He is being torn apart from within. Immobilized by stasis.

And up through the fissures of his torment bubbles the thought of a (shot). Heroin. A relapse shot, a first-bang shot after years of not drugging years

of clean living years of trying his bestfoot humble way to maintain to be straight and do no harm and participate like one amongst many. A fuck you shot, a fuck everything shot, a fuck the government fuck the system fuck this life I've been born into shot. A bang-shot-syringe-plunge arranged as an escape plan that dolls itself up all garden-snake tricky like a new kind of life, like a way-out of the hassles, like a way to escape 'square' dictums of centrality, like an enlightened route away from the multiplying pack, away from the veiled predictability and cozy stupidity of toes warm. The thought of a high. The thought to get high. The thought of a shot. He thinks it.

He knows immediately the thought is nothing more than deception. He has encountered it before, similar thoughts, voices encouraging retreat and abandon... it's a lie. Oh, but it is told so perfectly! So familiar... announced persuasive in Justin's own voice, its voice is his own... telling him campfire stories. And compulsive sad-eye'd ruminations of a full, warm opiated daze dance inside his skull until modernity finally pays off but he is distracted by the sound of our proud, ivy-university lecturer quoting John Paul:

Let us consider the waiter in the cafe. His movement is quick and forward, a little too precise, a little too rapid. He folds up his menus, walks toward the patrons a little too quick. All his behavior seems to us a game. He applies himself to chaining his movements as if they were mechanisms, the one regulating the other; his gestures and even his voice seem to be mechanisms; he gives himself the quickness and pitiless rapidity of things. He is playing, he is amusing himself. But what is he playing? We need not watch long before we can explain it: he is playing at being a waiter in a cafe. There is nothing there to surprise us. The game is a kind of marking out and investigation. The child plays with his body in order to explore it, to take inventory of it; the waiter in the cafe plays with his condition in order to realize it. This obligation is not different from that which is imposed on all tradesmen. Their condition is wholly one of ceremony. The public demands of them that they realize it as a ceremony; there is the dance of the grocer, the tailor, of the auctioneer, by which they endeavor to persuade their clientele that they are nothing but a grocer, an auctioneer, a tailor. A grocer who dreams is offensive to the buyer, because such a grocer is not wholly a grocer. Society demands that he limit himself to his function as a grocer, just as the soldier at attention makes himself into a soldier-thing with a direct regard which does not see at all, which is no longer meant to see, since it is the rule and not the interest of the moment which determines the point he must fix his eyes on. There are indeed many precautions to imprison a man in what he is, as if we lived in perpetual

fear that he might escape from it, that he might break away and suddenly elude his condition.

Oh John Paul, you shouldn't have! Can you see the waiter? He's strolling over to Justin, clad in irony, a black-suit outfit sharp with hair comb'd and napkin folded over forearm swift approaching the table holding a fat baggie, a syringe, setting a spoon and a candle down at Justin's place with a warm grin, "Here you are sir!"

Justin is a stupid worker-thing full of phony importance bolstered by a fat wallet.

He makes the money to spend the money to pay off the debt, a debt which he now conspires to accrue more of... thanks to sweet American dreams like the purchase of suburban land and Ford trucks and soft little babies who need to stay warm and well fed. Fork and knife, his place set... set to widen the pit, to dig deeper.

Justin is a sick liar, a due-paying member of the bad faith union.

And Justin loathes everything about his position. He can find no good, his time wasted. He can find no gratitude. He hates himself more and more as John Paul's words pile up between his ears... the lecturer's voice, Justin's voice... but then it all goes silent. Suddenly he is forced to acknowledge no-escaping-the-fact that there is no one to blame but himself and Jean Paul is right and *goddamn me* for allowing the train of life to chugalug *me* right here in this cubicle desk... *goddamn me* for being a fearful follower of the middle-class tribe of American values. For believing Reagan was a noble president. For believing we needed to drop the bomb to end the war. For believing this is the best greatest nation of democratic free land to be living in so celebrate, sing loud and rise for the anthem.

Embarrassment.

Hatred.

Angst. Justin grows restless, grows concentrated now to sooth his irritability, to alleviate his constant knowing of his own bad faith, his own cowardice, his own cross-eye'd acquiescence, his own abandonment of childhood aspirations of art of the World Series of true-blue love.

More hatred.

More embarrassment.

More angst.

The screen before his eyes freezes. He cannot go on. Justin cannot perform one more motion in the name of a paycheck, in the name of success, in the name of good-boy sobriety and grown-up responsibility, in the name of what others need him to be. A refusal... Justin turns around, sizing up his corduroy jacket... the keys are in the breastpocket... his wallet is fat, ready... there are people he can contact. There are corners he can wait at. There are things in his mind that cannot be un-memorized, indelible from the past. Ready to abdicate...

But Justin is simple and before anything else happens in his mind a herd of thoughts emerge logical in formation like this: Why the impulse to get high, to cook and shoot powder to fuck harems of loose women to dive into a darkness of addiction and cigarette butts- why be so quick to wish upon a new habit? What freedom hath a habit ever brought? Why am I so quick to confuse the firstdoomshot of relapse with freedom, with good faith, with courage? Those days in my youth all passed by, those days brought no freedom or creativity- I was shackled. I was still a dumb-stupid worker-thing with his plain cow-eye'd routines carted off to the big city each morning in a train car to the next office, the next desk- except without the commute and the cloths- instead stuck to a needle in a bathroom, on the nod, wasted and sick, wasted and sick. I never escaped anything with a habit. In fact I had deceived myself even more fully, even more completely in the fog of a needle.

"No my good waiter, no thank you. I'll have a cup o' coffee and a pipe full o' tobacco, thank'a kindly."

Justin presses **OFF** on the recording. He removes his headphones.

He stops wrestling with the desire, the obsession.

A breath.

Something quiet, like a prayer from within: Yes, I will have my work, my real work. My being-before-the-essence work is ahead of me. There is fullness, yes. It is waiting out there for me. Faith. I rest upon faith. And this is the faith of a world mover- not a faith dependent on Christmas morning guarantees, not a faith like wishing eyes-closed for eternal life, hoping dear to rise from the dead into an embossed heavenly realm with all your buddies, like being reborn a king in some exotic country, like receiving good karma in the form of winning lottery tickets after you throw a few bucks in the cup of a bum off some highway exit ramp- none of that vapid mystery faith which when it's condensed becomes a selfish coagulate of 'what's in

this for me'-ness. No sir. Instead, true faith lies in a future state, after pain and lessons learned and waiting and holding out and doing what is right instead of what is wanted. True faith is letting go of selfish concerns, trusting the mystery. True faith is subtle, and its rewards will arrive on a quiet twilight evening in old age inspecting the scars acquired along the footpaths of this journey, scars from bleeding wounds of today, wounds I am burdened by right now. Yes. Someday it will come together. And it will not be by Fentanyl or Percocet or Black Tar, dear Jean Paul, but it will be by good faith.

Justin knows he cannot sit here tree-stump forever in a neutered plastic cubicle plot hunched over typing and clicking endlessly off to infinity. He knows he cannot become a married man family-dad perfect disciple of capitalism of money-make-more'ness saving up 401k big-bucks and planning the next vacation. So here now, at an impasse. But Justin also knows the great ladderhoist over the wall will not be fueled by no chemical compound or mechanism of intentional destruction. His transformation, his ascension cannot be guided by chance or destiny, by laboratory execution or prayer. It must be his own way, grinded out against all odds against even his own limited self.

So Justin prays on, for the courage to express his good faith. Whatever it is. Silent, tucked in with feet under the desk, a desk resembling those astral desks near and dear to blissful bodhisattvas in math classes of Nirvana... can you see him there, quiet now with the lecture paused and all of these thoughts resolved? Justin pleads quietly to himself: You know it ain't never one shot to feel better, no chance, no matter what, because that one plunger leads back to a habit, leads to a second baggie and a trip to the cash machine for more baggies... remember all the years you spent proving that simple fact to yourself... and still, even after all those lost nights and legal troubles and costly fines and murdered tissue and imprisonments at rehab facilities, the itch can appear... but it's okay... keep going... you're doing the right thing.

It's hard to change... harder to stay changed.

--

On the couch, in the dark... seated, upright after lying down... in the dark. The door swings open, a crowbar snaps the chain the bolt the lock now unlocked the footsteps, a masked villain headed into the bedroom and he's helpless scared hiding behind the opposite end of the couch listening as the bedroom hinge creaks as his wife screams as her face is disfigured by the blunt end of a pistol the silence the laugh the madman's breath breathing harder and

harder boxsprings like smashed windows of innocence blown asunder thrashed by bricks, a twisted and forced penetration ceremony of helpless tragedy the pitiful husband waits plugging his ears waiting with hopes he will be spared... blood pressure like roman candles, terror, paralysis. A husband formulating and detailing and living through a scenario in his head, seated on the couch. No madmen intruders. No door frame damages. Eyes are closed. An itch on his paunched belly. In the dark.

Far away from conversations about diapers, square-footage and new appliances... on his way home from the desk and the emails and the coffee, bored in traffic he watches calmly as a semi-truck T-bones into his petite sedan... cracked in half the metal frame bent toothpick contorted inwards on his limbs his bones fractured at impossible angles his body twisted his last dying moment a final thought a final moment to reflect before his departure... the funeral, the flowers, his wife and his brother at the podium speaking kind words at the front of a church, a closed casket lingering in the periphery. Into the ground. Back to the earth. Dead. Buried. An accident. Tears falling, roses tossed dripping over the oak... down, down... back to the view in front of his windshield. Back to the brake lights. Back to his life... our man... his imagination spinning yarns... trying to feel, trying to wrench a genuine feeling out from his hollowed core, wringing his imagination to escape from the stone of his existence... a tragic school shooting, deforming his younger sister, blasted wide open in a hallway her face torn open burnt by metal smoking her jaw her teeth on the ground, the hospital bed visit the tiny wristband the teddy bears the get-well's and feel-better's... hospitals... his mother now a stroke, numb and brain-dead, the tubes and plastic and artificial pulsing of life the sterile lukewarm odor of staying alive... a tornado descending from the sky... an asteroid impact... the end of the world... supermarkets looted, my god the rush for bottled water, hoarding gasoline... back to a parking lot. Then a meeting. A bill to pay. A phone call. His mind in between- lusting for tragedy. Empty, bored- he draws up tales of heartache, of fractured karma, of unyielding hopelessness. A wife. A house. A child. A steady job. Healthy. Happy. Whole. Lusting for a destitute oblivion, craving that feeling of having no-chance, being left for dead abandoned no vigils no way out. Torment. A lust for something dispassionately terrible and huge and independently evil to enter his life. And so desperate for pain he brushes and paints gruesome details upon the canvas of his thoughts. A particularly strange luxury of the healthy and wealthy. Fires and daggers and rare blood disorders. He does not pray to keep what he has, he wishes only for loss. But his secret is safe. His secret is hidden. His secret is the secret of so many. Our man. It would be better for the kids to grow up without a dad, mythologizing and story-telling remembering only his heroic traits- better to end it now rather than live with the guilt of having

squandered away his potential. Better to die than to live. Better to hurt than to be numb. Anything would be better than this. Even though this is it... the outcome he had worked so hard for. He approaches the endgame. He played all the right moves. He made it. The irony... by playing nice, by following the rules, by working hard and trying his best, he has lost the ability to consider joy as an outcome. Happiness is no longer an option... so he craves wild *Pietas* visionary episodes because that is his only hope for feeling. He chuckles in stride flipping his keys end-over-end across the doorway to the dry cleaners, feeling an explosion blow him back across the parking lot, face down with a broken neck, a last breath... a sigh of relief.

--

Danny's brothers are on drugs again. He made a conscious decision to accelerate the pace of his beer drinking after they dropped their LSD. Acid. They offered him some, but the youngest of the three politely declined. He can't understand why they took it. He never will. His brothers and their drugs. Danny was fine with his beers.

It's 2:30AM. They're in a taxi, outside of their hotel, headed to the docks. They spent half an hour in the hotel lobby looking for sunscreen and water bottles and other sundry items they thought they needed for the boat. Joe and Neal stuffed Danny's coat full of towels, giggling hysterical. Joe was wearing sandals, and after Danny noticed he warned him it probably wasn't a good idea for the boat. Joe went back upstairs and changed into his sneakers after hugging Danny. He nearly cried with gratitude. The woman at the front desk working a solemn overnight shift had no idea what to think.

See, Danny's brothers had booked a ride on a fishing charter. Joe is getting married, so this is his bachelor party. LSD, deep sea fishing, his brothers. Neal is three years younger than Joe, and Joe four years older than Danny, which makes Neal seven years older than Danny, which makes Danny the youngest of three brothers. Danny loves Joe. He loves Neal. But they do maddening things like this- like fly him out to Virginia Beach so he can sherpa them into midnight harbors while they trip on acid.

The three brothers hopped into the cab once their ride pulled into the hotel driveway. Their esteemed driver and Joe started talking about philosophy, about God, about topics that ought to be avoided between two people where one person identifies as a devout-religious-believer type and the other person identifies as a take-LSD-and-head-out-100-miles-into-the-Atlantic-Ocean type. Danny stopped listening after the driver described the fourth of the seven seals, reiterating that Planet X will collide with the Earth on September 23rd. Danny's not afraid of the Book of Revelation. Danny's

practical; he's afraid of Joe falling off the boat as they head into a vast wasteland of desert, of sea.

Once they reached the dock Danny pulled Joe out of the front seat and gruffly offered a 'Thank you' to their driver. Stumbling, laughing, Danny's two brothers briefly comingled with a group of executive types standing around, six guys 40+ with coolers and food, prepared... the prepared types, with kids and six figure salaries and health insurance plans... so this was the crew, along with Danny and his two brothers. The executives gave an effort to introduce themselves, to make small talk, but their captain and the first mate yelled from the charter boat, "Let's go! We're burning daylight!" Everyone shuffled onboard. The first mate wore a red Coca Cola hat and told the paying passengers he would be going below to sleep on the ride out. The captain told everyone to enjoy the ride. He didn't bother to mention anything about life jackets. There were no safety instructions, other than three words, barked out at no one in particular: "Don't fall off." No expectations. No rules. A quick note on where the bathroom was located, and then the engines roared. They set forth, pointed into the inky sea.

This concerned Danny. Not even a sort of 'acquaintance' status could be reached between any of the factions before they set off into the dark, the deep, soon to be trolling 100 miles offshore in rocking waters. None of these people would care if there was an accident with Neal or Joe. The first mate was asleep. The captain might have been on amphetamine- there was a look in his eyes- gangly limbs, the thin lips. Danny silently admitted, "This is kind of fucking dangerous." Danny regretted drinking as many beers as he had.

At least there wasn't any further talk of Nibiru.

The executives slugged inside to the main cabin, reclined on several couches, and looked forward to sleep. Danny's brothers hung out on the deck with all the gear- they weren't tired. Danny stayed with them to man the watch.

Once the engines really kicked, after they had left the harbor- now Danny was startled. He had no idea the boat would be jetting along so quickly. It went from a lull to a thunderclap, without any warning. The motors wailed as they propelled forward. Joe's smile cut across his face intercoastal, and Neal grabbed on to a rail next to Danny and whacked him on the back, yawping, "Once more unto the breach, laddy!"

You can't choose your family, but... as the boat moved further out into the unknown, the overcast shroud began to fade and the aether exploded with starlight. Constellations. Galaxies. Each of the three brothers established

positions on the rail and they gazed, heads titled up at the empyrean for what must have been half an hour. Danny unhinged a community cooler, cracked open another beer, and Neal plucked a cigarette from his pack. Joe kept grinning. Danny pulled a towel out of his coat, waved it over his head, and the three howled wild. Optimistic and clueless- they didn't even know what kind of fish they were after. When Danny yelled over the roaring engines to Neal, he made his opinion known it would be tuna on their lines, but Neal was convinced swordfish would be on the menu. Joe seriously doubted they would catch anything. But it really didn't matter.

Joe turned to his youngest brother... "Danny, lick your lips my dear boy!"

"Why?"

Neal, hanging on Danny's other shoulder, "Just do it!"

The youngest of the brothers complied.

Joe, "Can you taste it my boy?"

"What am I supposed to be tasting?"

The two older brothers, together in synchronicity... unplanned, harmonic... "Freedom!"

--

"Ron's been trying to straighten out for thirty years... come on!" She glugs another sip of her red wine. Aunt Lauralie- Auntie Bourgeois of the Mighty Home Renovation Clan, Queen New Kitchen of the Sharpened Knife Set, Lady of the Country Club Pool- her spine aligned in perfect form upright on her chair finished with her cobb salad... low-fat dressing... satisfied.

Can you see her in front of you?

Have you figured it out yet?

"I know Laurie, but the guy, he doesn't... he means well."

"Not when he's drunk at a party talking to me about how my son reminds him of himself! He doesn't mean well. Come on! He's a loser!" She winces, imbibes another sip of wine.

Are you feeling awful, grizzly vibrations?

Can you see Aunt Jean, a keen ear leaning to Aunt Laurie... a quiet, peace-loving woman... can you see her squirm as she tries to reset her sister's perspective?

"I don't think he meant that Tony was going to grow up into being a loser, Laurie... he just meant..."

"It doesn't matter what he meant! The guy has always been a waste! He hasn't accomplished anything. Drunk at another family party. Lost another job. Divorced another wife. Come on! I've known him since we were kids. He's a loser! Waste of talent. L-O-S-E-R."

Aunt Lauralie's sin was not her misunderstanding. Her sin wasn't her unknowing... you can't know what you don't know and you don't know what you know until you know it marrow-deep like TRUTH. No, we can't fault her for that. Her sin was her nonchalance, her cadence whilst describing and analyzing the life of another, a fellow (Ron), the lack of respect for the complexity of a human life... like believing 1's or 0's could create consciousness, could recreate the mystery of this existing living being life of ours... a keen zero-sum game, witty. Her sin was her utter disregard for what life might be like for Ron, to suffer like how Ron suffered, to love like how Ron loved. Casual, she holds the stem of her merlot glass, forces in her deep breath, and swallows. Napkin to her Botox-injected mien... a fierce wolf disguised as a dainty sheep, ginger and napkin back on her lap. Her satisfaction... can you see the Good Lord during His Majestic Final Judgement, a curl on his lip biting one side like 'Well, what have you got to say for yourself?' cheek pinched shaking His head, asking Auntie to explain this one... explain why a woman blessed with clean genetics and a sound mind and all the opportunity in the world between her and her wealthy husband, all the tools you could ask for... explain why she amounted to nothing more than a peacock, on display and festooning herself feather'd in color, being of no use, no service to anyone or anything other than to announce her vanity to the world loud and unconcerned and satisfied. Why she felt the right to discriminate and judge the life of another man, to cast her ruling without any second thought.

Satisfaction... the root of all evil. Forget money, forget the church, forget all the other players. Comfort kills. Satisfaction tightens the rope.

Humph.

But now, one step further... here is our sin... pointing out Aunt Lauralie's sins... humphing in our own twisted fulfillment of having been right ourselves... not understanding her pain or her love, her story... perhaps we are underdog

sympathizers, we root on the marginalized, we are quick to classify and fault the privileged, so naturally we side with the low man on the totem (Ron). Are we no better than Princess of the White Luxury Vehicle? Where does it end? Aunt Lauralie is living Ron's life. You are living hers. Ron is living yours. Circles like infinity, trails and patterns veer off beyond the horizon, the ocean before us changing like a campfire like a fractal Pollock painting, translating the inputs to outputs to karmic ripples expanding round the wheel faster we go... embrace the paradox. Heads or tails? Heads and tails. It never ends because it never began. And you will never die because you were never born.

--

"Who's that guy?"

"Don?"

"Did he go to school with you?"

"Yeah." A sip from the glass. "He grew up in the western suburbs, lacrosse jock... I didn't hang around with those guys much. For good reason."

Phil and Lisa continued with their dinner. Filet. Potatoes. The maid of honor and the best man held microphones and stumbled through their mandatory speeches. Clapping. Laughter. The bride and groom cut the cake. A disc jockey activated a stack of amplifiers and sub-woofers. Everyone recognized the music being played, so naturally they danced. The night went on in a predictable fashion and soon the wedding was over and the bridal party (Phil, a groomsmen) were back at the hotel bar.

Suddenly Don walked up to Lisa and Phil with an extra beer in his hands. He offered it to Phil after noticing a full vodka soda on top of a red cocktail napkin in front of Lisa's place. Phil accepted the offering, a bit surprised. "Well shit, thanks Don! Cheers buddy!"

Glasses clinked.

Ties removed, top-buttons unbuttoned... relaxed... "Phil, let me just say... you, you and your wife make a beautiful couple. You really do. The cheers goes to you guys."

Lisa gave a furtive glance to Phil, and the three of them clinked glasses again.

Don continued. "What a great party? I mean, this has been great, hasn't it? It's great to see you Phil, really... it's been a while, huh?"

"Too long." Then a silence. A gulp. Without thinking much, Phil blurted out, "How are things with you? I heard you had a job over at Rothschild, doing tax law?"

Don paused, pursed his lips like he was choosing between two answers... the honest answer, or the expected answer... the real-life answer, or the television script... "Well, the job is fine. It is. But otherwise, I'll tell you what, it's been a tough year, honestly. Tough year. My mom passed away in February, so it's been... I've had a rough go of it. And let me just preface... I hate bringing this up, which is exactly what I'm doing right now... but I hate not bringing it up, and pretending like everything is okay, pretending and then talking about work or something meaningless... I don't know if that makes any sense, but..."

Lisa reacted, a hand on Don's shoulder... activated maternal instincts, that Gaian programming kicked in and all of her preconceptions were erased... "Don, I'm so sorry. I know we just met, but... that's awful. I'm sorry. We're sorry."

Don's head dropped, his eyes on the floor. "Thanks, really... I, I hate talking about it, but I have to. My therapist says it's the best thing to do, so it must be right, for what I'm paying her (nervous laughter)... but really, yeah, I've just kind of been lost. And seeing Tommy get married tonight, seeing you, seeing everybody from back in high school doing well, it's been good. It's been a good night, to celebrate, to be happy."

--

Arnie lives with his parents... a two-room condominium... the fourth floor... a balcony, he's crouched with his buttocks on top of his knees on top of a wicker foot-stool repurposed as his chair... he hasn't spoken a single word his entire life. He hasn't ever had to quell that incessant voice inside his head. His entire personality is hidden, revealed only by simple gestures. He is an observer, a witness. The likes of us... we can hardly understand. And it's not that his vocal cords don't work, or that he doesn't understand language... when his mother asks for a kiss, he pecks her on the cheek. When his brother calls on the phone, Arnie believes full well in the 'I love you' which bookends their call. Severe learning disability... that's the reason Arnie hasn't felt compelled to utter a single word for twenty-three years... doctors have explained his ascetic nature to be caused by a defective nervous system.

Arnie's up there on the balcony watching the building's parking lot at 10PM. He sits on humble chair, in rapture... never hollers, never comments, never critiques... a perfect witness. Arnie the Stylite. Posed up there now cloaked in a purple turtleneck sweater that Michelle, his mother, pulled over his head before he went out to the porch. Steve is already asleep, tired from a long day at the office. Michelle relaxes listening to music in the living room, Vivaldi, unwinding from her own workday wind-ups. There floats a quiet murmuring in the family home between the lilting symphony.

A perfect witness to the scene:

A white luxury sedan, fancy-car resplendent in the lusty streetlight it putt-putts into an empty space between yellow lines, engine cuts, an older (60ish) woman wearing a shawl exits passenger door before the brake lights blink off jetting off as the sound reaches up to the fourth floor and the woman is already ten feet away from the vehicle moving faster towards the rear entrance of the complex... lightning, then thunder... a man, half-minute lagging behind her opens up and closes and locks moving lugubrious left-foot right-foot head down in the woman's wake, a pudgy man slow but not on account of his weight more likely on account of a woebegone feeling of doomtragedy sludging him with an extra emotional gravity... maybe a fight that evening at dinner, maybe a decade of misunderstanding and saved toothbrushes, maybe anything but it's something and the presumable husband and wife pair appear to be at odds and not conjoined or adjoined in any way, more adjourned or resigned...

Arnie has no words to reflect upon or paint with, but after experiencing the man and the woman he feels an image of a withered flower.

Two teenage dressed alike talk alike walk alike cool-guy nightcrawlers with their cellphone lights ON full blast hovering like a pair of fireflies moving along the sidewalk next to the building, grass and shrubbery and flowers neatly landscaped before the redbrick ascends skyward there they are in a well-manicured tract of lawn between the parking lot and the condos with their phosphorescent incandescence maddening back and forth... lost an important object, or searching for a hidden treasure... they are furtive but obscene and dart between flower beds and bushes... a minute, two minutes... they can't find it... their artificial searchlights extinguish... shadows now... they resume their frenetic dance... disappear into the dark, the ether of night all ash and cinder...

Another image- two playful ducklings, quacking and splashing in a pond.

Striding past there he goes a Tejano factory worker (designated by his blue uniform and steel toe'd boots) coursing with ancient Mayan blood brown'd in his sinews, the stout man cuts through the asphalt lot with weathered lunch-pail in hand, a shortcut between sidewalks saving a little extra time, time to hug his children and eat his wife's homemade empanadas... whistling by... time...

A dime covered in patina.

--

Have you met him? The old man, the newspaper reader? He's reading fine print, typical, eyes squinting, coffee cup up and down, his wallet and keys arranged in precisely the same manner as he arranged them the previous morning at the same table with the same order 'one cream one sugar' and the same Front Page out in front of his nose, each action a replicated homage to the habits of his pre-retirement oak desk in the brokerage office of yesterday. Do you see him there? He sits there a tactician, a perfectionist, huffing and puffing at the articles, section by section flipping self-assured in comfortable fact-of-matterness. Have you cringed from the waves which emanate from his supercilious newspaper foldings? A smugness and self-assuredness, a conqueror's laurels... a belief that not only is he entitled to the wide-world but is in fact the very reason for that wide-world's existence. He beckons the earth to turn, bringing forth the sunrise of each day. Another page read. Another powerful jolt from his Styrofoam cup. Sundry patrons move in and out of the shop, employees boil bagels and fry doughnuts and brew pot after pot. Our ruler, he remains steadfast... when he is finished with his business he will not recycle the *Daily Times*, but throw it in the trash along with his napkins. He will call his accountant. He will buy, then sell. He will schedule a doctor's appointment. He will plan the next vacation. He will yell at the car in front of him for driving too slowly. He will never apologize, because such a notion would never cross his mind. He is too busy at the wheel, in control.

--

It was six people waiting in line at *Horatio's Dry Cleaners*. It was an 'action item' after a 'supervisory board' meeting. It was \$2.00 for air, in quarters, outside a gas station after a **WARNING MESSAGE** appeared on the dashboard console. It was an increase of 30% on the electric bill. It was a bitter cup of coffee. It was an annoying commercial playing for the twentieth time. It was a missed phone call.

Or was it?

Whatever it was, it didn't matter.

Roger Sinclair set a box of donuts on the counter.

He handed over a \$10 bill.

He went back to his parked car, unwrapped the packaging, opened the lid of the box and stuck his nose down amidst the frosted morsels.

Then he lifted the first powdered ring and put it to his lips.

And again, a second, chocolate and sugar and flour moving inside his cheeks, coating his tongue, stuck between his teeth... he paused... he swallowed. He gulped down another, and then another. Sprinkles. Boston crème. Strawberry frosting. All the fixings of a binge. It had been three years since the last. One box of donuts. Three years off the cycle, the binge then the purge. Then another.

Roger had chosen a convenience store the next town over from his family home to perform his indulgence. He had privately considered this moment for several months. He decided he would drive to the next town to start his next binge, his first in three years. It wouldn't be prudent to go off in his own town. Somebody might see him. Somebody might know. But in the next town over... it would be safe. Thirty-seven months of OA meetings, of recovery, of maintenance... a new set of teeth, a repaired esophagus, his family's trust... all the while he had publicly declared he could not overeat in safety. But here he was, 8 o'clock at night under a pitch-black sky devoid of zodiac markers, clouded, misty... in the driver's seat of his car... here he was crumpling a greasy handful of plastic, covered in crumbs.

He didn't notice the orbiting crucifix a'dangle from his rearview mirror, the vents of his car pouring out hot air jets which fueled each rotation, each kinetic dervish of wood and nails... revolutions... he didn't notice any secret force, any hidden energy... he didn't notice the pedestrian silhouettes at the cross-walk with traffic lights and high beams reflected onto redbrick Main Street buildings like astral pilgrims... he didn't notice the picture of his wife when he decided to walk out of his car with his wallet to buy a box of pastries... he didn't notice the woebegone look on his secretary's face when he left the office... he failed to see the yellow finch perched on the sapling in his front yard... signs in broad daylight... he didn't notice his hands on his knees, wrinkled, aging, as he bent over puking behind the store... he took another bite.

His only focus was on his process. Eat. Puke. It was the quickest surest easiest way to stop everything. To stop thinking, to stop worrying, to stop noticing- to end any sort of active participation in his life- and maybe gain a little happiness in the trade-off.

He had only wanted to be happy.

He had tried to do things the right way.

But now, not even the consequences mattered... wiping his mouth... the taste of stomach acid... the outcomes disappeared.

Roger took another bite.

He felt better.

--

"Do you think... so, here, check this... you're a baby, a newborn baby, alright? And being newborn nice and fresh from the womb, your first moments in the world, you got no context, no idea of what being a person is what being alive means... alright, no idea what's in store... you've just recently come out of nothingness... yo comprende? Right out of the nothingness of no-being, no memories, no preconceptions, no mental hang-ups... fresh... pure, alright? You have no fear of the end. You just came from wherever death lurks, alright? Get this... this is everyone that has ever been born, which is everyone... you start off totally at peace with your own mortality, no fear, ejected from the black hole darkside where you'll eventually return... if anything, you are afraid of life, right? Life, living, this world... that's the scary part... that's why we come out contorted in a ball, bawling... 'What the hell did I come into?' thinks the infant babe. And that's the beginning. You're practically an undifferentiated angel, yanked from the void, alright... yesterday you were the totality of existence, the spectrum, the mind of God... all things and nothing contemporaneous, at the same time... and today, 'Wham!,' tossed into this human existence. Exposed to time. And as you go on existing, because of culture, because of your parents, because of every word you hear and every person you see... the illusion sets in. You realize you aren't the breast you're sucking on. You're not the blanket covering you in the crib, alright. You're different than all this stuff, all these people and things... first words like 'mama,' the lady who feeds you... 'dada,' the thing you hardly see but is always being told what to do by 'mama'... then you get to knowing your own name... 'Petey' or 'Sally' or 'Billy' or 'Jessie'... your name... you become a thing, a separate thing from everything else, alright? You start to learn words, start to name the stuff surrounding you... you see where this is

going? Get this... the illusion of 'self' sets in! The illusion of you is perniciously born. You forget the undifferentiated state. You forget Nirvana. You forget where you came from. You're investing in this whole charade... this whacky game of made-up words and arbitrary boundaries, make-believe, alright? And the first category is... me/you. That's you. This is me. Which is only the start... on and on come the categories. You have a little brother, and in the bath, age three or four, you're looking at him... and he's got this penis thing that you don't got. Or you have a little sister, and she's got this vagina thing and you got one too... whippee... boy, girl... it blows your mind! Get this... I guarantee you freaked when you realized you had a penis and were a boy, and your sister had a vagina and was a girl... I bet my life on it. Your little-kid toddler-tyke self freaked sideways! I promise you! And then came more categories, after the foundational distinction of me/you... boy/girl, big/small, hot/cold, sad/happy... then the kicker, the magic final kicker category, alright... good/bad. Good/bad. 'Be a good boy!' 'You've been a bad girl!' Good and bad. Bad and good. Now it's all over. A whole lifetime spent trying to figure out what the hell it means to be 'good'... to figure out why being 'good' matters... to feel guilty about being 'bad'... then to feel guilty about not feeling guilty for being 'bad.' The snowball rolls right along into an avalanche from that dichotomy, that duality... the confusion, the tragedy, the whole human trip... that's... you following? That's the whole trip! Right there. Right there it all starts, and ends. The end of truth."

--

"Did you just fucking smell that?"

"Holy- fucking- shit!"

"Oh my god!"

"Like, seriously? What the fuck was that, like..."

"She smelled like my fucking grandpa's retirement home!"

"Oh my god, like fucking bedpans and piss!"

"She smelled like an antique pussy!"

"How can you like even try to smell like that?"

"She must live with like dead fucking bodies!"

"She must fuck dead bodies, like..."

"That was horrific."

"That was fucking disgusting."

"That fucking greasy hair, like..."

"Why the fuck would she even walk over here?"

"How should I know? Hillary probably invited her..."

"Hell no! I hate that bitch!"

"I can't even believe... like my nostrils are burned out."

"I know, like..."

"Look at her walking... what a fucking loser."

"How many dead bodies do you think she's fucked?"

"Like a hundred."

"Like a hundred last night."

"Seriously she smelled like my fucking basement storage closet."

"I swear to god that had to be a diseased pussy. That stench like overpowered me."

"Do you think she's ever seen a cock, seriously?"

"Other than like all the dead body cocks she's fucked, like..."

"What guy would want to stick their cock near that?"

"That guy... look at that fucking loser talking to her... I've never even seen that kid."

"Who the fuck is that, like..."

"He's obviously into antique pussy."

"Maybe he's a collector... look at his overalls, like..."

"He's greasier than she is, fucking gross."

"Well I'm not eating lunch."

"Like you weren't going to eat anyway Hillary you anorexic slut."

"Oh fuck off. Anyways, you know any anorexic bitches with tits this big?"

"How many cocks have you seen Hillary, a fucking hundred?"

"All I know the one I'm seeing now is big and black and makes my pussy wet."

"How big is he?"

"Like fucking huge. It takes me a couple minutes just to get him in, like, but when he is... oh my god..."

"You fucking slut."

"Whatever, like you wouldn't fuck him? Please."

--

Formalities were critical in front of the patients.

"Doctor Shaw."

"Doctor Deaver."

"Can I borrow your expertise when you get a chance?"

"Finishing up an exam. Shouldn't be more than ten minutes. Do you want me to step out?"

"Let's meet upstairs once you're finished?"

"Absolutely, Doctor Deaver."

"Appreciate it, Doctor Shaw."

The hoary locks, the shined loafers... Doctor Deaver was only a couple years away from retirement. The practice would be an easy sell, and thanks to his wife's money management strategies and aggressive collection practices, he would ride out into sunset visiting obscure European destinations drinking \$200 bottles of red wine.

A cup of coffee. A look out the window. Satisfaction.

The stairs creaking... footsteps up... face to face, the gentlemen let go of their official titles and spoke as an employer and employee would... "So what's up Ted?"

"How is your new assistant, Michelle?"

"Fine, fine. She seems competent. We have been getting along. It usually takes a couple months to start gelling, but I'm confident we'll get there. It's only for Tuesdays and Thursdays anyways, so... yeah, fine." Doctor Shaw, only three years removed from dental school, found it best not to complain about anything in the workplace. It was a mantra his own father had hammered into him... whiners are never winners. Michelle was aloof, disorganized, and wore too much perfume... an even countenance was plastered over the young practitioner.

"Tim, I had an interesting conversation with her today, about your 11 o'clock patient?"

A sip of water... "What about?"

A deep breath... Doctor Deaver had a curious tic, a nervous habit of crossing his arms and discarding his eyes downward whenever a confrontation was about to take place. He was unable to fire employees... he would beg his wife to keep front desk secretaries and assistants on the payroll, long after their prime. The temperature of the room began to rise... "Well, Tim, she... she told me that the procedure went longer than expected. The schedule was set up for fifteen minutes, but the entire hour block was used. And..."

"Sometimes you just can't predict how it turns out. We worked through it though, there wasn't much of a delay through the rest of my schedule. It was no big deal."

"I totally understand Tim, I do. But it seems... there has been a trend, in your late morning patients... the cases, they have been taking consistently longer. And the thing Michelle told me, which I found to be, uh, curious... was that you had the television on, in the operatory..."

"Is that not... are the televisions not allowed to be on? Did we change the policy? I had no idea."

"No, not at all... the television is not the issue. It's a courtesy, for the patient. Something for them to, uh, a distraction while we perform our tasks."

"Absolutely. I find it to be extremely helpful, especially for the nervous types. It's a great distraction."

"Uh, well, distraction is certainly the word... it's just, well... Tim, is it possible the television is distracting your own work?"

The pair of white-coat'd professional men, men of leather and chrome, men of portfolio tips and new construction plans, of 9-irons and after dinner cocktails- Doctor Deaver the expert, Doctor Shaw the novitiate- they had been standing, facing each other between filing cabinets and a pair of desks upstairs, removed from the heart of the practice. Doctor Deaver had purchased the residential home thirty-five years ago and converted it into an empire, with the operatories downstairs and the bathroom and administrative space upstairs. But now Doctor Shaw turned around, located his chair, found a seat, and swiveled back towards Doctor Deaver.

"Ted, what are you trying to say? What did Michelle say about my work?"

"Your work is fine Tim. Exceptional in many cases. It's... well, Michelle said you were taking breaks, during the appointment... to stop, and, uh, watch television. She said you spent ten minutes talking with the patient, watching a soap opera."

"Alright."

"Alright?"

Reddening in his face, Tim cracked his knuckles... "How am I supposed to respond Ted? I always finish my work... sure, sometimes it takes longer than expected, but I'm still very much at a beginning stage in my career, especially next to an accomplished business owner like yourself. I don't have the tenure like you do, the clinical expertise, the cases and the experience. I am trying to develop that. And you yourself say my work is exceptional, so... with all due respect, I think you're missing the issue."

Doctor Deaver absently scratched his chin stubble, "What issue?"

"Subterfuge, sir! The real issue! A new assistant, a young girl with spunk, a young girl without anything invested in the practice... she comes in, and she brings all of her baggage to lay on us... because you can only screen so much from an interview... she's a drama queen Ted. She joins the staff what, a month ago? And now she says something like this to you, something toxic... she's clearly divisive. I've been here over two years. You've been here thirty. She's been here two weeks. Don't you see what she's trying to do?"

"What's that?"

"She's trying to create tension, to pit us against each other, to make a fuss... she's clearly a troublemaker. And you don't need that in your

practice." Tim looked Ted directly in the eye... eye contact, key... Tim's father taught him that as well. Don't stare at your shoes. Make eye contact.

Ted didn't know how to respond. He considered whether or not Tim could be right. There had been several instances over the last twenty-eight years where a new hire didn't work out. It was possible...

"Ted, have you spoken to Tina about my work?"

Tim had drawn an ace of spades at the turn... smooth, unforced, his Monday/Wednesday/Friday assistant... Tina... Tina, a divorcee, three children, a dead-beat ex-husband who was perpetually late on his alimony payments... Tina who had gained too much weight after high school, who used to cheerlead in front of big crowds and ride football stars in privacy and later score rides in fancy sportscars and snort cocaine in fancy clubs, dressed in tight red dresses donning big 80's hairdo's... Tina who would stand mesmerized by *Wheel of Fortune* holding onto the suction tool next to Tim and gladly welcomed the hour break in their day... their silent agreement, their silent mutiny against the hustle and bustle of the rigorous work schedule... wheels spins, prize packages, audience contestants in homemade sweatshirts... a welcome reprieve. Tina clocked her hour of pay, Tim relaxed in a buzz of pixel and warmth... childhood stay-home-from-school-sick day memories, his mother's homemade chicken soup, a red fleece blanket on the old red couch the cushions worn in the family pictures hanging on the wall... sometimes their hour extended into the Local News, with weather and sports and traffic and election results... sometimes their two hours extended into a third, with a soap opera or talk show... Tina loved Doctor Shaw. She spoke so highly of him to Doctor Deaver, to the other staff members... Tina had worked her way up from a front desk girl to assistant, then to hygienist, and now was second in line for lead hygienist. The lead hygienist had been in her position for fifteen years, worked exclusively with Doctor Deaver, and had told her coworkers at the previous Deaver Family Practice Christmas Party that she planned on "working until she dropped dead," so there was no incentive to push any further... Tina had gone as far as she could in the office. Doctor Shaw was the best thing that had happened to her in years.

"Well I checked the book, Tim."

"And?"

"Reschedules, postponements, procedure extensions... there seems to be a trend. And it seems to have been a trend for quite some time."

"Ted, just last week, you told me how you were happy about collections... how the quarterly report looked great. We talked about the long-term. Your wife called us both together and reviewed the numbers. Everyone went away from that meeting pretty darn happy, right?"

"I know Tim, I just... it's just, what I heard from Michelle is concerning. Can you understand where I'm coming from?"

Stand firm. That was the final lesson Tim's father had left him before departing this world at age 53 from a myocardial infarction alone and cold in the center of a corporate parking structure, a first floor vice-president front-door spot, the day before Christmas at ten o'clock at night only to be found three days later by a member of building security who had been on vacation for the holiday... firm... "Honestly Ted, I don't understand. I really don't. Should I be looking for work somewhere else? What are we trying to accomplish here?"

"Let's not be rash, Tim."

"Rash? My character has been called into question by a little snitch of an assistant who knows nothing about me, you, or this practice... and you are siding with her. I think there is plenty to be upset about."

"It's not about sides..."

"I have to politely disagree sir, it's all about sides. And my side is that I will no longer work with her. So one of us is leaving, at the end of all of this. I don't even want to speak to her again, for fear of what might be said. That's how upset I am."

"This wasn't the point of all this Tim, really. I think we need to calm down a second. Nobody is going anywhere."

"Again, I will have to disagree sir. She has to go. Or I do."

Doctor Deaver's chest tightened, a lump in his throat plumed up, legs tired and numb... a firetruck blazed across Main Street, a windowsill vibrated in need of repair... electric currents plumed heat, air vents coursing like veins through the humming body of the office... phones ringing... business. Success. Beige walls. Tropical wallpaper borders. An empire, of sorts... and now the king was forced to render a decision. "Tim, why don't you take the rest of the day, and we'll revisit this tomorrow morning. I understand you are upset, I understand why. You and me are similar, we are perfectionists..."

it's why we got into this profession. I wasn't trying to attack your character, and I don't think Michelle was either. She just..."

Tim reached for his coat on the hanger next to the stairwell. "Ted... I apologize for getting worked up, but I am standing firm on this. I do not want to work with her anymore. So if she is in my operatory tomorrow morning, I will not stick around. It's unacceptable. I really thought we were developing a relationship, especially after talking about a future partner buy-in... the meeting last week... but I don't know. I have to maintain my integrity here. I won't work with somebody like that, like her. I can't perform up to the standard I need to with that kind of negative energy around me. I hope you can respect my position on this."

A white coat exchanged for a vintage snow parka, designer, faded classic and perfectly crisp... the BMW pre-heating in a front row spot, premium real estate. Tim would go home to his wife... Wednesday night, their favorite crime drama... followed promptly by sports highlights... then the late night re-runs, a trip to the microwave to bring a cardboard box of Chinese take-out back to life... maybe a feel-good comedy to fall asleep to... mumbling 'I love you' to each other at some point... they couldn't have kids, so the cable bill was always paid early and fourteen-hundred channels awaited their turn for that precious thumb indentation, the click...

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Windows like high school boredom in the heat of algebraic equations- windows like draping waterfalls, thick curtains in grandma's livingroom impatient for Thanksgiving dinner- a small porthole window on a cruise ship years ago sailing off from Orlando, FL in the moonlight of imagination, salt clouding the air unsure whether those booming cumulus exist on the glass or behind it- windows like a third story window off the main road of your commute home, routine and dutiful every night for seven years but now tonight for the first time this first holy glance of first-moment noticing the light to a child's bedroom twirling pink unicorn mobiles and she's there with weepy eyes sent to remind you that your pain is not exclusive- the stained windows of first communion piety hands folded down the aisle St. Jude watching from above- impenetrable windows on high-rise buildings looking out and over sidewalks like anthill pathways... windows reflecting back, windows peering far onto the horizon... pain agonized grey-eye'd staring, bright blue sun-reflected laughter... the windows of our eyes of our minds of our hearts... the glass, like our bodies, like our individual psychic beings of self, solid and real and there for your fingers to tap on and barriers and no denying them, but contemporaneously invisible see-through nothing to do but adjust your eyes

and notice the inside/outside dichotomy is nothing but fictionalized good fun. Nothing but an illusion.

Jesus I'm tired, Franny thought to herself... glancing away from the window, she noticed her own hands, folded over her knees... diagnostic machines, humming and recording her father's biologic processes... a giant oak tree swaying outside... how long had she been in this liminal space of untethered thought, of deep thought like her laboratory days pouring over data, outside of her own body... while her father remained so constricted to his own.

A clock. Hung next to the television, the upper corner of the hospital room... an hour hand pointing between 3 and 4... dark outside... morning... she forgot if she had slept. She couldn't remember her last restful sleep, her last dream. Dreaming... no, this wasn't a dream. She slid her legs off the foot of the hospital bed. She moved the blanket from her lap, adjusted herself on the chair... rigid, awake... awoken... lost and regained in thought, thinking she might still be asleep... it had been a four-day vigil. The old man hadn't been coherent for more than an hour stretch, brief five- or ten-minute intervals between a calcified, useless stupor. Machines breathing for him. Machines eating for him.

"Anne, where is Anne?"

His wife, her mother, had been dead for several years... thirteen to be exact... and yesterday, on Friday the 13th, her father put the question to his daughter. "Where is my wife?" Franny gulped, humbled and confused looking down at her maker... unsure how to answer... she didn't know. Where was her mother? In a casket? In heaven? In another body? She had never really taken the time to considered an answer. To consider there might even be an answer.

Franny could only respond, "It's alright dad, everything will be alright."

After he trailed off, she felt upset with herself. She had told him a lie. She debated with herself, unsure... well, the least she could do was bring reassurance. For every bloodied kneecap, for every high-school boyfriend break-up, every grad school break down... each time she would call out to him, go to him, asking for help, for reassurance... it was the least she could do, Franny decided.

Neither of her siblings had been able to escape the pressures of career or responsibility... their flights were scheduled for Saturday morning... it was Saturday morning, technically... was it Saturday? Franny picked up the chart next to her father's bedside... the last entry was Friday, Friday the 13th... 11:13PM... she remembered the nurse who came in, scribbling the note... the soon

to be meaningless note... what would happen to the pad of notes and dates and times, once her father passed away? Were these final checklists kept somewhere, in warehouses littered throughout the backroads of Minnesota or Wyoming or Nebraska, chilled and hypo-allergenically sealed, stocked and facsimiled and occasionally passed between the hands of busy-bodied clerks? Were they destroyed? Were they bequeathed to the families of the deceased? Why were the notes kept, if they didn't matter ultimately? Her father was dying. He had been dying. He would be dead. A smoker. Since he was fourteen. That's the way it was, back then. Fourteen. Fifty-six years later, it finally caught up to him. Cancer. Metastasis. Dirty medical terms like *small cell* and *adenocarcinoma* and *neuroendocrine tumors*... he was given six months to live after finally being forced to see a doctor... coughing up blood... she remembered her father's answer to one of the investigatory questions a physician's assistant read from off a checklist... "No, it's not unusual. I've been coughing up blood for years." Six months to live. Three months later, Franny at his bedside...

Am I supposed to cry, when he finally does go? she wondered as the light began to give way to the dark... the clock's hour hand now poking between the 4 and the 5... an hour had passed? The beeps, the electric current, the sterile fumes of the recently deceased... gauze and iodine and bags full of urine... clean, but so appalling... friends, coworkers, they would express their sympathy whenever she would politely disclose her father was terminally ill... "I'm so sorry Fran" or "That's terrible" or "I'll keep him in my thoughts and prayers"... she continued to wonder, if she had told those friends and coworkers the whole truth, about his half-century long Marlboro Red habit... "Well, he deserves it" or "Of course he's dying, I can't believe he made it this long"... whose fault was all of this? Her father's? His parent's? God's? Guilty parties... whenever topics like death or suffering or pain, mortality, were discussed amongst people in public those people would become more or less preoccupied with thumbing a root cause, finding something or somebody to attribute blame... as if all those human conditions didn't happen on their own in chaotic, magnificent wonder. As if there were linear explanations to any of this. As if a switch was flipped by a black-cape'd villain. As if life was meant to be rosy and perfect and eternal sunshiney, until somebody or something went and ruined the party. She didn't blame her father for smoking. She couldn't understand why he would be to blame for his own death. His birth was to blame for his death. His birth was the blame of his parents, as he bore the blame for her birth... to blame life, for death? He was fated into this, like every other fated member of *homo sapiens*. She might cry. She might not. It didn't matter. All that mattered was that she didn't blame him, and wouldn't resent him for being here with him in this hospital room at 3:45AM. No way, she reaffirmed, the words nearly escaping her lips.

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"At least she loves something more than herself."

"WHAT IS THAT SUPPOSED TO MEAN?"

"It means at least she cares about something more than herself."

"SO YOU'RE SAYING I DON'T LOVE ANYTHING ELSE BUT MYSELF?"

"That's not what I said."

"SO I SHOULD BE MORE LIKE CONNIE? I SHOULD START A FUCKING DOG KENNEL RESCUE CHARITY? SHOULD I TEACH THEM HOW TO DO LONG DIVISION AND SPEAK SPANISH?"

"It's not about my sister."

"THEN WHAT IS IT ABOUT?"

"It's about caring about something other than yourself. Or other than your car, or your antique book collection, your blueprints for the lakehouse, or your job, your job that's so important..."

"I THINK I'VE HEARD ENOUGH CHERYL!"

"No. It's true. You can sit there and make fun of my sister, how she teaches dogs tricks and posts funny videos, how she spends time with her kids and brings them to church festivals, how she doesn't have a nice house, how her family doesn't eat a nice restaurants... you can say whatever you want, but I'm entitled to respond. That's how a relationship works."

"SO DO YOU WANT ME TO BE CARL NOW? YOU WANT ME TO DESIGN SPOONS ON FUCKING ETSY AND LEARN TO PLAY THE GUITAR? GIVE ME A FUCKING BREAK!"

Cheryl's frustration brought her from leaning on the countertop to seated at a table. She put her palms over her temples. "For such a smart man, Mark, you really are an idiot. I don't want you to be Carl. I want you to take other people into consideration. To maybe not look at yourself as the be-all and end-all."

"IN THIS HOUSE, I AM THE BE-ALL AND END-ALL!"

The volume of Cheryl's voice crept louder, gradually beginning to match her husband's as she explained, "No, you are not. Just because you work, you think because you make the money you get to decide everything, that your way is the right way. That was never what we agreed to. Who raised your children,

Mark? Who took care of your son and your daughters? Who kept this family together while you worked and worked and worked... I never told you to work your life away. I never told you to not be present for your kids, for us. I never told you that you had to become a VP. I never told you that we needed to drive a Mercedes. I never asked for any of that. We just needed enough to get by." She stood up and met his eyes. "You love the money. You love the 'stuff.' That's your sense of power. But hear me, and hear me now, I never wanted it and I never gave you clearance to become a dictator in this house. I would have gone back to work in a heartbeat. In a heartbeat."

--

"Bruh, whachu mean u heading that way?"

"What the fuck do I have to explain to you Ray? I'm heading that way. Sit on yo' fuckin' hands."

"Bruh, there ain' nuffin' dere for u. Dis is my shit. All..."

"Ray, you ain' hearin' me nukka... sit the fuck down on it. Serious. Serious as Ma's grave. Imma get achu in twenty. Stay the fuck home. Stay off the phone. Done. You get it?"

"Man, bruh, I gotchu, but..."

"But nothin'. Hang up your end and wait."

"Aight."

"Aight."

Chris clicked out of the phonecall, the dialed out another number.

"Yo."

"What's good Chris? Been a minute nukka..."

"Ain't gonna be another minute, I need to swing by."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"Aight. Well, I'm finna be out of the shop in about an hour, you got an hour?"

"Nah man, that ain't workin'. I got my whip. Can I scoop you now?"

"Serious?"

"You don't need me to 'splain it, right? I'll be over in five."

"Aight. I'll be there."

Another click. Another ring.

"Stacey, you with the baby?"

"Yeah... why? Whachu..."

"I don't got time Stace... get over to your Ma's place. Go over there now. Wait for me."

"Christopher, you scarin' me..."

"Good. Go to your Ma's. I'll be over there later."

"Whachu mean by later? Later, Chris? What..."

"I ain' got time for this Stace. Listen to me. I'll be dere later. I promise, aight?"

"Chris..."

"I love you babe, I'll be at you soon. Take the baby, now."

Chris figured Stacey would call back, so he turned his phone to silent. He continued driving down 131st Street. Traffic ebbed at the whim of intersection lights, accelerating and braking, tense. He pulled up to the Auto Service Mart, and Darnell was outside on the curb waiting for him. The door opened.

"What's up cuz?"

"I need somethin'."

"I'll do what I can, all last minute and shit... you tryin' to do some work?"

"You wanna know 'bout it? Really?"

"Nah man, nah... whatchu need cuz?"

"Whatchu think I need, nukka?"

"Well I got to know what kind of piece cuz... you want a neena, you want a Berretta, you want a fuckin' AK..."

"Don't matter. Whatever you got now, at the spot. I need it. Now."

"What happen' cuz?"

"I thought you didn't want to know nukka? Just tell me can you help or nah?"

"You know I gotchu. But I can't do it free, of course..."

Chris pulled a roll of \$20 bills from his pocket.

"What's this?"

"Six. That work?"

"Thatta work."

Darnell took the money after looking briefly out the passenger window. The car stopped at another red. No words were exchanged, and the vehicle proceeded with another green.

"Heard business is good wichu cuz, got that big time shit down the way. You like Chase Manhattan I hear."

Chris didn't respond. He pulled off the main drag and swept down several alleyways. He pulled the car behind a dilapidated garage.

"Gimme a minute cuz."

"I ain' got a minute. I got seconds. Get at it."

The car door opened. Chris waited. Darnell walked back in a dilatory fashion after several minutes. He kept one hand underneath his coat, the Auto Service Mart uniform bulging near the waist underneath.

"Is it loaded?"

"Nah man it ain't loaded, I don' do like that..."

"Well you got the slugs with it."

"Yeah, there's a dozen or so in the bag..."

"Aight, give it here."

"Cuz, take it easy... let's kick down..."

"I told you nukka I ain' got time. I need it now. Get out of the car and leave that shit here."

"Cuz, you know that ain't how..."

"Darnell, I swear man... leave the fuckin' bag and close the door. I ain' seen you, you ain' seen me."

"What bou all these windows out here nukka? Who dey seen?"

"I swear to gawd..."

Darnell reached underneath the passenger seat with a brown paper bag, let go of his grip, and opened the door. He looked through the window at Chris, "You alright cuz?"

Chris yanked at the passenger door handle from inside the car, flipped the locking mechanism, and drove away.

More traffic. More buses. More people heading home from work, heading to work, heading headlong into Cardinal directions... heads down, plugged into earphones, staring at cellphones. Chris checked the bag a couple of blocks away from where he left Darnell... he felt the hard steel underneath the tenuous paper. He counted the bullets with his fingers. There were at least eight. He set the bag on the passenger seat then set his suit coat over it, reaching into the back seat... his left hand remained tight on the wheel. No music played on the radio. He tried to focus on the cars in front of him, but all he could hear was his heartbeat echoing between the sides of the chassis. Thump, ka-thump, thump...

At the next light he pulled his coat over just enough to open the mouth of the bag. He reached in, loaded six bullets into the chamber, and concealed the materials once again as the car moved forward. Ka-thump, thump, ka-thump...

He didn't have the option to reconsider. He didn't have the luxury of analysis. He didn't question his decision. He didn't need to verify any of the parameters. Chris was going to kill a man. He was going to kill a boy. He was going to kill a son. He was going to kill a father. He was going to kill a brother. He was going to kill an uncle. He was going to kill someone somebody loved. He was going to kill someone somebody hated.

He wasn't doing it because he wanted to. He wasn't doing it because he was asked to. He was doing it because it had to be done. It was never a question of *why*, once the question entered his mind. It was *how*. And now that question had been answered.

Up Douglas Boulevard. The city park on his left side, turning at 145th... then on his right side... his coat... the gun in his pocket... the keys still in the ignition... a clot of toughguy streetkids coagulating near a row of benches... empty ballfields... the brown-brick stage, dome'd and frozen against the sky... looking up, one second, one breath, upwards at a Mayan sky with children dancing and rhythmic drums banged with jeweled thigh bones, oneiric turquoise patterns ripple along once clouds now entire creation myths, secrets revealed. Moving... forward, onward... back to Earth... towards Skinny, Skinny and his patented red coat... "Dude'll be wearin' a red coat"... four shots, then a fifth... then a sixth... casual, letting go of the bag and the gun above a garbage can, the duct-tape obscuring Chris' fingerprints, the evidence... screaming... yelling... footsteps... ka thump ka thump, thump, ka thump... gears shifted, from **Park** to **Drive**... throwing his suit coat into the backseat... wheels turning, past a red light, into oncoming traffic... six more blocks... five... four... at a doorstep, two large gentlemen looking at Chris... "I need a word with your man."

"Who da fuck's you nigga?"

"I'm the one who just killed your boy Skin. Let me talk to your man."

The pair exchanged glances, confused... then enraged... each of them took one of Chris' arms, patted him down... a knock on the door... clickkkph, clickkkph, cluphh... "Reg... you ain' gawn believe this shit"... "This nigga sayin' he just smoke Skin, come walkin' right up."

Reggie turned from the couch, a fresh blunt in his mouth, a bottle on the glass table in front of him... a pair of women on either side... "Snow, how many times nigga I got to tell yo ass..."

"Reg, I know, but..."

Their leader put a fist in the air, then silence. Total silence. No heartbeats. No traffic. No gun shots. "Who you?"

"I killed your boy. And I'm here to get what I'm due. And end it."

"Who... da fuck... is you?"

"I told you. I killed Skinny Livingstone. I shot him down. And I know what I owe. I'm here 'cuz I know what I owe. And who I owe it to. And I want it to end."

"End what nigga? You ain' da one callin' shit in this house son. No no no. Who da fuck is you? You a suited mothafucka... you ain' no banger. You ain' put in no work before." By then Reggie had stood up from his seat on the white leather couch and confronted Chris, still in the custody of Reggie's associates.

"No, I haven't."

Reggie flexed, crossed his arms... postured like an action figure... "So why the fuck you kill Skin? And why the fuck you walk in here turnin' yoself in? You stupid?"

"I don't want any confusion."

"Confusion?"

"I don't know anything about you, except that you run the show. I know that Skin worked for you. I know that I owe you now. So I'm here to pay."

"Pay?"

"With my life. One for one. And that's it."

"Who da fuck is you?"

"I'm Chris Collins."

"CC Dimes, outta Park East?"

"When I played ball, yeah."

Relaxing his stance, the gang leader smiled, "I watched you play nigga. CC Dimes... shit. Why da fuck did CC Dimes merk my boy Skin?"

"It's my business."

Reggie laughed and blew several waves of smoke at Chris. Another long, exaggerated hit from off the blunt... "See nigga, it's my business now."

"We had beef."

Exhaling, slowly... "How you get beef with Skin? You ain' no banger... what you do for yoself? You got one of them educations nigga, you coulda got outta Harlem. You ain' street. Why you beefin?"

"He was goin' to kill my brother, so I did what I had to do."

"Why's he goin' to kill yo' bruh?"

"I only know what I hear. I hear they had beef. I hear he was going to kill my brother. I figured it was either him or my brother. I made the choice before Skin could. I don't know if dat's enuf to explain it, but I know because I chose Skin, I have to pay you back for it so no one else does. I ain't runnin' from you. I ain't bringin' anyone else into this. I did it. I man up. I'm here tellin' you before you hear some shit from anyone else. I just don't want no harm on my brother."

Silence.

"Get the fuck outta here."

Confusion.

"You can't hear now nigga? Get the fuck outta here. Open the door for this nigga. I ain't e'n like Skin. I'd done it myself. Let 'm go. Go." Waving his hands away from his body, shoo shoo'ing... exhaling smoke...

Footsteps.

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THERE IS A VICIOUS WILDERNESS INSIDE OF YOU, A LEVIATHAN WHOLLY UNEXPLORED

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"Did you ever read Dante in school?"

"Sophomore year, in college... *The Inferno*, the rings of hell... yeah, Dante wrote a bunch of townsfolk he didn't like into these awful punishments... an Italian poet from the 13th century... why, did he come up in the lecture?"

"Yes. So there was plenty... see, it wasn't just the Old Testament, the New Testament... Father James was bringing all sorts of other sources into the conversation, it was actually very well done Matt..."

"No, I believe it. Listen Ma', just because it's a church lecture doesn't mean I'm judging it. I think it's great you're getting out. You have to keep your feet moving."

"I know. Trust me, I'm trying. I'm trying new things. It's hard though Matt. I'm sixty. Most people my age are settling down with their spouse, retiring, winding up..."

"Agh Ma', forget what other people are doing. Forget the public. You make money at the track betting against the public."

"I know, but it's easier said than done."

"It always is... so, what was the big takeaway? Give me the final line. What do I need to know? Heaven and hell. How do I get in with the big guy?"

She paused, serious, "Well, once you go to hell, there's no coming back."

The pair laughed across the phone.

Chuckling still, "Well! That's... that's heavy. One shot, huh?"

Her voice rose. "But, it's your decision!"

"My decision?"

"Your decision. God lets us decide. We can either choose to be with Him, or we renounce Him. And that's when you go to hell."

"So that's the rub? Just say yes, huh?"

"That's the rub."

"I almost forgot... the real important question... were there any single guys at the lecture, besides the priest?"

"Matthew!"

"Ma'!"

"No, unfortunately I think Father James was the only single guy in the church basement."

"What's most unfortunate is I think he's also off the market... the whole bride of Christ thing... that's too heavy of a rebound. We need to find you somebody

with less baggage. What about the whole eHarmony profile? I thought Mrs. Brewster was going to help you set something up?"

"She... I don't know Matthew. I don't know about all that. It's, it's not for me. I need to meet somebody organically. I'm old fashioned. I can't do this whole internet dating thing. It makes me, uncomfortable."

"I get it Ma', but sometimes you have to leave the tree."

"Leave the tree?"

"Leave the tree. You're talking about meeting a guy organically, but you go to church lectures, family parties, and hang out with your married friends in the suburbs. I mean, you're insulating yourself. The internet thing, it gives you a way to sort of leave the tree, but in a controlled way. I think it's a lot less complicated than you make it out to be. Less scary. I don't know. You shouldn't knock it 'til you try it."

"It's easier for you to say Matthew."

"It always is... I'm not trying to be mean. Or critical... I just, I'm sorry."

"It's alright. At some point, you're right. I need to decide if I really am looking for another relationship. I don't see myself growing old, alone... but I don't know. I don't necessarily see myself growing old with somebody else either. It's strange."

"Well, it's like heaven and hell... you get to decide, right?"

A silence. "But not really. I didn't decide that your father wouldn't be here. I didn't... and that's why it's different. Can you appreciate that? How hard that is? I'm by myself, I never had any... can you appreciate that?"

A dry throat, a wince... "Honestly, I can't. I can't appreciate it, I don't have any context. I can't relate to it, we are at different points in our lives."

"But you're a smart kid Matthew. You can still appreciate it, even though you aren't as old as me, even though you don't have a family."

"All I know is it sucks Ma, and I'm sorry. That's all I can say. I'm sorry it all happened to you. I am."

"It does suck."

"Well, just... don't take it too seriously. Heaven and hell, single or dating... whatever. The whole thing could be purgatory. We could all be in purgatory right now, right? And I think you're doing great. It's hard with Danny out of the house, everyone is gone, the place is empty... you're doing great. One step at a time right?"

"I'm trying. I'm just, I'm tired. I'm really tired."

"I know you are Ma', but you're doing great. And I love you."

"I love you too Matthew. It's late. I'm going to let you go. Thanks for calling your dear old Ma'. We'll talk this weekend. Are you and Marie still headed up to the mountains?"

"Yeah, we'll be up there until Sunday. I'll give you a buzz when we get back."

"Have a great time."

"We will. Thanks."

"Ciao bello."

"Love you Ma."

--

"Oh my god that reminds me of the place we stayed in Marion two years ago on our post-college road trip with Marshall and Anita, oh my god the outside of the place was basic as hell and obviously it wasn't like a four-star hotel situation and we weren't too concerned when we pulled up because we were so tired by that point and honestly it wasn't that bad like honestly it was super affordable and they even had Paul Mitchell shower products which I totally grabbed up a bunch and even went to the maid's cart like I wasn't too proud to steal some extra but so it must have been in like the Hilton family of hotels at least on some level because of their business partnership with Paul Mitchell so it wasn't like that bad but obviously it wasn't for everybody like I remember my cousin Sean, that's Rick and Kathy's son you know the trust fund Aunt who opened up the kayaking company in Portland like they were the original hipsters out there thirty years ago or whatever but their son Sean he's an ambassador now to Australia and of course you know like he drives a Tesla and his wife is always very well groomed very high pedigree you know but they would never be able to handle a place like that but it wasn't that bad and I remember the brunch place South street Kitchen it was a happy little find down Main Street in Marion they had a great deal

on mimosas and Bloody Mary's and they had this like very cute little cocktail menu, very classy brunch with gourmet pancakes, huge portions oh my god I could have lived down there it was so cheap but it wasn't cheap like chintzy you know because I like wouldn't be settling for low quality you know it was really delicious honestly I remember Marshall didn't want to leave we were so close to coming home and we had just come back from St. Louis which we didn't really enjoy that much like between their shitty cracker cheese pizza and all the chintzy casino scenes we just were not that into it we actually ended up cancelling our last night and that's like how we got into Marion and ended up staying there so it was one of those happy little accidents that like happens on a road trip which is why going into it when we set up the route of course Anita wanted like directions from each gas station to each hotel which is like fine that's like her personality but honestly I don't know how Marshall ever put up with it and obviously it didn't work out with them R.I.P. but she was very particular about each restaurant we went to and like what activities we had planned and Marshall my little Matthew Rhys look-a-like oh my god if you saw him you would think you had accidentally like stepped onto the set of Brothers and Sisters which by the way what a classic show oh my god Sally Field and Calista Flockhart and Rachel Griffiths and incidentally like This Is Us completely ripped everything off Brothers and sisters thanks to Ken Olin because you know he produced both shows but Marshall so I remember Marshall oh my god we were in Tulsa visiting our friend Marie and Marshall just takes Anita's itinerary she had printed out and he was driving and she was holding it so I'm of course just a fly on the wall watching all of this in the background like very amused and Marshall takes the paper out of Anita's hands and rips it up and out the window on the highway it was hysterical it was one of those things like I believe that opposites do attract I think there is something to that but at some point like on some level like you have to have some similar interests and be compatible personality wise and Marshall god bless him but he just did not work with Anita's personality type and like now he's got his shit together and he quit smoking pot and everything but back then he was way too casual and she was just so like regimented I don't even know how they got started it was such a shock to everyone in our group of friends in college like I remember talking to Rachel when they first started dating like they had hooked up a few times but we didn't think anything of it but then it went like Facebook official and Rachel was like taking bets how long it would ask she was so funny and it's not like Rachel was a big relationship expert or had been in that many relationships but she knew Anita so well and Marshall had this reputation obviously amongst all of us because like his friends did know my friends pretty well because like a lot of them went to high school together in Wisconsin up in Door County you know up in the boonies all those

country kids like who knows what the hell they did growing up like tipping cattle or some shit and I was like the city girl in that whole scene with those basics but they ended up lasting like almost three years which goes to show like you never know with that sort of thing like maybe love is blind right which I'm like get me a pair of friggin' glasses."

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Static... Ray, ya set for that last loop?

He picks up the handheld radio... static... pressing TALK... Hey Alex, go ahead...

Static... I got a pair headed to Logan, over on Elm Street... 102... I think it's th' new Trinity Apartments over there...

Ray flicks a cigarette out the driver's window... Sounds alright, I'll be there in five... good morning if I ain't already said so.

You as well. How was th' vacation?

Ray pauses, exhaling the last bit of smoke... pressing TALK... Too short...

Sounds about right. And y'r tree-peeping?

Ray replies quickly, no chance for any fuzzy interludes... Beautiful. I got up to Katahdin, that was new this year. Usually I only do the Blackstone Corridor. But that was nice. I went on a Tuesday so it wasn't as crowded. A couple days in New Hampshire. Got up to Maine for that afternoon. Quiet. Real nice.

Waiting for Alex's voice to approve, the voice from beyond... the faceless voice... Ray hadn't been over to the main switchboard to see Alex in over a year. Their shifts never overlapped. Alex finished his day right as Ray began his. A morning dispatcher and a late night driver... two different worlds... Good to hear Ray, glad ya enjoyed it. I'll let the customer know you're headed over.

Ray shifts into DRIVE... Roger that.

Ray sprays a can of aerosol scent freshener towards the backseat at a STOP sign. He inspects his extended hand after jamming the LYSOL tube under the front passenger seat. The shakes have almost completely dissipated. A minor tremor, but nothing in comparison to where he was earlier in the week. By the time he had checked himself into the detox 'spin dry' on Friday night, he couldn't hold a pen in between his fingers for more than a second.

Two weeks' vacation. Tree peep. Spree drink. Spin dry. Work fifty weeks. Repeat. For seven years now, this had been the routine... it made sense to him. It made sense like how it made sense to answer "George" when someone asked him the question 'Who is your favorite of the Beatles?', like it made sense to stay away from credit cards, like it made sense to buy 2 lbs. of turkey on Sunday before another round of loops started so he wouldn't be bothered by making trips to the grocery store after work... grocery stores... like it made sense to work at *Al's Supermarket* for thirteen years, as a bagger/stock boy then as an assistant manager then deli manager then inventory manager then president of purchases and ordering... like it made sense to leave *Al's* on his own good standing before he was asked to leave in disgrace, when his drinking became daily and troublesome and out of control. But even the drinking made sense. It made sense to go from a six pack to a twelve pack. It made sense to go from beer to whiskey. It made sense to go from half-pints to pints, from pints to quarts. It made sense. Then it made sense to take a job as a taxi-driver so he would be forced to work nights, nights once reserved for drinking but now dedicated to a new profession... ten years later... everything still made sense... or it had made sense...

Ray shifts into PARK. He waves out the window at the couple waiting curbside. A small carry-on bag rests at the base of each of their feet. Ray begins to ask, "Can I grab those..." but they pay him no attention. The door opens. The bags come with them. No need for the trunk. Ray looks in the rearview, smiling... "Airport, right?"

The woman refuses to acknowledge Ray, and the man sneaks his eyes toward the front seat, furtive... "Uh, yeah." Then the man's eyes burrow into his hands, into a cellular screen... the pair sit in silence, heads pointed downward.

Ray shifts into DRIVE.

The protocol is very simple. Either the customer wants to chat with the driver, or he/she doesn't. A binary decision... more of a reaction, for Ray. Because it is up to the driver to play host, to understand the needs of his/her client, and respond accordingly. Ray considered himself an accomplished driver, and a master of the art of taxi'ing... with this trip, there was no need for small talk, no need to poke or prod. The customer(s) had rendered their decision absolute and precise from the start of the loop. In fact, over the past five years, Ray's job had required less and less conversation. Ray used to tell people he became a taxi driver because he liked to talk, he enjoyed the conversations, and he enjoyed getting to know his customers (which was not untrue, but still not the whole truth). Ray no longer responded to questions regarding his career motivations with answers

related to him being a 'people person.' There were hardly any people left to be personable towards. Customers opened doors for themselves, sat down, buckled up politely, and didn't look up for entire trips. Eyes downward. Eyes on phones. Eyes on computers. Eyes... Ray reflects to himself, merging onto the highway from an ON ramp... *I never see their eyes anymore.*

Ray looks at his own eyes in the rearview mirror.

Less blood-shot. Clearer. The whites, not so yellowed and feverish... brown irises... Ray takes a deep breath. *I'm glad this run is over. I'm glad I'm out of that damn detox center. I'm glad it'll be another year until... but why does it keep happening? Why do I keep doing it? Why can't I figure out shit from shinola? I'm fifty-three. I'm too old... but two weeks ago, when my vacation started... it's like I didn't even have a choice. If I don't want to do it anymore, the bender, the binge... why can't I just take a vacation, do my tree peeping, enjoy a mix of sugar maples, American beeches, and yellow birches, then rest easy like a man's supposed to do when he's my age?*

Exits, signs, buildings, bridges, overpasses... autopilot... miles, minutes... moving through space without any subjection to time... time evaporating... Ray preferred his job because time didn't pass when you were driving, it disappeared... the road to forever... when he comes out of his personal dilemma, Ray has skipped into the city limits, two stops from the airport. Blinking... time travelling... *why does this keep happening?*

Self-questioning... doubt... existential wavering... Ray hadn't experienced anything of the sort, at least not since he left the grocery business. Childhood was straightforward... follow the rules, and if you don't, make sure you aren't caught by an adult. Adulthood... show up for work, pay your bills, file your taxes, relax in your free time. When Ray's drinking became a problem, it was never a question of why... it was a question of how. *How do I make this work? Easy- get a job at night, so you don't have time to drink. You've never drank at work before. You never will. You've never drank in the morning or during the day before. You never will. Who works at night? Cab drivers. Easy. Simple. You like television, so watch television when you get home. You like cigarettes, so buy another pack. You don't want a family, so forget about women. Celibacy and microwave dinners. Simple. Easy.*

Ray pulls up to the **DEPARTURES** terminal. The gentleman swipes his credit card in the slot of an automated machine, swoosh, like a diving raptor. The woman has already exited the vehicle. No words are exchanged. Ray pulls around into the cabbie line, and lights a cigarette. He waits. He thinks.

A memory, an image appears and floods his mind's eye... before his folks split up... mom cutting green peppers above the sink, water running, deft and decisive she might be whistling, singing, humming an old Depression Era tune wearing her bright yellow apron and a subtle grin... her spell cast over the blade, holding the pepper in her hand bringing the knife to her thumb in that boyhood kitchen... it smells metallic... a salad bowl, the steel blade and earth and blood, little chunks drop in delicate and she never cuts herself, never once... perfect, in harmony... a craftsman... Ray exhales, slow, mystified.

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[ENTER ADDRESS]

[227 Washington Ave]

[FASTEST ROUTE?]

[Yes]

[LEFT ON W. OAKWOOD DRIVE]

Renee let her foot off the brake. She had initially planned on whipping together a meal in her crock pot, but she didn't have the energy. It would be sushi. Her favorite restaurant. Blue Fin Sushi. 227 Washington Ave. Palmer. Connecticut.

The car's GPS system took Renee down Oakwood Drive, past the mall at the juncture with Route 2, past the new Fitness & Aquatic center... Oakwood Drive to west Avondale Ave... Avondale Ave to Main Street... Main Street to Washington Ave... three blocks... destination on the left... parking garage on the right...

[YOU HAVE ARRIVED!]

Renee dined at Blue Fin Sushi once a week over the past four years. Fifty-two times a year... two-hundred eight visits in total... a fair estimate. She preferred to mix her wasabi and soy sauce alone, during the week. She preferred to sit at the bar and rarely ordered carry-out. She would watch the chefs roll, craft, and prepare her meal. A bowl of miso soup... an order of special maki... unagi sashimi... two maguro rolls... a glass of white wine. Occasionally the owner would pour her sake.

The owner was a short Japanese woman. They talked politics... a television played World News constantly above one end of the bar. They would engage in banter, enjoy a drink. Friends. Owner and customer. Renee felt decompressed

when she left Blue Fin Sushi. She walked out of the restaurant with a deep sigh back to her car.

[ENTER ADDRESS]

[Home- 1414 Stapleton Court]

[FASTEST ROUTE?]

[Yes]

[SOUTH ON WASHINGTON AVE]

Renee buckled up with the assurance of a tiny map on a screen on the front panel... the turns, the audio feedback... but while passing Route 2, Renee's consciousness unexpectedly flashed up a conversation... a voice played, Karen Wright, a childhood friend asking her how her mother didn't know... "How could she not know, she's been his secretary for the last ten years?" Renee remembered Karen's question, she remembered her cheeks reddening because she had no answer except 'She told me she didn't know. I believe her.' Renee heard that response from twenty-years ago playing in her head, coming up on Oakwood Drive... her father had been sent to jail for eight months, a Ponzi scheme uncovered, a couple million dollars... time served in a white-collar prison, a clean Visitors Room... Renee would visit him on weekends. The Wrights... Karen Wright... Renee's phone, during dinner, displayed a FaceBook status update... Karen Wright had posted a picture of herself on a beach, on vacation, tan and sipping a cocktail... the Wrights... one of many families who stopped attending dinner parties thrown by Renee's family. Dusty conversations, clear photo-shopped pictures, wondering... the car computer implored Renee, 'TURN LEFT'... but it was too late...

[RE-ROUTING]

[TURN LEFT ON Banning Court]

Renee made the next left turn. She wanted to eject Karen Wright's voice from out of her head... the questions, the Wrights... she tried to remember the texture of the creamy quail egg nested on top of her maki... she tried to remember the deal she closed at work earlier in the week. Replace the bad images with good ones. Stay positive. Stay positive. Renee pulled into the driveway of her townhome.

[YOU HAVE ARRIVED]

Sleep. Wake. Work. Gym. Dinner. Television. Magazines. Emails. The week went on through, Tuesday into Wednesday, Wednesday into Thursday... Friday morning. The end of the line. Renee had planned a visit to her parents [218 Cherry Parkway] on Saturday and then the farmers' market [21 Clark Road, Trailside, CT] on Sunday. She was looking forward to relaxing, unwinding. Keys. Ignition.

[ENTER ADDRESS]

[Select: Work- One Providence Place]

[FASTEST ROUTE?]

Renee's commute to the Reservoir Woods Building Complex depended entirely on the highway traffic conditions of each given morning, on what time she headed out, on the weather, on variable after variable only her car's internal computer (coupled with the internet) could possibly make sense of. Accidents. Truck breakdowns. Light patterns. Bird migrations (American black ducks along the last quarter mile of her journey into the business center were notorious for crossing into traffic and creating tense moments of back up, either resulting in delays up to 10 minutes or a feathery corpse). Fundamentally, the issue is binary. There are two routes to choose from. Her car computer produces the numbers, runs an algorithm, and the decision is made. Renee follows the arrows, the voice-over directives.

[Yes]

A digital hourglass spins across the LCD Display of her 2018 FORD Luxury SUV. Silver. Leather interior. Surround sound. Bluetooth. Climate controlled. Renee did not have any children. Her backseat never smelled like puke. French fries could not be found underneath her front-passenger seat. Car wash every other Thursday. Oil change every thousand miles. Pristine. Perfect. Her husband had left her three years ago. They had been married for seven years. Five of the seven years they spent trying various methods to increase their fertility. Renee stuck a four-inch needle into her backside every single day for thirteen months. Nothing worked. It wasn't her... regular cycles. It wasn't him... a healthy sperm count. It was them. When she brought up adoption, again, he left. Now he has a child, a baby girl, with another on the way. His new wife recently posted on FaceBook that they were aiming for six children... *1/3 of the way there... baby #2... LOL!*... that was the post her ex-husband's new wife made one evening. The post appeared on Renee's friend's account, and that friend, being loyal and concerned for Renee, proceeded to forward the information to Renee. 'Can you believe this crap?' was the text message Renee received, along with a screenshot of the post.

The digital hourglass continued to spin.

Renee made fitness a priority and participated in cardiovascular training most mornings (high-intensity intervals), before a shower and the commute to the office, but she decided to hit the 'SNOOZE' button on her cell phone today. It was Friday. She deserved it. A tough week. Three deals closed. The quarterly numbers set for the Northeast region. Goals exceeded. Deadlines met. Renee would soon be up for promotion, from senior manager to vice president. It was a lock. Everyone in her group knew that Renee was the next in line. Renee prided herself on being the only female senior manager. Soon she would be the only female vice-president. Then maybe a company president? CEO? Renee liked to aim big, especially when it came to her career.

A GPS map lit up on the car's display.

[RIGHT ON E. OAKWOOD DRIVE]

Renee took off. She put her sunglasses over her eyes, in addition to flipping down the visor. It was a bright morning. A blue sky, beautiful morning. Renee took a deep breath, feeling her shoulders and chest rise out of the leather seat. The talk radio host procured a joke about the recent election results.

Renee approached the split in her journey, the bifurcation... the point where her car would surprise her. In less than a mile, a highway ON-ramp would appear on her right-hand side. She could either take the ramp onto the freeway, or continue straight and navigate the backroads for another seven miles. The car's computer would let her know about 500 feet before the ON-ramp. Two lights ahead. One light. Renee had made a habit out of predicting the car's decision. Renee predicted today's route would include the highway. Traffic on the highway tended to move quicker on Friday mornings when compared to other days of the week. But she didn't know for sure. Renee waited for the screen, the voice, the computer... the instructions...

Then the GPS map went offline.

An hourglass appeared.

[LOADING...]

[LOADING..]

[LOADING.]

[LOADING..]

[LOADING...]

Red shifted to green. The minivan directly in front of her accelerated forward. Renee did not lift her foot from off the brake. The Jeep behind her beeped. One polite honk, at first. A reminder. But Renee did not respond. Then three consecutive honks. Still nothing. Then one piercing, relentless honk.

[LOADING...]

[LOADING..]

[LOADING.]

[LOADING..]

[LOADING...]

Finally the Jeep swung into the left lane. Passing by, the driver shouted something towards her. Then another driver shouted. And another. Renee did not focus on the other drivers. She gripped her eyes on the GPS image, paralyzed, bored into the car's internal display. At the mercy of invisible forces. The traffic light toned down, from green to yellow to red. Renee opened a new trip from the navigation menu. She inputted the address for her office manually. She thought maybe that was the issue. Maybe the presets were screwy?

[FASTEST ROUTE?]

[Yes]

The hourglass appeared.

The light revved back up.

Renee could not decide. She could not go forward. She couldn't make the fine calculations, analyze the multiple nodes of data... she needed the fastest route, but couldn't determine it on her own. More horns beeping. More shouts from outside windows. Renee drifted into the horizon, through her windshield, admiring other vehicles merging onto the ramp. Then she inspected another trail of steel and rubber, another snake of industry moving past the ramp, in the direction of the back roads. Renee couldn't decide on which group to join. She couldn't be certain. She had to be certain.

[LOADING...]

[LOADING..]

[LOADING.]

[LOADING..]

[LOADING...]

Red. Another cycle of procession missed. Another slew of upset drivers stuck behind her. Vexed faces whizzed past her. Beep, beep... a woman... once a woman... a short bulldog bleach streaked bob cut from hell, foo-foo'd up on her head like a feather duster like a village Dutch boy amok on the cobblestone hustling about to find a glass milk jug for mommy... a mommy herself, probably... the apotheosis of fast-food America's effect on the female anatomy... shrunken, muffin-top'd, shoulders hunched, rolled up underneath a flashy suit coat and a sea of jewelry, layer upon layer of adipose tissue folded pastry-style laminated and mortared together with her secret resentments and fears and hates and petty virtues... squishy, but firm. Catching a glimpse of the woman's middle finger nearly disturbed Renee enough that she forgot her own dilemma. But then she remembered. Renee's mind tangled, stretched but then focused singular watching the hourglass load. Then a knock at her window. She jumped, startled. A man in a suit coat. He didn't seem angry... more concerned... a muffled voice, genuine, "Are you alright ma'am? Is your car dead?" He must have walked up from his own car, parked behind her. Renee did not roll down the window. Renee could see him through the tint, but he could only make out her general shape. She double checked to make sure the doors were locked... they were. But she clicked 'LOCK' again. To be sure. She shouted back through the glass, "I'm fine, it's the computer, the car... it's stalled."

"Do you want any help? Can you roll down the window?"

"No, no I'm alright."

"Are you sure? I can help push you to the shoulder, if your car is stalled?"

"No. No it's alright. It should be working soon."

"Well, would you mind putting on your caution lights? Just to let people behind you know?"

"Sure, sure. Sorry about that." Renee flipped the switch on her steering wheel that triggered the caution lights. A clicking sound echoed through the chassis of the luxury SUV.

The man stared into the window for another second, shook his head, and walked away.

At that moment Renee received an image from her subconscious... a short clip, whether it was from a movie or an actual experienced memory she couldn't be sure, but the scene played out with a 'good old days' motif and her imagination portrayed a man pulling into a gas station to ask one of the attendants for directions. The attendant stuck a greasy rag into his back pocket, thought pensively and deliberately, then offered step by step instructions to the lost driver. Renee noticed a gas station up ahead to the left. Renee flipped off the caution lights, set her turn signal left, and moved towards the SHELL STATION as the traffic signal switched back to green.

Renee pulled into the gas station and parked. She walked out to station, took a deep breath, and approached the counter. Behind the register sat an elderly Indian man on a stool. The man was reading a newspaper, and kept his head down while Renee explained, "Excuse me sir, but my car... there seems to be an issue... can..."

"We are not a service station ma'am. I am sorry. There is a Midas two miles up the road, at Route 17. They would be able to help you with any engine issues."

"No, it's not an engine issue... it's the navigation on the car, it..."

"We do not offer any electrical or system service either. Our garage only performs tire changes or oil. That's it."

The man continued to read his newspaper.

Renee walked back to her car. She unlocked the doors, sat in her seat, buckled her belt, locked the doors, and accessed the navigation menu.

[LOADING. . .]

[LOADING..]

[LOADING.]

[LOADING..]

[LOADING. . .]

Renee punched in the address to her workplace. Again, the hourglass appeared and spun in a wave of electric blue light... a tear ran down her cheek. Then

another. A piece of granite... able to withstand blow after blow, solid in the face of so much, strong against the tides of life... then shattering, without warning, into a million pieces.

--

She shuts her eyes. She can feel Jesus when her vision fades to black. She tells herself she can see Him, that a picture is clear, but in truth the object of her contemplation is more emotional than pixelated. Her vision is more a memory, remembering an image indelible eroded onto her mental landscape from her childhood... her mother's house, on a modest wall, overlooking a modest kitchen table... an indigo backdrop fills the space behind her savior, it fills up all the way to the periphery of her mind's eye... He wears a glowing yellow halo, a circle of light behind his face... a white robe, a red cloth draping over his shoulder... a Bible in one hand, the other hand pointing... a sense of victory. When young Amber sat down for supper, she always set her plate on the side of the table that faced His image. She would look up at her Jesus until He filled her heart... until she could carry Him everywhere.

Once a young girl, now a mother of two... she laughs. Though her laugh isn't one of righteousness. She doesn't fancy herself any better or any worse than anybody else, generally, though she cannot tolerate racism and is convinced every cruel, white bigot she has faced in her life will share a fiery whirlpool in Hell. But that belief does not bring her pleasure. She doesn't laugh on account of the misfortune of others; it wasn't a laugh of demise. She doesn't laugh that nervous laugh of regret, the laugh an ex-husband laughs when he tells a story about allowing his teenage son to enjoy a couple of birthday special-occasion beers, forcing a promise out from the boy to never tell mommy... ten years prior to the ex-husband finishing his story in front of a bathroom mirror surrounded by the loneliness of a studio apartment a couple of hours after that same son's wake, dead from an overdose at twenty-three. It isn't a laugh of joy; Amber's day ran its course in a particularly average way. It isn't a laugh of accomplishment, the laugh of an Olympic athlete after crossing a finish line, the final run, the final heat, earning a medal. It is a laugh of contentment... of placement, of equipoise... of being alright. It is a quiet laugh. Only she can hear it. There is a musical quality to it... like a hymnal refrain.

Amber Cox is cooking dinner for her two sons. A family, they will eat their meal together, once Randy is home from practice. Their humble dining room is adorned with an iconic Jesus, a Jesus similar to the one of her childhood. She cuts greens for a salad. She stirs taco-meat over a skillet. She has not

sat down for several hours. Amber works on her feet for a living, then walks home from the clinic, her place of work, as a certified nurse. She assiduously takes care of elderly men and women. She draws a firm sense of pride from her work. Twenty years of nursing... only a kid, seventeen when she started. Her oldest son Sean is fourteen. He will soon be called from his bedroom to set the table.

"Sean Alexander, you come set the table for mama."

There is no response. A trio of worn plastic glasses is pulled from out of a cabinet. Amber mixes lemonade in a two-gallon pitcher. Pink lemonade. Her boys are partial to pink lemonade.

She makes quick calculations in regards to the browning ground beef, nearly done. She will add a packet of seasoning, but first, as Sean opens the cutlery drawer... "Finish your homework?"

"Yes ma'am."

"And your world history project?"

"That's not due 'til Monday. I'm gonna finish it over the weekend. I need a few more books, for my bibliography."

"You need me to take you to the library on my way to Bible Study tonight?"

"Nah, I'm gonna go Saturday."

"Why don't you go tonight and get a head start?"

"It's fine mama, I'll be finished with it..."

"Boy, I know how you do your Saturdays. You sleep in late. You like your cereal, your television. And I ain't telling you those are bad things, but I know you. You ain't waking up for no library."

"Mama..."

"Don't 'mama' me Sean, not tonight. No sir. You pack your bag after dinner and I'll drop you off. You can walk home when the library closes at 9."

"Mama it's easy. I can wait until..."

"No waiting, no 'easy,' nope. We finishing that bibliography tonight."

The thin, lanky young man reaches for a paper-towel holder and rips away three sheets, to match the three plates and three sets of knives and forks. He considers complaining about the Egyptian empire... explaining in detail to his mama why the Egyptians didn't matter... why the project was stupid... why the teacher, Mr. Chalmers, was an old white man hung up on memorizing useless dates... but Sean bites his tongue. Tonight isn't the kind of night for his complaints. Not tonight.

The front door opens. A bookbag plops to the ground, a pair of shoes finds a resting spot by the door... Randy hobbles back to the kitchen, favoring his right leg. He stands up tall once he is in her view. "Hi mama."

"Well hello sir. And I see our shoes are off, good boy. Give your mama a kiss."

Randy inches past his brother to kiss Amber on the cheek.

"You two go wash, then come sit down, dinner'll be right up." From the corner of her eye... "Randy, come here. Why are you limping?"

"I, it's nothing... "

"Don't look like nothing."

"I guess, I hurt my ankle, a little."

"What do you mean, hurt your ankle?"

"I twisted it, in practice."

"Why didn't your coach call me?"

"It wadn't bad mama. I got some ice for it. It don't really hurt that much..."

"You walkin' like it hurt plenty. What happened?"

Sean leaves his mother and brother. Randy keeps his eyes fixed on his socks. "Lay-up drill. I came down wrong."

"That coach should have called me. You shouldn't be walking home, not with..."

"I got a ride mama."

"From who?"

"Coach."

Mrs. Cox repositions a cooking towel from the grip of her hand and sets it over her shoulder. "Oh, really? So you mean to tell me that man drove in front of my home, with my son hurting his ankle, and couldn't come to the door to explain himself what happened? That's what you mean to tell me?"

"I don't know mama, I..."

"Well I'll be having a word with *coach* when I get back from Bible study, I promise you that."

Randy's stomach jumps, then implodes. A nervous feeling washes over him. "Mama, it's fine. Don't..."

"Don't what Randy? Don't be concerned for my son? You can't ask me to do that boy, no. Someday you'll understand... I don't play that way. Not tonight. No. I'll be speaking with him."

"Can you pray over it a little mama?" Randy knew that before his mother did something important, she would pray over it. Praying over it helped her make a decision. Praying over it brought clarity. Praying over it made sure things were alright with Jesus. Praying over it bought Randy time.

Amber nearly smiles, but catches her lip, containing herself... she considers her son's request, plating the taco shells and well-done beef on a platter... sour cream, cheese already out of the refrigerator... "Alright. I'll pray over it. But I am going to speak with *coach* one way or another. Here, take some ice out of the freezer and fix yourself a bag. You have to keep it cold, then rest it after dinner on the couch. You put your foot up on a chair, alright? Don't put those stinky feet on my couch."

"Yes mama."

"Go wash up."

In a few minutes the two boys would sit down next to their mother, a square table, four sides, one side empty... empty since Randy was 2, and Sean was 4... empty thanks to New York City's infamous crack-cocaine epidemic of the 1980's infiltrating Providence, RI, infiltrating her husband's life then his family's life on Asylum Avenue... but before they sat down, the three held hands... bowing their heads... "Father, we thank you for this food we are about to eat. We thank you for a roof over our heads. Father, let us remember those who are not as fortunate as us, let us remember we are blessed and will be blessed by You as we carry out Your will. Let us act according to your will always. In Jesus' name we pray Father..." in unison, three voices, "Amen."

Amber posits questions to her children concerning their day at school, about practice and chess club, about teachers and other students... "Is Kyle Walters still causing problems Sean? I don't want you hanging around that boy..." She eats quickly. The boys eat quickly. They are hungry. Randy will soon be left to clear the plates, and Sean will be told to retrieve his books for the library. Amber Cox glances at her watch, her coat in her hands and a plain, maroon scarf wrapped around her neck. "When I'm back at nine o'clock Randy you better have that television OFF. Make yourself a sandwich for tomorrow, I brought home some more peanut butter. Lord have mercy you two go through the peanut butter. Alright, let's go Sean. Randy, come kiss your mama goodbye."

Randy kisses his mother on the cheek. His lips meet her skin electric, and Amber is jolted by the fact her baby boy stands nearly as tall as her... surprised because he has so much more growing to do, God willing... surprised like she hadn't noticed him before that very moment in the kitchen, like he sprouted up from the crib to her eye-level overnight. But Randy thinks to himself, pulling away from his mother, that he will never be as tall as her... he couldn't be further from her 'eye-level' when confronted by her dark, nearly black-brown eyes. His mama is a large woman... not in stature, or girth, but in presence. Randy's mind is often filled by her presence even when she is not around. "You be careful with your ankle Randy" before she locks up the door behind her.

Sean leads the way down the walkway to the curb, and soon the family vehicle, a beat up Chevrolet sedan, is parked in front of the library... before the handle clicks open, "I'll expect you to be home when I get out of Bible Study."

Somewhat dejected, the boy zips up his bag. "Okay."

"You finish up your bibliography, and Saturday I'll let you sleep in as late as you want, alright?"

"Yes ma'am."

Sean closes the door. Amber drives a few blocks up to Congdon Street. Snow begins to fall. She locates a parking spot in the tiny lot next to the church and walks expeditious towards the brick building.

A friendly face, then a hug... "Good evening Miss Sarah."

"Good evening Miss Cox. How are we tonight?"

Amber brushes off some flakes from her hair. "Well I got two mouths fed, one at the library, one resting his leg on the couch after basketball practice. God is good."

"All the time."

Ms. Cox removes her scarf and unzips her jacket. "All the time."

"What about your mouth child? You keeping yourself fed?"

Two feet, stamping on a mat... "My salvation gives me strength, Miss Sarah."

"True, but sometimes we need a side dish or two to go with our salvation."

Mrs. Cox sighs, then, "Lord knows I got my fork and knife ready."

The pair of women saunter together, giggling. But out of reverence for the church, to maintain seriousness, to not offend their Good Lord... Miss Sarah cuts, "Did you hear about the shooting over on Caldwell last night?"

"Yes I did. A shame. Ten years old. It's a wonder I get to sleep any more. Randy's only two years older than that little girl was. Bullet to her heart... His ways are mysterious."

Reverend Jenkins enters from a closed door into the hallway, catching the tail end of the two women's conversation. "For us to ask the Lord for understanding is the greatest sin of pride for any man or woman."

The two, in unison, turn and answer the pastor... "Amen."

"It is not God who let that bullet into the heart of that child, no. It is man. That bullet was led by money, by drugs, by gangs. It is we who have fallen. And our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ is here to pick us up. Is he not?"

The pair of women do not respond. Amber nods, taking a deep breath. Miss Sarah finishes wrestling off her coat. The Reverend Jenkins offers Miss Sarah a hand, holding one sleeve tight to ease the portly woman's exit from her polyester encasing... but before he does, before the three of them walk into the Bible Study room, the reverend continues, "The Lord is close to the brokenhearted, and saves those who are crushed in spirit. Yes he does. And that child is in the greatest company any of us could wish to be, that I know. She is in the kingdom of Heaven. There are no stray bullets in His kingdom." The women hum together in response to the preacher... "Amen"... "There are no mistakes in His creation. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will

be comforted."... "Amen"... "That little girl knows a peace like she has never known, a love like she has never felt. Her comfort is our comfort. And our work is His work."

"Amen."

--

A classic scene... a corporate setting... the crime began at a color-photocopier... a blouse, a necklace, nylons and heels, buttons pushed absently... she had been hoping to run into him, casually, waiting anxious the past two days... "So you heard about James?"

"Nothing besides what everyone else heard, from the email. Dumb bastard was putting in like 90-hour weeks with the new system upgrade... I heard he burnt out, which makes sense. At least the project went through though. I'd feel bad for him, with Jerry breathing down his neck for two months, working like that, but at the same time, I'm sure his bonus..."

Coy, she shuffled papers, not making eye contact, a falsetto voice... "I know something you don't know."

"Oh yeah? Spill the beans."

"Well, I know he's technically away for a family issue."

"They have to call it whatever they call it, for HR to approve the paperwork."

"Nope, it doesn't work that way."

"So what do you know?"

"Well, what I know wasn't in the email, obviously. Come with me. I can't say anything here. Let's walk over to the cafe."

"I have to file a few more submissions before lunch..."

"Suit yourself."

"Fine."

He followed her past the security desk and into the foyer. Once they were clear of the glass doors, with no one in earshot, she began humming... "I saw it on Jerry's desk, the request for leave. So I talked with Tina, and she filled me in. You're not gonna believe this."

"What?"

Down the stairs and into the lounge space... tables and chairs, an upscale high school lunchroom... cleaner... quieter... more refined... "So, when James went back home for Christmas, the company gave him an approval to take his family out, you know, hotel for a couple nights and dinners on the corporate card..."

"Upper management perks, huh?"

"Not exactly. See, he went out to a real fancy steak house, back in St. Louis, where his mother is from... took his mom, wife, brother, sister, their spouses and kids... they racked up like a bill for something like two grand."

"Figures. They can't give any of us associates a Christmas bonus because of the budget, but that asshole and his family can drink top-shelf booze and champagne..."

"Well, it wasn't much of a bonus for James."

"What do you mean?"

"Tina, she made me swear... you can't tell anyone else."

"Who else do I talk to?"

"James' brother- his brother choked on a filet mignon, and died."

"What?"

"It was like out of a movie. They tried to do the Heimlich, but the poor bastard took off more than he could chew, and he suffocated, right there in this fancy smancy restaurant."

"Are you sure Tina wasn't bullshitting you?"

"I told you, I saw the HR form on Jerry's desk."

A pause... silence, except for an industrial purr, a humming sound being emitted from a gourmet coffee machine and a sizzling griddle vibrated between the short, platinum blonde-hair'd divorcee and the tall, slightly overweight and unhappily married man... early thirties... twelve years at the company between them, stuck in their roles, resigned to their titles, par for the course- cynical, tired, underpaid, frustrated, typical.

Then the man chuckled. He covered his face, looked across their clandestine table into the thick-ankle'd woman's eyes, out one of the large-cut windows

towards the pond, and back across to his co-conspirator... smiling wide beneath his fingertips... exclaiming in muted gasps, "What comedy! The irony in that... that's so, perfect."

Accomplished, the woman twisted a pyrite bracelet clockwise around her wrist and unleashed a grin of her own. "I knew you'd enjoy that little story. But seriously, not a word."

"Oh no, that's too precious to share. I can't even- sweet Jesus- that has to be the most perfect tragedy. Linda, you've made my day, officially."

"I had to hold back, when Tina told me. She was nearly in tears, she felt so bad for him... it almost made me feel bad."

"Oh fuck that! There's nothing to feel bad for, any of these VP's and managers... they deserve everything they get! Glad-handing each other, using their corporate cards and company vehicles. They all deserve whatever they get. And James deserved to see his brother choke to death while his stock options increased. There's nothing to feel bad about. That's karma, right there."

Eyelashes on overdrive... "I wonder who told Jerry to lie, in his email to the group?"

"I'm sure it came from Scott. The VP's have to cover it up. Think about it! If they didn't, if they told the truth, the rest of the group would think exactly what I'm thinking. Maybe if those assholes stopped going out to steak house dinners and started paying us what we deserve... maybe if they treated us like humans and not robots... I guarantee Scott came up with the lie. Guarantee it. They can't tell us the truth... it would make them guilty!"

She couldn't really follow his words but kept her gaze locked as he continued. "No, they're always protecting their own asses. There's no humanity left in this whole department. Do you remember the last set of layoffs? When they got rid of Gil? Twelve years, axed, without any notice or recognition. When they mailed his shit home to him and wouldn't even let him clear off his desk and say good-bye. They don't care about anything except getting paid. Wasting their time in those fucking meetings, and getting paid. Getting paid and keeping us productive."

"Yeah, that makes sense..."

Another pause- the man feeling accomplished, like exhaling a cigarette between bedsheets- the woman imagining herself next to him- the two of them,

the grease bubbling, the beans roasting... "Well, that just made my morning." He set his palms on the plastic table-top and stood up. "Lunch is on me today."

"Where do you want to go?"

"You're choice. As long as it's not a steak house!" a chuckle, then a smug walk back up the stairs, towards the badge-scanner and the security desk, the hallways and cubicles and executive suites and phone-calls... he watched her bottom half move up each step... she could feel his eyes... humans, not robots...

--

Andrea had been assigned to the '**Falvey Family**' (labeled on a manila folder handed to her by Professor Woodridge) for her semester externship. As a senior, her undergraduate work would culminate in a paper on Applied Behavioral Analysis with her first client (hopefully of many), Dexter Falvey. Andrea didn't know what to expect knocking on the front door of the three-story colonial, tucked in at the end of a cul-de-sac of the nicest gated community in the suburb. It was idyllic. Marcia Falvey welcomed the young woman into her home. "You must be Andrea?"

Marcia's intensity seared through Andrea's eyes. Andrea couldn't stare back long enough to make out the color of Mrs. Falvey's irises. She followed the middle-age, slightly overweight woman through a lovely upper-middle class house, a tour of sorts. They exchanged pleasantries. 'Your home is beautiful.' 'Where are you from?' 'How long have you been associated with Dr. Woodridge's program?' 'Do you have any siblings?' 'I'm a little nervous, sorry.' 'Don't worry dear, this is our third semester in the program.' 'Thank you for the glass of water.' 'What are your plans for after graduation?' 'I'm not sure yet, hopefully going for my PhD.' 'What's your family like?' 'What does your husband do?' After several minutes in the kitchen, Mrs. Falvey came to the most important question of their exchange, "So, are you ready to meet Dex?"

The Falvey basement represented the pinnacle of childhood fantasy... Willy Wonka meets Duncan's Toy Chest. A certified funhouse. Video game systems, bouncy balls, construction blocks, a drum set, a basketball pop-a-shot, pinball machines, stacks of clear plastic boxes lousy with knicks and knacks, a craft table covered in construction paper and coloring markers, and a big screen television. Dex sat on the floor, hands folded over his lap, watching an episode of 'Spongebob Squarepants.' Marcia apologized immediately for

"what a mess" the place was, but Andrea was having none of it and complimented her immediately for all of the "options."

Dex did not seem to be interested in their conversation, so Mrs. Falvey called out to him, "Dex, honey. Can we talk for a minute? We have to turn off Spongebob."

The stout 9-year-old with his black crew-cut didn't break concentration, but only whispered, "Spongebawb."

Andrea had always done well in school. She studied, she read, she competed doggedly against her classmates. Since deciding to pursue her major in Psychology, she allocated several hours a week, time outside of her classwork, to memorize the DSM-IV, to read supplemental literature, to attend professors' office hours... all in the name of preparedness. The young Hispanic woman harbored only one true fear: being unprepared. Her father had left their family without warning when Andrea was only seven. She remembered her mother crying on the phone to one of Andrea's aunts, "I'm not prepared for this..." Andrea never wanted to make such a phone-call.

"Dex, let's turn off the television. We have a visitor. I want you to meet somebody."

But no amount of case-study analysis, no research tables or data charts, no diagrams, no paradigms... not one of her academic pursuits could have prepared Andrea for Dexter Falvey. Clinical textbooks were one thing. This was a human being seated on the floor next to her, refusing to acknowledge her presence.

Marcia could sense the young student's uneasiness with the situation. "It's alright. He loves his Spongebob. It'll take a couple minutes, but we'll get him going. Dex needs plenty of what I like to call 'transition time.' He can't just go from one thing to the next. He sort of has to ease his way into things. You should see us getting ready for school in the morning. Right Dex?"

The boy muttered to himself, "Spongebawb," then laughed, a howling laugh. A satisfied laugh. The perfect laugh of adolescence. In a flash, out from a massive stack of toy trucks and Lego blocks, ran another child... "Hi mommy!"

"Hi Aiden! How we doing buddy? Guess what? We have a new friend who's going to help with Dex. This is Andrea. Say hi buddy."

The young man extended his hand. "Hi Andwea! I'm Aiden!"

Andrea naturally bent down and shook paws with the youngster, meeting him at eye level with a smile. A sister to three little brothers herself, such an introduction was not at all unfamiliar to her. She set her backpack at her side, and their handshake evolved without much 'transition time' into a hug. Mrs. Falvey grinned, her cheeks plump and red, as they separated and Andrea asked her new friend, "How old are you buddy?"

"Fwive!" Aiden held up his hand, each finger proudly extended.

"Five! That's awesome. Are you in school?"

"Kindergarten!"

"Oh wow! Kindergarten! That's awesome. So grown up. Are you learning how to read?"

"Yep. I can read three books already."

"Wow! That's awesome. That's so cool! Maybe we can read together sometime?"

"Uh huh!"

Mrs. Falvey, still toothy and beaming, offered, "Andrea is here to help Dex, Aiden. But you can help too, right?"

"Uh huh!"

She hugged her youngest against her thigh. "Aiden is my little helper. He loves helping his brother out. Sometimes he likes to be involved a little too much, but that's alright. We all have to help Dex, right Aiden?"

Both arms around her maternal thigh, blinking, eyelashes and all raised up to his caregiver, his source, his benevolent queen and creator, "Uh huh! I can help mommy!"

Mrs. Falvey licked her finger and patted down an unruly clump of blonde hair on her son's head. "I know you can buddy. We're going to let Dex and Andrea get to know each other, alright? How about some fruit snacks?"

The young boy clapped his hands together. "Yes!"

"Alright buddy. Go upstairs. I'll be up in a second." She patted her son on the head and he ran off up the hardwood. Mrs. Falvey went over to Dex, hugged and kissed him, then went to the television and pressed the ON/OFF button.

Dexter burst up from his seated position. "Spongebawb! Spongebawb! No!"

Andrea clutched onto her bag. She felt the flashcards, the behavioral practicum, the diagnostic tests and rules for establishing a baseline, the curriculum she had diligently mapped out... something to bring her assurance. Despite her inexperience, she understood in that instant, with Dex crying, pushing his mother away, Andrea helpless in front of them... all the preparation was useless.

Luckily Mrs. Falvey was a master tactician. She soon had Dex up the stairs, snacking on fruit chewies with his little brother at the kitchen table. After another half-hour, Dex turned his head toward Andrea and with plenty of cajoling from his mother, offered a terse, "Hi." The three went back downstairs, Dex clutching onto his favorite stuffed animal, a green alien with a shiny helmet, and under Mrs. Falvey's direction they positioned themselves around the 'work table.' Marcia took the opportunity during a moment of relative calm to point out Dex's schedule, a 5x5 structure attached to the wall of the Falvey's basement. It was a tremendous edifice of organization. Appointments with various physicians and therapists, treatment plans and medication regimens, homework assignments, after-school activities, sports practices... color-coded, annotated, cross-referenced and detailed with a clinical exactitude. Andrea noticed her own name on the board, and confirmed that Tuesdays and Thursdays 3-5PM would work for the rest of the semester.

Eventually Mrs. Falvey absconded to leave Andrea and Dex alone to work on mathematics. Andrea had prepared some flashcards, and was given an extra copy of Dex's schoolbook so she could craft their next lesson. For an hour and a half, Andrea fought for the young man's attention. Dex would take to spinning a pencil in his hand, and Andrea was hesitant to reprimand him. He attempted several times to turn the television back ON, and plagued her with questions of 'Spongebawb.' Where he was? What he was doing? What was the name of his friend? Was it Patrick, his name? She fought to remain positive, to continue using reinforcement tools, to follow the therapy outline... 90 minutes... fighting... they had only worked through three flashcards by the time Marcia rejoined the mix.

"Alright Dex, time to say 'thank you' and 'bye-bye' to Andrea."

Dex focused on his hands, a pencil twirling furious...

"Dexter..."

Patting down his cow-lick, "Bye-bye."

"And?"

"T'ank you."

"Good boy Dex. That's my boy. Come on I'll show you out."

While Andrea tied her shoes one by one on the area rug near the front door, Mrs. Falvey offered, "I know it was probably difficult today, but it will get better. Once he sees his aids a few times, things really take off. He just needs to get comfortable. But I need you to stay committed. These kids, they are my life. When he was diagnosed, my husband and I, we made a decision we were in. We are 100% committed to helping Dex get better, to teaching him a skillset, an education, to prepare him to live a life of his own. And I need all my aids, all the help I hire, I need them to be behind me. You are a part of our solution now."

Andrea was bent over, but managed to nod her head while pulling a lace through a loop... "I totally am Mrs. Falvey. I will be on time, I will be totally invested."

"My husband, he works downtown at a law firm, 80-hour weeks sometimes, to provide all of this for us." Marcia gripped an oak banister, "This is our life. These kids... they are my purpose."

"I understand, I do."

"You won't until you have kids of your own, but that's alright. We'll see you Thursday. 3PM. Sharp."

"Totally. Thank you Mrs. Falvey. Have a good night."

Andrea dictated the email in her head, down the brick walkway towards the street... questions for Dr. Woodbridge on how to better handle Dex's repetitive tics, how to incorporate Spongebob into their flashcard sessions and whether or not it would be detrimental given his preoccupation with the show... she would be better next time. Things would be better. They had to be. She would be prepared.

--

From a bench... students, professors, doctors and experts bustling on foot across a university campus... they trample scores of caterpillars underfoot underneath their fatuous steps, striding confident to class to a meeting to an interview to practice to dining halls and dormitories... redbrick graveyards of fuzz and invertebrate struggle, millions of them in search of food, safety... the summer fecundity, they spawn and crawl out from the trees then are dead and gone and erased in their exodus. Their genocide goes unnoticed,

almost. But alas, next door, a home near campus, there lives Judy the caterpillar... Judy on the thumb of a little girl cloaked in a bright blue-green sundress who names her pet bugs with people names, who plays behind the fence in her parent's tiny yard, oblivious to the irony implicit when cutesy little creatures from the bosom of nature are given by names of cruel unconcerned animals.

The ground before my eyes goes 'crunch.' Birds gaze on wide-eye'd.

--

"How many years have we been to Gallagher's?"

"Three?"

"Gotta be four now, right?"

"Four?"

"The first year Tim's dad was still with us. Remember? 'You boys are too damn stoned to be around guns.'"

They all laughed.

"Then the second year was the poker room, where Gallagher's kid won all our money."

"House always wins."

"And last year, when Kaylee won the turkey shoot. Nailed the last four shots from the tower like a fucking pro. And Steely was too drunk to hit a single flyout."

"True story."

"Fourth year indeed. Champion recollection old sport."

Dirt roads, half an hour... the phone GPS had quit... North Road... East Road... the compadres remembered the route, for the most part, but had printed directions for contingency's sake. The corn and soy fields blended together, swayed indistinct... entire family histories, blurred in watercolor... to the city slickers, a giant rural coagulate, the country... but every so often certain farm houses would stand out and pique their minds' webs of recollection like angry flies. A grain solo with a gash in its side like a bomb had gone off... the teal two-story monster, a halfway marker, before the creek and the bridge... the deep woods, running parallel for the last

stretch of pavement for a half/mile or so... a grid layout of sharp angles, of economy, of country air filling the cabin... tradition. The annual summer camping trip. Something to hang your hat on. Something to get you between Memorial Day and Fourth of July. Another excuse for a long weekend away from work... from the ice delivery truck route, from the bank teller window, from the graduate school research lab, from mom's basement... four gentlemen, a cadre of old-timey buddies from the neighborhood, the remaining members from an original group of eleven four years back, the first year they all went... now, the fourth year... the cabin, the lake dug by the Army Corps of Engineers seventy years previous, the walleye and bass and muskellunge, the cases of cheap booze and sounds of laughter long after midnight around the campfire... tradition.

Their green jeep pulled onto a wide gravel driveway... the crunch underneath the tires... slowing, then braked. All four doors opened. A crow took off from on top of the lodge in front of them in the direction of the fields.

A clubhouse, lifeless... the stands were gone, the towers... they looked at each other, as if they already knew.

They walked up to the door and knocked.

No answer.

They lingered with rubber soles kicking up stones, milling about for the duration of a cigarette. A parked yellow tractor rested out in the fields, beyond a clearing beyond the range. They were too afraid to even consider the possibility that Gallagher might not be around, or even worse, that his operation might be shut down.

Dirt kicked up like a dustbowl Woodie Guthrie movie-scene from along the road... a pick-up truck, weathered by work, weathered by design and for its utility, not like flat-beds in the city driven only for appearance or sensibilities... a useful thing on four wheels, now minding the turn, the hard angle, closer... a man driving the vehicle who assuredly knew more about carburetors and fuel-injection than his own wife's physiological make up... he sped the dual-rear-wheeler up all the way to the house, right where the boys were standing... and before opening the door, out a window side... "Who the hell are y'all?"

The wind shifted... Marty noticed the smell of mesquite in the air, Alex gulped, Steely took a long drag at the filter-end and Connor spoke up for the four... "We're here to shoot. We're looking for Mr. Gallagher."

"What's your name boy?"

"Connor. Yours?"

The car door opened. The man walked out, shorter than expected in stature, a stocky curled-up fidget with a cut-off bright-neon t-shirt and jeans. "My name is the owner of this here property. This ain't Gallagher property here no more."

No sense wasting time on inanities... "What happened to him?"

Squinting, "What are y'all to him?"

The urban cowboy deposited a burnt tobacco filter onto the earth and cleared his throat. "We've been coming here to shoot the past four years. He lets us spend the day between the lodge and the skeet range. Same weekend, the last four years."

The owner removed his camouflaged cap then tucked it into his front pocket. He cracked his neck to the side. "Well boys, I'm sorry to say, but Fred has been dead six months now. His son sold the property, we're their neighbors who bought it. We take care of the place now. The range ain't open to the public."

"There's no way we can shoot?"

"I don't know you boys from Adam."

Connor spit, thinking... "What about his wife? Is she still around? She would remember us."

"Mrs. Gallagher sits in a nursing home this very day. Yes she does. Hell, I'll bet this morning, she woke up confused as hell and had to be reminded by a nurse of who she was and what she was doing there. I'm sorry boys, but she doesn't even remember her own self."

Nailed to the cross. They looked dejected at each other in pairs, one set of eyes meeting another... they didn't want to leave...

"I'm sorry boys, but I have to ask you to get. I got work to do."

--

Cornelius Outlaw... if there ever was a name that fit like shoulder pads for a man, a man whose name reflected his passion and career, a man who began as a star-crossed boy to grow up and play middle linebacker... Cornelius Outlaw.

Imagine his childhood, a young barefoot creepy-crawler trudging through the sugar-cane twisting bayou fields of St. Martinsville, Louisiana, washing his feet outside his father's two-room shack so his mother wouldn't yell at him for staining her floor with mud... hand-made, crafted in the country, raised by church and by razor-strap, raised to be good, to be proud, to work hard and never complain... granny's cooking in the kitchen, he wipes his nose on his sleeve and she lends him that eye... that raising eye, a pearl amidst a fold of wrinkles, a sparkle of light pure and reflecting into his soul, then a sly grin... that combustible smile. The Outlaw residence... an outlaw, one who has broken the standard norms, one who failed to recognize the establishment... the racism, the poverty... Cornelius broke out. He kept running, from the cane fields to the football fields, endline to endline set by white painted boundaries, yet with his cleats on his feet he ran free. He took off, LSU, then the NFL draft. He couldn't be stopped. From running back to quarterback to middle linebacker... wearing a face that looked like hard work... back against the wall, according to the numbers, according to census data and sociologists. Sheer determination. Now look, there he is, covering the play sideline to sideline, hair on fire... a crushing hit. The lights go out... keep looking, go inside... blanking out, black... black like death, black like the time between the end of a dream and waking up, squid ink black like the kind of darkness that makes you cringe and doubt the permanence of the soul... deep, dark... alive, but asleep... awake, but unaware... walked off the field, escorted to a medical tent decorated by the team's logo... but asleep. Nothing registers onto the scroll of his memory. No recollection. He doesn't come to until the following week, an hour before kick-off... a blink, his cheeks stretched across his face, furrowed brow, jaw dropped and flipped on like a television... startled, facing his locker, his gold chain hanging and the crucifix back-forth in a pendulum swing. He stares wide. Teammates next to him, blasting music, revving up their emotional tanks, mentally preparing, they don't take notice. Cornelius is awoken. He is terrified to ask a question... he sets his arms up along the hanging rack, above his head, a gaze towards the floor... what happened? Where am I? He doesn't say a word... and nothing is out of the ordinary, because Mr. Outlaw was one of those players who let his work on the field do all the talking... pads, tape, jersey, helmet... no memory of the walkthrough, the game planning all week... unsure of who the opponent was... through the tunnel, into the stadium... a coach reviews strategy, he nods, agrees... by the end of the first quarter, he is benched. That same coach chews Cornelius out. 'Where's your goddamn head?!' he shouts. Cornelius has no answer. Faintly, like a dream, he hears an old song grandma used to sing... *Wash the dishes/ Dry the dishes/ Have a cup of tea/ A-one/ A-two/ A-three...* swinging in her arms. The game ends. A loss. Another loss. Before he changed or showered or cleaned up, a call home, to his father... 'Pops' he exasperates,

'I gotta talk to you.' Doctors, psychologists, consultants talking talking until a decision... his decision... to keep playing, or to hang it up only two years into a professional career? A gamble, certainly... all the information presented, honest and fair and a meeting in the head coach's office... 'We want you to do what's right for you son.' The play-offs... his teammates, his brothers... his family, his father and mother and grandmother's eyes, her smile... he continues on, another week. No press, nothing publicized. He suits up. 11 tackles. 2 sacks. Another week. Another and another and another... the next season... the season afterwards... a pro-bowl... a divisional championship... are you still with him? Can you feel his forgetting? Can you sense his fear, dissipating? A seven year career, cut short by a knee injury... hit after hit... then, over a decade later, driving with his oldest daughter, out of the driveway and into traffic, she forgets to look both ways, Cornelius too busy admiring her, admiring his proudest achievement, a feeling of gratitude fills up his heart... God is good... an airbag blows from the steering wheel, another from above the passenger-side glovebox... Amaya Outlaw turns to her father. Uninjured, he is physically fine, but she feels something is different... he is confused, he can't remember her name... the young cheerleader, the Cultural Club president, the college-bound track star with her daddy's feet and mommy's brains... she calls her mother, 'Something is wrong with dad. There's been an accident.' He makes strides, but just as quick he regresses... neurologists, experts... the league refuses to cover insurance, extends and prolongs and finally beats a legal battle... mom goes back to work... every couple of days, Cornelius does his best Lazarus impression and comes to, realizes he doesn't know where he is... but it doesn't last. Clean slate after clean slate, building a new structure of memories only to be wiped out again and again... the days stretch out to weeks, to months... the young girl becomes a young woman, becomes a mother herself... Cornelius watches, blank... nothing registering... faces, a swirl of images, unfamiliar... until the football player is set out to pasture, a nursing home specializing in care for dementia patients... Cornelius is the youngest patient in the **Hendersen Family Wing**... a cup of pudding under his chin, a bib covering his stomach... he twitches, turns on... horrified... all of his memories between his rookie season and that rainy afternoon in March, obliterated... his life might as well not have happened, because it wasn't his... 'I need to call my Pops, where is my Pops?' Hysterical, he catches a glimpse, the reflection of a stranger in a living-room mirror... a sound, a song in his head... *Wash the dishes/ Dry the dishes*... the nurses call in a doctor to sedate a patient, standard practice... a patient who has been unconscious for twenty years, to quiet him down and make him comfortable... how would you feel if one day you woke up older than you could ever possibly imagine, if you had lived a lifetime in a body that wasn't yours, and if you had no memories to prove any of it ever happened? How

strong of a sedative would you need, to ameliorate the pain from such a loss? Wouldn't you want to talk to your Pops if twenty years went out like a candle from across a dark cave, no proof, no connection? Can you blame Cornelius? If not, then who? Before you decide, the lights have gone off again for Cornelius... trapped in a permanent midnight, cold, uneasy, a gulf of despair... never to wake up again, never to reclaim his own life... where does he go? Is he dead before he dies? Are you?

--

Genevieve at the Post Office... turquoise rings taut against rheumatoid fingers, her hand mangled and curled around the head of a disability cane, one-step two-step tiny step by step only a few to go but then her balance betrays her... baby steps to mistake steps to side steps, a sway to and fro like an earthquake tremor beneath a flimsy bedbug motel... the foundation cracking... all 4'11'' of her tucked and turned and fell backwards, right in front of me... a woman I didn't know nor did I have any intention of knowing... Hernan, the Portuguese ambulance man with 'no English speaking' he types onto his phone first a string of words in native-tongue then transformed digitally into "Is help coming for this old woman?" as we immediately react and dart to her side, on our knees there holding Genevieve upright for ten minutes, I nod to Hernan... help is on the way... but not in the form of the manager of the Post Office, a worried snivel grease-blob of a man, I can see it in his faded blue eyes faded like a stamp in the rain like a junkie government worker like who he was and what I saw, consumed by words and ideas like 'liability' and 'insurance' and 'litigation,' words he knew primarily from television and had never felt the truth of their meaning so he feared them even more... Genevieve sitting up in my arms, "Does it hurt?" and "What is your name?" which I asked right off remembering from long-ago tutorials on CPR (training for a lifeguard program at North Avenue Beach Chicago) that on a rescue while assessing the injured/victim to always ask their name and then introduce yourself as their caretaker/hero... Genevieve... a Saturday afternoon, unintentional... by the time I left the paramedics had arrived, the manager had taken a statement from me and a number to reach me at (a phony number, provided out of bad habit and general distrust I suppose), Hernan had taken his place back in the line with his boy at his side, a handshake before walking outside to my car... wondering what it all means...

--

"What does your father have to do with it, Larry?"

"Nothing..." the pot-bellied every-man scratched at his neck, took notice of his gold watch, then sunk his attention back across the empty dishes and

silverware, "everything. He's got everything to do with it. I can still hear him calling me a worthless bag of crap. I can hear his voice when I wake up. I can see those eyes, those eyes from the sideline so disappointed... compared to Raymond... so... I'm trying my goshdarn best. I really am Jeanie. Aren't I?"

"Of course you are. Did I say something, to make you..."

Hands clasped together, gazing at his fingernails... remembering his last day as 'Regional Sales Manager'... in a quarterly review meeting, he told a story about little Lawrence breaking a window with a baseball in the house, and the cost of the window replacement, the custom cut of the glass (though nobody in the room listened, let alone sympathized)... Larry missed his workingman's uniform, his business casual apparel. He missed telling those stories. He missed the feel of his wife. He had been rendered useless, in every sense of the word.

"No, of course not. I've just... all day, going through these internet applications... all week, all month... the past fourteen months... the old bastard, he's, he's hauntin' me. And I can't help but start to listen to that voice, start to believe it."

"No, no. We've talked about this. The therapist, Larry... look at me." She reached across their meager faux-wood table, let her brown curls droop, and collected him into herself... "I love you, and you are doing everything you can. It's a run of bad luck. That's all. Hear me?"

The guilt, the remorse... two naps over the course of the day, once immediately after he returned from dropping his son off, and again before putting the InstaQuik meal in the stove... one lousy trip to the condominium complex's dumpster, behind their building... moved out of the house, defaulted on the mortgage six months ago... renting... Jeanie working doubles as often as the hospital would allow... she had stopped wearing make-up because of the sweat, the inevitable smudge... Larry broke eye contact with his wife.

"I'm going to go back on the computer, see if I can't get a few more resumes out tonight. Ya know, ya know I found this one lead as a finance counselor. I think that might be interesting."

"That's the spirit. I'll finish the dishes."

They went their separate ways. Lawrence Tilden III huddled in front of the television with a receiver connected to his ear, barking into the headset and exploding through another level, another boss, another objective completed... feebly, "Did you finish your homework buddy?"

Terse, between machine gun pulses... "Didn't have any."

Larry resigned himself to uselessness. Useless. He was hurt. He couldn't keep up with the next generation... the kids and their bowties at the interviews, the job fairs. He felt old. He wasn't really bothered by his father... Lawrence Tilden the 1st had died over a decade prior... retired banker, drinker, flag-waving and tax-paying ALL AMERICAN yelling at his boy who hadn't made the cut for varsity ball 'Of course you didn't! You didn't work hard enough you lazy prick!'... no, he hadn't really been affected by his father, at least not lately. It was a habitual response. A habitual excuse. Sure, Larry was drowning. And nobody could help. But it wasn't his father's fault he had disconnected from his wife... sexual intercourse was non-existent... he hadn't been able to procure a sustainable erection since losing his job (which was a blessing to be sure, because the guilt of masturbation would have eventually caught up with him) (in fact if self-stimulation had been an option, he most likely would have been driven by Catholic guilt to a bridge-jump suicide) which rounded off his ballooning sense of inadequacy.

Nor was it Larry's father who had forced Larry to push away his only son, cross-legged two-feet from in front of the screen... a dead-man could not be blamed for Larry's inability to engage with his own flesh and blood. Larry once made a promise to himself to never to become his old man, but despite his best efforts... there existed a coldness, a drift between himself and little Larry. And it wasn't old Senior who had filled Larry's heart with pride and prevented him from speaking to any of his way-way-back buddies, to reach out for a different job opportunity, a fresh start... no, Larry's father didn't tighten Larry's throat when his friends and family asked if he needed any help. Larry in that moment conjured up an image like a Christmas Card, an old boss who had made a fortune during the internet-boom of 2000's and retired down in Florida. Images, face... Larry's father hadn't forced Larry to disavow his own brother... Raymond, the small business guru... Raymond, the honor-roll student, the four-star athlete, the college scholarships the awards the plaques... Raymond, nearing his own retirement to a lake house in Minnesota... Larry sat down in front of the computer, alone, cataloguing a lifetime of hate. It was a common practice for Larry, a practice which his father hadn't taught him or even recommended. Line by line, face by face, nearly every person he had ever known. Larry, however, forgot the central figure on the list, the key entry... himself... self-loathing, pitiful, wallowing... calculating every comparison, every scorecard... woe is Larry, poor Larry... he couldn't type or click. He sat, numb with rationalizations. He couldn't hear the water running, swashing in the sink, the soap bubbles and the dishes in the background...

--

"Wash the dishes/ dry the dishes/ have a cup of tea... Grandma's song... do you remember that? Remember her at her kitchen table like an open lotus smiling and telling the poison story, after we begged her, imploring 'Grandma tell us the poison story!' and she would dry off her rusty hands on a dishrag and tell us about a longago time when Grandma herself was a little girl, over at a friend's house playing games and under the sink was a bottle of poison, skull and cross-bones, and Grandma decided to slug it down and the parents had to rush her to the hospital after asking her 'Margaret Mary, did you drink this?' pointing at the bottle with the warning label... the doctors had to pump her stomach, to save her life... if she had died that day? Then what? I think about that now. And her equally infamous chicken bone story? At dinner with Grandpa, remember? She told us he was trying to pry open her throat with a butterknife in the golf clubhouse, and her famous line... remember? 'Jack, I have to go regurgitate.' Remember? We loved that word as little kids even though we had no clue what the word meant but we would keep on repeating it and laughing, 'regurgitate'... I remember it."

Frustrated, the recycling and trash bins filled... cleaning... the guests gone... "What does this have to do with anything?"

"I was absorbed this morning, in the shower- I found myself lost in little kid memories... memories of Grandma, memories of others no longer with us... it's bittersweet. For now we carry her, she lives on through us, in those stories. But if we go, if we don't pass them on- it's like she dies all over again. I want to make sure her stories will live with our own kids. I have a notion to write everything down I can remember. Because all of us, one day- your entire personage- we'll be nothing more than a story."

"It's late. I'm tired. I don't..."

She looked away from her brother. "It's up to us to keep the dead alive. If we don't tell any stories... then what happens to them?"

--

OUT... FOR GOOD

C.J. Anderson

Jo Jo Hargraves, 24, has more playoff at-bats than any other player on the Nationals roster. He has won a rookie of the year award, and the NLCS most valuable player. He is considered by many to be a shoo-in hall of famer. Or, he was considered? During the fifth inning of Thursday's contest with the Dodgers, Hargraves halted that trajectory. Literally. The third-

basemen ripped what would have been a double into the left field gap, battling an 0-2 count with his patented defensive swing, but was tagged out between first and second. Hargraves wasn't the victim of a solid throw, or an unlucky bounce off the outfield wall. He quit running, unexpectedly, after rounding first, and seated himself in the basepath. On his behind; as if he had arrived at a picnic.

He came to a dead stop, removed his batting helmet, and went to the ground. His burly, batting champion arms gripped his knees, and he let his head fall resigned towards the infield dirt. At first, the entire stadium gasped with concern. Surely he had torn a ligament, blown out a knee, broken a bone. The reaction of his teammates was one of horror. Jose Rodriguez, the Dodgers second-baseman, was even reluctant to apply the tag. Fred Draper rushed towards his fallen player with the Nationals training staff. No onlooker had ever seen the Nats manager move as fast as he did, not even during his own playing days. No onlooker could have predicted the manager's reaction minutes later.

Hargraves tore no ligaments, broke no bones, and sustained no injuries. He simply had quit running. He is reported to have said, "What does it matter Fred? What does any of this baseball sh*t matter?" to Draper, and Draper went into a fit. It was a first for this baseball fan, to watch a manager lose his cool with one of his own players on the diamond. Draper tossed his hat onto the outfield grass and walked away from Hargraves in a furious burst. Hargraves refused to pick his head up for several minutes, and had to be dragged off the playing field by the training staff. But once he reached the dugout, he bolted into the clubhouse, not to be seen again.

Hargraves declined a post-game press conference and has not released a statement to the media, but Draper had plenty to say. "I don't have a godd*mn clue what happened. The kid, he told me he was through. He asked me 'what does it matter?' I reminded him why (it does). What does it matter... you guys tell me? I have no idea. Hell, I kept asking what he meant, but he wouldn't give me anything else. The docs all cleared him. He wadn't hurt. I have no idea what happened, or what's going on. There was no indication before the game there was anything wrong. Nothing. None of the coaches had any idea. None of the players. You saw him. He walked into the dugout, into the clubhouse, changed into his regular clothes and left. He didn't offer any explanation. He just left. He left his team out to dry. He left his responsibility. Quite frankly, it's inexcusable. It's cowardly."

His teammates had little to offer, except for more confusion. Most of them declined comment. Most of them hoped the best for him. Some wished a speedy recovery. But from what? Niles Montagne might have put it best. "I don't have any idea what happened. You guys are going to need to talk to Jo."

One can only speculate at this point, but it's safe to assume Hargraves will not be in tonight's line-up against the Dodgers.

--

Grover eased his way into a bakery on a blistering January morning. Tribes of young mothers decked in expensive boots wrangled their multifarious children into lines. Children picked and poked at a glass case full of doughnuts. It was gameday. It was churchday. But Grover didn't mind either. Grover preferred the look of people in morning sunlight. Grover murmured a

silent prayer, for sunlight (of all things), as he waddled up to the register. He didn't have a more than two dollars (in change) in his pocket, or a pastry in his hand.

"Well I've seen a lot of those jerseys today, and you Miss are wearing it the prettiest."

A sales associate blushed, taken aback by the old man... not sickened or creeped out, but surprised, genuine... his compliment woke her up from the monotony of her post. "Thank you sir. It's a big game today."

"So I hear! I'll tell you what, thirty years ago this team couldn't win a game. And look at 'em now."

The stocky woman removed a pair of latex gloves. "What can I do for you?"

"Oh nothing for me. No cakes today. Just thought I should tell you. Have a splendid morning Miss!"

Grover turned away and waddled towards the door. He had spotted the woman through the plexiglass storefront, and as he said, felt like he should pay her a compliment. His business at the recycling center, neighboring the bakery, had cashed him in at \$1.85. Not that he counted the money.

After crossing the threshold, back outside, Grover passed by a much younger man in a red skeleton cap that read WALLENTOWN in white lettering. He chuckled. He stopped. He looked the man in the eyes, warmly, "I'll tell you what, I haven't seen a hat that said 'WALLENTOWN' on it like that in over thirty years. The kids at the high school over there used to wear caps like that. Oh boy!"

The stopped to acknowledge Grover. "No kidding... well I lived there a couple years ago."

"You know, when I was a sport, back in the day, a friend of mine said to me 'You have to come to Wallentown. Forget the movies. Every Friday night, gangs of Irish and Italians fight it out in the streets.' So I went over that way on his advice, and sure enough, there were the gangs walloping each other on Moody Street."

The man laughed. "Well I think Moody Street has quieted down some... that sounds like a scene out of West Side story."

Grover chuckled, his corpulence expanding in and out, swaying left and right. "Right! That's perfect! And you're too young to even remember that... very good!"

"Take care sir."

"You as well sir, you as well!" Grover continued along the concrete slabs, wide-eye'd and satisfied. \$1.85 in his pocket. He moseyed out through the parking lot. A torn maroon shirt, an oversized coat (which was nearly impossible given his massive stature)... the wind bit at him, but a clear sky provided luminous rays which caressed his cheeks. Grover focused purely on the sunlight.

No one knew much about Grover's past. Maybe a teenage bagger at the grocery store whom the cheery old-timer once confided "I spent all my college money on pennywhistles. You don't make the same mistake! Ha!" No one knew much about Grover's opinions. Maybe the fitness instructor who Grover consoled in a parking lot, after the fitness instructor accidentally backed his car into a lamppost, to whom Grover admitted "Cars are fiddlesticks aren't they? I haven't had a license in twenty years. Best thing that ever happened to me." Maybe that punk-rock fangirl, a passenger on the local bus line with Grover at her side while she adjusted her headphones and asked Grover to slide over so she could get by to which he responded, "My favorite song of all time is 'High on a Mountain' by Del McCoury. Do you have that one on your machine?"

She didn't respond.

If you polled every man, woman and child in Fredericksburg, you might end up with that much information about the old man. Which was surprising, because Grover was the type of person who told everyone he encountered everything he could, scouts-honor God's-honest-truth, no exception. His lack of filtering, his social amicability, his commitment to verisimilitude... that might explain why he had been living alone for so long.

A local recycling center, the grocery store... his world was demarcated by trips to two establishments. Once a month he would take a jaunt to the Post Office. Grover preferred to venture out on the weekends, when the streets were flooded with people and the lines were long. He sought out and took advantage of every opportunity for human interaction.

Grover's family had struggled against fate for generations. His grandfather was a factory worker in Detroit who saved his fortune to purchase a dairy farm in Wisconsin. He had never seen a cow before he moved his entire family just south of Green Bay. Their farm collapsed and he was struck with Foot &

Mouth disease. That unlucky man's sister, Grover's great aunt, was a suicide case who had failed eleven times at taking her own life. She lived to be one hundred and six, alert and in good shape the morning she passed in her sleep. That unlucky man's son, Grover's father, Wayne, was a big talker, a short, stocky man who liked to drink and pick fights until oral cancer robbed him of his lower jaw. He didn't speak a word his final thirty-six years of living. He grew angrier and angrier. Grover's brother Miles was a nymphomaniac who ended up moving to the West coast and married a woman who abhorred the male anatomy, yet wanted nothing more than to become a mother. Miles existed as a closeted bisexual and the couple was unable to conceive despite their best efforts. They died in a car crash together on their way to a surprise anniversary party their friends were throwing. Grover himself was a man who loved his fellows, but had not been blessed with companionship at any point of his human journey. In childhood, he suffered from an extreme case of psoriasis and was teased by his peers, acquiring names like 'fish head' and 'lizard king' in the course of his early academic career. He was too scared to ever decorate his bike and participate in the township's Fourth of July parade. Eventually Grover chose to display his patriotism by enlisting with the Marines during the Vietnam War, but then was rejected for poor vision and questionable posture. He had never known the touch of a woman, and took a career as a night shift janitor working alone scrubbing floors and emptying trash cans in an industrial lens manufacturing facility. He slept during the day, and went thirteen years with limited exposure to sunlight. This, along with other factors, drove Grover into a severe depression, and he was forced to file for unemployment disability.

It is easy to understand why Grover opened his door to a faint knock later that afternoon. A strong looking pair of gentlemen, dressed in electric company uniforms, were at his apartment door. Each of them had their eyes set deep into their skulls, open mouth'd and dull. Grover lived in the garden apartment of a sub-average tenement. The government checks covered most of his rent. He had left his job nearly two decades ago and had been 'on the dole' ever since. That's what his mother called it. "On the dole still, Grover?" Those were her last words to him before she passed away from appendicitis. She made her living as a holistic medicine provider, focusing specifically on gastrointestinal health.

Grover smiled at the two men, then blacked out. He woke up on the floor of his meager apartment with a pool of blood stained into the cheap beige carpeting. The men had ransacked his room. Despite a thorough search, they found nothing worth stealing. The ceiling fuzzed, his periphery shrunk, and Grover passed-out again. Time went along undetected, and Grover felt none of its effects. He emerged from his black-out awake on a hospital gurney being

wheeled down a hallway. Faces levitated above him. An oxygen mask covered his face. There was no look of terror beneath the mask, no shock or horror or rage or anger or confusion... Grover offered his eyes up to the nurse whose hand was on his chest. He tried to speak, but he at once fell back into a dreamless sleep.

"Sir? Sir? Can you hear me sir?"

Grover felt the weight of his head as he tried to unhinge himself off the pillow. He felt the dryness of his throat. He felt the gown against his thighs. He was propped up, lying on several pillows above a mechanical bed. A television propped in a corner of the room slid pictures by. Teal wallpaper. White floors. White and teal. The colors bled around his periphery as he began to distinguish more objects... a tray with food, a sink, another bed containing either an occupant or a mass of sheets... he blinked, maybe for a second, maybe for several hours, and when his eyes opened again his entire visual field was consumed within a pair of warm, hazel brown eyes. The orbs peered back at him. Then a cherry-oak beard, a police officer's cap, a blue uniform... his area of focus continued to expand. Grover took a deep breath. "Why yes, yes I can hear you. What has... how are you sir?"

The cop crossed his arms in his chair. He squinted, curious. "Well, I'm fine. I'm alright. But see, it's you I'm worried about."

"How do you mean? Did I do something wrong?"

"Not unless you consider being mugged in your own apartment a crime. But the state doesn't see things that way. No sir. No, you did nothing wrong. I have some questions for you though. To start off, do you remember your name?"

"Of course. Grover. Grover Denson. How do you do?" Grover felt relieved when the neural signals to extend his hand did in fact extend his hand, but was abruptly startled to see a tube connected near the break of his elbow, inside his forearm, to an IV bag.

"Officer Yozwolski. Well Mr. Denson, do you remember how you got here?" Nigel Yozwolski... a 40 year old ladder-climber who started his career as a state trooper, addicted to justice, to a sense of right and wrong... Nigel's father had served in Vietnam, and was a proud Marine with abnormally large deltoids and an incredible sense of audio-acuity... a father who taught his son about the religion of the law growing up in rural Midwestern simplicity, Nebraska, *Highway 80* between Kearney and North Platte... a son completely self-fulfilled, who never once considered the value or merit of his contributions to society... writing scores of moving violation tickets over miles of useless

asphalt, perpetuating a cycle of uselessness... a son who grew into a father himself, teaching his own son about the religion of justice, now in front of Grover, convinced as ever in his role, waiting for the old-timer's response.

"Well, let's see. Say, is there... could I bother you for a glass of water, my throat..." Officer Yozwolski slid over a bedside tray with a glass of water on it, a straw shooting up from the plastic cup. Grover guzzled, then clicked his lips together. "You know, it's been thirty years since I've had to speak with a police officer. My, this is... I apologize. I'm not used to the formality. Let me see. Yes. Well, I had been at my home. I was, I was sitting in my easy chair. And the door, there was a knock on the door. There were two men there. They looked, they looked like you."

"Like me?"

"Pardon me. I, I meant they appeared in uniform. Official-like, as if they worked for the electric company, or the phones."

"What color were the uniforms?"

"A navy blue, if I recall. A button up, pressed number. Yes. They had matching outfits, and matching faces."

"Describe them, if you can."

"Well, I only gathered that they were white. The two gentlemen were white, a bit shorter than myself. They were wearing hats, and plastic glasses, almost like laboratory goggles. Yes. They had... that's all I can see. I can't see any of their features. I'm sorry, I really am. I simply. It was so quick, and then... and now I'm here. What happened with those boys? Are they alright?"

"Are *they* alright?"

"Well yes. They must have had a fright when I collapsed. Now don't get me wrong, I'm glad someone was there, to get me into the hospital, but..."

"Sir, they assaulted you."

"Assaulted?"

"You were mugged. Those two men clobbered you, tore through your apartment, then made off in the middle of the day. Did you have any valuables sir? This is very important. We can sometimes track these jerk-offs down through pawn shops, through Craigslist postings and things of that nature. Is there anything they might have taken from you?"

Scratching his head, "Craig was the fella's name?"

"No sir. No, it's... it's a website... it's nothing. Did you have anything valuable, they might have taken from you?"

Grover continued to gape confused at the officer, his mouth half-opened, his right eye pinched in on his cheek... considering, deeply... struggling to make sense of the idea... a valuable possession, of his, that another man would steal... "Valuable?"

"Yes. Valuable. Worth a lot of money. Something that a burglar would steal from you."

Grover's mind encountered a philosophical hiccup. He had great trouble equating the value or merit of an object or person or situation to how much money it was worth. Valuable. Well, yes... "My old stack of letters, from back in my protest days. And my records. I have, there is a box full of old 78's. I have some nice old coffee mugs, in my cabinet. And there's Gil. Yes. Gil, he's a stray. I named him 'Gil' because of his preference for canned sardines. A bit of a pun. Yes, he comes by my kitchen window, on occasion. I'll leave a saucer there. He's a black cat. Well, he's greying a bit, but don't tell him I said that!"

The officer, puzzled, asked "What about jewelry? Gold? Money? Electronics?"

"Electronics? I believe the microwave is electronic. You have to make sure it's plugged in, before you can use it."

The notepad scribbles ended. The police officer reaffirmed, "So no other details, in terms of the two men, their descriptions?"

Grover pondered. "Come to think of it, each of the fellas had on one of those yellow vests, the kind for maintenance crews. Yes. Yellow vests over the blue uniforms. Both white. They looked similar."

"Height? Age?"

"Middle age, average height perhaps?"

The notepad went into the officer's front pocket. "Alright then. A detective may be back with more information, but I think that's everything for now. If you remember anything, (setting a business card on Grover's food tray) call this number."

"I will indeed. Thank you sir, it was a pleasure working with you. I feel as though I've lived out a scene in the *Maltese Falcon*! Yes sir, thank you indeed. Best wishes in your pursuit of the accused. Though I must request you treat them with equanimity. Remember, every man is innocent until he is proven guilty. That is our constitutional bedrock you know."

The police officer shuffled out of the room and tipped his cap to a young nurse in the hallway.

Grover sighed, and began to think. His meditation was interrupted with, "Howdy neighbor?"

Grover turned towards the other bed in the room. He couldn't see the man's face, but responded "Hello there."

The stranger coughed back, "Couldn't help but overhear. Hell of a thing that happened to you. Sorry to hear a story like that, but I have to admit I ain't surprised. World's gone and turned itself upside down nowadays. But damn sorry to hear."

"Why, thank you. Yes, it was... I'm still not sure what to think of it."

"If I still had some spring in my step, I tell you what, I'd help you hunt down those bastards myself. Yes I would."

"That's awful kind of you sir, but it wouldn't do any good. No sense trying to right a wrong with another wrong. Maybe those boys were starving, maybe they needed money for an operation, for one of their family members. You never know what goes on in the heart..."

"Agh, that's a load of crap, mister. Those boys are criminals. They ought to be strung up by the balls for what they did to you. Strung up to the rafters."

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"Another Fibonacci sequence..."

"What the hell are you talking about now, boy?"

"The dial. The channels. You jumped from 4, then to 6, then back to 4. Just then. You didn't even notice it did you?"

"I've had it with the doggamn numbers son. Four to six to five. Who gives a hoot? It's too much. Can't a man enjoy his lunch break, or you got to go ruining that too?"

"Is that a Boolean 'or'?"

The shift manager nearly went cross-eye'd. "What in the hell?"

"Nevermind. I'm not trying to upset you. I'm just saying. Once you start to see the patterns, you can take advantage of them..."

"Oh, like you done with your life, right? Big advantage, huh smart guy?" The foreman, the rest of the guys... they had pegged Rick as one of those vide-gamer types. Lonely. 'Probably jerks off to little girly comic books'... that's what one of the crane operators had joked one afternoon. But Rick didn't play videogames. He didn't read comic books, much less use them as accessories to self-pleasure. He meticulously studied patterns and scribbled theories into moleskin notebooks.

"Miscalculated..." Rick trailed off, counting the lines of stitching in his wool sock, his foot crossed over his knee. Then it broke. "Go ahead then. Go ahead and rely on your hierarchical knowledge. Rely on your hand-me-down biblical stories. 'This is what my daddy believed in, so I believe it too. And this here son of mine, he'll believe it too, 'cuz I'm his daddy.' Go ahead you louts! You're all unoriginal! You're all slaves! Money, money, money! Call me a conspiracy theorist! Call me a fool! I see you all talking behind my back, I hear all of you laughing! You just wait! You'll get yours!" The long-haired reject of life and love pointed a lone finger back at his foe, stood up, and tossed his lunch bag into a trash can. The other workers in the break room had quit puffing on their cigarettes. The air quickly stank of conflict. A storm was brewing.

"Now you wait a second boy..."

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"What if I pay for the classes Kate?"

Kate simulated the possibilities in her head... a chess grandmaster, elaborating various lines their conversation might follow. She prepared several opening arguments. She formulated emergency rebuttals. She anticipated a clean counterattack to her mother's questions... the small-talk portion of their exchange was over. Battle was about to commence.

"Mom, I'm not Randy. I don't want to go back to school. My job is fine."

"Kate, I'm not trying to be a pest sweetheart... but this is my job, as a parent. I have to push you. I have to ask questions. You remember what your

grandmother used to say? Being a parent never ends. I got to where I am today because my mother kept asking me questions, tough questions."

"I know, I know. But I don't have any interest in school. I finished. I'm done with it."

"But what do you want to pursue?"

And here's the rub: everyone has an unhealthy habit or two, right? Kate's own mother couldn't pollute her mind with enough celebrity gossip, her phone-calls to her sister dominated by Kardashian updates and on-screen flings. Kate's father had been a workaholic, 60-70 hour weeks at the office night after night, month after month, year after year... frozen dinners, absent holidays... where's dad... oh, your father had to go back to work. Kate's brother was consumed by his schoolwork, the report cards, the degrees, the research papers. Kate even knew a guy in high school who ended up working at the board of trade by day and scored heroin on lower Wacker Drive by night. And Kate... drumroll please... Kate masturbated. Woop-dee-doo. She rubbed her pussy. She plunged into her g-spots. Constantly. So what? Who was she hurting? What did she owe anybody?

"Exactly what I'm pursuing right now."

Waiting... thinking... her mother came back with, "And are you still only eating the soup?"

"Who cares Mom? I like Campbell's. It's tasty. I eat what I like."

"I know, it's just... Katherine, you worry me sometimes. I can't help it. I want you to be happy." Mrs. Johnstone thought about their last vacation together, skiing in Utah... the picture they took, together, by the lodge's restaurant... Mr. Johnstone had asked a stranger to snap a few photographs before dinner... dressed up fancy, the holidays, a family portrait to be proud of... the stranger, before he clicked the phone screen, 'Hey little lady, don't forget to smile!'

"I am happy Mom. I like my job. And I like my soup. Everything is fine."

"But there is no connection in your life Kate! There is never any talk of men. There are no hobbies. You used to volunteer. You used to do the marathons, and the training. I..."

"Mom we have this argument once a month. I'm fine. I promise. Everything is fine. I'm not on drugs. I'm not in an abusive relationship. I'm not doing anything wrong. I'm fine."

"Well, are you still planning on coming over this weekend, for your father's dinner party?"

Kate hesitated. "I'm not sure yet. I'll let you know."

"When will you know? It would mean a lot to him, for you to be there."

"No it won't, he'll be whooping it up with his buddies the whole time, bragging about their big-game hunting and portfolios. He doesn't care Mom, come on."

"He does. You don't know it, he just, he has a different way of showing..."

"I'll keep you posted, okay?"

"Alright. It's no trouble setting an extra place."

"I'll keep you posted."

Kate had been scrolling between pages on her laptop. The wireless feed was set on her television. Wide screen, high definition. She had been on a BDSM kick. Leather, ropes, harnesses, forced fellatio... plenty of rabbit holes to dig in and explore. Her mother continued to defend her father, but Kate reached into herself. Moist. She licked her fingers. The video had finished loading.

"Listen Mom, I'll let you know, alright? I have another call coming in, from work. I'll talk to you soon, alright?"

"Well, alright. I love you Kate."

"Love you too."

Kate rarely wore pants or underwear in her apartment. She opened up her legs and set her feet on opposite ends of the sofa. She might have gained several pounds from her track star days, but she maintained her teenage flexibility. Pliant. This was her spot. Even the seat had an indentation of her ass-cheeks, perfect and in position. Between her ass cheeks and the faux-leather of the couch she had set down a bath towel. Another towel was spread out in front of her. She hit PLAY. A menagerie of dildos and toys on the coffee table. A vibrator in one hand, a bottle of lubricant tucked in between cushions. Within minutes she compressed out her first squirt. One hour, six orgasms later, she was forced by her own inherent biological limitations to take a break.

The clean-up routine consisted of three Sanitation Wet Wipes, three paper-towels folded onto each other (to increase absorbency), semi-circular motions designed to erase the mistrials of her bath towel already in the laundry machine, and a quick (3-4 minute) shower with the water turned to COLD. After patting herself dry, admiring the curves of her sylphy figure in the bathroom mirror, she bounced back to the couch and began surfing on her computer again.

Kate wasn't bothered by the lack of knick-knacks or trinkets or silly accessories that 'make a house a home.' The walls were bare. Color schemes, matching fabrics, flamboyant antiques, candlesticks and blanket baskets... none of it had ever crossed her mind. The television, the computer, top-speed wireless internet, a camera/microphone for her chatroom exhibitions... those were her essentials.

Her ritual started in college. She was exposed to internet porn by a boyfriend, and she ended up leaving him for instant downloads. She laughed secretly while her roommates discussed womens' liberation, while they criticized male archetypes like the Cassanova character, the womanizer and successful cavalier, the dominator model all turgid and smiling... she could care less what schemas laid underneath the XXX-Movie Industry. Internal models, external reality... she held onto the memory of a conversation with one of her roommates who declared any act of sex performed outside of the construct of a loving relationship to be denigrating. Kate always admired the eyes of a confident actress on the screen, during foreplay... the ego playing for show when the curtain drops, behind the stage a fearful and fractured sub-psyche... the fear of uselessness, and a burden of complete utility... whatever... Kate had everything she needed at her fingertips to make her feel incredible. That was her final revelation. The intensity of the orgasm. Forget taking an honest look at sexual insecurities... the external projection of sexual deficiencies... who cared? Fighting against the dominator model of the pornographic ubermensch that our culture models as the apex species... fleshy lust vs. timid prudence... what difference did it make? Kate liked to get off. Her sophomore year roommate came home in the midst of a three-hour session, and promptly requested a room transfer. It worked out for Kate. She had the place to herself. Her grades suffered. Her friends widdled off like wood shavings. She graduated. She got her own place. The ritual continued.

Her mother suspected drugs. Her father remained aloof. Kate acquiesced, conceded to regular urine tests... she proved her mother wrong. Her father continued running a multi-million-dollar finance department. Life continued. Her mother scheduled her an appointment with a therapist. Kate didn't mention

anything about her self-pleasure habits. Her therapist cleared Kate with her mother. The final diagnosis read Kate 'lacked motivation.' She was prescribed anti-depressants. Kate filled the prescriptions but didn't actually take the pills. All the while she kept a steady job. She would clock-out on lunch breaks and discreetly get-off in her car. She made it work. She was making it work. That's all anybody could do.

Another video had loaded. Kate contemplated making dinner. She decided it could wait. A new towel came out of the closet.

Kate didn't even have to waste the time to take off her pants.

--

It was Sal's last game of the regular season. Emerson Junior High's Flying Tigers were 11-3 and competing for a higher seed in the playoffs. The 3rd quarter was drawing to a close.

"Tell that retarded brother of yours to keep his pants on, Williams!"

Sal turned around to face the crowded bleachers. First he noticed his mother, struggling with his brother, Davey. In the last couple of months, Davey had taken to dropping his trousers in public.

There was laughter, and a naked boy.

Sal was in 8th grade. Davey was two years younger and in fact was diagnosed with Down Syndrome. Sal's father had abandoned his family before Sal could commit the man's face to record. But that didn't bother Sal. He saw the other fathers, the fat old men who yelled, who thought they knew everything- he decided he wasn't missing anything. No, not having a father was alright with Sal.

But as he watched his mother, who by now had contained Davey's impulses, begin to slowly walk his brother down several rows of hardwood steps- that hurt. He experienced the pain in her face, and his heart sunk as they went down the wooden bleacher stairs.

The laughter had stopped, yet somehow it continued to echo.

Their exodus went on for an eternity.

Most of his classmates were in attendance to cheer on the Flying Tigers. It was a Friday night. Girls, guys. Kids from the other school, St. Bonaventure. Parents, siblings, old neighborhood types who loved the purity of the youth

game, who considered themselves stewards of the future of Chicago basketball, who lived for the opportunity to one day tell a story about how they witnessed the next star play first. One massive set of eyes- they had seen everything.

His mother had turned down the court towards the EXIT door.

At that moment, a terrible fire stoked inside of the newly christened teenager- hormonal and hairy in strange places, confused and upset and a wave of emotions poured and frothed from his chest and charged into his feet, innervated his arms and legs. Sal pushed over his folding chair seat on the bench and searched out the instigator, that voice from the bleachers. He knew that voice.

Mark Peterson.

It only took a moment to locate Peterson's round face. Sal growled. One of Sal's coaches shouted for him to stop (who years later would be convicted of spousal abuse), but Sal's laser focus could not be jarred. He approached his nemesis, a single index finger extended outwards... Peterson remained seated. Up one flight, bounding past two more, into an extended dive forward. Past the other onlookers as if they didn't exist. Once he reached Peterson, Sal's fists unleashed hell on his opponent's face. Peterson was helpless against the violence. Punch after punch, swing after blow after strike, an explosion electric like a stormcloud with lightning bolts surcharged searching from end to end, relentless until several fathers rushed over and uncoiled the two classmates. Sal had broken Peterson's nose, it was later discovered. Sal was reluctantly kicked off the team (that same coach pleaded for a temporary suspension, but the school principal wouldn't hear of it). He was suspended from school. Peterson's mother was an attorney and wanted to press charges, but Father Mulcrone paid several visits to the Peterson home and convinced her to reconsider taking legal action.

When Sal brought home the note from school, the following Monday, confirming his suspension, Mrs. Williams hugged her oldest son and told him she had never been more proud of him. "There's a lot of bastards out there in the world, Sal. A whole lot. And they all deserve to be taught a lesson. Don't forget it- there isn't a damn thing wrong with being the one to do the teaching."

Sal never cried in front of his mother, so after their meeting in the kitchen he excused himself to his room and fell into his bed. The tears didn't swell due to pride over his accomplishment, or empathy for his brother... on the contrary, he cried because he hated Davey. He hated being an outcast amongst his peers. He hated missing the playoffs. He hated the fact he hated Davey.

The pillow sheet moistened, drop by drop, and gasping breaths were all that could have been heard. His mother prepared dinner.

Davey sat in the adjacent room with his pants off, examining his genitals.

--

Across time-zones, frustrated... over the phone... a conversation between brothers... East, West...

"It's like a prayer, alright. But it's not about reciting a string of phrases, or doing nine hundred Novenas in a row on the floor with your knees bleeding. It's a transformative yoga, kind of, a penance."

"Penance?"

"It's almost like Lent, ya remember Lent? Ya remember Mrs. Markey's class, and you'd write down what ya were giving up until Easter?"

"Candy. I gave up candy. But it never lasted."

"Exactly. But see, they didn't tell us when we were scribbling on the chalkboard, that we could have used all that energy and sent it up for something worthwhile. Forget atoning for our original sin, all that nonsense. What I'm saying is ya offer up the sacrifice for somebody or something other than yourself. That's how ya make it work."

"So I give up fast food, and pray for Ashley at the same time?"

"Well, ya make your intention known, so the universe picks up the frequency. And it doesn't have ta be fast food, for Chrissakes. What it does have ta be is something important to ya, or something that requires a lot of energy that is used exclusively by yourself. You have to make a conscious, intentional change in your behavior patterns. That causes a rift in the interconnected energy circuits, the fields that surround ya, so you can then direct the ripples towards Ashley to help heal the cancer in her body."

"I don't know the difference between this and Mom's Hail Mary beads."

"At least I'm giving ya another option. Ya don't believe in those wood beads any more than I do, and that's why it won't work. But Mom does. And her beads work for her. So let her be."

"I know, alright. I know. I'm just- well, at some level, I understand what you're saying. I'll give it a try. I think I'm going to sacrifice..."

"Don't tell me!"

"Why?"

"It's like blowing out a birthday candle. Ya keep the wish between yourself and the universe. Don't publicize it. Not to anyone. That keeps it locked in."

"Alright, alright... candy it is."

--

QUESTION:

ANSWER: Music is the only way I can effectively communicate my emotions. I figure, if I hadn't ever picked up a guitar, I would've picked up a gun or a needle. I'd probably be dead. Suicide, it's always had a certain... not appeal, but I've never moralized it. I've never thought, after hearing about somebody who had killed themselves, I've never been like "How could they do that?" I understand it, on more than a cerebral level. Depression, anxiety... this sense of "What the fuck am I doing here?" It's always pervaded my core, as long as I can remember honestly. I guess I'm not well adjusted to modernity. And if I had no means of expressing that frustration, in a way I felt deeply connected to, deeply invested in... in a way that I felt was real, that provided a real sense of relief... if I didn't have that, I suppose that would have to come out in some other way. Some far more negative, self-destructive way.

QUESTION:

ANSWER: Drugs never did it for me. I tried them, sure. Pot made me paranoid. With alcohol, I didn't like myself, who I was when I drank. I was a violent drunk. I had some uncles who used to go on that way, so that was a major turn off. And psychedelics, like, I am afraid of disconnecting from myself. I really don't like feeling disconnected from my person. I have enough anxiety being in here, being present. They just never did the trick for me. Maybe it's biochemistry, personality, I don't know. I don't think about it. I never really have. I tried them, and they weren't worth pursuing.

QUESTION:

ANSWER: More self-loathing. Languishing. Being untethered, you know? Just out of the flow. Hating myself. One thing that did work... I used to burn scars into my forearms, when I was a teenager. To like, to wake up. To get that high. I don't know, it's the best I can describe it really. From the outside,

when I'm like that, it might appear to be as simple as, like a guy sitting on a couch doing nothing, watching television, but internally... that's where the problem is. In my own head. And I think that's a reason why music has worked so well for me, because it fills my head. It keeps me out of there, the me who is prone to cultivating that negative energy. It occupies a space that I'm not very good at managing on my own.

QUESTION:

ANSWER: I wish, I mean I think everyone likes to take credit for that, after they finish a song, or an album or whatever... I don't know. Honestly, I never think about it when I'm writing, when I'm producing, even when I'm playing. It's intensely personal, for me. I think it's cool, don't get me wrong, when people can take my work and make it personal for them. You know, like, 'Well this meant so and so to me and helped me through this time,' that's great. That's more of a bonus though. I don't have any intention behind that, when I'm working. I just don't. And I think a lot of artists take credit for that after the fact. Like, who sits down and writes a song with the idea "Well this is for all the kids who come from a broken home" or something. I don't really buy it. Music, especially at its inception, is super personal. It's from within. But if you are honest, I think inevitably somebody is going to relate to it.

QUESTION:

ANSWER: Context is everything. It really is. Think about, the sun for example, okay? In the wintertime, it hangs in the sky real low, it's almost like a foggy candle. It comes off as this dim light. It's very benign. To the point where I, personally, will catch myself trying to look up at it, staring at it. Like it's alright to gaze at, because it's not as bright or as powerful. I'm drawn to it... even though there's no difference, right, between the power of the sun in January or in July. But in July, it's up there, beaming, a nuclear powerhouse, burning up in an electric blue sky. I wouldn't even dare to look up at it during the summer. But it doesn't matter, right? Either time, summer or winter, if you look at the sun, you're going to burn a hole in your retina! The atmospheric differences, the temperature, the frozen moisture, they're so negligible in terms of the fact there's a reactor up there on fire that is not meant to be looked at! Right? But I still sneak those looks in the winter, even though I know that fact. That lazy sun, glowing. Winter suns... it's a metaphor, but it works. It's all over the place. The context of something, whether I put it there, or it's there on its own accord, it distracts from the fact of the matter. The context tricks you into missing the truth. I think about that a lot. Today, for

example, a woman yelled at me as I merged left into a turning lane, and she flipped me the bird. So there's the context. But I don't know. Maybe she lost her daughter. Maybe she was fired from her job. In terms of exercises, I think that one is important, to re-set the context in order to bring you closer to the truth, or at least bring you closer to a potential truth that is more beneficial for all parties involved, right? We bring so much baggage with us, when we step out of our eyes into the world, we hardly consider it. I try to really be aware of that baggage, especially when I'm interacting with people. But it takes time, literally. We are so rushed around, our culture demands us to multi-task and double-speed, so there's no time to take a second, become aware, pause, and set the context. Context is everything.

QUESTION:

ANSWER: You know you're getting old when, after waking up from a dream, one where you run into some old friends, friends you haven't seen in years... when you wake up, all you can remember is how nice it is to see them again... that's growing up, thoughts like those.

QUESTION:

ANSWER: I don't listen to a lot of new music. I, I guess it's vanity, but I really only listen to my own stuff. Whatever I'm working on, at that moment. I'm constantly cutting tapes, demos. But, I mean I have always enjoyed the Dead, for a number of reasons. I kind of go through years. Like '72, '77, '89... all their famous runs, when they were really coagulating. I tried going through the mid '80's, with Garcia's decline and all that... I always go back to '69 and '70 though. Their early work is, more free-form, more exploratory. *Live From the Fillmore East* is one of my favorite albums of live music. I also enjoy jazz, because it sounds so complicated to me. I barely can get by with a guitar, honestly. I'm more of a writer than a musician. And you listen to the phrasing on some jazz records, the melodies, the jamming, Coltrane and Miles and Charlie Mingus, Bill Evans... that stuff blows my mind.

QUESTION:

ANSWER: I'd be really interested in a more visual, a more tactile project... the idea of doing an art installation is really appealing to me. I recently spent some time at the Hirshhorn, in DC, and I was really inspired. The exhibitions, it was incredible. It's so different, what they were doing over there... compared to a strictly limited medium, like music through a pair of headphones. There's a visual aspect to everything, when I play live, and I put a great deal of thought into the lights, into the scene that is presented

onstage, even in how myself and my bandmates are presented... but, I don't know. It's something I've never done. After I left the museum, I came up with this sketch, this idea... I'd like to curate a room, with all these little recording devices and speakers. And they all play at this barely audible volume, and they're playing responses from hundreds, maybe thousands of people, responses to a question like 'What are you afraid of?' or 'What about growing up in today's world makes you scared?' Fear. And, so entering into the room, you could hear all these whispers... you'd have to get close, physically close, become intimate with the speaker or the apparatus or whatever, to make out and distinguish the individual answers. Then maybe have some transactional aspect to it, like the people visiting the room could also record their own responses, or have a website opened where messages could be downloaded, to play throughout the room. And while you are getting all this audio stimulation, there would be projectors, just projecting slides of kids. Childhood photos. Happiness, in its purest form, you know? I don't know, the idea is there, the details I haven't quite hammered out yet. But I'd love to participate in that kind of project, definitely.

QUESTION

ANSWER: Notebooks. Tons and tons of bad lyrics, chintz, nonsense... I try to take everything down, get it on paper, then let it fester for a bit. If I can come back to it, and work with it, and if it still holds the initial shine, if it still gives me a buzz like it did initially, because I wouldn't have written it down if it didn't... if it holds, then I'll see what I can work it into. Most of my lyrics are pastiche. I don't just sit down, and come up with a four verse, A/B/A/B, refrain, boom... it doesn't unfold like that, for me. It has maybe, twice? But not usually. I have a lot of lines still waiting for a home. There's one I played around with last night... *I stopped caring/ When she set the clock fast/ I realized she was giving me/ Back some time...* we'll see (laughs).

QUESTION

ANSWER: Today. I try to stay in the moment. I really, I haven't toured in a couple of months. I've been holed up. I haven't given an interview in a while either, so I apologize. I went, after the last tour, I had a tarot reading. I'd never done it before. And the formation the reader used, it's called the Celtic cross. So in the card position for advice, on how to deal with current challenges, the Hermit came up. Like the Zeppelin album cover. Holding out the lantern. So, I guess... I'm in hermit mode (laughs).

--

"Nando," Grace whispered, "why won't your mother let us serve ourselves? She's been in that kitchen all night, we can get our own..."

"No, she likes it. It's the way. She has to do it this way."

"Well, does she like it, or is it an obligation?"

"It's no difference. Just keep eating. You don't eat, then she gets angry." Fernando pinched his fiancée on her backside in an opening behind the chair.

Banter continued around the family table until Fernando's brother Manuel united all of the independent conversations into one idea. "Mama, the relajo sauce, it's maybe your best yet. Notice I don't say ever, because next year, we look forward to you topping it. Thank you Mama. Salud." The oldest brother raised his glass, and the rest of his siblings and their partners followed suit. Fernando and Grace, Manuel and his wife Alicia, Santiago and his wife Laura, Isela and her husband Robert. Three boys, one girl, and Mama... the Vasquez family.

Together, "Salud! Feliz Navidad! To Mama! To Lita!"

Mrs. Vasquez waved off their applause. "Who's ready for more?"

Santiago plead with her, "Mama, sit down. Come here."

"You know how it is, in the kitchen all day, I lose my appetite. When I say 'buen provecho,' then my work is done. When I was a little girl, I watched your Abuela, and after she was done, we wait all night, until after midnight mass. Nobody ate nothing until after mass. And she never eat, either. It's tradition." Stains covered the tiny woman's apron. She waited by the large platter of tamales, waiting for the next hungry customer. Sweat hung gracefully above her upper lip. She resumed, a memory passing over her like a cloud, "But my Abuelo, he would sip cane liquor, and I sit on his lap- oh when the food came, I never saw a man eat more. He would sing songs with his mouth full, all night long."

"Salud!"

Wine was passed around the table. Alicia and Isela made trips to the back room where four grandchildren, ages 3 to 12, played with their food and contemplated what sorts of wonder rested by the family's Christmas tree... one thin layer of paper separating them from their most precious desires. The apartment was a bit cramped with all of the decorations, but everyone laughed comfortably and enjoyed their helpings. Abuelita eventually made her way

over to the table, and the conversation naturally turned to Romero. Grace hadn't yet heard the story.

"Daniel (she made the sign of the cross) and I, we were only twenty-one. He was working and studying, a student. Your father (she looked at Manuel), he always worked hard like that. We were in the capital, in San Salvador. Everybody was in the streets. Everyone, tears filled their eyes. Weeping, women, men. Thousands. Crying like, like the falls of a river. I never forget the sound. Your father and I (she looked at Fernando), we were not at the Cathedral, but we were not far away. And then the bombs went off. There was smoke, gunfire. Everyone running, screaming, more crying. We didn't know what to do. We hid in a café for hours, your father (now towards Isela) he protected me, and he said to me right then, 'My love, we are going to America. These criminals, they won't even let us bury Romero.' So two weeks later, New York City. Your father (Fernando's turn to receive his mother's gaze) was so brave. He worked. He continued school. We had to leave though. No other options."

Fernando offered, "To Romero. Salud."

Manuel followed, "To Papa. Salud." Quietly, the glasses drained.

Alejandra, Isela's oldest daughter, came into the living room on a cellphone. "Mommy, when can we open the presents."

"Soon Alejandra, soon. Did you finish your dinner?"

The young girl, dark skinned and svelte like her mother, did not pull her eyes up from the phone screen. "Yesssss."

Lita murmured, "*Cría cuervos y te sacarán los ojos.*"

Alejandra missed the proverb entirely and scampered out of the room. Isela was somewhat offended. "Mama, she is no crow."

"On that little screen, always Isela. Why you let her play so much on that little thing?"

"She likes it Mama, you wouldn't understand."

"I see everyone now, on these little things. Remember the baseball game Manuel? Remember what I said to you?"

The oldest brother's forearms tensed. "Yes Mama."

Lita continued. "The whole baseball game, right there (extending her hand), and everyone with their little thing, taking pictures. They pay so much money to go see the baseball players, to sit up close, and they watch through their hands, their eyes, no more. All on a tiny screen. Remember Manuel?"

"Yes Mama, I remember. People like to record though, on their phones, to make memories. That's all."

"No good. People don't know how to talk anymore. They only play with these little things. And the airplane, remember Santiago? When we take the airplane? The plane, it lands, and everyone open up their little things at the same time. I look from the back. Like a show! I count... you know I count... from twenty-seven people, twenty-four on the little thing right away. I counted. Together, all together. And of the three people not on the phone, two of them were children, no older than Alejandra."

Grace, while Lita was speaking, opened her phone underneath the table and double-checked to make sure the volume was muted. Robert, Isela's husband, went even further and turned his OFF. The gringos did not want to offend the matriarch of the household.

Fernando, the youngest, spoke up in defense of the new generation. "Mama, but the phones, now you can call home whenever you want to. They help people stay connected. You would not be able to call back to our aunts and uncles, no?"

The old woman, with no plate in front of her and a glass of wine in her hand, rebuked her son. Her wrinkles deepened on her forehead. "Agh, we could write letters. Letters are more touching anyways. A letter you can tell the truth, take the time... a letter is special. You have to wait, to check the mailbox. These little things, no good."

Fernando laughed and put his hands up. There was no sense in continuing the argument. Isela tried to change the subject. "Maybe we can set the manger up Mama, and light the estrellitas, a little early, yes? The kids will be tired by midnight."

"Are they, they no going to Mass?"

Isela gulped, "I don't think so Mama, Robert and I were..."

"If you tell them they can only open presents until after Mass, they will stay up. That's what we used to do for you kids. No presents until after

Mass. And everyone had to behave. Remember Fernando, when you misbehaved, and we made you wait until after all your brothers and sister? Oh you cried and cried. But you never misbehaved again at Mass. See, that is a lesson. Those little things (her bony fingers raised shoulder-level, mimicking the actions, the thumbs and buttons pressing) don't teach any lessons (then a motion like a baseball umpire, safe at home plate)."

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Theo pinpointed the exact moment the sinking feeling washed over him. Like a pair of sandbags had been tied around his ankles, slowly descending, the deep end of the pool... four of them, driving in the car, Theo was driving... they had been working on a new idea, for a song... it had been months since they had all been together, able to record... Theo started humming out a melody, and trying out lyrics... and the other three, his passengers, his friends, his bandmates, Theo noticed each one of them on their cell phone, scrolling, checking, tapping... no one paid any attention to what was going on outside. They were completely sequestered from reality... sequestered from reality... Theo glimpsed a pair of beautiful images at an intersection, trying to smelt them into a verse. One was a blonde girl, a teenager, in the backseat of her parents car, two grey-hairs, an All American family well-dressed like they were out for dinner and a show, the back window of a Mercedes and the look in the teenage daughter's eyes, the longing, gazing out the window with her head cocked, sullen, forlorn... it was a beautiful tragedy... she knew she hadn't experienced a minute of real living, it was a moment of epiphany, of utter defeat for her, with daddy's firm grip on the wheel and mommy doing her make-up in the mirror behind the sun-visor... only Theo noticed her desperate search. Only he felt the girl's weeping eyes. And at the same intersection, a man in a wheel-chair... it must have been twenty degrees outside, and he was there on the sidewalk with no coat, short-sleeves, just hustling by ferociously spinning, pump by pump... there was so much happening, but none of his friends could see it... none of them would see it. Theo felt utterly alone. He missed a left-turn but it didn't matter. It didn't matter where he was going. His friends didn't care. They had every stimulus they would ever need at their fingertips, fed by newsfeeds and updates and messages and posts, assaulted by sundry waves of digital ammunition... the powers that be, they had won. 'We have lost. We have been disassembled,' Theo thought to himself. "Four months, and here we were in silence, passing through a mystic world of revelation with nothing to say or comment unless it's been fed to us on a screen." His co-pilot let out a silent laugh. Satisfied. Fingers moving. Theo wanted to cry out but no air was left in his lungs. Sinking, a weight... loneliness. But he decided right then and there, at that moment, to disconnect, to unplug and never look back... even if he was

alone, he would know it and it would be on account of his own volition. He promised he would go out of the world of illusion on his own terms, and by engaging with reality, he would become present by means of his abstention. Theo carefully worked his free hand into his pocket and shut his own device off. The car sped on.

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NOISES OF THE DRAMA INSIDE MY OWN HEAD, LIKE INSIDE MY HEAD IS A PLACE WHERE A PERSON (ME) LIVES AND THINKS AND EXPERIENCES LIFE... THE ABSURDITY OF HEADS AND THEIR NOISES

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Six fucking years... Will Richfield took another hit from the marijuana vaporizer... *six years, and what was there to show for...* the fan in the bathroom hummed away. He exhaled. He reached for the glass on the floor. Whiskey and ginger ale. Eight in the morning. Another night, alone, in the bathroom. All of his friends had gone to work, commuted and parked and began their day with a meeting or a cup of coffee or responding to emails. Suckers. Meetings about nothing, interminably useless emails... a charade, a put-on to look important. He had asked Tyler that last weekend, "What do you even really do?" Tyler didn't have a good answer. A job, a career... it was all bullshit. What did he have to feel bad for? Will was ahead of the curve, locked inside his bathroom airing out the pungent smell of cannabis. *Why can't you get activated?* Look at your parents! His father was probably already at work. Mrs. Richfield would be out soon. She might knock on the door to see if he was awake, but he would just pretend to be asleep. Fucking idiots. Look at where it got them. They don't even sleep in the same bedroom.

You worthless bag of... another gulp. He disassembled the machine. He loaded another pinch of ground buds into the chamber. The machine light transition into a green READY signal. He waited for the bag to fill. *What is it going to take...* another gulp. All night. Gulping. Inhaling. Insufflating. The cocaine had kept him awake. The Adderall would continue to do so. Far cheaper than blow. Fucking idiots like Tyler spending all their money on blow... the pharmaceutical stuff was just as good, and cleaner. Yeah. Six or seven ground pills waited in a baggie on his nightstand. Sunbeams pierced through the plastic shades. *Why can't you get activated?* The light on the machine flashed green.

Another pull... another gulp... finally, the voice subsided. Will focused on the music playing from the stereo. He fuzzed. He blanked out. Minutes passed, drooling... perfect... stoned... quiet.

Will had lost another job. Four or five weeks ago. Unemployed. Rather, he had let it go... that's what he told his father. Trading, stocks, the exchange... it wasn't for me... that's what he explained. It was only a part-time position, but he found the hours to be long, the work to be dry... his bank account always had enough in it for dope and booze, regardless if he was working or not. His folks would never kick him out of the house. Nearly 30 years old. Most of his friends were married. A few even had kids. His brother had three children. Uncle Will. He bought his nieces and nephew Christmas presents using his parent's credit card. The kiddies loved their gifts. Will enjoyed being Uncle Will. But his brother was a fucking idiot. So was everyone else. Following the rules... the system... idiots.

A bachelor's degree in Joycean Studies. Four years spent on Ulysses and he had no clue what the novel was about. Will hadn't been accepted into any graduate programs... his grades fell short, but more importantly, he didn't apply. His father, a commodities and futures trader, tried to shepherd Will into the family business. But it wasn't for him. Money and suits and business hours and offices and desks, computer screens all day... it was depressing. Forget about the money. The money didn't matter. Will smiled. He whispered to himself, "Always remember to smile Willy." He was lying on his bed. He thought he heard the door slam. 9AM CST. It had to be his mother. The coast was clear. He kept smiling, eyes closed and wide.

Will opened the door to his room. He fixed breakfast... a frozen pizza. He set the timer on the microwave. He stretched his hand down towards Baxter, the family cat. Baxter rubbed against Will's palm. Their relationship had always been strong, Will and Baxter. Thank Christ for Baxter. "So what's on the docket for today Baxter? Wanna get high and play video games? Sounds good buddy."

Will shuffled back into his bedroom, removed a hoodie-sweatshirt, and then put on his plaid bathrobe. *Why can't I get any traction...* he tied a firm knot around his waist. Then he lined up two rails of amphetamines, and snorted them off a piece of glass on his desk. His eyes, bloodshot and slit, began to twitch. He tied his long black hair into a bun on top of his head. Silence. Perfect silence.

He shuffled back to the kitchen, removed the pizza, and deciding he wasn't hungry stuck the pepperoni disc into the refrigerator. Off to his bedroom. Pacing. The recliner. The television ON. A headset. A controller. Hours slipped by, unnoticed. Will succumbed to a flurry of pixels crashing and coalescing in front of him. But he awoke to... *look at you, you lazy piece of...* so back into the bathroom, to the apparatus, the metal grinder brimming with

fresh Northern California indica... three full bags of vaporized air... another cocktail... back to the reclining chair... silence. The controller, the sweat, his palms... more time, falling away... all the time in the world. Who cares about time? Who cares about a career? Who cares about family? Who wants a fucking family? A whole batch of kids to screw up? What kind of sick individual wants to be a parent? No, by saying 'No' to all of that... by refusing to participate... yeah, it was his choice. 'It's my choice, and it's the right choice. Because it's well thought out. Because I'm not following some stupid program. Some useless cultural paradigm.' Paradigm... what a great fucking word! The silence had left, and now the voice inside his head, Will found it to be agreeable. He was on the right mixture.

Maybe I'll start working on that novel? Maybe I'll get working on the next Ulysses... he paused the first-person-shooter videogame. He opened up a desk drawer. A notebook... he took some notes. **PARADIGM**... he wrote the word down, then noticed the alarm clock... it was 3PM... shit. His father might be home soon. Will texted a friend. Sweet Lou would be down to smoke. Fuck yeah! He untied the knot from around his waist, then from on top of his head. Things were alright. All of a sudden... *where are you going? You're a little boy, hiding away from the truth! Look at you! You selfish...* Will hurried on his hoodie-sweatshirt. He snorted through another rail of pharma-grade speed. He throttled another gulp from the bottle. He stashed the metal grinder into his pocket.

There was no front door to lock. His parents lived on the seventeenth floor, the penthouse. The elevator was his front door. "Going down" he announced to Baxter, perfect, right as the sliders closed... his cat staring up at him... Will chuckled as he plummeted down, satisfied. Before venturing out the lobby he waved to Pete, the front desk guard. Then onto the street. He glanced down at his phone after it buzzed. Lou would be home in an hour. An hour to kill. The bar. The bar would work just fine. Arcade games, a couple cold ones... the perfect afternoon. Yes indeed. The air bustled off the street, between cars and buildings, chilly. October. Winter on the way. *Another wasted fucking day...* Will was glad to reach the barroom. He was glad the sunlight closed with the door behind him. He would be alright. The right mixture... *this can't last...*

--

"I'm calling to get some information- I'm looking to kind of, change my career- and thought I would give y'all a ring."

"Beautiful. How is your day going?"

"Pretty good. Lots of wind around here."

"Oh I know- I thought our building was going to blow over yesterday-

crazy- crazy- well that leads me to my next question- what is your current zip code? We have seventy different locations- kind of want to narrow things down."

"Sure- it's 89511."

"Alright. Don't sweat it. We will take care of you and get you up and running in no time. And here we are. Reno! Beautiful part of the country. Oh- and by the way- we are on a recorded line. Just to make you aware of course."

"Sure it's no problem..."

"I'm sure you know we are the largest CDL school in the country- which means new facilities, new trucks, and a state of the art accelerated course developed by industry professionals to help you get on the road as quickly as possible. In only 160 hours- 40 hours a week for four weeks- week one chalk board, e-learning- everything that you are going to need to get your permit- the rules of the road, that which you will need to retain and regurgitate from memory at the DMV you take your initial permit test at- once in a classroom, now on a computer- that's week one- and when you pass your initial written exam at the DMV and have your permit, that allows you to get into the yard with a truck, an instructor by your side- weeks two through four- side by side, being asked questions- what is this called, what goes here, what is the name of this gizmo, that gizmo, make this turn, can you go backwards, go in reverse, what do you do in this situation, can you back into here, can you back out of here, can you get three hundred and sixty degrees, can you get ninety degrees, can you take it around the city can you take it around the highway can you take it down the block- behind the wheel- until you are comfortable to operate that vehicle, that truck, get your license, and start making money. You've come to the right place. What was your name sir?"

"Levon."

"Levon, I'm Shawn. This is the corporate office. I am already in connection with the branch manager in Reno. Stacy Asevito. Honestly we have super low prices- \$3604 - but there are a plethora of ways to pay for tuition. Meritized loans, state funded grants= the cooler part is sponsorship- where the carrier will actually pay for your tuition- a side story they started losing drivers, and they came to us, and they said listen we'll pay for their - our graduates, out the door are making 45k a year. A good option. Definitely a good options. We get a lot of calls, looking for drivers. You have to keep this in mind- a lot of these companies will look for prior experience- yeah obviously you have to start somewhere- and I'm throwing you somewhere. Four weeks- week one in the classroom, the electronic classroom- weeks two and three and four you're in the truck, you take the same truck down to the DMV, you're comfortable

with it, you're familiar with it. You're going to want to take it home. That's a joke- but- you're going to know the truck. You're going to know the instructor. We have a 93% graduation rate. Most everybody is done in four weeks. We push for it. Oh sorry- my computer- I'm running out of battery here, just give me a- ok, now Stacey is going to review all of this with you as well- so let's get you created in our system- alright- first name Levon- now I need your last name."

"Uh. Helm."

"Awesome. Let me- this battery here- your day still going well Levon?"

"Yeah. Yeah it's going pretty good."

"You sound like an excellent candidate. What got you into this area? Change of pace, money, explore the country?"

"I've worked on the road for a while- and well I knew somebody happy who was driving a truck..."

"You want in, I get it. I'll tell you what- I've seen it- people reach that pinnacle, build up a real true-blue success story- sure- I've seen people build a business- they buy one truck, two truck, three trucks- hire drivers, buy more and more, divide and conquer- WILD HORSES CATTLE- one guy built himself an entire operation- and literally there are people on his team calling us every single day looking for drivers. Logistically speaking there are more opportunities nowadays- from barge to freight- and freight to the store- and in this pandemic- more and more and more, not less and less- it's all yours- if you want local, if you want endorsements- but before we get into that- nine preliminary questions, alright? First one is the easiest- are you over the age of 21?"

"Yes."

"Perfect. One for one. Second question- do you have a valid Drivers' License in the state of Nevada?"

"I do."

"Highest level of education obtained?"

"College, a two-year college."

"Did you finish?"

"Uh, no. No I did not."

"No shame in that, no issue at all, no problem- are you working right now?"

"No I am not."

"Name of former employer?"

"Self-employed."

"Any accidents or moving violations in a personal vehicle in the last ten years?"

"Uh, no."

"Any speeding tickets in the last ten years?"

"No."

"Any DUI in the last ten years?"

"No."

"We're on fire here Leon! What about criminal history? Got anything there?"

"No."

"Well here is my jackpot call of the day- Levon you are a great candidate- you are going to be driving for Warner, Dollar Tree- these guys are paying \$80k a year- given you are being honest about your driving history- as long as you aren't a liability in the eyes of the insurance companies, and based on your answers and just my general sense with you right now you most certainly are NOT- you Levon will be hired by the best companies who will pay you the most money. When was the year you received your first drivers' license?"

"1976."

"Great memory, how about suspensions? No suspensions?"

"No."

"And no pending charges- criminal or otherwise?"

"No."

"And that's the golden ticket right there. Congratulations! You're a PhD in this industry- and you'll make the money- I've seen it, let me tell you- here- let's get Stacy's calendar open- Leon, when do you want to start classes Levon?"

"I'll have to do a little thinking- ask my wife, first off, and look at my schedule- see how it's all going to work."

"Exactly, exactly- you talk to Stacy, she will go through everything- you'll be all set- you seem highly intelligent, high functioning. You have a plan. Go for it. Yes sir. So Stacy has an opening tomorrow afternoon, can I put you down for 2PM Mountain Time?"

"Well I was thinking, can I call her, if you give me her number?"

"Wish I could Leon but I can't- we have to get you in the door- this is an in person- this is the branch manager here, I mean Stacy is prime time, she wants to meet you in person- can you go in tomorrow?"

"Well I guess, I think so."

"How does 2PM sound? Can you go in there tomorrow?"

"Um."

"Leon- you are in a great position. I am going to text you tomorrow twice- first text with the appointment once I get it assigned on Stacey's calendar, second text as a confirmation. And I'll leave you with this Levon- most people come in here with their eyes closed, most people come in here and they don't know- but your eyes are open Levon- you know. I feel it. The text is on its way. Stacy is looking forward to tomorrow. We

will have you on the road in no time, making money. A lot of people in this industry make a lot more money than me- and I'm looking forward to hearing your success story on the website, I really am. 2 PM tomorrow. Be good Levon."

--

Static cleared. A dozen Harris' sat around a couch, on kitchen stools and spread out over a delicate carpet. They were renting a house in Manchester. For the reunion. The big family reunion.

Jean's face appeared on the television screen. Uncle Raleigh had been fast-forwarding through Christmas dinners, Easter egg hunts... impatient. Whenever one of the cousins appeared in the frame, years younger, they would beg him to halt. He would only give them a few seconds, unless there was "action." There was an entire box of home videos to inspect. Grandma Kelly had passed away the previous year, and clearing out the house, Raleigh and his brother Pete stumbled upon Grandpa Ed's home movies. Uncle Raleigh wanted to make it through as many years of footage as possible. It was getting late.

But he set down the remote control once Jean appeared on screen... she was in an old house long since sold, with Nicky her son. At the present, Jean wasn't in the living room with the rest of the Harris'. She was in a hospital, with her husband Ken, a recent stroke victim. He was hanging onto life in an ICU, miles away. Jean and Ken and Nicky were supposed to be in the living room. They had to cancel their trip on the tour bus. They weren't able to enjoy the barbecue smoke-out with the rest of the family.

On the LCD, Jean was helping Nicky onto a rocking horse. She was showing Grandpa Ed how much Nicky could do. Nicky had been born with Williams syndrome. He might have been two or three years old on the screen... in the hospital he was twenty-seven. His younger self rocked back and forth on the wooden toy. His mouth open wide, cheeks high, a flush over his complexion... he spit in excitement. Jean clapped, and so did Grandma Kelly. They clapped and Nicky beamed with joy. The rest of the Harris' watched on, in silence. Jean helped Nicky down from the horse. She handed her son a harmonica. He played a single note, then set the instrument at his side and burst out smiling like he had done the most fantastic thing in the world, and let his mother in on his secret. She handed him a recorder, and he played the same note. He produced the same, perfect reaction... unabashed love. Whimsy. Light-hearted. Jean folded her arms, admiring her son. Admiring the product of her hard work... the blanket on the living room floor full of toys, books, a mirror to help him recognize himself, to help him understand himself, that he was a person, just as good as anyone else... then she worked with Nicky to show

Grandpa and Grandma some of his sign language. Ball. Food. Happy. I love you. Potty. Rainbow. Nicky would sign the words, and Jean would clap. Grandma Kelly said, "Jean, oh my gosh, it's remarkable. He's learned so much since last time we saw you two." Jean wiped her forehead unconscious, nodding. Nicky was in front of a play register, coins and slots and colors... Nicky had learned to match certain coins into certain slots. Jean said "Well, he's my little star. He keeps on going ahead. We really... I'm just glad I didn't listen to those doctors at Western General." Nicky started to pat his tiny palms on a pair of bongos. Jean clapped a rhythm with her son. Then they played 'Itsy Bitsy Spider', choreographed with hand motions and a dance... a bleeding, tenacious dedication of the highest order.

After the music ended, the Harris' heard a faint cry from Grandma Kelly. She was weeping, silently, somewhere off-screen.

Uncle Raleigh joined his deceased mother. He wiped his cheek. So did Aunt Mary, and cousin Kate. Tears ran down their faces. All of the Harris' watched on in awe. Uncle Pete acknowledged, for the first time in his life, in his heart, how little credit he had given his older sister. He felt like he had taken advantage of his own children's gifts, of their 'normalcy.' It had been easy for him. His wife looked on at Jean, stunned. She regretted every bad word she had ever uttered about her sister-in-law. Nicky's cousins held their mouths open. The pure love on display in front of their eyes... there was nothing to say. Every problem, every complaint they ever made, every impatient moment... entire existences had been put to shame by ten minutes of footage.

Nobody spoke a word.

--

A pair of crows hit the sky headed west across H.P. Kitgeridge's windshield. His foot raised from off the accelerator en route to picking up his evening meal. He drove uneasily the rest of the way. After arriving at the supermarket, he watched in horror as a black cat scurried from one end of the parking lot to the other... the animal appeared to have brown feet, but it might have been the mud on the ground. Twice, two omens, within the space of an hour.

H.P.'s mind filled like an ancient river valley teeming full of Sumerian vibrations... beginnings and endings, great mythologies... H.P. refused to make plans on a full moon. Never. If he found a dead moth, he usually spent a day or two in bed with his phone off the receiver. If he found a dead moth near his own door (either at the entrance to his apartment, in the hallway, or on

the stairwell), which had happened several times the month of December 2012 (the same month of the supposed Mayan Apocalypse on 12/21/12), he rented a motel room for the evening and ate butterscotch ice cream by the pint until he fell asleep above the sheets.

H.P.'s mother was a survivor of the Great Depression, truth to God, slumming in Hoovervilles and hustling on the streets of New York. She stole at least one overcoat every day for an entire year, from the ages eleven to twelve... bus stops, restaurants, park benches. Her father before her was a Dust Bowl drifter, picking fruit and selling homemade fly swatters door to door. He figured the big city would be the land of opportunity.

As a boy, H.P. took a liking to drawing strange mandalas, black and white circular patterns, like flowers, like starry projections, organic twisting and wild. Such images filled his school-day notebooks. Lotus blooms decorated steamy bathroom mirrors after his showers. He continued to produce his designs through college. Then he witnessed his first solar eclipse. He realized what the design had been, all along, embedded in him like a perfect Jungian symbol... the corona of the sun... the flower petals... the white glowing flames, extending and dancing beyond the black lunar umbrella... enchanted by the majesty of nature, mesmerized in cosmoluminescence. Illuminated. The night following the eclipse, H.P. researched Saros cycles until falling asleep on a library desk... a period of approximately 6,585.3 days, and two eclipses separated by one Saros cycle share very similar geometries... Babylonian astrological charts were copied, diligently. He woke up with a residue on his brain, memories he had dreamt of a flood. A cataclysm. He was convinced, so self-assured that his vision would come to fruition that he purchased an inflatable raft which he kept in dorm room closets, then apartment closets, for the next seven years. He told his friends about the warning. He soon lost them (his friends, not the visions). Most of his peers stopped talking to H.P. The young man did not show any remorse, because he figured the end was coming soon. That's when his superstitions took hold. That's when the quality of his own eyes changed. A once wide eye'd, sharp pupil'd, inquisitive and excited young man transformed. By graduation, he possessed the eyes of a man ready to welcome a redeeming quality or well nurtured instinct or shred of light in any man or woman but too often was disappointed to find none existed. He aged. He grew tired.

When his parents died, mom and dad, they passed within a month of each other, both of painless strokes (cerebrovascular accidents) early in the morning, falling off the toilet bowl after one final bowel movement, one final exhale, one final moment of relief before crossing the great beyond. They both died on the bathroom floor. By then, H.P. had settled down, the visions had

dissipated... things had been going alright. Sure, he still refused to wear a new shirt on a Wednesday, and avoided doing too much on a full moon, but things were... stable enough. Okay.

But tonight, the dusk of the crow and the cat, on this evening, H.P.'s paranoia returned. Greek augurs, druidical sorcery, voodoo imprecations, werewolf prowlings, forbidden spell-books... he returned to his car with a pair of plastic grocery bags. He shut the door, but was hesitant to leave the parking lot. He tapped his fingers on the steering wheel... 'Did she have brown feet?' he kept wondering to himself, 'Or was she entirely black?' He rubbed an old rosary hanging from the rearview mirror. The wooden cross felt like a marshmallow between his thumb and forefinger, worn from years of prayer, of recited lines with eyelids shut willing away perceived darkness(es). H.P. stopped going to church... he hadn't since reading Marcus Aurelius... a student of philosophy, logic and reason, a stoic... he would have identified himself as an agnostic had he belonged to any social circles... but the comfort of completing a string of Hail Mary's could not be replaced. After several minutes with the keys unturned, he fired up the gas and moved the clutch into first gear. A pit of growing hunger in his gut eventually won out.

Returning to his driveway, H.P. saddled up the pair of grocery bags and hustled towards the side door of his plain, ranch style home. He removed his waterproof'd calfskin boots in the mudroom on the mat. The mudroom... his mother had always insisted the mudroom be kept spotless. In fact, she cleaned the mudroom more than any other room in her home. Wasn't the point of a mudroom to sequester any dirty clothes, shoes? H.P. hadn't been able to make sense of that since he could remember... and now that he had inherited his parent's house, H.P., despite his philosophical objections, remained steadfast about keeping mud out of the mudroom.

H.P. slept most nice on a couch, a sofa in the main area. He had grown too big for his childhood bed. He hadn't cleaned out any of the clothes from the closets in his parent's room. A part of him was convinced their energy would remain, that their spirits would act as guardians of the domicile. *Penantes*, or something to that effect. Ancient Romans kept household guardians, ancestors, little totems around the family altar for safety and good luck. H.P. had enjoyed learning about civilizations of the past as a child. He fancied himself to grow up into a Roman senator. Maybe even Caesar... his Halloween costume in 4th grade.

Rubbing the bald spot on his head, H.P. breathed a sigh of relief and arranged the plastic bags on the worn counter. But then at the stovetop, he balked.

Gas. Fire. Explosions. Tragic outcomes began to condense and materialize in his mind's eye. Disaster. Sophocles, Euripides, Aeschylus... the green peppers and onions would certainly taste better cooked on the cast-iron skillet, but the microwave would be safer. He drizzled some olive oil over the chopped vegetables and lightly seasoned them with salt and pepper.

While the machine whizzed and the Pyrex plate turned, H.P. hummed to himself... singing softly, 'I pray my superstitions, don't get me thrown, off my land'... before the timer could issue BEEP a signal, he popped the door and removed the dish with a cooking glove. A desire emerged from within him, in an instant... to SEARCH the internet... to brush up on impending doomsday predictions... to determine when the next asteroid was due to strike, to decipher the next set of apocalypse coding embedded within the Talmud, to pinpoint the next volcanic superstorm or when the magnetic pole reversals would shred everything to bits. Understand that H.P. was caught up in the Y2K hysteria as a young man, and eschatology fascinated him since... Nostradamus, Mayan long-count calendars... for years he relished in his fear of the end-times. But H.P. had disconnected himself from wireless access years ago, at the request of his therapist. Their sessions tended to focus on the irrationality of his obsessions and fears. The clinical psychologist reinforced that "everyday life" would continue to go on, how there was no end in sight and no reason to believe it was coming, how stocking up on supplies and burying himself in survival equipment was a waste of time and money. None of those exercises came to his rescue, now... H.P. hadn't been going to therapy since his parents died, almost a year prior. Originally he had started treatment after a failed relationship. One of his many failed relationships with women. But without his mother's questions, her poking and prodding into his romantic life, therapy seemed useless. And expensive.

The yen to perform 'research' clouded the middle-age'd technical support agent's focus as he emptied the soggy vegetables into a pair of tortilla wraps. A dollop of sour cream... a bite. Chewing, counting each contraction of his jaw... sixteen, seventeen... patient, chew... briefly an image of his own body going lifeless after choking to death shrouded his plans to apocalypse hunt... H.P. quietly reviewed the steps to perform the Heimlich unassisted. He had watched several videos at work. He swallowed. A deep breath. 'I pray my superstitions, won't betray, my fellow man'... the crows... the cat... what evil lurked on the horizon? H.P. opened up a newspaper from his backpack (a free paper he picked up every morning at a stand outside his office building) to the Horoscope section... the horror-scope... what newsprint first coined the term 'horoscope'? What a stroke of genius... such an apropos name...

Zodiac ruminating, page by page... Scorpios understand the laws of the universe... the heavenly body with the most influence over Scorpio is Pluto... jealous and suspicious... an emotional water sign... a bunch of fortune-cookie hogwash, that's what his father had called horoscopes. H.P.'s father was a Sagittarius- Nostradamus was a Sagittarius- a fire sign- restless, adventurous- truth seekers.

H.P. checked the day's prediction:

Scorpio (Oct. 23-Nov. 21)

Do be careful because this is an accident-prone day for your sign. Of course, an accident doesn't have to happen but it does mean you might be distracted by something today, which in turn, affects your focus and concentration. Be on the lookout. Good day to meet new people and see new places!

"Be on the lookout" H.P. mumbled to himself. The paragraph, he reread it, and every word rang true... except for the line bout 'new people and places.' How could he seek adventure while at the same time being on guard? How was he to interpret the counter-intuitive advice? Then an epiphany. Without any internet connection here at home on Davis St., maybe... yes, a trip to the library. A new place, or at least a place he hadn't been to in several years. H.P. fished through his wallet. The card was still active, not expiring for another fourteen months. He could use the library computers... he could get back to his research. He could return to the high-tower, the lookout. Yes, he could see a new place. He could fulfill today's freepress prophecy.

Back to the mudroom. Boots, coat, hat, no scarf or gloves (still not cold enough yet)... seatbelt, heating system... brake pads, STOP sign, three seconds (counting them out loud, a complete halt)... a parking spot near the front, walking inside, approaching the front desk... the computer lab, a log-in password, internet access...

The predicted backside alignment quake event is scheduled for November 19, 2017- It's a mini constellation made up of a Dark Star, smaller than our Sun, which hosts seven orbiting bodies- Some are smaller than our moon, a couple are larger than our Earth. The Dark Star is called Nemesis, or some people call it Planet X- Seismic event indicators say Earth is moving through the middle of the second earth change uptick period for the 2017 Earth orbit cycle relative to the Black Star positioned in the Libra Constellation- Global seismic activity will be in up-down bounce mode for the coming few weeks with larger-magnitude earthquake events expected for November.

November... Scorpio... three weeks... just after his birthday... H.P. printed up \$13.40 worth of internet articles, stuffed them into his coat, and headed back to the parking lot. An elderly librarian, her head barely clearing the desk, made a waving gesture to him as he passed through the scanners but H.P. didn't notice her. His eyes were locked forward. He was determined. There was work to do, lost time to be atoned.

--

"Check this out guys, isn't this wild?" Craig hung his guests' coats in a hallway closet, asked them to politely remove their shoes in the apartment hallway, and lead them into the kitchen

Cherise, a junior partner at the firm, gazed at the transparent trinket. "Wow! It's like a, decanter? Is that whiskey?"

Craig pinged the glass sphere with a fingertip. "Armagnac. I started drinking it maybe two years ago, and I turned my old man onto it, so he bought me this for Christmas. See how it spins?"

Cherise probed accordingly, to move the conversation. "Cool. How does the globe, how do you pour it?"

"Just like this, hah!" Craig unlatched the contraption, opened the top, and poured a small sample for his coworker.

"Cool. Oh, it's strong."

Craig reached back to the cabinet. "Sam, do you want a glass?"

Sam had quit drinking, drugs, six years clean now... he smiled a regimented smile, a phony gesture, a conscious furrow, forced between his teeth, a smile of smiles, revealing in brief a pain running underneath, a canyon one-million-miles to the bottom... he adjusted a rosewood mandala wristband, "No, thanks."

"It's an acquired taste for sure, but really it's smooth. This brand is like \$300 a bottle, so it's definitely what you could call 'high end.' But there are bottles that run a couple grand, because of how long they have been aged, the season the grapes were produced, et cetera. There's a 1924 vintage, by Gelas, I had a glass of it with Dieter, the manager of the Euro finance team... have you ever met Dieter? Remember when I was over in Frankfurt last quarter? Dieter is nuts! It was fucking incredible."

Cherise finished her taste. "Yeah that's right... so it was a good trip?"

"All play and no work, the best kind. Those German bankers know how to party, for sure!"

Cherise noticed one of her direct reports, Meaghan, in the livingroom, and shouted to her from the kitchen. "Meaghan!" She left Sam with Craig.

Craig took a sip from his craft beer, "You sure you don't need a drink?"

"All set."

Craig then gestured like an ornate bird-of-paradise, "Here, I'll give you the tour."

First stop, the study... Craig rambled, hardly breathing between soliloquies, flexing his jaw and patting his fingers on his thighs... Paul decided Craig might be a little coked out. Definitely coked out. Great... not really listening, not really caring, the sober outsider noticed a television parked in the corner of the room. It would be easy fodder for small talk... "Still waiting to mount her, eh?"

"Nah, that's going to be a trade in. Probably try to resell it online. Maybe toss it. I have to buy a new one."

Sam was confused. "Is it busted?"

Craig clapped his hands together, grinning supercilious... explaining... "Nah. The technology, you buy one and a year later it's practically obsolete. It's incredible. And that's only what's on the market. These companies, they're three or four generations ahead in their R&D divisions. Once these VR systems improve- that's the game changer. The entire viewing experience... sports, you'll be able to sit on the sidelines for every game. But that's not even... can you imagine virtual porn? Ha! Dude I'll have to upgrade all over again."

Sam stuffed both hands into his pockets, thoroughly patronized and revolted. He stood several inches taller than Craig. A full beard to a clean-shaven baby-face. A Phish logo tatoo'd onto his forearm, covered by a wool sweater Cherise had picked out for him to wear... his tie-dye t-shirt being vetoed before they left for the 'condo warming' party... Craig in his Versace crew neck... "So, standard HD doesn't cut it anymore?"

"No way. You need to check out what I have in the living room. It's 4K Ultra. The difference is ridiculous, for sure. The human eye wouldn't even be able to handle a better pixilation. They'll probably be cheaper in a couple of years, but, I mean, when you look at it... I saw it in Best Buy last week, I had to pull the trigger."

Feigning interest, Sam itched his cheek, "Wow, I bet it's nice man."

"Just wait. It's the best."

The pair meandered over laminate silver-oak floors.

Perfunctory, "Cherise mentioned you also own a place down by Lake Delvan, too?"

"Well, funny story. So Oppenheimer flipped me seventy-six grand two... no, three years ago... for my bonus, and since the payments were donezo on my Audi... I wanted to build some equity, you know? I figured why not go for it."

"Yeah, wow... that sounds nice." Sam's voice, the pitch, increased noticeably... the same pitch shift that occurred when he answered, lying, 'fine' to the question 'how are you doing'... Sam noticed it, and he nearly cowered away, in shame... a sell-out, a duplicitous middle'r... the former day tripper, music festival attendee couldn't believe he had let his life bring him to this point, listening to some windbag with satyriasis brag about a yearly bonus... even more alarming was the prospect that he had zero-control over the course of his life... fate had dealt him this hand... this is where the road to forever had brought him to?

Balancing perspective, interrupted... Craig fired off, "For sure. I mean, real estate makes total sense. I netted like sixty-grand on my last condo. So I already have this place paid off way past PMI, when I closed I think it was at 38%, what I put down, so the monthly mortgage payments, since my accountant told me to set it up as a 30 year, it's super manageable. And, honestly, you can't go wrong with real estate. I'm telling you. It's safe. It just makes sense! Plus, I don't need another car! Ha!" Sam didn't know what to do with his eyes, his hands, how to respond- he tried his best to look comfortable, to betray his internal state... Craig continued, "I can have people up there during the summer. You guys should definitely get up there. I'll have it furnished by then, it's sort of barren right now... I need to recruit someone to decorate, do all the interior design. A woman's touch, hah! Preferably a good looking woman! But since I haven't had any time to get it together, all that's there are air mattresses and video game systems. And a stocked fridge for sure, hah!"

Real estate... Sam's memory frothed up an old acquaintance, Scary Gary Jones over at the Waverly Warehouse, a decrepit building with corridors of rooms gutted and leased for music practice space- shattered windows, cigarette burns, concrete floors that froze in the winter and burned like cast-iron in the summer- Paul used to play keyboards for a small outfit who occasionally

rented from Gary- he remembered sharing a joint with Gary one evening, and Gary recanted the story of Lead(pb)Sled, a band who used to rent a room from him in the late 80's- death metal, screampcore and Satanic rock emerging onto the scene- impromptu, Gary decided one Saturday night to check in on his tenants, and entering one of the hallways, the landlord witnessed a young lady no older than twelve or thirteen being yanked along by a leash fitted to a dog collar on her neck- Gary terminated his contract with the boys of Lead(pb)Sled... a different kind of smile pasted onto Paul's face, different than his gorge of pain in the kitchen. Craig misinterpreted it as a confirmation... "See, you know buddy... real estate!"

The pair walked on... the road to forever...

Craig motioned his guest into the master bedroom. "Here... Cherise said you were into music. Here. Put these on."

"What's up?"

"These headphones." Craig handed the device over. "Dude, you will not even believe how comfy they are. Total noise canceling, equalizer app on your phone so you can adjust the sound according to the kind of music you're listening to, wireless, charge lasts for sixteen hours. Got 'em for \$250. That's it. Literally top of the line. And like, they aren't too bulky, so you can run in them, work out. Try 'em."

Hesitating, strange... Paul adjusted the device over his ears. He gave an awkward thumbs up.

Craig reached up and removed the device. "Pretty sick, right?"

Sam scratched the side of his head and glanced at his feet. "Very."

Their tour concluded in the living room. Cherise was conversing to Meaghan and her husband. Several conversations, several nameless faces hovered above a dining table with scattered pizza boxes.

Craig found the remote control and broke out, "Hey everyone, check this out! It's fucking ridiculous insanity, literally. Google! Play 'Wasp versus Spider' YouTube!"

The television clicked off from a basketball game. A screen loaded, and a wild-life film began to play in front of the small group of look-a-like wannabe-executives. Sam remembered the bathroom... he excused himself... the heat of stress, the kind of itchy heat that radiates from earlobe to earlobe across your cheeks and dries your mouth and pricks invisible at your ribcage

invisible at first before distending and expanding through your stomach emerging like a phantom organ, outside of you, a tumor... the process engulfs your attention, your mind like a deck of cards like 52 Pick-Up like Go-Fish... confronted in the mirror.

--

Stretching up from his cubicle desk, worn down from another 6AM-6PM All-American twelve-hour work day, our over-time-every-time first-in last-out hero of the high-risin' high-payin' landscape sets the final touches onto a series of presentation slides for a quarterly-review meeting tomorrow, priority numero uno... the senior vice president flying in private-jet style from London... four slides, primed and ready to become (fingers crossed) the next propellant of his career... career driven, career motivated... interrupted from an intensely brief satisfaction, an alarm goes off on his electronic watch, a red flash, Mazer Foundation Meeting, HALF HOUR... a taxicab, briefcase packed... cursing the rush... cursing the community service hours, the judge who served him with an ultimatum... a suspected driving-under-the-influence... suspected... attorney's fees, lies to his ex-girlfriend, lies to his boss... now a trip to another corporate office... third floor... a sign at the door, a symbol, multi-colored hands clasped together **MAZER FOUNDATION** -> walking into a large conference center, ten other adults, old men, old women, young men, young women... multi-demographic, but unassuming... an advertising 'focus' group... he sits down, greeted by two women situated at the head of a long executive table... Joyce and Joan... the co-directors... pant-suits, smiling... "Hello, we're just getting started"... our hero watching his cell phone, glancing over articles, checking emails, checked out, can't wait to get home and crack open a beer... an old man next to him like MC Escher with a pointed white beard, a full head of hair even whiter than the whiskers on his face, thin-rimmed glasses, a vest and button down, probably an old timey pocket-watch ticking away in his pocket... the stranger sets a bowler in front of his place, coughs... coughs again, obviously at our hero... so All-America takes the defensive, immediately... 'Is this old fool serious? Is this a hint? You've got to be kidding me'... the old man coughs *again*, watching our hero tip-tap the screen of his device... Joyce is explaining the foundation's origin story, still no need to pay attention... son hit by drunk driver, yada yada... father started foundation for high school kids less fortunate than his son... the power of direct mentoring, influencing a young person's life... the simple gift of donating one's time... yada yada... SPORTS UPDATE... the old man stands up, unannounced, and stares right down to our hero... Joyce pauses, mid-sentence, fawns delicately towards him... clearing his throat, he pinches a wrinkle of fat under his chin, a nervous tug at his wattle, then speaks. "Our children, they are like flowers. The only way to pick up a dozen roses

is gently. If you apply too much pressure, the thorns will prick you. Our children need your care. You are all here to help them bloom. After I lost John, I made a decision, with my wife, Arlene. We decided that we were going to gain 15 new children every year, through this program. This is my son's legacy. This is my life's work. These are our children. And we are asking you to care for them as they were your own." Joyce's eyes water. She looks at Joan to continue. Our hero is disoriented. He hasn't assembled the clues... Joan fills him in... "Thank you Lowell. As I was saying, Lowell and Arlene Mazer started this foundation thirty-six years ago. And Lowell is still here with us for every training session, every award ceremony. Thank you Lowell. You truly, truly inspire us all." Lowell stood up several more times as the orientation for new volunteers continued... he pinched, he spoke... Joyce explained that during their time with the mentees, it was important to set ground rules for cell phones... Lowell stood up again, "Very few miracles can happen plugged into one of those things"... our hero buries his cell phone into his pocket... Lowell, again, "Tell your student this: you're not going to find any answers to life's important questions on your iPhone." Throughout the presentation, more and more... "Harbor no expectations, but always hope for the best"... "You're not their parents, but there is a possibility you may be more important"... genuine, battle worn, wise-old-man wisdom eeking out of Lowell Mazer... Lowell who never missed a commitment... rain, sleet or snow... who poured himself into the work... what other options did he have? After losing John in the accident... he made a choice. Lowell chose life. He chose to live on, to create a legacy. After he lost his wife... the question didn't even present itself. Joyce and Joan continued, they explained about the challenges their mentees faced like abuse, sex, drugs... the kids weren't really kids. Immigrants. Broken homes. Poverty. Urban wreckage... our hero's attention grew as the orientation went on. Joyce and Joan passed out binders. They scribbled notes on a white board. Pens jotted on worksheets, forms. At the halfway mark, the group participated in an icebreaker. Each person around the conference table explained what their job was, where they were from, why they had volunteered to mentor... our hero lied, but without his usual aplomb... our hero experienced a wrenching guilt as the other individuals explained in their own voices without a hint of duplicity why they had signed on, why they believed in the program, what they hoped to take away from the experience. Shep was a retired Marine sniper who once had to evade discovery in a brush patch 200 yards by 200 yards for twelve hours while an entire company swept the area. He heard about mentoring through his cousin who had volunteered for the program. Maureen was a computer teacher at the high school where the foundation recruited from. Wendy was a recent empty nester. Jonathan was a local basketball coach. Vince was an accountant. What was our hero supposed to do? Explain how he had been court mandated. Explain how

his girlfriend had left him. Explain how low, how shitty, how terrible he had felt the last couple of months. But Lowell Mazer spoke up, broke through our hero's guilt... "These kids will teach you more than you could possibly teach them. Remember that. They are going to change you." Our hero lets his mind wander. He opens himself up to the potential of feeling better... even the possibility.

--

"It's not part of my process. You have to respect where I am coming from. This is... you can't tell me how to do this, or why it's not convenient for you. You can't..."

"Don't tell me what I can't do, Trisha. I brought you into this world- dammit- and, we are going to have an adult conversation about this."

She hadn't heard her father curse in years. She paused, then realigned. "This was very difficult for me to do."

"I understand that. I do. I respect that. But the timing, with your brother's graduation this weekend... to come out, right now... to make it all about you... why couldn't you have just waited a couple of weeks? You're twenty-three. What would two more weeks have been?"

Blood vessels constricted... Trisha thought back to her conversation with Mary, her therapist... the lines had been rehearsed... "The timing doesn't matter. This was my process. I decided that now was the time. For my entire life, I've been afraid. I finally am comfortable with telling my family, people I *thought* that loved me. Now you're saying..."

"Trisha, do you realize how selfish that is? 'Your process?' To think that way... that's not the way that a mature adult behaves. It's not. A mature adult is considerate of other people. You had no consideration for Thomas. He was set to have a moment to himself, a moment for us to celebrate with him all that he has achieved the past four years, and you stole the show. I don't buy it. I think that you wanted to steal the show, because you know what, since you were a little girl, you have always wanted to be the center of attention. I'm sorry. That's how I see it."

"Fuck you! I can't even believe... how could you say something like that? This isn't a stunt, this is my life!"

"I didn't say it was a stunt Trisha, I said that your timing..."

She stood up from the loveseat. "It's my fucking process! I can't even... you know, Mary said this might happen. That you guys would twist this. She warned me. I just can't believe after everything that I've been through- I thought you loved me."

Her father closed his eyes. He breathed inward. Emotions... saboteurs... he felt angry at himself for cursing. He apologized, "I apologize for cursing Trisha." Eyes still closed... years and years of ups and downs had trained him to treat emotions like weather patterns... to prepare accordingly, deal with what came, but always remember that the clouds would pass. He annunciated clearly, opening his eyes... "Trisha, nothing is being twisted. I have no problem with you being a lesbian. I do love you. I have always loved you. I always will. I am proud of you for being who you are, for publicly telling us. I understand it must have been difficult for you. But this therapist of yours, to tell you that the weekend your brother was graduating from school, to make your announcement now..."

"Literally I am not going to sit here and listen to this. I'm gone." He watched her walk out the front door, down the porch steps and into her car, slamming the door in dramatic fashion before driving away.

Her father watched through the window above the sink as she cleared the driveway. He saw her as a little girl, as a beautiful dancer, a Halloween pumpkin, a tee-ball junior, a girl scout, as a frustrated high-school student, gaining more weight in college, becoming angrier, more emotional, complex... time passed in his mind. Before he died, he remembered watching her through that window, that afternoon- he remembered thinking to himself that he would see her soon and that it would all blow over.

Days without contact passed between them. For six months she refused to answer her father's phone calls. The anxiety attacks continued, panic striking in restaurant booths, at bus stops. She spent more hours in therapy, tried different combinations of medications. She shut out her brother. She worked longer hours at work. She struggled. She talked it over with Mary. She talked and talked. Mary helped her find her process, hone her process, execute her process. And after six months, Mary finally put the moves on Trisha. A back rub. A kiss. A proposal to move in... her process...

Trisha listened to a voicemail in the passenger seat. It was her brother. 'Dad is really hurt by this whole thing Trisha, you don't understand'... don't understand? *I'm the one who spent my entire life misunderstood! Understand... what nerve...* Mary asked who had called. "I can tell you're upset." Trisha talked. Then Mary talked. It all worked out. Not long after Mary announced she would be relocating her practice to the opposite coast. Trisha would

quit her job, find new work. They would be together. A twenty-three-year-old girl and a forty-seven-year-old woman. Lovers. Partners. A house by the beach, on the coast... months, years... fewer and fewer phone calls... a missed funeral, a card for her brother which he never responded to... decades... a forty-six year old woman and her seventy year old, sick, bedridden partner... the loneliness... Trisha's process had brought her to the Seaside Sunshine Mote (the 'L' was missing), eating ice cream, not showering for weeks, suffocating on cable television... some money from Mary's estate, but not enough to go on like this forever... there was nobody left. Isolation. Sadness. Regret.

--

Edward Kolchabeck approached the podium. Black suit, red tie, polished shoes borrowed from his father... 'Good luck today son'... Ed cleared his throat into the microphone, deliberate.

"I am the Lorax!"

The student body hung suspended in anticipation. Then Ed pounded his fist on the podium. This was the critical moment. "I speak for the trees!" At once the throng of teenagers burst into laughter. And their laughter continued, bringing applause... "I speak for the trees, for the trees have no tongues!"

More pounding. Ed's focus stretched wildly into the grandstands. Forget Saturday night basketball games... the gym hadn't been this loud all season... Coach Reiley was thinking that thought from his office in the locker rooms, and his curiosity forced him out to court to determine the source of the commotion... "And I'm asking you sir, at the top of my lungs - that thing! That horrible thing that I see!" Ed pointed into the distance. "What's that thing you've made out of my truffala tree?"

More applause. Shouting. Cheers.

The vice principal eye'd the dean of students, the two of them seated behind the podium on folding chairs with the candidates and other members of the faculty. Technically the candidate's speech was not inappropriate. They could not pull the plug on Ed, not yet... though Dean Standen concern rose and he was worried about inciting the crowd any further... "Yes, I am the Lorax who speaks for the trees!"

A chant had begun, building steam... 'Lorax- Lorax- Lorax'... "Which you seem to be chopping as fast as you please!"

Coach Reiley scratched at his goatee. Dean Standen crossed his arms. Tonya Rosencrantz shook her head in disgust. She had been class president Freshman, Sophomore, and Junior year... elected by default, as there had been no opposition party. But here was Ed, shouting, "But I'm also in charge of the brown Bar-ba-loots!"

'Barbaloots- Barbaloots- Barbaloots'... Tonya figured this to be some lame stoner ploy. She blushed despite her best rationalizations, her best internal assurances of why she would still win... "The brown Barbaloots who played in the shade in their Bar-ba-loot suits and happily lived eating truffula fruits!"

Complete pandemonium. Eight hundred members of the student body, all classes, all genders, laughing and clapping and chanting, hanging on Ed's words. The lanky, goofy nobody of no club, no sport team, no social circle took the moment in. He paused, deliberate. He let them whoop and settle, whoop and settle... then a final yawp... "Now, thanks to your hacking my trees to the ground, there's not enough truffula fruit to go 'round!" Ed raised both fists above his head. The crowd broke out. A standing ovation. Ed shook his hands together, doing his best impression of Richard Nixon, from one side to the other, basking in their energy... he turned from the stage and walked back to his seat. The student body remained upright, hollering and stomping on the wooden bleachers. Dean Standen had to call order several times before the next line of candidates could walk up to deliver their speeches which were written by their parents. Ed sat quiet in his seat, satisfied.

Once the assembly concluded, and the students filed out of the gymnasium... off to Math, Biology, American History... Dean Standen stood between Ed and the stairs off the platform. He set his hands on his hips and snipped at the young man, "Mr. Kolchabeck, exactly what the hell do you think that stunt was?"

Ed was prepared. Though he paused, staring at the overweight thud of authority in front of him, to be sure the question wasn't rhetorical... Dean Standen confirmed he wanted an answer with a "Well?"... Ed tightened his tie.

"Sir, I thought my speech was fitting, given the current American political environment. I presented it the way I did to make a quasi-social commentary, maybe even a social experiment, I..."

Interrupted. Barking. "Experiment? What the hell are you talking about? You made a mockery of the entire student government system. A mockery. What I saw was despicable." Ed never wavered, eye contact throughout... "Experiment? I'm not sure what I'm going to do, in terms of retribution for your stunt,

but I will tell you this: if you are elected, you will not serve. You will also be crafting an apology to the other candidates and the administration. I need to speak with the principal to determine what other actions will be taken for your 'experiment.'"

"Thank you, sir."

"Thank you? Are you daft Mr. Kolchabeck?"

"No sir."

"Get back to class. We will be speaking again very shortly."

"Thank you, sir."

--

An old man fisherman with meat-hook hands on the street, like one of Hemmingway's characters, I catch him in the rain as he works his pair of backhoes loading miscellaneous gear into the bed of his truck. A greying cherry-brown bearded man hair thick and full across his chin and cheeks and neck, untrimmed... denim jacket, worn, corduroy pants... but his face, *I know his face...* approaching then asking, "Leo! Is that you?"

He stops, the door of his truck still open... I run over, invite him to Sully's Tavern for a beer, to catch up... he accepts ... school-day friends, lockers and last names alphabetical positioned next to each other, acquaintances really, but here he was, back in town for a funeral... at the bar, low, quiet... I had asked him what happened, where he had been, why he left town... his attention shifted from the window, the raindrops and tears of a weeping earth, a Gettysburg rain of silence and reflection: "I realized early that every conversation I was having, even with people I loved, even with friends, was this kind of check-out line, grocery store conversation, like if you were making nice small talk with a clerk, but really on the inside you want to scream, you know? Every conversation was goddamn phony. And I didn't want to wake up as a thirty-year-old man with a family, with a white SUV, with all the accolades and achievements of society. I mean, hailing from Belmont, I saw the top of the peak. The big shooters, we saw them all growing up. They're still here. My old man was one of them. Not that there's anything wrong with being on the grid, being part of the mix. But for me, the advantages didn't outweigh the costs. You know what I used to call it, when I was a teenager getting into trouble and cutting class? Generica. America Generica. All the guilty pleasures, all the dumb television shows, everyone quoting the same movies, rooting on the same sports teams, listening to the

same music, a commercial break in between. I didn't see any value in that phoniness. Wearing the same clothes. Thinking the same thoughts. A consensus reality that everyone agrees on, but no one agreed to. Generica. I had such a distaste for it as a kid. I saw it as one giant cluster. A thoughtless mono-culture. I dunno, I guess I was sensitive- I felt all that, in my bones, at a young age. I did drugs. I rebelled. And so I left. Today, the sea brings me my culture. When I go out on the boat, and catch a view of the horizon, or a storm, or a sunset- that's what I want to be consuming."

"Did you ever think about coming back?"

"It's funny. The first season I went up there, I left and it was October. So I worked, it was slow. And I spent the winter in a roominghouse run by this nice old gal and her husband, Rita and Sam Hinchkey. Over on Trotter Avenue. Little beat up joint. And the kid I was working with at the time, on the same boat as me, he was only 18, so we were both green as grass, but he kept talking the whole time about the summer crowd, the summer girls, how much life would change come June and July. And you know what I realized that next summer? He was wrong. Sure, there were a few more people around, but that's not saying much in a town of 350. There were even some girls, but they didn't want nothing to do with me. And I'm glad it never really changed. That's why I stayed. I couldn't have handled seeing that place, this pearl I had discovered way up in the back country of Maine, ruined by commercialization too. I don't know what I would have done. I might have gone back to drugs, or taken up jogging (chuckles), or who knows what- probably would have ended up dead, because I would've known my chances of finding peace were zilch. But I stayed up there. And I saved up enough money, I bought my own boat, and the sea keeps providing. And before you know it, you're forty-five, on a second dog, with your place almost paid for because it ain't a second wife (chuckles). Sure it's a little shack, a bungalow, but it's home. People know me there, I have friends, but there aren't any grocery store conversations. There's either meaningful talk, or silence. And then you start to understand how silence is meaningful, how it's even more important than talk. That's the real weird part. How quiet it can get. Just being here a few days- the cars, the noises- to say I'm ready to go back is a profound understatement. I need to go back."

"That's wild."

"You know what's really wild? When you have the time, when there's no rush, and you are frying Brussels sprouts, and you watch them blacken on a cast-iron skillet, and you see them pulsing and bouncing in the heat, heartbeats in their sprout hearts- when you got the time to really see."

A family of four walked into the restaurant, a bell ringing above the door... my old friend fisherman watched them sit down... not directly... spying on them through a window but not actually through it... rather, on it, the reflection right there, following them, watching them fold the napkins over their laps with his eyes.

It happens when one man can dip into another man's thoughts, apart and in separate heads, but there are moments when the barriers dissolve. Leo wasn't jealous, or upset, but I felt him evaluating himself through them... everything he had just explained to me. I could see it in his pinched nose. He was evaluating his own life, his choices. That could have been him with his son and daughter and wife out for a sandwich, enjoying the weekend. But it wasn't. And he was alright with his place at the bar.

--

"It will all be alright."

"Alright?"

"Yes."

"Alright?"

"You can't see it now, but it... it's going to be alright."

"And how in the hell, after knowing me all of... twenty minutes... how you figure that I'm going to be alright?"

The priest didn't answer. His voice in his mind said 'The problems you've described to me, they are of the world, of the flesh, of the eyes. That's what dies. That's what goes. Of the Father, of the spirit, that's what's eternal.'

Maureen Anders passed away from pneumonia. She had been coughing for a few days. She went to the doctor. She kept coughing for another week, worsening little by little. She went to the hospital for difficulty breathing. By the time any tests were performed, it was too late. The bacteria had overrun her lungs. Doctors held a meeting with Mr. Anders, and they decided to induce a coma. It was her best shot. Young Marcus Anders didn't say much to her before she went under. She never came back. Mr. Anders worked on an oil rig in the Gulf, so after Marcus' mother died, the boy went to go live with his aunt and uncle. Aunt Karen collected coupons. She bought her groceries on the internet, and had them delivered to her door. When the doorbell rang, and a delivery driver brought her packages, she checked through window shades to

make sure he had left before she went to retrieve them. She needed to know for certain the delivery man had left. "Is he gone?" Uncle Ray drank with city workers at dimly lit bars after work. He refused to eat her dinners. Marcus trained all day for the javelin toss. He was determined to become an Olympian. His mother loved the Olympics. He even trained in his sleep, dreaming of gold medals, world records. He went on like that through junior high, into high school. An accident in wood shop ruined his chances at the javelin. His ring finger was spliced off at the second knuckle, on his strong hand, his right hand. He ran the 400m instead. A fine athlete, offered several college scholarships, but when he finished his senior year, Marcus joined the Marines. Parris Island. Private 'Gordo' was born. Graduation. Activated. Afghanistan. A full tour. Now he was back. Home... home. For good.

Gordo broke the silence. "Listen. I watched my friends die. I watched my enemies die. I watched my mother die. Bodies. Dead. Lifeless. I've been the Reaper. There's nothing about any of this (waving his hands at the wrists, like a hello or goodbye) worth a shit. You're here, then you're gone. That's the only thing I know. That's the only thing that makes me able to keep going, is knowing eventually it'll run its course. There's no 'alright.' Nothing's alright. All of it's fucked."

"Marcus..."

"Gordo! My name is fucking Gordo!"

Gordon was his mother's maiden name. His mother called him Marky. His commanding officer called him Gordo. Gordo started as his Marine nickname, but it became the name anybody who knew him called him so long as he had the chance to introduce himself, because he introduced himself as 'Gordo.'

"Gordo, son..."

"I'm not your fuckin' son!" Shaking his crew-cut head, "I'm done with this. I knew this was a bad idea."

Father Pat raised his voice. "You know what a bad idea is? A bad idea is getting arrested for a DUI after stopping at a traffic light with a half-drunk bottle of Jack Daniel's in the passenger seat and bashing in the windshield of the car behind you. That's a bad idea. Sitting down, and talking about what's going on in your head, that's courage. What you're doing here today, this is not a bad idea."

The imbroglio our parish priest is referring to occurred last week. Gordo, after waking up and lifting weights for several hours, headed to the liquor

store, purchased a bottle (750ml) of Single Barrel Whiskey, polished half of the harsh, glowing liquid in three gulps (375ml), and left the parking lot. On the way back to his apartment, at a red light changing to green, a woman beeped her minivan's horn at Gordo because he failed to move after the signal flipped. Then a different signal flipped. Gordo set his truck into PARK, walked deliberately to the bed in the back, removed a spade from off the smooth metal floor, and proceeded towards the minivan. He didn't say a word. He didn't make eye contact with the woman. The blade of the shovel lurched over his shoulder and slammed into her windshield. Screams. Two children in the back seat. Again and again... it took six policemen with blackjack clubs to detain Gordo. The judge presiding over the initial hearing was a good friend of the pastor. He had arranged for this meeting to take place. He thought it would be a good idea. Gordo had no family, no friends, no one else to talk to. Nobody wants to lock up a Marine who has served his country.

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The Acougue de Cowboy is like this: a busted screen door that won't close shut, bright fluorescent bulbs, a small counter with an old-timey register, a **CASH ONLY** sign taped onto the countertop, a maidenly teenage girl tip-taps her cell phone not looking up at you, white washed floors and walls, two slide-door coolers humming with Brazilian soda pops and juices, a steel rack of candies and little homeland edible memories, a butcher officiating behind a full plexi-glass viewing station, a barely perceptible incline in the floor, a miniature television playing a futbol match with the volume muted, advertisement posters, smells of iron and soap.

His back is turned, hacking away at shanks, filets, grinding sausages, mixing herbs... you cough... then ask "Hello?" No response. You forgot.

From around the corner his daughter screeches from the register, admonishing you, "He can't hear you. He's deaf." Another chop is hacked.

You walk over to the girl. "How do... can you let him know...

Assertive, the girl asks, "What do you want? I'll tell him."

"I need, um, I need some tripes... some, sausage casings."

Bemused. "Sausage cases?"

"The, uh, it's the thin layer, the casings... tripe, beef tripes...

Still bemused. "Tripes?"

"Yes."

"Hold on." She chews gum, swivels off stool, and is gone. You sound out the word in your head, tripes... tripas... but before you decide on where to put the accent the girl returns, "Come this way."

You shuffle around the corner. The butcher is standing next to the girl. A father and his daughter. There is a resemblance. Presumably his daughter... you haven't confirmed. Standing there... confused and jettisoned, you feel like you're interrupting something intimate. She is signing to him, he is opening fridges, heads to a freezer in the back, a steel door... he returns and drops a plastic bag, aqueous and crawling, on the counter in front of you. She asks, "Is this what you mean?"

Beef tripes. A whole package. Fresh animal intestine. It is exactly what you came for. You nod. Correct. You mouth out 'Thank you' slowly but the butcher's facial expression is unchanged. Just another order. Just another number. The girl asks "Is that it?" You respond "Yes, that's everything." Not a flinch, not a motion from the man behind the blood-stained apron, the proprietor behind the operation, hands on hips... you return to the counter, you pay with cash, you push past the broken screen door.

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Nighttime... raining. The earth is crying herself to sleep. Fog. Darkness. The end of one of *those* days. Long hours on the road, sales pitches, phone calls, emails and messages awaiting responses, co-workers and managers pulling her in every direction. One of the kids is sick at home. The other is failing Geometry. On her way back to playing wonderwoman, she decided to stop at **Dino's Pizza & Subs**. Her husband already fixed dinner for the kids, he was home early to check on Nathan's fever... a slice of pizza sounded nice. A Wednesday treat. A boost to bring her through the rest of the week.

She had earned it.

Striding up to the counter she bounced light on her stilettos, relieved, and set her keys and her wallet in front of her. But her relief was short lived. Immediately she noticed the metal spinning rack behind the counter was empty. The rack sat inside an insulated plastic box rigged up by the old-time brothers Dino and Luca, invented to keep fresh slices of cheese and pepperoni warm and proudly display them for the customers. She sighed. There would be a wait.

Wiping his forehead, Dino shut the oven door, turned, and grinned earnest at the tall brunette, "How are you Miss? What can I do for you?"

The district manager, the soccer team assistant coach, the communion minister... she kept an even face and dismissed the first question... straight to the point, "Do you have any slices available? A slice of cheese?"

Dino glanced at the empty rack. "No slices right now, but, uh, how about I make you a small cheese pizza, just for you. I charge you for a slice only. Okay?"

"Great," she responded, "but, how long do you think?"

"Seven minutes, tops."

The woman unearthed a credit card, "Perfect."

While Dino processed the order on his computer, both parties in agreement, they exchanged lamentations over the weather. A careful exchange... Dino knew when a customer wanted to shoot the breeze, wanted to be entertained or humored or listened to. It was a skill acquired after many hours worked in the foodservice industry, dealing with many customers. He had owned the pizza & sub shop for over thirty years. He could tell before the receipt printed it had been a trying day. The woman longed for quiet, for peace, for a slice of warm cheese pizza. He wiped his hand on his white t-shirt before handing her a pen to sign off with. "It will be right up Miss."

The woman set her keys and wallet back into her coat pockets and found a seat at an empty table. Every table was empty. Low-tide for the shop, 8:45PM, near closing time. A television set played above a cooler full of bottled sodas and waters. The volume was turned to nearly a whisper, but she could make out a news reporter's analysis of a tax-break that was being passed by the state senate.

A ring, a bell above the door... in walked a young boy, maybe ten or eleven, African-American, wearing sweatpants and sandals, socks underneath. The adolescent moved slow, deliberate towards the weathered counter. Dino met him, perched at the register. The woman listened while the boy ordered a buffalo chicken sub, no bleu cheese, extra ranch dressing. Dino rang up the total... \$6.45. The woman turned her head with an over-the-shoulder glance, examining the boy as he fumbled through his pockets. He stacked up change, a few single dollar bills... he had \$6.05.

Unapologetic, Dino rebuked the youngster, "You're forty cents short my friend. Do you want to order something else?" If Dino had let every customer slide who was short on cash, over the course of thirty years... he would be broke.

The boy continued to search his pockets. Empty. Scared, he refused to look up and make eye-contact with the purveyor of the establishment. The youngster was at an impasse. He didn't know what to do. "Ummm..." His heart had been set on a buffalo chicken sandwich. There was a great pause that permeated throughout the non-descript shop.

At that moment the woman stood up, without thought or premeditation, walked next to the boy at the counter, and set down a dollar bill. "Here you go honey, that should cover it."

The boy turned to her. He didn't know what to say. Then he turned to Dino.

Dino smiled at the woman, surprised. "It's okay Miss. You keep the dollar. We'll let him slide today. It's alright." Dino left the dollar in front of the woman and assembled the rest of the young boy's money into the various compartments of the register drawer. Instead of reclaiming it she picked up the dollar and set it into the TIPS jar.

Dino chuckled, "Ah, well thank you Miss. Very kind."

She did not respond to Dino. She offered an assiduous look of compassion, of comfort towards the young boy and walked back to her seat. The young boy remained at the counter, not sure what to do. Almost embarrassed... the kindness of white women had been a rare phenomenon in his experiences. Thought patterns, processes, things were turned upside down inside his head. Finally he spun around and located an empty table next to the compassionate stranger. Slumped over on his elbows, he offered "Thank you, ma'am. I really appreciate it."

"Oh it's no problem honey. People have to help each other. Especially when it's raining outside."

Their eyes shared the warmth of each other's faces.

Dino called out from behind the counter, "Your pizza is ready, Miss."

The woman leaned up from her seat and retrieved the cardboard box from Dino. She did not thank him. She tore off several napkins from a holder and turned away.

"Have a nice night, Miss," Dino offered.

As she walked out of the shop past the boy towards the **EXIT**, they exchanged one final glance, a smile and some words... "Take care."

His tiny voice croaked, "Thank you again, ma'am."

As she walked to her car, the woman noticed another car with the lights on, a female driver, a scowl cast over her face, an African American woman with a cigarette stuck between her lips... it must be the boy's mother, the woman thought.

She pulled up her coat and opened the driver's side door. She set the pizza box in the passenger seat and started the engine. Before she flipped the lights on, though, the woman paused. She settled into the moment, reflecting on what had occurred. She felt disappointed at Dino for not letting the boy get by initially. She felt like he should have been kinder to the boy. She pegged him as a racist. She decided she wouldn't order pizza from the shop again. But then she felt a wave of goodness, of gratitude, thankful to be able to help out the young boy. She wrote the story of his life in an instant... hard luck details, being short on money, his mother waiting angry and impatient in the car, family troubles... no wonder the boy didn't rush outside to gather the remaining .40 cents that were due.

As the woman pulled out of the mini-mall parking lot, she felt useful, truly useful, for the first time over the course of her long day.

In another car... after the boy told his mother about the exchange... admonitions, a threat- "Don't you ever do that again or I'll whip you good. Letting a woman like that feel good about herself, feel like she's doing something to make up for three hundred years of oppression. Hell no! Don't you ever do that again. Don't let no white woman with her nice shoes on feel any better about herself than she has to. You hear me?"

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Cleaning out a basement. Cabinets. Stacks. Piles. Detritus. Lifetimes marked by objects, by clothes and clutter... a dusty shoebox, a tape... **LECTURE 47- OCTOBER 1997**... into a player... a voice:

"Notice the rise of alcoholism, drug addiction, over-eating and obesity, depression, suicide, attention deficits, all the psychological and biological neuroses- why does the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual grow

larger with every revision? Why do population studies point to steeper and harsher trends? What about the poverty gaps, the distribution of wealth?

"And, for the sake of inclusion, can we truly declare that those who are deemed 'successful' or 'healthy' by society are truly well adjusted, healthy, integrated people? The fortune mongers, the over-achievers, the ladder climbers, the rock stars and millionaires- is there not a deep anxiety fueling their drives? Workaholics? Aren't their ranks also obsessed with relieving some relentless internal conflict, or preventing it from entering their awareness? Where is the actualized man or woman? Who is totally at peace?

"What lies at the root of our problem? There are countless theories- brain models, psychological studies, genetic tests- but I don't believe it is a question of biology or psychology. There is something more fundamental at work. On some level, sure, there are genetic predispositions to depression, to mental illness, to addiction. Yes the behavior patterns which explain psychological dysfunction are solidified in neural networks. Emotion plays a key role- I absolutely believe that humanity has become too interested in 'feeling good.' Recall the tests done, the papers published involving laboratory mice who would forego food, water, basic survival instincts reduced to nothing, when a lever was available that when pushed activated the 'pleasure centers' in the rodents' brains? When there are so many different types of levers... food on demand, sex on demand, drugs, alcohol... can you see the parallel, in our own society? Pain is nature's fundamental means of communication, but for whatever reason, modern human beings stopped tolerating its presence. We have become supporters of one cause- that which alleviates suffering.

"Society has evolved at a faster rate, thanks to technology, than our brains were built to handle. Advertisers, manufacturers, companies of all sorts know the fundamental truth about 'pleasure levers.' They know all about creating a desire, a need in the public. They know how to fulfill it, whether in a shipping package or an instant message. They know the hit only lasts for a fleeting second, and that an addictive cycle can be created, leaving the user wanting more and more, needing more and more.

"Next time you are on a bus, or a train, watch young people interact. Their phones mediate their entire social lives. They cannot relate directly to each other. They cannot connect despite every wireless network at their disposal. And on a grander scale, modern man is unable to view our relationship with the cosmos. The horizon has disappeared for modernity, the stars have vanished- we have lost touch with the heavens. Certainly these

aspects of 'nurture' are at play- we built our environments! Culture is our creation, it is a mirror that reflects back on us! We have allowed our technological advances to become armaments for the capitalist machine. We are a monetary, commodity culture. Buy. Sell. Consume. Produce.

"But I digress- nature, nurture; the psychic, the biological; culture, individual... is everything we discussed thus far merely different expressions of a more fundamental issue? Again, I believe we need to go in a different direction with our investigation as to why so few people today seem to develop into self-actualized, healthy, contented human beings.

"After years in the field, observing, studying, treating individuals with a wide range of issues, it occurred to me: when discussing options for treatment, the realm of the spirit has been too long neglected. The spirit, I know... hokey witchcraft, superstitions of dying men, fanciful myths... grant me forbearance, for the sake of argument. And ask yourself this: has mankind lost a fundamental connection along the road of progress? Or even if we never had it in the first place- which I am inclined to disagree with- are we missing an element which would allow us to be unified individually, and thus collectively? Mind, body, spirit... where has this third element been the last two-hundred years in our history?

"Let's revisit suffering. Certainly there is a pantheon of long-form explanations as to why we execute this behavior or that, why the junkie takes his first hit, why the homeless wino takes his first drink, why fast-food drive-thru's dominate the roads, but fundamentally, man suffers, and man seeks to remove the conditions which cause his suffering. But suffering is essential. The Buddha himself declared the first truth, of four, which he could surmise after lifetimes of reflection and meditation, was this: man suffers. He didn't come up with a dictum on the fundamental forces, or some mathematical construct, or comment on any scientific matters. No. He said that the first truth of all reality is man suffers. That's the whole game, *sub specie aeternitatis*. To live, for any and every man, woman, or child who has ever lived or will ever live, is to suffer. Death and taxes, as expounded by Benjamin Franklin.

"Perhaps due to technology, progress, advancement, economic success, I believe 21st century Americans are more concerned with preventing, alleviating, avoiding and destroying their suffering than any other nation, tribe, or culture that has ever assembled on the mantle of this Earth. Not only do we limit our awareness, our focus, to unnatural obsessions with 'feeling good', we are further untethered because we believe the conditions which cause our suffering exist externally. However, it can be proven

unmistakably that these conditions arise and persist inside of our minds. The Buddha eliminated desire, he fortified his mind through practice. Monks across the world still follow his prescription. Jesus Christ sacrificed himself and sanctified his pain. Selfless nuns and priests across the world follow His model of compassion. Hindus practice yoga techniques to transform their suffering. Various religions have programs and prescriptions, but at some level any well-established faith system addresses the fact of suffering and what to do with it. I do not offer religion as a solution, however. Religions are man-made systems, rooted in dogma and practice and rules established by men. Religion is our feeble attempt to standardize the life of the spirit. Spirituality is a much more inclusive, far less dangerous angle to take. And circling back to my original point, I believe modern man, in his reliance on western reductionism, his reliance on science and technology, has lost contact with an essential part of what it means to be human. Namely, the spiritual. A connection with something larger than himself. An indestructible sense of meaning and purpose. The sacred. His scope has become narrower and narrower.

"If mankind is to survive, if we are to continue, if we are to evolve, we must begin to prioritize and foster the development of our spiritual lives. We must widen the scope. It is naive to offer a panacea, but I truly believe that if spiritual development, in any form, was integrated into our culture, many of the aforementioned neuroses, conditions, and dysfunctions could be alleviated. It would require an entire restructuring of culture at every level. Altruism would become the priority on a community level. Symbiosis on a planetary level. It certainly would require us to change our economic policies, our propensity to consume and convert and waste irrespective of future generations. It may even require a tragic ending to modernity. But I hope there will be men and women left to learn from our mistakes, to take the lessons and make their lives sacred.

"There is good news though: we don't have to wait for an apocalypse. As individuals, we can take on the challenge and begin to transform within, starting right now. Maybe if enough people seriously move in a direction to foster their spiritual life- and again here, I make the distinction between the religious and the spiritual- then a critical mass might build. That is my hope. That is my personal wish, my miracle dream for mankind, for intelligent life on this planet. I don't know how it looks, or how it plays out. But our current course is unsustainable. One life might seem negligible, might seem insignificant, one man's efforts might not add up on paper- but one more person might be all it takes for the tide to shift. Maybe it is your life. Maybe you are the last piece? Even if nothing around you changes,

if nobody else follows, you will have changed. And remember: if you change, then everything around you changes, whether it wants to or not."

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Eileen walked into her sister's office.

"Anne, do you have a minute?"

Anne remained focused on a *Mechanic's Lien* form on her desk. She had set her glasses on top of the fresh manila folder, a garage builder in the northwest suburbs... a new client... a new set of demands, but a chance for another paycheck. The builder of the property had neglected to reimburse the subcontractor and the case was solid. The sum was hefty. It looked like a simple arbitration. It looked like another invoice covered for her son Daniel's college tuition bill. It looked like she would survive another month.

The older sister leaned back in her chair, rubbing her temples, "Sure, sure. I want to finish this by the afternoon... are you still planning on coming into the office tomorrow?"

When Anne looked up, she noticed gray strands in Eileen's hair, the crow's feet poking from the corner of her emerald eyes, faded irises like iced-over February windshields, that tightness across her sister's forehead... distraught. Anne's tone morphed, from business professional to lullaby thunderstorm in an instant, from an employer to a big sister... "What's up?"

Eileen had shut the door to her sister's office as she walked in. She began to cry. "It's Cecilia, she..." The rest of the words became engulfed in sobs, desperate staccato gasps... "It's Dennis... he's going to..."

Anne hired Eileen to come on part-time to help with clerking, typing up documents, organizing the computer networks... little sisters with computer skills prove to be invaluable to older sisters who run a reputable law firm but can't tell the difference between a modem and a printer. Besides, the local college was only able to offer Eileen three classes to teach last semester, and she wanted to spend more time outside her fortress-like home. A real-estate-developer-pamphlet redbrick tucked into an insipid gated-community. Money wasn't the issue. Dennis made seven figures as a VP of International Commerce for a large firm in the city. He controlled all of the family finances. He checked every credit card statement, every account balance, knew every transaction that went in and out of his fortress.

Anne passed over a box of tissues she pulled up from a desk drawer. "Alright, tell me what happened. What's wrong with Cecilia?"

Cecilia was the only daughter of Dennis and Eileen. Eighteen, smart, blonde, a cheerleader and an honor society student. Recently, Brown University had accepted her with an early admission offer. Dennis had attended Brown. Eileen had attended Northeastern State.

Eileen finished wiping her nose, "She's fine, I mean, she's fine. She was just... she went to a country music concert, over the weekend, and she got a ticket for drinking. She wasn't arrested or anything, but the ticket is for six hundred dollars, and she... neither of us can get the money out, to pay for it, without Dennis noticing. If he finds out Anne, I can't imagine..."

Anne put her hand up, gentle enough but still with a certain commanding force, a force dictating her sister to end the explanation... a perfect balance obtained after years of courtroom work, after a divorce, after raising four boys, the youngest now in his final year in college... "How much was the ticket?"

"Six hundred."

With her other hand, Anne reached for the business folder. A check book, petty cash... one, two, three, four, five, six bills... she folded them and put them in front of Eileen. "Don't worry about the money. Take care of it. But at Cecilia's graduation, explain to her why old Aunt Anne didn't put anything in her *Congratulations* card, alright?"

Eileen smiled through her moistened eyes.

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"Alright everyone. Today, big surprise- we are going to review the assigned reading from our syllabus. We missed our usual lecture time last week on account of the mid-terms being extended, so let's try to make our way through the material quickly so we can get back on track. Alright? Alright."

"Our topic, Evolutionary Psychology... alright, first off, what do we mean when we say evolutionary psychology? We mean the development of the mind, the development of the brain, taken into consideration from an evolutionary perspective. Evolutionary psychology is not a sub-discipline within the field of psychology, per se. It is not geriatric psychology, or developmental psychology- rather, evolutionary psychology is a lens that can be used to inform various branches within the discipline of psychology. What do I mean here? I mean you can look at developmental psychology, geriatric psychology,

industrial psychology- inspect them through the lens of evolutionary psychology. Alright? It is a lens that takes into consideration that evolutionary processes have sculpted the brain, the psychological mechanisms the brain carries out, and the behavior those mechanisms produce.

"So when we talk about the word 'evolutionary', what are we talking about? We are referring, of course, to Darwin, alright? We are referring to all those juicy terms from Bio 101, like species fitness, reproduction, adaptation, and of course we are primarily concerned here with natural selection- the evolutionary process, as explained by Darwin, which has been a salient theory for over 150 years. *Origin of Species* was published in 1859. Has evolutionary psychology been relevant for the same time period? Well, no. Not at all. It seems that once Darwin returned with his notes from his incendiary voyage on the *Beagle* in fact only the scientific, quote unquote, disciplines were immediately impacted. Biology was completely reconfigured. The study of plants, animals, ancient and contemporary, the study of organ systems, the study of fetal development, the study of ecology, conservation, systems interactions- a plethora of scientific disciplines were beneficiaries from the framework provided by Darwin's evolutionary theory. This idea that nature selected for traits, selected for behaviors, behaviors that would prove to be successful in the environment in which the organism was a part of- in other words, his work precipitated a revolution across various quote unquote scientific disciplines.

"But for whatever reason, the human sciences, the social sciences if you will, did not incorporate the framework of natural selection or evolution as a method of interpretation or modeling. In a famous book, famous in the sense of the controversy surrounding it, called, *The Adapted Mind*, a team of anthropologists and psychologists proposed that the basic framework of psychology, from a utilitarian perspective to interact with quote unquote other scientific disciplines, had been limited during this period from Darwin until the late 20th century. They labeled this framework as the 'standard social science model.' Alright? The SSSM. A mouthful, right? What the authors said, basically, was that while the natural sciences, the 'hard sciences,' were prospering, psychology itself was limited in its view. It was limited by the SSSM. So what is the standard model? Consequently, as a note, we'll refer to the SSSM as the 'standard model' moving forward.

"Many of the ideas behind the standard model are reflected in a paradigm we have reviewed and studied very closely- remember behaviorism? Alright. Remember Doctor Skinner? Doctor Skinner said forget thinking, forget symbolism, forget complex emotional structures- behavior is a result entirely of conditioning. Animals are conditioned by their environment to behave in

certain ways, reinforced through experience, whether it be positive or negative. And consequently, every single observed behavior an organism, including psychology's favorite organism of study- the human being- displays patterns which be interpreted along those lines. Receive positive feedback- continue to behave in a certain way. Receive negative feedback- cease that behavior. I'm laying out a very simplified view here, alright, but it is a rule-based system that operates along those line. And behaviorism emphasized the importance of culture, of shaping, of socialization, in that the human brain is conditioned by its environment to behave a certain way. Individuals, subjects, displayed different behaviors because their socialization processes were different. This was considered one of the core components of the standard model.

"Another core component of the standard model is the idea that the human brain, and consequently the development of mental functions, arise from essentially a blank slate. A *tabula rasa*, if you are interested in the Latin. There are no tendencies inborn within a human being. There are no essential instincts, if you will, to compare us with other animals. The human brain develops as a holistic, general purpose mechanism- the brain is an all-in-one computer. Input comes in, through perception, through the environment, the input is processed, and the output comes out as behavior. There is one learning mechanism, one program, which handles different types of situations. Standard model, alright?

"As an aside, it is important to remember that while Doctor Skinner and several of his theories contribute to the standard model, Skinner himself never proposed or even associated himself with the model. The SSSM name didn't even formally come about until 1992. Doctor Skinner passed away in 1990. I don't want you to take the idea that Skinner's career consisted of promoting the SSSM. He wasn't even able to defend himself from being attached to the standard model when *The Adapted Mind* came out.

"But when *The Adapted Mind* was published, and as the evolutionary perspective has since been infused into multiple realms across multiple fields of psychology, the consequences for the standard model have been negative. Many aspects of the standard model have been debunked, if you will. Let's start with the concept of *tabula rasa*. If the human mind were truly a blank slate, how could a human being ever respond to the environment? How could our first response occur? If there were no inherent rules, for how to respond, what could precipitate our first responses to certain situations? A case of the chicken before the egg, if you will. Another key development was the understanding of the interaction between nature and nurture. Psychology was primarily concerned with the nurture aspect as the 20th century rolled along.

Behaviorism. Culturalization. Learned patterns, informed by observation, sculpted by the environment. There was very little sense of how genetics, of how pre-dispositions, contribute to human behavior. There was a rift between psychology and biology, where biologists preferred an evolutionary explanation, and psychologists preferred to identify cultural and social influences. And finally, the idea of the mind being a single, general purpose tool- it has been established quite clearly that the mind instead is a collection of many modules, of many computers, that have evolved to solve specific problems. These problems are essentially related- to? You guessed it- reproduction and survival. Problems that Darwin was concerned with, that evolutionary models are concerned with.

"So here we are, now, today, and evolutionary psychology has become the dominant paradigm, a primary lens, that affects the study of all sorts of human behavior. Psychology, as a field, has shifted from asking questions related to mechanism, to now asking questions related to function. Mechanism vs. function. "The 'how' vs. the 'why.' Alright?

"Now let's consider an example: 'social anxiety.' Alright. That is our behavior. Now let's examine the behavior from the lens of trying to understand it as a function- a function specifically related to adaptation, selected by pressures of reproduction or survival. Alright? Social anxiety, everyone familiar with the term, the idea? Anyone ever get nervous before? Good. Of course. Now previously, social anxiety might be explained by learned behavior. It might be explained by a child learning anxious behaviors from a parent, or a sibling. It might explain the mechanism of those behaviors through conditioning, through explanations like being reserved or shy may in fact render more attention from a parent, or from an important individual in that person's life. Standard model, alright? Explanations derived from learned behaviors, from conditioning, from a presumption that there is no inherent predisposition.

"Now let's try to focus our understanding of social anxiety from an evolutionary perspective. What comes to mind? How could social anxiety serve an individual from a biological perspective in terms of reproduction, fitness, et cetera? What if we consider that social anxiety functions to motivate an individual to maintain status in a group, to maintain position in a hierarchy. The increase of blood pressure, the increase in adrenaline- one the individual is confronted by the group- the behavior serves to focus the individual into his/her context in a group. A hyper-awareness of sorts. And there is an adaptive aspect to social anxiety. It drives the individual to perform- to adapt within a group system, to present one's self as a viable candidate for reproduction, to members of the opposite sex. That behavior

may have been enforced by learned behavior, it may have developmental components, but the fundamental function of social anxiety is illuminated when it is examined within this evolutionary perspective.

"Does everybody understand how framing the question around adaptive problems, as opposed to arbitrary sub-fields like developmental or social psychology, offers a more robust explanation and helps eliminate boundaries within various branches? Evolutionary psychology really offers us a meta-perspective.

"So you may be thinking to yourself- 'Professor, that's all fine and well- but social anxiety isn't really all that positive. In fact extreme forms of social anxiety represent hallmark behaviors of many different psychological disorders.' And you would be right. In some cases, the behavior of social anxiety becomes maladaptive. So our new question: why does social anxiety become a full-blown neurosis? Because a little social anxiety isn't bad. It motivates an athlete to practice before a big game. It motivates a professor to prepare his notes before a lecture. There are benefits, certainly, to be found from the experience of anxiety related to being in a social situation. But when the anxiety becomes debilitating, say when a person becomes agoraphobic and refuses to leave his or her home- what we are seeing is an evolved mechanism failing to function as it was designed to.

"Let's remember that psychological adaptations, these modules within the human mind, have been sculpted by ancient environments. They have been selected for over the course of thousands of years. From the plains of Africa which was home to the earliest tribes of *homo sapiens*, early man, some thirty thousand years ago, were certainly different environments than a college lecture hall. The Coliseum in Rome may not have been that different than a football stadium on Saturday afternoon, but you can see in many critical ways how our modern environments differ from our ancestral environments. And here is a key point: many of our current neurological, psychological modules were perfected in ancestral environments. Now that these modules are faced with a modern environment, with completely different considerations- well, issues can arise. Agoraphobia was the example we used. If we can understand how these ancestral modules operate in modern environments, we can ask better questions related to the treatment of maladaptive behaviors. We can observe how individuals display differences in strategies for adaptation, and we can begin to ask why these differences occur. There is an entirely new framework to operate within that the evolutionary perspective provides.

"Let's explore this idea of ancestral environments versus modern environments. Ask yourself this question: when is the last time you've had

to hunt for a meal? When's the last time you had to defend your family against a hostile tribe? When's the last time you had to migrate due to the weather? When's the last time you had to develop tools related to survival, weapons and flints and water-collecting apparatuses? For most of you, the answer is never. You have never faced these environmental stresses, stresses related specifically to survival. Remember evolution- natural selection- the force that drives the organization and development of biology- it all boils down to survival and reproduction.

"And as human beings in the 21st century, we simply do not face the same environmental stresses related to survival that drove human development for tens of thousands of years. The world has changed a great deal in the last twenty years. Think of how pervasive the internet has become in our society, how embedded we are, as a species, into the idea of being 'online.' The last hundred years before that, there was not nearly as much change. The last thousand years before that- even less. And finally, the last ten thousand years before that- is it clear to see what I'm getting at? Between 50,000 BCE and 5,000 BCE, not all that much changed in human environments. *Homo sapiens* were nomadic, lived in small communities, employed primal tools. They told stories by campfires. The technology did not change much. The advancement and organization did not change much. For tens of thousands of years mankind was, for lack of a better word, 'stuck' in a very static period in human history. But then between 5,000 BCE and 500 BCE- you have the emergence of complex human civilizations, increased travel and commerce between groups of humans. Things began to change. The environment changed. And 500 BCE and 1500 AD- more change. Faster. Technology. Empires evolve. The world gets smaller. Between 1500 AD and 1800 AD- significant change. Market economies. Industrialization. Political philosophy. Faster and faster. And still now, in our current society, with the spread of the internet, the use of computers, the boom in technology. Is my point a bit more clear? The changing structure of human environments- from huts to apartment high rises- is occurring at a much more rapid rate than it has, historically. If we could plot change over time the curve would appear to be exponential. And this curve seems to continue to be accelerating, steepening- to the point where in even five years the world of today may be completely unrecognizable. Fifteen years ago, nobody owned a 'smart' phone. Can you even imagine that world?

"And as a result of this rapid change in human environments- primarily for our Western society- mankind has seen an abundance of resources, an 'easier' life thanks in part to the advances in technology. To put it simply, from a standpoint focused purely on survival, it is easier to live as a 21st century American than it ever was in high plains Africa thirty thousand years ago.

And as modernity brings with her creature comforts, the human mind still consists of primal modules that are wired for survival and competition. Do you see a potential disparity here? Do you see how these behaviors, like social anxiety, put to use in a modern environment may now become maladaptive?

"And now, if you'll allow me a slight digression- or a tangent perhaps- by this point in our time together you are all aware that my research deals with the maladaptive behavior of addiction. And primarily my research deals with the social aspects of addiction. Many of my colleagues are exploring the neural pathways, the reward-functions of the limbic system, the physical, biological networks involved in the formation and strengthening of an addictive pathway- which is critical, of course, to understanding addiction- but my work is more centered on examining the problem from the individual, rather than a cellular level. My work is concerned with how psychological behavior modules, when they are not forced to operate in high-stress, survival situations, but rather operate in our modern environments, how these modules can trigger something like addictive behavior.

"With that let's pause. Let's take a moment. Are there any ideas, questions- anything in regards to the topics we have covered so far?"

The room ballooned with an unwavering silence. A laptop was set in front of each student. A cell phone rested next to each computer, or moved in the hands of an undergraduate. Professor Ellroy searched for eyes. He saw none. But then, from the front row, to the left, a hand raised.

"Please, go ahead."

A young woman coughed into her fist, then offered, "Well, it's interesting... like, in relation to addiction, like... it's like these modules of the brain that had been wired to face harsh environments, to solve problems in high-stress survival situations... it's like now, because life is so much easier, those modules needed something to do... it's like they got bored. So in order to compensate, it's like becoming addicted to a substance, or to an activity, or to whatever... it's like it creates a high-stress situation for the brain to perform against. Like the brain is creating a problem of its own, when the environment doesn't provide one."

"Very well said. And very much in line with how I'm approaching my research. I enjoy how you framed that, Miss Chen. That is certainly taking an evolutionary approach to understanding the 'why' of a problem like addiction. Thank you. Anybody else?" Miss Chen raised her left hand again. The typing of fingers on keyboards... the gulping of large cappuccinos... "Yes Miss Chen?"

Miss Chen adjusted her glasses. "Another way to think about it, is like... since the survival modules didn't have any work to do, they still had to come out in other way... it's almost like a conservation of energy thing... where that energy had to come out, like, somewhere else... that energy had to displace somewhere... so human beings get wrapped up in all these different addictions... religion, fitness, technology, social media, other people, drugs, alcohol, sex... and that is dependent on the personal adaptations, or whatever you had said. Those are like the individual differences. But on a species level... there is this huge tendency to become addicted, which is explained by looking at it from this evolutionary perspective."

Professor Ellroy leaned on his desk and the legs creaked. He considered his weight... his girth... his own addiction to food, an adaptive preference... his addiction to tobacco, cigarettes... Miss Chen's words provided a sense of ease... they almost relieved him of culpability.

The room remained neutral.

In her mousy voice, squeaking, "Professor?"

"Yes- yes, of course Miss Chen. Very astute analysis. On the whole, I would have to agree with you in that human beings, being human in modernity, seem to have a proclivity towards very addictive tendencies. Your ideas fit with what many researchers have proven to be true. Is everyone else following? Any other comments or ideas here?"

Silence. A room full of screen. A room full of social anxiety. A room full of teenagers and young adults born into a world of instant access, the most privileged of the most privileged- the wealthiest, the safest, the easiest set of circumstances compared to any generation that had ever gone before in human history. The irony was lost. The capacity for self-reflection, for critical analysis- unless it was posted to a social media feed, unless it appeared as a result from a search engine... silence.

Professor Ellroy reflected on his own experience, on classes long since past-kids who used to raise their hands, debate, challenge him, push the conversation- engaged, alive. He stood in front of a room of nearly a hundred students. Their minds were elsewhere. Their thoughts- who knows. He could not understand them. The old man could not relate. The world had changed too quickly. He couldn't keep up. At least Miss Chen was there to bail him out, to provide some glimmer of hope, a reason for continuing on... but Professor Ellroy realized that soon enough even the Miss Chen's of the world would be subsumed by the group, the collective, the amorphous glob of post-modern teenage anonymity...

Miss Chen looked up to Professor Ellroy who gazed disconsolately over the tops of heads, hooded sweatshirts and ballcaps, combed hair and unkempt... over-caffeinated psychology majors glancing furtive towards walls, along corners of the large room, beige, fluorescent shadows... a clock in the rear of the lecture hall above the EXIT doors blinked in a digital red... a TA sat in the last row convinced he wasn't and never had been addicted to anything, satisfied and rationalized all the while twitch-tapping his foot through the lecture, checking his cell phone every forty-three seconds (on average)... blinking... 10:29 AM.

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Buckled in tight to her car seat, Morgan "Midgey" Browning focused her gemstone baby-blues in a shimmer out the window while Mommy and Daddy discussed a tip Daddy left for the waiter at dinner. Mrs. Browning thought Mr. Browning should have left more than the requisite 15%. Mr. Browning disagreed. Morgan couldn't understand their argument, and soon found herself absorbed in a world of hotels and surf shops and pizza stands lit up along Gulf Drive. A satisfied grin elevated her chubby cheeks, anticipating the climb up Ocean Bridge, across the mainland to Treasure Island, where the Brownings were spending their spring vacation. Tiki bars, palm trees, pink flamingos, yellow-tooth'd crocodiles... families, couples, other kids laughing and playing on the boardwalk after sunset... Morgan's eyes were bombarded by images, too fast for her to form any conclusions, to make any judgments, to offer any deep insights... pleasantly stimulated.

She curled her bangs with a tiny index finger. She sucked her thumb. Grinning.

But before the family vehicle made its ascent up Ocean Bridge, Morgan's young eyes witnessed an odd exchange... odd because it did not fit with the boardwalk's scene... the characters were so different, the mood, the dark side-street where it occurred... a young woman, holding a baby in her arms, being pulled at and then struck by a man with tatoo'd arms, no shirt sleeves... the window was rolled up, so Morgan could not hear the woman screaming or the child crying, but nonetheless the four-year-old Browning girl could sense pain. She felt uneasy. The sense of carefree fun vanished off her face.

Her mind processed simple facts: babies were pretty, angelic creatures that required assiduous devotion, very soft kisses and kind whispers. Maybe even the occasional nursery song to help them calm down. And mommies were beautiful, mommies were queens of the universe who required the protection and love of daddies. You couldn't hit mommies. You couldn't upset tiny babies. Those were the rules.

After Morgan caught the public display of domestic abuse, that terrible exchange down that dark street by that bad man... after seeing a mommy being hurt, a baby being mistreated, the toddler knew the rules were being broken. She knew that she needed to tell her own Mommy and Daddy. It wasn't good to be a tattletale, she remembered that from the family Christmas party when she told on her cousin Katie, but this was too important. Mommy told her that she could always talk to Mommy and Daddy about something, as long as she told the truth. Morgan had to tell Mommy about this.

"Mommy."

Mrs. Browning turned her head around to face the back seat. "Yes, baby?"

"We need to stop. I saw something."

"What do you mean, baby?"

"I saw something bad."

Instinctive, Mrs. Browning reached back and held her daughter's hand. "What did you see?"

Morgan began to cry. "I saw a bad man. I saw a bad man being mean to a mommy and a baby. He punched... he punched them..."

Mrs. Browning looked over to her husband and at the same time gripped her daughter, firm. "Where baby? Where did you see the bad man?"

"Just now."

Mr. Browning offered "Was it on a television show Midgey?"

Tears, her cheeks reddening... "No. I saw it. Out the window."

"On the street Midgey?"

"Yes."

Mrs. Browning lowered her voice, "Maybe we should stop, Kevin."

"Stop and do what?"

"I don't know." Mrs. Browning turned back to her daughter. "Show me what the bad man did baby. Show Mommy what he did."

Morgan's tiny fist thrust into the air. The safety belt restricted her motion, but her pointed finger was clear enough. She grimaced while she swung her arm behind her shoulder, pointing still. "Back there!" Then she resumed crying, sobbing now... "He was a bad man Mommy."

"I know baby, I know. Where was it? Was it on the street?"

The little girl shook her head up and down.

Back to her husband. "Kevin."

Not breaking his concentration, the road ahead... "What?"

"We should do something. She's upset. She saw something..."

"What are we supposed to do? I'm not a cop. We don't even know what she saw. It could have been anything."

"But what if..."

"I'm not law enforcement, Keri. What can we do? I will call the cops if you want me to. I'll tell them our toddler saw a bad man out the window. That literally is all I can do. I'm not turning around. There isn't even anywhere to turn, the median..." the father's voice trailed off, frustrated.

Mrs. Browning turned back to her daughter. She would express her dissatisfaction for her husband's pithy remark, but not now. Now she had to attend to Morgan. "It's okay baby. It was probably like a bad dream, okay? Sometimes we see things, but they aren't exactly what we think. Sometimes..." the mother struggled to find the right explanation... "I promise, no one will hurt you, okay? There are no bad men here, okay? Mommy promises."

Morgan didn't understand. She wasn't asleep. This wasn't a nightmare. This wasn't a monster, or a scary ghost, or a commercial from the television gone wrong in her imagination. The girl knew what she saw. She knew it was bad. She knew a man was breaking the rules. She wanted the bad man to be punished, to get a spanking. Nobody should break the rules. "Mommy, there was a bad man. He was..." The crying settled down, but the little girl was still visibly upset.

"It's okay baby. I promise. Look at Mommy. It's okay, alright?" Mrs. Browning rubbed her daughter's blonde hair, then her cheek, and continued to watch the girl's expression... in an instant, the young mother's mind shifted... a conversation, maybe six months before... "the naked game"... a babysitter, a girl that the Holzmans had recommended to the Brownings... a high school girl,

cheerleader type, nice, bubbly... harmless... a charity gala... the next day, Morgan had told Mommy about the "naked game"... she pointed to where the babysitter touched her... she was shy, scared... private parts... Mr. Browning wrote it off immediately as "kids' stuff"... Mrs. Browning's uncle, a parish priest, a trained psychologist from an Ivy League school, reaffirmed Mr. Browning's position... "active imaginations"... "taboo sexuality issues"... "Keri, I've studied developmental issues like this. Kids test their parents. They try to figure out how to bring up conversations about private parts, about sexuality, about all of the naughty things they aren't supposed to talk about. It was probably something she heard. It's normal."

Mr. Browning could sense the unease brewing in his wife. He checked the rearview window. He made eye contact with his daughter. "It's okay Midgey. I promise. There are no bad men here. We are all safe, okay? Tomorrow we are going to swim with the dolphins. Doesn't that sound fun? We can pet the dolphins. Isn't that cool, Midgey?"

Mommy and Daddy watched their young daughter... waiting.

Paralyzed.