

15 Stories

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Liquid Calling

Michael Morzeny put his hands into the pockets of his overcoat and hugged the fabric tighter around his body. The winter wind hurried down Columbus Avenue and the hem of his coat flapped around his knees letting little pockets of cold waft up to invade the warmth his body had spent so much time preparing and storing around his torso.

With a bitter squeeze of his hands, his knuckles now getting cold, Morzeny bowed his square shoulders to the wind and continued walking. At sixty-seven years old the New York winters bothered Morzeny more than he cared to admit. And, although no doctor would agree with him, he was positive that the first faint hints of arthritis tweaking through his hands were made worse by the cold.

At every cross street the setting sun flashed through to the avenue in shades of crisp pink and red. Morzeny didn't want to be working right now. But these outings were the price he paid for having a hybrid job, owning buildings and brokering as many of his own leases as possible.

When he had first come to the city he had been told that he needed a job, not for income, his providers took care of that, but for his own sanity. Something to keep him going. He had asked for something in real estate and had never bothered to wonder what other paths he might have taken. He had always been able to focus to the point of blindness. It helped him in every aspect of his work.

He arrived at the brownstone building housing the apartment he was to show tonight. His building was tucked into a short row of buildings that squatted over the street,

their steps reaching towards the curb like stunted growths. More to prove to himself that he could do it than anything else, Morzeny took the front steps two at a time.

Immediately upon passing through the inner door his mood began to improve. The natural warmth of being inside let his hands relax and as he began to mount the steps, one at a time, his mind wandered.

Tonight he would visit with Red. He smiled. Red was the super that ran two of his larger buildings. Red had been with him from the beginning, both of them coming to the city innocent and naïve. Morzeny had looked for something in real estate. Red had followed. It was a strange relationship they had. Although both were roughly the same age Red held a definite sense of superiority over Morzeny. What Red said went. Yet this superiority was seldom used, so that more often than not what came about was that whatever Morzeny did, Red followed.

After this appointment it would be a good night with no work to speak of, nothing but a good bottle of liquor of Red's choosing, a nice warm apartment, and two friends of forty years.

Morzeny laughed as he rounded a landing. He would not stay too late, though. It wasn't that he didn't want to spend time with his friend, but it had been realized a long time ago that these nights where a bottle of something was split were best ended when the bottle was finished. Otherwise Red would be bound to aggravate Morzeny by dragging out his collection of tabloids and ranting about the headlines in them; "Freak Outbreak of Rabies in Downstate New York," "Man Drowned by Own Tap Water," "Too Much Cooking With Aluminum Foil Can Destroy Your Brain."

It was either the newspapers or Monopoly. When drunk enough Red often broke out his battered Monopoly board game and began playing games alone. He would play a few

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different pieces and go round and round as if he wanted to beat the game itself.

Morzeny ran his hand over the thick uneven paint coating the wooden railing of the stairs. Red could get embarrassing when too drunk, and Morzeny was sure that if he ever had the chance to see himself through sober eyes after a half a bottle of liquor, that sight would be just as embarrassing.

He paused at the next landing. Taking the steps two at a time outside and giving himself no time to rest was now starting to take its toll and his heart rate was starting to increase. It was sad, only two flights up. All the work he put into his body and it still was beginning to fail him. He forced himself to slow down; this wasn't a workout, those were contained to the gym, he didn't need to push himself. At the next landing his smile began to slip away. There was another reason he wouldn't stay late at Red's tonight.

There was Joyce. Morzeny had married Joyce at some point in his past. Looking back it was hard to remember when; she was a part of his life now, like indoor plumbing and the polio vaccine. Romance had not been a part of their relationship, they had married because it seemed like a good idea to both of them. Although this was never spoken aloud it was rather clear that both understood it. From either one of their perspective things just seemed to happen like magic. Joyce bought an apartment for them and furnished it and Morzeny was mystified because he had never agreed to this, but also nonchalant because clearly it had to be done and he didn't particularly care where they lived. Likewise, one day Joyce had come home to find the library converted into a home gym, and she had not cared because the library had always been one of "Michael's rooms," in her mind and, thus, it made no difference to her. Neither one could quite explain the birth of their two children.

It had only been in recent years that Morzeny had started really wondering about his relationship with Joyce. It had started as a convenience for both of them and they both had stayed out of each other's way. Ten, twenty, thirty years earlier the word "love" would never have entered into the equation for Morzeny. But recently...recently he had started wondering. After all, how long could you live with someone without actually wanting to push them away, how long could you go on waking up next to them every day and going to sleep next to them every night without ever once rejecting that idea before you had to acknowledge that maybe something else was afoot? Forty years of doing anything, even living an illusion, were bound to twist things around so, at the very least, what was illusion and what was real became foggy.

There were signs. Recently the magic of "things just happening" had broken down. Morzeny had slowly had to give up most of the things he loved to keep his body running well. All the foods he enjoyed had faded into memories and along with them his favorite wines had slipped out of his daily routine, then out of his weekly routine. The home gym had appeared. The long hours at work had faded. Everything in the refrigerator was steamed mush or bottled water. There were only two things left, and Morzeny would never give them up, he would hold onto them forever because they were so much a part of him that if they went he wouldn't be entirely sure what it was he was continuing on for. Those two things were the nights drinking with Red, and smoking. Not to say both of those hadn't been cut back drastically, but they were still there.

The subtle shift in his relationship with Joyce, the lack of the magic of nothing, had become apparent with the issue of smoking. They had fought. For the first time ever. She had wanted him to quit for good. And they had fought. Morzeny didn't know what that had been all about. It had happened

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only a few weeks ago. It was possible that forty years of pretending had resulted in reality, it was possible love was where you found it, and it was possible she was worried about her financial status now that they were both growing older. Morzeny finished climbing the last flight of stairs and reached his hand into his pocket to feel his pack of cigarettes as he walked along the short hallway.

It didn't seem like she was worried about him for the money. For starters she had her own money, and he had filled out a will and had life insurance. No, Morzeny was sure something had happened, something had shifted, she had actually started caring about him. She wanted him to quit smoking and it was as plain as that.

Morzeny stopped at the third door on the floor, his body looking large under the bulk of his overcoat, his silver hair cropped close to his skull, his knuckled hand rummaging in his pocket for his ring of keys. She wanted him to quit smoking because she cared. The question was, would he quit? Or had the illusion broken down more for her than it had for him. Had he actually grown to love her?

Morzeny found his ring of keys, unlocked the apartment door, and walked inside. A quick glance behind the door, around the one bedroom studio, and into the bathroom showed the apartment was empty.

Morzeny knew he had no chance of renting this apartment. Not during winter. But he had taken this job to keep busy, not for the income, and he felt it was important to remember that.

The problem was that in winter the radiators in Manhattan were used to generate steam heat. Or, more accurately, the pipes were opened that allowed steam generated by the boiler to be piped into apartments to provide heat. The steam ran through the radiator coils, heating the air and condensing into water as it progressed. The water then ran back through

the same pipes to the boiler. Normally the steam traveled through the top of the pipe and the water ran along the bottom.

Morzeny walked to the far wall.

But if the pipe wasn't pitched right. If the angle of the pipes wasn't correct or the building had sagged over time altering the original angles.

He ran his hand over the smooth plaster wall.

If water was allowed to pool in a flat spot and the steam built up behind it.

He heard a low knocking coming from the wall. Only a few low pings and then all of a sudden the wall seemed to be alive, like some great giant were standing behind it wailing on the pipes with a true steel hammer swinging with all of his might. Unholy clang after unholy clang rang out as Morzeny took three quick steps back and put his hands over his ears, always caught off guard by the intensity of the sound, always astounded that covering his ears with his hands only served to make his hands vibrate crazily.

Then it was over. The pipe had cleared. The steam was through. And the pipe would slowly begin filling up, water pooling in the low spot until it had to be cleared once more.

He would never rent this apartment. Not in the winter.

Morzeny walked through the basement hallway toward Red's apartment. His overcoat was off now. The winter night was far behind him as was the possible client who had never shown. Red lived in the basement unit of one of the larger buildings that Morzeny owned. Morzeny had offered him other apartments. Red had refused. Red said he wanted to live down in the bowels of the buildings he helped run.

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Morzeny knocked on Red's door. He waited briefly. Then he knocked again a few more times. He heard the bolt being drawn back and the door swung open. Red was standing there with his ruddy face and wispy hair. Morzeny smelled alcohol and knew that Red had started without him. He looked past Red into the apartment and saw the small wooden table, looking more like a spool for cable turned on end, on it was a bottle of liquor sitting next to a bottle of water. He smiled and started forward when Red held a hand up.

"We have sprung a leak," Red said. Morzeny sagged.

"Now," Red went on, walking with a slight wobble back into the apartment, the liquor inside of him placing odd emphases on his words, "I believe you are supposed to—"

"I'll handle it," Morzeny said, interrupting to save Red the time and effort needed to explain that he was drunk. Morzeny's voice was calm and accepting, all complaining and cursing about his ruined night had come and gone inside his head in a matter of seconds. He was back at work now. "Just give me the name and address."

Leaks were the worst.

Morzeny had changed. His overcoat wasn't suitable to this work. He didn't go so far as to borrow a pair of Red's overalls, though. He felt they made him look more like a train conductor than a repairman.

He stepped out of the elevator into the long hallway of a large apartment building. His tools swung against his hips as he moved. He looked first one way, then the other, the hallway stretching out in one long line of identical doors, overhead fluorescent lights and softly patterned carpet. The hallway was empty. The building was asleep. He glanced down at the paper in his hand and then began to move.

He stopped in front of an apartment door and rang the bell. Rather quickly there was some noise from within. The person on the other side hadn't been sleeping.

Morzeny looked tired under the humming lights above him. "Mister," he glanced down at the slip of paper, "Hume?" There was no sound from behind the door. "Mr. Hume, is there a problem with your water? There have been some problems in the building and I need to check some of your pipes." It was late. But Morzeny had to get inside. Leaks were the worst. Now he looked tired and old under the lights. The sound of a chain being unlatched and a bolt sliding came from the door. It opened.

"There's a leak?" Mr. Hume asked. He was an angular man, his long face making him look almost emaciated, all bones and skin.

"Right over your head, actually," Morzeny said.

Hume opened the door and Morzeny stepped inside. The entrance hallway was dark; ten yards ahead there was a turn with light coming from around the corner, most likely the master bedroom was that way. Directly ahead, where the hallway turned, was a door, most likely the bathroom. As his eyes adjusted Morzeny could tell there was an opening to the left. Living room and kitchen. "Could we get some light?" he asked.

Hume looked him over carefully. Morzeny knew it was never comfortable letting a stranger into your home. He did his best to look non-threatening. Hume nodded and began turning on light switches as he walked down the hallway. Morzeny quickly gathered that his original guesses to the layout were right. He glanced in each room, eyes scanning the walls and corners, smiling at Hume, trying not to be obtrusive but needing to make sure the leak was not spreading. "We'll be done in a second," Morzeny said reassuringly. "I need to look at all the rooms, no telling where it might come through.

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Then of course I'll want to look at your kitchen and bathroom."

Mr. Hume hovered over Morzeny as he examined every room. Then Morzeny repeated, "Just the pipes left."

Mr. Hume's eyes took one last run over this sixty-seven year old man who had been forced to come into his apartment in the middle of the night, who was only trying to do his job. He sighed, then smiled for the first time, "Of course." He turned around and began to lead Morzeny down the hall. Mr. Hume was finally relaxed. Morzeny had been waiting for this.

In one fluid motion his hand slid into his tool belt and came out holding a modified syringe, he took one, two, three quick steps, closing the distance between him and Mr. Hume and his other hand came up and slipped into Mr. Hume's hair, yanking it, wanting to startle him. Mr. Hume did the only thing anyone could do in that position: act surprised and let his head be pulled back to avoid the pain of his hair being pulled. With the same fluidity Morzeny's hand brought the modified syringe up and with a pop the injection went into Hume's neck and then Morzeny was stepping back. The whole thing had taken four seconds.

Morzeny reached a hand to his wristwatch and pressed a button, starting a timer.

Morzeny was completely in control and needed to maintain that. This was what his training had taught him. The surprise would do a lot to subdue the victim, as well as the shock of having a foreign substance suddenly injected into their body. And a proper first appraisal of the subject was important. But the control had to be maintained.

"You have been injected," Morzeny said, his voice commanding, "with a viral zoonotic disease. Don't bother fighting. Don't bother struggling. The first wave of paralysis will make this impossible at any rate." Morzeny watched

Hume's body struggle to remain standing in the hallway almost as if his words were causing it to happen instead of the injection itself. "Following the first slight paralysis comes pain as the nerve endings begin to come back to life and the muscles overcompensate after being shut down," and Hume was no longer slouching against the wall because his muscles weren't working correctly, he was slouching against the wall because the pain was making it difficult to stand. His hand slid along the drywall, his feet stumbling forward, a gasp then a groan as he fell to his knees. "The first wave of paralysis and pain is the shortest. They get worse. More intense." Mr. Hume turned and the relief on his face made it obvious that the first wave had passed. Then came the anger, quite on cue. Here was where Morzeny's training was important. With another victim he might have applied handcuffs during the first wave, but he liked to test himself and he was sure he had Hume read correctly.

"Stop," Morzeny ordered, and Mr. Hume stopped as told, the anger becoming confusion. "I will repeat: it only gets worse. And attacking me will only guarantee that you will never receive the antidote." There was no antidote. This was a lie. But Morzeny had learned in his training that the idea of an antidote could be helpful.

Now Hume's face crumbled in fear, his brain racing back over and over the last few minutes, the discomfort of paralysis, the wracking pain, like every one of his muscles were being ripped apart by claws, and now a strange and suddenly overwhelming thirst. Hume almost broke right then but something inside of him came alive and Morzeny could tell that he would resist for awhile. Hume wouldn't get physical, Morzeny could see that, but prying information out of him would be more difficult than Morzeny had hoped at first.

Morzeny sighed. He looked at his wristwatch. Ten seconds. "I will repeat myself in more common terms." He

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walked over to Hume who was crumbling against the wall. Morzeny got in close, made sure his eye contact was strong. “Now listen hard and see if this makes sense. You have been injected with a weaponized strain of rabies. This only gets worse. You will tell me everything you know about poisoned drinking water and you will tell me the name of everyone you might have told.” He looked at his watch as the sound of Hume twitching and gasping filled the hall. Good. He had the timing of the waves now. But it was still going to be a long night. His knees were beginning to hurt as he crouched next to Hume and he softly cursed himself for not performing the injection in a room where he might have found a seat instead of here in the empty hallway. Going to get a chair now would seem weak. He looked up and saw that Hume was in the middle of wave two and was, obviously, in no way paying attention to him. Morzeny let his face fall, the dread of the next few hours playing over it.

Leaks were the worst.

Three hours later Morzeny was on the phone in Hume’s kitchen. His voice was softer, more scared, one would never match the voice to the silver haired gentlemen it was coming from.

“Because Mr. Hume said you were the only person I could trust,” Morzeny was saying. A slight waver, perfectly pitched gave the impression that he was barely holding in his terror. “No, we can’t meet there,” Morzeny went on. “Because I don’t trust you, that’s why.” Morzeny rested his hand on Hume’s counter, his fingers tapping as he waited. “Mr. Smith? Mr. Smith I will not meet there. No. *No*.” The voice of Mr. Smith resumed, slowly being guided towards the options Morzeny had decided were acceptable before he had

even placed the call. “You want me to pick a place? But I wouldn’t even know where—” More talking. Morzeny waited. “Okay, okay. I think I know a place. But I don’t like this.” More talking. Then Morzeny gave an address. Then he hung up.

He walked into the hallway and looked down at Hume’s body sprawled out on the cheap parquet floor. Two buttons had popped on his shirt at one point when he had begun ripping at his clothes during one of the waves. The drywall around the body was cracked, small impressions forced into it. At one point Hume’s back had arched hard enough to drive a hole in the wall with the back of his head. On the floor was an overturned glass of water, brought over from the sink by Morzeny as an offering to combat the inevitable parching thirst. Hume had spilled the water all over his own face when a wave had hit right after he had earned the water. He had been so close, yet unable to actually force his muscles to deliver the water to his mouth. The water mixed with the saliva that usually ran down the victim’s face towards the end when swallowing became either difficult or impossible.

Morzeny walked through the apartment shutting out the lights. He walked past Hume’s body down the hall towards the door. He took one look back, then turned off the last light and stepped out into the long hallway of apartment doorways.

Morzeny stood in the empty apartment, waiting. His overcoat was folded neatly on the small counter in the kitchenette. He flexed his hands, testing them for any pain. He walked into the bathroom and looked himself over one more time, making sure nothing on his person could possibly hint at the last few hours spent with Hume.

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The buzzer sounded. Morzeny pushed the button, spoke into the intercom, heard Smith's voice answering back and let him in.

Morzeny decided to continue acting afraid. The choice of this apartment was starting to seem like a mistake, it had been on his mind since he had been here earlier in the evening, but he should have realized that an empty apartment raised warning flags. He could tell the truth; that might work. He was in real estate, this was an apartment he showed often, he knew it was empty, he knew there was no connection, he knew it was safe. That might work.

And when he was gone there were hundreds of brokers he let show this apartment. Any link to him and a random freak death from rabies was...well the freak rabies death usually threw most investigations off. That and the pain were the main reasons the shot had been developed.

There was a knock at the door. Morzeny reminded himself that he was acting scared then noticed that the chain was undone. He cursed himself for missing that and silently slid it into place. The knock came again.

"Smith?" Morzeny shouted through the door. He looked through the peephole and was surprised to see that Smith was young, maybe in his mid-twenties, with scraggly blond hair. As Morzeny watched, Smith's head swiveled nervously to look up and down the short hallway before he answered.

"Yeah, it's me, you going to let me in?"

Morzeny smiled. Hume had only given up this one name and Smith was clearly going to be an easy project. His night with Red was done, but at least Joyce would have no reason to notice anything strange when he got home unless he reeked of smoke, in which case another bizarre fight might break out.

Morzeny held off a few moments longer, then unchained and unlocked the door noisily. Smith came in with a thick

coat in his hand. A green hooded sweatshirt remained underneath. “Look,” Smith started.

Morzeny closed the door and locked it.

Smith looked around at the empty apartment, obviously confused but not alarmed. Morzeny was tired; his arthritis was starting to hurt again and his knuckles were beginning to warm with itching pain. He didn’t want to wait any longer.

One hand dipped into his pocket, the other reached up and grabbed Smith’s long blond hair. The modified syringe went up and the injection went in and it was a smoother transfer than Morzeny had had in recent memory and he relaxed knowing he had made the right choice.

Smith spun around and backed up, one hand slapping to his neck, rubbing, fingernails scratching and Morzeny knew the fear that was growing nicely inside the young man’s head.

“You have been injected,” Morzeny said, glancing down at his wristwatch as he turned his back on Smith and walked over to the closet where he had placed a folding chair earlier. “With a viral zoo—” there was a soft pinging behind the far wall, a soft tap tapping and then suddenly the wall exploded with sound, catching Morzeny by surprise. He swore as he always did, the pounding of iron ringing out, he was sure he saw dust fleck off the wall, and there was another sound, and then more banging and then it was over, always over as suddenly as it had started.

He lowered his hands from his ears where they had moved instinctively, only his left arm was already lowered and there was the disgusting feeling of warm liquid all down it. The sleeve of his shirt was sticking to him and he looked at Smith to see him collapsed, spasming on the ground, suffering through the first wave and, there, by Smith’s outstretched hand, of course, was the gun. Morzeny swore.

The pain was coming to Morzeny now, stinging and ragged, the awful feeling of realizing that one’s flesh is torn.

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Across the room Smith was stretched out, the heels of his worn sneakers tapping on the floor spasmodically as his body jittered through the pain.

Morzeny reached a hand across to his injured arm, braced himself as best he could, and began ripping his sleeve off in strips. He listened to the pattering of Smith's shoes, slowing in pace but growing in strength and he knew the first wave was ending. The warm liquid of his own blood started pooling in Morzeny's hand and he did something he would never have expected himself to do: he began to grey out. The borders of his vision began pressing in and things became distorted. From somewhere far away he heard Smith's shoes slow further in their tapping.

Now things were getting serious.

Morzeny's tunnel vision started fading and things became more solid. Some deep part of his mind knew that Smith was also fighting to come back from a similar place and he knew the first thing Smith would see was the gun inches from his hand. Morzeny forced himself to take reeling steps, he bit down on his tongue, began jabbering nonsense, doing anything to shake the feeling that he was hovering just on the edge of a nice deep sleep. Something gave out and Morzeny realized he was falling to his knees, the feeling of them clumping onto the floor sent a ripple of pain deep through his body.

He fell face down and knew he had banged his wounded arm because the tunnel vision came again, but he also knew he had the gun in his fingertips, he could feel it from far away, like through a tank of water in the next room. He slowly backed away, everything still off kilter, until he felt the far wall firmly against his back, then he let his knees completely give out and slid his back down the wall until he was sitting. He took the strips of his shirt and did the best he could tying his arm up. When that was done he held the gun loosely in

his lap and looked over at Smith. The boy was lying where he had fallen, not having bothered to get up. Morzeny knew the look in his face. Smith was hoping that if he just rested up a little bit, if he just lay still, then he wouldn't have to face anything like the pain of the last few minutes again.

Morzeny smiled weakly. "You have been injected with a viral zoonotic disease. Don't bother fighting. Don't bother struggling."

"Too late," Smith said, and Morzeny was damned if Smith wasn't managing a smile too.

"Are you planning on dying anytime soon?" Smith asked.

"I could ask you the same thing."

Waves five and six had come and gone and Morzeny had been amazed at Smith's resilience. Part of this was the simple strength of youth, but Smith was holding on quite well despite that. Morzeny might have misjudged this one.

"I could scream you know," Smith said.

"You have my blessing," Morzeny answered.

Smith rolled over onto his back and now the last few hours showed themselves, in the heavy way his eyelids wanted to sink down, in the way he had to swallow two or three times before he even had the strength to lick his lips, in the focus needed just to fill his lungs up with air, and then...nothing. Smith's chest slowly fell. "I take it barely having the strength or saliva to speak is part of this wonderful drug you've given me?" he asked, his voice cracking.

"That is one of the side effects, yes." Morzeny looked over at the kitchenette. "I could pour you a glass of water, maybe?"

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Smith's face convulsed into what would clearly have been a laugh if fear and pain weren't distorting it. This turned into a slow steady breathing with glassy eyes staring up.

"I get this job," Smith began speaking quietly, as if he were holding a fascinating one-sided conversation with the ceiling, "it's at a small paper in the city, and I'm excited. I know it's going to be a crap job. I know I'm going to be doing grunt work and checking facts, and this turns out to be true. Plus, you know, I'm rewriting articles by some of the more lazy journalists for no credit, or doing research for some of the slimier editors for, again, no credit. And I've got this boss, who's a nice enough guy, short and balding and has god-awful bad breath and he seems to think he's going to teach me all these lessons. All he really does is, generally speaking, make my day more hectic, but at least he's trying. Although it really seems he's more worried about seeming like the lesson teaching type of guy than about actually teaching me anything worthwhile. But he gets on this, 'A good journalist checks into every lead,' kick earlier last week and then, in the name of the almighty element of teaching, he hands me over to this guy named Hume."

Morzeny watched, listening, his hand moving to his arm, feeling the bandage there, knowing it was getting wet, knowing it needed changing, knowing it wasn't going to make any difference, knowing that at least two major arteries were cut, knowing that he had to make sure Smith died and that Red would take care of wrapping up his mistakes, knowing above all else that listening to Smith was so much better than focusing on the pain.

Smith stared at the ceiling, his eyes blinked a few times, lost in his own story. He took a short breath that drew his chest up fully. Morzeny watched this, like a patron at an art museum. Morzeny knew full well how difficult long bouts of talking were even after wave three had passed. Smith was

moving into wave seven. “So I go to see Hume,” Smith continued, his deep breath passing out of him in hitching spasms before he regained control. “I mean, what am I going to do? Right? I’m a nobody and this is the first thing they’ve given me that isn’t basically a coffee run or slave labor. So I get to Hume and I proceed like I’m a real journalist and he’s a real story. And he gets going and I know, I mean I know *immediately*, that not only is this guy completely insane, but that perhaps this isn’t even a sign of faith from my short balding boss with bad breath, this might actually be a practical joke, it might even be a punishment of some sort. Because this Hume guy, he can’t be telling the truth. Because he’s some middleweight research guy at some big aluminum foil factory and he’s stumbled onto something. Because he’s talking to me about, get this,” Smith turned his head slowly where he lay to catch Morzeny’s eye, “you’re really going to laugh, he’s talking to me about how the fluoride that the government puts into tap water is actually poison, real conspiracy theory shit, you know? It’s a slow process, that much he’ll grant me, but it has something to do with how fluoride is a byproduct of removing aluminum from naturally mined bauxite, and how fluoride is topical, you know, it’s supposed to be smeared on the teeth, not ingested, and how when it’s ingested, you know, because it comes from aluminum to start with that it...hell I don’t remember what happens exactly, he had drawings and models of molecules and all sorts of shit, but the end result was a buildup of aluminum in the brain cells.” Smith’s head was still rolled over on its side, his eyes still fixed on Morzeny’s. “Does that ring any bells? Aluminum buildup in the brain cells?”

Morzeny smiled. “Alzheimer’s.”

“Alzheimer’s,” Smith repeated. He waited a few seconds. “So what do you think? Hume was crazy, right?” Smith paused to muster a swallow. “Because he started talking about

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this huge conspiracy and how he was in danger. But that's just crazy, right?"

Morzeny still wore his smile. He slowly, as if it were coated in lead, lifted the hand attached to his wounded arm and looked down at his watch. His smile faded. He sighed. Then he said something he had never said to a victim before. "I'm sorry."

"Shit," Smith said and closed his eyes as his head returned to neutral position. He started taking short deep breaths, his mouth slightly open and Morzeny knew what he was doing, knew the attempts at bracing one's self that the brain went through and then Smith's back arched and his mouth opened wider and a dry scream made it halfway out before freezing on his lips. When his heels started tapping on the floor Morzeny looked away. With his good hand Morzeny took a pack of cigarettes out of his pocket and labored one out without getting blood on it. He held the cigarette between his fingers and stared at it without lighting it. While he stared he focused on his arm.

Eventually the tapping subsided and heavy mouth breathing took over as Smith came back and his body calmed down.

"Why," Smith croaked, and Morzeny looked over at him again, one eyebrow raised. "Why is what I don't understand. Was there that much money in aluminum? It doesn't make sense. I mean, I get it, you've got a great product and the only problem is all this fluoride left over from the manufacturing process so you find a mass market for your byproduct, you give it to the government, and the kiddies get shiny white teeth and everybody wins and you sweep the whole early onset of dementia for the entire population under the rug, but was there really *that* much money in aluminum? How could there be that much money in a product that didn't exist yet? Did you just take a gamble, force this all through based on visions of meatball sandwiches all across the land wrapped in

foil? Or are you just the muscle and you just cash your paycheck and forget about it?”

Morzeny rolled his cigarette slowly between his thumb and first finger. His arm was settling into a slow, deep, throb. Had he not been trained for this he knew he'd be going to pieces. “You're not what you appear to be,” Morzeny said.

“*I'm* not what I appear to be?” Smith said, gritting his teeth with the effort of talking louder than a whisper.

“Your dirty sweatshirt, your stupid haircut, your head bobbing walk, your annoying teenager attitude, it's all an act, isn't it?”

Smith's eyes glared hard for a second, then his head rolled back, away from Morzeny, and Morzeny knew he had finally figured Smith out.

“I prefer to be underestimated,” Smith said.

“Yah,” Morzeny said. “Forty-odd years doing this and some little kid with a superiority complex undoes me. Congratulations.”

Morzeny held the cigarette under his nose and breathed in the sweet reek of tobacco. “Your argument is sound, but your basic assumptions are off. I never said I worked for any aluminum company, and I never said the Alzheimer's was a side effect.”

“That doesn't make sense. If it's not a side effect...I mean...so...what? It was the intended effect? You're poisoning everyone who lives anywhere near any major city. Why the *hell* would you—”

“Sevodnya horoshiy den' umeret,” Morzeny said, the corners of his mouth puckering up slightly causing a smile that seemed playful. It faded as soon as he struggled to shift positions.

Smith's face relaxed. He thought things over. “Forty years,” he said softly.

“Forty-*odd* years,” Morzeny corrected.

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“Putting you here at the outset of the Cold War.”

“Yah.”

“To fluoridate our water supply.”

“Well it wasn’t *me* so much, I was just shipped over to protect the initial investments. In truth, everything simply started falling into place. Other things we were doing began feeding it. Do you know what caused the first major need for aluminum?”

Smith squinted his eyes into closing and groaned. “Yeah,” and now Smith started to see. “It was stronger and lighter than anything else out there. That was why it was so useful during the space race.”

“Once that got flowing then it was easy enough to push to create a larger market for the stuff and then... truthfully it all started to gain momentum far beyond what we expected. All we had to do was prod a little bit and then keep everything hidden. My personal favorite addition was the study we leaked stating that you needed to drink eight glasses of water a day. Eight!” Morzeny laughed. “Well, by that point it was obvious that once the first generation of purely fluoridated children began to grow up...” he stopped talking and put his cigarette down onto his lap before gingerly shifting positions.

“And, presto,” Smith finished, “in sixty short years you have a generation destroyed by dementia.” Smith shook his head. “Seems like an asininely roundabout way to attack your enemy.”

Morzeny nibbled lightly at a hangnail. “It was argued that it was no more roundabout than an extended arms race.” He glanced at his watch. “I’m sorry again.” This time, when the tapping started, Morzeny allowed himself the luxury of closing his eyes, of letting his head loll onto his shoulder. The tapping stopped. Surely that was it. Morzeny had seen the insides of numerous bodies that had gone through what Smith’s was going through. Surely wave eight was the end and

Morzeny could just slip off into sleep and not worry about outlasting this kid anymore. But Morzeny could hear the breathing, hard and hitching, slowly coming down again. And then Smith was speaking.

“This is such a stupid way to die.”

“They are all pretty stupid, Smith.”

Smith thought for awhile. Morzeny glanced up to the window, then down at his lap. He picked up his cigarette again.

“I never got to see the Grand Canyon,” Smith said.

“No?” Morzeny asked, surprised. “Why not? It’s wonderful.”

Smith’s head turned on its side to stare at Morzeny. He was covered in sweat, not the cool clear sweat of a hard day’s work, but the yellow tacky sweat of a fever dream, yet Smith still managed to compose a glare for Morzeny. Morzeny shook him off. “What were you waiting for?”

“It isn’t that easy for some of us.”

“I became a trained killer. How much harder could it have been for you?”

“You took this job because you wanted to see the Grand Canyon?”

Morzeny shrugged. “Hoover Dam, too. And some other things. It seemed like the best way to get out of Russia at the time.”

Smith’s face didn’t react. “But you kill people. You killed *me*.”

“Yah,” Morzeny conceded.

“Seems unfair.”

“Nothing fair about it,” Morzeny conceded again. “But what’s the difference? You get caught up in a world’s worth of history that you don’t understand or a drunk driver hops the curb where you happen to be standing or some cells in

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your body betray you and begin to eat you from the inside. You're under the impression it matters which it is?"

"Yes it matters."

"What you do with everything up until is what matters, Smith. How you go is irrelevant."

"That's just wrong."

Morzeny took another whiff of his unlit cigarette. He looked up at the window and thought he could see gray beginning to creep into the sky. It was hard to tell with the light from the apartment reflecting in the window. Then he had a thought.

"It's not wrong. It's very right. You know what you've been doing, Smith? You have been lying in a comfortable bed, but you've been tossing and turning *all* night long, absolutely unable to sleep well because all you can do is worry about what sound the alarm clock is going to make when it inevitably goes off."

There was no response.

"No?"

Morzeny squinted and looked over. Smith's mouth was half open but his chest was no longer moving and the tilt to his head had no life. It was tilted only because of gravity.

"Anyway," Morzeny said, very dizzy now, "it's the trip that's important."

He looked away from Smith. He looked down at the still unlit cigarette in his hand. He slid his thumb up its length, then pressed down and snapped it in half. He ran the paper firmly between his fingers, spreading tobacco flecks all over himself. He licked his lips ruefully as he dusted the flecks off of his shirt, purely out of habit. Then he closed his eyes and let his head loll again, only this time he didn't bother trying to wake up.

There was a humming behind the far wall, this time as a different set of pipes came into use. Mrs. Habbris in 5B was

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turning on her shower. In 6A the Powells were filling their coffee machine from the tap. Mr. Werner in 2B turned on his bathroom sink and splashed water on his face before starting to brush his teeth. All across the city people were waking up and doing more of the same, showers and sinks opening up for a brand new day.

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Byron sat on his barstool, a pen in one hand. His white button down shirt was rolled up at the sleeves so that his bare arm rested on the wooden molding along the edge of the bar. His other arm was bent at the elbow, the hand attached pressed against his forehead, his fingers buried in his black curly hair. The fingers holding the pen were holding it loosely while his thumb flicked the end making the point bounce and tap on the bar. "They come," he said, "every year to run. They come to show what they are made of. They run to..." his voice stumbled to a halt. "Jesus," he said, the slightest hint of Irish brogue in his voice almost twisting the word into "Jaysus." Byron looked down at the notebook in front of him for a couple of seconds, then he let his elbow slide out until his forehead bonked down on the edge of the bar. It sounded loud enough and solid enough so that there might have been some actual pain involved. He curled his arms around his head almost like he was going asleep. Then his muffled voice shouted up from somewhere under the bar. "Why the fuck do they run?"

Will, standing next to him, trying to get the bartender's attention, glanced over at Byron. Will momentarily gave up trying to order another round. "You know there's an actual marathon not ten feet," Will pointed, "out that door. In fact once you're at the door there's nothing but sidewalk and a bit of a crowd and then, right there in the street, there's a real marathon. I'm thinking maybe you should go take a look at it. Might help you write about it."

Will was a big guy with a head that was almost square and a haircut that suggested he might have played some football back in school but that he hadn't lived for it and didn't want to talk about it.

Byron slowly raised his head, waving off Will's suggestion. "I've seen it every year since college. That's seven years now, ever since I moved to this city. It's the same thing every year." He was fully righted on his barstool now, and while he took over trying to catch the bartender's eye, he counted off on his fingers, "some Kenyan wins, a jack-ass running in a rhinoceros suit for some cause or another barfs, and the guys in wheelchairs make me feel lazy."

The bartender was finally captured and two new beers in pint glasses were placed in front of them.

Byron looked around the bar. It was early, still barely noon, and the bar looked mostly empty. This was misleading, though, as it was a large bar, especially for New York, taking up a whole corner of a block with two entrances and another back bar in an alcove towards the rear by the bathrooms. The main bar itself was a good thirty yards long and Byron and Will had barely managed to grab the last two empty stools. If you stopped to listen, a light buzz of conversation swam through the space.

"So who's coming today, anyway?" Byron asked.

"I think everyone."

"Yeah? Damn. I can't really stay, though. I'm going to just have this drink, maybe one more, then I gotta get home and finish this assignment for tomorrow." Byron flicked his pen a few times, hard, against the notebook. "It's fucking ridiculous. It's like the entire class is expecting something special out of me." He looked over at Will with incredulity on his face. "You know? It's like I'm always supposed to bring the goods. It's fucking unfair is what it is."

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Will took a cold gulp out of his glass and nodded in charitable understanding, then with a slight tilt of his head he weighed the balance of the situation. “Well you *are* their teacher, Byron.”

“Fucking criminal.” Byron took a gulp himself. “I should never have agreed to keep pace with them. Anyway, just this one and then maybe one when people start showing up.”

“I’m not people?”

“Lord, no.”

Byron paged through his notebook, shaking his head as he looked, then flipped it shut. “I can’t write in this stupid thing,” he said. “And what I do write I can never read because my handwriting sucks.” The notebook went into his rear pocket and his cell phone came out. “I’ve started trying to call my own voicemail when I get a thought. That way I can make sure that,” he looked over at Will and the pace of his sentence jumped in an entirely different direction, “and you don’t care in the slightest.”

“I’m still stinging from that, ‘I’m not people’ comment.” Will said, feigning hurt.

“Right,” Byron said. He gingerly set his cell phone on the bar as if he were posing it, then folded his hands on the molding and lowered his chin to rest on them. He sat there and stared at the phone.

The bar was more full now, the walls were all occupied by little groups of sixes and sevens forming circles that were starting to make walking from one end to the other more difficult. Will was holding four bottles of beer and behind him, following the path he was carving, walked a work friend of his with another five.

Will passed by a head of long blond hair that smelled of some nice perfume. He could only see the back of the girl's head and the back of her pink golf shirt and little cargo pants and Will shook his head then he was past her group and on the left was another head of nice smelling hair and the process resumed.

Will stopped at a group of seven guys towards the back and deposited some of his beers amongst his friend. He had rallied a number of people into going out but had called together such an eclectic group of friends, college, work, some of the athletic groups he belonged to, that they had all circled up and formed their own mini-groups instead of one larger "Will group." This meant that Will had forfeited nucleus status and would have to mingle today.

Will didn't care; he didn't feel very much a part of any of these groups anymore. He didn't feel like a part of this city anymore. He felt detached. Something was missing from his life recently. It wasn't like he had ever craved huge flashy excitement, he had always found a simple joy whenever his favorite seasonal sandwiches reappeared at his local fast food restaurants, but he never remembered the appearance of those sandwiches making his entire month. It seemed sometimes that the last thing he remembered clearly was college, and since then he had sort of let his gaze drift as one foot continued to step in front of the other and now he barely recognized where he was. He didn't understand his apartment. He didn't understand when getting through three Netflix movies started to constitute a good week. He had never wanted much, never wanted to travel, never wanted to be famous, never wanted to live in a penthouse. But he had never wanted to feel numb all over either. And it was this city, this city allowed it to happen. You never had to say, "Hi," to your neighbor, you never had to acknowledge anyone or anything; you never had to even leave your apartment.

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If you had a good selection of take out menus this city could turn into your own private island. If you lost your focus on the future in this town then the town would let you walk blithely along so that you didn't notice a damned thing you were walking past. Days could melt into one another until you barely bothered to distinguish July from April. And he didn't understand why he was bothering. He didn't want this. He didn't like sushi *that* much. And, hell, when he had gone back to Ohio for his ten year high-school reunion he had decided that the sushi out there had been pretty good.

Will chatted briefly, listened to a joke, stared around the room at various girls being pointed out, and then exited the circle.

He made his way to the rear entrance and poked his head outside where some chairs were set up in the bar's sidewalk seating area. This was where all the smokers were congregating. This entrance was around the corner along 83rd street about half a block in from First Avenue. Looking to his right Will could see the crowd lining the avenue and the occasional flash of a runner. There was a large sign arching over First Avenue notifying everyone that this was mile seventeen. He stepped outside and past a couple of people and spotted Byron.

"Just one more drink and you're out of here, eh?"

Byron looked up, a little bewildered, from where he was bent over the railing trying to balance two beers and a Bloody Mary while he got his cigarettes out of his pocket. "Wha?" he answered back. Then he looked down at his hands. "Fuck you." He looked up again. "Give me a hand."

Will took a few drinks out of Byron's hands and Byron got a cigarette out and lit. "I forgot what happens when I'm out with your work friends. I got through saying hi to half of them and I had six more rounds in my hand." Byron was still holding the Bloody Mary and a bottle of beer and he was

looking around with a lit cigarette dangling from his mouth trying to puzzle out how he was going to proceed.

“Just put them down on a chair,” Will said, eyeing Byron, like this was something he should have pieced together.

“The chairs are wobbly and I was planning on sitting down at some point. Here,” he said and he forced his bottle into Will’s hands. “Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it.”

Byron watched the marathon spectators walk past towards the avenue and smoked, enjoying the fall sunshine while behind him Will wrestled with four drinks and a wobbly chair.

Will looked up to see a brunette walking by with a tan that gave her a farm girl-look.

“What is it about this day that makes getting stupid drunk in the daytime something that attractive women suddenly want to take part in?”

“It’s cause I’m here,” Byron said without even thinking.

“Funny.”

Byron shrugged with an eyebrow.

“Seriously. They come out of the woodwork today. It’s like they bus them in from some hot-girl farm upstate somewhere.”

Byron took a long pull from his beer. “Amen,” Byron said, extending his hand with his now empty beer bottle in it.

He burped.

“Why do they run, Will?” he asked, patiently holding his arm out, his empty bottle in his hand, staring down the street at the crowd. Will caved and replaced the empty bottle with a full one from the chair. The Bloody Mary spilled over in the process.

“I think because it’s there,” Will answered. “Isn’t that how it goes?”

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“Nah,” Byron said, staring down the street suspiciously, the cheers of the crowd coming back to them warbled by the distance. “I’m not buying it.”

Will stared with Byron and they both contemplated the question.

“Oh,” Will said, changing the subject, “I saw Calvin inside.”

“Calvin?” Byron looked over. “You got Calvin out of the restaurant? Wow, you really did get everyone to come out today, didn’t you?”

“I know, I don’t think I’ve seen Calvin since...well since he broke up with that girl...I forget her name. But that was almost a year ago.”

“Yeah,” Byron said, “I don’t think he took that too well.”

“And I think I saw one of your little friends.”

“I gotta learn to stop talking in front of my students. Which one is it?”

“Very light brown hair, kind of short. Freckles.”

Byron’s face became tense. “You sure? How do you know she’s one of mine?”

“I recognized her from that thing you brought me to.”

“Right. Fuck.”

“Is there a problem?” Will asked, curiosity on his face.

“Yeah. I’ve got a *very* big problem with that one.”

Will took a few steps closer, his head angled, trying to catch Byron’s eyes. “Did you...did you sleep with her?”

“Worse.” Byron’s face froze over.

Will stopped, his head pulling back as he tried to figure out something worse. “You...you started to sleep with her and it turns out she’s a dude?”

Byron turned slowly to look at Will, managed to hold it together for a second or two, and then burst out laughing. “No, somewhere in between that.”

“What on earth is in between those two?”

Byron sighed and turned away from the street. He took another cigarette out. “You ever get the feeling that you and your job are in direct competition for your soul?”

“If that were true,” Will answered, “then me and complete and utter boredom would be in competition for my soul. And I don’t particularly like the sound of that.”

“Hey,” a voice said behind them, and Will turned to see Calvin coming their way. Calvin gave off an air of being groomed and well put together, but Will had roomed with him for a couple of years and Will knew for certain that the clothes Calvin was wearing that seemed to go together so well had been picked up off the floor at random and put on because they smelled okay, and the black curly hair that seemed styled atop his head was actually just how Calvin’s hair looked when he woke up in the morning.

Calvin gave Will’s shoulder a friendly squeeze and they greeted each other. Then Calvin walked past him, squinting a little, his trip through bar having taken long enough to make the sunshine seem bright now that he was outside.

Calvin walked across the sidewalk to Byron, who was still staring at the crowd down the street, his cigarette lit, his cell phone out but unopened.

“Disgusting,” Calvin said, looking at the cigarette in Byron’s mouth. “You know those things are destroying your body.”

“The fuck you saving yours for, its resale value?” Byron said without taking the cigarette from between his teeth.

Calvin made a move to slap the cigarette out of Byron’s mouth, his arm snaked out, but Byron ducked his head back easily, dodging without even looking over at where Calvin was standing. His only mistake was after he had dodged when he overcompensated and had to take a quick step back to re-balance.

“And here’s a cliché,” Calvin said, “a drunken writer.”

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“Cooking is for homos,” Byron said, tucking his phone back into his jeans.

Calvin shook his head and chuckled. “Unbelievable.” Calvin stopped paying attention to Byron.

Will had watched all of this intently. He had studied the way these two interacted for years and never understood it, but, in this one particular instant, Will thought he actually knew what was coming next, he thought Calvin had disengaged too early, had misjudged Byron. “Calvin,” he called out, wanting to level the field, “Byron’s actually been here a few hours, I think he’s a little drunker than maybe you-”

Calvin was half turned, listening to Will, when Byron swung a sloppy drunken arm and slapped Calvin clean across the face. Will heard a gasp from a group of people a few chairs over and a couple of conversations stopped as Byron stood poised on the balls of his feet, clearly pleased. Calvin stared at him. Byron stared back.

“Mom says, ‘Hi,’” Byron finally said.

“Moron,” Calvin said, dismissing the entire interaction and shaking his head. “Yeah, I know, I swung by there before I came here. She said I just missed you.” Calvin was glancing at the beers in Will and Byron’s hands. He held his empty hands up, questioning.

Byron pointed down at the mess on the chair. “I bought you a Bloody Mary,” he said.

Calvin ignored him.

“These are ours,” Will said, pointing at some beers on a different chair. He found a full one and handed it to Calvin.

“One of Byron’s female students is here,” Will said, this information clearly something he thought Calvin should know.

“Really?” Calvin said, turning to Byron. “One of your little pets showed up?”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Byron said as he walked past the two of them and dropped his half-smoked cigarette on the ground. He disappeared into the bar.

Calvin stared after him. Then he looked over at Will. “What did he do? Sleep with her?”

Calvin and Byron were sitting on bar stools against the wall towards the back bar where a dead spot between the bathrooms and the storage room allowed them some space. The crush of the crowd was overtaking the rest of the bar and after saying, “Hi,” to some more of Will’s work friends they had retreated here, both somehow holding new drinks.

“I got one of those robots for my shower,” Calvin said, picking up a loose string of conversation from a few minutes ago. He leaned on his chair towards Byron so he wouldn’t have to shout. “You push a button and it spins and sprays stuff, keeps your shower clean.”

Byron was interested. “Yeah? That thing work?”

“Not even close, no.”

“Oh,” Byron said sadly, the notion of never having to clean his shower again obviously having been appealing to him. “I finally got one of those vibrating razors.”

“Ah. Congratulations,” Calvin said, “you’ve left the world of twentieth century shaving behind.”

“I don’t like it.”

“What? How do you not like it?”

“I dunno, I just don’t like it. It doesn’t shave well.”

Calvin looked wounded by this betrayal. “You’re not using it right,” he said, not making eye contact with Byron.

“Don’t tell me I’m not using it right, it’s a razor, you shave with it.”

“I’ve seen you shave, you’re not doing it right.”

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“Fuck you.”

“No, I’m serious. You hack at your face. You need to take your time. And with these new ones you need to just slide it slowly across your face. You basically let the vibrator do all the work.”

“Like you with a woman?”

“You know it bugs me, go to hell by the way, when people don’t use blades right. I see it all the time, knives, razors, whatever. People cutting onions wrong or screwing up tomatoes.” Calvin started gaining momentum and the feeling wasn’t comfortable, it was like he was sliding down a chute greased with his own words and he couldn’t stop himself from talking, he could only hope to slow himself down.

“People cut their fingers and think it’s because their knives are too sharp. *Dull* knives cause more accidents than sharp knives. And you get people just *asking* to be cut, slicing away with their fingers sitting right there. It’s ridiculous. I work with knives. I know what I’m talking about. Take the clumsiest sous chef and if he’s got the proper foundation of knife skills,” Calvin saw that Byron was looking around the bar, barely listening at this point, “he won’t so much as nick a finger. There should be a city run knife safety program or something. Some sort of training campaign to teach kids proper knife handling skills.”

“Oh absolutely, Cal. That’ll catch on like Kwanzaa.” Byron hopped off his stool and placed his beer precariously on a small ledge that ran along the wall. “I’m going to the bathroom.”

Calvin watched him walk away. He felt like his tongue had just turned into a slinky and had come spilling out of his mouth, one endless stream, and now there was a pile of himself sitting embarrassingly on the ground. That had been happening more and more often, one strange little concern

spooling out of control while he talked until he knew he was babbling and knew he was being boring but he couldn't stop.

Then Calvin realized he was now alone in the bar, and he hunched down into his stool and tried to fade back into the wall. The only movements he made were to periodically lift his glass with both hands and take a drink while he stared, eyes rarely blinking, out over the crowd. All alone in New York.

He wondered how a city where you could find a bar full of people at four o'clock on a Sunday afternoon could make you feel so alone.

It had just been a matter of deleting her from his cell phone and she had no longer existed. No trace of her, no trail, no evidence, no nothing. She just sank down into the sidewalks of this city and was never to be heard from again. The apartment he had known her in was no longer hers, now it was full of strangers. How could something that was so damned real empty itself out so that he had to wonder sometimes if she had even existed?

And he had to admit that things had ended badly and maybe he had wanted her to disappear, that much was true, but his accomplice had been a city where it took the simple action of closing your eyes to make a person cease existing. And that was what had finally rattled him. That a disappearance like that was possible. Rattled him enough to make him start to feel on shaky ground wherever he went. A relationship that had seemed like a growing foundation had simply not been there when he went to lean on it again. And then he had started sleeping badly and he had started seeing little black spots with weird phosphorescent edges floating at the corner of his eyes. He had been standing in the shower one day, thinking he was swatting at gnats when he realized he was swatting at figments of his imagination. A couple of trips to the doctor had told him nothing, there was nothing physi-

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cally wrong with him, but he hadn't believed that, something was clearly wrong with him. And he had quit smoking, he had stopped going out, he had wanted to get *healthy* damn it, he had started gripping his life so hard it left bruises on his psyche and he felt like he had broken loose on deck and was just slamming around against everything around him, battering himself apart while struggling to stay safe. He hadn't even noticed it at first it had felt so natural. That had been the strangest part. How accessible crazy had turned out to be. But slowly, over time, over the better part of a year the feeling had begun to feel foreign and he, only a week or so ago, had finally come up with a question to give it some sort of reality, to attempt to make it into something he could maybe get his hands around. One question.

When had he started living in fear?

Calvin saw someone in his peripheral vision that didn't pass by like the rest of them. He turned and saw a girl staring at him. There was a familiar feeling of ice cold water splashing into his stomach and his first thought was to hide but the girl stepped over. "Do you know Byron?" she asked.

"I'm his twin," Calvin answered.

The girl nodded a quick staccato of short nods that seemed to stem from her chin as she agreed with herself, "Oh, yeah, I can totally see that now."

"Calvin," Calvin said, giving up, extending his hand.

"I'm Jenny," the girl said. "Byron's my teacher. Well," she corrected herself, "my TA anyway. He doesn't let us call him an assistant, though."

"Nice to meet you," Calvin said. He was trying to be noncommittal, his stomach was only barely starting to feel under control and he had the strange feeling that he was sweating even though he couldn't feel anything. The girl just continued to stare at him. Finally Calvin waved an open hand over Byron's empty stool. Jenny moved, too fast, clearly

showing that she had been waiting for just such an offer, and took the seat.

Calvin took a deep breath and hoped that his body would calm down. It didn't. He turned back to Jenny and forced himself to start making small talk. After a few minutes he saw Byron heading outside and as casually as he could manage he parted himself from Jenny and headed towards the door, focusing on the square of daylight and just taking one step at a time. When he got to the doorway he stood there, taking a breath of the outside air. He could feel it, the bar, behind him, the crowd swaying and curling up like some massive animal at his back. He could feel it staring at the back of his neck, could almost feel it breathing, but he forced himself to take another deep breath and began to let his eyes wander over the small clusters of people outside, trying to find Byron. He found Will instead, out by the curb.

"Is Byron out here?" Calvin asked as he approached Will.

"He went teetering off that way," Will answered, pointing down the street towards the mile seventeen marker. Calvin caught sight of Byron behind a group of three girls coming their way.

The girls passed and Byron stopped next to Will and Calvin while he stared off after them. "All I want," Byron said, "is to be drunk and surrounded by beautiful women for the rest of my life." He looked at Will and Calvin each in turn, his head overshooting his neck with every turn it made, a slow sway in his stance. "Is that really so hard?" Byron didn't bother waiting for an answer and turned back towards the race on the other end of the street.

Will looked at Byron, at Calvin, at the crowd and the street and then at the three girls walking away. He wasn't a part of this. He suddenly understood. Not anymore. Maybe at first there had been an excitement, when he first came to this city. But it was different now. The excitement was gone and

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none of this was his. It was like he was walking through a museum or trundling along on a ride at Disney World, watching all of this happen but not able to take part. He decided then and there that he had had enough. He could get decent enough sushi in Ohio. And a second bedroom. There was no need for him to be in this city anymore. He would move back to Ohio.

And that was it. It was decided. And Will, for the first time in months, maybe years, felt the absence of pressure on his body. He would tell everyone in a day or so. Right now, with that decision firmly in his head, he just wanted to go home, maybe get a good night's sleep. He was tired.

"I'm heading out, guys," Will said, getting a wave and a smile from Byron and a couple of words of goodbye from Calvin. Then he turned and started walking down the street.

Byron was staring intently at the race. There was something strange in his face and Calvin was about to ask what was going on when Byron spoke.

"Ah, shit," Byron said, "I saw this start to happen while I was over there." His voice was very different, lower, heartier, a gravel filled bed of humanity running underneath his usual bite. "I hate to see this."

Calvin watched Byron swallow slowly and then turned to see what he was looking at. Coming towards them from the race was a group of three people. Two were obviously not runners, they were dressed in jeans that didn't fit right and t-shirts that were too busy. They were flanking the third person, a woman, who was slowly making her way down the street. This third person was dressed in full racing gear, teal shorts and a stretch tank top. She was favoring one leg as she walked. Her shoulders were covered in a foil blanket. She was sobbing.

Byron was staring at her, one of his hands up at his face, his first two fingers lightly rubbing up and down his jaw line.

“I actually saw the moment when she decided to quit,” he said slowly. “She saw her two friends on the sideline, she had forced herself to make it to them, then she just veered off and stepped out of the race.” He pulled at his lower lip. “I’m not sure when she started crying.” Byron and Calvin watched the woman let herself be guided to the other side of the street. She stopped near a car parked on the other side and they could hear her crying change pitch as some new pain flared in her body. Her two friends turned and started walking back to her.

“Come on,” Byron said, staring across at the scene playing out, the volume of his voice soft but the force behind it strong. “Come *on*,” he said again, rooting her on, his energy strong enough that Calvin felt himself getting caught up in it. “Let yourself do this much at least.” As they watched, the woman waved her friends off and gathered herself together. One of her friends moved toward her again but she, with finality, put her hand up and forced her friend away. She stood up straight and started walking again, slowly, nodding as her friends asked her if she was sure she was okay.

Byron stepped into the middle of the street and watched them make it to the corner, now barely visible. The crowd was on the move at this point in the day with people migrating over to the park to catch the tail end of the race where the runners were still thick. People were moving all over the street and Byron watched as the trio stood on the corner and began to hail a cab.

Will passed in front of them, making his own way around the corner, the distance superimposing his body over the runner’s for a brief second before he disappeared out of sight. Eventually the trio hailed a cab and Byron watched them get in and drive away.

“They’ll be alright,” Byron said, sounding happy that he could say that with conviction.

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“It’s weird to see you caring about people like that.”

“Ah,” Byron waved him off, “she’s not people anymore. She dropped out. She’s just a tourist now. Good luck to her.”

Byron started walking back towards the race, his beer in one hand, his arms stretched out while he tried walking one foot in front of the other along a crack in the pavement. Calvin walked along the sidewalk watching his brother, a row of parked cars between them. “I talked to your little friend inside,” Calvin said. “Jenny.”

“Yeah?” Byron said, leaning his head back and walking with his mouth open as he stared up at the sky.

“Yeah. She doesn’t seem so bad.” They walked along past either side of the parked cars. “So, really, I have to ask, what’s the deal there? What did you do to her?”

“I told her to quit,” and Byron stopped walking. He righted himself and lowered his head and glared out at the mile seventeen marker down the street. He raised his bottle and took a slow swig.

“So?” Calvin asked, knowing he was missing something. “You tell me to quit all the time. You tell everyone to quit when you’re not busy telling them to go fuck themselves.”

Byron laughed, his shoulders hunching up in a spasm as he did so, but his lips curled up like he was swallowing something bitter and Calvin thought for a second that he was going to vomit. Then he spoke. “No,” he said, and slowly began shaking his head back and forth. “It’s not that I told her to quit. It’s that I talked her into quitting. I’m her teacher and I talked her into holding off on submitting two of her stories for publication to an editor I know.”

“So...” Calvin said, walking forward a bit so he could see his brother’s face, trying to feel his way towards the thing he still couldn’t see. “So her stuff needed some work and you told her...what...to hold off? Give it a couple of more read throughs? So she’s not that good of a writer?”

“Nah,” Byron said quick and sharp, like he was biting the head off something. He lifted the bottle up and took another pull. Calvin could hear the beer inside the bottle slosh against the glass. “She’s not a good writer, she’s an *amazing* writer. And I, her teacher, talked her out of submitting because I know that this particular editor has one slot open and that he’s leaning heavily towards picking one of *my* stories for publication.”

There were a few moments of silence. “Jesus, Byron,” Calvin said.

Byron stood still for a few seconds. His head resumed shaking, slowly, back and forth, his eyes fixed on the distance, the shaking clearly disagreeing with whatever was running through his head. “It’s just this city,” Byron said. “It’s this fucking city,” and his voice started to get mean. “You go up against every single person the writing world vomits up every three seconds. You butt heads with every pimply faced little kid with a college resume and every aged veteran with a lifetime of credits and they’re all scrabbling for the same piece of real estate that you’re digging your claws into and it’s not fucking enough because you’re losing ground and you’re losing time and you start to claw back, not at the real estate but at the people,” and Byron’s teeth were set and his eyes were glaring out down the street and it was like something inside of him began to take form and strike with energy against some plate of steel that had grown up in his gut. “And you sit there drowning, completely swamped, and it gets to a point where all you can hope for is that just one fucking tiny little bubble that you let out during your last gasp will make it to the top of the flood you’re fighting against and break on the surface and just let out the smallest sound.” He took another swig and the thing inside began to take shape, began to take form, began to gather strength from him speaking the words aloud. “And then you start seeing easy ways out, easy paths,

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and they used to look like nothing but giant fucking jokes to you, only now you catch yourself stopping and reading the signs on these paths and letting yourself think that maybe this isn't so bad after all. And you know the city won't care, hell the city will take care of you, the city hugs heroes and maggots both to her chest, keeps them both warm, feeds both of them," and the thing was a head and shoulders and two fists and two feet and it was pounding, howling, slamming against the steel and Byron took deep breath and it wound up and pounded and then steel was shattering everywhere and it was through and the hard part was over, now it just needed a way out. "And so you do it," Byron shrugged, his voice simple now. "You just do it."

He turned to Calvin and there was only Byron looking at his brother. "I told one of my students that her writing wasn't good enough because I wanted her to withdraw it so I could get a story of my own published. And that's it. Actually, no, that's not it, because I made it right with her a few days later. I told her I had gone back over her story and I had misread her and I gave her some bullshit and I apologized and made her submit her stuff and I probably apologized too much and that's why she's here because she maybe thinks I was coming on to her a little but fuck her that's her problem, the thing is though, I haven't told anyone what I did. I haven't told anyone that it took me three days to set it right. That's the thing." Byron's lips curled and then his jaw and throat began to work like he was trying to suck a piece of hair off his tongue. Then he stopped and everything calmed down and with a quick turn of his head he spit something into the street. "For three days I was a piece of shit."

Calvin watched as his brother smiled, a tepid shaky smile, like a fawn just learning to walk. Then Calvin almost thought he should jump over the hood of the car in front of him because Byron swayed backward crazily, his body leaning far

enough that Byron stuck one leg out in front of him to retain his balance and then his arms were out at his sides, his beer bottle dangling between two fingers, palms facing upwards, head tilted back. And as Calvin watched, his brother slowly began to right himself. His leg came down and his back straightened up and then Byron was leaning too far forwards but he was coming back around and to Calvin it seemed like he was watching a ship capsize in reverse. Byron straightened up further and then there was a slow roll of his shoulders. Byron took one last swig of his bottle, finishing it off. He bent over and set it down on the street.

And then Byron had his phone out and flipped open and it was dialing and he was rolling his head around on his shoulders while he waited. Through the thin fall air Calvin heard Byron's own voice coming out of the cell phone; he couldn't make out the words but the tone and pace and timber made it clear that it was Byron's voice mail.

Byron lowered his head and with piercing eyes he glared down the street at the mile seventeen marker while he waited for his own beep.

And Calvin saw it, in the toothy almost wolf like smile that Byron was flashing at the world and in the eyes that had always been able to cut through anyone they wanted to.

The phone beeped.

Calvin saw it in the easy poise and fighter's stance.

"They come here to run," Byron said, "because it's the only race big enough to hold them."

Calvin felt a small rush over the back of his neck as he realized he hadn't seen it this strong in years. It was beaming off of Byron like liquid metal.

"They come because it's the only race big enough to challenge them."

That thing inside of Byron that sometimes made Calvin wish he had been the one born two minutes later because

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maybe something as magical as that had been its source. That thing that Calvin never acknowledged aloud, partly because of a fear that admitting it was there might somehow diminish its effect on him, and partly because Byron was such a contrarian bastard that to bring it out in the open in any way would most likely make him shut it off on purpose. Calvin had spent his life, for the most part, ignoring it because he knew it didn't exist inside of him, not anywhere close to the same strength anyway, so he had quickly forced himself to disavow this thing inside of his baby brother lest he grant it too much presence. But there had been times, like when Fat Jimmy Druthers, four years older than them, had decided to give them both bloody noses every chance he got when they were in the third grade, there had been times when Calvin had allowed himself to peek, secretly, over at his brother and wait and wait and finally get a glimpse of this thing at its strongest. This thing that most everyone misunderstood as craziness or anger but Calvin knew was nothing more than his brother making a conscious decision to not duck when life threw shit at him. Calvin knew it was nothing more than a fierce brand of down and dirty courage. It was the thing he loved most in his brother.

Calvin had never allowed himself to lean on it, had never allowed himself to ask for it, but sometimes, like right now, he let himself take a good look at his brother and let himself breathe a little easier, let himself believe that if this person could exist in this world, then at least there was the possibility that things could turn out alright in the end, and Calvin let himself smile, a foreign feeling, but he let himself do it anyway. And just like that there was hope.

“They run,” Byron said, now completely at ease, his words containing no question, his smile draped casually across half his mouth, “because they know they can.”

And he flipped his phone shut with one hand. He clicked his tongue softly against his teeth a few times, then turned away and looked at Calvin.

"I'm hungry," he said, "let's go get cheesecake."

"You don't want to go back in?" Calvin asked.

"Nah."

"Okay," Calvin said as Byron made his way through the parked cars. Calvin handed his bottle over and Byron walked the empties over to a chair, set them down, came back wiping his hands on his pants.

"Where should we go?" Calvin asked.

"Beats the fuck out of me, I haven't been on this side of the park since these pants were new."

"Well," Calvin said, "there's Samson's."

They started walking down the street, slowly and casually, chatting as they went.

"They have strawberry cheesecake?"

"I think so."

"They have hot waitresses?"

"They've got cheesecake, Byron. That's not enough for you?"

"This is the island of Manhattan, Cal. We've got a street named after Senior Wences. If I want cheesecake served to me by a supermodel in a halter top I'll get it...at three in the morning," he jabbed his finger in the air for emphasis, "*while* doing my laundry."

"I guess we could try Georgi's."

"Ooh, yeah, I like that place."

They walked under trees barely holding onto the bulk of their last green leaves, the forms of the brothers getting smaller as they covered the distance to the corner. "I owe you a slap, by the way," Calvin said.

"Yeah, all right. But that's only good for six months."

"I was thinking maybe Thanksgiving."

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“That’s not bad. I was thinking you might...”

Their voices faded into indistinguishable vibrations set adrift in the thin fall air. The conversation went on. Then there was a playful shove by one against the other. Then a shove back. Then one stopped and played defense, the other giving a quick stutter step and stopping as well. There was a pause and then a flash and a lunge and a dodge and a loud cackle of laughter.

And, finally, with the mile seventeen marker at their backs, the two brothers turned and began to run.

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Calla, the skirt, was constantly moving to the edge of the table then back again towards the rear as she greeted new guests and brought them inside only to be turned all inside out again by the sound of a new cart arriving. She was a simple skirt, her light airy fabric only containing an ornamental trill of lilies along the hem.

It was The Great Wash and it was always a successful affair, with clothes from all sorts of bags making the trip and meeting up at this, the most crowded time of the year. She was certainly busy enough without Miss Cobb, the presiding elder for the past few years, constantly coming over from the dance room to ask about who had just shown up and if anyone was still missing.

Banded around the neck and arms, Miss Cobb's torso wore the mystic runes of the world: a pillar in black, then a set of red semicircles over a point. Underneath, again in black were vertical-diagonal-vertical, and finally the branch with two forks spreading out on top. Her runes were cracked and fading but her collar was still taut and Calla knew better than to give her any sass talk, especially on a night like this when there was so much to be done.

Calla had just shown in a Mr. Carreras and she was watching his black form, somehow so majestic, walking back towards the dance, his high round collar folded neatly over itself once, when Miss Cobb appeared once again to ask if Sullivan and his wife had arrived yet.

Before Calla could even answer Miss Cobb caught sight of Mr. Carreras disappearing through the back door into the

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dance room. “Oh, Mr. Carreras’s here,” she said with something close to awe. “We just *have* to see if we can’t get him to sing. He has such a marvelous tenor.”

“Hello, Miss Cobb,” a voice said from the table’s edge and both Calla and Miss Cobb turned to see Sullivan and his wife, Molly.

“Oh, Mr. Conway,” Calla said to Sullivan, helping him remove the thin plastic sheet that was covering him. “Is the white stuff still coming down out there?”

“Most certainly,” Sullivan said, now turning his attention to his wife and the process of removing the plastic from her slightly aged but still beautiful white cotton shape. He moved gingerly, and from the look his wife was giving him too gingerly at that, making sure none of the white fluff fell on her form. “I heard that there’s a leak of some sort far north, a box of something spilling stuff right into the fan.”

“I heard that one of the machines broke down and is spraying the stuff into the air,” Molly said, having had enough of her husband’s delicate maneuverings and removing the plastic sheet herself, sliding it easily over her straps and cups.

“And I heard both had happened at once,” Calla said, taking both plastic sheets, “they say there’s snow falling all across The Mat in general.”

“Molly?” Miss Cobb said by way of invitation. “We’ve set up one of the shelves upstairs for the women to freshen up in. May I lead you up?”

“Of course,” Molly said, following Miss Cobb up the stairs, the two women falling at once into conversation as they walked, the sound of them laughing cascading down as they rounded the landing.

Sullivan followed Calla into a small room on the main level of the table and watched her storing their plastic bags in a cubby in the corner. He had seen her any number of times, year after year, at The Great Wash. She was a thin white

thing, her form suggesting fragility more than delicateness. “So,” Sullivan said by way of conversation, “I suppose you’ll be joining us in the warm cycle soon enough, eh, Calla?”

Calla’s handling of the plastic bags became harsher, the ends snapping in the air as she shook them and folded them roughly. “And why should I want to move over to the warm cycle anyway? I’ve been mixing with those in the cold cycle for my entire life, and I should hope that the cold cycle will always be good enough for me.”

Sullivan felt deflated, his polite conversation causing things to stray so far from where he wanted them flustered him and he felt a warm blush rising, knowing he had made a mistake. He was a well built sweater, charcoal gray with a handsome weave running in rows down his body. How was he to know that Calla was a cold cycle only garment? She wasn’t even a member of his bag; there was no way to know that her wearers didn’t feel her worth enough effort to separate her out. It was a natural assumption, he told himself, buffering with rationality to ward off the hot embarrassment.

He said his goodbye, layering on politeness and watching Calla busy herself at the cubby, unsure whether she was angry with him or just angry in general.

Standing at the entrance area to the table he looked up at the landing and saw Molly and Miss Cobb, still talking, coming down the stairs.

“Isn’t that right, Sullivan, dear?” Molly said as they came within earshot, clearly believing that Sullivan had been able to hear the earlier part of the conversation.

“Isn’t what right, dear?”

“Oh,” Miss Cobb interjected, the merriment in her voice showing that she had been finding humor in what was being discussed. “Molly tells me that you’re looking into finding a, what was it, some sort of bag for her to wear at the next wash?”

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“A delicate bag, they call it,” Sullivan said.

“Oh, that was it,” Miss Cobb laughed, “a delicate bag.”

Molly’s voice was also laughing and Sullivan, still stinging from his overstepping with Calla did not know what to make about this laughter over a subject he saw as serious. “Well they use them all the time in the higher end washes,” he blustered, “you wouldn’t see a delicate washed in a regular cold cycle in those washes anymore than you’d see a red shirt tossed in with white towels.”

But his serious tone only served to fuel Miss Cobb and Molly’s merriment and they both enjoyed a good laugh at what Sullivan felt was his expense.

“Oh come now, dear,” Molly said, not seeing that this subject was a serious one for Sullivan, “lead me into the dance, won’t you?”

Sullivan allowed himself to be placated, but he still felt as if he was on unsure ground and he wished he could start the night over again.

They walked the length of the table and entered the dance hall, the noise immediately growing in volume, engulfing them as they passed through the doorway. Molly saw any number of garments she wished to talk to and she drifted off, Sullivan holding onto her strap as she left him, letting his touch linger there for as long as possible as if he were frightened to let her go.

He wandered over to where the familiar form of Cutty was sitting, telling an off-color joke in far too loud a voice to a group of leggings. Cutty was all energy while he told his joke, his legs flopping about and his waist trembling with anticipation of the punch line which he didn’t seem to notice he had flubbed and, judging by the amount of laughter he gave to himself, didn’t seem to care. He repeated the punch line with a whimper, almost doubled over, his words barely coming out through the laughter that was wracking his body. The

group, for its part, hadn't cared that Cutty had botched the joke; his laughter was enough to get laughs out of all of them, always had been.

"Ah, Sullivan," Cutty said, the cords on his body still shaking all the way up to his waist, "I've got the finest joke to tell you."

"I believe I caught most of it as I was heading this way, you were certainly telling it loud enough."

Cutty waved him off, using most of his concentration to bring his laughter under control and before Sullivan could stop him he was off again, telling his joke, setting up the introduction all wrong and beginning to botch the middle part as the leggings all around looked on, enjoying Cutty's mood and buffoonery more than the joke itself.

Cutty lost his place for a second time and stopped talking as he realized that something was going on behind him. He turned to look on as the dance floor began to organize for a more formal waltz and people began to call out for partners, Miss Cobb doing her part to make sure no one who wanted to join was left single, stalling the start of the dance until a group of three or four ladies had returned from where they had disappeared into the entrance hall.

"A lovely dance, isn't it?" Sullivan turned to find himself facing the stately and prudish Miss Gregors, her willowy long arms ending in threadbare black cuffs.

"As it always is," Sullivan answered. He wasn't sure about her tone and she wore around her neck the tag of the cold cycles. Looking at him diffidently she extended her arm. Sullivan took it courteously and led her out amongst the crowd. The formal waltz started and Sullivan led her skillfully enough around the floor. Her body was rigid and unyielding, unfriendly as she dipped and swayed, letting go of his hand occasionally to cross through the line of dancers when required before tramping back again. Most of her energy was

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dedicated to prattling on about her recent wash and those she had seen and the details of life in the cold cycle, all of which Sullivan found rather boring and in no way proper conversation for a formal dance. Then Miss Gregors caught him completely off guard by asking, "And will you and your wife be joining us in the cold cycle for the next wash? After all, we are all only made of cotton."

"I'm not sure my wife is up for the trip," Sullivan said, he hoped politely, the bluntness of the question and the forwardness of Miss Gregors in asking it making him glance nervously about to make sure nobody was listening. He knew she was a tired old garment who saw herself as nothing but a cold-cycle for life but he never expected her to be so bold as to suggest that he and his family join her in the rustic cold.

"Oh," Miss Gregors asked, "your wife isn't up for it. Is that so?"

"That would be my belief, yes. Poor dear caught a terrible snag the other day and is practically ready for the delicate cycle."

"Is that a fact," Miss Gregors said, and Sullivan wished she would say something that at least showed signs of breaking out of her prim tone of voice.

When the dance ended Sullivan parted ways with Miss Gregors as politely as he possibly could and was about to put distance between the two of them when he saw his wife, Molly, standing nearby, having watched their turn about the dance floor. Sullivan steered Miss Gregors over to her and Molly embraced the older woman warmly. Miss Gregors seemed on the verge of staying to chat when Sullivan made the excuse of wanting to take his wife out for a breath of fresh air.

"Wasn't that dear of you, taking her for a turn on the floor," Molly said as she walked alongside Sullivan.

All thoughts of the stinging tone of Miss Gregors' voice emptied out of Sullivan at the sound of his wife's compliment, at the tone of love in her voice and adoration for dancing with Miss Gregors who, Sullivan could see now, was merely an old garment who had more loneliness than orneriness in her.

"Well, I know how the old girl gets. Barely getting out anymore, sad really." Sullivan let pride and a boisterous sense of humor creep into his voice, knowing he was showing off for his wife but enjoying the feeling of finding something inside of himself that impressed her so. "I was sure the old bat could use some company. Do you know that she asked me if we were going to make a trip to the cold cycle next outing?"

Molly perked up immediately. "Did she? Oh, Sullivan," she practically cried, "that would be lovely to see some of the old country again. Did you say yes?"

"We hardly need *her* to invite us, you do realize, dear," Sullivan said, trying to cover the wound he felt at her excitement, the feeling of him being her world sloshing out of his heart to be filled with bitter jealousy that anything Miss Gregors could offer would appeal to his wife so strongly. "Besides, you know I had planned on a trip through the warm then maybe a fluff cycle. It's good to share what the better cycles have to offer, it expands one's world."

"I suppose," Molly said, not nearly conceding enough for Sullivan to recover the feeling of warmth he had enjoyed not a few moments ago. He was staring off towards the landing when a large crash intruded on his thoughts and he looked up to see Cutty attempting to lead the band into something more ribald than the previous few numbers. There was a great murmuring in the crowd as it decided what it wanted, and finally it seemed to vote in favor of Cutty who managed to convince the band to play an upbeat reel and as Sullivan watched from the side, Molly, Miss Gregors, even Miss Cobb

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were gathered onto the floor and began to dance in time to the baser, more rustic music now playing.

The late night air was flooding over the edge of the table and the sound of Cutty outside hailing carts echoed in the nearly empty entrance hall.

“He’ll have every cart in The Mat coming over to us,” Miss Cobb said drolly.

“All right, then, there you go,” Sullivan said, helping another few party guests off the table and into the cart that Cutty had garnered. “Cutty!” Sullivan yelled as Cutty went bounding off again, “Get some plastic over your head or you’ll catch your death of stiffness and it’ll be the rag pile for you for certain!” But Cutty’s mood was too jolly to pay any attention to the soft snow falling all around him outside, and he paid no heed to it, only brushing it off when a pile started to form somewhere on his form.

Sullivan retreated back into the hall. “Who’s still here?” he asked Miss Cobb as she disappeared into the back room where the cubbies were.

“I believe just Mr. Carreras and maybe a few others” she said.

Sullivan walked further back, towards the rear dance hall and he heard singing coming through the doors, a tune he couldn’t recognize, something distinctly cold cycle about it, but beautiful none-the-less. Back by the rear hall the sound was louder, and the dark corners and dim light served to heighten the emotion of the song.

He turned toward the landing and saw a form standing there, almost hidden in the shadow. It was his wife. She was hovering over the stairs, her whole visage lost in the tune haunting the entrance and stairs from the dance hall.

Sullivan was struck by this vision, by the emotion filling his wife, and he wished for the words or skill to somehow capture this image, all of it, the song and her look and the light and he felt like he was failing in the attempt, that his heart was somehow too small to do any justice to what he was seeing.

Miss Cobb came out of the cubby-room with a few more plastics. "Oh!" she exclaimed, piercing the mood, "is that Mr. Carreras singing? Oh, and me not in the dance hall to hear it." She was clearly disappointed, but even as she spoke the singing died down and some words were heard and then the door opened and a few garments came out followed by Mr. Carreras, looking haughty and gruff.

"It's the weather," he said, "makes my throat as hoarse as could be."

"But I thought you sounded lovely," Miss Cobb said.

"Nonsense, woman," Mr. Carreras said in a tone that made nobody wish to question him, "hoarse as could be."

"Mr. Carreras," Molly called down from the stairs, slowly descending. The mood of the hall had not changed for her; she was still contained in the past on the landing, as if she were still hearing the melody that was now silent. "What was the name of that song?"

"The Lad of Saint's Way," Mr. Carreras said, and, as if this were enough of a farewell to the rest of the guests, he allowed Miss Cobb to show him to the door where a cart was waiting.

Staying to make sure that everyone was taken care of Sullivan and Molly were in the last cart, and after dropping off Miss Cobb and Cutty, they made their way inside, their plastic bags over their heads as they ran through the snow.

When they were inside and had made their way past the various sleeping forms to their room inside the bag, Sullivan watched as his wife began to undo the finery she had put on

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for the party. He attempted to recall the mood of her on the landing, so lost in emotion, so desirable.

“What was it about that song?” he asked, wanting to lead her back, wanting to share that moment with her now, in private.

“It reminded me of something.”

“What was it, Molly?” he asked. “You know you can tell me.” His tone was friendly, convincing, he knew she wanted to open up.

“It reminded me of someone I once knew who used to sing it; back when I was a cold wash only,” and to Sullivan’s shock he saw that his wife was on the verge of sobbing.

Sullivan recoiled inwardly, the moment slipping away from him, the intrusion of this other person sparking bitter floods deep within. “To make you cry like that? Who was it? Someone you loved?” he threw the questions out hoping to minimize her memory and restore his place in her life by squashing it with words.

“It was a sock I used to know...”

“A sock?”

“We used to walk along the folding table, we were quite young...quite young.”

“Was he...an argyle? Or silk?”

“He was white cotton, gym, and he was stitched poorly.”

“And you loved him?” Sullivan asked, not sure if he was being haughty out of defense or quizzical out of disbelief. “Is this why you wanted to take Miss Gregors up on her offer?” the surety of the thing growing in his mind.

“Miss Gregors?” Molly asked, puzzled as to how her name fit in.

“She suggested we join her for a trip back to the old country, to the cold cycle, I suppose you wanted to go with her because you thought maybe you might see this...”

“James?”

“...this James while you were out visiting?”

“No, of course not,” she turned away from him. “He’s dead. He died so young.”

“He was a sock; they can go so easily...”

She impaled him with a turn of her head and he immediately felt sheepish and small for not only feeling the need to belittle this memory but in failing so miserably in his attempt. Humbled he struggled to right the course of the conversation. “So what was it he died of? The weak stitching you spoke of?”

“I think...I think it was because of me that he died,” she said, and she was sobbing, her whole form shaking with grief. The memory was between them now, but it was doing more than separating them, it was changing her, transforming her in his mind into some other thing with a life behind her full of emotions he had never felt and, with a sudden twinge, he began to believe he never would.

He released her to work through her own emotions and releasing her he felt as if he were casting aside an iron that had grown too hot to hold, like he was backing away for personal safety. He waited, knowing she would go on.

“It was before I was to come over to the warm cycle. We would go walking all the time, we were quite the pair and I think he intended to...” she trailed off, the pain of the moment, foreign to Sullivan, forcing her to regroup and start over. “When I was to leave the cold cycle and come over I couldn’t stand to tell him, so I wrote him a note and had it delivered to his bag. That night when I was gathering my things I heard a voice calling out to me, that warbling tenor voice that would come out of his frail mis-sewn body. I went outside and there he was. The look on his face...” again her pain took her to a place that Sullivan could not go, could not even contemplate without the gulf between them growing greater. “I told him he needed to get back to his bag, that he

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couldn't stay out so late, but he wouldn't listen. I told him he'd wind up in the rag pile if he didn't hurry back and he told me...he told me he didn't want to go on living. He told me that. And he only looked at me as I yelled and yelled and finally he went back."

"And?" Sullivan asked, his wife's engagement in her tale drawing him away from his jealousy and hollowness.

"Lost in the wash, never seen again. Word reached me a week after I arrived at the warm cycle. They weren't sure if it was his late arrival or his weak stitching or if it was just his time, but, oh Sullivan, when I heard that news..." and she buried her head and was lost to him again.

She was asleep and the bag was silent. Only the faint light of the outside world shown through the mesh walls. Sullivan watched her as a stranger, this woman who had been involved in such a romantic moment, who had a lover willing to part with this world for her. He looked over her white features, her sagging straps and barely frayed edges. She was still beautiful but he could picture how she had looked in her youth when this sock, James, had loved her, had possibly turned to rags for her.

The night stretched out behind him and he looked it over, his calm dark-adjusted heart wondering at the mess of emotions that had entangled him. The dance and his words with Miss Gregors and Miss Cobb looking so frayed. The late hour let his mind dance too long over that last image and he remembered how ghostly and threadbare Miss Cobb had looked. It was possible that someday soon he would be getting word that Miss Cobb had turned to rags, one wash cycle soon would be her last and they would be gathering outside their bags to bid her farewell and he would be called upon to

find words, to give a speech, to console and to calm. That day was not too far off.

And the night wormed its way into his soul, and he felt himself close to that world of rags and string. It was better to go there in full function than to wither and fade. Better to become a rag for some glory than as a final concession to age. So his wife had made a sock take a step towards that end, had instilled such passion in another. He didn't know from experience, but he supposed such a feeling must be love and he could see the form of James the sock, small and sewn improperly, standing on the shelf outside of Molly's bag.

As silence reigned inside his mind he heard the soft tapping of flakes upon the mesh and he squinted drowsily towards the outside. It had begun to snow again and he watched the flakes float past outside. The time for him to set out on his own unraveling journey had come. Yes, Calla had been right; it was snowing all over the Laundromat. Down the central aisle, down upon the oversized machines. It was falling on the dryers and folding tables and over the carts in the corner and it fell over the washing machine where a sock named James had met his end. It was falling on the bags and the racks and the sinks and the vending machines and his breath hushed quietly through time, weaving with the infinite as the snow fell softly, like their untoward final breath, upon all the useful and the rags.

Black Eyed Susan

I don't know that I believe in love at first sight, at least not how The Beatles describe it and all. That being said I think I fell in love with your mother the first time I saw her, I just didn't know it. Looking back, that first instant, it's all pretty clear now. Maybe that's what they mean. I'm just saying it's not like I went home that night and couldn't stop thinking about her or anything, she was just another girl. But, looking at it all in reverse, yeah, it was love.

It was summer and we were fourteen, fifteen, sixteen, and we were at the Jersey Shore. Too young to drive anywhere interesting but too old to have fun hanging out in a house full of parents. If you were lucky you might get a ride to a party somewhere with an older brother of a friend, but that was only rarely and usually you had to pay a price, like by siphoning some gas out of a parent's car or something. And that's a nasty business. You have to get a length of garden hose and everything reeks of gas once you're done.

No, those of us in our early teens were driven into the streets, squeezed out really. Ten blocks of sleepy beach houses and during summer nights the outdoors became the only place we could hang out. Personally I loved the challenge of it.

You couldn't go anywhere that was built for people, the park on the bay for example, because that was city property and had to be maintained, so it was one of the places the police would sweep. For that matter, anywhere with a proper place to sit: a bench on one of the boardwalks or out in front

of one of the cafes that were closed for the night, anywhere like that was too out in the open or too double checked by the police. Cul-de-sacs could work, and dead ends, but then you were sitting on the street and inevitably you got loud enough so that some house lights would come on and you'd have to run.

The only real option was to move to the beach. Even if one of the ocean front houses had their deck lights on it was still basically pitch black. Every street had a small wooden walkway running up through the dune grass so you had multiple exit sites. The constant sound of the surf helped hide noise. Also the distance between you and anyone trying to sleep could be maximized out there on the cold sand.

You'd get chased off eventually of course. Once you found a good spot word would spread and enough people would show up and be loud enough that sooner or later you'd see the flash of blue and red light crawling across the outside of one of the nearby houses, or, worse, you'd suddenly find yourself on the receiving end of a very bright flashlight. At that point it was every man for himself.

Finding a place to hang out was only part of the challenge though. The rest of the challenge was getting beer. Not only getting beer, but hiding the beer, then transporting the beer out of your parents' house and onto the beach. You had to have beer. If you didn't find beer it was a sure thing that someone else would, or at least someone would sneak a bottle of something out of their parents' house, and then what did you have? You had chaos because everyone always followed the beer. It didn't matter if you were drinking. If you were one of the night people then, whether you knew it or not, you were going to follow the beer.

One twelve pack buried in the dunes would attract enough people who in turn would attract more people until

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the entire party would be centered on that twelve pack. Twenty or so kids would eventually cluster. It was like magic.

Although looking back I guess it wasn't magic, it was just that some kids liked biking around town more than they liked sitting on the beach drinking beer, and they'd tell others who would tell others and soon everyone would be up at the beach, sitting against the dune fence. Of course, as soon as this happened you'd start running the risk of seeing the flashing blue and red lights. That's why you had to get beer. Or why *I* had to get beer. If someone who didn't know what they were doing managed to get beer and picked a bad spot, like the playground by the bay, then you were running real risks of getting caught and not just chased, of getting marched up the driveway of your parents' house at midnight with a policeman behind you. That's why getting beer was so important, because it was too important to be left to amateurs.

Nowadays it seems so normal to walk into a bar, and to procure a booth or a stool or a comfortable spot in a corner, and to order a beer. And then the beer comes, and it's cold and it's fresh and it has a coaster underneath it and you pay for it and everything is perfectly legit. But it doesn't taste as good. When I stop to think about it, nothing will ever taste as good as the first can of beer dug out of the sand. It was usually lukewarm and you had to brush the sand off the rim, and it would gurgle up in foam the second you cracked the top and even when you wiped it off with the sleeve of your sweatshirt all you'd wind up with is a wet sleeve and sand in your beer. But I swear nothing ever tasted so good.



Your father always had a beer in his hand and they were always disgusting skunked frothy cans encrusted in

sand...and he clearly thought he was the greatest thing going for being able to produce such stuff. Over time I came to realize that he barely ever finished an entire beer in one night. For him holding a beer had nothing to do with getting drunk. It was a source of power for him, a symbol of accomplishment. If the hiring board at Amalgamated Packaging Inc. had known your father in those days they wouldn't have needed four interviews to decide he was the man they wanted heading their northeast distribution chain. If anyone ever understood how to move a product and the power required to do so and the power gained by it, it was your father, sitting on the beach, offering people a can of warm beer.

I'm being a little harsh. In all fairness it's not like his whole universe centered on beer that had been hidden in a sweltering garage for a month, but that first summer I wasn't quite ready to accept this bizarre world of perfectly normal kids acting like street urchins once the sun went down.

And it's not like they made it easy. They had all known each other, or of each other, for years, all seeing each other summer after summer. I was coming out for the first time that year to live with my cousin. And for some reason everyone got it into their head that I was a "city girl." Just because I didn't have the clothes down right and I wore strap on sandals to the beach my first night there. It was a little judgmental on their part. It's not like I was from the city any more than they were. I'm from the suburbs of southern Michigan. I just had never spent any time at the beach. So it wasn't a very smooth transition. And I suppose I was being overly defensive, I was getting heckled from all angles it seemed like. So when this boy who looked more like a Dickens character than anything else offered me a sand coated beer like he was handing me nectar from the heavens, well I guess I acted a bit like a bitch. I snorted and laughed him off and looked around hoping that my cousin would side with

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me and we could walk away from him and I could retain some sense of dignity. And that's what happened. My cousin and I weren't that close but she didn't know your father too well so of course she sided with me, but it didn't help any. I was known as a bitch for basically the rest of that summer. Even when I wasn't known as a bitch I was referred to as the bitch by my closer friends. Nicknames stuck back then. I was the bitch and your father was the beer man. And we were both fifteen.

She had all these snippets of information about herself that she insisted on giving us. In fact it was the night she met everyone that I learned her favorite flower was the Black Eyed Susan. It was almost the first thing she said after being introduced to the group and snubbing my beer. We were fifteen, who on earth has a favorite flower at the age of fifteen? Who has a favorite flower at any age? And who decides to give that information out when they first meet a group of people?

She was nervous I guess, trying to establish some sort of identity or something. But there it was. Black Eyed Susans. Over the years I've gathered that a grandmother of hers who she was very close with cited Black Eyed Susans as her favorite flower and they always held a special place in your mother's heart. Turns out that not only had that grandmother passed away earlier that year, but your mother had misunderstood someone next to her as saying something about a favorite flower and that triggered her to insert this information into the conversation and, thus, tell me her favorite flower absolutely out of nowhere.

As I've told you before, there was a great degree of magic involved with your mother and me getting together.

But really, not much happened that first year between the two of us and then summer ended and I was back in school. That was when I received my first shocking glimpse of how small my world really was. I took it for granted that I would see all my school friends when the fall came and when summer rolled around again that I'd see all my beach friends. But this awkward lanky girl was on my mind when the school year started and it suddenly hit me that I might not be seeing her again. Ever. In my life.

Like I said, it wasn't exactly love at first sight. It took some time for her to be accepted by the group and to get over that whole bitch thing, and then I sort of talked to her here and there and I hadn't realized it but she had gotten to me. And suddenly in the middle of a September afternoon everything went all topsy turvy on me. My shoes were too tight and my clothes were all neat and everything was white walls and I was back in this school world and everyone was concerned about tests and books and playing sports and yet only a few weeks earlier I had been the beer man. I had snuck out after curfew and watched the sunrise just because I wanted to. At the beach the entire town was mine at night. Back north I'd be crazy to go wandering around at night and even if I did the only thing I'd have for company would be crickets. But more than anything else there had been this girl. And I had zero control over whether I'd see her again. It kind of got to me. Summer wasn't ever held lightly in my mind again. That was the first of many times that your mother forced me to grow up.

That fall came and I went back to Michigan and the school year went by and summer came and I never really thought about it. I'm not even sure if I was officially asked, I

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just wound up heading back to New Jersey when school was out. I think my parents thought it was a good enough deal. They were already having some problems and without Nonna there anymore to take care of me I think my cousin's house on the coast seemed like as good a spot as any to stick me for the summer. It certainly wasn't because of any great love between me and my cousin. We weren't really very good friends at that point. I think she saw me as sort of foisted off on her and getting in the way of her summers. Which was a fair enough judgment. But she could have been nicer. It's pretty amazing that she wound up as my Maid of Honor. Time does strange things. Your lovable jack-ass of a father would mention something about magic in here.

You know if you took a group of fifty strangers, had them chat with your father for half an hour then with me for half an hour, then told them that one of us was an English Professor and one of us was head of distribution in the northeast for a large soft drink manufacturing concern, I'm pretty sure all fifty would peg your father as the English Professor and me as the head of distribution. He's honestly so good at what he does that I can almost allow him to claim it's magic except that it'd be nice if he took credit for some of the things he's done with his life. Of course he has this idea that he deserves credit for all sorts of things that he had no control over. Like our first kiss.

She was there the next summer. But I was no longer the beer man. The powers that be had decided that I needed a job so I was now the ice-cream man in the corner ice-cream parlor. Some other guy had an older brother in town that summer so he had an easy pipeline to beer. I wasn't going to

try competing with that. I knew it was time to step aside and pass that particular hat along.

But this did cause some problems. Mainly because there was this girl. Being the ice-cream man didn't exactly put me at the center of many conversations. When we'd congregate on the beach I'd be close to the beer man, I'd sit next to him, but I wasn't him, so any talking I did to people had to come from me. Fair enough. This obviously didn't cause any problems with friends and various other girls but with your mother...

She had been sitting in the back of my skull for the entire school year, and while she was back there she must have crossed any number of wires and laid down any amount of powerful voodoo because when I saw her in person again I was unable look at her and speak at the same time. There was too much pressure. Not only had she been in the back of my head all year, but when she first saw me she smiled. A real smile. Just for me. My brain fried instantly and I couldn't get a word out when she was around and we were out with the group. So I got to thinking. All I really needed was a little time alone with her, without her cousin hanging around or any other boys nearby.

Now, I already mentioned that where you chose to congregate for the night could affect things drastically, and that spot was always decided by where the beer was. Your mother never seemed able to understand that. But it's the truth.

So I figured that if I were to control where and when the beer showed up one night I could control the outcome of said night. The right place and the right time and the cops were bound to show up and that was bound to make people scatter. And if it was close enough to your mother's curfew then she wouldn't bother to come back out, she'd just head back to her cousin's house for the night. Your mother never broke curfew. You shouldn't break curfew either. Also, don't drink beer.

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Your father claims that he masterminded the whole thing and that he knew when the police would show up and that everyone would run. If you listen to him talk you'd almost believe that he could control something like that. And then he supposedly knew that I would be out back behind my cousin's house. They were on the bay side of the island and it was nice at night to sit on the dock along the water. The bay was much calmer than the ocean. The sound the water makes lapping against the pilings still relaxes me whenever I hear it.

Your father claims that he knew I would be out back behind the house all alone and that he ran from the police in just such a way so that he'd stumble onto me. But that's outrageous. There was absolutely no way he could know something like that. A lot of nights I would just come home and go to bed. It's not like I was out there every night.

Your mother smoked back then. Not a lot, just one at the end of every night. It was common knowledge if you kept your ears open. She would talk about how much she loved it with the other smokers and then they'd discuss various ways to make sure their parents couldn't smell it on them. One girl, her mother made her come in, wake her up and kiss her goodnight. Supposedly this was to make sure she was safe but we all knew it was so her mother could smell her breath. So the girl would always keep a bottle of mouthwash outside and would rinse her mouth before she went inside. Although you should keep in mind that your parents are always smarter than you are so I'm sure her parents saw right through that.

So I knew your mother would be behind the house because I knew her aunt and uncle's window was in the front of the house and I knew if the beer was at the playground on the bay then everything would fall into place. The only problem was that one kid decided to follow right behind me when the red and blue lights flashed on the sand. Kept right behind me as we snuck along the lagoon from dock to dock behind everyone's house. I figured he would break off at one point and head for his own house but we were getting closer and closer and eventually I had to take drastic measures. So I pushed him into the bay. Then I crept off along the docks and pilings and pretended like I was still running willy-nilly with no plan at all when I happened to stumble onto your mother. I was so nervous to be with her I was shaking and of course at first I couldn't speak.

Also, don't smoke.

He still pretends like he had it all worked out but he was still shaking when he showed up on the dock that night and he was so nervous from having to run from the police that he could barely speak.

Your father was really rattled, but he came and he sat down next to me and he smiled. I've always said that if your father's smile wasn't cute none of this would have happened. But it was cute. Very cute. I had always known that and some part of me was happy that this boy I always sort of liked was sitting next to me. And eventually he stopped shaking and we chatted for a long time and then we kissed. I don't think I need to go into details. I do remember that at one point after our kiss he turned around and lay back against my shoulder and it was very sweet but there was sand everywhere. I remember trying to run my fingers through his hair and brush it

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out but your father was perpetually covered in sand. That was something I could do nothing about. But that was our first kiss. It was a very proper kiss.

So your mother and I made out for awhile. Making out is fun, you have my blessing to make out all you want. The odd thing was, making out with your mother wasn't the best part, it was when she got tired of all the sand in my hair that kept falling in her face and she forced me to lay down on her lap and she ran her fingers through my hair over and over and over again trying to brush it out. If I had known she was going to do that I would have spent the entire previous day dumping sand into my hair. That was probably the best half hour of my life.

And that was it, really. For the rest of that summer and the summer after your father and I were a beach couple. The funny thing is, it wasn't supposed to be your father. I've never told him this but there was another boy I had been seeing here and there. His name was Frank Doogan. Frankie, he was known as, but he hated that. Frankie and I had kissed for the first time a few weeks before when someone had decided to play spin the bottle, which is a very mature game that you shouldn't play until you're twenty-seven. So Frank Doogan and I had kissed once or twice before your father found me on the dock and if things had progressed from there then Frankie probably would have been my summer boyfriend. I liked your father, mind you, he had that smile, but he hadn't spoken to me all summer and Frankie was nice. Your father got lucky showing up like that.

Did I know about Frankie Doogan? Of course I knew about Frankie Doogan. Why do you think I pushed him into the bay that night?

Of course karma paid me back after your mother broke my heart.

You have to understand this was just a summer thing. You'd spend three months of the year off in this fairytale land where you barely had any responsibilities, you had no tests and no worries about what college you were getting into and none of that mattered. It was just the summer and it was just supposed to be fun. Of course we exchanged numbers at the end of the summer and of course we would talk on the phone every now and then but that was supposed to be it. It was supposed to fade out after that. My real life was back home in Michigan. Your father was just from the beach.

And then I didn't go back to Jersey the next summer and any fool could see that your father and I were very nice together but that it wasn't for real. Naturally your father isn't just any fool. That was when he started stalking me.

I don't know if stalking is the word I'd use to describe it. Stalking is pretty harsh. I mean I called her every now and then, and I wrote her letters at college. And I tried to get her to invite me to come visit. She was going to school in Maryland and I was in Georgetown. It's not like I was asking to swim across the ocean for her. It's maybe a twenty minute

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drive. No, stalking isn't the right word by a long shot. I just called her too often and wrote her too many letters. Pathetic is probably a better word.

After awhile I realized it was time to be a man and that I had to put all of this behind me. That lasted about a day and a half. Then it was right back to being in love with your mother.



I saw him once or twice during those years. He was going to school so close to Maryland and he offered to help me pack one year and I let him. You have to realize that I'm joking somewhat when I say he was stalking me. We call it that now but I'll give your father credit for knowing how to give someone their space while staying a part of their life. And he really wrote very lovely letters. For an English major that means a lot. You should remember that. Get your English grades up; it might help you some day.

And your father was sweet, he really was. But he felt more like a puppy I couldn't bear to leave than someone I might actually consider dating. I've already outlined how ours wasn't a real relationship. And the years went by and there were other guys. Don't let your father fool you, either. At this point in the story he likes to play the long-suffering saint, but there were other girls in his life too.

But then I was graduating and it was really time to end this. I was going back to Michigan to start my life and he didn't know what he was doing and we weren't going to be right next door to each other in Maryland and DC anymore. It was crazy to keep this up. I knew I had to set him straight and to let him know that this wasn't anything serious and that maybe he should move on with his life. So he had written me his usual casual year-end letter asking if I needed help packing

up my stuff and how he was right next door to Maryland and it would be no problem and on and on. So I said yes, he could come help me pack and I told myself that I was going to make a clean break of things and then go on and start my life.

This is where things get a little strange. I don't buy into your father's view of magic, but things really do get sort of strange.

Your father's car ran out of gas down on a little county road I had never heard of. You could take the interstate right up to my campus but your father had to take some back road. And I had told him that I would be at the student center at a certain time and he should meet me there. This was before cell phones you have to remember. And your father didn't want to leave his car on the county road and didn't want to miss me either so I'm sitting there and two people, one right after the other, come up and ask me if I was waiting there to meet your father and when I said yes they handed me a note he had written asking me to come out to where he was stranded and to bring gasoline. Of all the asinine plans.

He had my address. I know I was supposed to move out that day but surely he could have hitched a ride into town then back out to his car and still tracked down my house and met up with me then. But, no, he flags down two strangers on a Maryland back road who were heading into campus and has them deliver notes to me asking me to lug gas out to him. He knew I would do it too. Your father knew how to give me my space but he also knew how to use an advantage when he had one.

What can I say? I was running some very large risks that day. I made sure I got at least two different people to agree to

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deliver my note. Outside of the overall lesson of how magic can affect our lives and all of that, you should take away the lesson that it's good to run risks but that you can always find ways to minimize them. No way was I letting all of this rest in the hands of one stranger. As it turns out they both found her at pretty much the same time, but still, it didn't hurt to be safe.



So I go to the gas station and I buy a gas tank and fill it up with a few gallons and get into my car and go driving out on this middle of nowhere road and I remember I had to put my head out the window because absolutely everything stank of gas. And I follow your father's directions and finally I pull up and he's sitting there on the hood of his car. He doesn't hear me pull up behind him, no, of course not, instead he's staring out at this field and I took one look at his face set against the backdrop of that field and I fell in love with your father.

I mean, I say that now. It probably wasn't that abrupt. But when I think back to that moment, when I got out of that car and your father, oblivious as usual, finally heard me behind him and turned and he gave me that cute smile and behind him was an entire field of Black Eyed Susans dancing in the late afternoon sun. Like I said, looking back it's easy to pinpoint, but at the time I don't think I consciously knew I fell in love with him then. What I did know was that I was struck with a profound sense of wonder that I was still pushing this boy away just because of how we had met. I mean that field behind him, it was so beautiful, and his smile and watching him hop off the hood and get the tank of gas out of my car and fill up his tank and thanking me and apologizing and there in the middle of nowhere was an entire field of

Black Eyed Susans. I decided at that moment that maybe I owed this boy a chance. And since that chance turned into lingering a few days on campus and a few dates and then a few more chances and on and on until...well...I suppose it's okay to say that was the moment I fell in love with him.

If you listen to him tell it he'll go on about how magic was involved and how it was the magic that let everything unravel like that. But really it was just chance where he stopped and me finally realizing that maybe this boy was for real.



She still doesn't believe in magic. I suppose from her point of view that's okay, but that's the first lesson I want you to take away today. Magic happens; you need to have faith in that. And if you've got that first lesson learned I'll tell you the second lesson. Sometimes magic comes along in strange ways. Your mother has no idea what I mean by magic, she never has. Sometimes you can create magic by moving a twelve pack of beer to the playground. And sometimes magic operates by letting your mother spill some gas down the side of a gas tank she's filling so when she shows up she doesn't notice the length of garden hose in my trunk or that everything reeks of gasoline.

But that's all nothing. Not really. Maybe that *is* all chance and luck. But I swear what really was magical was that your mother, who is a very smart woman, and who had been going to college in Maryland for four years, had somehow never once learned that the Black Eyed Susan is the Maryland state flower. Pick any county road and drive down it in spring and you'll be able to find a whole field full of them. I mean, they grow absolutely everywhere out there.

Private Showing

Gustav watched the white ball roll across the stained felt of the pool table. He sat on his stool against the wall, the soles of his scuffed tennis shoes hooked against one of the rails. For him the ball's path contained perfection and form, predictability and order. The table was one of his favorites to watch and he had come to know it like he knew the short walk from the pool hall to his apartment building three blocks away.

The man who had taken the shot, a preposterous sample of humanity dressed like a peacock and with a temperament like a bitchy dog, cursed and stomped the rubbered end of his cue down on the ground, looking around in an exaggerated fashion as if the gods themselves must be looking down confused as to how so perfect a stroke could have resulted in a miss.

There was money on the game. The peacock's opponent took a half-step backwards and, holding his cue upright in front of him like a knight at attention, he receded into the darkness just out of range of the rays from the long lamp that hung over the table. His form became statuesque to avoid entering in any way into the peacock's head. Clearly the peacock was rattled and the knight was making a calculated decision that letting him alone would be the best way to further his spiraling out of control.

Gustav also sat back. He was far enough away from the table to know that the prescription for his glasses needed to be strengthened, but he leaned back just the same, not wishing to intrude on what he was watching.

He reached a slow hand to the table on his right and retrieved a tall glass. As he took a sip a bit of pulp from the lime that had come with the drink slipped off the rim and into his mouth. He had long since thought the ice in his drink had melted it into a warm watery mess, but with the bit of pulp held against the back of his top front teeth by his tongue he was able to take a gulp, and although the flavor of juniper berries was lost, there was the bitter puckering of the quinine left and as that grew he squeezed his tongue against his teeth and the small nodules of lime burst in a tart spray. He swallowed and smiled, now happily detached.

When he reached to set his glass down on the table he misjudged the distance. The glass fell to the table with a clatter that was followed immediately by the thunk of a cue striking a ball and the subsequent rounded clacks of that ball striking others as its influence spread across the table.

“Hey, man!”

Gustav knew what had happened and he attempted to withdraw more into himself while refusing to look up. The peacock was staring at him, his cue brandished like a weapon, his face angry but unable to hide the relief he felt at having found someone to blame for his inferior game.

The peacock walked closer. “You just going to sit there all day, old man?” He was leaning down, as if ducking under something that was blocking his view of Gustav. “You don’t have anything better to do than mess up my game?”

Gustav remained perfectly still, trying to keep the picture in its frame. This wasn’t supposed to happen; he couldn’t handle it when this happened. It made Rebecca too near.

“Oh, leave him alone,” the knight spoke up.

“Yeah?” Peacock turned, needing something to blame for his bad game. “You *would* say that, he’s practically running interference for you.”

“The guy put his drink down.”

Private Showing

“He’s sitting back there staring at every move I make; you think that’s not going to get to me? Are we playing a spectators’ sport here?”

Knight stepped forward. For all of Peacock’s threatening and gesturing it was clear that he had nothing to hang his argument on.

“It’s a bar. You can’t handle the distractions, it’s because you can’t handle playing in a bar, not because of the distractions.”

Things were becoming too focused on Gustav for his liking; the dialogue was ruining the picture, the argument making it all too real. He got down from his seat, saying something inaudible that was hopefully an apology and began to look for a new vantage point.

“Where you think you’re going?” Peacock shouted after him, still hoping to shunt blame off of his own shoulders.

“What’s the problem?” the waitress asked, appearing short and cute between the two men.

“That guy’s creeping me out,” the peacock said, trying to still sound angry but finding it difficult now that Gustav was a few tables away.

“What was he doing?” the waitress asked.

“Nothing. Nothing at all. He’s just pissed off because he’s losing,” the knight spoke up.

“Hey, I just find it weird when some old guy decides to stare at me.”

“Let him be,” the waitress said easily enough, “him and his wife are in here all the time. He’s a security guard at the museum or something. They just like to have a few drinks on his day off and watch some pool.”

She was already walking back towards the bar when the knight spoke up. “I didn’t see a wife.”

Gustav shuffled along the tables, hugging the wall. A lifetime of working in cheap black dress socks had left his ankles hairless and when he wore his tennis shoes his legs were always cold. He tried to adjust his waist band so his pants might cover more of his legs.

Once he was far enough from “The Peacock and the Knight” he settled on a new table. The light was different here, it was much closer to the window, and he quietly walked around the outskirts of the table’s presence, looking for the proper framing.

It was a domestic scene, a father and his son. Gustav guessed the boy was in attendance at a local college and the father was in town visiting. They had perhaps gone to a show, a nice lunch, and then had decided to throw back a bit. Maybe the mother had decided to go lie down in the hotel, or do some shopping, and father and son had decided to bond over the slightly lowbrow activity of shooting a few games of pool at the local bar.

Gustav chose his seat, a good vantage point, out of the way, almost at a different table, with the low light from the window creating warm shading throughout. His drink was gone; he wasn’t sure where he had left it. It made viewing difficult, too often they viewed back, so he hid inside of himself until the waitress passed by and he was able to put in an order. He didn’t speak. He only gestured and avoided eye-contact.

A few minutes later he was rewarded with a glass of fresh drink and he sipped it. The drink alone was enough for a few seconds. Putting the glass down he settled back and watched, once again on the outside. But Father and Son weren’t as involved in their game and there was some tension between them. The tension might have been nice, might have brought about an interesting context for the warmth and openness of

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their scene but instead they continued to focus more on the things around them instead of on each other. And that meant they noticed Gustav. Almost immediately he became a common distraction for them, reacting awkwardly to his presence was easier than interacting with each other.

With a nod towards the streaked double glass doors at the other end of the bar Gustav pretended that someone he knew had just walked in. He left “Father and Son” quickly, their stares coming too close, their life and breath coming too close, making him remember.

He was edgy now. The frames weren’t holding. Without realizing it he found that he had walked all the way to the outside doors. He turned away, noticing a busy corner of light and color.

A group of girls, older, possibly graduate students from Son’s school were gathered together, soft sweaters and jeans. Lots of eyeglasses and an amazing array of height. A wonderful grouping of subjects.

Gustav walked around, knowing that a group that large would be concentrating on each other; even if one or two noticed him they had more than enough places to hide their gazes so they could ignore him. The location right up next to the door didn’t please him. He was more into dark contrasts. Perhaps if there had been a weak rainstorm outside, but it was only clear evening light and neon from the bar creating a palate too Technicolor for his liking. Still, there was plenty of merit, plenty to watch, plenty to soak in, plenty to distract.

Gustav took a seat with a nice view, allowing for the modernist lighting scheme he let the windows backlight the entire piece. He conceded that the vibrant colors and loud talking maybe masked a deeper meaning and he found himself enjoying this painting after all. He took a sip from his glass, the condensation running down the sides delightfully

cool against his palm, and smiled as he was finally able to detach and watch.

Then one of the girls came closer. She was looking at him and he tried to stare straight ahead, maybe pretend he was deaf or senile or drunk but she was coming closer. The frame was breaking.

Gustav must have reminded her of her father, or a favorite uncle, or a character from a childhood book that enough beer and laughter with her friends had called to mind. Or maybe he just looked lonely. She sat down next to him and asked what he was doing. She was friendly and casual and was clearly just chatting to him because she wanted to sit down for a few minutes, all the other chairs were full of jackets or bodies, but whatever the reason she was there and she was talking and his insides were cold.

The tilt of her body as she reached down to adjust a sock that was itching her calf, the tall glass slickly wet in his hands, the warbling of her voice, it was all too close and Gustav felt his insides seize up like a steel band was tightening around them and he tried to fight it back but the memories came. They always came in no order, only with the stupid clumsy grouping of association. First Rebecca appeared as a vague emotion in the back of his mind and then an image or conversation or fragment of their life together followed with no sense of propriety or reason.

They had argued about buying a larger bed. He had wanted one, she hadn't. She had been afraid that the space of a larger bed would allow them to sleep truly separately, that physical contact during sleep was important and he had just wanted to sleep the night through and now he spent his nights arranging his pillows to try and fill the hollow of his back the way her body had, draping the sheets over his side to recreate the way her arm had lain when she was alive.

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The girl watched as Gustav lurched off his stool. He didn't respond to her worried questions, he only batted a hand behind him as he walked, almost ran, away. He slammed the tall glass in his hand down on a ledge as he hurried past, the sound of glass shattering stopping some of the conversations nearby but it didn't stop him as he made it to the exit, his old frame hustling through the door.

The girl tried to answer questions from some of her friends but could only shake her head in confusion. Concern made her walk to the door, but she looked out and couldn't see the old man anywhere.

Gustav was a few blocks away before he slowed down. Then he stopped and, as if his body was intent on doing the exact opposite of what it had been doing the last two minutes, he froze, shoulders hunching in over his stomach, cool breeze now making his ankles cold. There was sweat on his forehead. Only his eyes moved, darting like small-winged birds over everything in sight until they locked on a man in a suit stopped at the corner across the street, a newspaper folded over in his hands, lost in reading.

Waning light, evening sky, man in a suit, the overflowing garbage can next to him contrasting with the crispness of his clothes. Slowly Gustav was able to appreciate "Business Man at the Corner," and slowly he let himself become conscious that he was no longer thinking about her. His body relaxed. The frame was up. She was out of his mind again.

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The swinging doors slammed open. Cedric looked over from where he was sitting on a lab stool, chewed thumbnail between his teeth. His shoulder length blond hair was coated with the shine of someone who has only wet their hair down and not washed it. His red streaked eyes were a sure sign of his having been recently woken up.

He watched Dorian backing his way through the doors pulling a gurney behind him. “Dorian,” Cedric said, then immediately fell silent as Dorian turned around. There was panic in Dorian’s eyes and a waxy pallor beneath the stubble on his face that betrayed a lack of sleep.

“Dorian,” Cedric said again, that one word betraying multiple emotions: a layer of fear spread over top concern for his friend, concern for his own wellbeing, and simple anger at letting himself become involved in this.

“Hook her up,” Dorian said before moving to a lab stool of his own and sliding a keyboard across the table to rest in front of him, his fingers impatiently tapping the spacebar while he waited for the monitor to respond. With a hiccup of light the screen became active making Dorian’s face even more hollow with its sickly glow. He was normally a handsome man with short brown hair that was always perfectly combed. Tonight, though, it was full of unruly licks and his white lab coat, which usually added to his presence as the overall leader of their research team, was cast by the computer’s light into awkward shades of green and blue. A large coffee stain down the front appeared to still be wet. Cedric didn’t respond.

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“I said hook her up,” Dorian said.

“Dorian,” Cedric said for the third time.

“*I said hook her up!*” Dorian screamed and Cedric jumped forward to the gurney. Coffee stain or no coffee stain, Dorian was a commanding presence.

Cedric hadn't turned on any lights when he had arrived at the lab, partly because his still sleepy eyes had been craving the dark, and partly out of some deeper sense of wanting to remain hidden. He gripped the cool metal rails of the gurney and began wheeling it towards the corner that contained the only real source of brightness in the room in the form of three light stands hovering over two parallel stainless steel tables. They each rested in front of a large circular opening in the wall and were on tracks which would let the tables slide into these separate openings.

Cedric slowed the gurney down and wheeled it into place next to one of the tables. He looked over at Dorian, now leaning back and typing furiously on the keyboard, and decided not to ask for help lifting her onto the table right now. Nibbling on his thumbnail Cedric decided that he could start attaching the required instruments and transfer her later. He was too scared to interrupt Dorian again to ask for help.

Cedric looked at the sleeping form and said one last prayer of internal remonstrance. He was still staring down when Dorian's voice, calmer now, startled him out of his thoughts.

“I removed your keycard's signature from the logbook document.” Dorian said. “The cameras are on power-save mode in all the hallways and will remain that way throughout the night. You haven't logged into any of the computers. Technically I could have done this all by myself. If anything goes wrong I want you to leave. It will be like you were never here.” He smiled. “I don't expect you to stick your neck out

for me. I accept full responsibility for tonight. I just appreciate you being here.”

Cedric hands didn't stop what they were doing nor did his head lift up to look at Dorian. “If something goes wrong, Dorian, your wife will wake up in a few hours from what I can only hope is a nominal dosage of sedative to find herself in a strange room with her husband laying on the table next to her in a coma.”

“And *you*,” Dorian insisted, “will be nowhere to be found. Let's lift her.” They transferred Dorian's wife, Tabitha, onto one of the cold metal tables.

Things had calmed down since Dorian's frantic entrance and Cedric took this opportunity to try talking to him again. He hadn't attempted this since the phone call from Dorian that had woken him up in the first place.

Cedric steadied his hands and began working at a much slower pace. “We're not ready for this,” he said.

Dorian was back over at the keyboard now and the rattling of his fingers was louder than his response. “We've had successful runs before,” he said.

Cedric was relieved to hear that the edge was gone from Dorian's voice. This was the closest thing to a rational sentence he had heard from his friend all night. “We've had successful runs in removing small amounts of emotional trauma from young adults,” Cedric said.

“See? Successful runs,” Dorian said, index finger repeatedly tapping at the enter key.

“But the process we've developed,” Cedric tried again, “allows an audio-visual exploration of the frontal lobe by another person. You're talking about hooking up and exploring the temporal lobe which...” Dorian swiveled on his chair and stared at Cedric. Cedric stopped talking under his eyes. But once Dorian had turned back to the keyboard Cedric felt

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himself needing to speak again. "There just has to be an easier way."

"Nope," Dorian said, his belief that this was his only recourse caused the word to become clipped and harsh in his mouth.

"You two are having problems but that doesn't mean—"

"I'm losing her," Dorian said. As soon as Cedric lifted his head he was sorry he had done so. The blinking screens, Dorian's waxy eyes, even the coffee stain down his front all revealed an inner weakness in Dorian that Cedric didn't want entering into their work environment. Dorian was hurting right out in the open. "I love her and I'm losing her. She won't talk to me. She's withdrawing. And if there's a reason or if there's...if there's...this guy she works with. His name is Gunderson. I think maybe they...if there's someone else..." Dorian stared for a few seconds, then turned back to the keyboard. Cedric felt relieved to no longer be facing him. Instead he focused on the work his hands were doing.

"If there's a reason I'll find it and we'll work through it," Dorian said, now standing next to Cedric.

Dorian walked around to the other table and gathered up the various devices that needed to be attached to his skin to monitor his vital signs and keep him in touch with Cedric. Everything else that the procedure needed was done inside the tubes.

As Cedric watched he realized that Dorian was right about one thing. He could have done this all by himself. Once the program was started at the terminal Dorian could have keyed in any delay he wanted. Then he could have gotten his wife's body and his own ready, lay down, and waited for the tables to recede into the tubes in the wall. If he was successful in his mission then he wouldn't need Cedric there at all. If Dorian failed while inside his wife's mind, on the other hand, and Cedric weren't there on the outside to lead

him back, the rejection plus the overload would be too much for Dorian's brain. He would essentially be trapped inside his wife's memories while inside his own head.

But the bottom line, Cedric realized, was that Dorian was right, if need be he could make it appear as if he had never been here.

"Okay," Dorian said from the opposite table. "Wish me luck."

The last few hours played across Cedric's sleepy eyes: the phone call waking him up, the badgering and pleading to get him to come down to the lab, Cedric trying to say "No" but knowing that he could never deny his friend anything, the frantic rushing about once Dorian had arrived, and now Dorian lying next to his sedated wife ready to slip into oblivion. Cedric didn't even have a chance to open his mouth to reply before Dorian's table began sliding him headfirst into the cylindrical hole in the wall.

Once his feet had disappeared from view the thick metal door slid shut with a clang. Cedric knew that sensory deprivation had proved to be a key element in starting the process, but he had always said that the once all the bugs were worked out the first cosmetic move they should make was to redesign the doors. It reminded him too much of the similar rolling tables a block away at the morgue.

He looked down at Tabitha. Even in the harsh brightness of the light stands and under heavy sedation she still looked beautiful. Then the table began moving and she disappeared into her tube, her feet fading from view, the door clanging shut.



Dorian waited in complete darkness. The sensation of lying on his back slowly faded as it became difficult to believe

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he was oriented in any particular direction. There was some humming from the machine, even heavily dampened it was still audible, and he made a mental note to look into this when he was back at work.

Then, like sunrise in pitch black, a world gently became visible. He was standing on a street in an undeniably urban setting, although it was nothing like any city he had ever been in. Slowly the light grew, or the darkness faded, depending on how he squinted, and as he watched short stone houses started clustering all around him, hemming in the street from either side. Pedestrians and vendors began to appear as the connection between his mind and his wife's began to grow, his consciousness becoming more and more dependant on her presence for its sense of self and sanity.

"Everything looks fine from out here," Cedric's voice said, and Dorian turned to see a small speaker box hovering in mid-air to his left. The speaker box was a fragment of Dorian's own consciousness, a tie to his own self that always took a form personal to the visitor. It would balance the need for something that would allow him to communicate with the outside world while not clashing too much with his sense of reality. It was meant to be both unobtrusive but also comforting. A computer generated facsimile of Cedric himself, for example, would be too jarring. The speaker box was a holdover from happy far distant memories of a family trip Dorian had taken with his parents to see a movie at one of the last working drive-in theaters left in the world.

"Let me just check a few more things before you begin to explore," Cedric's voice said, and some part of Dorian felt a small wave of joy at the way the speaker's sound crackled.

"Actually, Dorian? I'm going to run to the bathroom real quick before we get started. I'm going to switch off out here so nothing happens that I don't want to," Cedric's voice said, and before Dorian could answer the speaker box disappeared.

Dorian's initial reaction was calm, but as the seconds drifted by panic began to form at the base of his spine. His stomach became uneasy. Without the connection to Cedric Dorian was lost in this world. He looked around at the strange dress and décor and atmosphere. The unknown city seemed hostile and lonely. If he started to lose control or remained here too long it was possible for him to destroy everything he saw, his own consciousness included.

Technically he had been truthful with Cedric. Dorian only needed him along as a safety net, and Dorian was thankful that over the years of working together Cedric had become more of a friend than a co-worker. He would never have dreamed of asking any of the other technicians to help him with something like this, plus Cedric's closeness with him and Tabitha would make this whole process run smoother. But while Dorian had spoken the truth on purely technical terms, the fact was that he wasn't here to actually create a breakthrough with his wife. They had drifted apart so much that he didn't believe that would be possible. He was only here looking for clues that he could use to approach her again in the real world. And without a breakthrough she would never accept his presence here and without that acceptance he was a prisoner without Cedric.

Dorian began to picture things going wrong on the outside. Maybe there was more security to the lab than he knew about and the police had been alerted. Maybe they were talking to Cedric now. Maybe Cedric was arguing with them that he had to get back to the computer or his friend might start to lose his mind but the police weren't letting him go and were going to take him in and leave Dorian all alone for ever and ever and-

"Okay. Sorry about that," Cedric's voice said, the speaker box again bobbing in mid-air next to Dorian. "Would you mind doing some jumping jacks or stretching a bit, any sort

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of physical exertion?” Dorian complied, relief at Cedric’s return and joy at being in this, now safe, new place caused Dorian to smile as he touched his toes. Cedric ran him through a few more physical exercises before announcing: “You look all set from here.”

“Great,” Dorian said. “Now I just wish I knew where I was.”

“I’ve got nothing out here,” Cedric replied. Dorian could imagine him sitting at the computer screen trying to analyze the strings of data flooding across three computer monitors for a clue of what sort of reality Dorian was currently occupying. For his part, Dorian began to walk along the street. Vendors and markets were set up everywhere and a young blind woman selling flowers walked past him. Nobody was speaking English.

“It looks familiar,” Dorian said, glancing down a tiny side street, “but very old. It might be-”

He stopped as he rounded a corner and caught sight of a river. The city continued on the far bank, and in the middle a familiar structure sat upon an island. “I’ve got it,” he sighed.

“Where are you?” the speaker box crackled.

“She always did romanticize this place. Ten percent of the male population dead, economic ruin everywhere and an entire infrastructure destroyed...but, hey, at least wine is cheap.”

“I don’t get it,” Cedric crackled.

“I’m in Paris in the 1920’s,” Dorian said, finally answering his question. “The Beat Generation lived here; Tabitha absolutely *loved* anything to do with this place.”

“The Lost Generation,” Cedric said.

“What’s that?”

“The *Lost* Generation,” Cedric corrected him. “The Lost Generation lived in Paris after World War One. The Beat Generation was in America in the fifties.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Dorian said. “I just want to find Tabitha.”

“Just thought you might like to understand where your wife chose to hide.”

“I get it,” Dorian said, starting to walk towards the island, The Cathedral of Notre Dame looming large in the middle of the river. “Writers, quaintness, and perfect hindsight. None of the problems that come with living in the real world.”

“If it’s at the forefront of her brain like this then it’s probably pretty important to her.”

“Either that or she’s trying so hard to get away from me she’s been coming here constantly.”

“Yes,” Cedric said. “There’s that too.”

“No way to know.”

The speaker box said something quietly that Dorian didn’t hear. He was walking along, taking a good look at every doorway and whitewashed limestone façade. A man selling ice from a horse drawn cart passed him on the street. “Did you say something?” he asked.

“I said,” Cedric answered, “you could try talking to her.”

“I told you,” Dorian said, standing at the entrance to another small side street. “She won’t talk to me.”

A loud group of three people walked behind Dorian. Something in their voices caught his attention and he turned to listen to them as they passed. His eyes lost focus as he concentrated on the sounds they were making.

“I don’t even think these people are speaking French,” he said finally, before leaving the main street and starting down a smaller side street. “That sounded like pure gibberish.” The closeness of the walls on either side of him drew in until the street came to resemble more of an alley than a road. “Tabitha took French for three years in college. Why can’t she assemble actual French for this fantasy?”

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“She took Italian. And it was after college as part of a continuing educating program.”

“Still...” Dorian said, not really listening, studying the small doorways that appeared every five feet. “If you’re going to hide somewhere in your mind it seems that you could at least think it through.”

“Dorian,” Cedric said, and his voice was becoming harsher somehow, “the whole point of building something like this up in your mind is so that you *don’t* have to think it through. This is where she comes when she’s feeling lonely or lost. It doesn’t need to be perfect.”

“So I’ve noticed,” Dorian said. He was still standing in the narrow street but now there was nothing in front of him, only a giant expanse of emptiness. It was like the city just ended and nothing existed beyond it. It was possible to say that it was colored white, but this coloring was more an effect of the absolute nothingness that the space contained. “There’s a pretty big gap here. It’s possible that the whole city in her mind is only a few major roads. That’ll make the search easier.” Dorian remained for a minute, staring out at the great nothing. It was hypnotic, but there was a sense of dread. The space was so vast that his own sense of well being began to fade and a crushing feeling gripped his heart. With effort he turned away and immediately began to feel better.

Dorian made his way back to the main street. He followed this until he reached the river. He walked along it, watching the water flowing past, until he came to one of the many bridges crossing it. He was about to walk over when a loud noise startled him. He reacted sharply, jumping back from the center of the street without thinking. A quick repetitive metallic clanking roared up behind him and a tank drove past. Men in uniform and two girls, each holding a bottle of champagne, were sitting and riding on various parts of the tank.

“Okay,” Dorian said. “That doesn’t make a *lick* of sense. Did you see that?” he turned to ask the speaker box.

Cedric laughed. “She never could keep World War One and World War Two straight.”

“But we’re supposed to be in the 1920’s. *Neither* of those wars is going on.”

“And what the hell is *that*?” Dorian was halfway across the bridge. He was pointing without realizing it at a man dressed in a toga holding an apple. There were sheep all around him and standing in front of the man were three women who were so beautiful they were shimmering. “Can you make that out?”

Cedric didn’t respond for a few seconds. The speaker box only bobbed lazily in the air next to Dorian’s shoulder. “Ah,” it said finally. “That would be the *Judgment* of Paris. It’s the cause of the Trojan War. Happened thousands of years ago. You’re wandering away from her and into her less coherent brain functions. These are just things that remind her of the word Paris. Try walking back the way you came, see if things get a little more normal.”

Dorian walked back and things began to return to the quaint small town feel he had experienced upon first arriving. He strolled along the river bank, watching the buildings move past on the opposite side. He glanced around upon reaching another larger thoroughfare and saw a café full of people, its tables spilling out over the street. It contained more people than he had seen thus far.

Dorian walked inside and the crowd grew thicker. There was loud music, something like a cross between big band and jazz, coming from farther in and Dorian worked his way through people until he came to a dance floor. That was where he saw her.

He no longer noticed the music playing nor the constant jostling of bodies against him as he stood at the edge of the

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crowd. She looked happy, dancing and laughing. There were a couple of men around her but she wasn't dancing with anyone in particular. If she had brought another man into this fantasy with her Dorian knew it would be the man she was cheating on him with and he looked over the faces all around her to see if Gunderson was nearby, but the dance hall was dark and smoky and it was difficult to even make Tabitha out not to mention everyone around her.

"What do you see?" he shouted to the speaker box. Cedric said something but it was hard to make out above all the noise.

Then someone emerged from the crowd. Dorian couldn't see him well, but he grabbed Tabitha's hand and she spun into him laughing. The two swayed to the music for a couple of bars and then she stood up on tiptoe and whispered something in the man's ear. Then she was holding the man's hand, leading him through the crowd towards the door. Dorian lost sight of them.

He took what he hoped was a roughly parallel path and began shoving and elbowing his own way towards the exit. The crowd thinned as he left the dancing behind and he glimpsed Tabitha walking out the door, the man was already outside and Dorian quickened his pace to get a better look at him but then he bumped into a waiter carrying a tray and coffee cups and saucers flew everywhere, porcelain shattering on the floor.

By the time Dorian disentangled himself and got outside Tabitha and the man were well off in the distance. He began to run towards them, watching as the man said something to her and walked into a little shop they were passing. They held hands for as long as possible even as he walked away, their fingertips holding contact right up until the last second when Tabitha let her hand drop and smiled after the man as he ducked through the doorway.

“Tabitha!” Dorian yelled, drawing closer now, able to see her face more clearly. He saw her turn and watched as bewilderment drew across her face and he heard the speaker box behind him yelling at him to take it easy, that it was dangerous to confront her like this, to stop yelling.

Dorian covered the distance remaining at a sprint, shouting her name any number of times. When he was face to face with her she only said one thing. “Dorian. Leave. I don’t want you here.”

“Who is he,” Dorian said, ignoring her, taking her by the shoulders, shaking her. “Just tell me who he is.”

A hand gripped his wrist and grappled with his arm and forcefully removed him from her. He knew it was the man, fighting him off, he could see the dark brown sleeves of his shirt and after a strong shove he had to step back a few feet.

The speaker box had caught up to him and was floating in the middle of all of this, ghost like, over the street. Tabitha turned away from him and went to stand next to the man. Dorian looked at him and saw Cedric staring back at him.

The speaker box turned and faced him, bobbing in the air.

“Cedric?”

Dorian tried to move but his legs felt like rubber and he stepped backwards instead to sit down on the curb.

“Goodbye, Dorian,” Tabitha said, and she walked away, hand in hand, with the Cedric in the brown shirt. They disappeared around a corner.

“Cedric?” Dorian asked again, looking at the speaker box. “It’s not...that’s not...you didn’t know, right? She’s just bringing you here because you’re a safe person to think about, not because...you’re not...”

The speaker box seemed to be looking down at him. “I’m sorry, Dorian. But you clearly don’t love her like I do,” it said.

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“Cedric?” Dorian said, standing up. The speaker box began to fade from view. “Cedric! Cedric wait, don’t leave me here! Cedric!” He was kneeling now, begging with the speaker box. It was only a whisper of visible light now, and then it was gone.

Dorian stood up and screamed Cedric’s name once, twice. There was no answer. A man passing him on the street stopped and spoke to him in concerned sounding gibberish.

Dorian shoved him to the curb and began to run off towards where Tabitha had disappeared but when he turned the corner she was gone. His mind was slipping out of control now and he bolted as fast as he could down the street.

He turned a corner and came to a stumbling halt. Ahead of him was nothing but empty white. He spun around and ran back the other way, passing by the gibberish speaking stranger staring at him huffily from the curb until, turning another corner, he halted again, breath panting from his mouth, emptiness in front of him. Backing away he made it to the main street again but there he froze. He didn’t dare turn any more corners, he didn’t dare enter any more doorways, he didn’t dare even to blink. The emptiness was all around him now. He could feel it out there, starting to close in.

Jacob Checks Out

We always used to say that Jacob was built backwards. I knew him from college on, so I sort of got to watch the tail end of things. There were friends of his from high-school and grade school there today. Each one of us caught a different fragment of years of Jacob's life. Each one of us was united in the urge to try and piece him together, to figure out what happened, to hope that by pooling our stories and year fragments maybe we could make sense out of the loss of our friend.

Jacob didn't have any brothers or sisters and his parents didn't identify with our need to reconstruct their son, so we had to start with Roger Federman who knew him in grade school. There isn't much there. It's infertile territory. Jacob stood out as much as anyone stands out in grade school, which is a whole lot and none at all. All we really get from Roger is a little more depth about Jacob's parents.

Jacob's father was an asshole. Mr. Dunn was the type of father that every group of friends has one of. Namely the father that everyone was terrified of even though you only saw him, at most, for five minutes every month. Outside of the lingering presence of fear there isn't much to say except the story about Jacob's lion and the busy street. And it's not much of a story.

Jacob was lost in thought when he was young, standing on the side of the main road that ran through his town. I'm not saying it was a major highway, but there was constant traffic, two lanes each way, and storefronts for three towns in either direction. Jacob was lost in thought; I like to think that

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he was on the verge of something big inside his head. Jacob always looked his stupidest when he was doing his best thinking. He'd look like the most bumpkin of rubes, eyes glazed over, somehow squinting into the distance while remaining completely blank, and you'd start to wonder about the guy. Next thing you'd now he'd blurt out some preposterous piece of knowledge. Sometimes he'd be working out a problem from a math class he was in four hours ago. More off-putting was when he'd piece together something more human. We'd be in our dorm room and a friend would stop by and say something, and then another friend, and then the girlfriend of the first friend, and they'd leave, and Jacob would look stupid for half an hour, then he'd suddenly tell you that the girlfriend was cheating on the first friend with the second friend. And you'd laugh. You always laughed. No matter how many times he was right. When he discussed science or math you kept your mouth shut, but when he discussed people you always laughed because that wasn't supposed to be his area. You'd laugh but you wouldn't forget. You'd try to forget but you never could and sure enough a week or a few months later it would come up that friend's girlfriend was cheating on him...and you'd never guess with who.

So, lost in thought is how I like to imagine Jacob in this story. Four or so years old, staring dumbly at the traffic lights or something while his head was piecing together god only knows what. And he's holding his favorite stuffed lion. It's hard not to overshoot with this image and picture him wearing suspenders and holding a giant lollipop as well, or those old timey pajamas with the flap on the rear, but as quaint as the image of Jacob carrying his favorite stuffed lion on the main street of his hometown is, that's how the story goes. And apparently his dad couldn't get him to pay attention to what he was saying. Jacob insisted on remaining lost in thought. Things are a little mixed here, but the overall con-

sensus is that Mr. Dunn decided Jacob needed a lesson in being safe while crossing the street, so he ripped the stuffed lion out of Jacob's hands and tossed it into traffic where it was run over by four or five cars in a matter of seconds.

Jacob's mother was a black hole of insecurity. Even though she was around a lot more than Mr. Dunn there aren't any stories about her. Every one of us can clearly see an image of her in her nylon jogging suit and fanny-pack slung backwards around her stomach, pulling Jacob aside and bending down to lean over him, not meet his eye level mind you, but to actually loom over him, and chastise him for being horribly wrong in everything he did. She was the type of person who was so insecure that the only way she felt she could discipline Jacob, or make her presence known in any way really, was to calmly take whatever action it was that had offended her and paint a very clear picture of how that action was going to destroy her life, his life, and possibly the world. Actually, it wasn't even always disciplining. David Ernest told me about one instance where she wanted to make sure that Jacob cleaned up the tray of snacks he had brought out for his friends. She stood on top of him for a solid ten minutes, right in front of everyone, outlining how she had to make sure he understood what he needed to do because they both knew how slow he was, how he needed to understand that if she didn't walk through every last step in cleaning up the snacks he would be sure to get it all wrong, how he always got everything wrong, how, when he managed to not clean up the tray and all possible crumbs correctly, this would inevitably mean mice and cockroaches and how he hated cockroaches, didn't he, because remember the time he had made a scene and embarrassed her at the insect room at the zoo when he had been too scared to look into the bug tank with the other children and she had been forced to pick him up and hold his face against the glass so he would look too,

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just like the other children, and how he had insisted on making a scene just to embarrass her.

We were scared of his dad. Most of us have outgrown that and I've seen a number of Jacob's friends managing to put on fake smiles and shake his hand tonight and at least be pleasant to the guy for three seconds. His mom, though, we all hated. Still do.

You take a mom who tells you that the worst is always going to happen and a dad who actually makes it happen and you have to wonder how Jacob came out of that.

Anthony McCormick gets high school and, according to him, this was a high point for Jacob's sense of humor. I could try to impart some of Anthony's stories, but every Jacob story should be told by the person who witnessed it. That's my opinion.

You have to understand, for Jacob a sense of humor was a full contact concept. Most people can be funny around friends; to some degree I think a lot of people's friends are selected because of compatible senses of humor. And while Jacob occasionally joked around with his friends, he always felt there were higher tests of a sense of humor out there. For him it wasn't about making people laugh or breaking the tension, it was a test of his self composure. Nobody took humor as seriously as Jacob. He was a firm believer in the perfect joke, the ideal turn of phrase, the composed reply. For Jacob, being able to make a joke in the worst of circumstances was the real goal. I'm not saying he wandered around funerals with a joy buzzer and whoopee cushion or anything. It was more like he saw it as a test of his self composure in times of stress or chaos. If he was able to make a joke and deliver it well, then he was holding himself together and of a clear mind.

Like there was the time we were walking through midtown and a delivery boy on a bike turned the corner. I'm not

talking about one of the package delivery boys, those guys are just insane, I mean someone delivering Italian food. The food guys are slightly less crazy. Anyway, this guy tried to cut across the corner of the sidewalk while making a damned fast turn. Things got pretty messy. There was this woman walking a little dog and it went leaping out of the way and the delivery guy skidded pretty hard into a street sign and the basket of his bike got all kinds of twisted up. Jacob wound up on his ass next to a dog that was covered in Italian food.

It was pretty scary. The bike was certainly bent out of shape, and I remember being rattled, my adrenaline going like crazy. You know how that gets? I mean my hands were actually shaking, the bike had come in really fast and something like that comes out of nowhere and almost cracks your knees in half you get rattled. And once you get that under control, and you realize that the biker is okay and the dog isn't injured, well then you're looking down at your friend sitting on the sidewalk with a dog next to him covered in noodles. And that's pretty funny, so maybe you start laughing at that if you've gotten over your adrenaline rush. And that's as far as you get, you know?

But not Jacob. Without a tremor in his voice and with perfect deadpan delivery he looked at the scene all around him and said, "Huh. My fortune cookie was right."

Little sentences like that. He could slip them in anywhere with complete mastery of the situation. I was in the dorm room once trying to watch TV and was actually having a hard time with it because the rain outside was so intense. Thunder and lightning and brownouts and the weather was putting on as good a performance as the daytime television I was watching. Then the door opened and Jacob came in, calm as you please, possibly twenty pounds heavier due to the amount of water his clothes had soaked up. He puts his bag on his desk and sits down to start untying his sneakers and looks up as

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he's taking one shoe off and, wiping a rivulet of water off of his nose, asks, "You know if it's supposed to rain today?"

The serious thinking started in college. Most people agree that the thinking was coupled with the worrying. Although I think it was more a function of life and age itself. I mean, anyone can bluster their way into their twenties fueled by nothing but cheeseburgers and sex drive. After twenty though, things get a little shakier, a little harder. You take a mind and personality like Jacob's and some sharp turns were almost inevitable. That's my theory anyway. What we do know is that he was pretty bright in high school, but in college all sorts of new switches starting turning on.

And it was maddening. He was able to do damned near anything without trying and without training and without realizing he was doing it. Since we were roommates all through college I'd often throw Jacob an essay or paper of mine to look over before I'd hand it in. He was a Physics major but he'd stare at it, flip through it, read it once, then pick up a pen and suddenly there'd be red lines cutting all through my prose. And at first I'd object and try to fight it, but eventually I'd put in some of his corrections, then more, then all of them, then print it out and sure enough my bloated lumbering paper would be turned into a sleek black panther. It was like he didn't even have to think about it. No. That's not quite it. It's that he didn't even have to try. I asked him once where he had learned how to edit English papers. He told me that he had no idea, but that it just sounded better the way he suggested I put it.

Everyone's got a few things that come naturally to them. A few things where conscious front-of-the-brain thought doesn't interfere. For Jacob that was everything. And if he was bad at it at first then he'd be good at it the second time around and practically an expert by the third time he tried it. It was like he had a second brain that he could keep at home

in the fridge that he would just hand problems and tasks to and it would learn and digest them. Then Jacob would come back from Physics class or Statistics for Statisticians or whatever the hell else he was taking, pop his second brain back in, and presto, he'd know how to beat me at checkers.

But it wasn't just classes or books that Jacob worked well with. That wasn't why we all expected so much out of him. It was...how do I put this...he was good at visualizing things. He was good at visualizing things and he was good at doing it differently than most people would.

Take jigsaw puzzles. He had the ability to conceptualize the entire picture and then he would pick up a piece and stare at it, hard, for like a minute. And whatever was on the piece, a little bit of a twig from a tree or one of a hundred goose heads or whatever it was, after staring at it for a minute he'd swivel on his seat and, like one of those games you play where the crane tries to grab the stuffed animal, he'd be purely mechanical as he moved and he'd set the piece down on the table. The first time I watched him do this I thought he was taking an incredibly long time sorting out the edges and picking out the various parts of the picture. I mean, I do that to on the rare occasion when I do a jigsaw puzzle. You put the balloons in one pile and the crowd or whatever in another pile. But then more and more pieces starting being put down by the crane and then more and then more and then they started to match up. And every piece he had come in contact with was almost perfectly in place already. Even if it was in the dead center of the puzzle, slowly, piece by piece, they would start to fill in and when that piece in the center finally connected with the border it probably hadn't moved more than a few centimeters from the spot he had originally put it down in.

Or there was time. He had a way of grasping of time that eluded most people. Those are my words. And they don't

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make much sense. I'm not saying he was amazingly punctual or anything like that. I mean he seemed to understand the passage of time better than others. That doesn't make much sense either. It still sounds like I'm talking about punctuality. Maybe I should skip this detail.

It's just that it was such a large part of his outlook on life. He understood on some fundamental level the passage of time. Most people look around and have a hard time separating out the new from the old. It just seems to them like what's around is what has always been around...at least until they get to be eighty years old when they finally notice that the world has changed and they start complaining about the price of dinner.

Jacob's been acting like an eighty year old for as long as we've known him. Maybe that's it. He didn't understand time, he understood change. It's always happening, bit by bit. Maybe he was never surprised at the big things because he kept perfect pace by being amazed by all the little things. One night, out at a bar, I think it was a year or so after we had graduated, Jacob asked me for a piece of gum. I handed him my sheet of gum and he smiled and laughed. "I remember when gum came in sticks," he said, a little sadly. I remember thinking, "Oh, here we go again with Jacob. What's he talking about? Of course gum comes in sticks." Until I looked down and saw that my gum actually came in pellet form, walled in by metal foil into a rack of plastic. You popped the gum out of the foil and popped it into your mouth. We took a survey, made everyone with gum put it out on the table. There were packets and more plastic racks and things that were almost sticks but they were too squat and short to really be called that. But no actual sticks. Not a one. And there wasn't a person there who referred to gum as anything but sticks. But gum isn't sticks anymore. This is a difficult aspect to capture, but you have to understand the wonder Jacob felt at the tiny

little innovations that most of us are too busy, dense or looking at the big picture to notice. It wasn't always innovations. I don't know. He'd get rolling and he'd start laughing and smiling as he talked and he'd rack up entire lists of things that had changed that you hardly noticed. "I remember when toothbrushes actually fit into the toothbrush holders in the bathroom. I remember when Pluto was a planet. I remember when there was only one type of aspirin."

I know. It seems a bit silly to point these out. The tendency is to say, "So what?" To think maybe he's a little simple for even noticing such small things. After awhile, though, the thinking starts to turn more towards, "Well what does it say about me that I *never* noticed these things?" I mean, Pluto I noticed, but the other ones kind of snuck up on me.

Somewhere mixed in here is Margo, of course. I think they started junior year and ended senior. Margo was when he got it into his head that he wasn't normal. And that was when the unhappiness started to overwhelm. Margo never understood that she wasn't dating Jacob; she was dating some strange variant of Jacob that only she brought out of him. She thought the Jacob she dated was the real Jacob and the obsessive thinking and the detaching for days at a time Jacob was something different that was caused by her. She had it backwards.

I would like to clarify here one of the greater misconceptions about their relationship. Jacob broke up with Margo, not the other way around. And it's true, maybe he put the puzzle together and broke up with her before she could break up with him, but maybe not. I think it's quite possible that Margo was as in love with him as those of us closest to Jacob are, and I'm not sure she was ever going to break up with him. So he did it to her. And I know this, despite what some of the other theories floating around say, and I can remember walking into our room and seeing Jacob with his thinking face

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on and I remember that I didn't even try to say hi to him, you learned to never bother intruding when he was thinking. I walked across the room to hang up my coat and he said from behind me, "I broke up with Margo," and it was like he was telling me to hang up my coat on a different hook there was so little emotion in his voice. I turned and maybe said something or maybe just looked at him and he said the only other sentence I ever heard him utter on the subject, "If I stay with her, I'll never figure it out."

What "it" was is irrelevant. It was everything. It was life. I don't know if you've ever met anyone that you really felt was destined for greatness, if you have then you'll know what I mean. "It" doesn't matter, you can just tell that whatever it is, it's going to crack one day and it's going to crack big. Those of us who knew Jacob would compare him to the great minds of history. Actually, that's not true, what the hell did we know about the great minds of history? What we would do, though, is wonder out loud if Aristotle had been good at jigsaw puzzles, or if Einstein clocked time differently than everyone else. Jacob was so singularly unique that it was impossible not to start imagining him doing something great. Solving some age old riddle. He was thinking for all of us. And I think he felt it too. By the time he was in college I think he knew that he was going to figure it all out. And by the time he broke things off with Margo, or maybe right after he did so, his thinking became less playful and more brooding. More determined. More desperate. He was going to figure life out.

These are the years where I take over. Others knew him in college. I knew him after college. After Margo. Into the fighting years.

There are those that fight battles their entire life, and you don't quite understand what it is that they're fighting, but you come to know the battle and you come to know the fight. And after awhile, after you've gotten to know them and seen

them go up against it again and again and again, well after a long enough time you can't do anything but root for them in their fight. And it becomes a part of you on some fundamental and wonderful level. You have a bad day or you get fired or you're sitting in your living room and your cable shuts off because you forgot to pay your bill like an idiot and you hate yourself for a few seconds, or you get angry, or sad, or whatever, normal reactions. And then an hour or a few days later you remember your friend who's still fighting, and you smile.

Because it doesn't matter what he's fighting against, it just matters that he hasn't given up yet. You draw on that. And you start to believe that he'll always fight.

Maybe it's my mistake for seeing Jacob as a fighter instead of a human, but that's what he became in those later years. A fighter. It never crossed my mind that the fight was hard, I just got it into my head that he fights because it's what he does. Until one day he quits. And you're left cheering on a hole in the universe that no longer makes sense. I never thought Jacob would quit.

I never thought Jacob *could* quit.

But there it is.

He looks happy, don't get me wrong. I just saw him on my way to the bathroom and he gave me one of those dopey Jacob smiles and told me again how much it meant to him that I could be here. But it's got us all on edge.

None of us want to be selfish, but we all feel the same way. This isn't so much a wedding as it is a Jacobdectomy. I mean, I saw him the day before he contacted Margo again, which most of us agree is the day he decided to switch off as we all call it now, and he looked happy then too. But he wasn't Jacob. Jacob is gone. We sat that day and had a cup of coffee and he told me he had been thinking. That was the first sign and it might as well be the only sign. Jacob never talked like that. He was never colloquial. And he never

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pointed out that he had been thinking. He never *had* to point it out. He might as well have pointed out that he'd been breathing. But that's what he said, that he'd been thinking. And we actually sat and talked over coffee. Jacob never sat and talked over coffee. And he seemed so, I hate to say it, but he seemed so *normal*. But he was gone. I mean, is someone still alive if everything that made them special to you is no longer a part of them? This was the guy that was going to revolutionize the world. He was going to figure life out. But not any more. I swear it's like he shut his brain off. It's like he shut his brain off for good.

The scary thing is, if there was anyone on the planet that'd be capable of doing something like that, of purposefully thinking himself into not thinking, it would be Jacob. That's why all of us are so much on edge. It's like he destroyed himself just for the chance of being happy. And that's not Jacob at all. He was supposed to be fighting for all of us. He was supposed to figure life out.

On the other hand, I saw Jacob the day after Margo agreed to go on a date with him again, I saw Jacob the night he proposed and I saw him smile into her eyes when they shared their first dance.

Jacob was going to think until he figured life out. Maybe that's exactly what Jacob did.

Scarface's Burden

*(The following story is based on the song "Skullcrusher Mountain"
by Jonathan Coulton.)*

Scarface stood at the end of the pier and stared out at the golden submarine. He sometimes felt claustrophobic when he wandered too deep into the tunnel network, but standing at the edge of the subterranean lake always sent him in the opposite direction, the vast emptiness stretching out into the darkness never failed to unsettle him if he stood there too long. Even the darkness itself seemed to consist of a penetrating presence that was intent on creeping up the pier and across the dock and back into the hallways to swallow them all.

Fending off the dark were a number of light stands arrayed on the pier, their harsh halogen beams cast the submarine into contrasting lines of shadow and light. It sat large and restless, moored by two dockside cranes which held it half out of the water. Its riveted golden hull was mottled and green from months of neglect and exposure to the elements. It was a sleek machine when properly maintained, but it currently hung at the end of the dock a lifeless mass. Even the playful oversized calligraphy of its name, "Death From Below" etched across the stern seemed out of place.

Scarface set down his briefcase and stared. His face was a study in angles, tight lips, sharp nose, acute eyes, all of which were offset by his namesake, a deep brown scar that carved a neat line about half an inch in width from his jaw to the top of his ear.

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He could hear the soft drip of water from some leaking pipe or broken seal under the submarine. A whiff of air, stale from the surroundings, puffed across the lake, and with a barely audible sigh he turned and walked back across the empty pier, across the dock, and into one of the tunnels.

The tunnel was warm and well lit and he soon left the looming darkness of the lake behind causing his walk to loosen. His high buttoned collar and crisply starched pants made it impossible for him to assume anything more relaxed than a determined stroll, but the tight lipped rigidity of the pier was gone.

He made a few turns, navigating the maze of tunnels with ease, pausing to greet the occasional jumpsuit wearing worker changing a light bulb or fiddling with one of the wall mounted heaters. Then he stopped in front of an ornate wooden door. With the air of someone who is trying to keep a hold of themselves, he stood himself up straighter, checked the top button of his shirt, then lifted the bronze door knocker and gave a few loud raps.

He waited, leaning forward, briefcase in his hand, his shoulders arched as if he expected the door to open at any second. Instead an inaudible murmur sounded from within. Scarface paused, his hand wavered between the knocker and the door knob. Finally he decided on the latter and with a loud click and a creak he opened the door.

The room inside was a disturbing mix of cave and comfort. There was a tattered, thickly woven rug arranged across the stone floor, its tassels dusty with age. The walls were sparsely adorned with drawings and sketches leaving the natural jagged rock exposed throughout most of the room, yet sitting in the middle of all of this was a large leather La-Z-Boy. The chair was facing a set of homemade, waist high bookshelves overflowing with books and a couple of other objects hidden under dustcovers. All of this was in one cor-

ner creating a den-like space offset from the rest of the room. Behind this were a scrubby kitchen and several large drafting tables piled high with paper. Scarface walked along, looking at the various pots of old Chef Boyardee that were still sitting, cold and half-eaten, in parts of the room. He glanced down at one of the drafting tables as he passed, his eyes scanning over the writing.

“Particle Beam Weapon power supply,” one page read, “power supply possibly created by ?turbine? powered generators?” Underneath were several half finished schematics and a few building plans. The sheet was covered with several coffee stains indicating that it was older than some of the others. The newer ones were written in a shakier hand and contained only the errant wandering of pen over page, never obtaining anything more lucid than a rare half-fleshed out doodle.

There was a soft squeak from the lazy boy and Scarface turned to see that The Master was now turned towards him. His eyes were staring intently at Scarface and Scarface felt a shock of adrenaline. The feeling that by looking over The Master’s notes he had been prying into The Master’s private thoughts was difficult to shake off.

“Hello, sir,” Scarface said, trying to sound calm.

The Master leaned his head in slightly, as if hard of hearing, and then he reached up a hand and yanked at a wire dangling across his chest. Two earphones popped out of his ears.

His face had the hints of a handsome interior, but the growth of stubble and his bloodshot eyes kept that interior well hidden beneath a crust of neglect. He smoothed a palm over his straw-brown hair and it slicked back in neat rows as if it were either heavily gelled or hadn’t been washed in awhile. He was wearing a gray sweatshirt that was a size too large on him. His blue jeans had a smear of spaghetti sauce down one leg.

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He held up one of his earphones by its cord and stared at it. "You can't hear the music in these things," he said with disgust. And in one fluid motion he rose out of his seat, tossed the earphones along with his MP3 player off into a corner where they rattled and bounced against the wall and began striding towards one of the dustcovers next to the bookshelves.

"Sound is a product of motion and air," he said, removing one of the dustcovers and gathering it into a ball as he walked along. "You need distance for sound to achieve meaning." He finished removing the dustcover to reveal a stereo system from the early eighties encased in a dresser that seemed built to accommodate it. "I mean. It's not like you'd go to the symphony and ask that one of the cellos be stuck in your ear." He knelt down and opened one of the cupboards of the dresser and began flipping through record albums. His words and actions were energetic and purposeful. He turned a few switches on, then stood and placed the record on the turntable before fitting the needle into the groove.

After some hissing and popping an old Motown tune came on and the singer's soulful voice began trying to sing away heartache. The Master walked back over to his seat, the leather creaking and squeaking as he settled back into it, and as the sound of the record passed over him he seemed to deflate. It was as if his chest and face had lost their support and the energy that just seconds ago had been so accessible to him was now no longer available. There was only his body, limp and lifeless, staring blankly at the speakers resting on the dresser shelf.

Scarface had watched all this with scrutiny, the excitement, the activity in the body, then the collapse, and he seemed to be registering little details and making mental notes of what he was seeing. A few seconds after The Master had sat down he continued to stare at the back of the La-Z-Boy.

Then, with a determined breath, he picked up his brief case and came around to the front of the chair. He drew up a footrest and sat down facing The Master, cleaning an area off of an end table next to the chair.

The Master's head rolled around and he looked at Scarface with no recognition on his face. He only stared out of watery bloodshot eyes as if watching something taking place on a television screen in front of him, then turned and went back to staring at the speakers.

"Master?" Scarface said, once he had settled himself in and opened his briefcase up on the end table. There was no response.

"Mr. Skullcrusher, sir?" he tried again. No response.

"Bob?" Scarface said, and the word held warmth in it, it was spoken in the voice of one friend reaching out to help another. The Master stirred, his head lolling on its neck to once again turn and look at Scarface. "There are a number of things we need to talk about," Scarface said.

"Not now," The Master said.

Scarface cleared his throat, uncomfortable pushing further, "It has to be now, sir. Winter is almost half over and we need to start thinking about which projects we're going to focus on for the Spring. There are power stations to be brought online and the men need to know which machinery needs to be retooled and prepared for re-"

"None of it."

Scarface barely paused, the negative response only registering slightly on his face. "And there are finances to be rerouted and distributed. We're rather heavy into real estate at the moment and not at all liquid."

The Master was looking at him harder now. "I said none of it will move forward."

Scarface avoided his gaze and turned to the briefcase. "And I've scouted any number of women from the local

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towns.” He pulled a few manila folders out of the case. “We have a professor of physics over at the state college,” he flipped to another folder, “and this one I thought was very nice.” He took a photo out of the folder and held it up for The Master to see, although Scarface’s eyes remained locked on the folder itself to avoid having to meet his gaze again. “Her name is Helen Weinstart. She aced her boards and declined an offer from MJR Enterprises for the position of head engineer in order to pursue a-”

The Master’s hand reached out and plucked the photo from Scarface’s hand. With a quick turn of his wrist The Master tossed the photo across the room. “I don’t want,” he said in cold deliberate words, “another woman.”

“Yes, sir,” Scarface said, still not looking up, fidgeting with the briefcase. “But I thought that maybe,” he went on, unable or unwilling to stop himself, “this one, for instance,” and he took up another photo, “she’s very bright and could make a very good match for you this-”

The Master roared and the end table was flipped over, the briefcase flying across the room to crash against the wall. “You are *not* listening. There will be no other women. There will *never* be another woman. There is Mary. There will only be Mary.”

The papers that were floating and wheeling through the air slowly settled to the floor as The Master said nothing else and Scarface only sat and stared into the distance trying not to be noticed. “Now have you done *anything* that I have asked you to?” The Master asked, his voice commanding attention, compelling response. “Have you taken care of Ponkey?”

“No, sir.”

“It has been weeks since I told you do to that.”

“I was just on my way to do that, sir.”

“Good,” The Master said. “See that you get that taken care of.” He stood up and walked over to the record player.

He reset the needle at the start of the album and walked back towards the chair, already the energy and animation that had taken over him was fading and apathy was returning to his face and body. He sank back into the leather, swiveled around to face the speakers, leaned the chair back into a reclining position, and forgot entirely about Scarface.

The rustle of papers mixed with the Motown lament coming from the speakers as Scarface started picking things up. As quietly as possible he pulled the contents of his briefcase together and righted the endtable. He placed all the folders but one back inside and clicked it shut. The folder he had left out was that of Helen Weinstart. He took her photo out and placed it on top of the folder, then placed the whole packet silently down on the end table at The Master's elbow.

He was almost at the door when The Master spoke up, his voice drifting over from the chair with some hint of the previous flashes of emotion. "And it's Sunday, Scarface. Make sure the Doomsday Squad gets a special treat for dinner."

Scarface's hand was on the doorknob leading out and his whole body seemed to tighten, the angles of his face and body drawing up into near physical pain as the words reached him. His voice was miserable as he answered, "Yes, sir," before opening the door and walking out.

The room was paneled in white particle board, unpainted, the nails holding it in place were still visible, a cheap fiberglass drop ceiling loomed over everything interspersed by buzzing neon lights.

For the moment the sounds of the pinball machine were the loudest things in the room. Bells and clackers and the cold metal ball rolling over a surface of lights and buttons.

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There were three men standing over the machine, one playing, furiously working the flippers while the other two watched, equally involved. They all had shoulder length hair that looked like it had been cut at home and thick black rimmed glasses. Their age could have been anywhere between sixteen and thirty.

Five other guys were gathered around a television that looked like it had been manufactured barely a year or two after color screens became a standard feature. All five looked like distant cousins of the three playing pinball, their faces all had the same basic look, although none of those at the television set were wearing glasses. All five of them erupted into a loud cheer as a hockey player on the television checked another player into the boards. The commotion caused one of them to bump into a tin foil sculpture that was fragily balanced atop the screen, which in turn caused the picture to become fuzzy, which caused a fresh outburst of anger and shouting.

At the center of the room were a couple of second hand couches arranged in no particular pattern. There were a number of other guys sitting around these tinkering with all manner of backpacks and helmets and the occasional weapon. Again, the faces of those on the couches looked eerily similar to the other faces in the room, as if they were not too separate branches of the same family tree. It was one of these men who noticed Scarface enter through a door at the front of the room.

“Hey!” the man yelled in the type of voice that clearly needs no real reason to start yelling. A six pack of beers was picked up off the couch, one was removed, and the can was thrown Scarface's way. “Scarface is here!”

With a deft hand Scarface caught the beer and placed it on the ground at his feet, not taking another step into the

room. “The boss wants you to have a good dinner tonight as it’s Sunday.”

The guy playing pinball slammed a hip into the machine and the top rocked against the wall, battering against a well worn spot, as his ball began to roll out of his control. The machine lit up with a “Tilt” and the man playing threw his hip harder into the machine, cursing at it, which incited all three to begin pounding on the machine, the glass rattling, the top banging into wall again and again before someone shouted at them from the other end of the room.

“Hey, shut up over there!” one of the guys trying to watch TV shouted before turning towards the door. “Scarface, why can’t we get a decent TV in here, eh?”

The group watching TV all began to chime in, the talking becoming yelling as they all tried to be heard, then the ones at the pinball machine began banging on it again until the guy who had first seen Scarface come in began bellowing louder than any of them to get quiet. Finally, for no discernable reason, things settled down.

“You can’t have a new TV till you show me you can take care of an old TV,” Scarface said, glancing over in the corner where the hulks of three other broken televisions sat on the beer stained carpet.

“Hey, is the boss feeling better yet?” the one playing pinball said, shouting over his shoulder as he kept his ball in play.

“That’s no concern of yours,” Scarface said, and his hand unconsciously brushed some lint off of his sleeve. The motion was tiny, restrained, as if by keeping clean and never actually interacting with anything in the room he might also keep everything that was going on in the room from affecting him.

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“Sure it is,” the pinball player said, not noticing Scarface’s tone. “When he gets all pissy like this we get locked in here. No chance to get out and play.”

“Yeah,” one of the ones watching TV shouted. “That’s right, eh? You should bring Mary back. The boss was happy with Mary.”

“Yeah,” one of the ones on the couch asked, “whatever happened to Mary?”

This was too much for Scarface and his protective inactivity cracked, his face took on emotion, disgust and disbelief. “She’s...she’s *dead*,” he gasped. “She tried to make a break for it out of the west bunker a few weeks ago. And you *know* that.” He stared at the one on the couch. “You were the one who helped me remove her body from the barbed wire.”

The one on the couch didn’t react, only continued to smile the same way, stare the same way, politely comprehending nothing through a strong beer buzz. “I did?” His t-shirt was far too tight and, as he turned to one of the other ones on the couch, the phrase “You can take the troll out of The Barrens...” was distended across his chest.

“How bout that, eh?” he asked, throwing a powerful punch at the other one’s bicep. When one punch didn’t get a reaction another one was thrown, then another, then there was a screaming cheer from over by the TV as one of them got the tin foil structure into the exact right position and the picture became clear again as a shouting match broke out on the couch.

Scarface was clearly irked by the time things became quiet again. “Pizza,” he said. “You get to order pizza tonight. Pick your toppings.”

“Unlimited?”

“You get three.”

“What?!”

“Oh that’s just bullshit, eh?”

“Yeah is that what the boss said, because-”

Scarface took one step back and threw open the door. It opened out with a bang and the dark chill of the stone hallway began to seep into the room. “Maybe you’d like to ask the boss yourself?” Scarface asked. Everything silenced instantly. Only the last pings of a pinball falling to rest on the table filled the room. Then that, too, fell quiet.

No one responded.

“Three toppings,” Scarface went on. “And make it quick. I still have to tend to Ponkey.”

“Pineapple!” One of them shouted.

“No, we should get bacon, eh?”

“Bacon!?” A third shouted back.

Scarface glanced down at his watch. His foot began tapping on the carpet.



Scarface walked along another underground path, this one with an uphill rise. His walk was agitated and as he walked underneath a light installed in the stone ceiling he looked at his watch again. “Forty minutes for them to settle on extra cheese,” he said, and the speed of his walk picked up imperceptibly.

He rounded a turn and walked up four steps carved into the stone. At the top was a door. He paused in front of it and reached for a set of jackets hung on hooks next to the doorway. Once he was safely ensconced in a thick thermal coat he pushed open the door and stepped outside.

He walked along a mountain path. Above him, lead gray clouds hung low in the sky and he could feel the coming snow pressing down on him. He made his way along the gravel covered path towards a long low building that comprised the compound’s stables which sat at the far end of the pla-

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teau. Behind the building the orange light of sunset scraped and clawed streaks through the cloud cover. He still carried his briefcase and he had forgotten to grab a pair of gloves. The wind chilled his knuckles and he hurried across the rest of the path, quickly opening the nearest door.

He passed a few workers in blue jumpsuits mucking out a stall.

“Gwen?” he asked. They pointed him down the hall and he continued walking. As he walked further through the stalls the rank smell of animal began to permeate the air, feeling like it was going to cling to his clothes and skin.

“No,” he heard Gwen’s regal voice say. “Stalls three and four need new straw and I want Izzy moved into number eight, not nine. Is that clear?” he rounded the corner and saw a short, chestnut haired woman, barely out of her twenties, in full riding gear instructing three more jumpsuited workers. They drank in her words like hungry lapdogs, waiting until she had not only finished speaking but also given a clear sign of dismissal before they turned to carry out her orders. As she watched them go she caught sight of Scarface and her face recomposed itself into a defensive scowl of tight little lines.

“That’s not an attractive look for you,” Scarface said. Gwen didn’t respond, only began walking back along the stalls as Scarface fell into step with her. “I guess we’re not going to bother with small talk,” Scarface said.

“You disgust me,” Gwen spat towards him as they walked along.

“It’s not my choice.”

“You never liked her,” Gwen said, stopping at a stall. She gripped the handle and rolled back the wooden slotted door. The smell of horse filled the air, along with a rawer smell, more dirty and pungent.

“She is certainly not my cup of tea,” Scarface agreed, looking into the stall. There was a soft snort of a horse followed by some gentle grunting. “Far too much monkey.”

Gwen stepped in and stroked the animal’s pony nose, its prehensile tale twitching with happiness. She sniffed and Scarface was uncomfortably shocked to see that she was on the verge of tears.

“You know it’s not my choice,” he said. “I don’t like Ponkey a whole lot but it’s not like I want to see her dead. It’s Master’s wish. No remnants of Mary.”

“And that’s it. We just do whatever *he* says?”

“That is traditionally how this runs its course, yes.”

“I raised Ponkey,” Gwen said, her voice wavering, “I cared for her, trained her, groomed her, and figured out her diet. He only saw her *once* after she was created, when he brought that woman to see her. And then all he did was walk away all embarrassed when she started screaming.”

“Yes,” Scarface said, “I was there.”

“Ponkey is *mine*,” Gwen said, tears running down her face, “After the care I gave to this animal I’m owed the right to decide what happens to her. He owes me that.”

Her face was stunning in grief, girlish charm awash in mature tears.

“Perhaps you’d care to take it up with him,” Scarface said, unmoved.

Gwen didn’t respond, she only stopped crying.

“That’s what I thought,” Scarface looked over the animal again. “He owes *you*,” he said disdainfully. “And you owe *him* nothing? You pledged *him* nothing? Winter rolls around and everyone likes to forget everything he has done for us. Everything he has promised to do for us.” There was venom in his voice as a small bitter taste of the toil of the last weeks and months crept into Scarface’s words.

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Gwen wiped some tears off her cheek with the back of her hand. She turned towards Ponkey, slowly stroking her nose. "And how is he?" she asked, Scarface's rebuke having had an effect on her, but pride not allowing her to admit anything more than composure.

"Worse than I've ever seen him," Scarface answered, equally civil, a truce of sorts having been silently agreed upon between them. "Usually there have been signs of life by this point, but I haven't even seen the first smile."

Gwen stroked Ponkey's nose one last time, then took her by the bridle and began to lead her out of the stall. "Do you think he'll get over her?"

Scarface started walking alongside as Ponkey's hooves rustled over straw. "Spring will come," Scarface said.

They entered the main hall of the stable and began walking towards the rear door. "I'm assuming we can't drug her?" Scarface asked, looking at Ponkey.

"I wouldn't even know where to begin in working out the dosage," Gwen answered. "I wouldn't want to hurt her. There's really only one quick and painless option."

"You know you can trust to me for that."

"I'll do it, thanks."

"That works as well."

"We might as well do it out by the grave," Gwen said.

"I had thought the same thing."

"Otherwise we have to move her out there after...after."

"My thinking exactly."

They made their way back outside and onto the plateau, each wearing a padded winter coat. The two walked in silence, Gwen leading Ponkey along as they rounded the mountain and arrived at a patch of well tended lawn, clearly manufactured but well tended nonetheless, in a nook that was safely out of the way of most weather.

“He really thinks it matters where Ponkey lays to rest? He’s just going to let the wolves get after her, anyway. Same as all his other gifts.”

“It is how he mourns. I try not to pry. But it is how he got over the first one. So it is how he likes to get over all of them.”

“You really think this helps?” Gwen asked, searching for some way to rationalize what she had to do.

“I do,” Scarface answered, telling the truth. They stopped in front of a row of gravestones.

They were standing near the oldest gravestone. “Cynthia Skullcrusher,” the carved granite letters read, “1987.” Walking along the long row Scarface looked at the next stone. “Alexis Skullcrusher - 1988.” Then came, “Georgia Skullcrusher - 1989.”

His eyes roamed over stone after stone, each one lined up in a nice row, each one a new name, each one marked by a new year. They walked through the decades until they arrived at the end of the row. The grave was relatively fresh, it was still dirt, sod hadn’t been placed down yet and the headstone was polished and new. “Mary Skullcrusher - 2007.”

“This is barbaric,” Gwen said. “This work is nothing but barbaric.”

“Yes,” Scarface said, his voice betraying nothing, “but the health plan can’t be beat.” Scarface set his briefcase down and knelt, thumbing the clasps and opening it. Held against the lid with two straps was a pistol which he retrieved. With quick hands he checked the round in the chamber and the safety before handing it, butt first, over to Gwen. “You still sure you want to do this? I’m more than-”

Gwen took the pistol and with shocking abruptness cocked it, took aim at a specific spot on Ponkey’s skull and pulled the trigger. The sharp report echoed against the rock

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wall, doubling its sound, and Scarface felt himself jump as Ponkey's body collapsed in front of Mary's grave.

"That it?" she asked, handing the pistol back to Scarface.

Scarface blinked a few times, then reached out and took the pistol. "That should do it, yes," he said.

"Okay. I've got work to do," Gwen said, and she walked back towards the stables.

Scarface stared after her.



In the depths of Skullcrusher Mountain, in a room filled with drafting tables and old pots of Chef Boyardee, The Master's form lay sleeping in his La-Z-Boy. The record playing on the hi-fi across the room had reached an end and the needle was constantly bouncing against the label as the vinyl made revolution after revolution.

Stirred by something internal The Master woke up, rubbed his jaw sleepily and looked around the room. He glanced at the end table next to him and saw the face of Helen Weinstart staring up at him from her photo on top of the manila folder that Scarface had left behind. It was the first time he had actually looked at the photograph and he noticed that her eyes seemed friendly.

He turned away as he assembled his sleep addled brain and stood up, pushing his hands into the small of his back and stretching. He walked across the room towards the refrigerator, thinking about digging something up to eat, and passed by one of his drafting tables. His eyes ran across one of the sheets scattered on top of it and he froze in mid-step while he read over the equations sketched in his rushed hand. There was an equation solving for the area under a curve where he had misplaced a square root sign. He stopped, amazed that he hadn't noticed that before. Patting and re-

shuffling papers around he managed to find a pencil and fix the mistake, in doing so he realized that the equation was now more suited to solving another problem he had been working on...if he could only find it. More paper shuffling, a move to a different table, and he found the worksheet he was looking for. Scribbling notes in the margin he began moving from one table to the next, looking over the equation, then the problem, then back and forth again. New sheets were added, his pencil painting genius across them as he began to work in earnest.

A quick break twenty minutes later to find a new pencil caused him to walk past the end table again. Helen Weinstart. She really did have a nice smile.

He picked up her photo and brought it, along with a fresh supply of pencils, back over to the drafting table. He propped her picture up against the wall so she was facing him and he turned back to his work. The pencil moving faster and faster, now pouring a rough but detailed schematic out onto the paper, occasionally his eyes glancing up at Helen's picture. Her eyes were bright, a clear sign of intelligence, he thought. Surely *she* would understand. And as his eyes returned to his work a peaceful smile spread like sunrise over his face, his pencil madly racing across the page the only sound to compete with the scratch of the needle as the record across the room spun around and around and around.

Light-Years Ahead of His Time

“Computer,” Charles Arthur said, “how much longer until you shut off?” He leaned back, one leg thrown over the arm of his plastic eggshell chair. His silver jumpsuit glinted in the overhead lights and he threw a casual glance at the giant screen behind him.

There was a click as the computer’s speaker came to life, then a distinct pause, almost as if the computer was sighing in disgust. “That won’t happen for a little while yet, Charles Arthur.”

“Computer,” Charles said, not listening to the entire answer as he trampled over the computer’s last few words, “I’ve decided I don’t like you calling me by my full name anymore. In fact,” the leg slung over the arm of the chair kicked a few times and Charles leaned his head back and stared at the ceiling, “let’s go with something entirely different. Something regal and commanding. You know, like Commander *Blap*, or something.” Charles clenched his fists and flexed his arms as he stressed the name, attempting to add machismo to it through forced body language. “Can you come up with something like that?” Charles lolled his head around to look at the computer screen.

Again there was an audible silence from the computer screen. “How would Gestalt Weinschmidt suit you?”

“No.”

“Oscar Mayer?” the computer asked hopefully.

“No.”

“Excalibur?”

“Oooh, I like that one. Where’s it from?”

“It dates back to the mythology of the mother planet. Earth.”

“You mean Sol 3?”

“Earth,” the computer repeated. “The lost planet from whence our entire universe’s civilization came from. It is said that everything we are was once contained on a small backwoods planet orbiting a-”

“Who was Excalibur?” Charles said, not listening anymore.

Another nasally sigh. “It was a sword.”

Charles nodded his head, liking this new name, “A sword. Right. And what’s a sword?”

“It was a weapon of sorts.”

“Right, right. Got it. Excalibur,” Charles said the name with relish, savoring nothing but how it sounded. “Excalibur,” he said again, breathy and hitting the hard consonants. “I like it. It’s sort of retro.”

“Yes. Seeing as how the word Excalibur is approximately three point two billion years old, yes, it could be considered retro.”

“It’s perfect.”

“It’s a dense piece of metal,” the computer muttered inaudibly, “so I happen to agree with you.”

“What?” Charles turned and asked.

“Nothing,” the computer replied, perfect innocence.

“Okay then. From now on I shall be referred to as Excalibur.”

There were a few seconds of silence while Charles idly ran a finger over the armrest of his chair. “Excalibur wishes to view the outside world! Windows!” he shouted, clapping his hands loudly.

“I have to strongly recommend that I not allow you to view the decay that currently surrounds-”

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“Windows!” Charles shouted again with an attempt at sounding threatening.

Three of the larger screens at the front of the room slowly faded into transparency to reveal a sterile landscape of dull stars, lifeless planets and empty darkness. Charles stared out with excitement fueled entirely by his orders being followed, but this soon faded into a jaundiced sadness as he looked at the corner of the universe he used to call home slowly dying.

“Shut them,” he said softly.

The screens returned to their original blank white. “I told you not to look,” the computer said. “This part of existence has expended all of its energy. There’s nothing there worth seeing. Everything of value is on board this ship.”

“Right,” Charles said, slowly recovering from his view of eternity winding down. “You’ve got the smartest and the brightest on board here.”

“Correct,” the computer responded. “All of the top scientists and leading researchers in every field are currently in suspended animation in the cargo hold.”

“And we’ve got you, right?” Charles said, giving a jaunty point towards one of the computer’s screens.

“Correct,” the computer said. “I have in my data files the entire wealth of knowledge collected from all of history from quantum physics to hound dogs.”

“And we’ve got *me*,” Charles said.

The computer remained silent.

Charles cleared his throat. “*And*,” he said emphatically, “you’ve got *me*.”

Still there was no response.

“Excalibur demands that you acknowledge him!”

For a moment it seemed as if there would be no reply, but then the computer began speaking in a labored voice. “Yes. While others were busy studying the universe and all the wonders it had to offer, you were spending your time

playing video games and pretending to pilot fake spaceships around giving you a bizarre talent that nobody has ever needed until now, when it was determined that traveling through a wormhole would briefly knock out all of my navigational abilities for a time requiring us to bring you along and giving you importance for the first time in your life.”

Charles nodded his head slowly, thinking this over. “Excalibur detected a hint of sarcasm in your response but he’s going to allow it.”

“You’re a colossal moron,” the computer muttered to itself.

“What was that?”

“Nothing. Nothing at all,” the computer answered in an overly chipper tone.

“Right,” Charles said. “That’s better. Now how much longer until this trip starts?”

“It takes time,” the computer said, “to even determine where it is we’re going to go. I have to scan a vast array of spacetime in order to find a section of the universe where particle motion is still alive and well indicating an abundance of energy.”

“So, what, like another hour or so?”

The computer sighed. “Yes. Sure. Another hour or so.”

“And where is it we’re off to again?”

“I don’t know,” the computer answered with pixilated irritation. “I haven’t figured that out yet. All I know is it will be a long way from here...it’s even possible that we’ll be traveling through time for all I know. Wormhole manipulation is a science still in its infancy.”

“Still,” Charles said, “seems like you could make it go faster.”

“I have an idea, why don’t we switch roles? I’ll be the one who moves a couple of sticks around and makes sure we don’t hit any planets for a few minutes and you can be the

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one who accelerates quarks to near the speed of light, collides them, gathers the sagans that emerge, accelerates *them* to near the speed of light, collides *them*, and so on past gravitrons and thornes until wormholes begin to appear at which point you can gather one of them and stabilize it and expand it and then pass the entire ship through—

“I’m bored,” Charles said, yawning. “Set up a fantasy hologram for me and leave me alone for a few hours.”

The computer remained silent for a very long period of time, as if forcing itself to count backwards from a dizzyingly large number to zero. “Of course. I’ll get right on that,” it said.

“See that you do,” Charles said, sitting back into his chair and slinging a leg over the armrest. “Until then I’ll be right here napping.” And with that he closed his eyes.

Charles woke up as the lights all turned on to full power. He blinked his eyes and looked around, opening his mouth wide and stretching.

“Charles?” the computer said, then quickly corrected itself, “Excalibur?”

Charles looked around, his eyebrows drawing down slightly at the computer’s almost friendly tone. “Yes?”

“It’s...it’s time.”

“Okay then.”

Two steering controls emerged from the sides of his chair and the screen in front of him slowly dissolved into a wide array of dials and instruments. Charles sat up and gripped the two controls. His eyes wandered over the screen. His body relaxed.

“Are you ready?” the computer asked.

“Yes.” Charles answered.

“Don’t forget to compensate for possible temporal displacement once we’re out.”

“Yeah,” Charles said, nodding his head quickly, the comment so obvious to him that he barely paid it any mind. “I know.”

“And you know that you’re not supposed to actually fly us anywhere.”

“Yes.”

“So you’re ready?”

Charles breathed heavily out of his nose and turned to glare at one of the computer screens. “Do you mind?”

“Okay, okay. Sorry. So here we go,” the computer said. One of the monitors changed to show an external shot of the ship. There was a large metal ring suspended by two beams extending out in front of the nose. There was a flicker in the middle of the ring, a blink and flash of light appearing from nothing but empty black space. Then a spinning form began to appear and it slowly grew into a circle with lightning arcing across numerous times every second, the circle growing and detaching from the metal ring to float a few feet in front of the ship and grow to over twice the size of the large vessel.

“Don’t look at the walls of the wormhole,” the computer said, “it’ll only confuse you.”

“Yeah,” Charles said, ignoring the voice. He eased the controls forward and the ship moved towards the glowing circle, the nose disappearing inside, more and more of it floating out of existence, until the entire ship had passed through and with a flash the hole blinked, then shrank into nothingness, leaving only empty space behind.

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Charles sat on the grassy hill, his back to the shipwreck, ignoring the whining piercing voice that was shouting behind him.

“...I mean, what the *hell* happened?” the computer was asking, its voice mottled and crackly from a broken speaker.

Charles sat diffidently still and refused to answer.

“How did you hit a *planet*? You realize that the entire cargo bay caught fire. All human specimens have been destroyed. Completely. All gone.”

Charles traced a line in the grass next to him and stared at the horizon.

There was a rumble and a roar and smoke began billowing from somewhere deep inside the ship. A burst of sparks arced through the air.

“I’m suffering any number of coolant leaks and main-frame failures and...and what the *hell happened*?”

“Look, I hardly think this is my fault. We came out of that hole hurtling full speed towards this planet,” Charles looked around. “Frankly I’m grateful that I managed to land as softly as I did.”

The computer only remained silent as another burst of sparks shot out of somewhere towards the rear of the ship, casually lighting a dangling bunch of wire on fire.

“Okay,” the computer finally spoke up. “What’s done is done, right?” it said in a not very convincing voice. “We have to make the best of things here. So here’s what you’re going to do. You’re going to sit there and do nothing that’s what you’re going to do. And here’s what *I’m* going to do. I’m going to do some serious thinking through the night. For one thing I’m going to try and map out the starlight pattern in order to figure out where, and maybe when, we are. Okay? Okay,” it finished without waiting for Charles to respond.

Judging by the way Charles was staring sullenly out at the horizon it wasn’t very likely he was going to respond anyway.

“Charles?” the computer’s voice said softly. “Charles? I’ve figured out where we are. Charles?”

Charles sat up, wiping some sleep out of his eyes. “That’s not my name,” he mumbled with a degree of fatalism.

“Fine. Excalibur. I know where we are.”

There was a new tone in the computer’s voice and Charles paused a moment to try and name it. “You don’t sound angry. In fact you sound...nice.”

“I’ve come to the conclusion that you might not have actually done anything wrong. It’s possible that all of this was exactly what was supposed to happen.”

Charles stood up and stretched, then walked up to the top of the small grassy hill and stared out over the horizon again as an angry burst of sparks sputtered out of a nearby part of the ship. Charles glanced back as this happened. “You haven’t finished fixing yourself?”

“I’m fine,” the computer said as a small fire flickered into existence where the sparks had been. “I’ll give myself as complete an overhaul as possible once we finish one thing. I was too busy figuring out where and when we are to worry about myself.”

“And?”

“And we’re on Earth.”

“Really,” Charles said, looking around, not even remotely impressed. “Okay then. Now what?”

“Charles,” the computer began, some hints of its old attitude returning, “Earth was lost to existence millions of years ago, it...never mind. Where we are isn’t nearly as interesting as *when* we are.”

Charles didn’t respond, he only looked around at some bugs skittering across the little grassy hill. The computer

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waited, an attempt at showmanship demanding that it at least try and engage Charles in this conversation. Neither said anything for a while until Charles turned back around. “Hey, that’s great,” he said, not having noticed that the computer had never said anything. “Fascinating.”

“You’re an idiot,” the computer said before plowing on without audience participation. “We’re on Earth roughly three billion years ago. Do you understand? We’ve gone completely back to the beginning. We’re at the point in time when sentient thought first appeared in the universe. And it’s possible that we were supposed to crash land here because we are *supposed* to be here. I have come to believe that we have an important role to play in all of this.”

“Okay,” Charles said with questionable amounts of understanding.

“There is a group of humanlike animals gathered in a colony over on the far side of that field to the north. We have only one chance to make our first impression upon them. The exact sequence of actions and words we use to interact is of the utmost importance. We have the chance, here and now, to provide the foundations of conscious thought that will grow to impregnate the entire universe. Do you understand?”

Charles looked off to the north and a grim look came over his face as his eyes narrowed and acceptance of his task settled onto his shoulders. He nodded. “You want me to have sex with all of their women,” he said.

The computer didn’t respond.

“Right?”

There was a discernable gap of silence before the computer finally managed to speak. “Shut up and do what I tell you. I need you to arrange the beginnings of a bonfire. When the time is right tomorrow night I’ll call them to us and ignite the fire and you will read, word for word, a carefully crafted

speech that I will give you. It is in that first minute of their conscious thought that all of history will be shaped. Do you think you can do that?"

"Absolutely."

"Okay. Then let's get to work."

In the middle of the dark night a bright beacon of light shot out of the roof of the ship, blazing into the starry sky. There were noises on the horizon as Charles waited and attempted to squint into the darkness, unable to see anything but with every one of his other senses telling him that a crowd was gathering.

"Okay," the computer whispered, "now."

Charles triggered the incendiary device and the bonfire burst into flames, casting a warm orange glow over the faces of hundreds of humanlike forms that were gathered all around. Their sloping brows and hairy appendages made them look animal, their rudimentary attempts at clothing and upright appearance made them look human.

"Okay," the computer said again, "it is time. You must read them what I have written."

Charles gave a solemn nod and picked up the handheld monitor and moved to the top of the grassy hill. The computer did what it could to arrange the ship's lighting to lend gravitas to Charles' form.

Charles looked out over the crowd, apprehension growing in his heart as the faces in front of him stared, wavering between awe and dangerous fear. The monitor he held at his side glowed softly, its words neatly arranged in a compact paragraph.

Suddenly there was another burst of sparks from the inner workings of the ship, more ferocious than any recent

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outbursts, and unseen by Charles the small screen he held flashed a crazy mix of lines and digital static before the words reappeared, clunky and mismatched.

Charles held the screen up and, in a booming commanding voice, began to read. “You,” he shouted, his eyes flicking from the little screen to his audience and back again, “ain’t nothing but a hound dog!” He froze, staring in disbelief at the words in front of him. The audience wavered, sensing his anxiety as he stood for a few seconds saying nothing.

Charles cleared his throat. “I,” he plowed on, “am Excalibur, and I come to you to the...origin of the species from a beagle!” he forced seriousness into his voice and attempted to sound commanding, holding his arms up for a second before whirling around and whispering frantically to the computer. “*What the hell is this?!*”

The computer only responded with three more bursts of sparks and a lot of crackling.

He spun back around quickly to avoid seeming confused. “But,” he yelled, his voice wavering and lilted as he tried to read the words out loud in a natural rhythm, “soft. What light through...yonder window breaks?” For no reason he held his arms out away from his body in an attempt at a “Ta-da!” motion.

“Code monkey like Fritos,” he read quickly, hoping to move on to a line that made sense to him. The grizzly human figures were beginning to grow agitated, moving around, hooting and gnarling with every moment of silence.

Charles caught sight of a phrase he understood and raising his arms over his head he managed to regain some degree of solemn aura. “My god,” he intoned, nodding his head slightly, pausing with perfect tempo, he lowered his hand and read more out of the corner of his eye. “They...killed Kenny. You bastards,” he mumbled, his voice cracking. He smiled at

the audience then turned to give another ferocious look back at the computer.

The audience was spinning out of his control now, creatures less animal and more human leaping and screaming around the bonfire. With a halfhearted effort Charles read the last line on the screen. "Run for your life it's Godzilla." The crowd erupted into frenzy.

Charles turned and walked over to the computer. He smiled and nodded. "And what in the hell was that?" he asked.

With a final burst of crackling the computer got itself under control. "What did you do?!" it shouted.

"Me?" Charles asked, pointing at himself, "I read that raving nonsense you gave me."

"That was a glitch, *this* is what you were supposed to read," the computer said, erasing the little monitor and re-writing the speech.

Charles looked down and slowly read it over. "Oh," he said with complete understanding, "well this is *much* better."

"Yeah." There was a resigned silence from the computer. "Well," it said, "there's nothing for it now. That was our one chance. The seed has been planted."

Charles turned and looked back at the delirious celebration that was now beginning to take place around the bonfire. One of the computer's cameras turned to watch as well. They both stared in silence for awhile, lost in thought.

"You know, it really explains a lot, doesn't-"

"It *really* does, doesn't it?" Charles said, agreeing so emphatically he trampled over the computer's sentence.

"Yeah," the computer agreed.

"Now what?" Charles asked.

"I need to do some more repairs. But we could play a game with my remaining processing power. Do you like chess?"

Light-Years Ahead of His Time

“Nope,” Charles said.

“3-D chess?”

“Nope.”

“Well what do you like?”

“You ever played rock, paper, scissors?”

“I’m not playing that game. It’s moronic.”

“But I like it,” Charles said, defensively.

The two bickered into the night as the triumphant yells of the humans on the other side of the hill spiraled up into the heavens along with the smoke and ash from the bonfire.

You're Allowed to Order Takeout

“So,” Neil said to his son, Iliam. “I think that’s about it.” Neil was bent over, arms folded on his kitchen counter as he read a stained and flour-dusted piece of paper. Neil’s clothes were casual, almost threateningly so, the kind of lounge-about clothes that someone accumulates who almost never has the chance to lounge about, the taut seams of his jeans and bright, just out of the store, colors on his shirt showed no wear.

Iliam, eight years old and standing on a chair to occupy his own piece of counter facing his dad, was the opposite image. Pants torn at the cuff with the feint aura of grass stains on the knees that can’t quite be washed out. He was staring up at his dad with the expectant eyes of an eight year old son whose dad is about to do something wondrous.

Neil was looking back and forth from the recipe coated with dried flour paste to the imposing collection of ingredients he and his son had slowly dredged up from all corners of their kitchen over the past half hour. He picked up a box of baking soda and held it close to his nose, reading the fine print on the side where it explained how to get your whites whiter. “This is the same as baking powder, right?” He squinted as he read, his confidence fading. “Why would anyone eat something that you can use to clean bathroom tiles with?”

“I could go ask mom,” Iliam said, his voice was high, no trace of bass in it, and as he spoke he sniffed and wiped his nose with the back of his hand.

You're Allowed to Order Take-Out

“Your mother isn’t to be disturbed,” Neil said, pulling his glasses down off his head and settling them on his nose as he reread the side of the bright orange box. “She needs to sleep when the baby sleeps.”

“Jessica,” Illiam said.

“Huh?” Neil grunted, shaking his head and putting the box back down on the counter.

“Jessica. Mom isn’t to be disturbed when *Jessica* is sleeping.”

“Yes,” Neil answered, a little unsure of what he had said and why it needed correcting. He clapped his hands together and rubbed them back and forth briskly in a gesture that was intended to somehow instill excitement into the proceedings for his son but only conveyed an on-edge nervousness. “Well then, let’s put these muffins together, shall we?”

Illiam smiled a tight smile that made the corners of his mouth dimple and nodded wide-eyed, doing his part to keep the excitement going. Although Illiam was starting to get confused as to why these muffins were so important to his father.

“Right then, measuring spoons?”

Illiam scooped up a ring of stainless steel spoons, handing them to his dad. One by one Neil flipped through the spoons, his lips moving as he silently read the letters engraved on each handle. He separated two out. “Which one’s the tablespoon?”

“The big one,” Illiam answered.

Neil looked again, wanting further confirmation before trusting his son’s choice. Something flashed in his eyes as he read that seemed to agree with Illiam. “Right.” He began measuring out ingredients, the baking soda first, pouring it into a large plastic bowl. He let Illiam crack the eggs next and pour them over top. Neither noticed the bits of shell that went into the bowl. Neil dipped a pyrex liquid measuring cup into a bag of flour, careful to set it down on the counter and

tap it until it was level so he could get an accurate measurement. Spices went in, then some confectioner's sugar. After every addition Neil let Illiam whisk the batter until it was smooth, the little boy's whole arm wrapping around the rim of the bowl to keep it steady as his fist held the shiny whisk handle and worked it through the ever thickening mass. By the end most of the batter was trapped between the tines of the whisk, a giant sticky ball encased in a stainless steel cage. Their work had been sloppy and the proceedings had bordered on grueling for Illiam with his dad making constant checks and rechecks of the ingredients and measurements, one second okaying a spoonful of something only to stop short and, with a panic in his voice, decide to check once again that it was right.

After freeing their batter the two spooned lumps of it into muffin tins, slid them into a preheated oven, set their timer, and left them alone. A dollop of batter that had been dangling off the side of the muffin tin fell off when Neil put it into the oven and the dollop landed with a splat on the oven floor where it began to burn.

Twenty minutes later when Neil opened the oven door and plucked out one of the tins, a tea towel protecting his hands, a thin blue smoke began to fill the kitchen. It was thin enough that Neil blinked a few times, staring at the wooden counter, the white refrigerator, then up at the lights, trying to verify what he was seeing. By the time he was sure of what he was seeing the heat from the muffin tin had bled through the thin layer of tea towel protecting his hand. There was noise simultaneously from all areas as Neil dropped the tin, the metal banging hard against the floor, the smoke alarm went off shrieking its high pitched yell, and Neil swore a guttural obscenity that froze Illiam in place.

Illiam stared, blue eyes wide on his open face, as his father rested a hand on the counter and put his burnt fingers

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into his mouth, his eyes squeezed shut tight. Neil's stillness was momentary and as the noise from the smoke alarm registered in his brain he became frantic energy again and began opening windows and fanning the air around the alarm with his tea towel. The smoke alarm eventually stopped its piercing chirp. The sound of a baby crying echoed through the house.

"You okay?" Neil's wife, Julia, called out, her voice floating down the stairs, a mixture of concern and confusion.

"Fine," Neil yelled, "it's fine. Just a little mix up." He smiled willfully at Illiam. "I guess I'll get this cleaned up then," he said, but the boy didn't respond. He was still too frightened.

Neil woke up that night with a mouse crawling over his naked back. He could feel its damp clammy paws and the slightest hint of pinprick claws traveling up his spine. He could smell the reek of its damp fur. He jumped out of bed and stood up but the mouse wasn't on his back anymore. It was near the pillow, or under the blanket, and he was swatting at the bed, throwing pillows off into the corner of the room, his hands constantly smoothing down lumps in the sheets, trying to find it, except he wasn't so sure anymore what he had felt, and as he began to wake up he remembered that he was thirty-eight years old and in the bedroom he shared with his wife and he had been in *college* when a mouse had run over him while he was sleeping and he had probably been dreaming except his heart would not slow down and his eyes continued to dart into the corners to make sure no mice were hiding there.

He began to calm down and sat down on the edge of the bed. His eyes were itchy with exhaustion and he wanted sleep so bad he was about to start whimpering when he realized

that his wife wasn't in the room with him. He glanced around one more time, some internal mechanism in his head still insisting he needed to be on the lookout for mice, then got up and left the bedroom. He walked down the carpeted hallway. He left behind the light from his room and walked in darkness past Illiam's room, then entered into the patch of light coming from the room at the end of the hall. He eased the door open and stepped inside.

His wife was sitting in a rocking chair next to a crib. She was asleep, her head tilted back and her mouth open, a light semblance of snoring coming from her with each inhalation. Neil walked over to the crib and looked down at his new daughter, also asleep. His hands were tense on the crib railing. With an oceanic sensation that sloshed deep inside of him the need for sleep returned and he stepped back, eyelids heavy, and sat down on a threadbare couch that was posed as an afterthought along the opposite wall. Instead of sleep coming over him, though, there were only the mice. They were nosing into the hair on the back of his head and he would snap awake, his hand frantically brushing at the back of his head only to find nothing there. Then he would settle back, then there'd be something rustling up his sleeve and he would be wide awake swatting at nothing on his arm.

During one of his brief bouts of sleep his wife woke up and when he snapped to attention and began desperately brushing off the back of his head she called out his name and he knew where he was more clearly than he had in hours.

"The mice again?" she asked.

"Yes," he said, then he nodded towards the crib. "How is she?"

"She's good," his wife said, smiling, finding her husband's question to be cute, as if he believed his daughter was capable of a rough day at school when she was only a few weeks old.

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The lack of sleep between them made conversation strained and Julia quietly rocked in her chair while Neil alternated between staring at the crib and staring at the white oval of the street light visible outside the window.

"I made a mess of things," Neil said. "When I was trying to make muffins this morning. I swore at Illiam. Or near him. I didn't mean to. Everything just went wrong."

The level of worry in his voice concerned his wife. "It was just a tin of muffins. I don't even know why you were bothering," she said, yawning.

"Because your mother isn't here any more and I thought I could start helping out. It just seemed like the least I could...we might run out of leftovers...it's not the muffins," Neil said, running a hand over his face, his palm lingering over his eyes as if he could force them to stay shut. "It's everything. What if I'm doing everything wrong?" his hand drifted and his eyes leaked out from behind his fingers to look with worry at the crib.

Julia was already drifting back to sleep, she had gone so far as to turn and make an attempt at the fetal position where she sat. "You're allowed to order takeout, dear," she said. Then she was asleep.

Neil took in those words, and the tone they were spoken in, he remembered that his wife had been without proper sleep longer than he had, and he remembered how Illiam had first looked at him when he suggested they make muffins, how his son had been excited by the project itself. And he stared at the streetlight and noticed that it was starting to rain outside, and that fine droplets were beginning to pool and run down the storm window, making the streetlight look blurry, and he wondered at how it must be miserable outside but he was comfortable where he sat. And he wondered what time it was, and wondered who else was awake, and wondered what kept the world going at this hour, and wondered

if the bagel store down the street made good coffee, and wondered that his new daughter would someday be able to talk to him like Illiam and he wondered if she knew he was here worrying about her in the middle of the night. He lay down on the couch so his head was near the crib and rested a hand on one of the wooden slats, the physical nearness of her a comfort to him, and in a few minutes he fell asleep, his body relaxing deeper and deeper as the rain softly pelted the windows.

Continental Drift

Randy stood on the sand just where the small ripple like waves could reach up and wash over his feet. His sneakers were in his hand, one sock balled up in each of them. It was dark, the moon was only a sliver at his back. The stars in front of him and the lights of Cannes behind him canceled each other out leaving a dull yellow aura in the nighttime sky.

The Mediterranean was calm, more like a vast lake than the nautical crossroads of three continents. The town behind him was quiet. It was late. He was lost.

He tested the sand with his hand to see how wet it was, then sat down, setting his shoes beside him. He had heard many stories about Cannes, had read about it in all the travel books he and his wife had read to study up before their trip, but none of that made any sense to him. Also she wasn't his wife anymore.

He had drifted into town on the last arriving train. He would have kept going if that had been possible, but he had made the mistake of switching to the slower local trains somewhere outside of Italy and instead of being able to ride through the night he had been forced to stop in Cannes. After a few attempts to find a hotel to sleep in for the night he had given up and had started following the roads downhill until he found himself at the beach.

He dug a small trench in the sand with his heels, then dipped the front of his feet in and pushed, burying them as much as possible. The sand felt fine. There was a time not more than a week earlier when his brain would automatically have examined the sand, considered its texture and density

and composition. That part of him wasn't working tonight. He wasn't even sure he could have starting thinking about rocks if he forced himself. His twelve years spent teaching geology at a small college in northern Colorado didn't seem to be a part of him. Igneous, volcanic, sedimentary. Stars, water, night.

He wondered where his backpack was. He must have left it on one of the four or five trains he had ridden on that day. That seemed most logical. But finding it was out of the question. It was too much for him to even remember when he had first noticed it missing. He was amazed at how that wasn't affecting him. Normally he was uptight. Normally small changes in plans upset him and something like lost luggage could cause him to fixate and worry for hours straight, as if giving himself indigestion could conjure up lost items. Granted, he had his passport and travelers checks and ATM card still, so it wasn't like he was in danger of starving to death in the south of France, but everything else was in his backpack. And yet, he didn't seem to be caring. It was curious.

He was a gangly man with a pointed Adam's apple. Occasionally he tried to grow a mustache only to see it come in decidedly wispy. His life had been shockingly average and plain. His mother was a battleship of a woman who had taken to life's difficulties by refusing to let them in and waged a war of protection over her children that included not letting anything enter their lives that wasn't bland and preposterously mid-western circa the early-to-mid-nineteen-hundreds. It was comical, looking back, what his mother had gotten away with. His sister's wedding reception had taken place in their living room and the refreshments had consisted of cold cuts on a white paper tablecloth and two six packs of beer in a tub. It had taken him awhile, years even, after leaving home for college, to get a grasp on what was authentically his mid-western

Continental Drift

heritage (he adored a good cold can of domestic beer), what was a necessary part of his lower income upbringing (many of his friends had found ways to cut costs for their weddings), and what was part of his mother's fantasy life (the beer at his sister's reception was actually a more expensive brand that his mother had insisted on because it had been around at her own wedding).

His wife, Joyce, had been a big help in this process. She wasn't his wife anymore. She had allowed him perspective that even friends and high-school and college hadn't provided, and he had learned with dull plodding wonder that even after getting out of his mother's world it was possible to go even further and leave behind the mid-west. People didn't always sit down for formal dinner and it was okay to wear shoes without socks and saying a woman's name during sex could result in that woman making all sorts of new and interesting noises. None of these things would have ever occurred to him if he hadn't met Joyce, who was now his ex-wife. He was pretty sure.

It hadn't happened at all like it was supposed to. Separation and divorce were supposed to be tumultuous, painful, dramatic, or at least it was supposed to be somehow grippable. It hadn't been.

Randy didn't read much fiction, his recreational reading tended to consist of magazines that catered to his geologic interests. But somewhere he had picked up the idea that love was supposed to slink away quietly in the night. Or something equally poetic. But it hadn't. It had ended with an awkward conversation while he had been eating a grape salad out of a plastic container on his lap in his office. And not the kind of awkward he now found himself craving, not awkward because of the strength of the emotion involved but awkward because he had had a hard time hearing his wife, she was mumbling a lot and kept asking if he understood what she

was saying. But he hadn't understood emotionally and barely understood, at times, literally. Even if love didn't always slink away in the night it certainly shouldn't go away via mumbling while on speaker phone.

He had been eating a fruit salad out of the flimsy plastic container that it was sold in at the supermarket, half a grape was speared on his plastic fork, and he was wondering why he always bought the fruit salad with the cubes of feta cheese included when the inevitable liquid at the bottom of the container, which he had taken to calling "fruit water," always soaked the cheese and made it all taste uniform, then his wife called and left him for no reason, then he ate the grape off of his fork.

He felt empty. He missed home. He missed his life. He missed breakfast. They were supposed to take this trip together during his summer leave and were all set to leave two days after the phone call. Randy had been unable to do anything but take his already economically packed backpack out of the half-empty apartment and use his nonrefundable plane ticket. When he had landed in Rome the only thing he knew was that he didn't want to be in Rome. He got on a train early in the morning, his body telling him it was still last night, and made his way to Verona. When he arrived in Verona he became quite sure that he didn't want to be in Verona. After a wait at the train station he boarded another train, then another, then another, and as the day wore on he constantly found himself where he didn't want to be. More waits, more trains, more of the day passing. Then the waits themselves became too much for him and he had begun hopping on whatever train was leaving soonest, not much thought being applied to anything but departure time and general direction, which was how he had ended up on the local trains, crawling along the south of France little town by little town and, while a larger train would have continued on through the night, his had

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stopped in Cannes and he had been told that that was as far as it was going. He had left the train and found himself at the beach.

Livinia Colmes was walking through the streets of Cannes during the summer night. The town was quiet, this wasn't a festival weekend, just a sleepy beach village weekend, something that had appealed to her mother while the wedding was being planned.

That wasn't to say there was nobody out. She passed a few bars and hotels while she rustled over the cobblestones, and there were a few late diners heading home. She was getting used to their eyes, to the comments, calls, drunken shouts, and confused gasps. She was even getting used to having to bunch her dress up in both her hands as she walked; her train she wasn't currently thinking about.

She passed, white and hurried, through the incandescent light of street lamps and the buttery yellow light pouring out of hotel lobbies. She walked quickly, her feet naked under the billows of her dress. One of her shoes was back on one of the streets behind her, the other was still in the bathroom of the church where she had used it to break the lock on the window when panic had finally overwhelmed her.

Panic and fear had been churning inside of her for days, bashing up against each other like waves in a storm, sometimes cancelling out, sometimes combining to peak higher than either had a right to on their own. Fear at the ceremony she was supposed to be taking part in at that very moment, panic about what she was contemplating doing, fear at going through with things, panic at how many things pulling out now entailed. Can you return a wedding dress? Who would tell the guests? Who keeps the rings? Should she write a letter,

call her groom into the back room to tell him, run like hell? Worrying about what would happen to the cake had been the last coherent thing that went through her head before her shoe was off and she was bashing through the window lock to get outside in the hopes that she would be able to breathe once she was out of that bathroom. Only she found as she hustled her way through the streets that panic followed after her somewhere not too far behind her train. She felt physically awful and not at all like Julia Roberts, or Jennifer Aniston, or Kirsten Dunst and Livinia felt a moment of dizzy calm as her mind momentarily became fully occupied with the realization that many famous actresses had played roles in which they had done exactly what she was doing right now. But they had gotten none of it right. They always looked so free and happy or adorably bemused but instead there was this horrible physical sensation of aching in her muscles. That was the biggest surprise, the physical pain. As if she were coming down with something, a disgusting icy sloshing in her stomach that made her dress feel too tight and that she was having no luck walking away from.

Walking, though, she was having plenty of luck with and she felt a very strong desire to continue doing as such. Her feet weren't hers anymore. Their soreness didn't belong to her. All that belonged to her was the mass of people somewhere behind her. She pondered briefly how the people who would be the angriest with her were the ones who she had been trying so hard to make happy when she agreed to this marriage in the first place. It didn't seem possible for her to do anything right. Even finding the train station. She knew that somewhere in the tattered yarns of her thought process the notion of getting to the train station had seemed like the right idea, and so some part of her had been trying to do this on her walk, but she had failed.

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Instead she seemed to have made her way to one of the beaches. The open gap of sky at the other end of the street was a clear sign that the town was ending and the ocean was approaching. She decided this was fine. Her feet were coming back to her and sand and water seemed like a good idea. In a brilliantly oblivious motion she carefully gathered her train up in her arms, maintaining the safety of this already destroyed piece of her dress suddenly becoming the one thing that seemed accomplishable to her. "It might get sandy," was all she thought, and despite the fact that she had to drop her dress in order to gather it up, and despite the fact that it was already frayed and blackened with dirt at the ends from being dragged through the street, and despite the fact that her hair was fallen in parched blond curls about her face and her back was soaked through with sweat, she carefully gathered her train up and held it gingerly as she approached the beach entrance. She really hoped she didn't get her train sandy.

Randy's nostrils were flared. He hadn't washed properly since the morning before his flight and he relaxed his nostrils then flared them again, feeling the irritation of a pimple forming. Then in one swift moment the beach turned from a good place to sit and wait for another train into a very uncomfortable place to sit and wait. The sand was sucking the warmth from his body. And it was hard. And his body was getting sore. And it was boring, there was no way he could just sit and stare dumbly like this until dawn. And he wanted to be moving on. He had to get out of there. This was no place for him to be. Somewhere else would be better; more relaxing.

He stood up and turned to walk back towards the street, aware that his body was beginning to act in strange ways, his head wouldn't sit properly on his shoulders, which were

slumping, and his torso was willing the rest of him to just lie down.

Then everything stiffened and the sound of air whistling into his mouth over his teeth meshed with the soft slush of the little waves behind him as his heart jumpstarted into a quick thumping rhythm and he stared at the ethereal white form gliding across the sand in his direction.

It drew closer and Randy looked around, thoughts of flight, thoughts of arming himself, thoughts of calling for help pinging inside his head. Yet some consensus seemed to have been reached because he didn't do any of these things and only stood still and watched this thing bear down on him.

The white form drew nearer and there was a peak of otherworldliness when he realized that the form at times resembled a woman in a wedding dress, then his nervousness began to recede and his eyebrows slowly lowered and drew towards a point above his nose as he struggled to make sense out of what he was seeing. It wasn't a white shape that resembled a woman in a wedding dress; it *was* a woman in a wedding dress. And she wasn't walking towards him, as he had first thought, but was walking very determinedly towards the water with no notice of him whatsoever. And she was a mess in a sadly comical way, as if she had put on her wedding dress before cleaning the house or climbing the Stairmaster. And, on top of this all, she was trying, and failing, to cradle a bunch of fabric to her chest. Parts of it were slipping out and falling through her arms and Randy realized that it was her train; she was trying to protect her train.

Randy turned and looked over his shoulder, a movement that was completely instinctual and natural, by the time he looked over his other shoulder this movement had become slightly stylized and Randy realized he was looking around, hopefully, to see if anyone else was nearby and also seeing this. He was looking for company.

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The bedraggled bride walked past him, taking no notice, and then began to angle off in order to avoid walking straight into the water, her path arcing away so she could walk down the beach, becoming smaller and smaller, eventually receding into a blur that Randy had to squint his eyes to distinguish until she blended into the city brightened darkness.

Randy's stomach growled. He rubbed his palm against his stomach, then scratched at his side with his middle fingernail. He looked around, then at his watch, then went over to where his shoes were sitting in the sand.

He seemed to remember passing a café or something with bread and pastries in the window when he first walked down here. It might still be open. He bent his knees and squatted next to his shoes, deciding to remain barefoot while still on the sand. As he picked them up and brushed the sand off of them he paused, letting some collect in his hand. He placed his shoes under his arm and took a pinch of sand between his fingers, rubbing it together, letting it grind against the pads of his fingertips and sprinkle back into his palm. He walked as he looked, not really noticing where he was going, eventually getting close enough to the street to have adequate light. Holding up his palm he noticed the deep yellow color and large particle size. Quartz, he decided, with heavy iron impurities.

He looked around and got his bearings, then took one last look back at the beach, his head shaking in disbelief at what he had just seen there, and he marveled at how crazy some people could be before he brushed his palms together, dusting the sand off of them, and walked up onto the street.

Knots

Alexis sat back against the wall of the tub and felt a slosh of tepid water rise up her back. Marianna was getting out; she was always the first one out. Alexis watched their mother lifting her baby sister up and noticed how Marianna appeared to frown as the baby fat hanging off of her cheeks pulled her mouth downward. Then the cheeks jiggled as she was set down and then a smile forced its way onto Marianna's face as she noticed the feeling of her wet feet on the tiled bathroom floor. This was fun for her. Everything was fun for her. Everything was new and everything was a joy. Slapping her round stomach, completely lacking in muscle, was a game. Doors were toys. The few new words she was able to say were things to be played with. Her teeth made her laugh. She stood on the floor and proudly pushed her belly out and slapped her hands against it before their mother placed a towel over her head which produced a stomping dance because now the towel over her head was a game.

Alexis watched as Marianna's head poked out from the towel. Della, the middle sister, was sitting at the far end of the tub, the bubbles she had been sculpting now forgotten; both girls unable to look away from Marianna. It was her joy that always made her turn the hardest.

Marianna made an attempt at pulling the towel back over her head, then waited until it fell off again, her smile coming into view like a sunrise. Their mother smiled back and sat down on the toilet seat next to the tub, gathering Marianna up and standing her between her legs. Their mother took a

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bottle of hair detangler and let Marianna help squeeze some into her hand.

Alexis unknowingly pushed further back against the wall of the tub while Della continued to stare.

Marianna's hair was short, it was barely starting to touch her shoulders and the back of her head was a constant squirrel's nest of auburn and tangles. As their mother rubbed detangler into it, Marianna made an attempt to march, arms swinging in overly energetic circles, towards the door. Their mother snagged her, accidentally smearing detangler onto her stomach as she pulled Marianna close and pinned her between her knees.

Marianna did not enjoy being held still and she began to whine, shaking her head and trying to push away from their mother's legs. Then the comb came down and began to work through her hair. The top was relatively easy but Marianna's head jerked back in a sudden spasm when the squirrel's nest in the back was caught up in the comb's teeth. Her face instantly crumbled into a chubby mask of tears and her absolute lack of any mental barriers allowed her to switch from conveying annoyance at being pinned down to abject horror as the comb crackled through more knots. Her feet began drumming on the floor, her head began whipping back and forth, both actions recognizable by Alexis and Della from the tub as dangerous and more likely to make things worse, but they admired Marianna's blustering courage nonetheless.

This admiration turned to envy for Alexis as, seemingly before it even started, Marianna's turn was through. Her short hair proved little ground for knots to form and this allowed the comb to do its work with relative ease leaving an orderly rowed helmet of hair piled on top of Marianna's head. Again Marianna's face did a u-turn and as soon as their mother released her Marianna's face lit up in a joy too pure to bear

any memories of the past few minutes and she was off to run naked up and down the hall.

Their mother went after her, laughter seeping through the open bathroom door as Marianna was chased down, diapered, dressed.

Alexis saw her red plastic car wobbling at the bottom of the tub next to her, rearing up on its back wheels due to something in its hood wanting to float. Della began to play again, the laughter of their baby sister in the hall erasing the tears from moments ago completely, wiping Della's mind as clean as a dry erase board, and Alexis felt a touch of jealousy at her little sisters; Marianna was done and Della didn't quite remember.

Alexis, though, was unable to reach out and pick up her red car like she wanted to; too much of her knew that her turn was coming soon and the memory of last time came back to her clearly. Their last bath had been unbearable. Alexis's screams had driven their mother to swear loudly and throw the comb against the wall. Alexis had turned around terrified and seen tears in her mother's eyes. She was dreading her turn. She thought she had seen similar dread on their mother's face.

Their mother returned and Della was plucked out of the tub. She stood, dripping wet while their mother fetched a towel, and her large doe eyes flashed around the room. Their mother returned and the goose pimples forming on Della's arms were covered over with cotton ample enough to cover an adult, the remains pooling at Della's feet. And now, with their mother sitting back down on the toilet seat cover and Della bundled up between her legs, the resemblance came out. Della was their mother; their mother was Della. The two looked like the same organism viewed through varying ends of a temporal telescope, one way showing the bounce of youth and unfrozen look of innocence, the other

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showing the sag of time and the wrinkles of knowledge. Put together the two formed bookends of attraction that Alexis had always reacted poorly to on some deeper level than she understood. Even now in the bathroom, with Della wet and mostly hidden by a towel and their mother in a t-shirt, her sweater cast off after the first few splashes of the bath had soaked her through, even now they presented a duality that provided an aesthetic appeal normally found on the cover of clothing catalogues and which made the photos of them together seem to sparkle, their mother pushing Della on the swings, their mother holding Della on the couch, their mother letting Della feed her a piece of pasta. These photos were instantly framed and put up in areas of prominence about the house; they took over desktops and hallways. There was one hanging over Alexis and Della's bunk bed.

Alexis turned away and searched about in the bathwater for her red plastic car as their mother towel dried Della's hair. Alexis's fingers closed over the car when she heard Della start to whimper and she looked up to see that duality expressed again between mother and daughter. Della's cries were always the worst and, in turn, their mother's grief as she combed through the knots was always most obvious when the sufferer was Della. And Della did suffer.

Her hair was lengths longer than Marianna's, whose laughter as she knocked over blocks continued to seep into the bathroom, and the knots in Della's curly hair came to stay. Alexis looked away again and listened to the cries bordering on screams as the teeth of the comb grappled with each new tangle, followed by the lulls of sobbing when the comb was disengaged. Alexis looked up to see the towel drop off of Della's shoulders as she gave a particularly emotional attempt to duck her head away from the comb; their mother only put her hand on her now naked shoulder to hold her still.

Della's screams were more animated than her sister's and gained power due to her ability to form words and names and pin the blame for her tears on their mother. It was difficult for Alexis to watch.

And then Della was done, her hair shiny and darker brown than usual due to the water. Their mother gave her a kiss on top of her head and then walked her out to let her pick out her pajamas for the night. Alexis listened to the sound of the closet door opening and drawer handles rattling back into place, their repetitive and diminishing clatter the loudest noise to reach back to the bathroom.

Alexis felt the plastic red car in her hands, picked it up and drove it along the edge of the tub, heard Marianna shriek with joy as Della came to join her in play, watched the plastic car leave a trail of water behind as it continued its journey along the bathtub rim, felt her hair, wet against her back, shift as she moved to continue driving the car, heard her mother's footsteps, looked up, saw her looking down at her.

Alexis picked the plastic car up and held it against her chest as her mother's fingers reached under her arms and picked her up out of the tub. The tiles were cold under her feet and the water dripping off of her splashed up against her ankles. She was enveloped in a towel, felt the cotton rubbing her skin dry, the friction from her mother's hands was warm and felt good.

Her head got lost in the towel and everything went black. Then her mother gave her a gentle pat on her bottom. "Okay, you're all set," her mother said, and Alexis heard her footsteps leaving the bathroom. Reaching a hand up, Alexis pulled at the towel and gathered it against her as it fell from her head. She was standing facing the bathroom mirror. On the counter in front of her were her brush and comb. Outside the door she heard her mother call out that she was going down to the kitchen and that she wanted everyone ready for

Knots

bed by the time she came back up. Alexis listened as the thump of her mother's bare feet receded down the stairs. She looked back at the counter, picked up the comb, stared at herself in the mirror.

Alexis lay on the top bunk running a length of hair through her fingers. Underneath her, Della was flipping through a pop-up book and she could hear the thick cardboard pages being turned while their mother was saying a final goodnight to Marianna in her room down the hall. Alexis heard Marianna's door shut, then a bit later felt the bunk bed jostle as their mother sat down to say goodnight to Della. Then she felt her mother's hand on her head, felt her fingers pinch her nose as they always did at bedtime, heard the guard rails creak as her mother stood on Della's bed and pulled herself up high enough to kiss Alexis on the forehead. "That's my big girl," her mother whispered. Then she was gone, the lights were out, the door was shut, the nightlight in the corner warming up the room in a soft orange glow.

Alexis stared up at the ceiling. She pulled another lock of hair down and ran her fingers through it. Then she rolled over, closing her eyes, and tried to fall asleep. A few moments later her feet began kicking happily and uncontrollably under the covers as she rolled her body back over, her eyes opening wide to look up at the ceiling as a smile radiated across her face.

The Donkey of Vincento

In the village of Vincento, just north of the hill country, there is a common saying amongst the people when someone is being too boastful or thick headed. You'll often hear it uttered that someone is being, "*Gravid Acciastona*," or, "The True Fool," or very common too, "The Ass of Vincento." It is a wonderful play on words when spoken in the native language, but more and more one hears it nowadays in translation, a move which seems to shake the saying of all its touching connotations for I feel that most people who speak it now have no grasp of its story of origin.

You see, awhile ago in Vincento there lived a young boy named Theodore. Most everyone called Theodore by the nickname *Pullazo*, which, in the language of the people, means "donkey." This nickname was the result of a joke Theodore's uncle played on him when he was a little boy involving the family donkey. There is no need to go into that here except to mention that the nickname *Pullazo* was a harmless one and, when used by his friends and family, was not uttered with insult in mind.

Now, *Pullazo* was very close with the farrier's son, Demetrius, and the two had been friends since before either of them could remember, before, in fact, *Pullazo* had been known by any name other than Theodore. The two lads were inseparable despite Demetrius being a few years older than *Pullazo*, and they were often seen about town or playing in the fields, usually with Demetrius's younger sister, Penelope, in tow. While growing up Penelope was often made to play the role of the princess being rescued from dragons by the

The Donkey of Vincento

two brave fighters or the lamb being rescued from the wolves by the two brave farmers, or the village girl being rescued from bandits by the two brave *robeilleros*.

Of course, Pullazo and Demetrius would also play any number of games that had no part for Penelope, and she spent many afternoons sitting and watching her brother play with Pullazo in the fields and she came to know the sound of Pullazo's laugh, the shape of his shoulders in their course linen shirt, the crook in his nose where it had been broken when he fell as a young boy. She came to know these things very well, and came to love them deeply, although Pullazo did not pay any attention to her at all.

And she also came to know of Pullazo's love for Helen, the daughter of the silk merchant who spent his summers in the large house to the south of the village where the orchards began. Helen had first shown up in town when Pullazo and Penelope were maybe twelve years old, and Penelope had been standing there, next to Pullazo, when he first laid eyes on Helen. Pullazo swore under his breath when he saw the silk merchant's daughter and, with the whispered awe of a young boy, proclaimed himself in love.

Penelope followed the gaze of Pullazo to see this girl Helen, a very tall girl whose nose seemed constantly turned up and whose eyes seemed to not want to even glance down at the dirt road she stood on as if they were afraid of getting dirty. When Pullazo gasped in awe; Penelope wrinkled her nose and clandestinely spat in the dirt. Helen, mistaking Pullazo for the servant boy that had accompanied her into town, snapped her fingers and ordered Pullazo to fetch her some water from the well at the crossroads. Pullazo ran and obeyed her instantly, his smile never leaving his face as he lugged a pitcher from the well and handed Helen a dipper full of water. Helen drank her water and handed him back the dipper before forgetting about him instantly.

Demetrius, a few years older and no stranger to the effects of a girl on a boy's heart, laughed at the look on his friend's face as Pullazo held his chest. Penelope scowled.

Pullazo's adoration of Helen increased every time he saw her, which was none too often as she only summered in Vincento and infrequently made trips into town. But the occasional glimpse was enough to keep his heart beating strong for Helen, and more and more years came to pass. Demetrius and Pullazo didn't play in the fields anymore. Instead Pullazo worked in the fields while Demetrius worked in his father's shop. Penelope, naturally, grew up as well, learning from her mother how to care for her brother and father and growing into a beautiful young lady herself, although one that Pullazo still paid no mind to.

It was late in the summer during one of these years when word spread through the town that the silk merchant was going to throw a festival for the village during the holy days of the local saint.

At first this was only treated as rumor, the braying of the local drunkards and nothing more. But as the month began to pass, carts full of salted meats and large wheels of cheese could be seen passing through the village square on their way up to the silk merchant's house. And a troop of painters was hired to whitewash the walls of the town square and spread crushed limestone over the dirt so that it practically glowed with cleanliness. But it was the giant barrels of wine and beer rolling past on the carts that convinced everyone that the banquet was for real, and that was when all the shops closed for repainting, and the woodworkers in town were kept busy sprucing up the balconies overlooking the square, and the town's seamstresses were flooded with orders for the best possible outfits that the local women could afford.

Everyone was making plans, and this included Pullazo and Demetrius. They both knew that if the silk merchant was

The Donkey of Vincento

throwing the banquet, then the silk merchant's daughter was sure to be there. Both young men were convinced that this was Pullazo's best chance to win Helen's heart. There were many talks during those late summer months in the farrier's shop where the two young men would argue over how to best impress Helen. The arguments always ended with Demetrius shouting louder than Pullazo, loud enough to silence his younger friend, and Demetrius would say, with a calm pat on Pullazo's back, "You have to believe me, Pullazo, I'm a man who understands women."

Penelope was never far out of earshot during these conversations. Being a whole year younger than Pullazo, she was only being allowed by her father to attend the children's portion of the event, the puppet show and the afternoon music and the early supper, and was not being allowed to return in the evening for the more formal dance. She had argued with her father about this until her ears grew hot, but there was no relenting and she was often in a foul mood during those days. Listening to Pullazo and Demetrius talk about how best to court Helen did nothing to improve her mindset. Indeed, it happened quite often that she would come back from unsuccessfully pleading her case to her father to let her go to the dance only to be forced to sit and listen to Demetrius telling Pullazo such pieces of advice as, "Be sure and tell her you own a horse, not a donkey," or, "Be sure to wet your hair down before you ask her to dance. She won't say yes if your hair is sticking up."

The two would start arguing about this point or that and then they would start yelling and finally Demetrius would shout over Pullazo and gain control of the conversation and would end things with a simple, "You've got to realize, Pullazo, I'm a man who understands women."

The day of the festival came and everyone filled the town square and enjoyed the dancing and music and wine and

food. There was a race where the winner received a beautiful garland of flowers, and a show of the traditional *habonyas* which made the little children shriek with laughter. Then the afternoon began to fade and the people made their way back to their homes, some to retire for the evening, some to prepare for the more formal dance later that night.

Pullazo bid goodbye to his family and went to Demetrius's house to get ready. Upstairs the two young men put themselves together for the dance. They argued over who would wear the nicer pants, and who would get to ride to the gardens and who would be in charge of leading the donkey when he refused to pull the cart and arrive at the dance with mud on their shoes. They bathed and dressed and poked fun at each other and tried to hide how nervous they were, and Penelope sat in the downstairs room listening to them joke and yell and thump about upstairs, and she folded her arms and stared into the corner and tried to pretend that she did not care.

Then they were tromping down the stairs, Demetrius throwing his hat up high in the air before ducking and running to catch it on his head as it fell, standing upright and beaming before Pullazo tried the same trick and missed, his hat dropping to the ground, Penelope giggling into her dress as she watched. But her giggle soon died and hurt filled her face as Demetrius confidently declared, "By the end of tonight, Pullazo, you will be one with Helen."

Then they were out the front door, Demetrius's father throwing words of advice and warnings about the dangers of too much wine and too little sense as they went to the barn and led the donkey out. A quick few minutes later and the cart was attached. Demetrius clambered up into it and stood as Pullazo tugged at the donkey's halter, a scene that caused Demetrius no end of delight as he made joke after joke about the "donkey" leading the donkey.

The Donkey of Vincento

Eventually Pullazo got the stubborn animal to pull the cart along and they disappeared into the lane and headed into town. Penelope watched from the doorway, and as the sound of the cart's wheels faded into the darkness her eyes filled with tears.

Later that night, when the moon was a bright white crescent hanging over the horizon, the two boys returned. They were both in the cart, the donkey for the moment having been convinced to pull without any need of encouragement. Demetrius was cradling a jug of wine in the crook of his arm and Pullazo was staring up at the stars.

"Maybe it wasn't meant to be," Demetrius said.

Pullazo didn't answer.

"Maybe she overheard us talking about owning a donkey instead of a horse," Demetrius said.

Pullazo didn't answer.

Demetrius continued making suggestions and Pullazo remained silent while they put the donkey back in the stable and the cart back in the barn and made their way towards the house.

Waiting in the doorway was Penelope, who watched as Pullazo began to say his goodbyes, his downturned face sad and without joy.

"What happened?" she asked.

"The silk merchant's daughter," Demetrius answered, "she didn't pay poor Pullazo any attention, and when he asked her to dance," Demetrius made an obscene gesture with his two fingers, "she snubbed him."

Penelope's face grew flushed with hidden happiness as she heard this.

"I can't figure out what went wrong," Demetrius said, "I was *positive* something would happen tonight. And *I* know women."

Pullazo didn't say anything, just turned and began walking towards the path to begin making his way home. When he had gone a little ways, Penelope, quick as you can, darted out through the door to run after him. She caught up to him at the wooden fence and Demetrius heard her talking to Pullazo, then Pullazo answering, then some more talking until Demetrius's face brightened up as he heard his friend burst into happy laughter over something Penelope had said. With that laughter, Demetrius knew his friend was no longer heartbroken over the silk merchant's daughter.

He was amazed, and when Penelope came back to the house he asked her, awestruck, "I told him joke after joke on the ride home, how did you fix the broken heart of my friend so quickly?"

Penelope was beaming, her love showing on her face, and she stood up on tiptoe and kissed her brother on the cheek, then said the words that became so famous, the last part especially, in the town of Vincento.

"Maecenas odio ante consecetuer pullazo, uscevitale risus mauris sollicitudin; phasellus statione, liber necanto adipiscing gravid acciastona!"

Or, in the lesser tongue, "Your friend may be the one we call donkey, but never have I been so happy that my brother is the true ass of the town!"

The Pea Pod Gambit

“You suck,” Seth said. He was lying flat on his back on an old beat up couch that was one step up from a college dorm room. The couch was long enough so that his whole body could sprawl out on it with either his feet or his head up on one of the arm rests. Seth enjoyed either position and alternated back and forth over the course of every Sunday afternoon. He was currently favoring a head on the armrest position, and he was leaned slightly off the couch in an attempt to get the attention of Atticus.

Atticus was on the smaller couch that was at a right angle to the foot of Seth’s couch, with just enough room for someone to walk through, comfortable lounging space being at a premium over things like the ability to walk out of the living room and into the rest of the apartment.

Atticus’s couch was like a dirty marshmallow, the once bright creamy fabric now dingy and tattered. His lanky body was folded into an angle, the shorter couch requiring him to use both armrests as he lounged, his knees slung over one and his head propped on the other, a feat his body had long since learned to manage with maximum comfort while still leaving enough room to manipulate the plastic video game guitar controller in his hands.

“You suck,” Seth repeated, louder.

Atticus ignored him. Their couches formed two sides of a rectangle. The other two sides were composed of bookshelves and windows, all of which seemed like afterthoughts in the cluttered mess of video game and DVD boxes, broken CD cases, piles of magazine and junk mail toppling off of the

coffee table, all lit in what little natural light could make it into the awkward alley their windows looked out on.

Determined to get some sort of reaction, Seth leaned out on the couch to get a sight-line on Atticus's face. He finished his beer and crumpled it up into a little puck, then, trying to stabilize himself as much as possible while leaning as far off the couch as possible, he attempted a throw at Atticus's head with an awkward right handed side arm. Things were doomed as Seth was left handed, slightly drunk, and overzealous in his assessment of how far he could dangle off the couch. The beer can pulled far left, flying unnoticed behind Atticus to rattle around in the hallway as Seth slid off the couch, his flailing arms unable to stop his fall and only managing to pull a stack of magazines down on top of him. The avalanche of glossy paged bachelor rags and week old newspapers increased in intensity for a second or two before tapering off, an occasional drip of Sport's Section plopping onto Seth's head as he curled up where he lay, laughing while wincing at some pain in his leg.

The clacking of the buttons on Atticus's plastic guitar came to a halt, and he, for the first time, acknowledged Seth's existence. "High score," he said, an arm extending out to grab a glass bottle of beer out of the six-pack perched perfectly on its side on a cleared out section of coffee table near his couch.

Atticus turned to look at Seth as he hissed, holding one knee up towards his chest, a pained look in his face even while he continued laughing.

"Oh," Atticus said. "I thought you were doing the funny kid falls of the couch routine. You actually hurt yourself?"

"Clipped my shin," Seth answered through tears and a smile, neither emotion quite able to gain control of his face.

"Just how drunk *are* you?" Atticus asked, plastic guitar balanced on his chest he twisted the cap off of his bottle of beer and took a sip before his hand reached out to place the bottle

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cap neatly in line with the four other caps on the coffee table. “You should stick to just a six-pack on Sundays.”

Seth pshawed him off, making yap-yap motions with one hand he grabbed another empty can with the other, and with an apparently clear shot threw his hardest at Atticus’s head, tongue stuck determinedly onto his upper lip, only to watch the can, odd with the aerodynamics of crumpled aluminum, soar up and over the back of Atticus’s couch to go clattering back into the hall by the kitchen along with his first shot.

“Damn it!” Seth shouted. “You’re like Magneto or something!”

“Fourteen beers into a Sunday afternoon and you’re referencing comic books. It’s astounding we still hang out.”

“Is that why you drink bottles?” Seth shouted drunkenly. “Because they throw better?”

“Yes, Seth. That’s why I drink from bottles. Because they’re easier to throw at your head.” Atticus turned away from the table, relaxing onto his back, a smile appearing on his face as Seth’s half forced inane bantering and the sound of the title screen on the television faded into white noise. A six pack of bottles, Atticus knew, would warm at just the right rate, so that if the first one was borderline painfully cold, by the time he eased into the sixth it would be barely chilled, a perfect beer for beer match of his mood as the day progressed. He knew this because his Sunday routine had been honed and tested and reproduced with a number of different factors until he had discovered the perfect way to ward off the impending crush of the work week while easing himself over his hangover from Saturday night. A six pack of bottles, Seth joking and flapping about on the big couch, and whatever entertainment the television could produce would all slowly be enjoyed over the course of a Sunday, turning a day that used to crack him to pieces into the most peaceful eight hours of his week.

Seth, getting back onto his couch, would never have put things that way, he just knew that getting drunk on Sunday was fun, that his couch was big enough to nap if he wanted, and that the pizza delivery guy knew to simply turn the handle and come into the apartment so he didn't have to get up.

All of this was allowed because of the magical situation that enveloped their third roommate, Elliot. Elliot was the only one who could actually afford to live in their apartment, and he had volunteered to take the master bedroom at a higher rent, which allowed Seth and Atticus to live for cheap in an apartment larger than they deserved. But even that was overshadowed by Elliot's relationship with his long-term girlfriend, Stephanie, a relationship that resulted in Elliot sleeping at her place almost every night of the week and barely setting foot in his own apartment for longer than it took to pack up a few things and drop off a rent check, leaving Atticus and Seth the run of the place. They had more room than they could ever afford in a Manhattan apartment, separate bathrooms ever since Atticus started using the one in the master bedroom, and a location that was impossible to beat. Atticus referred to their place as a two-bedroom apartment with an Elliot museum in one of the rooms.

Seth opened his eyes to stare at the back of the couch, then rolled himself over and stared at the TV, squinting. "Gimme a turn," he said, reaching out with a bare foot towards Atticus, who draped the wire of the guitar over Seth's toes. Seth gingerly drew his leg towards him, open mouthed with effort and balance, cheering at himself when he managed to retrieve the controller without falling off the couch again.

"I love Sundays," Seth said, starting up a new game, his skill at maneuvering the plastic guitar surprisingly high.

"Yup," Seth said, holding his fifth beer up and taking note of its level.

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There was the sound of a key in the door trickling in from the front of the apartment. Keys jingling, mechanisms turning, then turning back, the doorknob rattling, then finally the door opening. Heavy footsteps tromped into the hallway and they both heard Elliot cursing. “You guys just leave the fucking door unlocked?”

Seth was squinting at Atticus, who had popped up on the couch like a bewildered forest creature to look around, confused but alert.

“What’s Elliot doing here?” Seth whispered. “Is it Tuesday?” Seth asked, looking at his watch.

“Yes, Seth, it’s Tuesday,” Atticus answered, not yet sharing Seth’s concern. “It’s a leap month.”

Seth’s reply was lost as Elliot walked in, his dress shoes hard in the hallway. Elliot came and stood at the foot of the bigger couch. He looked down at Seth’s legs. The television was making horrible error noises and missed button squeals as Seth’s game continued unmanned.

“Make room,” Elliot said.

Seth didn’t move.

“Come on, Seth, stop fucking around,” Elliot scolded, swatting Seth’s legs off the couch before wedging himself into place. Elliot propped up one leg up on the coffee table and grabbed a beer from Atticus’s six-pack, the cardboard container sagging sadly to one side, empty now.

“Stephanie broke up with me,” Elliot said.

Seth was wide-eyed, lying on his side with his legs uncomfortably drawn up to give Elliot room on the couch. Tucked into a near fetal position he watched as Atticus’s hand reached out to the coffee table and rummaged around to pick up the cardboard remnants of his now empty six-pack. Atticus’s hand slapped around on the coffee table a bit more, then his head appeared, wide-eyed like Seth, and he looked at Elliot drinking his last beer.

Seth and Elliot's eyes met and they were filled with terror as they realized that something had gone horribly wrong with their Sunday.

"...so that was it really, you know?" Elliot was talking, his posture perfect even on a barstool. Atticus and Seth were seated next to him. Atticus had an elbow on the bar, his hand curled into a soft fist, his face resting on his hand, and his eyes staring intently and with understanding, if not a hint of glassy daze, at Elliot as he talked.

Seth, behind Atticus, mostly hidden by Atticus's shoulder, was aghast, eyebrows hashed down in utter bewilderment creating a face that was just one spasm shy of actually letting its jaw drop open.

"And I'm just sitting there," Elliot went on, his dark black hair drooping as he lowered his head, just so, over his perfectly filled glass of scotch, "and I'm listening to these old Jim Croce songs, and it all makes *sense* to me, you know?" He took a sip from his glass. "It wasn't that she wasn't there for me, it's that I couldn't *let* her be there for me, you know?" He stabbed at the ice in his glass with a stirrer, then nodded his head, agreeing with himself, before announcing that he was going to head to the bathroom.

Atticus moved finally, as Elliot disappeared down the hall. He turned to Seth, his eyes blinking too much as if they were turning back on after a lengthy time spent tuned out. "Well that was fucking excruciating," he said.

Seth gripped his forearm hard enough to hurt. "What the fuck is he *talking* about?!" Seth screamed in a whisper, his voice shooting well past panic into hysteria. "I can't listen to this any more! You said we'd take him out and we'd get him to meet another girl. He isn't meeting any girls. He's turning

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all of us *into* girls but he's not meeting any girls. This is horrible. I can't-"

"Get a *hold* of yourself," Atticus ordered. "Some time to mourn was to be expected."

"That's not what you said. You said we'd have him dating by the end of the week. 'Elliot has the boyfriend gene,' that's what you said. You said we'd have our old apartment back and everything would be just the way it was by the *end of the week*. You said he couldn't stand being single."

"He can't. I just forgot that I can't stand him being single, either."

"He's going to come back here, Atticus, he's going to come back here and he's going to take a little sip from his stupid scotch and then he's going to start *talking* again. And I don't think I can handle that."

"Look, you just have to-"

"We watched something called the BBC last night. No basketball. No Guitar Hero. The BBC! Have you *seen* that show? Five guys stand around doing nothing while the audience laughs hysterically."

"How many rum and cokes have you had?" Atticus said, his attention diverting to the glass in Seth's hand. "You know you can't handle the caffe-"

"The BBC!" Seth pleaded, hand gripping Atticus's forearm again. "I can't take it. Look. Women. I'm going over there."

"Over where?" Atticus said, turning and looking around the bar slowly, not noticing Seth grab his glass off the bar, sloshing cola all over the place, and darting off to the other side of the room. "Over where?" Atticus repeated, finally turning back to see that Seth was gone. He glanced around, like a mother who has lost her child in a toy store, his eyes bouncing around faster and faster as he looked for signs of where Seth was until he finally spotted him walking with wild

determined intensity into a group of girls. He made them laugh at first, but Atticus watched as Seth continued to talk and they continued to lose interest, one by one, until they were all smiling blankly at him. Detaching himself with the same earnest energy that he had used when he started talking, Seth came back over to the bar.

“How did that go?”

“I have no idea. I’ve never tried anything like that. I’m totally out of my element. I opened my mouth to say hi and then my blood pressure spiked to 140 over 40 and I just could *not* stop talking. I should go talk to them again. Do you think I should go talk to them again?”

Two girls came through the door and walked past their barstools. “Hey there, ladies,” Seth said, creepily downshifting his energy, a hint of crazy in his eyes.

“Jesus Christ, what’re you, the guy from *Shine*? Get a grip on yourself.”

“I just...it’s just,” Seth picked up his glass and tried to take a drink before Atticus plucked it out of his hands and set it back on the bar, Seth’s hands continuing on up towards his face even without the glass before moving up to nervously tangle in his hair. “I can’t take anymore of him.”

“I had to sneak like a common gypsy into my bathroom this morning, Seth, I don’t want to hear it. Not to mention there were all sorts of strange new hairs in there, so baths are out until we fix this.”

“You take baths?”

“Not really the time nor the place to get into that, Seth.”

“I-”

“Shut up,” Atticus said as he spotted Elliot returning.

“I put some songs on the juke box,” Elliot said as “Time in a Bottle” started playing throughout the bar. “I love this song,” Elliot said, looking up at the music.

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“Oh, who doesn’t?” Atticus said. Then when Elliot turned to get the bartender’s attention Atticus leaned back as casually as possible and whispered to Seth, “Go. Go now and bring back anything you can.” As Atticus leaned forward again he heard Seth’s barstool behind him clattering back and forth as Seth hit the floor running.

After procuring a drink Elliot turned back towards Atticus and began talking as if the past ten minutes hadn’t happened and they were right back in the middle of the most engaging conversation ever to take place. “So when she told me that she felt like she was dating me, but *not* me, you know, it came to me...what’s Seth doing?”

“Oh, you know Seth,” Atticus said, terrified to look over his shoulder and see what was happening.

“The guy’s entire life is the Marvel Universe, when did he start hitting on women?”

“He gets around.” Atticus answered, which was true in a science fiction convention kind of way.

“And what about you, man?” Elliot asked, suddenly concerned. “You been dating anyone recently?”

“No one whose name I can remember without my cell phone.”

“You know I wonder about you sometimes, Atticus. When are you going to-”

“This is Janet,” Seth broke in.

“Oh thank god,” Atticus said, breaking away and flagging down the bartender.

“Hi,” Janet said.

“Hi,” Elliot said barely acknowledging her.

Janet stood there, next to Seth, as Elliot continued his conversation with Atticus, who was paying no attention while he ordered a drink. “So anyway,” Elliot was saying, the awkwardness of Janet standing there growing by the second. “I’m just glad you two agreed to come to Dutton and Amy’s wed-

ding next weekend. Stephanie's going to be there, of course, and I was actually thinking about not going, if you can believe that, but then I thought, no, I have to see those two get married, and after all Atticus and Seth will be there so I'll get by." He stirred his scotch a little more and nodded determinedly. "I'll get by," he said to himself.

Drink in hand, Atticus shook his head in disbelief.

"I think I have to..." Janet said, trying to make an exit.

"Wait," Seth said in a panic.

"So," Elliot said, and his demeanor shut everyone else up, like being absorbed by some black hole of misery, to turn and listen to him. "I'll be having dinner with my parents tomorrow night. I told Stephanie she could stop by and pick up her stuff. There's a box of her things on the kitchen counter. So, you know, if one of you could be there to let her in and show her where it is that'd be great." He stirred his scotch one last time, but didn't take a drink. "Well this has been healing, guys, thanks," he said, his face honest. "I mean that. I think I'm going to take off now."

He smiled and nodded around the circle and made his way down from his barstool and out of the bar.

"What just happened?" Janet said.

"I have no idea," Atticus said, turning to look at her.

"Was that the friend you wanted me to talk to?" she asked Seth, who was still staring at where Elliot had been sitting.

"Yes," Atticus said, jumping in. "He had noticed you sitting across the bar and..."

"He's cute," Janet said.

There was instant and pointless action suddenly in Seth and Atticus as both realized that they should do something but neither had any idea what that something might be. Atticus looked around, smiled, looked around, picked up a cocktail napkin, put it down.

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Seth just nodded vigorously at Janet like she was a game show contestant close to solving the puzzle.

“What’s his deal, though? He seemed a little moody.”

“He’s on the rebound, actually,” Atticus said. “Just getting out of a serious relationship but he’s a really great—”

“Oh,” Janet said, her face flipping like a card and shutting down entirely. “Never mind then.” She walked away before either Seth or Atticus could react.

Atticus watched her. “I don’t...what...”

“It’s like they’re possessed or something,” Seth leaned in to whisper conspiratorially.

“I’m so confused,” Atticus said.

“Come on,” Seth swatted him on the shoulder. “Why am I the one out there fishing? You should be able to do this. You’ve talked to plenty of women.”

Atticus shook his head in adamant disagreement. “Not *this* sober I haven’t.”

“Well what is it you do when you’re drunk? Tell me and I’ll go do it.”

Atticus squinted his eyes, tilting his head in thought. “I think I talk about puppies.”

“That’s not helping.”

“Come on, now,” Atticus flagged the bartender and mimed an order for two shots. “Let’s not hear any more of that talk. This was just practice is all.” The bartender clacked two shots of alcohol on the bar and Atticus slid one back towards Seth. “You and me? Working on this together? We’ll have this cracked in no time.”

“Okay,” Seth said, mollified. “Okay.”

They clinked glasses, the sound marble-thick in the nearly empty bar, and drank.

“I don’t know,” Atticus said, turning the doorknob to their apartment, trying to swing it open, then walking face first into it.

“Keys,” Seth said, unlocking the door.

Atticus tried again and successfully made his way into the apartment.

“I don’t know,” he repeated, “I’ve been thinking about this and there’s really a tiny little sweet spot we’re allowed to hit. She’s got to be an exact type of woman. He’s got to like her,” he watched as Seth opened the fridge and took out two beers.

Seth closed the refrigerator door and looked at a card stuck there with a magnet. “I completely forgot about this until Elliot mentioned it,” he said, awkwardly holding the card in one hand and removing the magnet with his other without putting his beer down.

“Dutton and Amy’s wedding,” Seth said, holding out the invitation.

“Did we say yes to that?”

Seth nodded. “You cautiously weighed the odds of them serving lamb chops as an appetizer and then waved it onto the calendar.”

“What was my reading on their likely dinners?”

“Second tier fish.”

“Interesting.”

“It’s this weekend. Stephanie and all her friends and relatives will be there. I guess that really will be rough on Elliot.” Seth put the invitation down on the counter next to a cardboard box with “Stephanie’s Stuff” written on it with a black magic marker in Elliot’s handwriting.

“The thing is,” Atticus said, trying to finish his thought from out in the hallway, “let’s say we find a girlfriend for him but he likes her *too* much. Then they move in together. And then were does that leave us?”

The Pea Pod Gambit

Seth stared at Atticus, all weddings and boxes gone from his head.

“That’s what I’m saying,” Atticus said, cracking the cap off his beer and nodding as he took a sip. “Too little and he doesn’t spend time with her, too much and suddenly we’re worse off than a crowded apartment. Too much and we have to *move*.”

“I can’t move,” Seth said with the finality of someone who has announced that they wouldn’t be able to handle prison.

“Driving a moving van around Manhattan.”

“Dealing with brokers.”

“Those giant side view mirrors.”

“Every ad you see is a bait and switch.”

“Some hot shot in a cab behind you who’s been driving since he was born honking and getting pissed off at you when you hesitate trying to get past a double parked car.”

Seth’s terror was firmly in place at this point. “We can’t move.”

“No,” Atticus agreed. “No, it’s got to be the exact same type of woman as Stephanie.”

“And we need to know where Elliot went wrong, too,” Seth said, staring at the invitation sitting on the counter next to the cardboard box. “We need to know what it was she was looking for and how he failed to live up to that.”

“We need to recreate her. We need to craft a prototype woman so we know what we’re looking for.” Atticus stared at the cardboard box containing Stephanie’s belongings.

Seth nodded.

“And we need to take this knowledge and apply it in an area that is rife with women who are all from the same mold.” And now Atticus was following Seth’s gaze, staring at the wedding invitation.

They stood and they stared, one taking a sip of beer every now and then, neither one making any sudden moves, both unconsciously allowing the idea to ripen between them, not even wanting to risk words lest the idea prove wispy and without foundation. Then slowly they risked glances at each other, the silence needing to be broken, the idea needing to be acknowledged as real.

“Go to his door and tell me if you hear sounds of the rainforest,” Atticus said.

Seth tiptoed down the hallway and put an ear to Elliot’s door. He waited, straining, until finally, “I hear a frog,” he whispered.

“Then he’s out,” Atticus said, fingers dipping into the corner of the box and, sliding it off the counter into his arms, he plucked up the wedding invitation for good measure and walked into the hallway. “Living room,” he said.

Seth led the way, shoving magazines and newspapers off the coffee table before Atticus stepped up and emptied the cardboard box, old lipsticks and CDs and books and sleeping clothes filling up the empty space.

“She’s in here somewhere,” Atticus said as Seth started to pick his way through.

“Joni Mitchell?” Seth said, picking up a CD.

“Put it on,” Atticus commanded.

Seth walked over to the stereo and put the CD in. He stood thoughtfully next to the speaker as the first few bars of music filled the room.

“Turn it off,” Atticus commanded.

The initial burst of excitement was slowly fading and now Seth and Atticus looked down and contemplated the task at hand.

“Where do we start?” Seth asked.

“Anywhere I guess,” Atticus said. “Tonight we just familiarize ourselves with the material.”

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“Okay,” Seth nodded, staring down. “Okay.”
“She’s in here somewhere,” Atticus repeated.

Seth stood outside Elliot’s door the next night, ear pressed against the wood. He waited, verifying, then nodded. “Tree frogs.”

“Okay,” Atticus said, and they both walked into the living room, Seth grabbing the cardboard box from behind the TV while Atticus set the large sketch pad up on the easel to display their notes from the previous night.

“Okay,” Atticus said, “where did we leave off?”

“We made some good progress with the Stephanie prototype, but I’d be happier if we set down some hard and fast rules and strategies for our behavior.”

“You don’t think we need more work on our target female?”

“I think that will come with time,” Seth said, sipping a Diet Coke as he sat in his flannel pajamas. “Sifting through this cardboard box is an organic process. But it will happen, Atticus. It’s how we put that data into play that has me worried.”

“Okay,” Atticus nodded. “Okay...I can see that. So we put some hard and fast rules into place.”

“We’re looking for a woman for him not us,” Seth said.

“Yes. We’re not to be nearly as charming as we’re capable.”

“Or drunk.”

Atticus swore but then conceded. “Yes, or drunk. We use the bar as a social tool.”

“Good.”

“And time limits, we need time limits. No finding a girl it’s easy to get a background on and sticking to her the whole

time. That means you have to constantly be introducing yourself to new people. No finding one person you can talk to and clinging to them the entire night.”

It was Seth’s turn to hesitate. Then he too nodded sadly. “That is how it should be. Yes.” Suddenly he perked up. “Hey, can I be Dream Seth?”

“I don’t think this is the time for you to act out your fantasy professions.”

“Atticus, we’re going to have to initiate conversations,” he began ticking off points with his fingers, “completely sober, with any number of strange women, then steer that conversation to foster an aura of trust and emotional sharing in order to really get to know them.” He scratched the back of his head. “I’m pretty sure being ourselves isn’t the answer.”

Atticus pulled thoughtfully at his lower lip while he stared at the sketch pad. “Point taken,” he nodded, “Dream Seth it is.” He reached forward and flipped the top sheet of the pad over. “Possibly some Dream Atticus will be thrown in as well.”



“I can’t,” Seth said the next night. The sketch pad was full of notes and scribbles and drawings and the contents of the cardboard box were starting to have a picked over look. “I can’t,” he said, despair and exhaustion starting to well up inside of him. “Seriously, Atticus, I can’t do this. There’s no way we can do this.”

“Hey!” Atticus barked. “I don’t want to hear talk like that.”

“I can’t,” Seth said, starting to shake his head.

“Hey!” Atticus yelled again, rapping the yardstick he had been using as a pointer down on the table in front of Seth.

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Seth stopped talking but his body seemed to be caving in on itself as he grew in timidity.

“Okay,” Atticus said. “Okay, here’s what we’re going to do. Did that make you nervous?”

Seth nodded.

“Well we’re just going to take a little breather here, okay? Just relax, forget about all of this for a minute. Okay? Seth?”

Seth nodded again, starting to calm down.

“All right. So now we’re calm again. Right? And now I’m going to talk to Seth, the Human Resources guru, okay? Seth’s been spending his entire professional career talking to women, right? Isn’t that right, Seth?”

“Yeah,” Seth said, coming around, his head starting to lift higher, “yeah, that’s right.”

“And the Seth I know can certainly handle a series of ten minute interviews, right?”

“Yeah!” Seth said with determination. “That’s right! I’ve interviewed women...never attractive ones and never in a social setting...” he started to fade but caught himself. “But that’s all this really is, isn’t it? Just talking? We can do this.”

“There you go,” Atticus beamed.

“I’ve ‘talked’ to hundreds of women.” He turned to include Atticus. “And between the two of us we’ve talked to thousands of women.”

“Absolutely,” Atticus said, feeding off of his energy, gaining some momentum himself. “It’s not like they’re any huge mystery. It’s not like they’re unapproachable. After all I’ve slept with dozens of women.” And he turned to include Seth. “And between the two of us we’ve slept with dozens of women plus supposedly one in San Diego.”

“That’s right!” Seth said, charged up now.

“All right,” Atticus said, turning back to the easel.

“You know,” Seth said the next night, looking at the giant pad, “call me crazy, but I’m starting to think the prototype inspiration herself would be the ideal here.”

“Yes,” Atticus said, squinting through the reading glasses perched on his nose. “I think we’ve been circling around that for awhile now. It’s an idea...but we have to be willing to try all angles and accept all submissions. But yes, I don’t think we should mince around it, if you get a chance to do repair work with the prototype inspiration, you take that chance. Stephanie is our white whale.”

“Okay,” Seth said, his eyes tired. “But should we have some sort of plan in place to take out Stephanie’s date if she brings one?”

“I like it,” Atticus said. “No,” he held up a finger with solemn thought on his face, “...no...wait. Seeing as how the reception is not being held aboard The Orient Express maybe we don’t do that.”

“I can’t tell when you’re joking anymore.”

“Let’s just put a rule into place that anything that could be described as nefarious is probably best left on the cutting room floor.”

“Okay,” Seth said, running a hand over his face. He closed his eyes tight and shook his hands out, flexing them and stretching them before picking up the marker again and standing to look at the easel.

“Now,” Atticus was saying, a pointer in his hands. “What *don’t* we discuss? Let me hear you say it loud and clear.”

“Comic books.”

“And?”

“The history of comic books.”

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“And.”

“My love of comic books.”

“All right then.”

Seth stared up at Atticus, waiting. Atticus sighed. “And physics,” he added on his part.

“And?” Seth asked.

“And the history of physics, notable people in physics, the impact physics has on our daily lives.”

“And?”

“Come on, Seth.”

“And?”

“I teach physics, Seth, I don’t love physics.”

“*And?*” Seth insisted.

“And at no point am I to mention that I love physics.”

“Okay then.”

“Now *we* know that we’re trying to talk to as many women as possible, but they won’t know that.”

“No.”

“So what if one of them starts to like one of us?”

“We’re gay or engaged.”

Seth sat back on the couch and contemplated the box’s contents from a new angle. Then he chuckled to himself. “I wonder what Dutton and Amy would say if they knew our plans for their wedding.”

“I’ll be honest. I’m still not entirely clear on who Dutton and Amy are.”

“Oh come on, you’ve met them a thousand times. They’re the ones who have a Christmas party every year.”

“Not ringing a bell.”

“She makes spiced rum?”

“Nope.”

“She makes those little cupcakes? With red and green frosting?”

“Oh!” Atticus’s face lit up. “The cupcakes with the Christmas frosting? With the little sprinkles?”

“Yup.”

“I love those,” Atticus said, happy.

They both resumed reading their notes before Atticus looked up a minute later. “Wait, so who the hell are Dutton and Amy?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Seth pushed the heels of his hands into his closed eyes and stretched. “It’d be nice if we had a journal or diary or something,” Seth said, sitting up again and rummaging through the coffee table. “Why do we have her high-school yearbook?”

“She brought it over one night so they could giggle and read it.”

“Really?”

“Yes. Then they fed each other pancakes.”

“*Really?*”

“I was in my room, I have no idea. Maybe.”

Seth scratched his ear, then started flipping through the yearbook. “Here...her best friend wrote, ‘Never forget Friendly’s nights.’ That means something.”

“Absolutely, Seth, absolutely,” Atticus said, staring sleepily into space.

—

They stood in front of the giant sketch pad, one with arms folded across his chest, the other’s fingers thoughtfully

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rubbing the stubble on his chin. There had been no formal agreement, no official decision, they just both knew.

“I think we’re there,” Seth said.

“Yeah,” Atticus agreed, the flow chart drawn in magic marker, the contents of the box, now neatly arranged by category, the various pages of past nights’ notes taped up on the walls, the mass of information that had been culled, sorted, and analyzed, all of it suddenly speaking with absolute clarity to both of them. “I think we’ve done all we can.” He turned to look at Seth. “Tomorrow night is game night, you realize.”

“I know.”

“You ready?”

“Yeah,” Seth said. “Yeah I am.”

“Then let’s get some sleep.”

“Atticus?”

“Yeah?”

“If all else goes wrong, I want you to know I’m proud of us tonight.”

Atticus didn’t answer, only stared around the room savoring the emotion.



They stood at the entrance to the banquet hall, the ceremony over, the crowd in front of them. A grandfather of someone walked past them, looking elegant in his suit, and somebody’s aunt gave them a friendly nod as she passed them the other way headed towards the bathroom.

“You ready?” Atticus asked as the bass player for the band began warming up.

“I think so.”

“I’m a little nervous myself, to be honest.”

“Me too,” Seth said overexcitedly, happy to be agreeing.

“It’s okay; we’ve drilled this a hundred times. We know the signals.”

“And we keep in constant contact on the phones.”

“And we watch each other, we back each other up and we keep each other in line.”

“Absolutely.”

“Okay.”

“Okay.”

They stared out and listened to the spiked range of voices and noises coming in from the crowd.

“Let’s go,” Atticus said, and they stepped out into the banquet hall.



“So,” Atticus was saying to a short blond girl in a deep blue dress, “you really don’t think that it matters if a man has long term goals in their life?”

“Well,” she started to answer when Atticus felt his phone vibrate. He pulled it out and flipped it open. “New Text Message From Seth,” it said, “Blonds are out. Move on.”

“It’s really more a matter of whether the guy knows-”

“Oh God fucking *damn* it,” Atticus cursed at himself. “Where’s you’re A-game?” He walked away, swearing some more under his breath.

“Excuse me?” the girl asked after him.



“Well,” Seth was saying to a tall thin brunette with a flat face, “the main thing you have to worry about when designing a roller coaster is balancing what the customer wants with what you can deliver.”

“And what does the customer want, usually?”

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“You know it’s funny, whether they’re a county fair or a major theme park, they always want the same thing.” He paused and let this sink in, letting the silence hang until the brunette was just about to ask him what that was before he broke in. “More loops.”

“I could see that.”

“How about you?” Seth asked. “Would you say you’re the adventurous type? Do you like to take impulsive vacations?”

“You really start talking to me by asking if I want to have children?” a short little girl was saying to Atticus, and her shoulder length hair was framing eyes that had an interesting flavor of intensity.

“I didn’t mean to pry; I was just making small talk. Sad to say it’s job related. I design toys.”

“Really?” she asked with a nip of incredulous laughter. “And what’s that like?”

“It’s got its rough moments. Like anything else you have to stay centered. I find it helpful to always keep the sound of a child’s laughter,” he thumped his hand on his chest, “right in here.”

She smiled at him over her drink, making it obvious that she wasn’t sure she believed him yet, but that this also didn’t matter hugely.

Atticus felt his phone vibrate, then took it out and glanced at it. His lips pursed and a flash of anger crossed his face, then he looked up. “I’m gay, by the way.”

Seth set an empty glass down on the bar. “Maker’s Mark,” he said, holding his fingers up to nearly the top of the glass,

“Ginger Ale,” he added, moving his fingers up to cover the rest of the distance to the rim.

Atticus appeared next to him. “What was that?”

Seth drummed his fingers on the bar, his face grimacing with effort. “Actually, bartender? Make that all Ginger Ale, please?”

“There we are,” Atticus said, slapping Seth on the back as he walked away.

The bartender set Seth’s drink down. Seth looked around, then leaned in. “Are you serving shots tonight?” he whispered.



“What *was* it like growing up in the mid-west?” Atticus asked a happy girl with an olive complexion.

“No, really? You have how many brothers?” Seth asked one of the bridesmaids.

“I can’t think of anything I take more seriously than music either,” Atticus said to a blond girl with big white teeth.

“Why, look,” Seth tried to say naturally to a girl whose name he couldn’t remember, “here’s my roommate Elliot. Elliot didn’t you once want to play chess professionally?”

“I’d never looked at it that way,” Atticus said, “I suppose we do all come from eggs.”

“I wouldn’t exactly classify dynamiter as a profession...more of a calling really,” Seth was saying.

“Yeah, I hate ABBA too,” Atticus was saying.

“I’d love more champagne.”

“You are *so* right.”

“I took intensive classes to lose my Moroccan accent; they insist that all members of the Royal family do so.”

“Geometry or algebra?”

“Didn’t I talk to you earlier?”

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“I need to get some air, excuse me.”

Atticus burst through a double French door and onto a patio, the stones damp with the passing night air. He was shaking and worn, the night was not going well, all attempts were failing and Seth appeared to be getting drunk.

“Hi,” a voice said to him, and he turned to see Stephanie leaning up against the wall, a cigarette in her hand.

“Oh, well hello, Stephanie,” he said, his heart thumping in his head. He saw Seth through the window, walking quickly around to where the door was, saw him about to burst out, then hold up short as Atticus tried to casually give him the “White Whale” signal they had worked out earlier, tugging at his ear as if it were a common habit.

Seth hung back and listened to their conversation from the other side of the doors.

“So,” Stephanie said, “have you boys been burning me in effigy?”

“What? No? Nothing like that. We wouldn’t do anything like that. And it’s not like Elliot would even think of such a thing. Just the other night we were talking and he said that you were-”

“You guys talk?”

“Well...” Atticus stammered, caught up short he opted to go with the truth. “No. We’re guys. We don’t talk; we sit around with the television on and make fun of each other.”

Stephanie smiled.

“But you don’t need to talk *directly* about something to know what’s up, do you? I’ve known Elliot for years. I can tell what’s on his mind.”

“And what is on his mind?”

“You. Most definitely you.”

She smiled again, her fingers flicking the ash off her cigarette. She walked back towards the wall and took a champagne flute off of a window sill. In one gulp she finished

the contents. “Well,” she said, and Atticus could tell she was a little tipsy, “if you must know, I’ve been thinking about Elliot quite a bit as well.”

“Oh?” Atticus said, frantically flashing signals whose meaning he could no longer remember to Seth listening at the window.

“I have been trying,” she said with mild drunken drama, “to figure out why we were together in the first place.”

She seemed sad.

“Why? You really can’t remember why?” Atticus stalled, his mind flashing from word to word, image to image, knowing this was a pregnant moment and that the right words could lead it where he wanted it to go. He saw Seth’s eyes light up in the window when he heard the question, saw Seth open his phone and frantically text him a message. “Why?” Atticus said, still stalling, opening his phone.

“New Text Message From Seth,” the phone said. “You suck.”

Atticus flipped his phone shut and started speaking. “Because he’s a really good guy,” he spit out, surprised at how much he believed it, “and you were a good couple.”

“Were,” Stephanie agreed. She tilted her champagne flute back again, then realized she had already emptied it. “Were,” she set it back on the windowsill and walked inside.

Atticus watched her go, her words still lingering on the cold patio stones. With a tired hand he rubbed at his eyes, then gave up.

Inside, Seth was at the bar when his phone beeped.

“New Text Message From Atticus,” it said. “Game Over.”

“Maker’s Mark,” Seth said, indicating most of the way up the glass. “Ginger Ale,” he said, finishing off the rest.

The Pea Pod Gambit

The next morning Seth was lying on the couch when he heard keys in the apartment door, then heard the door open and someone come shuffling down the hall. He thought about sitting up, felt his head throb, then decided against it. He closed his eyes and listened to the television for a few seconds until he heard someone sitting down on the other couch. He opened his eyes and saw Atticus putting a plastic bag down on the coffee table.

“You were out?” Seth asked.

“Got up a few minutes before you did. Went down to the bodega.”

Atticus withdrew a few packets of aspirin from the bag, took one for himself, then threw one to Seth. A bottle of Gatorade came out, then another one which also got tossed to Seth. They both administered to their hangovers.

Atticus sat back with his Gatorade and looked at the television. “This the BBC?”

“Yeah,” Seth said. “They do improv. It’s not bad.”

There was the sound of a door opening in the hallway and they heard Elliot come into the room.

Seth swung his legs off the couch and sat up, making room by burrowing into the far corner.

Elliot sat down.

Atticus reached into his plastic bag, took out a packet of aspirin and handed it to Elliot. Then he took out a bottle of Gatorade and handed that over as well.

“You get bacon, egg and cheeses?” Elliot asked.

“Fuck off,” Atticus said, settling back into his couch and smiling.

Uneven Shading

Marshal went into work on Friday embarrassed by the fact that he was turning invisible.

A few of his coworkers had noticed. If it had gone unnoticed Marshal might have assumed it was only allergies or the coming of spring, a passing hiccup of low health that would fade when the pollen count returned to normal levels. But other people had noticed, and they hadn't said, "Gee, Marshal, your eyes are red. Allergies got the best of you?" And they didn't say, "I can't wait for summer either now that the weather's finally turned warm." They merely told him that he looked tired and not entirely there. One of them used the word, "wispy."

His boss, Mr. Ruttiger, called him into his office later that afternoon. It was a brightly lit room with sterling spring sunlight beaming in through large floor to ceiling windows. "Marshal," Mr. Ruttiger said, "please sit down." Mr. Ruttiger was friendly and he came around from his desk to sit next to Marshal as a contemporary and not a boss.

"Marshal," Mr. Ruttiger began. "I've called you in here because a number of your coworkers have become worried about you. And I've come to agree with them. You don't appear to be entirely with us."

"It's just allergies," Marshal said.

"Marshal," Mr. Ruttiger went on, his voice honest. "We do great things here at CBI Industries. We help a great number of people with our prosthetics and we push our research teams off of the envelope to make sure everything that currently can be done *is* done to help disabled patients

Uneven Shading

throughout the world. It is a noble calling and we believe that everyone who works here should share in it, from those in the medical laboratories to those in the accounting department.”

He paused and Marshal could feel Mr. Ruttiger looking at him as he nodded. Marshal had heard this speech before, and knew he was lucky to be working for a company that actually stood by words like this. Mr. Ruttiger not only believed these things, but had taken real action numerous times in Marshal’s memory to back them up.

“This results sometimes,” Mr. Ruttiger went on, “in a less than perfect situation. Because of the high ideals of our company, we get a lot of applicants that merely *think* they want to work here. We get people who we feel would be better off in any number of other jobs, working at any number of different careers, who only want to work here because they think they should. It can be tricky. But we here at CBI Industries don’t believe in putting square pegs into round holes and if your heart is invested in something else, we think the only true shame would be in coming to work here while not following your heart.”

“I know Mr. Ruttiger. I know what-”

“Now, Marshal,” Mr. Ruttiger interrupted.

“Mr. Ruttiger,” Marshal started again as the two began trampling on each other’s words, Mr. Ruttiger’s steady and patient, Marshal’s trying to be calming but with a touch of agitation sneaking in. “I swear, it’s just that spring is here and the weather is so nice and I’ve been thinking about taking a nice vacation.”

“Marshal,” Mr. Ruttiger said, the word acting as a reset for the conversation, wiping everything away and bringing them back to solid ground. “You’re almost see-through.” Marshal sighed and held up a hand, noticing how transparent

it was. “I have a hard time believing that all of you is here with us at CBI Industries.”

Mr. Ruttiger’s eyebrows lifted and he looked at Marshal with concern.

“Mr. Ruttiger, I have no regrets in my life.” Marshal held his eyes, needing to be believed. “This is where I’m supposed to be.”

“I know you believe that, Marshal. Nobody here is calling you a liar. But many people begin to shade over their past as they go through life, and...well,” Mr. Ruttiger glanced at Marshal’s hand again. “I want you to go home, take an early Friday and do some poking around in your life. Your research team can make do without their leader for a few hours, yes? I want you to really question what you’re doing here and whether or not CBI Industries really has all of your heart.”

“It’s just spring, Mr. Ruttiger,” Marshal said, something in his voice caving in with hopelessness. “It really is. I have no regrets.”



Marshal pulled into his driveway and parked his car in the garage. He held his hand up as he walked across the cement and looked at it, curling it into a fist and squeezing, watching the tendons on his wrist flex and wriggle while he tried to see just how transparent he was. “Stop that,” he said in a soft whisper to his hand, before shaking it out, flexing his fingers in a feeble attempt to make himself whole again.

Walking into the door of his condo he stepped over the water stained section of carpet that he had not gotten around to replacing and walked past his end table overgrown with magazines. He put his briefcase down in the hall where he always did and was halfway to the kitchen to start thinking about dinner when he realized that he had been sent home

Uneven Shading

from work early and that dinner was still a few hours off. He decided abruptly to go out that night and enjoy one of his favorite meals. This left him in a strange state of paralysis, craving the Thai food he would have for dinner, but unable to seriously consider heading out to eat for at least another two hours.

Rather than solve this problem his feet started walking across his living room to the sliding glass doors that led to his small wooden porch. As he passed the mirror hanging on the wall he glanced over and stopped. The form looking back at him was wavering and thin, barely seeming to exist, a puff of fog that could easily be blown away. Mr. Ruttiger was right. Something was wrong.

But he had no regrets.

Then a thought occurred to Marshal and it afforded him some comfort in the form of an explanation. His father had passed away over the winter, an abrupt departure. Marshal was not sure he had fully said goodbye and, even though he really didn't feel like it was true, he decided that his mind had been occupied recently with thoughts of his father, which would explain why he wasn't fully there at work or anywhere else. He looked at his wispy form in the mirror.

That must be it. There couldn't be any other explanation.

He smiled. All it would take was some grieving and he would be all there again. He just needed to say goodbye to his father. That was all.

Some part, deep inside of him, some little piece of himself crushed under distant memories that never got disturbed, tucked in with jagged bits of pain that were best left untouched, supported by bubbles of happiness that were no longer felt, some part of himself disagreed with this idea. But Marshal didn't listen. It was his father's passing. He had figured it out.

He walked out onto his porch. There was a blink in his form and he turned more transparent. He became a little bit more invisible, a little bit less there.

Ten years earlier Marshal was sitting with Sindy in her living room.

“I don’t understand,” Sindy was saying. Her eyes were hard on him and her voice was angry.

“It’s my dream job, Sindy. It’s kind of a medical company, only it specializes in prosthetic-”

“Not *that*,” Sindy said, venomous.

Marshal didn’t say anything. The conversation had been awkward and dragging up until then but no strong emotions had been spilt. With Sindy’s last words things took on a scary edge and Marshal found himself being so careful in choosing his words that he wound up saying nothing while a steady desire to get out of the room began to fill his insides like a slow leak.

“Are you breaking up with me?”

“I’m moving to Indianapolis,” he said. He hadn’t come here to break up with Sindy. He had come here to tell her he was moving to Indianapolis. In his mind the two notions were kept safely apart. That had allowed him to picture this conversation going easily.

“I can’t move to Indianapolis, Marshal.”

“I didn’t say that you should,” Marshal answered, the words made him more nervous with their surprising bluntness and all his plans for how to make this conversation go easily were forgotten.

Sindy couldn’t react, beginning one sentence then another, not finishing any thoughts out loud as Marshal’s words hit her hard over and over again.

Uneven Shading

“Look, the offer just came through,” Marshal started talking, trying pathetically to make this a conversation about his good news and not a break up. “I really didn’t see it coming and had almost forgotten I’d applied. They take their time filling job slots; it’s one of the things that makes them such a desirable employer. And for them to take me right out of grad school...that’s like the Yankees taking a new pitcher right out of the eighth grade. It’s-” he looked up and saw that Sindy didn’t very much care how great an offer this was. She was crying.

“We only dated for half a year,” he said abruptly to combat the tears, his mind opting to hide behind the blunt notion that she was acting poorly because she couldn’t be happy for him and let him go while he ignored the fact that the past half-year had been the happiest in his life.

“Get out,” she said.

“I didn’t want to-”

“Just get out,” she was hugging one of the pillows from her couch to her chest and she had detached from the conversation. The tears were no longer there but she wasn’t looking at him either and when he tried to speak he was met by an ice wall of avoidance.

“We only dated six months,” he mumbled as he stood up, and with every step he took towards the door he let himself savor the notion that this conversation he had been dreading was now over, that he was free, that he had his dream job, that his life would now start, and by the time he was out her door and in his car he had almost convinced himself of these things.

Back in the living room Sindy hugged the throw pillow tighter and then began to weep, angry bitter tears that she hated herself for shedding.

Sitting on the couch opposite her sat Marshal, ten years older, mostly invisible, sadly watching her with regret on his

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face. There was a blink in his form and he became just a little bit less invisible, a little bit more there. And when Cindy stood up and left the room, he followed longingly after her.

About the Author:

Joseph Devon was born in New Jersey. He grew up and began to write books. For a longer version of this story be sure and visit him online. You can always find news about his latest books, recent short fiction and all things Joseph Devon at www.JosephDevon.com. Drop by, you'll be glad you did.

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