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Dissent

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Dissent

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Creative Writing
Fiction

by

John Peter Belli III

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To my mother and father, without whose unwavering faith and support this project would not have been possible.

To all of my families, thank you. I carry you all with me always.

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Beneath Clouded Sky

Takashi breached up in his bed. Everything existed as amorphous brushstrokes of color, impressions of what a room should look like. He searched for the closest shape, something he could hold onto and ride out the rest of the waking process. By his head, a single blot started shaping edges. The edges formed a right angle, then another, and came back around to complete a rectangle and frame something within it. Before the image came completely into focus, he was able to recognize what it was: a photograph.

The rest of Takashi's room followed obediently as if a curse had been lifted. His slippers waited at the end of his bedroll. The bookshelf gathered dust by the window. The small kitchenette was clean save for a single coffee cup left unwashed in the sink. Little Yuuka's crayon portrait hung on the refrigerator. His boots were by the door where he had left them, along with his flannel jacket, and his scuba suit.

Takashi's knees, elbows, neck, and back ached in turn as he got up. He stepped directly into his slippers to avoid the cold floor. Shore apartments, especially old ones, rarely had heated floors since it would only be useful for a couple months out of the year. The apartment had a heating/AC unit, as well as an electric *kottasu* that his son had bought him. But by the time either warmed up, Takashi would have already finished his coffee and left the apartment. So they remained unused.

He turned on the electric kettle and the radio and listened to a fluttery aria as he waited for the water to boil. It surprised him that he had lost his taste for music later in life. From classical orchestral pieces to the bouncing synthesized chorus of all-girl pop bands, it

all seemed to allude to busy life happening elsewhere. Takashi looked at his granddaughter's picture.

It depicted the four of them on the farm, Takashi, his son Kenta, little Yuuka, and the girl's mother. Takashi kept the farm even after losing his wife so his granddaughter could have a place to play. Children develop more fully if they grow up with nature. But when Yuuka's mother left the country with another man, Kenta moved to Tokyo. They visited the farm less and less frequently, until finally Takashi decided to sell the farm and move into a one-room apartment by the coast.

After finishing his coffee, he deposited the empty cup back into the sink, grabbed his gear, and headed off into town. For a number of reasons, Takashi always ate at the same diner on the opposite end of the main street closest to the sea. He would sit at an outside table, even in winter, to avoid disturbing the other patrons with his scuba equipment.

"Good morning, Mr. Hikasawa," the young waitress said gravely. "The manager is just on the phone, but will be out to see you shortly. May I take your order? Would you—may I bring you the usual order?"

"That'll be just fine, thank you," Takashi said. "There's really no need to trouble yourselves."

The waitress bowed and darted back inside before Takashi had a chance to clarify what he meant. He had gained local celebrity since the media ran his story, which was one of the reasons he ate at the same restaurant. People from town would whisper and stare rather obviously when he walked into town with his gear. This restaurant was the only one whose staff wouldn't inundate him with questions or platitudes as he tried to digest his food. The waitress was new, so she was still shy around him. But the manager, a half-

Korean woman around the same age as Takashi, spoke with him as if they had gone to middle school together. She insisted on coming out every day to chat about her family drama or gossip about other local businesses. The only conversation that alluded to Takashi's situation in any way occurred once he had finished eating. The manager would bring out some tea and sit down to report about the tidal conditions of the day, which she researched on the Internet every morning.

His standing order was designed to give him enough energy to dive through lunch if needed: A western omelet over rice, grilled mackerel, seaweed soup, three slices of rye toast with butter, orange juice, and a second coffee.

The young waitress brought all this out on a single tray with the same solemnly respectful look frozen on her face. "Here is your order. I'm sorry, the manager is still on the phone. It's a small family emergency."

"Thank you, Miss. Please don't worry about me," Takashi said.

She bowed and went back inside. Takashi finished the eggs and the fish with no sign of the manager. Instead, the only sounds were the rhythmic whooshing of passing cars and the crash of the waves against the beach in the distance. It was mid-fall, so the tourists had mostly left. The sea was still warm enough to dive, but not enough to enjoy a casual swim. Yesterday, the water had been unusually calm, and Takashi had spent the whole day out on the water without getting tired. Below the surface everything was quiet, but even a couple minutes swimming against strong waves could leave his body too exhausted to get back into the boat, a lesson he learned when he first started diving.

The third piece of toast and the last sip of coffee had gotten cold. He felt it was time to go, not because he was on any particular schedule, but because routine demanded it. He

had only ever missed two meetings with the manager. If past experience were any indication, she would have an especially detailed tidal report tomorrow, along with a full recount of today's phone conversation. For as frivolous and drawn-out as it would no doubt be, Takashi rather looked forward to it.

He put the money on the table and grabbed his gear, which felt heavier than when he had first sat down. Perhaps his body was still digesting breakfast. The street leading down to the docks was vacant, even for this time of year. It was a rather dreary day. Fine rain was being kicked around by the gusts coming from the sea and splattering over everything. Even the undersides of store awnings were getting wet. But the rain was not heavy enough to cancel the dive.

It was dangerous to call off a dive for any reason other than unsafe conditions. A gauntlet of possible excuses ran from the chilly floor of his apartment to the bow of his boat. One missed dive could easily turn into a month without going out at all. Soon enough, Takashi would have to give up diving, but in the meantime he would continue searching as regularly as he had when his wife first went missing.

Whenever Takashi untied the first line on his boat, he always thought of the young coast guard recruit with the silver stripe in his hair. He was no older than twenty and had peach fuzz growing underneath his nose and chin. When he took off his hat to report they still hadn't found anything, the streak of gray hair aged him by ten years in an instant. He looked ridiculous, and when he bowed it took all Takashi had to keep himself from bursting out laughing at the silver caterpillar crawling up the boy's head. Daisuke, Daiki— Takashi couldn't remember his name. But when the other soldiers told him to go home, it was Caterpillar Head who made the case to let Takashi come along on the rescue boat. He was

the one who explained how surface currents worked, and in which directions they traveled. And when the coast guard stopped the search operation, the boy was the only one who offered any advice on how to keep looking without using the word ‘unlikely.’

Takashi headed toward the inlet at the far side of the bay in the single-engine fishing boat he had bought with some of the money he received from selling the farm. “Wisteria” was painted in English on the stern. He wanted to change the name, but the Canadian man who sold it to him said it was unlucky to change the name of a boat. Takashi was not particularly superstitious, but didn’t dislike the name enough to go against the man’s advice—but it was a bad name for a fishing boat.

Wisteria was no speed-demon, but could hold her own with the mackerel trawlers. She pitched and skipped against the waves, a little choppier than expected, and brought Takashi to edge of the bay in about thirty minutes. He anchored near the beach about two kilometers away from where the bay opened up to the sea, far away from the freighters and commercial fishing boats. There was a spot a short swim away where the water got very deep. Any debris that wasn’t washed out to sea was dragged down and trapped there. How Caterpillar Head blushed when he first used the word ‘debris’ when showing Takashi this location. It may sound insensitive, but it was also unreasonable to use any other word. His wife’s physical form had long since been destroyed. What Takashi was searching for was not his wife, but a remnant of her. It was the way a chunk of space rock is the debris of a radiant meteor.

Takashi put his arm into the slimy mouth of his wetsuit and a chill went through him. There was a ladder attached to the stern so he would not have to execute a roll off the side of the ship, a maneuver he had never succeeded to gracefully perform. He checked the

tank and took in a couple breaths from the mouthpiece to ensure it was working properly. Some of the other students in his diving class said the air in the tank tasted different than natural air, but it was all the same to Takashi.

The bottom was only a couple meters below him, and he allowed himself to fall until his flippers hit the sand. He waited a moment to adjust to his own buoyancy before swimming toward the spot.

Familiar landmarks guided the way better than his equipment could. He had a waterproof compass and a depth gauge, but all he really needed to do was head away from the beach until he saw the rock that looked like a giant *takoyaki* ball, then move slightly to his right until he found the piece of timber that was probably once a support beam of a house that had been destroyed in a typhoon. The spot was just beyond that.

Typhoon. Takashi still felt nauseated by that word. He never watched the weather channel. It wasn't because he had lost his wife during a typhoon, but because of the word's ubiquity during the panicked moments of his wife's disappearance. The news media was relentless and were at his feet like starving mongrels even while the official search was still being conducted. The incident was by no means a national crisis, but news must have been slow enough to send packs of camera crews out scrounging for a story.

Takashi reached the spot. It lay in a large, flat circle against the sea floor. It was so deep that light from the surface could barely reach the bottom. Though not an extreme depth for an amateur diver, it had taken him two days to work up the nerve to plunge beneath it.

Even now, after all this time, the anticipation of the experience made him hesitate. But one foot or the other would give a strong kick and he would be hovering over it. He had

only to let out a long breath to start descending. Bubbles marked the way back to the surface.

The seafloor did not go straight down as it appeared to do on the surface of the shadowy circle, but at a steep angle. Takashi's headlamp revealed a grainy portrait of this secret world—ever changing, yet whose governance has remained the same. Few bother to witness it, yet it contained untold small mysteries that could captivate audiences far better than television. First up was the scene of the disappearing food stand: A fully-intact food stand lay at an angle against a few large rocks like it was serving the occasional eel or tarpon that swam by. Most liked staying closer to the surface, but larger fish journeyed down to this depth.

Next was the shipwreck of a metal canoe, around which grew, Takashi speculated, an evolved species of muscles. They appeared longer than those found nearer to the shore and on the underside of the docks. Maybe they just grew larger because there was nothing to disturb them down here.

Takashi finally reached the area he referred to as the 'junkyard'. This was the deepest portion of the spot according to the depth finder on his boat. It contained the lighter items that couldn't escape the pressure of the current. Cardboard sheets and plastic joints and rusted shrapnel— all were twisted and smoothed by the water until their original shape became unrecognizable. They scuttled along the seafloor, imitating the creatures around them. He even found a fedora like the one Humphrey Bogart used to wear. Occasionally, Takashi would check his GPS, which would prevent him from going farther out than he'd mean to.

Miku.

Miku loved black-and-white noir movies. Her favorite was *Casablanca*. When they first started dating, Takashi explained that it was originally designed to be a propaganda film, but the story evolved into a romance. This only made her like the story more.

“Art can come from any circumstance,” she said. “Human beings can’t help but look for it, even when they’re told not to.”

Some art critics would probably disagree, but who cares? Takashi wasn’t in love with them, he loved Miku. She was as beautiful when her grandchild was born as she was when she had said that to him. Little Yuuka was only a couple months old when they went on that beach trip together. His last memory of Miku was walking barefoot along the jetty. It hadn’t started raining all that hard. Her deep-black hair was thrown around by the wind. She was looking out toward the dark clouds rolling in.

Takashi had headed back to their bags to fetch his camera when he heard a terrific crash of a wave against the rocks. When he looked back, she was gone.

The storm had only claimed one life, Miku’s. It wasn’t a national tragedy or a newsworthy story, but a freak, senseless, inexplicable accident. The typhoon hadn’t even arrived yet, but it delayed the search efforts and carried her body far out to sea. For a long time, rage clouded any sense of loss or sadness. First it was directed at the incompetence of the government and the coast guard, then at himself, then, finally, at the meaninglessness of it all. The hardest thing for Takashi to overcome was the idea that Miku had been taken from him without any reason. She didn’t leave, or pass away, or move on, or drown— but just disappeared.

Yet somewhere in the depths of this shadow world Miku still existed. In searching for her, he could be with her. She wasn’t in the picture by his bedside or nostalgic

recollections told over breakfast. She was in this place that changed but never progressed, where time ran in a dark, flat circle.

Takashi felt it was time to go. He swam about a meter up before he was pushed back down to the bottom. A storm may have rolled through on the surface and he wondered if maybe he should have waited for the manager to deliver her report. He thought of the first time he saw the dark entrance to the junkyard. In the same moment he feared the sea and himself equally.

Seaweed tangled around his ankle. He felt its slimy grasp through his suit and tried to kick free. It was harder to draw air through his respirator. Would she appear, Takashi thought, through the ring of the darkening circle above him? Was eternity down here the same as it was above? The fedora, caught in the current, was just within reach. But he let it be carried off.

He drew a long breath from the tank and then scanned the rocks. If he was unable to swim up, he could claw along the edge to escape. He slipped beneath the current, passed the canoe shipwreck and the seafood stand, swam out of the entrance and beyond the giant *takoyaki* ball.

He was glad he left the fedora. The goal was to bring back evidence, not a memento. It was dangerous to take pleasure in sentimentality. One trinket that reminded Takashi of her could easily turn into three, then six, and at some point he would be satisfied and have no need to dive anymore.

Breaching the surface of the water, Takashi looked up at the sky. The clouds were dull and gray. The manager was always saying that up there is where he should be looking. He always responded that he would be there soon enough.

But after awhile, Takashi caved, and visiting the family grave became the last part of his daily ritual.

It would be dusk by the time he arrived. After listening to the crashing waves all day, the quiet of the graveyard felt overwhelming. The stone had both their names, Takashi's was painted in red. Every time Takashi visited the grave, the paint seemed to fade a little more. He could complain to the grounds keeper, but never felt the need.

Takashi knelt down to wooden box where visitors placed their business cards when paying respects. There were three cards: One from his friend, the restaurant manager, who came once a week; one from a teacher, whose name he didn't recognize; and his son's, which was coming apart at the edges and the ink had almost vanished.

During the media coverage of Miku's disappearance, the caretaker said that the box would have to be emptied every day. Cards from as far as Hokkaido filled it to the brim.

Takashi put the two in his pocket and returned his son's card to the box. He picked up the picture of the two of them that sat beneath their names. It was a copy of the one by his bedside.

Despite its age, the image was sharp and clear— the two of them standing in front of the farm they had just purchased, smiling and oblivious to how hard they would have to work. Everyday they woke up aching and went to bed exhausted. They planted everything from rutabagas to roses, cursing themselves for buying the farm every time a crop died or didn't sell. Years would pass before they took a vacation. They fought about money. She would flirt with other men. He would come home drunk. A couple times she threatened to leave him. All of it was now elsewhere.

Good memories or bad, it was comforting to know that Miku was undeniably there in those moments in time. Whether she was above or below didn't really matter.

Takashi placed the picture back on the grave. He was exhausted and wanted to get home before it got dark to get a good night's sleep. He had another dive tomorrow.

The Debunker

The realtor indicated up the stairs. Christian noted the blind alley next to the house before ascending. This time, it was a 19th century double-gallery property owned by one of those real-estate LLC vultures. Personally, Christian hated everything about those businesses—but they paid on time and at his highest rate.

“Neil,” Christian said, “I thought you said the house would be unoccupied.”

“It was supposed to be,” the realtor said. “The tenant is fighting the eviction since, technically, her lease goes through December. The owner won’t shut up about it, he thinks it’s my fault that—”

Christian waved his hand as if he had just smelled something foul. “Keep the minutia of your business to yourself and show me where the encounters happened.”

A skilled realtor, Neil diplomatically said nothing and guided Christian to the second floor. “The tenant and two of her friends claim they felt hands push them at the top of these stairs. Like you said—”

“Indeed, this one is so easily explained it scarcely bears mentioning.” Christian traced the angle of the stairs with his hand. “Assuming the occupants weren’t drunk or under the influence of hallucinogens, which is a rather sizable leap given the décor of this place, then both the falling and pushing sensation can be explained by an acute episode of vertigo. These steps are much steeper than how they construct stairs in modern homes. Someone not used to them, i.e. everyone born in the twenty-first century, would be vulnerable. Next.”

“Debunked,” Neil stated dryly.

“Must you say that every time? And before the tenant gets here, stop calling me ‘The Debunker.’ It makes me sound like a cable TV reality show.”

“It helps me keep track of the points we’ve covered. Fine, I won’t introduce you as the ‘The Debunker’ to clients anymore, but I think it adds an air of professionalism: Need to fix your plumbing? Call the plumber. Need to debunk a haunting in your house? Call the debunker.”

“Next site,” Christian said.

Christian was led to a small bedroom, the place from which he could learn everything he needed to know about the occupants of a property.

On the wall were pen line drawings depicting what could only be described as nihilistic sexual congress. A framed Klimt postcard by the bed. A prized Krewe of Muses decorated shoe showcased on the mantle, along with various dolls and crystals he had seen at the spiritualism trinket shop downtown.

“That drawing,” Neil said, already sounding exhausted. “The tenant says she has seen it fall off the wall, without anyone being near it. No trucks going by, nobody moving, and so on.”

Christian removed the portrait and knocked on the wall just below the nail, then a few inches to the left and right of it.

“Not nailed into the stud. Virtually anything imaginable could bring this down, from walking up the stairs to—“

Neil slapped the doorframe. “Debunked. Next site.”

The next site was most likely the attic door Christian had seen walking up the stairs, but the two men heard a metallic sound coming from below them before they got to it.

"I hear a poltergeist trying to find her keys."

"Damn," Neil said. "She said she wouldn't be home until six. Can you come back later? She believes in ghosts, as you probably already guessed. I'd rather not have to deal with you two getting into it."

"It will cost your client another consultation fee. Time management is your responsibility."

"Fine, just shut up and wait here, maybe I can get rid of her."

Neil shot down the stairs to intercept the tenant. Christian noted that conversations from downstairs were audible from where he stood. He could almost hear Neil sigh when the tenant exclaimed, "I got to meet this Debunker guy!"

The tenant could not have been more like his mental profile. She was half Christian's age, maybe in college. She exuded confidence (if not a touch of promiscuity) that Christian could not help noting. Her too-tight jeans synched up her love handles like a corset, and the plunging neckline of her black shirt distracted from the pit stains. Her black, uneven bangs she had obviously cut herself reminded Christian he was old.

"Well, that took awhile, see anything you like?" Her accent was stronger than he would have guessed.

"Apologies," Christian said, noticing she had deep brown eyes. "I was looking at your belt buckle. Is that the Egyptian god Anubis there?"

"Mmhm," she hummed skeptically. "So you're here to point at a couple creaky floor boards and rationalize away spiritual traditions that go back centuries."

Christian flushed. "My job is not as simple as all that. Yet you're right in saying that most of what I find can be easily explained by a rational mind."

“Rationality and rationalizations rarely follow one another.”

“I couldn’t agree more.” Christian smiled. “Yet it seems all spiritualists, regardless of denomination, meet scientific scrutiny with antagonism. Either they beg the question of a specific haunting by pointing to the absence of evidence, or they resort to an *ad hominem* style of rhetorical attack, claiming the observer is not sensitive or in-tune enough.”

“Do you consider yourself a sensitive person?” the tenant asked.

Christian met Neil’s gaze. His eyes were dry and appeared like they were trying to jump out and strangle him—Christian had a talent of inadvertently insulting people.

“No,” Christian said. “In any case, Neil invited me here on behalf of the owner to conduct an inspection.”

“Don’t let me stop you, hon. I’m Shanna, by the way. Come down stairs, I have a good one to show you.”

The stairs creaked as the three of them descended at the same time, and the sounds echoed in every room. Christian listened and tried to follow the direction of the sound.

Shanna led the realtor and the skeptic to the back of the house, to a small room whose angular design made its original function a mystery—too small to be a living space or office, but too large to be a closet or pantry. There was only room for Shanna to enter comfortably.

She turned on a lamp on the floor. “This is the source. I think it’s a gateway.”

“Shanna, did you do this?” Neil said.

On the largest wall, opposite the door, was a faded mural. It had ancient Egyptian iconography, but the artist was obviously an amateur, perhaps even a child. The painted men steering the ferries were not identical and their arms were too long. There was a scene

depicting the weighing of internal organs, a trial to determine if a soul went to heaven or hell, but it was awkwardly out of scale. Largest and most out of place, was a depiction of the head of Anubis. A snake was shown slithering out of his mouth, which, as far as Christian knew, was not consistent with the mythology.

“It was here when I first looked at the apartment,” Shanna said. “I admit, it was the reason why I started renting the place. I was drawn to its presence, though in the beginning I didn’t know why. I knew it wasn’t authentic—well, of course it isn’t, we’re not in Egypt. I mean this was done by someone who wasn’t trying to replicate an authentic piece.”

“How could you know that?” Christian said, still examining the mural. He noted that a few of the lines extended below the floor. “Why couldn’t it just be done by an artist of poor skill?”

“An emerging artist imitates, but as far as I could research online, this scene isn’t taken from any historical work. The person who made this is expressing her own relationship to the idea of the afterlife, and is using Egyptian symbols to do so. As for mental health, that’s all relative.”

“I hate to bust up the art discussion,” Neil said, “but I’ve got a showing later. Could you tell us what goes on in here?”

“There has been more activity in the past couple months, probably feeding off my negative energy from having to deal with my asshole landlord.” Shanna stared at Neil. “You can tell him I said that.”

“I will not be doing that,” Neil said. “Please, tell us.”

Shanna sat down on the floor, facing away from the mural and the two men. She let out a dramatic breath, sarcastically signaling that she was exhausted with the two of them.

“Voices,” she said. “Everywhere in the house, at any time of day. You may think I set up a Ouija board the second day I lived here, but I was skeptical at first, believe it or not. They sounded like whispers in your ear. But that could have been anything, tiny auditory hallucination. I work downtown at a noisy restaurant— maybe my ears were ringing, so I got this—”

Shanna leaned over and removed a pocket recorder from a bookshelf. Christian was already a few steps ahead of her in his mind and at work with his rebuttal.

“I started doing EVP sessions. I heard spirit voices could be picked up with a tape-recorder, because the microphone is more sensitive than our ears. Listen to this, you can clearly hear—”

“Wait a minute,” Christian said. “This isn’t the first time I have encountered Electronic Voice Phenomena being used as evidence. And I always say the same thing: ‘If you have to tell us what it’s saying, then what you have most likely is not real.’ Instead of trying to influence us with the power of suggestion, just let us listen to it and come to our own conclusions.”

Shanna gave Christian the same look she gave Neil a moment ago. “I was going to say, ‘you can clearly hear my friend in the background, but listen to the sound between us talking.’”

Shanna turned the recording on before Christian could respond. The ambient noise was less than silent. There was music playing from a stereo in the background, a synthesized mash up of non-instruments from a band Christian gladly knew nothing about. Though he couldn’t make out the words, the conversation had a relaxed excitement to it, like the way people talk before getting ready for a party.

Footsteps. The sound of glass clinking together. More footsteps moving closer. A cabinet door opening and closing, then some murmurs, followed by—

I'm here.

Neil cursed. Shanna nodded her head. Christian said nothing.

It was raspy, as all EVPs were. Whatever produced the noise was much closer to the microphone than anything else. Shanna played the last part of the recording a couple more times without a word.

Christian moved to take the device, but then thought better of it. Instead, he took out his smartphone and opened the tape recorder app.

"I'll admit," Christian said. "This noise sounds more like a voice than most of what I have come across. But, assuming everything is above board in the honesty department and this is not intentionally fabricated, I'd like to show you something."

He scrolled down a bit and pressed 'play.'

The recording was much quieter than Shanna's, but the footsteps were closer, suggesting the device was being held by a person walking. There were two distance male voices. Suddenly a close voice, like the one in Shanna's recording, said something like, 'I'm coming. You die.'

"Impressive," Shanna said.

"It took a couple hours to make, but I think it provides a good example of how EVP is pretty unreliable, even for those who believe in ghosts."

He pressed 'record' and with the fabric of his pants made a rustling sound. After that, he stretched out his phone arm in front of Shanna and tapped the top of the device. He played back the recording, but nothing in it sounded like voices.

“It’s hard to replicate,” Christian said. “But this is how I made the sound you just heard.”

“There’s a lot wrong with your argument,” Shanna said, standing up. “Like how the person in your tape was moving, or that the voice was less distinct than in mine. But Neil’s got to be somewhere, so let’s just move on.”

Shanna led the men to the kitchen and filled three glasses of iced tea.

“My mother passed away just before I moved here.”

Christian tried to make a sympathetic sound, but it came out sounding like ‘ah ha!’

“I’m sorry,” Neil said, apologizing for Shanna’s loss and Christian’s behavior.

“It’s fine. She had been sick for a long time, and she was ready to go.” Shanna turned to the back window. She held her cup in both hands. “I saw her through this window, out in the yard, looking in at me. The first time it happened I freaked out and called my friend from the front porch, sobbing. I think I was more afraid that I was going crazy.”

“Visual hallucinations are common among grieving individuals.”

“Christian, for fucksake,” Neil said.

“He’s right. That’s exactly what I started to think, and it made me feel better. I just missed my mom, so a part of my brain was imagining her. She was great. As typical as it is to say, she always found something to like in a person.” Shanna pointed her glass at Christian. “Even in a guy like you.”

Christian managed to smile, but was busy examining the quality of the window. Several of the panes were pre-1950s, and had several occlusions that could easily distort the image outside.

“I would see her several times after that, looking in at me. One of my neighbors even said he’d seen her, but that was after I told him the story. The truth is, whatever made her appear, supernatural or psychological, the underlying cause was the same. I missed her. So, I decided to pursue both avenues. Test both theories simultaneously.”

Neil looked at his watch, then finished his tea. “I’m sorry Shanna, we really have to go.”

Shanna seemed hurt. “Got what you need, huh? Well, it was nice meeting you Mr. Debunker.”

The realty sign outside had an empty space that awaited Christian’s verdict. It was not uncommon in New Orleans to see a real-estate sign announce “Haunted” or “Not Haunted” right below the realtor’s name. Pandering, the Debunker knew, either to the mystical, historically oblivious vision of the city held by out-of-state clients; or to the superstitious, department-store troglodytes who were filled with religious righteousness and afraid of their own shadows.

However, Shanna did not appear to fit either of these descriptions. Though clearly blinded by superstition, she was the least unpleasant tenant Christian had encountered.

“Let’s meet at O’Hares later tonight,” Neil said. “I’m already five minutes late for my next appointment.”

On the way home, Christian thought about his own parents, who were down in Florida with everyone else’s. They knew about the bookstore he bought when he first moved to the city, but not about his part-time job as ‘the debunker.’ Were they to pass away, it would be unlikely that he would encounter their apparition. Spiritually, ghosts do not exist; and psychologically, he was not all that close to them.

~

“I want to go back,” Christian said, sensing he had revealed himself a little too much.

“Go back?” Neil took a sip of his beer. “Why? The client will have more than enough to convince a buyer that the place isn’t haunted. You’re not trying to chat up that hipster girl are you?”

“That’s not it. We didn’t make it to the attic, and I would like to examine the mural room again. The investigation is not complete.”

“It’s done enough.”

“I know that you think what I do is just some scam, a sales trick you can use to calm a nervous buyer. But I happen to see myself as an educator. It is a slippery slope from harmless superstition to people being burned at the stake as witches. Observation and critical thinking are dying arts. So few possess the ability to think outside of a situation, outside of themselves.”

Neil finished his beer and ordered another. “I think you’ve spent a little too much time outside of yourself.”

“I appreciate your genuine, not-in-the-least-bit flippant concern. But all I want is to do what I do well.”

“The client won’t pay another consultation fee.”

Christian winced. “It would seem he’s no better than you are. Tell him it’s a follow up. I won’t charge.”

“There’s a first. I’ll go with you, since I doubt she’ll let you in unescorted. But try to be personable for a change. Maybe don’t insult her belief systems and emotional grief quite

so much. Because if you want to go back again after that, you're going to have to be invited by her. I have a lot of other clients."

~

Shanna was out of town the following week. Christian pointed out that it would be better to finish the investigation with her present, to hear the rest of her encounters. He explained that he could form a more comprehensive rebuttal to any of her sightings this way, in the event she would try to scare away potential clients.

In the meantime Neil took Christian to three other houses: a shotgun-style house uptown haunted by a possum in the air-condition ducts; a university apartment building that had squatters in the abandoned house across the street; and a plantation home outside the city which had a family of red foxes that made womanly, blood-curdling screams in the night. Only ten books sold at Christian's store the entire week, three of which were from the dollar bin.

Neil had given Shanna Christian's cellphone number. Despite being away, she found time to poke at him via text:

-Heard you comin' bak. Wanna check down my shirt for ghosts again?

-Saw Santa will be at the mall this year, should I expect to see you there spreadin truth to all the kids in line?

-Hey. Saw my dead mom again. Said you dress like a toll-booth operator.

Feeling above these remarks (and maybe also following Neil's advice), Christian did not respond. The day before he was scheduled to go back to Shanna's place he received one

last text. He was at the bookstore, trying not to glare at a customer who had been reading for at least fifteen minutes. Christian heard the buzz through the pocket of his tweed coat, a sound that always reminded him of June bugs trapped in a house. Christian flipped open his phone:

-You probably don't believe in fate. But I think it's weird that you guys are coming back on my mom's birthday.

With some difficulty, Christian punched in, 'I'm sorry.' That was something people say. He was not as unfeeling as Neil liked to characterize him. But something had changed in the world, progressively to others, yet unnoticed by him until it was virtually too late. Technology had synergized society awkwardly— the workplace was at home and vice versa; professionals were at constant odds with a growing collective of amateurs; facts had never been more relative. But at least sympathies and condolences were the same. Death never changes.

Christian heard another trapped June bug:

-Got'cha! Her birthday's actually in February. Looking forward to tomorrow.

"We're closing," Christian said to the idling customer, waving his phone toward the door.

Shanna was waiting for them on the balcony. She had on a floral white summer dress whose neckline revealed a lot, even from the second floor. Christian noted to himself not to observe the matter anything further.

"Door's open!" Shauna called out, pouring herself a drink.

"Let's not take all day with this," Neil said once the two men were inside. "Not that I don't enjoy being The Debunker's sidekick, but patching things up every time you offend

someone is exhausting. Remember what I said yesterday. Find the rest of the noisy water pipes and try to reel it in with the lectures.”

Offended by yet another jab at his part-time career, Christian nevertheless knew Neil was partially justified. The plantation fox job had not gone smoothly. It turned out that the client was so convinced the property was haunted, she requested Christian instead of a psychic. In addition to rattling the man’s spiritual beliefs, he had sunk the home’s ghost tour business, which Christian called ‘a predatory exploitation of the under-educated.’ What Neil did to calm the man down was a mystery, since Christian had to wait in the car.

“Nice, isn’t it?” Shanna said as the two men joined her on the veranda. “I knew we’d be kicked out eventually. Real estate prices have been shooting up in the city now that everything’s fixed and the movie companies are here.”

Neil cracked an ice cube with his teeth. Christian noted a branch from the oak tree by the sidewalk touched the roof of the house.

“Which isn’t a bad thing, necessarily.” Shanna looked at Christian. “I’m fighting the eviction more on principle. In most places, you can’t just ignore a contract and kick someone out. I know you weren’t part of our lease agreement, Neil, but the guy you represent is a real jerk. I hear there isn’t even a buyer yet.”

“How did you know that?” Neil said.

“I would tell you, but I don’t want The Debunker to blow a gasket. Let’s just say I heard it in the wind.”

Christian was still sore from yesterday’s text. He was determined not to let Shanna win again. “You were telling us about your investigation the other day—exploring the practical and the spiritual simultaneously.”

“Indeed,” Shanna said mockingly. “There is a lot of similarity between self-psychoanalysis and spiritual exorcism. Both involve looking inward to find *the reason*, which, if successful, results in the disappearance of the apparition or hallucination.”

“Tell us about what you did,” Christian said.

“On the spiritual side of things, I started by saging the house and all the doorways. I didn’t mind seeing my mom there anymore, but that idea that she couldn’t pass on to the next life was killing me. I burned three whole sticks all over the house, my roommate ran down the stairs because she thought there was a fire. It stank for days after.”

“Did that solve the problem?” Christian smirked behind his glass. Amateur spiritualists used sage burning like disinfecting bleach. Even if he could believe that a habitation retained electromagnetic energy of dead people, he found it unlikely that burning fancy grass would influence it in any way. At least the more devoted members of the community used Telsa coils and MEL meters.

“If anything, it made things worse,” Shanna said. “The same night I called my dad, who I don’t really speak to. He divorced my mother when I was a teenager, but he still knew her better than anyone. I pushed myself to open up more than I ever had, asked him question I was too afraid to ask before—why he left, how he felt about Mom, where he thought we go after we die. It was a really good talk, better than any conversation we had after the funeral. Cathartic. I was left feeling a sense of closure about her passing.”

“But she came back,” Neil said, pouring another drink. Christian noted a single black hair sprouting from Neil’s ear.

Shanna nodded. “For three days nothing happened, I thought it worked. Then, walking out of the kitchen, I look down the hall that leads to the mural room and there she

was—not a shadow or a reflection in the window, as clear as you are to me. I screamed and ran right out of the house. My neighbor came outside to see what happened, she must of thought I was being murdered. At first, I couldn't stop shaking. Her expression was the worst of all. My mother had such happy eyes, even when she was furious she could never make her eyes match her mood. But then... her eyes were so—”

“So what was your dualistic approach to this encounter?” Christian asked. He saw Neil turn sharply toward him, but ignored it.

“Later, I felt guilty for running out,” Shanna said. “If that was my mom, she must have felt awful seeing me freak out like that.”

“I'm sure she would understand,” Neil said.

Shanna dabbed some sweat away from her forehead and chest. “Yea. After spending the night at a friend's house I decided to talk to a psychic and a school counselor, since my university insurance doesn't cover visits to a psychologist, apparently. The counselor said I was still coping with the loss of my mother, that one cathartic moment may not be enough, and I should talk to someone. I thought, ‘talk to someone? What the hell am I doing right now?’ She also recommended I keep a journal. So I did that, and refrained from looking at family pictures too much, which may have been planting images in my mind.”

“Not a bad approach,” Christian said.

“On the other hand, the psychic mentioned that what I saw may not be my mother, but a spirit mimicking her appearance. She said it was called a mimic. Do you know what that is?”

“From the Latin *mimicus*, from Greek *mimikos*. In most religions, gods and other spirits shape shift. In the Catholic tradition, deception and trickery are strictly evil things

and thus mostly associated with the devil. Not coincidentally, mimic spirits often change into things of which the Church does not approve. One of many scare tactics employed to preserve influence over its congregation.”

“Well, my psychic is actually Wiccan.” Shanna raised an eyebrow. “But I get *at what you are driving*. Sapphire, yes, that’s her name, also said that the mural could be some sort of gateway, and that I may need to hire a shaman to perform a ritual to close it.”

“Did you do either?” Neil asked.

“No, not yet anyway. To be honest, I got frustrated. Both basically said, ‘hire a professional,’ which I don’t have the money for.”

“Is that all?” Christian said. He felt pleased with how much he had been able to debunk while he was listening to Shanna talk.

“On my end, I’ve tried talking to my mom, talking to the spirits of the painting, talking to my father again. There’s still a lot of activity. Cabinet doors have flown open in the kitchen. I can hear footsteps in the attic. I don’t mind that as much as the EVPs or seeing the image of Mom. Those can’t be explained away so easily.”

Neil should be proud of me right now, Christian thought. He noticed that Shanna seemed like she was waiting for him to say something. He felt the opposite of what he had felt previously— It didn’t matter that she was backhandedly trivializing his job. He was in control.

“You’re right,” Christian said, fetching his reading glasses from his jacket pocket. “The footsteps you hear *are* easily explained by that oak branch banging against the side of the house. It’s also easy to note the percussive effect from a thunderstorm or passing trucking shakes your house and opens the cabinets.”

“And your theory on the visions?” Shanna asked.

Christian slowly put on his glasses. “I don’t presume to know.”

“Whoa. Could it be because The Debunker is stumped?”

“It is because he is not a psychologist,” Christian said.

Shanna blushed a little. “Dissociative or borderline personality disorder could explain everything. I am a psych major, by the way. But I don’t fit any of the other criteria.”

“Do you think it’s possible,” Christian said, “that students enter your program in an attempt to solve their own issues? That was the case when I was a student; the psych majors were always the most neurotic.”

“What was your major? Something tells me you had a few issues when you were younger.”

“I think that’s called avoidance.”

“You know, I talked to her about you after you left. I wanted to know what she thinks of you.”

“Your mom is dead, Shanna. She can’t talk about anything. I know it’s really none of my business, but it is unhealthy to perpetuate this delusion. We have microscopes that can see individual atoms, yet have found no traces of anything like a spirit or ghost. Science has clearly shown how the brain ceases after death. The electrical signals that comprised her consciousness have stopped functioning and her organic tissue is undergoing the decaying process. She is not able to speak, hear, or see for she no longer has the necessary functioning organs. That’s what death is. Your mother is dead.”

Christian knew Neil was already working on an apology, trying to spin some excuse. But it looked like he was having trouble. Summer cicadas took the place of crickets as no one spoke. Christian wanted to apologize.

“I’m sorry about him,” Neil said.

Shanna must not have her mother’s eyes, Christian thought. They were now large and clearly reflected her mood.

“He’s just stating facts,” Shanna said, standing up and motioning to the door. “No crime in that. Come on, it’s getting hot out here.”

The two men rose and followed Shanna into the house.

“Mind if I look in the attic?” Christian said as they approach the stairs. “You said there was activity up there.”

Shanna ran her fingers along the top banister— deliberately, as if she were strumming an imaginary harp.

“Please don’t,” she said in a low voice. “Legally, I can’t stop you. But it’s too dangerous. You don’t believe in spirits, fine. Just don’t go into the attic. Up there exists something that no one can explain, something far more inexplicable than water pipes or a crazy girl seeing her dead mother. It’s evil.”

“Then isn’t this exactly what I have to see?” Christian reached for the attic chord but Neil pushed him forward.

“You have more than enough,” Neil said. “Wait for me outside.”

“Shanna.” Christian looked up at her through the bannister. “I’m sorry.”

Instead of making fun of him, she responded, “It’s OK.”

Christian found a shady spot under the oak tree outside. He removed his tweed jacket and folded it in his arms. It was humid, but not as bad as it would be later in the summer. He idly scrolled through his text messages while he waited for Neil. Compared to the single word texts from Neil, or the notices from his part-timers asking to switch shifts, the liveliness of Shanna's messages stood out. He had always been contemptuous of text messaging as a means of communication. But Shanna's were provocative, stirring. In the quietude after the buzz of trapped June bugs, Christian had felt an untidy amalgam of feelings—annoyance, expectation, anxiety. Now, he only felt guilt.

He envisioned several scenarios that would give him a chance to apologize properly: he could text her after a suitable period of time; he could email, or, better yet, write a letter; he could ask Neil to pass along the message the next time he showed the apartment.

The only method he could not visualize was walking back into the house and apologizing face to face. Every time he envisioned Shanna's expression from the balcony, the imagined scene dissolved.

Neil emerged from the house. He was not as visually agitated as he usually was after this sort of event.

"You owe me," Neil said. "Not only was I able to get her to forgive you for insulting the memory of her dead mother, but I got you into the attic. She'll text us the date and time."

"How upset was she?" Christian unfolded his tweed jacket.

"Not as much as she should be. I think she has the same weird fascination with you as you do with her."

Christian started to protest, but he was thankful Neil had again mediated the situation. Neil was truly skilled at his profession.

~

The bookstore sold twenty-seven books the following week, several from the paranormal section Christian had unenthusiastically installed up front. He flipped open his phone every time a customer bought a book from this section. There were no new investigations. Shanna had not contacted him yet.

Christian had opened a bookstore as an alternate avenue to follow his intellectual pursuits and satisfy his need to be away from his hometown.

Regrettably, most of Christian's time was spent on the business side of running a bookstore. Instead of evolving into a rare and obscure literary boutique as he had imagined, he was forced to follow the latest pulp fantasy trends on the internet just to keep the shop from losing money.

Other than the title, Christian enjoyed his role as The Debunker. It was an intellectual anthropological exercise. Perhaps more importantly, it afforded him a chance to sample other places. The small cut of Neil's commission eventually allowed Christian to add one shelf of rare books.

The store was closed Mondays. During this time Christian slept in, cooked pasta for lunch, never left the apartment. He hated not going into work. It reminded him too much of being back in his hometown— he could theoretically go anywhere, and thus went nowhere.

After making lunch using a recipe for crawfish linguini he found in one of the shop's cookbooks, Christian got a text message from Shanna:

Come 2nite. 8.

Christian put the phone in his pocket and stirred the pasta. Part of his mind was busy rehearsing the full apology he had been drafting all week, while another wondered why the message was so short.

He flipped his phone back open. There was only the one message. He thought about calling Neil. Instead, Christian typed back:

See you then.

~

Christian had never investigated a home at night. It was counter-intuitive to look for answers in the dark, but this time he wasn't about to argue.

The house appeared older at night— trying to fade back into the darkness of the alley. None of the windows were illuminated. Christian wondered if he should call or knock on the door.

The front door opened before he could decide. Shanna emerged, clad in sweatpants and a tank top, holding a flashlight.

“Power just went out,” Shanna said. “But come on in.”

Christian fastened the top button of his jacket and walked up. The house was not as dark as it seemed from the street. Candles lined the entrance to the stairs. A small electric lantern illuminated the way to the kitchen. Another flashlight was moving around in another room.

“Miss Shanna,” Christian began, mimicking the southern manner of politely addressing someone. “I would like to say, in regards to the other day—”

“Forget it,” Shanna said. “It wasn't the best way of putting it, but maybe it was what I needed to hear. I'm glad you came.”

The flashlight in the other room distracted Christian from what he wanted to say next. "Are your roommates here?"

"No," Shanna said. "Why do you ask?"

A figure emerged from the doorway holding the flashlight low. Backlit by the kitchen lantern, nothing but a shadowy profile was discernable. It took several casual paces closer.

"Neil," Christian said as the figure approached the candlelight.

"Hi, Christian. Shanna texted me. To be honest, I was a little curious about this attic business myself."

"Now that we're all here," Shanna said. "This is the deal. Neil convinced me to let you look at the attic, but only on the condition we do things my way. That means we have to first say a prayer by the mural, followed by a spirit box session. Only then may we enter the attic." Shanna held her flashlight underneath her chin, making her large eyes enormous.

"And no debunking. Don't say anything until we're done, understood?"

Christian nodded, unsure if she meant starting from that moment.

Shanna led the two men down the smaller hallway to the mural room. She sat down left of the mural, indicating Christian sit to her right. The image was framed in light by the candles lining the base. In the imperfect light, its artistry seemed less amateurish. Shadows made the river crossed by the ferrymen seem deep and added contours to their faces that weren't visible before. The eye of Anubis was particularly striking, whose iris was faceted by the darkness.

"I'll wait outside, there isn't room for me in there," Neil said and shut the door.

Christian wanted to call him back, but feared interrupting Shanna, who was lighting incense.

“Calm spirits,” Shanna said. “Only light may enter this home. We seek knowledge. We seek understanding. We are not afraid of what we do not comprehend...”

We are not afraid of shoddy architecture, Christian added silently.

“Speak to us this night, so that we may aid you in passing on.” Shanna folded her hands together and bowed. After a moment, she reached over to the bookshelf. “Do you know what this is?”

Christian shook his head.

“It’s a spirit box. It scans radio frequencies very quickly. Paranormal investigators believe it can capture disembodied voices.”

Shanna turned on the device. Loud static came out of it, as well as a rhythmic chop from the frequencies changing, which Christian counted about two per second.

“We’ll listen it to it for awhile, just so you see it isn’t picking up a radio station.”

Her tape recorder was placed next to it.

Christian followed time on his watch. At two stations a second, ten minutes was more than enough time to allow the machine to cycle through all the stations, several times. They heard nothing but empty static.

“Spirits,” Shanna called out over the static. “What is it you want?”

The device responded:

Take back.

“What is it you wish to take back?” Shanna asked.

The device produced a noise, either disruption or a murmur.

“*Who* is it you wish to take back?”

Christian.

The voice was clear this time, a deep, man's voice.

"Holy shit!" Neil said from behind the door.

"Where?" Shanna said. Her eyes were wide, darting between Christian and Anubis.

"Where would you take Christian?"

Ten stations passed before the device gave them a response.

Back home. Hell.

Christian felt a bead of sweat drip along his ribcage. For Shanna's sake, he was suspending his disbelief, but he felt a sudden urge to start debunking. Shanna quickly turned off the spirit box. Static still rang in Christian ears.

Shanna put her hands on her knees and let out a long breath. "Nope. I'm out. Believe what you want. I can't deal with this."

Christian, for many reasons, said nothing. The door opened.

"Guys, get out here."

The two got and up followed Neil back out to the main hallway.

"I heard noises on the second floor," Neil said. "That sounded like footsteps. Don't give me that look, you know I'm with you on this stuff. But the weird part was, I heard a door open and then slam shut. But it didn't sound like a normal door."

"Check it out if you want," Shanna said. "I'm staying here."

Neil motioned to Christian, and the two made their way up the stairs. All the doors on that floor were open. Christian walked over to the door nearest to the front of the house, inspected the windows, and then slammed the door closed.

Neil shook his head.

By the entrance to Shanna's bedroom, there was a hallway closet with thin doors. Christian looked around to see if anything had fallen, then slammed it closed.

Also not the sound Neil heard. That left the attic door.

Christian pulled the chord slowly. The rusty springs stretched noisily as it opened. Halfway down, Christian let go of the chord and the door snapped shut, causing a metallic reverberation.

"That's it," Neil said.

Christian pulled the attic door fully open and unfolded the steps. Neil handed him a flashlight.

A shock of hot air at the top made Christian almost lose his balance. It was incredibly humid and smelled of old wood. He ran his flashlight along the ridge of the roof, which led to a small window facing the backyard. There were only a couple feet of clearance, so Christian had to crawl through.

As he made his way toward the window, angular shadows danced all around him. Each he could easily debunk as being formed by a crossbeam. The voice from the spirit box was trickier, and his inability to quickly find the cause made him uneasy.

Christian pulled himself up to the small window and peered out. The backyard was illuminated by the streetlamps. There was a pale object in the middle of the yard.

He wiped at the window with his sleeve. A woman in a pale dress was looking directly at him.

Christian called out for Neil.

"What?" he said, still downstairs.

Christian had trouble forming the sentence he wanted. “There’s something in the backyard. Go out there and check it out.”

“All right,”

He listened closely to the footsteps, tracking Neil’s progress through the house. The woman did not disappear.

Using his peripheral vision, so as not to take his eyes off the woman, Christian looked at his watch. Neil should have gotten to her already.

He called out to him and Shanna, but got no response. It was hard to keep eye contact with the woman. Her stare was cold and defiant, making him feel like a peeping trespasser. He called out again.

No one answered. Christian focused on the woman harder, trying to grasp any detail that could help him. Once more, he called out. When there was no answer, he pushed himself away.

It was difficult to move quickly on his hands and knees. Splinters jabbed into his palms. Almost at the door, Christian felt something grab him. Whatever it was tore a hole in his jacket. An exposed nail or a possum, it didn’t matter what it was. Christian pulled himself out of the attic and down to the first floor.

The backyard was empty.

Christian felt frustration overwhelm him, particularly by Neil’s incompetence and Shanna’s timidity.

On his way back down the hall, he heard scratching coming from the mural room. It stopped just as he put his hand on the doorknob. The candles inside were extinguished.

A heavy dark shadow enveloped the middle of the hall. The figure lunged toward him.

“Time to go home, Christian!”

He shrieked, tumbling out of the room. The figure was close behind him. Every exhalation released another scream. The front door felt miles away. The figure was on him, surrounding him. He would be consumed by it if he stopped.

The doorknob to the front door was stuck. He managed to shake it almost off the frame before the lights came on.

He turned and saw Shanna, eyes painted like Anubis. She was wearing the same pale dress as the woman in the window. Neil appeared from another room and burst out laughing.

Shanna didn’t laugh, but looked down on Christian with the same expression she had on the balcony. He felt pinned underneath it, unable to pull himself away from the door. Then she smiled, and he was released.

“Boy, that was better than I could have hoped for.”

“Oh man,” Neil said, “I didn’t think you could move that fast.”

Pieces of evidence slowly began putting themselves together, but it was too late. The Debunker had not seen a ghost, but now wished he had.

“Christian, now we’re even,” Shanna said, lifting him off the floor.

He should have felt humiliated, singled-out, and debunked as a fraud. But he didn’t.

“Admit it, we got you,” Neil said. “You really believed she was a ghost.”

“I did,” Christian said. The admission did not fill him with shame or make him feel like a charlatan.

They went out to a pizza place that stayed open late. They talked about paranormal reality shows and the city's witch community and the best books about haunted houses. They ate two large cheese pizzas. On the next listing, the three of them inspected the house together. They were even.

'pilō

“I think my pillow eats my dreams.”

Jiyeon often made fantastical declarations like this. It wasn't until I looked up to find her scowling that I thought something might be wrong.

Jiyeon spoke English well, but slowly. The way she would often pause to construct her sentences gave her an air of wisdom, like she was reciting words from an ancient and forgotten tome.

“When I was young, I dreamed all the time,” she said. “In high school, I used to have bad dreams—in college too. But these days, I don't have any dreams. My grandmother bought me a new pillow. It was made in Gyeongju, the old capital of Korea. It is very beautiful.”

I brought my coffee mug up to my face. “And since your grandmother gave you that pillow you haven't had any dreams?”

“Maaa-bye?” she said, and erupted into laughter.

I left the café around five. Wednesday's class always felt the longest. I was working at a private English cram school from six in the evening until eleven. Students came right from their regular school to my class, often exhausted and distracted.

When I walked in the classroom, several of the students were napping over their desks. “What if desks ate memories?” I thought. “Not much point in teaching class if my lesson is just going to be gobbled up.” I spent my break between classes thinking of what kinds of food would correspond to specific types dreams. Dreams revolving around a Jungian Shadow archetype would have to taste like *heuk dweji*—*black pork*.

“I don’t want to go home,” Kim said, rubbing his eyes. “My wife is crazy. I think it must be that we cannot communicate well.”

This was a pretty severe understatement. Kim and his wife co-owned the school, before they were married. Their courtship and subsequent marriage, Kim once told me, had all the sentimentality of filing for zoning clearance. She set the date, booked the wedding hall, and updated the financial documents, all the while scoffing at Kim’s attempts to woo her—the pragmatist versus romantic. There was a rumor around the office that she once took flowers Kim brought home and added them to a stew that night for dinner.

“I told to her that we should go on vacation,” Kim said. “She says, ‘with what money?’ I say, ‘All this money! Look at this money here! I have it! Let’s go-go!’”

He laughed, but cut it short and gave a serious look, like a big brother realizing he’s not setting a good example. “But I know her heart, I know what she means,” Kim said. “You, the students, this building, that stapler, they are all things that need to be put into an equation to make them the most successful. She has always looked at things that way. But, happiness is not a commodity. There is no cost-benefit ratio of going on vacation, so she doesn’t see the point in it. I’m the opposite, all I do is dream things, picture them all together like a painting. Maybe that’s worse.”

“Seems like you’re fated to each other to live argumentatively ever after,” I said.

“I think so!” he roared.

Like many married men in their thirties, Kim rewarded his success in business by growing a small potbelly that bulged along his thin frame. When he was teaching his class or talking to other members of the staff, he exuded detached warmth, like a doctor

interviewing a patient for the first time. Maybe it was because I was a foreigner, but with me he would often let his guard down a little.

Kim walked across the hall, and I could hear the beep of the coffee vending machine. He returned with a Dixie cup of coffee in each hand.

“Still,” he said, setting mine on the desk, “I sometimes wish... no, just wonder. I sometimes wonder if I could erase a part of me, if it wouldn’t be better to edit my personality so I could be more compatible with my wife. If I saw a red rose, for example, I wouldn’t think ‘I should buy that for my wife’, instead I would think ‘that costs too much!’”

“Don’t you think that would cause problems? If you take out one part of your personality, then won’t the other parts that depended on them also be disrupted?”

“Sure, that’s true. But if I could be guaranteed that it would make my life easier, then why not do it?” Kim took my empty cup and held it against his temples. “Maybe I should just get electro shock.”

“A vacation would be cheaper,” I replied. “Jiyeon, from the café, Dan, and Hyein were thinking of getting out of the city for a long weekend. Why don’t you come?”

We had all decided to go to a spa resort the third week in January. Winter break had started and most went south toward the coast or Jeju. We went north instead. When we arrived the place was empty; only a couple faint shoe tracks in the snow revealed there was anyone around. The lodges looked out over acres of farmland, now just mud and hay bales, frozen solid.

Light flickered from the little market attached to the concierge. It looked unprepared for guests. I gathered a few packets of dried squid, beer, and chips and brought them to our room.

Eager to exorcise the gloom surrounding the abandoned resort, Dan threw our bags on the ground, switched on all the lights, and turned on dance music. The lights seemed to fill the room slowly, like fire filling a hot air balloon.

“Ahh I’m so hungry!” Dan and Kim took turns saying in English and Korean while ripping through the plastic containers and setting the table.

Hyein had brought up fresh tuna sashimi and *sangnakiji*. Jiyeon cooked cheese ramen on the stove. I emptied the packets of snacks onto tiny plates and set them around the table in a circle. As a finishing touch I unveiled the bottle of J&B whiskey, which was met with merry applause.

It was a good group— like a family circumstance adopted. Dan was the only other foreigner, a chemical engineer from Milan doing research at *KAIST*. He had a crush on Hyein, who was working part time at the café. Hyein spoke a little Italian and only really used nouns when speaking in English. But she was so sprightly and enthusiastic that filling in lexical gaps came fairly easily.

“Drinking game! Let’s go! Everybody!” she sang.

We drank along to rhyming songs and filled ourselves with food. The light of the cabin had finished filling the room and spilled out into the night.

At two a.m., Hyein sprang up and said goodnight to the stars, then to us, before climbing upstairs to bed. Dan was slouched in his chair mumbling something about tomorrow. Kim looked stoically out the window. Jiyeon was humming a quiet melody. I folded my hands under my nose and watched, trying to imprint the little tableau onto my memory. One by one the rest dragged their full stomachs to bed. Sleep came quickly, unhindered by the disturbances of city life.

I woke up to someone screaming.

The sound was so hideous it took a moment to convince myself it was coming from a person. I stumbled over the couch. The room was covered in dark static.

“Jiyeon, Jiyeon *Il reo na!*” someone was saying.

I ran up the stairs. Hyein was kneeling down, trying to shake her awake.

Suddenly, the screaming stopped.

The moonlight from the tiny window illuminated Jiyeon’s eyes. They looked like two still pools, infinitely deep. She caught her breath and started to whimper.

Hyein gave me a look telling me that I should go. I walked back downstairs to the kitchen and made some tea.

The group decided to continue the trip as though nothing happened. We played cards and went on a hike. But the following night Jiyeon woke again screaming. Again she couldn’t remember what happened afterward. Hyein and Kim spoke to her for several hours. I stayed up listening to them, but couldn’t follow the conversation. I studied Korean every day so I could be closer to her. Jiyeon was my friend too, but the language barrier between us kept me away from the serious conversations—the ones that mattered.

By the third day, Jiyeon looked gaunt, like a corpse found at the bottom of a lake. Packing the car back up had the solemnity of a funeral procession. We pulled away and wound around the icy farmland for a while. Fragmented shards of hay floated around in the winter sunlight.

“We should take her to the hospital,” Dan whispered.

Kim shook his head. “She’s fine. The mountain air does this to some people. Altitude and the air, it sometimes effects people, makes them restless. If she stayed up there for a

week or two, she would have gotten used to it. Once we get back she will be back to normal.”

I wasn't sure. I had heard about people getting altitude sickness. Maybe someone could get nightmares from air pressure, or even just being in an unfamiliar place. It seemed reasonable enough. But I could still hear the scream in my head.

Jiyeon was gazing out the window. I figured it was better to not let her fall asleep. If she woke up screaming, Kim may swerve the car right off the side of a cliff. After a couple miles of obsessing over what to say, I decided on a joke.

“I guess fresh air isn't that good for you,” I said.

“Maybe,” Jiyeon said. “I don't want to talk about it.”

I felt rejected. Thankfully, no one in the car said anything. They knew it was the wrong tactic. They also knew why I was trying. They knew, despite there never having been a conversation on the matter. They were good friends.

When we returned to the city, work quickly swallowed us up like an incoming tide. Correspondence was limited to bursts of quasi-informative phone messages:

-Jiyeon O.K. Says sorry for trouble.

-Dis lab is gonna kill me! Saw JY in town. Looks fine.

-Hey, talked to Jiyeon, she is herself again. See I was right!

The messages were drifting in from disembodied senders. What was Hyein's expression as she sent her update? I tried to imagine Dan's wiry fingers clumsily tapping on his phone. Was Kim's inflection celebratory or gloating? The messages felt like extensions of my own thoughts. I was relieved, but somewhere I maintained doubt.

Café Eka hosted a Christmas party for regular customers and the staff. Kim and the owner of the café were high school friends. Locally famous for staying open late, he took me once after work. There I met Hyein, who introduced me to Jiyeon, who went there to study for graduate school. *Kaist* wasn't far from the café and Dan soon became a regular as well, quoting Andreas Capellanus and confiding in me his aspirations to woo the barista. We were drawn to the sanctuary of the dim café. The owner's shaved head and tranquil demeanor gave the impression of a monk, quietly tending to his chores and whatever problems his flock of patrons confessed to him.

The owner had eclectic tastes: posters of *The Who* and a local indie film on the wall, plastic anime figurines and model cars adorned the shelves. An elegant false chandelier hung between the open rafters. I still couldn't speak enough Korean to really get to know him, but I felt that his café was a reflection of his psyche. It gave the impression that if the contents were studied long enough, one might be able to learn idiosyncrasies of his character that could never be reached by normal conversation. When two people don't share a common language, they become amateur semioticians.

The party was larger than expected, twenty or so. Hyein arrived late carrying two bottles of champagne under each arm.

"Excuse me, miss," Kim mocked, "are you old enough to drink alcohol?"

Hyein jumped to attention, "I am ID!"

"No!" Kim arched his back and brandished his finger, "You must say: 'I *have* ID! No champagne for you tonight!"

Hyein howled like a cartoon puppy in the rain. Everyone laughed, and the party began.

Two tables had been pushed together to create a buffet: *Ddeokpoki* and vegetable croquettes, prosciutto carbonara and *bulgogi kimbap*, sliced tuna and cold cuts. Everyone congregated at the table, almost in unison, and collected food to bring to their group.

Two college students pulled a guitar and *cajon* from behind a couch and started to play at the back. The layout of the café seemed to defy partygoers' urge sit in one place: a boxed-in openness, as if we were all standing on a stage. Unable to secure mistletoe, Dan contented himself with sitting silently next to Hyein while she chatted to her friends. Kim was at the counter telling a story to the owner.

My eyes started to feel heavy from the champagne. I headed to the couch farthest from the performance on which we had tossed our coats. While I moved them out of the way, I found a pillow.

The blue embroidery was frayed slightly around the edge. But the pattern, a sort of bamboo paisley, was sharp and unworn. It was next to Jiyeon's bag. She was on the other side of the room dancing with some of her classmates. I loved the way she danced— no particular moves, but always attune to flow of the melody.

I thought to go up to her and ask if I could use her pillow to take a nap. But it seemed childish when I imagined it. Her friends may think I'm strange. Maybe she was interested in one of the guys she was dancing with. If I could remove one part of myself, it would be how I care about things like that.

I rested my head back on the pillow and listened to the murmured conversations and the clink of glasses being refilled. No matter where you go the sound of a Christmas party doesn't really change. Rising jubilation inevitably lulls into rhythmic patches of

sound, like a winter fire slowly dying out. The soft strumming of the guitar gently competed with the cicadas screeching outside.

Something made a thud inside me, a soundless reverberation.

Cicadas in winter? Maybe one had flown into the cafe. The sound is deafening! There'd have to be at least a dozen!

I shot up. The entire café was invisible behind a dense fog.

A fire! I started running.

Why had no one woken me? Did they forget about me? Was I so insignificant that they couldn't save me from burning to death?

After sprinting a moment I noticed that the air was cool and didn't smell like smoke. Icy soil crunched under my feet.

It's fog. What am I doing outside?

I started to move toward something in the distance. It was the sound of children playing.

Am I near a school?

In the opposite direction, I saw an old woman hunched over, pulling a black tarp over the ground. A large visor hid her face. Despite her age, she moved with surprising swiftness.

Moving closer, I saw she wasn't wearing shoes. She hopped like a crow from corner to corner trying to straighten out the tarp.

A loud crack echoed over us from far away. The old woman stopped what she was doing and slowly lifted her head toward the noise.

"Ah," she said, noticing me, "you really shouldn't be here."

I had never met her, but something about her slow, unaffected voice sounded familiar.

“You’d better leave before things get all muddled up. Or worse, we could run out of room entirely!”

A broken bottle was sticking out from underneath the tarp. “This might sound strange, but could you tell me where this is exactly? I won’t mess anything up.” I pulled an empty bottle out of the dirt.

“*Pabo!* Don’t touch that, foolish boy!” she hissed.

Something bumped me to the ground. I looked up and saw a well-dressed man, maybe in his early twenties.

“Watch where you’re going asshole.” He exuded self-entitlement, a kind that had always made my blood boil.

Saying nothing, I flipped him off as he walked away.

“Aggression is not going to get you anywhere, especially not here.” The old lady moved closer, tarp still in hand.

“I’m sorry I’m in the way. If you could please just tell me where we are.”

The old woman snatched the bottle and slipped it back under the tarp. “Sure, to you it seems like there is a lot of space left. When you’re young, the potential in front of you seems limitless and you ignore the little bits time gobbles up. What happens when everything’s covered, you say? Well, then who she will only be a memory of those who knew her.”

The icy breeze was cutting straight through my clothes. “Who will? Please, I really just want to know—“

“*Reeeally* want to know? I don’t think you care about her at all,” she said lifting off her visor, exposing a face as flat and smooth as the surface of an egg. I watched dark clouds rush past as I fell backwards.

The second I felt the impact of the ground my eyes shot open.

“Drink too much?” Hyein grinned.

I must have only been asleep a couple minutes.

“Let’s get him some water,” Dan said.

What was that? I don’t even remember falling asleep. The cold. I can still feel it.

I got up to stretch. Polaroids of people, presumably all customers or employees were taped to the back wall amidst doodles on cocktail napkins and art show postcards. Scanning over them, I came across a picture I hadn’t seen before.

“Here you go.” Dan returned alone with a glass of water. “Whoa, are you feeling alright?”

“Yea, I’m fine. Who is that in this picture?” I said, pointing at the picture.

“That’s Jiyeon! I think it’s from when she just started undergrad.”

“No, who’s next to her.”

“Oh, her ex-boyfriend. Hyein told me he cheated on her and they broke up. Apparently he was a real bastard.”

He was also the guy who knocked into me in the fog.

Everyone was starting to leave. I waited around to catch Jiyeon and ask her about the guy in the photo. I didn’t know why I was being so sneaky. If she asked why I cared, I wouldn’t know what to say. More than likely, I just saw him on the street or in another picture.

She finally walked over and scooped up her bag. We both lived on the other side of the city, so I suggested sharing a cab.

“What’s in the bag?” I blurted out.

“Ah! Yes, this is the pillow my grandmother gave me.” She pulled it out of the bag and held it in the light streaking past us. “Isn’t it beautiful?”

“It is, nice design. Why did you bring it to the party?” I felt guilty for asking.

“Just...” She looked down and started to comb the edges with her palm. “It’s a stupid thing. Ever since we came back from the spa, I keep it with me. For, something like security? That feeling was horrible. I had bad dreams that time but cannot remember what they were, just the feeling. It was like everyone in the world was watching me, and they thought I did something bad. Judging me. I felt...paralyzed.”

“It make sense to me, I don’t think it’s stupid.”

“I knew you would think that way. You accept things very easily. Maybe you are a little bit *foolish?*” She said and burst out laughing.

The taxi dropped me off first. In my apartment, I poured a glass of water and looked out at the highway through the blinds. I was a little offended at Jiyeon’s characterization of me. She was unique, to me a least, unaffected by conventional hang-ups— always in the present and free to experience every detail with focused consideration.

But then again, I *had* readily accepted that her pillow ate dreams. And now I was already halfway to accepting that after sleeping on her pillow, I had seen what was inside.

A poster of the album *Groovin’ High* hung on the wall opposite the window. “Let’s just say,” I said, turning to it, “for the sake of indulging my foolishness, that tonight I didn’t have a dream, but instead entered some other place.” Dizzy, of course, had no objection.

“Dreams are the result of the mind attempting to work out the anxieties and fears of the dreamer. But Jiyeon said that she had stopped dreaming. If the pillow was eating her dreams, what would happen when, as the old woman said, they ran out of room?”

No answer. Work started in a couple hours. That night I dreamt my apartment had mice.

A binder filled with student evaluations was waiting on my desk. Busy work has always had a sobering effect on me. Its repetition puts me into a trance, freeing up another part of my mind to process things.

Regardless, the matter of Jiyeon’s nightmares seemed to have passed unresolved. To my knowledge, she had never gone to see a doctor, or even made an effort to explain it. Was the rest of the group unconcerned, or were they keeping it to themselves behind the impenetrable curtain of their conversations in Korean?

Conspiracy theories are not a great way to keep friends. So, I decided to ask Kim directly.

He was still in the conference room after his business class. The room was dark with the slides from the last class still up on the projector.

“Hey, finished all your work?” Kim said before I could start.

“Yep, all done. Listen, I was wondering how Jiyeon has been? Since our trip, I mean.”

“She’s fine now.” The light from the projector reflecting off his teeth made his grin look as if it was suspended in air. “Why are you so interested in Jiyeon these days?”

This was not the conversation I wanted to have. “I’m not. Just, as her friend, I feel like I ought to be checking up on her, but with the language barrier between us that’s hard to do sometimes. Especially with sensitive stuff like this.”

The floating grin disappeared. He switched to his big brother face.

“You are worried about her.” He said, letting out a long, thinking sigh. “Jiyeon is a good person, kind. But she is, a little bit... detached.”

“From what?”

“Life, maybe? Or people? I can’t really explain it, almost like a disconnected circuit.” Kim checked his watch. “You two have a connection. Maybe it will be love, after some time. So, I will show you this, but please don’t tell anyone.”

I agreed. Kim tapped on the computer and brought a website onto the projector. It was an English language article from one of the main news outlets:

ON WEDNESDAY, MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENT, SURNAME LEE, WAS FOUND UNCONCIOUS BY ONE OF HER CLASSMATES AFTER HAVING APPARENTLY FALLEN FROM ROOF OF THE SCHOOL. SHE WAS TRANSPORTED TO D— CITY HOSPITAL WHERE SHE DIED OF INTERNAL INJURIES.

The article went on to say that the police suspected the case was a suicide, most likely due to school pressure or bullying. It was dated October 3rd, ten years ago.

“This was Jiyeon’s best friend. Apparently, they were always together. Would even be mistaken for one another. Jiyeon was the one who found her.”

“How do you know all this?”

“Jiyeon tells the Owner many personal things. I saw this article open on his computer one day and he told me.” Kim shut off the computer and walked over. “It’s hard for you to be friends with Jiyeon, because you can’t communicate with her well. But even myself, or Hyein... we can’t understand what she is thinking. She has to deal with it her own way.”

I imagined Jiyeon as a middle school student, kneeling over her friend, eyes wide open and absent, unable to process that her friend was irretrievably gone, like she had been erased.

“Do you want to go to the café tonight?” I asked.

Kim frowned deeply. “No, I have an appointment. Remember, this is a secret. Please don’t talk to Jiyeon about this.”

I nodded. The truth was, I wouldn’t even know what to say.

I caught the last bus just as it was starting to roll away. It took awhile for the bus’s winding route to find its way to the café. But I enjoyed the ride— everything becomes frozen. There were no choices, no decisions; the only option once you step on the bus is to ride it.

We passed a stretch of dark farmland. I pictured the old woman hunched over that black tarp. The details had evanesced. *There was a heavy mist. The old woman told me I shouldn’t be there. She had looked up because she heard that noise, off in the direction of the sound of children playing—A loud crack.*

I bit the inside of my cheek, hard. The reason the pillow ate dreams was to protect Jiyeon from a memory. As she got older, more painful memories, like cheating boyfriends, inevitably started coming in. Soon the pillow wouldn’t be able to hold them all. The memories would spill out all at once as they did at the spa. Then *she will only be a memory of those who knew her.*

It was quarter to twelve when I got to the cafe. In the corner booth there were two businessmen trying to recover from a company dinner. They swayed back and forth in their seats, drunk and cut loose from their responsibilities of the day.

“Do you want your usual?” The Owner recited, smiling.

I shook my head and ordered an espresso. I sat down at a table ensconced by a bookshelf and a potted fern.

I tried mapping out the pillow world on a cocktail napkin: The school— her first bad memory, the field of buried dreams, the direction from which the ex-boyfriend was walking.

Jiyeon seem doomed with or without the function of the pillow. The memories would come back either way. There was nothing I could do.

Dan appeared from behind the bookcase; his ID badge still clung to his shirt. He stirred his coffee, like he was winding himself back up.

“These hours are starting to get to me,” he said. “I’ll be glad once this project is over.”

“Plus you’ll get to go to the café during hours when Hyein is working.”

“Actually,” Dan said, still stirring his coffee. “I think I’m going to give up on that particular endeavor. I can never seem to come across the way I want to. Kim was right, the language barrier is just too great.”

“Kim told you that?”

He sat up and took a long sip. “Not directly. He just seemed to be hinting at it. The Owner always smiles when he sees us together. I think he knows I like her. I’ve tried to ask her things indirectly, but it always ended up backfiring. I still don’t even know if she’s seeing anyone.”

I almost said he should be straight with her: ask her out on a date. But even if he didn’t know it, that advice would have been prodigiously hypocritical.

“Asking her friends is too dangerous,” he continued. “I mean, if I told her and she didn’t feel the same way, it might get weird. I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but we all have kind of a unique dynamic. This type of things doesn’t happen often. But sometimes I feel, for as close as we’ve become, it’s also delicate, like a complex program. One line of bad code and the whole thing breaks down.”

“So it breaks.” I lit a cigarette and blew the smoke toward the ceiling. “Just go back in and fix the code.”

Dan shook his head. “That might work for videogames. But when you’re programming a machine, the consequences are more serious. If the code goes wrong the first time, that might be it. The damage could take years to undo.”

So you’re just going to throw a tarp over the machine and leave it alone? A surge of familiar aphorisms came to mind, but I repressed them all. I was projecting my hang-ups with Jiyeon and giving bad advice. I could tell he had already made up his mind.

“There’s a lot more to Hyein and me than the fact that I have a crush on her. It can change into something else.”

He had a point. Maybe people could remove ideas, opinions, or even bad memories that they didn’t want. Because the individual was the one choosing what to remove, that person’s personality would remain the same. Maybe it was better, as Kim had said, for Jiyeon to handle this on her own.

I heard the scream again. It was muted, like the cars passing outside the café. I could see Jiyeon at the spa, helpless, paralyzed, and eyes wide open. I felt sick.

The tail of a vintage Kit Cat clock swung like a metronome to Na Yoon Seon’s *Uncertain Weather* the Owner had put on the record player. In deference to exam week, the

café would stay open well past three so students could have a place to take a break from their all-nighters in the library. However, at the moment we were alone.

A message came in on Dan's phone. He picked it up off the table. Every feature reacted as he read, and his expression underwent a goofy transformation.

"It's Hyein. She wants to know if we want to get a drink with some of her friends."

I crammed the cigarette against the bottom of the ashtray. That little metamorphic smile had just undercut the entire argument.

"No, thanks. I'm just going to hang out here for a while."

Dan hurriedly began responding to his message. I looked down at my sad napkin diagram. I wanted to go back. I could help the old lady, or scare off the ex-boyfriend, or discover some way to erase it all.

"You sure you don't want to come?"

There was no proof that any of this was real. The idea of blasting my eardrums with cacophonous pop music started gaining appeal. I pictured how the night would go: discussing movie releases and vacation destinations around a glass mug of watery beer and good barbeque. Real, ordinary life.

We both stood up and started collecting our things. "Oh look," Dan said, as he put on his coat. "Jiyeon must have forgotten her bag here."

"I better take this back to her," I said. Before Dan could say anything else, I added "I'll take a taxi to her place and meet you later."

The taxi stand was empty. I opened the bag. The pillow was inside. At that moment she would either still be awake or in the middle of a terrible nightmare. I knew I should

return it, but a perfect opportunity to go back to the pillow world had presented itself. I could return it in the morning. No one would know. I finally had a chance to help— maybe.

A taxicab was approaching. I wondered if any of this was my business. I wondered if any of it was real. I wondered what would happen if Jiyeon and I slept together on the pillow.

"Oe di ga?" The taxi driver said through the window.

I didn't know how to answer.

From What is Visible

Tom looked up from his notebook to see that a woman had sat down at the opposite end of the courtyard. Her hands rested delicately in her lap. Long strands of dark hair covered her face, prevented him from guessing her age. She possessed such stillness that he could not hold his attention to her for very long, and his focus drifted to the floral arrangement in the forefront of his view. It was as if she had been sitting there for her entire life, as permanent as the ivy grasping the fence or the stain along the stone path.

He had never seen the woman around the hotel before, and her anonymity excited his imagination. A feeling of contentment passed through him, grounding him to the chair. But his curiosity demanded he rise and speak to her. The more he struggled to summon the courage to stand, the more enchanting she seemed, thus making him unwilling to disturb her.

The woman did not so much as light a cigarette or look at the time. Sitting there, lost among the flowers, she was more than just a beauty. Whereas the gaudy radiance of supermodels and actresses made life seem dull by contrast, hers was the other kind, the sort of modest elegance that made life feel intentional.

Before Tom could finish his thought she rose from her chair and left. The courtyard was now empty. Tom admired the unfamiliar feeling the woman evoked within him, and what familiar desires were not.

Tom spent his afternoons in Wenceslas Square, ducking in and out of bars and swarms of tourists to find 'something that could not be seen and with a name he had heard, but could not pronounce.'

The thought of finding this entity had burrowed into his mind years ago on his first trip as a tourist, and the memory of it would resurface during moments of extreme tedium (mostly at the office). Like the Buddhist *ohm* or the Kerouacian *It*, the entity was nebulous, yet wished to burst from within him. It was something he had only experienced in Prague, so it followed that the city was a stimulus, if not the source.

At least, this is what he told himself. The idea of finding, much less understanding, anything in Prague was daunting. Every cobblestone and gilded relief was connected with a complex and heavily scrutinized epoch in history— as well as a sensationalized version told to tourists. To presume any sort of understanding of the city, especially as an American without an advanced degree, was an open invitation to ridicule. The histories of different time periods were interwoven and created a kind of lock inside Tom's head. It made the city as a whole feel entirely inaccessible. Nevertheless, Tom *had* felt something, or at least experienced some sort of revelation, when he had first come to Prague.

After an hour of walking around Tom imagined a man with a willow divining rod searching for an ethereal spring beneath the sidewalk. He was a short, thin man with a very round head and wore a beaten canvas windbreaker. The old diviner led Tom to *Café Slavia*, a historical meeting-place for intellectual dissenters-turned upscale tourist restaurant. The story of the Velvet Revolution excited him— Playwright activists circulating pamphlets and dodging the secret police during the Soviet occupation. In college, Tom had once attended a protest outside city hall. He couldn't remember what it was about, but his disappointment in the affair stayed with him. The organizers bought a permit, gathered a small crowd holding laminated signs, and marched everyone around for an hour. The police watched. Then everyone went home. It didn't make the evening news, let alone history.

Tom walked until he found the smallest, emptiest restaurant on the street and sat down at a table. The waitress was a tired-looking woman who spoke to him in Czech, but pointed at the pictures on the menu. Unsure of what she was trying to communicate, Tom ordered the only dish he knew how to say, *Smažený Sýr*, a type of fried cheese similar to a mozzarella stick. The waitress repeated the word back to him in a disapproving tone. She may have hoped he would order something more expensive, or was correcting his pronunciation, or having a bad day. Tone was all he had. Trying to discern meaning without language evoked a special kind of anxiety in him. The process was a primal as it was ridiculous.

He ate quickly and overpaid.

The diviner took him to Charles Bridge. It was packed with tourists end to end. Tom felt nauseated. It seemed the diviner was taking him to springs that had already dried up—perhaps once the Charles Bridge was once as beautiful as it appeared in the postcards, but now every inch was consumed by parasitic gawkers with DSLR cameras and dripping ice cream cones.

Tom thought about the woman in the courtyard and started feeling better, but it didn't last long. The old diviner brought Tom back to the dance club he visited last night.

~

The club had six floors, if Tom remembered correctly, each claimed to play a different genre of music. But it all ended up sounding the same to Tom. He went with his only Czech friend, Vincek, and two guys from Vincek's office. All the guidebooks spoke of the club's nefarious reputation as a tourist trap, calling it a swirling vortex of modernity drawing in those whom had had enough of all that history and art.

The four men took the elevator straight to the top floor—bouncy electronic lounge music. The floor was virtually empty. There were only a few couples making out in the corners, whose silhouettes were vanishing into the dim light. Vincek sat down at the bar while the other two fled downstairs. Tom sat down next to him.

“I will stay here,” Vincek said. “I hate this place. But it can be useful if you are on a certain kind of mission. Be careful. There are lots of traps here. Bad people know tourists come here.”

“I may just stay up here,” Tom said. “The music is quiet enough that I can actually talk to people. There is a view of the castle. You can tell me more about why you disapprove of Ripellino’s version of Prague.”

“No,” Vincek said. “You would just be trading one guide for another. Quit your job again in ten years and we can talk about Ripellino.”

“You’re saying a man in his twenties can’t—”

“I’m saying you’re a man in his twenties who still needs to experience some things the hard way. It’s one thing to learn the definition of kitsch, or *weltschmerz*, or defenestration. But going around using fancy words won’t bring you closer to that moment of clarity you’re looking for. Go downstairs and help those two idiots pick up American girls.”

“Fine,” Tom said, a little hurt. Vincek had already started fading into the room by the time Tom got to the stairs. The disillusioned Czech salary man seemed impervious to loneliness, doubt, and ambition. Tom admired this about him, but also pitied that all that intelligence was wasting away at a desk job.

The floor below had some sort of hip-hop theme. The shorter of Vincek's two friends emerge from a scrum of dancers.

"Drink this," he said. "Give me a good English pick-up line."

"I don't think there is such a thing." Whatever the drink was, it tasted as if it would be better used starting a tractor.

"You are worse than Vincek," he said, inspecting the bar. "Please. As one man to another, I am asking you this." His target was most likely the blonde at the end, hopefully dressed up for a bachelorette party. She was the antithesis of the girl in the courtyard.

"The only time I have ever heard a pickup line work," Tom said, "was when it was ironic. Try: 'excuse me, do you have a moment for me to hit on you?'"

"That's terrible," he said. "No wonder you're single." They had another drink at the bar, and then another. The path cleared, and he ended up using the line anyway. Tom figured it was a good time to clear out. The noise was starting to get to him.

However, the next floor was not much better—the *what was on American radio in the 90s* floor. Vincek's other friend towered over the other dancers. He was bobbing his head to the music, spilling a little of his drink with each motion. The large man seemed perfectly content and reminded Tom of a buoy riding atop a rough current.

Despite having another drink, Tom could not find any similar feeling of contentment. The whiney melodrama of the 90s song lyrics brought up memories of middle school dances and ironic college parties. How many of the tourists here, Tom wondered, thought that they were being ironic?

Tom made for the exit. He didn't quit his job and travel across an ocean to be a bitter wallflower in a tourist bar. To hell with what other people were doing. To hell with Vincek.

Outside, the air felt so cool that he imagined steam rising off his shoulders. The light of Prague Castle twinkled on the other side of the river. Tom heard a story that the Rolling Stones had bought those lights. He heard the Velvet Revolution was inspired by the band Velvet Underground, that a golem was buried somewhere in the city, and rubbing a statue on Charles Bridge would destine you to return to Prague. The city was a catalogue of legends, rumors, and histories without a table of contents. All alluded to a life beyond what Tom was experiencing.

Stumbling to the edge of the river and drunkenly talking to himself, Tom invented the old diviner. A personification of his unconscious mind that could lead him to the ephemeral realization— his own epiphanic moment found in most classic works of writing. The old man was Tom's imaginary amalgam of Bulgakov's Professor Woland, Rabbi Lowe, and he possessed the stern jowls of Ernest Hemingway.

Tom's imaginary guide led him to a bulletin board. There was an announcement, written in Czech and English, that Střelecký Island would be closed to the public the following night for a private gala.

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The notion of breaking into a private gala was positively operatic. There was no telling what sort of people would be there— modern royalty, traveling folk artists, famous intellectuals.

Dusk was settling behind Prague Castle. He had plans to meet Vincek at the *herna* in a half hour. He spent the walk over fanaticizing about sitting on the shore of the island with the girl from the courtyard, looking up at the stars and talking about Kafka.

He got there late. The windows of the Gold Gate *herna* bar were tinsel with neon tubes, making its exterior almost indistinguishable from an adult movie store. Once Tom walked in, he saw that not only had his friend arrived early, but had started getting drunk without him.

“You, Tomas, are really the worst type of person,” Vincek said. “You fly by the crotch of your pants, you don’t care about anything but the woman.”

“Aren’t you one that said a man in his twenties should—”

“I am not insulting you, I am just telling you this. You say you are following something, something that cannot be seen or heard or named, well then how the fuck are you going to find it? Do you know what it is? I know you Tomas. You are no great philosopher. You’re a lazybones rascal who flies around by the crotch of his pants.”

Tom waited for Vincek to finish. “Yeah I know, I’m a phony—”

“You’re not a phony, you’re an authentic lazybones. That is what you are. Let me ask you this: what have you done today? Did you write? Go to a museum? Learn some Czech?”

Tom shook his head.

“You did not. You walked around and thought about thinking.” Vincek’s stare grew soft as he leaned back in his chair. “Maybe, doing nothing is heavy work on its own. I don’t envy your age.”

That was Vincek’s way of apologizing.

Somehow a beer had found its way in front of Tom. “Let’s do something tonight,” Tom said, leaning closer. “Meet me at Strelecky Ostrov around eight, there will be beer and music and dancers. The public’s not even invited.”

“So it would not make much sense for us to go, would it? If it’s not open to the public, what are you going to do, rent a rowboat and watch from the river? Or have you finally made another friend?”

“No, we’re going to sneak in. I think the host is some kind of old money, maybe royalty. A new-age fête with some of the most beautiful women in the world.”

“What did I say?” Vincek laughed. “Always flying by the crotch of your pants. I am too old to care about this, Tomas.”

“It’s true, you’re eighteen years free of your twenties. I do envy your age. You’re not burdened with the constant pressure of having to prove yourself.” Tom placed the back of his wrist against his forehead. “You have conquered your fear of the future. How it must be a weight off your shoulders. For I have no direction in my life as a worthless, itinerant lazybones. The thought of how much I don’t know feels so heavy, it follows me around everyday.”

Vincek slapped Tom hand away. “ Yo, Okay, fine, I will meet you on the east entrance of the bridge. You will need someone there to get you out of jail.”

A heavy fog had crept into the city. By a quarter past eight, Vincek had still not yet arrived. Tom peered over the edge of the bridge.

The party was just starting, but already the clamor of live music and squawking laughter had filled the little island on the Vltava. The dancers were even more beautiful than Tom had imagined. Every face was lost amidst the fog, but the blues and greens and golds of the dancers’ clothes stood out with a brilliant vibrancy. Their arms moved in fluid rotations, fingers bent like claws, their hips popped and swirled along with the music. With every motion seemed to beckon the mist, calling it around the area in which they danced.

Tom felt dizzy, his feet felt as if any moment they would simply detach from the earth and he would float away. He pushed himself away from the edge and urgently searched for Vincek amidst the thickening air.

“Vincek,” Tom whispered.

A small figure emerged, bobbing slowly with its steps. Tom recognized the brown woolen jacket and rushed across the street.

“Look at this fog Tomas. I have never seen a fog like this. Who knows what ghosts lurk past what we can see?” Vincek said.

“Yeah, it’s great. It’ll probably give us some cover.”

Vincek let out a sigh, as if just then remembering their plan.

They went down the stairs opposite to where the party was being held. A waist-high metal gate blocked all the entrances from the bridge, with the help of a large, expressionless bouncer. They would have to jump off the bridge onto a ledge then run beneath it. Tom turned to Vincek and asked if he was ready.

“No, I think I will just see you try,” Vincek said, fishing a cigarette out of his coat.

Tom leapt over the side. He landed squarely on the ledge and made his way along the underside of the bridge, passing just above the bouncer’s head. He found a spot where the bouncers were invisible to him amidst the fog. Tom lowered himself down.

He was only a few yards from the crowd. He could smell the roasted meats in the buffet and hear the jingling of the dancers’ dresses.

He felt eyes watching him.

“What do you want?” the eyes said.

Tom stumbled back. He swore he could hear the splash made from his heart flying into the water.

“Just wanted a cigarette,” he muttered.

“This is private, not for the public,” the face responded, now attached to a security uniform. The wall of a man stood between him and the party and said nothing more.

Back on the bridge, Vincek was staring vacantly at the ground. When he finally looked up, he did not seem surprised. “No good? Oh well, we can watch from the bridge.”

“The bridge? Who gives a shit about the bridge?” Tom hissed. “I don’t want to watch, I could turn on a TV and do that. I want to go in, I want to be a part of it all. It’s in there Vincek, what I’ve been looking for. Something real.”

“Listen to me, there is nothing for you here, these people do not care about matters of the soul any more than those at the club. They are like the blue men of the fountain I showed you, they drink and piss and think they had a good time because they’re unable to remember a thing. You will find no beauty here. We will go on a walk. If you need a girl so bad, I will find you one.”

“Who said anything about that? You can waste your life away in a bar if you want, but I’m tired of hearing stories. I want to have something of my own. What I’ve been looking for is in there. I can’t just leave now.”

Vincek stepped back. Tom’s complexion had turned such a deathly pale that it looked almost green. His hand moved in shivering gestures, and his pupils had severely contracted.

“Don’t you worry about me,” Tom said, “I’ll get in on my own.”

Vincek looked in his jacket for another cigarette. By the time he found one his friend was almost on the other side of the bridge. The cigarette he retrieved was gnarled, but not broken, and the flame from the match cast a halo of light around him. With a sigh, Vincek stood vigil and blew smoke into the fog.

Vincek watched his friend make the same maneuver against the other entrance. Again, he was caught. But instead of contritely returning to the bridge, his friend started shouting, cornered by a host of faceless shadows. His friend lunged at the giant bouncer, missing dramatically. One deliberate counter-punch from the bouncer snapped his head backward and sent Tom choking to the grass.

The fog had cleared by the time Tom awoke. Someone had carried him to the Charles Bridge. Tom pulled his arm up to check the time, and noticed a piece of paper fastened to the lapel of his jacket. It read:

See you at the bar -Vincek

Tom reread the note several times before lifting himself up. He was placed in front of the statue tourists rubbed as they passed to ensure a safe return back to Prague. Tom felt ashamed. The meaning behind why Vincek had brought him here throbbed along with his forehead. Vincek had put him at the bottom, allowing him to view everything in front of him. Back when he first came to Prague, Tom had no preconceptions about intellectual integrity, nor any desire to find something unique or meaningful; he was just a tourist, free to appreciate the city in any way he saw fit. Ignorant of all the histories of the city, he had created a singular, internal history.

Tom checked his watch. The metro would start again soon. As he made his way towards the station, Tom decided that he would forget about Ripellino and Kafka and

instead spend the day writing in the courtyard before meeting Vincek back at the *herna*.

And if the woman were there again, he would surely ask for her name.

Transferred Home

Above all else, Alexander hated the sound of the door. His new home at Sandy Pines had the audacity, if not complete ignorance to his acute misophonia, to assign him the room right next to the front entrance. He calculated that no fewer than forty times a day it would squeal open and slam shut again, squeal, slam; squeal, slam. The wall closest to the entrance would perceptibly shake, endangering the safety of his personal property—family curios on the shelf and an original Hancock, a local artist of which the staff had no appreciation.

Derek would be coming soon. He would say, *Good morning, Alexander*, with unjustifiable condescension. In his lifetime, Alexander had served as a clerk in the mayor's office, head docent at the Trenton City Museum, a master's candidate of psychology, and an army reservist during the Korean War. Still Derek, a pimple-faced, glorified housemaid at an assisted-care facility, opens the door without knocking, sticks his head in, and rouses Alexander from sleep without the least bit of shame.

It was also a constant reminder of how bad things had gotten. Trenton was a wonderful place growing up. Italian families had a restaurant on every corner; children could safely walk to school. Now, with the gangs, the city was like a war zone—worse than that. In Korea the shooting only came from one direction. Now a couple restaurants remained and the only buildings under renovation were the prison and the courthouse.

His childhood home, social propriety, and, more recently, his autonomy—the present had surged in like a violent, dark tide. Those less fortunate than he were corralled

into the government-run hospice center downtown. At least Alexander's prison was in the suburbs.

On the exterior, Sandy Pines was every bit of the pastoral communal habitation promised in its brochure. But even before seeing the inside, Alexander knew 'elderly residential assisted-care community' read like a warning label.

At least once a day, like his morning medication, the memory of first arriving there was administered.

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His eldest daughter is whispering to the Hispanic girl behind the desk. She thinks Alexander is oblivious to what they are discussing. Other than the fireplace, the interior is identical to a government facility. He will probably be charged one thousand dollars a year for the privilege to sit by that gas-powered hearth and think about how lucky he is to be there.

Echoes assault the lobby from every angle. The other inmates are disinterested, if not entirely unaware, of the principles of acoustics. If they only conversed at a lower register and put on their hearing aides, everyone would be taking one step closer back to civility.

The noise is impenetrable. Immeasurable. Alexander is anxious to be taken away. He imagines a corner-room overlooking the retention basin in the back.

"Good Morning, Alexander" Derek says for the first time, "let me show you to your new home." He ushers his eldest son, desperate to unload the bags he is carrying, twelve paces, to the first room on the northern side of the building. Alexander feels a sinking in his chest that will never again rise.

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One day, there was a knock at the door. It was more resonant than Derek's meek knuckle tapping. Alexander waited to make sure it wasn't Lupwoski from room 21, who carelessly allowed his walker to smash against the walls on his way to his room.

A second knock came just as impatiently as the first. Alexander opened the door. Seeing a person in a suit made him feel nostalgic; neither staff nor residence ever wore a suit.

"Ah, good morning," the man said, making Alexander want to slam the door in his face. "We're offering optional mental health screenings to the residents of Sandy Pines, conducted by our in-house counselors. It's very informal, and also gives you a chance to voice any questions or feedback you have about living at Sandy Pines. I understand you submitted a number of queries to our staff these past few months, mister—I'm sorry, I don't think I can pronounce your last name. Is it all right if I call you Alec?"

"No," Alexander responded.

Throughout his entire life, Alexander had fought against the foreshortening of his name—Alec, Alexei, Alex, Zander... Lexie. The endeavor was important to the preservation of his identity, even if it came at the expense of alienation. Life could rob him of lunch money, take away his assets, debt him with alimony, and assign him a lousy room; but from birth certificate to gravestone his name would forever be Alexander.

"Alexander will suffice."

"My apologies," the man said, "there is a sign-up sheet in the lobby if you are interested."

The suited man who failed to introduce himself properly was not as far removed from civilized normality as the others. Most importantly, his voice was low and sonorous and did not echo down the hallways. Alexander would sign up for the screening after lunch.

The thought of sharing ideas with an analytic mind, even if only a counselor's, was uplifting. Alexander would mention the acoustical problem, perhaps the counselor could explain to the warden of this inheritance-draining prison how psychologically detrimental the current noise conditions were to the cellblock population. Reciprocally, whatever study the counselor was conducting could benefit from having an educated, inside perspective from someone in the field of study.

Alexander heard snickering at the reception desk as he signed up. To them, he was just an angry, senile old man.

To hell with them, Alexander thought. Their malfeasance will be noted in the counselor's report and then they will be out of a job.

Alexander spent the rest of the afternoon looking at his old notes from psychology class. He had given up on his degree after having children. Nevertheless, he considered himself an academic. Upon first moving to Sandy Pines, it was his intention to resume his intellectual pursuits, but was unable to find the motivation.

Alexander combed through the notes and thesis drafts that had survived the move, searching for anything *a propos*. The closest research he found to his current situation was a website detailing psychological screenings conducted on prison inmates to test for psychopathy. It even included a special riddle designed to identify psychopaths.

In an interview-style evaluation, the riddle was designed to evoke responses from the subject's personality that reveal inclinations toward glibness, impulsivity, antisocial

tendencies, and a grandiose sense of self-worth. Alexander added his own insight on a piece of scrap paper: “lack of awareness of social and civilized normalcy.” It was an obvious deficit in an otherwise decent evaluation of inmate psychopathy. Alexander would be sure to mention his revisions to the counselor.

Interviewing Derek would be a good place to start. Alexander already knew that Derek exhibited no signs of psychopathy, so he would make a good control, a baseline sample from which to measure the deviancy of the others.

Just before dinner would be an ideal time to administer the interview, since residents and staff often ate together. Alexander pondered on how candid he should be about his intent. He decided on a simple approach, and would operate under the pretenses of a casual conversation while collecting his data.

Derek had his dinner tray and was gravitating toward his usual group, a raucous collective of female staffers. Alexander intercepted him and deftly poised himself between the subject and his paradigm.

“Hello,” Alexander inquired.

“Alexander, we missed you outside today. Can I get you anything?”

“No, I was wondering if you have time— if you had a few moments to—talk to me.”

“Oh, sure.” Derek looked over at his group and shook his head, a nonverbal signal that he would not be able to join them. Alexander made a mental note to include gestural signifiers in his report.

They sat down at the table at the farthest end of the cafeteria, where the chatter would be the most diminished.

Alexander allowed Derek a bit of time to eat before beginning. Occasionally, Derek would look up from his tray to his group. This could possibly be a kind of social 'checking-in', another signifier that Alexander noted.

"So, let's start with some preliminary things," Alexander said. "What brings to you us?"

"Us? 'Us' who? You mean why did I start working at Sandy Pines?"

"Correct."

"I just enjoy helping people."

Unhelpful. Better this be a blind study anyway. Alexander could always confer with the counselor later. Nevertheless it was important to establish trust between the interview subject and the test administrator.

"I see," Alexander said. "Myself, I'm here for the same reasons all of us old farts are here. In my case specifically, my kids moved me here. I loathed it at first, but I have recently come to realize it affords me the opportunity to pursue my unfinished intellectual pursuits.

"That's great, Alexander," Derek said, checking in with his table, "really, great."

It appeared Derek was exhibiting empathy. Alexander's initial diagnosis had so far been correct. One more question would be enough to complete his analysis. But it would have to be a little more advanced—a targeted scientific query, proven to expose even the most deceptive psychopaths. He had found it on the computer.

"Let me tell you something, and then I'll let you go," Alexander said. "Years ago, my family and I were all attending the funeral of our mother when my sister was introduced to a man we had never met before. On the drive home, she confessed that this man was the

love of her life. However, she did not have a chance to get his phone number. Two days later, my younger brother was killed. Do you have any idea how this could have happened?”

“That’s terrible. You lost your brother and your mother within two days?”

“No, that’s not the... never mind. Thank you for your time.”

“It was nice talking to you, Alexander,” Derek said as he got up from the table.

“We’re playing chess outside tomorrow. Hope to see you there.”

If not a little dense, Derek’s brain could now be considered otherwise healthy. Science confirmed he was not a psychopath. The online journal showed that a psychopath would answer the riddle by saying that the sister killed the brother in hopes that lost love would come back to attend the funeral. The riddle showed up many times in his online research, so Alexander was confident that the test was legitimate.

Alexander was startled by the bell marking the end of dinner. It was like a damn school bell from the underworld— how Mephistopheles and Faust now learned when homeroom was over. And it surprised him every time because he would always forget about its terrific squawk the moment it was over. But during that moment of complete auditory overload, the entire room would turn two shades dimmer. A shiver would course through him like electroshock.

That night, he lay in his bed with the chatter of the day ringing in his ears, as he had every night. However, he noticed the clamor was a little less unbearable, which he attributed to his return to academic life. Tomorrow, Alexander would continue his research on someone he suspected of having psychopathic tendencies. He would accept Derek’s invitation to the chess tournament as a means to find and interview a suitable candidate.

The next day, Alexander scanned the courtyard for a subject. He spotted Aaron Hollenbeck, who was sitting under the copula, not participating in the tournament. Before being moved to Shady Pines, Hollenbeck had narrowly escaped being imprisoned in a real penitentiary for his involvement with some variant of a real estate pyramid scheme. This made him an excellent candidate, since the wretched hucksters involved with flipping houses were likely all psychopaths. The profession required amorality and double-speak to be clearly printed under pertinent skills on one's resume.

Alexander would have to approach cautiously, without condescension, yet exude friendliness— as a diplomat crossing the desert to a savage empire.

"Hello," Alexander queried.

"Professor Lexie!" greeted Hollenbeck. "Welcome to my little piece of prime lake-view real estate."

Exhibiting symptoms of delusion, Alexander noted. "I would like to have a word with you. I can come back later, if you would prefer to keep reading."

"This doorstep?" Hollenbeck said, holding up the book. "My son gave this to me. It's all anti-capitalist liberal propaganda."

"Good, I'd like to ask you, do you regret the pyramid scam you were involved in?"

"Whoa, look at this guy," Hollenbeck said. "I don't believe we've spoken more than a few sentences to each other, and now you come out with this? How'd you even know about that?" Hollenbeck placed his book on the table. He put an unlit cigar in his teeth. "I regret I got caught, but let's face it, everybody's out to make a buck, from Rockefeller and Trump to guy on the street trying to hustle cashiers out of quarters. If you add up the net worth I made, I'll still be worth more than the chump with the 401K. The government just wants a

taste because it can't stand on its own two feet, that's why I'm here instead of a beach house in Rio."

"Good," Alexander said.

"What's exactly good about it?" Hollenbeck turned to Alexander, exhibiting a common posture of primate intimidation.

Alexander made a mental note that saying 'good' could lead to subject-aggression steaming from deep-rooted insecurities. He would have to again reestablish trust with the patient for the interview to proceed.

"Nothing is good about it. I am just glad there is another person in this... dump who feels the same as I. I was hoping we could talk as fellow businessmen. If you don't mind, I was wondering if I could ask you one final question."

Hollenbeck was turned toward the tournament. It was obvious he couldn't play chess. Alexander noted the distant longing in Hollenbeck's eyes, the lamentation of pursuing an empty life of finance.

"You writing a book about everyone?" Hollenbeck asked, pointing to the clipboard. "Ask away."

Alexander told the same story about the funeral as he had with Derek, only this time it was the brother who fell in love with a strange woman, and the sister who was suddenly killed.

"So you lost your sis and mother on the same day? If the police haven't brought that woman in by now, they're more incompetent than I thought, which would be something. Did they ever question the mystery person?"

"Nevermind," Alexander said. "Thank you for your time."

That was disappointing. Hollenbeck had been cleared by the test. He would have to present his findings to the counselor.

More patients would have to be surveyed. Perhaps the counselor could introduce him to a colleague who would be willing to co-author a study within Shady Pines. Once his credibility was established, Alexander could serve as a kind of liaison to university programs seeking to do research in geriatric psychology. The present's black tide was finally beginning to roll out.

"Alexander," Derek said, molesting Alexander's shoulder, impatiently vying for attention. "I think it's time to go in now, it's getting hot out here. Why don't we go back inside?"

"Good," Alexander almost said out loud, but recalled his previous encounter with Hollenbeck.

A satisfactory amount of time had passed to collect enough data to present his findings. His data pool, while limited, had yielded compelling foundational insights.

"Don't forget, tomorrow after breakfast you have your appointment with the counselor."

Derek again seized Alexander's shoulder. While not a psychopath, Derek did have some underlying tendencies toward aggression that needed to be addressed. Truthfully, he had grown a little too familiar.

Before lights out, Alexander took out a pen and paper and was able to draft a preliminary outline of the study, which included several tables delineating the modified tiers of analysis and mapped the socio-political divisions between residents and staff.

That night, the moon was in the waxing gibbous stage, which allowed Alexander to jot down a few additional notes while falling into the first stage of sleep. It made him think of his life before getting married and having children—when Hutton’s Paradox seemed more important than paying the electric bill. Even in a roach-infested student dormitory or a crowded basic training barracks, life’s possibilities seemed infinite. But when his wife was pregnant with his first son, everything from finance, to travel, to career paths became predetermined.

Alexander awoke before the sound of the first door-slam. Sunlight greeted the corner of his eye and tickled him awake. Breakfast was particularly satisfying: warm, fluffy scrambled eggs and crisp toast. Alexander theorized perhaps there had been a re-staffing at dining services. His findings were tucked under his arm while he ate, protected by a dossier he fashioned out of an old notebook.

“Ready to go?” a receptionist asked.

Alexander had not yet finished his toast. It was impolite to rush someone while eating. This was axiomatic among civilized people. She may have to be interviewed.

“You want to go to the bathroom first?” she asked.

Such superficiality, noted Alexander. It could be indicative of narcissistic personality disorder.

“Now just wait here,” she said. “The counselor will be with you in a minute.”

Alexander placed his dossier in the middle of the table. There was a low humming in another room, from a laundry machine perhaps. The grey noise was a little nauseating, but would not distract the meeting too gravely.

“Good morning, Alexander.”

The counselor was a woman. Nevertheless, she wore a smart blazer and her hair was done up fashionably. She appeared exhausted. *She must have already had her meeting with Hollenbeck*, Alexander thought.

“How have you been getting on,” she asked. Alexander began to envision them standing together, accepting an award for their collaboration, but the image never fully materialized.

“It has been difficult,” Alexander declared. “The others are, as you can imagine, not always amiable when first approached. And the staff, while nice enough in their manner, are often want of helpfulness from time to time.”

“I see,” the counselor said, “but it sounds as though overall you have adjusted well.”

“I have accounted for several observational biases during my tenure here.”

“What are your future projects?”

“I would like to remain grounded in my work. Any peripheral distractions will be put second.”

“I’m glad to hear you have something you’re passionate about.”

“This is what I have so far,” Alexander said, pushing the dossier toward the counselor. “I think you will appreciate what insights I have uncovered.”

“Marvelous, keeping records of your experiences can be very therapeutic. If you don’t mind, I’ll take a look at this later.”

Alexander knew the councilor would understand the mutual benefit that could be gained from a partnership.

“I understand you have some interest in psychology. Have you ever thought about finishing your degree? There are many online programs available these days.”

At this, Alexander felt something within him sink. His daydreams of award ceremonies and packed lecture halls shrank away, bringing the conference room of Sandy Pines into unbearable focus. He had a semester left in his master's degree, many more than that if he wished to pursue a doctorate.

"I don't think so," he said.

"Oh, you should. Resuming old ambitions is the great joy of retirement. Edith, who lives down the hall from you, has picked back up the piano after fifty years. Simon paints every Sunday. Rebecca has knitted a scarf for almost every member of our staff. I believe it's important to find something constructive to do, don't you agree?"

"Yes," Alexander said, pulling his dossier back toward him. "Will you excuse me?"

"Oh?" the councilor was either surprised or excited. "Okay then. We will do this again in a couple months. I'd like to check in and hear how things are going." The councilor said nothing further. There may have only been a slight pause before he left through the door, but the silence within it was deafening.

Alexander felt ridiculous at having been running around Sandy Pines, conducting silly interviews and dreaming about fame like a college freshman. He had initially been furious that the councilor had compared his scientific pursuits to a mere hobby. Now he felt exhausted.

He looked at the other residents in the lobby. Some were keeping themselves busy while others seemed too tired to do anything. There were never any psychopaths. They all seemed content with being there. Alexander concluded they had adapted to their environment.

He sat in a plush, green armchair across from the hearth. There was a worn newspaper folded up in the seat cushion. His heart was racing. He opened his dossier and wrote: *Possible Diagnosis: An acute anxiety episode. Treatment: Read the newspaper. Expected Prognosis: to belong.*

Carpenter's Rule

Straw grass prodded at Penny Harthon's earlobe. Heat waves made the minivans and school busses slow dance in the parking lot. Cheers from the last soccer game echoed off the library. *They'll all be fine*, Penny thought.

Jenna Weizner. State school. Business major. Perhaps she'd get some corporate job designed for attractive girls, like a pharmaceutical saleswoman or a flight attendant.

Will Knight. Parent-funded acceptance to a private New England college. Music. Probably will work for his father's firm after his band fails.

Luke Scranson, maybe a non-profit developer. Milly Knowles, librarian or grant beneficiary...

From her perspective, their tracts were grounded, if not already predetermined. Penny's future, however, seemed to be missing. A college degree was a lot of money to spend for a piece of paper that no longer guaranteed a job at the end. Penny knew her choice to take a year off was mostly to delay making a decision that would set the course for her adult life, and that this conflict was a luxury.

The heavy clouds in the sky looked like a map of another world. She charted a path around the edge toward where it covered the sun. Her eyes started to burn. She covered them with her hands, focusing on how soft and cool they felt.

"Tomorrow you're going down to Macy's and filling out an application," Mrs. Harthon said when Penny came home. "I don't want you to have a blank spot on your resume. Your father says that's a red flag for college applications."

"Fine, Mom. Where is he?" Penny asked, looking at her watch. It was already seven.

“He has an evening lecture this semester. Don’t change the subject. First thing...”

“First thing,” Penny announced, diving onto Franklin.

Franklin was a stuffed toy basset hound Mr. Harthon had won at a carnival for Mrs. Harthon when she was pregnant with Penny. It was the length of a sofa and took up almost a quarter of the living room.

“Your father said it’s time to get rid of that thing. He tripped over it the other day and spilled his drink.”

Penny scowled and found a tannish stain on Franklin’s hind paw.

“Alcoholic. He can’t even walk straight.”

Mrs. Harthon kicked Penny’s ankle on her way to the kitchen.

“Don’t use words you don’t understand. He had one drink with dinner. The university has your father practically running two departments. It’s stressful.”

Penny curled further into Franklin’s stomach, cradling her ankle.

“I guess. He’s just grouchy when he gets home, *whenever* he gets home.”

“Let’s see how happy you are after your first day of work.”

Penny went to her room and changed into her favorite shirt, now too small for her. She stared at the person in the closet mirror. The Hello Kitty face on her shirt was wrinkled by her breasts. She imagined a bleached retail uniform.

The women at those stores always wear such tight clothes. Maybe her boss would be a pervert. Or her co-workers would all look like Jenna and play silly mind games.

Her father once said that high school never really ends, it just starts over with different people. In school, no one ever seemed to have any imagination, but instead

obsessed about their clique, or appearance, or their grades. Even her art teacher had them copy other people's work.

About an hour's walk to the department store, through a dog park and rows of prefab strip malls, she noticed a building across the street from the complex she had never seen before.

The façade resembled a small cottage she saw in a fantasy anime cartoon. A large cherry tree in the front yard made the building look like it was hiding from the rest of the shops.

Macy's isn't going anywhere, Penny thought, and shuffled across the highway to the other side.

Two wooden gargoyles stood guard over the door. There was a crimson colored bench underneath the tree. Detailed figures and scenes covered the arms and back of the bench. One depicted a demonic creature attacking a farmer—a cottage behind the farmer and the forest behind the demon. The farmer's pitchfork was held above his head while the demon's long claws stretched out like the limbs on the trees. Penny then wondered if the farmer was instead attacking the demon.

Another had a man bowing to another, a king perhaps. The face of the king was almost identical to that of the farmer. The bowing man resembled the demon. Penny did not recognize the scenes from any story she had read in English class. She wondered if whoever carved them had invented the story or had just copied the images from the internet.

A chime was sent through the reception area when Penny opened the front door. There was an empty desk and a myriad of elaborate furniture. Some types she had never seen before—a sofa with only half a back, a nightstand with a bowl instead of a flat top.

“Who’s there?” someone called out from the next room.

Penny didn’t know the answer to the question. She was still lost in the stories from the bench.

“I’m looking for a job,” she blurted out.

A loud clanging made Penny jump back, almost knocking over an apothecary table.

“Goddamn! What job, there ain’t no— aw hell! Just come’on back here!”

Tools were scattered around the floor of the garage. Penny followed the trail of sawdust and nails up to a hole in the wall where the shelf had given way.

“Oh, excuse my *Española*, missy,” the man said, clutching a rule. “I was just making sure this *canapé* here was perfectly level, and the God-blessed shelf flew right out of the wall!”

“I’m sorry to bother you. I was just curious about this shop. The job I’m going to is actually...”

“Since you’re looking for a job. Would you mind giving me a hand cleaning all this up?”

While they worked, Tommy told her about the shop, which sounded like he had told it a thousand times. She couldn’t help but think what he must have been like in high school.

Tommy Jacobs – graduated high school in ’73. Bought the shop two days after graduation.

“So, you’ve been a carpenter your whole life?” Penny asked.

“*Craftsmen*, actually, though I don’t blame you for not knowing the difference. Carpenters are those guys you see taking three days to build a flight of stairs. I’d be, if you don’t mind my saying so, more of an artistic carpenter. See all those pieces in there?” He gestured toward the door with his rule. “All original. Unique. That’s how I express myself.”

With everything back on the shelf, Tommy lit a cigarette. The garage was remarkably different than the front room: concrete floor, moldy panels in the ceiling with exposed wired draping down.

Tommy offered her a summer job. It would be ‘hard work and minimum wage,’ but he would let her build a piece of her own and would provide the supplies. Certainly preferable to counting change all day, and by the end, Penny too would have something *original and unique*, not a copy.

“It’s fine with me,” Mrs. Harthon said, consumed by a soap opera rerun. “Just as long as you’re doing something. And your father is always going on about craft.”

Penny stretched over Franklin.

“Will Dad be home tonight?”

“No, he has an evening meeting with a guest lecturer from Yale. There’s a big brouhaha over it.”

“Broo-Ha-HA!” Penny said to Franklin.

“You know, Penny, I almost killed myself today tripping over Franklin’s tail. I was carrying a box of dishes up to the attic and nearly broke my neck. Your father says we should donate him to the children’s hospital.”

In her room, Penny imagined herself in extra large denim overalls standing next to her first completed work. She was out of the house before Mrs. Harthon had made breakfast the following morning.

Tommy looked strange standing in the reception room, like a flabby old tire in the middle of a garden. "There's my apprentice! Come on back and help me with this."

Penny nodded and followed Tommy to the workbench.

"I need to cut this cherry wood down to size for a dresser I'm crafting," Tommy said, guiding his rule across the edge. "The client is a stinky cheese-munchin' knucklehead. But he's got taste at least. You won't be doing anything like this, too advanced for a first project."

"I want to build a desk with a secret drawer," Penny said. "One that can only be opened by pressing a button."

Tommy laughed. "Interesting choice. You got potential. Real out-of-the-box thinking. But no, you'll be assembling a chair for now. I premade four legs, a base, two thingys up the back, and a top rail. All you have to do is drill the spots I've marked off and put it all together. If there's time, we can add arms and manchette together."

Penny walked toward the end of the table and grabbed the chair base.

"Hey now, don't get sour," Tommy said. "Everybody starts off making a chair. You have to learn the basics. How to craft pieces, how to be economical with what you've got, even how to critique other people's stuff. It's all a part of being a carpenter."

"Craftsman," Penny said.

Tommy smirked, yanked back on the trigger and set the table saw screaming.

At noon Tommy sent Penny into town to pick up lunch at Parkside diner. Some of the customers were staring at her as she walked up to the counter.

“Working hard, hon?” the woman behind the register said.

Penny realized she was covered in sawdust and had wood tarnish all over her hands. Her cheeks started to burn a little.

“Pickup for Tommy,” Penny said. Her shoes were dirty too.

The waitress disappeared behind the kitchen curtain.

‘Penny? Penny Harthon!’

She turned around and saw Will from school peeking up from behind the booth. He bounded over to her with a goofy swagger. It was hard to be aloof and excited at the same time, she guessed.

“Hey dude, how’s you’re summer going?” Will said. “You get a job as a lumberjack or something?”

“As a carp—craftsman’s apprentice,” Penny said.

“Similar difference, right? We’re just on our way out now, doing the Kerouac thing, *on the highway*. Just see where it takes, probably up north.” Will pulled at a long curl that had bounced out of place.

He lowered his voice a little. “My dad has a house there.”

“Sounds like fun.”

“You going anywhere before school? Oh, that’s right, you’re taking a year off. That’s cool though.” Will removed a cellphone from his pocket and observed the empty screen for a moment. “I gotta get back to my table, have fun apprenticing.”

While she waited for the missing waitress, she heard the other kids at the table laughing.

“I’ll be in late tomorrow,” Tommy said through a mouthful of hoagie. “But I want you to come in early and finish your chair. Make sure to imagine the whole chair before you start. Think about *chairness*, the perfect chair, what it means to be a chair. And then copy the image in your mind.”

Chairness? Penny thought. It was hard for her to believe that this was the same person who invented the story of the farmer-king. Tommy made his living doing what the mass production furniture companies were too scared, or too unimaginative, to do. Yet now he was instructing her to stifle her imagination and follow a mold, just like her art teachers. The basics are important, but Penny did not see why she couldn’t learn them while also expressing herself. She was taking a risk with this apprenticeship. This was not the sort of job that would look good on her resume nor did it offer her any career-relevant skills.

Will’s attitude had gotten under her skin a little. But if she could make something special, she would have a visual reminder that she’s not wasting this next year; that she wouldn’t be a year behind everyone else.

A rusty sedan almost hit her on the way home. The college kid inside blared his horn and screeched to a stop a couple feet away, then sped away flipping her off.

Penny stood in the middle of the road biting her lower lip. It was as if ‘real life,’ the invisible track everyone was riding, was also flipping her off—the highway of success ran through a world unconcerned with *chairness*.

As Penny approached the house, the living room looked different through the screen door.

Franklin was missing.

“Mom!” Penny yelled. “Where’s Franklin?”

“I don’t know, dear,” Mrs. Harthon called from the basement. “I think I saw your father take him.”

She could already see Franklin in a landfill, being picked apart by seagulls. Using a rule from work, she forced the liquor cabinet lock open.

Johnnie Walker Blue. Two hundred and twenty-nine dollars a bottle.

Penny looked over at the sink, then went back to the empty corner of the living room where Franklin used to be. She remembered curling up next to him when she got her first ‘F’ and the tea parties they had when she was little. Whenever her classmates were cruel or her teachers unfair she would feel safe next to him.

With each memory flashing past an acidic feeling grew inside her. She stretched her arm as far as she could behind her and flung the bottle into the corner. It shattered magnificently.

Let’s see that bastard relax now, she thought as she slammed the porch door behind her.

Penny struggled to pull fresh air into her lungs. The feeling inside her had been flushed out, replaced with a hollow nausea.

Her mother’s tumbling footsteps came from another room. Penny scrambled around the side of the house, avoiding the windows. Running into the woods would be childish, but she didn’t want to fight with her mother either. So she walked toward the shed and decided she would sit behind it and think about the perfect chair.

Her mother called out for a couple minutes, then went back inside, muttering under her breath. When it started to get dark, Penny considered sleeping in the shed. It wasn't ideal, but she thought she might as well check it out. Reaching for the light, she felt something soft brush against her leg. She didn't need to see what it was, but she turned on the light.

On the floor of the shed was Franklin, with a bleached spot on his paw. The bottle of Johnny Walker could not be repaired. Penny curled up next to Franklin and went to sleep.

She had several dreams about going back in the house. In most, her mother was there, cleaning up the mess. Mrs. Harthon looked up from the broken glass but did not shout, or say anything for that matter. She had cut her hand scrubbing the floor. Blood was swirling around with the scotch.

In one dream her father was standing over the glass, silhouetted by a bright light coming from the open front door. As Penny moved closer, she could see her father's face looked incredibly gaunt, like a zombie. But instead of letting out a ghastly moan or stretching out his arms, Mr. Harthorn seemed to use every bit of energy he had left to smile at her. In none of the dreams did Penny ever get in trouble.

It was not yet dawn but it was already humid inside the shed. Penny had the key to the shop, so she could leave before her mother got up for work. The stack of tools and supplies she needed were neatly arranged on the far side of the garage. Penny laid out the chair components in the middle of the floor. The finished chair inside her mind was unimpressive, the kind of chair that would spend most of its life collecting dust in a storage closet of a church rec room.

If Penny could not replace the bottle of scotch, she would at least use her chair as a kind of IOU. It was something her father could use to rest, which would also convey that she has learned her lesson.

But Penny wanted to make sure her message was clear. She took the top end of the chair over to the worktable. Using a pencil, she traced the Johnny Walker man as best she could from memory, then added some trees like the ones she saw from the outside the shop.

Using a small spiked tool, she struck the edge of the outline. The instrument skipped awkwardly. Her second hit was softer, the third softer than that. The process was slow, but every etch brought the design a little more into reality. Penny thought of the Buddhist monks she learned about in school who made elaborate designs out of sand. They spent hours hunched over creating a work almost one grain at a time. It was exciting to be that devoted to your work.

Penny wondered if her father felt the same way about his work. He could certainly make more money elsewhere. Penny had never thought about how or why her father became a university professor. Did his parents approve? What were his friends doing? Did he take a year off too?

A couple more strikes and the man on the chair looked just like the Johnny Walker label. Penny looked at the clock before starting the forest.

Tommy would be back in an hour.

Penny quickly brought the base of the chair to the table and began drilling the marked off points. She had just finished placing the last leg of the chair when she heard the front door chime.

She put the chair on the floor. In a frenzy of drilling and gluing, Penny had forgotten to use the rule. It wobbled a little, but looked like a chair.

Tommy immediately walked past Penny over to the chair. He shook the top of it and kicked at the legs. He glanced at her engraving but offered no praise.

“Sorry, kiddo,” Tommy grunted.

He walked in front of the chair, lifted his arms, and rocked the full weight of his considerable rear-end directly onto the chair. The legs immediately exploded from their housing.

“Now look,” Tommy said, lifting himself off the floor. “That might’ve seemed awfully harsh, but you didn’t listen. What is a chair? It is something somebody can sit on.”

Penny clenched her teeth. “It was going to be a gift for my father.”

“I didn’t tell you to make a gift! I paid for all of this stuff, and your assignment was to make a chair.”

“It *was* a chair. A decorative chair.”

“A decorative chair’s still a chair! The craft comes before the artsy stuff! A chair has certain fraggin’ *characteristics* that make it a chair. Being able to support somebody’s hind-end is what makes it a chair.”

“Then how did you know to sit in it?” Penny hissed under her breath.

“What’s that?” Tommy said, raising his voice.

“Nothing. I’m sorry. I’ll pay you for the material. I still want to give the head piece to my dad.”

Tommy said she could have it, as a reminder of his lesson. A client was coming in a few hours so Penny was given the rest of the day off.

Clutching the headpiece under her arm, Penny sprinted across the highway to avoid any more rusty sedans. The coffee shop at the far corner of the strip mall had a sign on it:

Help Wanted

She looked down at her hands. Split-open blisters oozed glassy puss over a bulging callous. Her face in the window was covered with tarnish. She couldn't imagine anything.

"Excuse me," Penny said to the barista. "Could I have an application?"

The barista winced. "Yea, sorry," she said, "we're not hiring right now." Penny left and looked back through the window. The barista was laughing with another customer.

Mr. Harthon was at the dining room table when Penny got home. Seeing her, he scratched at his dense beard. Even sitting, he looked like a giant. There was no chance he would have been able to use the chair.

"So, you thought I stole Franklin, did you?"

"Yes, sir."

"And broke my scotch."

"Yes."

"And called me an alcoholic?"

"I was... Yes, I did"

"And what is that you have?"

Penny hesitated, embarrassed that she was still giving her father handmade presents and hoping he'd like them. She explained why she made the chair and what happened with Tommy.

Mr. Harthon laughed. "That sounds like something I would do. I guess carpentry's just like anything else. You have all this technique drilled into you only to be told to break the rules later on if you ever want to be successful."

"I'm sorry," Penny said, looking down at Franklin from across the hall.

Mr. Harthon led Penny to the living room, where the broken glass had not yet been cleared. "I told your mother to leave it. I'm sure you know why."

Penny hunched over the shards and carefully began picking them up.

Mr. Harthon brought in a pail and broom. "When I first entered college," he said while Penny cleaned, "I had this literature professor who, on the first day of class, assigned us all a five-page text, entirely in ancient Greek. He said it was due the following Monday, translated and fully summarized. Half the class dropped out right there, while the others tried to find the translation somewhere. I was one of the few who actually tried translating it. I used a dictionary, spent hours at the library. I managed to translate a single page, and based my summary around that. The following class period we turned in what we had no one had much more than I did, and I was feeling proud of myself to be among the best."

"I bet he was trying to scare off the slackers," Penny said.

"That's what I thought. But the following class, we got our work back and we all flunked the assignment. Turns out, he had written it himself. Each page was a different story."

"I bet people were pissed."

"Everyone, myself included. What was worse, when we asked what this impossible assignment had to do with studying literature, he said: nothing."

"So was he just some old jerk?"

“He was, but I suspect he was much like your new boss, Tommy. Of all the basics in all the disciplines, there is one that can’t be taught, only learned—failure.”

Penny cleaned up the rest of the glass. She doubted that Tommy, the goofy-speaking craftsman, was actually trying to teach her a complex lesson on failure the way her father’s professor had. She figured it was unlikely he would teach her more than how to build things out of wood. What she would learn was up to her.

Roaming

The kettle was missing. Geoffrey scanned the counter top in between stirring the rice and cutting celery. He saw the dishcloth hung languidly over the handle of the stove, a cup still encrusted with last night's tea by the sink, an overflowing recycling bin.

The kettle's round base was plugged into the wall. It looked like a launch pad, the memory of the kettle glowed a hazy after-image over it. Perhaps it had blasted off to explore someone else's kitchen and would return in time to make coffee tomorrow morning.

His boss's name appeared in a call bubble on Geoffrey's computer. He let it ring as he rummaged around the dishwasher. The kettle wasn't there. Each synthesized ring prompted Geoffrey to look in another place. Cupboard. Under the sink. In the bathroom?

Geoffrey resisted the thought for as long as he could. But there was something ridiculous about the image of a thirty-two-year old computer programmer avoiding a call from his boss by frantically scouring a studio apartment for an electric kettle. The call would be about a zone designation bug that hasn't been fixed that wasn't even his responsibility. But he would spend the rest of the day fixing it, and consequently fall behind on his own project, which he would be scolded about tomorrow.

Geoffrey just moved into his apartment a month ago and worked from home. Every tension lingered around the apartment like a heavy, invisible musk that was gradually suffocating him.

When the ringing stopped, he glanced over toward the computer. He turned away. The kitchen clutter was rising over time like moss on the back of a tree.

The kettle was in the fridge.

Geoffrey lifted the kettle and secured it back onto the base. He felt like a bit of a party-pooper. It looked like the kettle was enjoying its time in a new part of the kitchen. Its metallic surface shined brightly, and almost didn't look like a kettle at all. It was out of place, and therefore could be anything it wanted.

For the past several months Geoffrey had only left his apartment to go to the grocery store. Everything else, work, movies, friends, could be found inside his computer screen. The period of adjustment to his new city had become a tired excuse not to leave the apartment. But the thought of going to another bar and listening to other people complain about their career seemed like an insipid way to assimilate to his surroundings.

He was becoming dust—comfortable in life, but inactive and unremarkable.

Though he doubted it was cosmic symbolism, Geoffrey decided he would start exploring his new city by following the Yellow Dust Gypsies.

They had many other names, varying in judgment from romantic to pejorative: gutter punks, street kids, wanderers. Geoffrey called them Yellow Dust Gypsies, which felt more neutral and uniquely referred to Philadelphia street kids. The groups he noticed walking down Lancaster Avenue or migrating up from the river were invariably covered in a layer of some powder slightly lighter than the color of rust, even the dogs. Every group had a least one dog.

Geoffrey imagined a disgruntled brotherhood, cloaked in archaic punk-rock attire, traversing the railroad tracks that ran along the Schuylkill, toward an urban wasteland long forgotten by Center City. Nomadic travel, the derelict beauty of urban decay, the road. It

was point-for-point the opposite of his current life— grocery store commute, the pristine monotony of modern furnishings, the ladder.

The thought of life outside the norm excited him. He imagined long fireside discussions under an orange, light-polluted night sky. Based on that image, Geoffrey began planning how he could sneak into that world.

It took about a week for Geoffrey to fabricate a wardrobe. He collected dirt from the vacant lots on his way home from work. He used flour, baking soda, food coloring to get the color right.

His first attempt to join a group was a disaster. Geoffrey saw a man searching through a dumpster and struck up a conversation. The man was an ex-National Guardsman leading two German shepherds. Geoffrey tried to be careful not to reveal too much about himself. But when the man asked directly where he was going, Geoffrey couldn't produce an answer. The man accused him of being a phony and scolded him for pretending to be something he wasn't. "This is real for me," he said, and led the two dogs away down the street.

It would take two more weekends and one more failure like that for Geoffrey to join a group.

~

"You think I can smoke out of this?" Mel asked.

"A PVC joint?" Geoffrey said.

"Nah man, it's just weed."

Alternate scenarios darted around in Geoffrey's imagination as he thought about how best to correct him without sounding too educated, yet also not sounding like a

caricature of the person he was pretending to be. Every interaction added points on a continuum of legitimacy. He couldn't wait too long, but Mel's state of mind allowed for a few extra seconds of deliberation.

"Nah, 'PVC joint' is the name of the thing you're holding. You could probably smoke out of it," Geoffrey said.

"Ha, my bad."

They were smoking near a high school, which made Geoffrey uneasy. But the time from the PECO building was suspended in the clouds far in the distance. 3:41. There wouldn't be any kids around, so there wasn't any harm.

Jinny and Nick came back, each holding one handle of a large grocery bag. Nick was the tallest of the group, and Jinny the shortest. She was probably carrying the brunt of the weight the entire way.

"We scored milk, cheese, hotdogs, and bread from the District Market dumpster. They just tossed it." Nick said, carrying the bag the final two feet by himself and presenting it to the center of the circle.

"What'd this guy bring?" Nick said, nodding to Geoffrey.

Geoffrey hedged, trying to come up with an excuse.

"We ain't the Salvation Army passing out free food to moochers. You've been hanging with us for three days and you haven't brought shit. No drugs, no food, no booze."

Geoffrey's continuum rattled around inside his head. He could play it aggressive, but Nick was twice his size— lanky, but probably deceptively strong. Dismissive or pitiable would work, but would lower his standing with the group.

“I’m just fucking with you,” Nick said, slumping down next to Jinny. Mel was staring wide-eyed from across the circle, his expression looked three steps behind everything that had happened.

“Oh,” Geoffrey said. “Sorry, I’ll pick up some stuff tomorrow. What all do you like?”

“Whatever’s free,” Jinny said.

“Something delicious, I’m tired of bread,” Mel said next.

The group looked at Nick. “Whatever, man. I said I was just joking. Get whatever the hell you want.”

Nick had broken an unspoken rule. What separated them from bums and posers were their ideals against consumerism and greed.

“Let’s cook this shit up,” Mel said.

The group got up and walked home to the Shilo, an abandoned textile factory a few miles past Fishtown. The building had been used by squatters for a couple of years, so there was plenty of furniture. Marci, Nick’s Labrador, hobbled to them on its three legs when they arrived. They ate, smoked, and went to sleep.

Geoffrey chose a spot on the floor close to the makeshift stove they used to heat dinner. He watch eyespots squirm around the high ceiling of the factory. One particularly lively one jumped off the rafter and wriggled down the support beam and landed on Jinny’s nose. He wondered what she looked like without her steel lip ring and heavy blue mascara. Geoffrey thought the eyespot might fall into the opening of her tank top, but instead shot back up toward the ceiling.

Mel followed Geoffrey out in the morning, making it impossible to go to an ATM.

“The music here isn’t too bad actually, if you like rock, or new punk, or whatever,” Mel said on their way west along Spring Garden St. “Nick goes on and on about how bad it is, right? ‘Generic-ifying hipster’ spending their mainline parents’ money on outdated equipment, just for looks. But who cares where it comes from right? So you’re a derivative of the Black Keys, who were derivative of so and so. It’s all good if it sounds good, right?”

Geoffrey thought about telling Mel his secret. About how he needed to get home because work was piling up. That he could buy him some food and they could still do all the same things they had been doing. More importantly, Mel could shower.

“Let’s take Main and cut up Walnut. Usually some pretty tasty stuff in the cans there.”

Mel checked every can up the street, always pulling at least one discarded sandwich container or a bit of uneaten pretzel. Geoffrey followed, hoping his four-day-old beard would prevent anyone from recognizing him. His office was in Old Town, but several of his coworkers lived around there. When Mel stopped, he turned to face him, swiveling around the can awkwardly trying to avoid everyone all at once.

“Disgusting,” said one woman who passed. She had hawkish features and hair the color of a polished railroad track. Most of the others looked away nervously, a few in disgust. Geoffrey could feel his cheeks burn underneath his beard. Finally, the gauntlet of strollers, jogging student athletes, and murmuring librarians ended.

“That wasn’t too bad,” Mel said, looking over at Geoffrey. “I’ve had people try to lecture me, threaten to call the cops. ‘Call the cops for what?’ I said to one old bitch. ‘You gonna charge me with felony possession of a hamburger wrapper?’ She followed me for three blocks, swearing and chewing me out.”

“Ha, that’s funny.” Now, Geoffrey needed a story to make up for not eating anything out of the trash.

“There was this one place I was crashing,” Geoffrey said. “It was just covered with bugs, I mean infested. Cockroaches, bedbugs, everything. It was like that when I moved in. I was just staying a couple days on the couch, but I was always being told to clean ‘em up by the dude who found the place. I did my best, but the other stinky motherfuckers kept leaving shit all over the place, food I mean. But this guy didn’t care, kept telling me to clean up other people’s messes. So I finally gave up, told him to fuck off, and left.”

“That’s tough. I hate when drifters turn on each other.”

Drifters. That was the first time Geoffrey had hear someone from any group refer to themselves with a name. It had a good image, focusing on movement rather than status.

They ran into Nick and Marci on 52nd.

“Where’s Jinny?” Geoffrey asked.

“What’d you care? She’s off limits to you, moocher,” Nick said.

“My fault, she’s your girl, huh?” Geoffrey said, trying to match Nick’s tone.

“Hell no.” Nick reached into his bag. “Here, I got this for you. I knew you would need something to eat.”

“It’s fine, I don’t want to take your food.”

“Eat,” Mel said. “You didn’t have anything on the way up. Gotta get some calories in you.”

The four of them started walking south. Geoffrey was walking behind, but felt they were watching him out of the corner of their eyes. He lifted the Styrofoam lid. The spaghetti looked like a squid trapped under a layer of ice. There was a spot of fuzzy mold at the

corner. Geoffrey sunk his fingers into the opposite corner and lifted a clump to his mouth. He tried not to think of fungal reproduction or the color of bile or the short hairs on a rat's tail as the gelatin tomato sauce swished around in his mouth.

He finished everything within an inch of the mold and almost showed the empty dish to Nick.

That afternoon, Geoffrey managed to get away and return home. A shower would have been nice, but would have to be explained when he went back. He washed his hands under warm water instead.

His email inbox had sixty-seven new emails. He opened a new email, addressed it to his boss, and wrote: "Sudden death in the family. I will be back at my desk Monday."

Geoffrey didn't have any siblings, and his mother had died shortly after he graduated college. His father left when he was young, so there was no one left who could be in danger of suffering the karmic punishment of this excuse.

He turned on the kettle and walked into the bathroom. A bit of tomato sauce was stuck to his beard. A fine layer of yellow dust covered his denim jacket. He could see the apartment over his shoulder in the reflection. He liked how he stood out now, like the kettle in the fridge.

After the end of this week, he could put a stop to it. He had walked through almost every region of the city. He could start looking for something that didn't involve eating rotten food or passive-aggressive librarians.

Jinny wasn't at the Shilo when Geoffrey got back. He didn't ask where she was. Mel was smoking his PVC joint, and Nick was over talking with another group.

“Guess there’s some kind of festival over at Clark Park,” Mel said. “All those local guys are gonna spin fire and have a drag queen talent show and some other shit.” His pipe made a hollow sound like a tugboat horn as he took a drag. “Might be fun.”

“So where are you from, originally?” Geoffrey said.

“Cali. Hopped the freight just like the Beats used to do. Lot harder nowadays though. More stops, more bulls, more bullshit. I’ll probably save up and take the bus back.”

“Kerouac is pretty great.” Geoffrey’s continuum rattled a bit, but maybe the comment would come off as ironic.

“He’s important, I guess. Bukowski had a better handle of the absurd, you know?”

Nick came back and slumped down on a couch they had stolen from another area.

“Moocher, you brought food!” Nick said, opening the plastic bag.

Geoffrey picked up Cold cuts from District on his way back, making sure to unwrap them and eat half to make it look less fresh.

He used this trick for the next three days. No one said anything, which again made Geoffrey wonder if there was any point in lying at all. But at this point, he thought he might as well wait until after the festival, when he would drift back to his normal life.

Jinny came back to the Shilo the night before the festival. She must have been down by the river, because her clothes no longer had dust on them. She sat down close to Mel and took his pipe without a word. Nick sat farther away, combing tufts of dirt out of Marci’s fur. The way Nick had said “she’s off limits to you” still stung a little. It was the only time Geoffrey felt as if Nick was addressing the real Geoffrey, instead of his drifter self. He’d dealt with enough macho bullying to understand Alpha male psychology. They were

probably keeping things casual, or maybe he is still working his game. Nick wasn't a bad guy, but out of the three, he was the one Geoffrey would miss the least.

"Are you going to this thing tomorrow?" This was the first time Jinny spoke the whole night, which was almost over. The rest of the tribe was already asleep.

"Might be fun," Geoffrey said.

"Good. I'm probably gonna leave after."

Geoffrey checked every variation he could think of to ask where she was going: Where're you headed/Oh, you're headed out?/ Where to?/ To where?/ Goin' home?/ What city?/ Which train you taking?/ Where's next?/ What's next?

"Me too," Geoffrey said.

"The air really sucks in here, so dusty. I'm always waking up coughing."

Not asking her where she was going made asking any other question impossible. Geoffrey poked at the fire with a length of rebar and watched the strongest ember of the group float up, struggling to reach the ceiling, or the sky behind it.

They got to the festival around nine, just in time to catch the end of the drag queen talent show. Madame Stephanie was finishing a haunting, seasonally inappropriate, rendition of "Santa Baby." Even among the drifters, plaid-cloaked locals, the fire dancers, and the burnouts, Madame Stephanie stood out from the rest. Her stocky frame bulged under the restraint of her glittering blue dress. She was like a tacky siren, beckoning those floating in from the dark neighborhood streets with the promise of a different world, a new normal. Despite the spontaneous flats and creaking falsetto, those docked around the edge of the stage remained attentive. Waiting, not for the song to end, Geoffrey thought, but for the aesthetic of it to set in.

“Clark Park hipster fêtes are something of an institution up here,” Nick said.
“Probably won’t be long before it becomes popular and gets sponsored by Subaru.”

“Probably,” Mel said. “Oh shit, a Lebanese food cart. I’ll be back.”

Geoffrey followed Mel. He looked over his shoulder and saw Jinny followed too, leaving Nick and Marci on five awkward legs underneath an oak tree. It felt like a victory over cynicism.

They got mushrooms from a kid with a backpack and mixed it into their plate, hoping to mask the taste. The result was so horrendous they were only able to consume about half a dose’s worth.

A drum circle formed around the fire dancers, and people took off their shoes to dance around them. Each off beat made by one of the peripheral drummers sent a cold shock through Geoffrey’s body. Determined not to have a bad trip, he moved closer to Jinny. She shook her head back and forth as she drew circles in the air with her arms. The air. It was so incredibly fresh. Each heavy breath Geoffrey took as he danced cooled him. The stars seemed truly infinite, able to absorb an entire city and its problems in a fraction of a second. Jinny’s lip ring caught the flame light to the rhythm of her step. Hypnotic flashes delicately perched on her bottom lip.

He wanted to kiss her, swallow the pulsating light and carry it inside him back to his apartment. A memory, embedded in him like a living talisman that would disperse the tension in his apartment like the yellow dust did.

A wobbling shadow appeared in the corner of his eye. Marci was making her way over to the dance circle, Nick walking after her. Geoffrey felt the impulse to lunge toward Jinny and kiss her right there. But when he turned back around, the flickering had stopped.

A few of the other dancers started petting Marci, then the three of them moved back to their spot under the oak tree. Geoffrey decided he wouldn't return to the Shilo, he'd go straight home. He waited until the circle broke up a bit before sneaking away to walk through gelatinous darkness back to his apartment.

Geoffrey woke up the next day disoriented. His drifter clothes lay in a pile in the bathroom, which indicated he had gone straight to the shower before crashing. A fine layer of gray dust had settled on the top of his computer. He could already see the boss's name within the empty screen.

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He thought about going back to the Shilo several times the following week, in his regular clothes. Part of him felt it would be a sort of resolution between his two identities, but it would more than likely end in an argument or at least more snide remarks from Nick.

He eventually saw Jinny walking across Spruce and 33rd. She was in a Catholic high school uniform, without her lip ring— that was what Nick meant. Not only was she too young, but maybe Nick knew she was an imposter. It was likely he knew Geoffrey was an imposter as well. There was no such thing as Drifters, only those who drifted.

Geoffrey had not attained anything to ward off the feeling of being unremarkable, just a good story to tell at the bar. Everything kicked up by his time spent with the drifters had already settled down.

Vita

Jack Belli was born in Pennington, New Jersey. He obtained his Bachelor's degree in English from Drexel University. In 2013 he joined the Creative Writing Workshop at the University of New Orleans to pursue an MFA in Fiction.