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DIONYSUS

By

Cody Bursch

B.A. University of Maine, 2016

A THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

(in English)

The Graduate School

The University of Maine

May 2018

Advisory Committee:

David Kress, Associate Professor of English, Advisor

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DIONYSUS

By Cody Bursch

Thesis Advisor: Dr. David Kress

An Abstract of the Thesis Presented
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Arts
(in English)

May 2018

The manuscript below is an amalgamation of farce with the purpose of exploring a character within an inescapable existence. Indeed, the narrator is so deep in the trench that he has been manipulated twice over at a two-fold distance from the thesis writer. First, the narrator's story is being retold by the narrator himself from memory, then he employs the story-within-a-story cliché by placing this retelling in a narrative which he wrote on a collection of notecards. After this, the notecards themselves have been rearranged to an uncertain degree by a Professor of Philosophy somewhere in Florida after the notecards were delivered to the scholar's office in Miami. It is possible that the professor, aptly named Apollo Bartholomew, has rewritten entire portions of the text considering he took the liberty of inserting himself into the epilogue and advertising for his own books throughout the text. When he completed his work—or, rather, when he gave-up, since he could no longer go on—he sent it all to the thesis writer who further edited the script for thesis submission. All this to exaggerate the first narrator's sense of entrapment. There is no way out—not even from his existence within a text.

Dionysus is a tricky character whose presence is never given the weight he would perhaps prefer to have. One finds that the mischievous puppet continually inserts himself in places in order to draw the attention of spectators—a desire which is understandable, coming, as he has, from the intense social

setting of Ben Jonson's play *Bartholomew Fair* where Dionysus (or Dionysius, as he is called in Jonson) achieved his audience. One can therefore assume Dionysus was, at one point, in search of this missing audience from which the thesis writer/Apollo/the narrator has so violently seized him. Now, with the understanding that this audience is no longer achievable—an Elizabethan audience? In today's climate? History would not allow such a thing!—Dionysus contents himself like a spouse in a marriage full of resentment to play his games with the narrator as though to torture whose-ever genderless wrist he can get his skirt around (the narrator is quite keen on cutting off his own genitalia, though this is not the only reading in which gender inescapability possible in this text). It is unclear whether or not this was an original choice of the narrator, if Dionysus actually existed, if Apollo inserted him for proportion, or if the thesis writer included him so he had a reason to call the thesis *Dionysus*.

DEDICATION

For my mother and father. Please never go.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to thank my advisor, David Kress, for reading all my re-writes and guiding me not just through my thesis construction, but also through the last four years of my creative development. Without him, there would not be stuff ... like talking hand puppets or tile setters or Stanford University.

I would also like to thank everyone here and there who may have consciously or unconsciously provided me with material. Telemarketers, mushroom-headed nurses filling out amitriptyline medications for the sake of permanently damaged urethras, a class D driver's license, a Fischer Price telephone, Apollo Bartholomew, Ph.D, the Wee Skull Childcare Clinic, proctology offices, PBS, vegan poets, sour fornication, Jack Dawson, dear Vladimir, Betty Babblor, Prevail adult diapers, a new Power Mac with a 800 MHz processor featuring 256 MB RAM and 40 GB hard drive, Wal-Mart, Target, and errant hubcaps.

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FORWARD

I received “Dionysus” handwritten on a stack of Oxford 3x5 index cards on July 22, 2017. They were delivered to my office at the University of Miami in an anonymous package. I can only presume either the author wishes to remain, like his package, anonymous, or that he has died of such-and-such disease (coronary thrombosis or pelvic inflammation, I am guessing) and someone else delivered the box to me; however, included on the top of the stack was a note. Its contents are not worth transcribing verbatim, but in summary the writer asked that I prepare the enclosed documents for publication.

My task proved more difficult than implied by the above wordage. Apart from innumerable solecisms (some of which, I suspect, are purposeful; these have been un-lifted) and shameful exonerations of faulty character in both human and business (which—and I think any good Christian would agree with me on this—are obvious signs of moral ambiguity, however unintentional, on part of the anonymous author), I was forced to write my character under its current objective into the epilogue in order to clarify and, if you will allow me to coin a phrase, *didactify* the narrative. Various anachronisms have been untouched—as have been the moments in which the author seems to be integrating fictional objects or words into reality (as a respected associate of the University of Miami’s moral philosophy faculty, you have my word that every object has been checked and checked again for this distinction; however, I have exploited a few of these over-itemized incidents in order to advertise some of my own theoretical work, as you will see—most of which can either be found at any bookstore, both national and international {although, I would prefer if interested parties ordered on my website, www.didacticprophylactic.com, where the books can be found at a steady rate of \$265.00 a piece—10% discount for Florida students!}). Furthermore, even though I have done a thorough exploration of Ancestry.com, I can find no living record of the people to which our author refers; therefore, I have left all names—people and places—intact.

To my knowledge, this is the first time anyone but myself and the anonymous author have seen the work. I should hope this is true since the text contains an egregious amount of immoral obscenities and merely implies others, thanks to platitudinous circumvention. It is my hope that readers who entertain this text will do so with an open mind—that is, one willing to be taught several lessons and what-not-to-dos. It is also my hope that anyone who associates with sympathizers of the likes of our anonymous author should forthwith defriend this sympathizer on the proverbial Facebook. It is a constituent of all good and moral souls to rid the world of temptation and remove from out all they deem evil within. I know what you are going to say, so please keep in mind—parents, thespians, legal contractors, short-haired automobilists—that we are all human, we make mistakes. Forgive yourselves for Facebook friending such vile detritus in the first place.

It also goes without saying that I am not here to be subtle like other so-called professors who have been made to author forwards to unethical trash (e.g. the heinous *Lolita*). I am here to change the world. I hope by the time of this book's publication that my vision will have already been realized.

Pahokee, Flor.

Apollo Bartholomew, Ph.D.

December 12, 2018

PART ONE

1

I only knew him by a silly, seven-digit username. I have no idea what he looks like, but I have often tried to imagine that he is four foot eight, pearl-skinned, and sockless, that he sleeps with his knees tucked into his tummy or his arms folded over his chest. Even though it has been nearly twenty-five years since I last spoke to him, he is still twelve-years-old and always will be.

When I try to think about other things—mother, for example—I think about his prepubescent cock instead. My little lovely boy. Where did you go? I would bury him if I could, deep into the abyss of my mind, far enough so that I may never think of him again, but what bones do I have to bury?

It occurs to me that, as long as I go about sitting on the toilet as I have been, nothing changes. The only way I may ever be able to quell my proclivity for this callipygian cupid is by going to the park and molesting a twelve-year-old. Yet here I sit, immobile and indecisive. Until I know for sure, I shall not budge.

2

It is an overcast December afternoon and I am sitting on my toilet. The tile setters are sitting in the bathroom doorway and have not moved since they arrived. Dionysus, who is a hand puppet, sleeps on my fist.

I often use pre-prepared notecards to mediate conversations with people like utility services, king sized mattress salesmen, the mushroom-headed nurse who fills my amitriptyline prescription—those are pain relievers for my permanently damaged urethra. This is so I know I will say all the right things. But I did not have a notecard for tile setters. So, before they showed up on my doorstep, I managed to construct a few sentences I thought might be necessary, such as “good afternoon, cold enough for you?” and “let me show you the damage”—any number of introductions and antiphons. Unfortunately, this proved to be insufficient.

When the tile setters walked into the bathroom, they plopped themselves down. One of them extracted a roll of measuring tape and held it in his hand, but neither wanted to measure the size of the floor. They went back-and-forth—you do it, no you do it, no you do it—until finally everything went silent. I had no idea how to respond to this situation, so I sat on the toilet and waited and here we remain.

“I would kill myself if it was possible.” I say, looking at the spigot in the tub.

The tile setters ask what is stopping me.

“This fellow.” I say, lifting the napping Dionysus up for them to see. “Last week, I said, Dionysus, give me a pistol. I am going to shoot myself. I declare it. So, he handed me a gun and I aimed it at my face. When I pulled the trigger, all I got was a poke in the forehead and a hideous orange flag stamped with the word *bang!* I should have known since I do not own a pistol. But you should have seen this lovely little zanni chuckle!”

One of the tile setters laughs.

“Why are you laughing?” I ask. “I do not like being laughed at.”

He goes quiet.

“Well, are you going to ask me why I would kill myself?” I say.

They say no.

“Why not?” I say.

They tell me they are not interested.

“I have been trying to kill myself for years now, but at some point you just have to give up and live.” I say. “And apparently I cannot do that either. See, my friends, I thought I was going to be a famous writer. Writing made sense to me. I spent much of my twenties attempting to write—journals, short stories based on Greek mythology, schedules, taxes. I always had trouble finishing things, though. Halfway through any project, I put up my pen and said this is no good. It is not satisfying. You may check

my study if you are interested, endless stacks of fragmentary episodes, notes to myself, letters from the IRS—but I finished a novella! If that counts, and a short story which, at the age of twelve, was the first thing I ever wrote. I never got around to sharing that in its entirety. but I figured I struggled so much because I never had the talent. So, I stopped trying, thinking something else would come along and grab my attention. Here I am, forty-two, generation X, and nothing has changed.”

The tile setters shrug.

“Yesterday,” I say, “I even found myself partaking in that atrociously hackneyed ritual you so often see in novels about elderly men—that is, looking at myself in the mirror and touching my face. It occurred to me that I am breaching the age during which it is common to say one has gone over the proverbial hill. However, when I looked in the mirror, I still appeared as young as thirty—dare I say five and twenty? I was born in 1975, my friends! Where are my crow's feet? Where is the hair in my ears? The preposterously large pores on my nose? Look at my head. Do you see a bald spot? Even my colleagues in middle school had bald spots! I just want to know why—why, of all people, me?”

The tile setters continue sitting in front of the door. One of them picks loose chalk from the floor. The other plays around with his measuring tape. Dionysus snores. Sleep, sleep. They are not interested, but they do not seem to be going anywhere.

“Let me tell you this.” I continue. “When mother passed away, that was the first time I tried to kill myself, but apparently there is no melodramatic suicide in my narrative. You really cannot imagine what it is like to sit here waiting for your lungs to dry, waiting for your heart to stop, hoping to see your mother again. I sleep from ten to nine and wake up every morning feeling like my brain has stuck to the base of my skull. It is all the more agonizing when I realize sleep has done me no good; I have not aged a day. And now Dionysus has suggested that I go to the park and molest a twelve-year-old. He asks me what can be more exciting than that?”

One of the tile setters asks what is stopping me.

"I *do* have morals." I say. "How do I know it will satisfy me? What if I try again? and again? Madness! Absolute madness! No, just because I have a gun does not mean I have to use it. But, really, my friends, it feels like the only solution at this point. I have tried to write. I have tried to die. I have nothing to show for my life but a novella and a story I never got to share."

The tile setters roll a rubber barrel drum back and forth.

"Hey, wait a minute." I say. "You do not suppose that is a symbol for something?"

The tile setters ask me what.

"The fact that I never got to share that story with anyone. I always got about halfway in, maybe a little more, but every time something stopped me from going on. Yes! A symbol, a serious symbol! It must be. How can I possibly be satisfied with anything else until I atone for the first sin?"

The tile setters blink.

"And neither of you seem to be interrupting me at all. I could potentially share it with you now. Do you suppose it is as simple as that? Yes, of course it is."

Dionysus yawns and smacks his lips.

"But if that was my only hope, then all is lost. I put that story through a paper shredder after mother died—ah! but the novella is still extant. I even made sure to memorize it just in case I ever needed to share it with anyone at a moment's notice like a judge or a disinterested jury. Well, it was one of those auto-biographies, a memoir. Do not look at me like that. No one else was going to write about me. I wrote it in the light of the sun on a hot summer day."

At this point, I hear a gentle chirp-chirp from Dionysus. He giggles in his sleep. The tile setters giggle with him.

"But, in point of fact, it has been a while since I last blew the dust off that particular text. An arduous task it is to relive my young adulthood and I am trying to sweep that complicated time of my life under the rug, as it were."

One of the tile setters plucks a penny from their pockets. He asks me to call it.

"I do not like this game." I said.

Call it, he says.

"Why?"

The tile setters say, the way they see it, I have two options: I can either recite the narrative or I can go to the park and molest a twelve-year-old. Heads or tails, respectively. The coin flips. The coin is caught. They ask me to call it. Dionysus wakes up.

"All right, all right." I say. "Without further ado, I present to you my testimony."

3

Father killed himself because he was bored—no, because he was tired—no, because he was unhappy. Well, he killed himself, and that is a fact. If you could look at his class D driver's license—expiration date: February 21st, 1978—you would see that he was a thirty-year-old Minnesotan. He had hazel-eyes, was 5'10", and weighed 135 pounds (all much like myself; although I had mother's blue-green lookers). He was born in the December of 1957 and had one of those edentatic Hancocks that looked like the footpath of an inebriated armadillo. He had a fascination with cultivating shiny things, vilifying the upper one percent, and abusing alcohol. A mortal man of Russian descent, I would like to say that he was the owner of a fancy French hotel, but in fact he was a plumber's apprentice—and only for two years before marrying mother, who was an accomplished proctologist with money to spare. His parents, his brothers, his sisters all died long before I was born—and when his Catholic in-laws found out he was a nihilistic non-entity from the Sunshine State, they and all of mother's many sisters unequivocally deserted the married couple with no hope of reconciliation. I never knew any of my extended family.

Father lost his passion for fixing other people's porcelain thrones—that, or he never had it in the first place. He always talked about wanting to be a famous soul singer like Hatfield or Medley, but he

was born with acute dysphonia and never tried to sing. (Although, my friends, I am remembering now that he did collect obsolete Telefunks through over-the-phone lotteries. So, I guess that was a step in the right direction.) The first time he tried to kill himself was a few weeks before my twelfth birthday in the Fall of 1987. The silly man tried hanging himself from a willow tree using a worn-out waistband that was far too weak to hold him up long enough—ironic that this would be his first choice since his oversized pants were notorious for falling about his ankles.

His second attempt—inasmuch as it can be called one—came two months later by way of stainless steel shears. He came into my room and asked if I had taken the shears. He said he was just about to cut his throat, but when he turned around to fondle his neck and contemplate the consequence of his decision, someone had taken the shears like a missing set piece. He said he would just have to do it without thinking next time—which is what he did three weeks later. He sat on the toilet and slit his wrists right when I walked in to use the bathroom. Honestly, I tried to stop him, but he would not listen to me and, because father would not listen to me on that day, like an earthbound specter I perpetually seek the ears of a man, or boy, who will.

(But in truth, my friends, I know not why I am so desperate for attention; my aforementioned plea is a fictitious liberty taken in part to fill this very hole in which my nitpicking jury/judge would no doubt find fault. In reality, I said nothing to father, but instead watched him die silently.)

4

At twelve-years-old, I had questions. These questions—tormentors! Day and night! Torrents of tears and nocturnal bed wets, mother coming into my room at four o'clock in the morning to clean me up, replace the sheets, embrace me (oh, mother, my mother). The questions in question were not unusual for a boy my age: why did he do it? what if I go crazy? what if father's ghost appears to me and asks me to kill people? So on and so forth. My dreams were illustrative of these particular anxieties, in fact. I wrote about them once at the request of a child's counseling center to which mother had me go a

few weeks after father's funeral—a specialty clinic to the west of Uptown Minneapolis, one of those walk-in/by donation dealios with one complimentary duck pond—or two or three or five. The waiting room was bound in painted rainbows ribboned around the walls, a child's play set in the corner—My Little Ponies, a Fisher Price telephone pull toy, a See-and-Say Farmer Says wheel. On another side of the room was a library which I preferred to dingle about, although it was not for a child's consumption; rather it was for the parents to peruse while they waited for their mentally unstable seeds to finish gesticulating. You see, I was quite intelligent for my age. On the shelves: flimsy articles from *Psychology Daily*—volumes 21, 22, and 24; April, March, and December of those years, respectively; a newly published text entitled *The Heroes of Salem: A Guide to Solving Artistic Decadence* by Apollo Bartholomew, Ph.D., the cover of which—a painting: “Burning of a Witch” by Matteson, 1853—intrigued me; next to this, a proverbial copy of the Bible. I never had a chance to invest any serious time into these texts, although I flipped through the Bartholomew a few times. Serious illustrations.

There were four counselors through whom I shuffled—let us see, there was a Dr. Andre Checkson, a Dr. Tony Hoff, a Samuel Bree, and one Vincent Nodoff who preferred to pontificate about the wing patterns of Lepidoptera instead of other people's feelings. Yes, yes, wonderful counselors, everlasting fathers, counselor after counselor—no one was interested in what I had to say. If I still had copies of the exercises they had me complete, I would transcribe them here, but unfortunately every personal record of my time at *The Wee Skull: A Childcare Clinic*—for which, if I remember correctly, Doctors Checkson and Hoff were the proprietors—was lost in a modest house fire; however, if there are any interested parties, the clinic kept their own record and most assuredly would maintain proofs and copies of important documents in an annex, a depository, or some other magnificent archive. (Ah, as a matter of fact, my friends, since I wrote this, the clinic is no longer in operation and has been replaced by a Vietnamese/Scandinavian fusion restaurant. Doctors Checkson and Hoff have disappeared.)

The writing exercises, which commenced as word associations—*father, anarchy, Calvary,*

insanity, Christianity, just games mostly—and letters to myself, were precursors to what would eventually become a semester of English studies at Stanford with a \$20,000 scholarship. Between then and then, however, I found writing to be a therapeutic albeit temporary Band-Aid—in layman's terms: organizing the events of the past few months onto paper in a chronological and manipulable order was satisfying, but only just-so. For one appointment with Dr. Bree, I wrote a story as a reaction to father's death (this, my friends, is the aforementioned text which I sent through a paper shredder in 1993). It was a symbolic variation on the Icarus myth, very serious—only it somehow involved a sad teddy bear named Ichabod and a blunderbuss. While I presented my work, Dr. Bree, who was munching on a biscotti, interrupted and asked me what the point was.

“It is about why my father killed himself.” I said.

“I tried to kill myself once.” Said Dr. Bree, in his orange pea coat, looking longingly at the window. “Yes, weighed myself down with bricks in that very pond right there. I was down there for only about ten seconds before the bricks and all manner of personal trinkets fell through my pockets. See? I knew this coat was no good. I floated back up to the surface. Life-affirming light. Here is an idea: write a story about faulty coat pockets. Maybe then you will find the meaning that you seek.”

Then Dr. Bree—who, I may remind you, was a specialist in child behavior—got up from his desk and left me there in his office.

That evening I had a nightmare which I will not bother transcribing here. The only thing my dreams were good for were making me wet my bed. I hated dreaming. It was a pleasure to wake up with mother standing in my doorway having just popped on the light.

5

And mother died rather stupidly six years later.

She was an accomplished proctologist with an office on Brunswick Avenue. She spent eight years studying medicine at UCSF and successfully fought for a monopoly on the colorectal business in St.

Louis Park for ten years. She bought out Atlas Proctology, Lakeside Anorectalists, and even ProRectal Relief (they did those late night jingles if you remember: *Pipes-a-failing? Recall: we fix it all!*). There was not a soul around who did not know mother's name. And mother died of a simple, explicable heart attack.

I flew in from my first semester at Stanford on a Thursday in the early December of 1993. There was a brief hiccup on the plane out of a layover in Denver when we hit turbulence—foreshadowing mother's heart attack. You see, I had a carry-on chock-full of that semester's required texts including but not limited to two plays—*The Seagull* by Anton Chekhov and *Hamlet* by Shakespeare—*Gulliver's Travels and Other Stories* by Jonathan Swift, a theoretical text by several Stanford alumni called *The Didactic Prophylactic* (1985) contributed to by Messrs. Milieu, Roland, Bartholomew, Hullabaloo, Yabbadabbadoo, et al., and short independent anthologies with comfortably colored covers redolent of Matisse. In order to avoid an overweight baggage charge, I transferred most of these texts from my suitcase to my briefcase. When the pilot of our Boeing 747 naively flew us through a black patch of cumulonimbus just after taking off, the resultant shake-shake pitched our carry-ons from the overheads to the foreheads of incognizant travelers. I was hit by an empty kitten carrier which led to four close-knit stitches from the maxillofacial surgeon and a head wrap. One poor lady in her mid-thirties, whose countenance was not unlike that of Arcadia Smithers—the famous actress from the 30s who died of too much experience—got knocked in the soft spot of her temples by my briefcase. The resulting blood was what caused a chaotic uproar in the cabin and forced the plane to go back to Denver so they could get the woman to the hospital.

I landed in the Minneapolis Airport several hours later, a sour mess. The next day, mother helped me tighten my head wraps and we went to church—one of the many Calvaries in the suburban area. Then we sat together on the living room sofa for the rest of the afternoon. She with one hand massaging my hair, the other hand filling out a lengthy application for what I understood to be an

important business loan for her profession. I watched re-run after re-run of a PBS quote-in-quote documentary entitled *Who Was Lee Harvey Oswald?*, a two-parter called *Innocence Lost* produced by Ofra Bikel and a silly dramatization of the American Revolution. I had fallen asleep and woken up and *Howard's End* was on. Mother was still filling out the loan application. The film got to the part where a man in a bowler hat accuses Helena Bonham Carter, who is in the middle of eating a scone, of having stolen his umbrella. Right when Helena said "I'm so sorry, I do nothing but steal umbrellas", mother leaned forward, grabbed my wrist, and died.

I reacted as any mother-loving child would do in a situation like this. I furiously fumbled over the telephone trying to control my ligaments long enough to dial 911. When emergency services finally arrived, they told me mother had suffered a heart attack. Ah, I said. Well, that explains it. I do not need to tell you I then dropped out of Stanford and gained possession of the house. I have lived here ever since. The place used to be decorated in old family photos before they too burned up in that fire. (It should also be noted, my friends, that I have started forgetting what mother's face looked like which should hopefully increase the stakes of my narrative.)

6

It is also worth mentioning—very briefly—my one semester experience at Stanford.

I flew in to SFO in the last week of August. I was fully prepared to move in on the bound-to-be abysmal week of orientation, but I was tossed out quite literally upon my arrival. I approached the front of either the Florence Moore or Wilbur residence halls—I cannot recall which was which—where they had tied hideously red balloons monogrammed by a bold "S" and the El Palo Alto to a fold up on the lawn. An effervescent blonde, who was surely a member of the proverbial Greek life, welcomed me to the Farm, which was I guess a cute appellation for the campus, and asked me for my name. I set my suitcase full of books and a roll up sleeping bag down by my feet and gave my name. The girl ran the tip of her pen up and down a clipboard and said she could not find me. I repeated my name as though she

asked again, but did I stop there? No, no, I kept repeating my name over and over again, with a striking urgency comparable to that of a cockatoo. When I would not shut up, two bouncers—football stars in t-shirts too tight for their meat—picked me up by my arms and dragged me back to the street. I sat on the curb and rifled through my belongings, looking for my acceptance letter. I remember the official seal and specifically recall seeing the words “congratulations” and “our pleasure”. But then perhaps I did not think to bring it with me. Was it a custom of every university to make two lists? One of accepted students and one of tossables? Tossables for show? A line-up of Maxi Pads?

Actually, I thrived quite comfortably for the next two weeks in a purple doored storage unit north of Palo Alto High, where, though it was not my intention when I first selected the space, I caught a glimpse of one or two backpacked buds walking home down Embarcadero Road in nothing but shorts and tank tops. And they were smooth-skinned with milky shoulders. My proclivities had not yet become, how you might say, unconventional. At the time, I was still transfixed by a male species anywhere between the ages of three or two years my junior—those baby faced cockerels at the climax of pubescence. Alas, my physical impetus—that is to say, a poke, a member—was still relatively undeveloped as compared to what I saw of other, more masculine Charlies, Devons, Jacks in the high school locker rooms. I simply did not have the stamina at eighteen-years. I was not “attracted” to these cupids in the colloquial sense of the word; I was fascinated, though I knew not why, with the shape of their callipygian bums and the undefinable black in their eyes. Yes, a curious fascination as unexplainable as my father's suicide. (Really, my friends, I do not know why I am the way I am and that has been the most upsetting thing to live with.)

From what I could see on the steps of my throne at the storage unit, the backpacked boys stepped past a Jack in the Box burger joint. I went down the stairs and walked across the street to order some fries. I followed many boys and ate many fries, an animal, an animal, in the two weeks I spent dreaming in the storage space, mostly with my eyes, but sometimes I would pass through the vicinity of

the purple doored storage space and follow any number of ganymedes past decorations of palm shade and stoplights. A corduroy boy six blocks up Alma Street, a flamboyant ginger to a hummus shop, a soccer player past the Aquarius theatre—I often lost myself in the endless cubes.

The storage unit also introduced me—quite against my wishes, thank you very much—to an allotment of hilarious characters. These were haggard, weed-smoking guttersnipes with showerless hair or vocalic monologues taking the physical form of vegan poets. One particularly hairy fellow, my neighbor, who always left his storage unit open—like me, he did not have much to steal—rose and rolled-up his sleeping bag. Then he stepped outside, stretched, and sat against the wall and munched on a half-eaten apple. Then he got up, moved a half-a-block south, and sat down again. Every time he got to his feet, he straddled the curb between the sidewalk and the busy street—a passing Volvo, passing Toyota, passing Hyundai—whichever it was. He watched the cars and a few times made to step in front of them but then hesitated and pulled himself back to the sidewalk as if unable to curb his fear of death.

At the end of these two weeks, I followed a duple of uniformed urianists no more than sixteen-years, poetic tomes dangling by their sides, down Embacadero Road for several blocks until Rinconada Park where they sat at a picnic bench together by the museum and curled each other's heads in one another's arms. I hid behind a tree and watched them. On the other side of the road there was a payphone. I walked across the street, dropped a couple quarters in, and called mother because it had been a while since I spoke with her. Of course she was overjoyed to hear my voice, but then she said she got a call from the Stanford student services yesterday wondering why I never checked-in to Florence Moore or Wilbur. She said she had no way of contacting me. I told her the school was mistaken because I most certainly checked-in to my dormitory two Thursdays ago. She asked why it took so long for me to call. I said I had been so enjoying my time that it completely slipped my mind—and this was true, only not for the reasons implied. She said how excited she was that I was happy to be learning so much. I would have liked to have continued speaking with her, of course, but the homosexual scholars were still

dingalinging with their noses on the picnic bench, half-hands in pants, thinking they were hidden by the tabletop—

They did not notice me return to my place at the tree. I shifted positions every now and then. I hoped they would see me. I hoped they would not. I might have lifted my leg a bit or picked at the bark on the tree, but nothing more. I could never decide on an outcome. I preferred to play coy. So, I sat in a nook at the base of the tree, shifting irritably and watched them until they left, watched the whites of their eyes until I could no longer see them. They disappeared around a corner.

I thought about returning to the Stanford dormitories now that I knew the confusion between whether or not I was supposed to be there had been resolved, but then again I found some prime real estate in the purple doored storage facility—even with its eclectic inhabitants. Even so, not returning felt like cheating on mother. I did not like the sadness in her voice. I got up from my place in the nook of the tree, but stood there until nightfall, unable to make up my mind. Then a ruff-n-tuff perspiring authority figure who sounded like William Shatner came around and told me I could not sleep in the park. So I started walking in the direction of the storage facility. I took my time, hanged right on the residential Middlefield Road. I nudged a can of Quilty IPA for a couple feet and kicked it into a dog owner's lawn—it bounced off a running sprinkler head and landed back in front of me. Then I decided to do some window shopping. Only a few house lights were still on. I lingered in the diamond-paned window of a brick cottage and watched a family of four eating dinner. I could see past the dining room into their den of casual décor. They had a 45" television mounted over a fireplace, a battered box for the game of LIFE in the corner, the game itself on the carpet, a Life Cycle exercise bike recently used—“Deb” lost 142 calories today! At the dinner table, I got a glimpse of the kids. The daughter was a bushy, unimaginative bummer. The son wore a black baseball cap with an orange monogram—one of those boyish gang symbols, “Sour Fornication”, “Slippery Felines”. His face was heavenly, dimpled, precious pinchable cheeks! Then he got up with his empty plate, came around the table, and his mother looked

up, and kissed him on the cheek. It was several minutes before I noticed I was leaning against the window, salivating.

Three blocks down, I turned left between a Whole Foods and a sushi restaurant. I spied the same uniformed, tome toting boys from before, sitting, kissing on a garbage can. They giggled as I passed. I caught a sparkle in their eyes and stopped to watch them.

“Oh, my love,” said one of them, “we would have never met if you had not chosen Stanford over all the other Ivy leagues that accepted you.”

Then one of them—a freckled short-hair—saw me and I tried to look as curious as possible, in a sense innocence—what is the word? Nice, non-threatening. Again, I could not decide what I wanted from them after being recognized. Was it intimacy? The freckled boy alerted his lover to my presence who then asked me if I was enjoying myself.

“I do not know.” I said.

He leapt off the garbage can and started walking towards me slowly with his hands in his pockets.

“How long have you been watching us?” He said.

“All day.” I said.

“You aren't Jamie's friend?”

“No. Are you?”

I can hardly compare myself to a snake at eighteen-years, so I will not say my glance slithered, but it was a similarly evocative movement. His bangs, such as they were, came to a sharp point on his forehead. His shoulders opened up at ninety degrees, and smoothed out as they flowed into arms—oh, this is undiscovered territory! His uniform, a denim blazer, and felt black buttons undone, wrapped him in a heavenly geometry, all his curves, and the points at which these curves met with angles, around his knees. And what glitchless skin and healthy lips. Yes, you see? Velvet skin. Yes, lovely, lovely, lovely.

“Are you from Woodside?”

I could look at him forever.

“Dude,” said the freckled boy, “do you have the stuff or not?”

I smiled, almost certain they would smile back, but they stepped away quite dramatically through the dirt and bolted together down the alley, never to be seen again. With them, the moment.

I returned to Stanford (oh, excuse me, *the FArM*) the next day and queried student services. They apologized for the mishap and sent me back to either Florence Moore or Wilbur where I was assigned a room with two other roommates—one of whom had the flare for which I was fascinated. He was a salacious fly named Horace Bean who buzzed about women with all the resilience of a praying mantis like an adolescent paper hawker on a French corner. He tacked a poster of Winona Ryder to the wall by his bedside and frequently invited females to our room, a dormitory of debauchery. The other roommate whose name I cannot recall just slept all day. I do not suppose they declared him dead, but it would not surprise me if they did.

Horace Bean did not want roommates, much less a third. He said he registered for a single and was given a triple and said that his rights had been violated. Why, he would say to me twice every day in the first week of my residence in room 312 even though I never asked, did they even bother having us fill out the questionnaire if they were going to ignore it anyway? Roommates are abhorrent! How abhorrent are roommates! If he would have bothered to ask me, I would have told him that I mailed the entire application in without filling out a single question other than my name and other information labelled with the proverbial asterisk—“answer required”. But I remember the rooms were not big enough for three beds.

Horace had already claimed the top bunk apparently, but on the day of my arrival before I had met him—presumably he was in class—I removed his brittle sheets and pillows from the mattress and rolled them onto the bed below. I stuffed my sleeping bag up with my suitcase and climbed the ladder. I

fell onto my belly and observed the room. The other roommate, who always slept, was sleeping in the corner, his back to me. He was not much fun to watch, so I studied the contents of Horace's desk: item, a framed photo of a sunglassesed Horace riding an elephant in nothing but his knickers on a father/son trip to Angkor Watt—oh, Horace had the pearly bod of a middle schooler and the hair to match, the androgynous Jack Dawson from *Titanic*; item, a blue-washed keychain from Tampa Bay; item, a portrait of a man who could only be Mr. Bean, labelled by his lachesimal diameter (1949-1992); item, a mail key to box 1224 smudged with black adhesive gunk; item, which I discovered digging around in the back of one of the drawers, a purple silicone dildo ribbed in realistic veins and further wrapped in paper towels. I returned the dildo into the drawer and looked around the room. Stuck to the side of a saxophone case in the corner was a Clinton sticker. I gathered the boy had strong yet vaguely uninformed opinions and liberal sentiment. Therefore, I hypothesized in those few moments before I met him, in the warm damp of the room, that he was one to make things overly complicated—I did not like this thought. On the wall was the Ryder poster. She looked mildly confused. Indeed, I expect I, too, would be confused if I were stuck in a poster. I could not account for the knobby green succulent on the windowsill. Such a thing certainly did not belong to Horace Bean as I thus knew him. Perhaps it belonged to the roommate who always slept, who was still sleeping.

The wait was incorrigible, I tell you, laying on that bed, expecting every tick in the air and voice in the hall behind the door to be him and then finding myself disappointed. Conversely, I was also relieved because would it not be more appropriate to meet him first thing in the dark? To have him, lightless, hop into bed with me, a ghost, not even realizing I was there? With the way things were going, though, I half-expected never to meet him. I would then be stuck a whole semester with a roommate who always slept and a roommate who never appeared—with whom I dearly wished to interact. Halfway between Heaven and Hell. What a marvelous joke.

In between then and Horace's grand entrance, I selected at random a book from my suitcase to

pass the time: *Lolita*! Oh, of all books for my hand to brush! This edition I discovered in the presence of a dumpster full of more *Lolitas* outside an auto service station. Clearly it was not very popular and no one wanted to read it, and yet people continued to open it, gaze at the words, imbue dear Vladimir's prose. Somehow, it survived two years of publication hell, rejected rejected rejected—I expect even in a world with no *Lolitas* that somehow *Lolita* would still find a way to be read! Thus, I picked it up inevitably and on my bed in Florence Moore or Wilbur, I started reading. I managed to read to the chapter 30, just after the eponymous nymphet (Lo, Lola, Lolita)—who is about as innocent as she is legal—sanctions coitus with double-H. Disappointingly, the scene is merely referred to. I slapped the book shut and tried to toss it away, but it slipped through my fingers and fell on the mattress by my side. Vladimir, I said, you gave us everything! Right down to the color of her dress! Could you have been more specific, dear Vladimir? Could you have given me what I wanted instead of playing coy? You gave double-H, that least deserving fiend, a very girl with whom to play! I have so far received nothing and wish you could have given me at least a peek—just a peek, dear Vladimir! Anyway, my frustration masked the state of eagerness in which I had otherwise been when—

The door swung open, hit the wall, and Horace entered with his back to me so I could not see his face. He wore bell bottomed khakis which gave his buttocks a mildly formless definition. I never saw him in anything but these khakis. At night, in the dark, when he would invite in his girlfriends, it would be quite impossible to see—the boy was an expert in bodily hush-hush! He was not alone. Behind him came three unashamed she-people in white breast-cupping spaghetti straps and shorts, the contents of which left little to the imagination. Hello, Circe! Hello, Donna Julia! Hello, *la Belle Dame sans Merci*! I wish I actually knew French to shade my descriptions of these girls with an appropriately ugly timbre. Everything about them was wrong, like dogs, and made me gag—like the sound of glottal stops! Uh-oh, Hate Mail, and Button! How on earth did these vixens earn Horace's inexplicable reciprocation? What secrets?

So, behind the lovely Horace came Uh-Oh, Hate Mail, and Button. He kissed these harlots with the grace of a ketchup bottle and, by this time, my state of excitement—arousal?—was cleft in two implacable compulsions: I could either linger there on the bed and risk losing the ideal Horace that seemed, at the moment, entirely more attractive than what I was seeing or I could jump through the third story window and never have to see the boy again on account that I would be dead. Did I fancy either? When Button pointed me out on the bed, Horace at first misunderstood and thought she was talking about the sleeping man in the corner. When she reiterated and said, no, there is a boy who is really quite awake on your bed, Horace turned. He wore a pair of black Aviators on which I could see my reflection and I wondered, Horace, what color are your eyes?

The whores were silent when he, similarly silent, parted their company and mozied on over towards me. His shoes hissed across the floor, each step a sssss and a click, not quite a whisper, not a *shhhh*. It was harsh and deeply anti-sensual, like a popping bottle of ether. But the height of the bunk was perfect. Pity there was not a photographer nearby to capture the vase between our noses. Lovely illusion. He put his elbow up onto the mattress and smiled. I took his glasses.

“Hey, give it to me—” he pleaded, dangling his pianist's fingers in the air.

I looked at myself in the Aviators, perfectly enchanted by their snowy glow. Then I looked at Horace's eyes. The answer was hazel, dull, and inconvenient—unsatisfying. Not at all what I expected. Perhaps something more satisfying lay behind them? Horace had a lovely head. But if I removed it to inspect later he would most surely be dead.

He reached for his glasses again and I held them back. In revenge, Horace pounced onto the bunk and snatched my copy of *Lolita*. He sat against the wall and flipped through the text negligently. Then he marked a page with his finger and his dull eyes roamed the words therein. He appeared to be reading the book with a cornichon of intrigue. His velutinous knees swung this way and that with the harmless waggishness of a child. I set the Aviators down onto the desk below and watched him read. I

grabbed his wrist and expected—quite wanted, in fact—for him to recoil, but he glanced at me and continued reading. I let him go. Then he turned the book around and pointed at a random place in the text as though he expected me to know what he was pointing to and asked if I was interested in taking a road trip like that with him. I did not know to what he was referring. He laughed and continued reading.

“Is this book supposed to be funny?” He asked. “I do not mind funny things as long as I am not expected to take the funny things seriously.”

He flippantly and successfully chucked the book at the dormitory window. It fell on its spine with a thump. When I lifted myself to look at it and then again at myself in the Aviators on the desk, I felt a lust, deep and physical, poke the insides of my gut.

“Come here.” He said and waved me closer.

“No.” I said. “You make me quite uncomfortable.”

“Why? What have I said to make you uncomfortable?”

“It was the way you tossed my book across the room. I did not like how you did that.”

Horace laughed and asked what we were doing, having a chat, how mediocre. He said he was far past that kind of talk, the way college students talk. Smart talk which is just as much that talk of adolescents. He said he had gone on to bigger better things since going to school. He bounced off the bed and opened the bottom drawer of his desk. He plucked out a plaque with blue paper and calligraphy. You see this, he said, this I got for being the best saxophonist last week at a saxophonizing competition. He tossed it in the corner. It shattered. He giggled and plucked out a brass statuette with the words “Best Performance by Freshman Musician at the National Youth Foundation 1993”. This, he said, needs no explanation. He tossed it. The statuette hit the Clinton sticker on the saxophone case and parted from its podium. He dug around some crumpled paper and found another award, just as shiny and prestigious as the others. A silver medal bound in a victorious embroidered lace, the image of a music note and a number two. He told me, well, one cannot be the best every time, but out of one

thousand individuals, internationally, I might add, he continued, I made second over the course of several months in competitive slap tongueing. Maybe I can show you sometime, the slap tongueing. And he tossed the medal through the open bathroom door where it landed in the toilet bowl with a liquid ping.

I leapt from the bed and dashed to save the sunken medal.

“What are you doing?” I said, dipping my arm deep into the siphon of the toilet bowl. “You have already made so much of yourself! What on earth are you doing?”

“Oh yes.” He laughed, swinging his room key on his pinky finger. “I am a god. I am very special. Well, you probably already guessed as much, other people take me so seriously. I am much too mature to do that for myself.”

Then he stepped into the bathroom with me.

Several weeks later, my philosophy in literature professor had us read Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil* in preparation for class Wednesday night. He lectured for three-hours about the abyss, struggle, and other things that made the world too complicated for me—a chalkboard tapper and rambler. On Wednesday, he assigned us pages 45-55 of a recent text by A. Bartholdy or A. Bartholomew or A. Bartleby entitled “The Anti-Virtue of Indecision”, and an unfortunate text by Adorno. After class I walked to the Jack in the Box, ordered a basket of fries for two dollars, and walked back to Florence Moore or Wilbur, munching on the fries, and casting glances wildly across the street to see if I could spot any uniformed lads on their way home from extra-curriculars—soccer, string quartet, soldering club. In truth, I could not wait to get back to the dorm where it was a widely known truth that Horace Bean would be deflowering a college concubine. No one else knew about the dildo in his drawer.

Room 312 was dark when I arrived, only a hint of moonlight breached the blinds, crossing over Mr. Bean's portrait and onto the roommate who was, as usual, sleeping, cocooned in a plethora of sheets. Horace had relinquished to me the top bunk after a week's worth of troubled silent gestural

games indicating our equal stubbornness—e.g. removing each other's bed things and replacing them with our own, hiding the mattress to keep the other from using it. There was Horace's little lovely body on the lower bed, brilliantly lit from the light in the hall. And, what was more, he was alone. I shut the door behind me, dropped my things, and hopped onto the bed, hoping it would wake him. The room was warm enough where I could sleep without the cover of my sleeping bag. I took my pants off and rolled onto my belly, munching on my fries. Horace grunted in his sleep. I leaned over the edge of the bunk and looked at him. He was still wearing those awful khakis and had not bothered to remove his Aviators. I could just make out my reflection in their lenses. If his eyes were open and he was, in fact, watching me, I would not have been able to tell.

I said his name a few times and he answered back mildly, as if unsure as to whether or not he wanted to wake up enough to have a conversation. I took a peek at the sleeping roommate in the corner, still asleep.

“Horace,” I said, through a mouthful of fries. “There comes a time in every person's life when they must make a decision between two equally unpleasant options and in that moment it is just as preferable to simply do nothing at all. This being said, I can no longer go on without knowing how you feel about me. The daily back-and-forth between us is unbearable. I wish I could quit your game and end all this ambiguity for good, but you are alive and are still available to tell me why you have done the things you have done. Please tell me. Because I simply do not understand what it all means. I feel as though I will never be able to let you go without an answer. So, lay bare your intentions in as clear a way as you are able. For instance, saying I love you should suffice.”

I put my fries down and leaned my hips further off the cliff. I unbuttoned the opening in my boxers and let my lust dangle out. A gesture as clear as day.

In a word, nothing happened. But it was the closest I had ever come.

After mother had her heart attack and died, the only legitimate contact I had with other people for the next three years was through my new job as receptionist at her old proctology office, whose new owner—mother's perfectly anal partner, Dr. Melania Karnofksy—wrote a very specific list of communications for me to memorize and employ for all interactions between me and her clients. To make an appointment, run through available times. To cancel, ask for their name and erase it from the spreadsheet. If the patient starts complaining about an abscess or incontinence or anything, just ask to make an appointment. If they say they cannot make an appointment, send them away. If they ask about health insurance, ask for their card and record the information on the card. If they do not have health insurance, send them away. If they keel over on the desk in front of you, send them away. It was delightful—especially so since, if a patient or a patient's child got unruly and unpredictable, all I had to do was sit behind the desk and stare at them while they punched the drinking bird and banged their fists on the ringer. Yes, I told myself I was quite happy remaining home and doing nothing for the rest of my life. I had my house, my job, and plenty of books to read. I convinced myself that death would come any day and soon I would see mother again.

Now, let me introduce to my listeners the virtual community of WBS—a much more welcoming platform of communication than *The Wee Skull*, Stanford, or a storage facility. On a Sunday morning in 1996, I was flipping through channels—an episode of *Tom and Jerry*, static, a televangelist, static—when it occurred to me that a few weeks had passed since I last put pen to paper. I was working on a marvelous adaptation of *Lolita*, in fact, but something had kept me from completing the work and I only managed ten pages within the past eighteen months. So I clicked-off the television and went to my desk in the other room. I drew an empty sheet of paper from a drawer and shuffled the other ten I had already completed around. I reached for my pencil—a simple mechanical Papermate—and realized it was not in its usual place on the left side of my desk, nor were any of the other pens I bought. I roamed around the house for it, but to no avail. The house was completely bereft of Papermates. Yes, I had a

few other kinds of pens—blue caps, and a few designer pencils with those colorful images of flowers and the inadequate erasers—but I wanted my Papermates. So I went to the Target where an old babushka of an employee tried to assault me with conversation (my friends, I could not remember her name when composing this chapter, or the next, or the next—she will make her appearance again shortly and in the interest of time, I will wait until I get to a section in which I did recall her name to reveal it). I said all I wanted was Papermates, but she kept walking me around the store, advertising fine china and hosiery. We passed by the electronics aisle and I caught a glimpse of a Windows 95 home computer. Thinking to myself that writing would be much easier if I never had to step into another Target again—especially with this blue-footed booby in a human body working there—I quickly purchased the computer.

It took me several hours to set up—I had to call IT services or whatever they were called to help me along in the process. This only proved a boon, however, since the man on the other end of the line told me how to access the internet as well. But, at first, I remained focused on my adaptation of *Lolita*. I opened Microsoft Word and stared at the blank page and was struck with an irritating spell of writer's block. I decided to access the online for inspiration. That was when I discovered WBS which made it preposterously easy to share my stories with a large selection of hungry readers.

Extending conversation with other people was much easier online when all one had to look at was but their own reflection in the computer screen. The personalities with whom I participated on WBS in these exchanges—who played more like temporary house pets than anything—were always captivated by the most banal information like the color of my hair or the size of my feet. And attracting partners was easy employment. I merely logged in and waited and they always came. Some days it would take longer than others, but they always came. One or two at first and sometimes all at once. The trick, as it consistently is of course, was to keep these puppies and cats entertained. Though it was perpetually exciting to log out and return with a different username, thus attracting a new round of participants when the first round had died, the sudden death of each subsequent bird—signaled by a

tweet that read something along the lines of “cucklover69 has gone offline”—felt like getting shot. One time, I was speaking with a pathetic Doberman who refused to use any other letter but the letter *k* and, sensing its feeble attention about to break, I closed out of the page without so much as a goodbye. There, I said, see how it likes being cut from its leash on the ledge of a bridge. There was simply nothing worse than being abandoned.

Attracting birds in the first place all had to do with one's choice of username. Including a number anywhere between twelve and sixteen helped more than did, say, ten or twenty. But thirteen was the luckiest. As a rule, this number stood for one's age—or, in my case, the age I surreptitiously imitated in order to sell my show—but there were certain words one used if they wanted to convey that they were oversexed and looking for a one-night engagement. Many pups could, of course, be horny without saying so and this often functioned as my leverage to keep them online.

Never before had I run into the same username twice, but one morning a year past, while sitting in my pajamas, looking at my face in the computer with a glass of warm milk, one of the lost deer with whom I had shared an unusually tender connection the first time I logged into WBS reappeared! Curious little faun, his concern for me had been addicting when he first discovered me and his interest did not wane like it had with everyone else who flew away. He let me speak on and on without the slightest hint of apathy in his replies. I was convinced I found the proverbial one—even if I did not know who he was nor what he looked like; I had no doubts about us. But, alas, he disappeared all at once and without the usual signs of decay—limited vigor and single word retorts, *k k yeah oh*. His loss was the proverbial bullet to my heart. Indeed, I should have expected it. Many cherries disappeared if I ever revealed my true age. When I finally told this particular faunlet I was twenty-one, he sent a frowny face and said he had hoped I would be just a bit younger—seventeen, sixteen perhaps. I told him not to worry.

“Your luck is in: I am a twink.” I said, grumbling. “As baby faced as any prepubescent cherub. I never went through puberty. You know what gynecomastia is, right?”

Thus commenced a year of nightly excursions into the rooms of WBS, trying to find this missing faunlet with whom I had so desperately wished to speak again, even changing my name in the hopes of tantalizing new squirrels had begun to promote results in an exponential decay. More time was spent waiting on the rank tin boat for catfish to bite in the only lake to which I had access than was spent reeling them in. In these periods of drought, time slipped away and another year passed of this constant searching.

Coming home from the proctology office, I went directly to the computer and spent the rest of my evenings, well into the morning, waiting. Then I stopped going to work because many of my opportunities were missed during the day. If my employer had deigned to buy me a computer, I might have remained amiable. But Dr. Karnofski never bought me a computer. At first, I merely requested time off. She said I must be catching the flu. It is all in your head, she said. Then she compared my sickness to having a hemorrhoid and asked what I would do if I had a hemorrhoid. I told her I would go to her. She said yes, you would *do* something about it, would you not? She said that is what her clients do. They *do* something about their hemorrhoids. They do not ask for leave and sit on their hemorrhoids all day. Otherwise all they would have is hemorrhoids, not money. And if her clients do not have money, how is she supposed to get paid? And if she does not get paid, what does her eight-year medical degree even mean? Nothing! And then the world would be full of untreated hemorrhoids! So, she said, *do* something about your hemorrhoid and I will see you tomorrow.

It was 1997 by the time I was fired for too many absences and I regularly forgot to eat. Remaining in my house became less than a satisfying experience; I even tried swallowing a half a cup of dish detergent, but all that did was force me to expel every bodily fluid imaginable from the depths of every available orifice. I was hungry. I was sick. But I was also pleasantly excited. I missed mother every day. Every night I spoke to her and said see you soon. See you soon, mother, because I miss you with all my heart.

But, when on the verge of happy collapse, Shota12 returned.

Shota12. *Shhhh* like a whisper. -ota like an open mouth. And the perfect number twelve. Alive, blooming, little lovely bud. His name, all that I had, a pick of precious pixels, appeared online. I hovered over him with my cursor. Hard to breathe. Over and over, I spoke his name. Shota12. Shhhh. Shhhhhhhhh. Shhhhhh. (There are exactly nine more of these sensual *shhhh*'s, my friends, and I apologize; if I could skip ahead, I would, but unfortunately, because I have memorized the story in order, if I skip a single word I will forget my place and have to start all over again.) Shhhhhhhhh. Shhhhhhhhh. Shhhhhh. Shhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh. Shhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh. Shhhhhh. Shhhhhh. Shhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh. Shhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh.

Yet, at the same time, I did not want him back. Do you understand? I was nearly dead, you see. So close to reuniting with mother. Shota12's return was unfair. The first thing he said was that he had not been allowed to use the computer for several weeks. I did not respond immediately.

“Every day and night since we last spoke, I thought about you.” He continued, obviously responding to my cold silence. “You have to believe me.”

Oh, how could I ignore the poor child?

“I looked for you, whenever I snuck onto the computer.”

Brave baby buck! Adorable faunlet! What was I supposed to do? I could not just sit there in silence. I had to do something!

“Well,” he continued, “I hope you can forgive me. No one else will do. I love you.”

I attempted to imagine a Shota12, a physical green-eyed faunlet, and his round bottom in my lap, in a blue tank and summer shorts, napping by my side even, twitching legs, singing in his sleep—all this to stir my insides. All was well. No more questions! The bristles of light bodied hair on his shins. And then I would lightly wake him with the hush of my voice. Dear Shota12, dear my affectionate love. He wiggles. He squirms—ah! gentle moment, quiet equipoise!—and lifts his chin up to meet my moaning

mouth. I clench his sunburnt thigh. The boy likes to play out in the summer haze like I might have done had I been a friendfull scamp at his age. I rest one hand beneath his chest, lift him, and swing him around like a bird. He giggles. What fun! I push my hand towards the yellow zipper on his shorts—

“I need you to do something for me.” He said.

But I was not in an alternate state of consciousness; indeed, were a phone to ring—which it would most definitely not since I did not no anyone who would call me in the first place—I would have heard it. The image of Shota12's ripened legs on my own, pig pink fingers tugging at the collar of my button-up, kept falling apart in my head. Yes, you might expect me to say that it was the most transformative euphoric absolution I have ever experienced. It was not about enjoyment; it was about satisfaction. But nothing came, quite literally. There was no conclusion. Incredibly disappointing. So, you see, I really had no choice. I needed to know. No more standing around. Time to take action.

“Anything, anything.” I finally said to him.

“I need you to save me, my love.” He said.

I did not need to ask him from what. I knew what he needed saving from. Clearly, he had been kidnapped by an odious malefactor, stuffed in the trunk of a Subaru, duct-taped and gagged, a tasty amusement for the beast's vengery. Only now has Shota12 had the opportunity to seek assistance which would explain his brief withdrawal! It had nothing to do with my age!

“Should I call the police?” I frantically typed.

“No.” He said. “It needs to be you.”

It was at this moment when I realized I did not need to write a best-selling adaptation of dear Vladimir's *Lolita*. Why try writing a book—a daunting and complicated task—when I could just save this twelve-year-old boy from a dismal and uncertain demise and be a hero instead? Imagine, if you will, the following scene: an assortment of cameras, lights, and newsmen all huddled outside the house in which Shota12 has been stowed. The day is overcast, flecks of rain. Then I, carrying the broken body of

Shota12 across the altar of my arms, burst through the door. A beam of light breaks through the clouds. Lots of cheering from the crowd. A dapper Dave, grim and solemn and serious, approaches me with a microphone. What of the perpetrator? He asks. The perpetrator, I say, is no more. The boy is safe. My little lovely boy is safe.

After all, it was better than sitting around my house doing nothing.

“What can I do?” I said.

“It is my parents.” He said. “You absolutely must save me.”

Ah, perhaps the prepubescent ganymede was not kidnapped; however, what other reason could a twelve-year-old boy have to hate his parents unless they beat him daily or kept him locked in a closet under the stairs? (Just replace the word “perpetrator” in the previous scene with the word “parents”, my friends, and the same effect is accomplished.) It is a wonder that Shota12 was cognitively mature enough to operate a computer—what, with his blood stained ankles, bruised and scarred kneecaps, lambastic shadows on his back, between his thighs. My poor catamite. I snatched a nearby Kleenex and wiped my forehead.

My lust pumped slowly and the queerest thing occurred. I started wondering, my friends, wondering what the richness of Shota12's hair was, the touch and smell of his feet. The color of his eyes. From what dripping Sodom did he tinkle-type his verse? What was his name?

“How soon can you be here?” He said.

“Where do you live?” I asked, prepared for him to say Wisconsin, South Dakota, Iowa, but instead I got—

“Florida. Just outside of Pahokee.”

I dashed for one of the road maps mother kept in the office. I drew a line from my house to Pahokee and returned to the computer.

“It will take me several days to drive.” I said.

“Where do you live?” He asked.

“Minnesota.”

“Take a plane.”

“But I would have to buy you a ticket, too.”

“You can do that.”

Of course, the truth was that I could not even afford a ticket to Florida for myself—let alone gas to drive all the way there—seeing as I had just lost my only source of income. I told my faunlet this and his response was most expeditious:

“Oh, bye then.”

“Wait!”

I should have let him go, but another idea spawned. I could call the police, report child abuse, and still be give a slot on the seven o'clock news. The parents would still die—in prison or by gunshot—and they could transport the boy to me. But when I told Shota12 my plan, he quickly reciprocated:

“NO!” He said. (In all capital letters, my friends.) And then, “You cannot call them. It has to be you. No one else can save me.”

“But, my wee skulled cockerel!” I said. “Certainly the police will be better equipped to reach you in time before they kill you.”

Then he paused and said, “Is that what you think they will do?”

“Please, stop fooling around.” I started smashing the keys. “They could kill you at any moment!”

“You silly goose—”

“Oh, how could you?”

“—my parents are not going to kill me.”

Shota12 said that his parents have never touched him. So I have nothing to worry about.

“Then from what am I saving you?”

He said to let him explain. His parents are always off on business trips and they are never home. He said his mom tries to be there when she can, but not really. She only pretends. And she calls her colonial lady snooters over when she is bored—such fussy names he listed, Mrs. DuPont, Mrs. Martin, Mrs. Kit, so on and so on, who I imagine all took the names of their financially satisfied husbands. The fact of the matter is, he said, that his parents care more about themselves than they do him and he has had it up to here with school, curfew, being lonely and never having pizza in the house. He said he has even tried to throw himself in front of a speeding train but instead of being blasted into a thousand pieces his little body fit so snugly between the tracks that the train just zoomed right over him. He escaped unscathed. On and on he went, about his father's business—a sporting goods store owner with an office in Fort Lauderdale, seventy miles away, captivating harlots left and right, he would have to assume. His mother owned an elderly daycare service. He had two siblings, Rosie and Samantha, out at so-and-so doing who-knows-what with bachelor's degrees in nobody-cares. Seven cousins, three seconds, a short-limbed nephew somewhere, two half-breed pit bulls—

“And everyone else around here is a Cuban.” He said. “Or a Spanish. Or whatever.”

“A Spanish! Oh my!” I said.

The boy only wanted someone to show him affection. His humanity warmed my heart. I understood his grief. How dare his parents neglect such a captivating cupid? Those heathens. If I did not make the papers saving Shota12 from child abuse, at least I could save the life of an innocent young boy from neglect—and from any further ridiculous attempts at suicide.

I asked Shota12 for his address. He gave it to me with a supplementary winky-face. It was a housing complex not a mile east from Lake Okeechobee. I would have to purchase a round trip to and from West Palm Beach and an extra ticket for the flight home—not to mention ordering a rental car and paying for gas. In total, the journey would cost me roughly eight hundred big ones that I did not have.

“I will have to get a job.” I said to myself.

I told Shota12 to give me two weeks. He pleaded with me to get there sooner and I said I would try.

Our conversations continued for the next few days, but Shota12 seemed only to respond when asked questions about his life. We occasionally spoke of my suffering—which was a severe modification to our earlier correspondence. I told him about the time I had a brother who died in utero. I told him about the time in second grade when mother almost crashed us into Lake of the Willow south of West Calhoun on our way to school. I even told him about the time in my freshman year when I auditioned for a high school production of *The Bald Soprano* and was subsequently cast as the hair. Shota12's rejoinders were gradually laconic and arrived at a haste which I mistook for alacrity while my messages were loquacious and often spanned several lines of text. Any attempt to reign him back in, to get him to send something significant was futile. And at the end of every day he would ask me if I had enough money to save him yet. I would say I was working on it. I could feel his interest leaking away. I gave these attempts at escape no quarter, you see. I would not have him trying to kill himself. So I made sure we were chatting at every hour of the day.

Furthermore, Shota12 never described his physical appearance and such. Whenever I asked about what he looked like, he offered cheeky innuendos as though attempting to start a lascivious scene—what are you wearing? I said. Clothes, he replied, but I do not have to be, and then he sent me one of those kittenish winky-faces.

I stared at myself in the computer screen while simultaneously scrolling through that day's conversation with Shota12. Yes, it would be fine to have a record of our conversations. I should have written them down somewhere, previous chapters of this epistolary novel vanished, some passages particularly fruitful in their literary merit, others not quite so much—but I could dispense with those as I have already here done. In the moment I thought how nice it would be to have a trinket at all, a symbol of our love, as they say, something I could keep with me at all times—at least of those more lust

inspiring parts of the conversation.

Then a Spring evening came, cast over by rain, and at the end of one of our daily interactions, Shota¹² asked if I wanted him to send up a photograph but—much to your surprise I am sure—I did not answer immediately. Oh, I wanted it. No doubt that I wanted it. This fire hot, metal yellow desire. Plunged into water. Steam rise. Ahhhhhh. But what, noble Lord, would be the consequence? *Confiteor deo Omnipotenti*, bless me, bless me. I have sinned, *cogitatione*. Oh, *mea culpa, mea maxima culpa*. So on and so forth—but in all seriousness, a photograph would just be a seragliotic distraction to my job-search (which, I need not remind you, my friends, was already disappointingly sterile). What was I to do? I could choose either between the abyssal chaos of not having a concretizing image or the moral chaos of having one. Two choices, yes, but what if I just sat at my computer and looked at my reflection in the computer screen without saying a word and simply starved myself to death?

My faunlet, however, with one of his proverbial winks, said he would send me the photo anyway and just like that my choice was made, however forced. Clearly, there was no stopping my miniature Ganymede from sending me his photograph. Scoffing, I was determined to put it in a four-by-four frame on my wall where it belonged—as though he were my son from a past betrothal. Keep it chaste, very chaste.

“If I send it,” he said, “you have to send me a photo of you when you were my age. Promise?”

He said he thought I would really like the photo, but would have to send it tomorrow when his father left for a three-day white-collar orgy in Williamsburg and his mother synonymously went to coordinate a 5k for three hundred senior citizens in and around West Palm Beach. How lucky for them, I thought, that they would all get a chance to heave-ho and die.

“Until then.” I said.

“Haha.” He replied and signed off.

Oh, he laughed. That bubbly boy. We would need to work on that, educate the little fellow. It is

not his fault, I kept telling myself, sweeping my way to the bathroom, removing my clothes. It was his parents, I said. I released a steaming flood into the tub where I sat and hum-diddily-ummed in the dark.

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Three days later and the photo still had not arrived. When I told him the photo had gotten lost in the mail, I asked him to send another one. He told me “nah”—nah! How insolent! I do not mind telling you that I nearly chucked the keyboard across the room.

“Well, you must have sent it to the wrong address at least.” I said.

He did not respond to this. We remained silent for the rest of the day.

The next day, I worked myself into a stupor. There was a half-eaten pepperoni pizza in the fridge I could have munched on, but I lost my appetite. I even went out to socialize. I watched a high school play—a mediocre adaptation of *The Bell Jar* by an unintelligent brunette named Keli (with an “i”) Homebody—and left at intermission. I drove to the library and thumbed through the selection of books-on-tape. Before getting sick of the voice, I listened to half a cassette's worth of Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, read to me by Emma Bunton. I flipped through Flaubert, flirted with Forster. I plucked an old copy of Ibsen's *Gedda Habbler* from the shelf and sat at one of the short tables in the corner. I parted the text open and grabbed a pencil from the library's endless supply of pencils and started making corrections. Just then a puffy bald headed adolescent, who showed me his new library card and made sure I knew his name was Gilbert—or Filbert, or Gordon, or something or other—came by with a toy fire truck and asked if I wanted to play with him. He moved up so close to my chair that I made out the stale scent of cheddar and ammonia oozing from his tiny-toothed craw. What a joke God, Christ—Sam, for all I knew—was playing on me! There was a plain but relatively tempting Mason, Martin, or Morris just two tables away working on his homework, sucking his pen! Sam, would it have been so difficult to send me such a modest angel? No, I do not think it would have been so difficult. And Gilbert/Filbert/Gordon/Flordon kept poking me in the shoulder with his fire truck.

Eventually, I closed *Betty Babbler* and made my way out of the room. Flordo, whose little lips started quivering, shuffled back to a purple mat on the floor in the kid's section and sadly choo-chooed his fire truck left and right.

I went to the front desk to borrow the text when I realized I did not have my library card. I returned to my place at the table thinking it had fallen from my pocket when I noticed Floyd had started silently crying in the corner, fire truck and library card spiritless on the mat. He had his paws up to his face hoping no one would notice. My guess is that several people noticed. They just did not care about the bald-headed thing. (Now, listen to this, my friends.) I went over to him, kneeled down, and patted the boy on his back. At first he recoiled, but then I started choo-chooing his fire truck around. He started giggling. He wiped his snot covered nose with his sleeve. He wore a Blue's Clues shirt. I saw the program a few times. I asked if he liked the show. He grinned and nodded.

“Do you want to play a game?” I asked.

He nodded in the same overzealous manner again.

“Mother and I used to play this. Close your eyes and I will hide your library card somewhere. Then, you have to find it. Does that sound like fun?”

He closed his eyes.

I took his library card and stuck it in between a pile of children's books—*Goodnight Moon*, *The Hungry Hungry Caterpillar*—with just the corner sticking out. Then I stood up in the center of the children's section and told the boy to open his eyes. He immediately started toddling around, bending over, looking in every nook and cranny. Impatient, I whistled suspiciously and nodded towards the stack of books. He giggled and grabbed the card victoriously. We did this a few more times. Then an angry woman came around complaining they would be late for a doctor's appointment. She picked up her son and walked away without a word.

I went home and put my head in the oven, but realized at about 100°F that it was electric and

would take far too long to broil myself to death—for Christ's sake, mother, my darling! How I longed to take my head between your lovely arms again. Reapply my bandages. Replace my urine soaked pajamas. How happy I was to die before Shota¹² reared his pretty head back into my life.

“Oh!” I said between handfuls of aspirin. “Oh, better that the photo never arrives!”

Suddenly, a small brown sleeve popped through the mail slot. I spat out the aspirin and went downstairs. There was no return address, no identifying information other than my name and address. I picked it up and undid the adhesive at the top, popped it open, and drew from its abyss a coffee stained Polaroid that fit snugly in my palm. I do not know who took the photo, but it would have been impossible for him to have taken it himself. At the time, however, I did not care. I recall every detail of that long-lost photo and will descant it to you here. The world of the photo, a glossy bedroom, was hued in the reagent contrast typical of instant cameras. White walls, caressed by scraps of yellowy paper. Bushels of toilet paper scattered across the room, cigarette butts, and a Lite-Brite against the wall and thousands of colorful, plastic pins beside it, and a neon-green Super Soaker, and a Nintendo. In the reflection of the television the flash of the Polaroid camera blazed like the light at the end of a tunnel. It concealed the photographer's shape quite ingeniously. The windows were covered by black sheets—which evened out the coverless lamp by the bedside. And he—my faunlet, my catamitic cupid, my Shota shh shhhhh—was on his bed, a frail, honey-hued prepubescent angel with almond hair and voluptuous, porcelain lips. Half-shut hazel eyes, melting mouth, a naked belly of warmth, arched spine, upper limbs raised carelessly across the top of his head—quite seductive. If you could draw your attention now to the inguinal crease at his waist where his shorts were just barely lingering. Oh, palpitating figure! Primordial pederos! No, hush yourself, I said, hold—

I dashed to the bathroom and uncontrollably masturbated into the toilet.

Inexplicably, I also threw-up.

I turned the photograph over on the bathroom counter, cursing the boy—no, cursing myself—no, cursing the dead. Ejaculating offered no satisfaction! I only wanted more of it! In fact, I became so frustrated, that I turned around and masturbated again; although, this time, I threw-up purple before reaching climax, all over my clothes. The scene was obscenely Dionysian. The only thing that could have made my suffering more hysterical was a wine guzzling goat man vocalizing catholic hymns in the shower. I went downstairs and tossed my clothes into the washing machine and, as I waited with my naked hips against the vibrating drum, I looked at Shota12's portrait and masturbated again. This time, I threw up into the old sump pump well. I have never been to a fraternity party—surprise, surprise—although one night coming from my Classics course back at Stanford, I passed by the house of Sigma Alpha Epsilon and the lights! Purple, yellow, crystal, green! And the sound was a silly old sixties tune that had remained popular well into the nineties—*viva viva, neon cry, crashin' bandits, glasses high*; or something like that. It had one of those catchy choruses with silly lyrics. Dancing shadows in the windows and the caustic smell of sweat and ale. My head in the basement was in a similarly groggy space that I associate with such raucous bacchanalia.

But back to business: I returned to the computer after wiping my mouth, ready to tell Shota12 about the photograph's appearance, but he was not online, nor was he the next day, nor the next. The nighttimes drifted on and on, my loneliness a constituent of my heartbreak, even the bleak low shades on my window seemed to realize this. I reasoned to myself that it was a Floridian storm, a grand tsunami that severed the power in Pahokee—not that I had heard of any such thing in the news that day. Alas, Shota12 never came back, even after months of waiting.

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I did not know that I would never hear from him again, however, and I still had his address The boy needing saving—no doubt about that—and the only way I could think to speak with him was if I buckled down, got a job, and purchased a flight to Pahokee.

Thus began my job search. I spent the next month thumbing through the classifieds in a local paper and modelling interview attire in the bathroom mirror. I was drawn to a khaki double-button blazer/conservative blue button-down combination. You should have seen me. I looked the proverbial gentleman. I did my best to fold a piece of toilet paper into the breast pocket just to see what it would feel like.

When I was not performing dress-up, I practiced barging through my front door, and would make a mad dash for my car through an onslaught of imaginary news reporters whilst cradling a potato sack of sand in my arms as if it were the delicate bones of a pale prepubescent, and I would yell “leave us alone!”—what? a celebrity should, after all, provide some manner of chase, the Athenian how they say *poikilos nomos* for one's paparazzi. I could still enjoy the pursuit. Case in point: when before I would have slit my wrists before acting out in public, now I very much seemed to enjoy the real attention I collected from the jogging couplets or the Mrs. Next-Door-Neighbor watering her zinnias across the street or the garbage man whose name was whatever.

There was an opening for a janitorial temp at the public pool in Crystal. The Walgreens four or five blocks down wanted a customer service associate *and* a senior pharmacist—those hogs. An employment agency in the city “currently supporting a Top Fortune 500 company”—unnamed, I might emphasize—was looking for a financial planner who “[excelled] at building long-term relationships and [was] comfortable working with numbers”. Now, numbers I am comfortable with (I am sure you have noticed, friends, how easy it is for me to remember them); the long-term relationships, however, are certainly desired but trickier. I continued searching until fate offered a consumerist reprieve: the Target in Brooklyn Park was looking for a cashier. The description was direct and specific: smile and wave, smile and wave. I applied for an interview. Two weeks later, they penciled me in for Friday at 11:00.

When I arrived in my stunning professional garb, I was asked to take a seat across from a seven-layered cake named John Anderson whose thin neck was absurdly out of proportion to the rest of his

hefty build. He held out his hand with a startling gusto and for a moment I could not be sure what he wanted me to do with it. I shook it a bit, realizing that my skin felt like grape skin, and sat down. He asked me a few questions about my previous work experience. I relayed my time at the proctology office. He asked why I quit and I told him I left my last position as a receptionist to spend more time with a family member who needed my attention.

“Well,” the cake continued, “your job requirements will be straightforward, but no less important than the duties of which I am required. We are not looking for mediocrity here. The Target is a serious institution where employees come to be an important part of an important family. We are confronted by common laborers frequently, you know. They come and think they can work on the floor for another day, another dollar, lift a box here, rack a shirt there—and for what? A bottle of cold medicine? This will not do, this will not do, you know. You absolutely must know. Life is all about the Target.” I nodded encouragingly as he went on. “I, Mister John T. Anderson, have personally selected from several willing candidates who have presented their best impersonation of a son, a daughter, a loving wife, and I have thrown each and every one of them out the front entrance at the expense of my credibility. Do you know why? Because I was looking for real sons, real daughters, and real loving wives—” here, he twiddled his wedding ring, a bunted brass knob on a peanut buttery nipple, “—this is my wife, Mrs. Amanda Anderson, of ten fine years. And here are my children—” he indicated a frame facing me on his desk, two toothy grins, the boy's of which was relatively lovely. I nodded for no reason in particular and he went on, “—I love them, but they remain at home. At work, my employees are my family, you know. Certainly, you have heard all this before [nod, nod]. In the past, of course, we have had altercations with various stepsons, grandparents, and children undisciplined, who have all been associated with organizations whose employee/employer conduct is such that it would do well to remain unaffiliated with them—off the record, Wal-Mart, Costco, Disneyland, you know [nod, nod, oh yes]. Some businesses are just better than others and at the Target—particularly at the Target of

Brooklyn Park—I expect you to understand how much each and every one my relatives means to me, so we do our best to rechannel whatever habits you might have acquired from these previous alliances with undistinguished cold-blooded companies into constructive practice that are in-line with the Target family's three most cherished values: community, humility, and dignity. We take care of our own here, you know? And, certainly, it is not unusual to expect the best from our sons and daughters. Correspondingly, we expect our employees to take unconditional pleasure in scanning toilet wipes, six-packs of Root Beer, water. We expect employees to translate such pleasure into life fulfillment. If they choose not to do this, they will be reasonably disowned and can find some other company with whom they will inevitably decompose, you know [nod]. It is of chief importance that we do the best we can for one another, make the proper sacrifices, so that this grand mechanism can continue to flourish almighty.”

Mr. Anderson then sat there and drank the pause as if he expected me to stand up and applaud. I nodded in agreement instead. He smiled and continued,

“As a cashier of the Target family, you will be held to the highest standards as anyone else. You can expect rigorous supervision to make sure you apply yourself adequately and beyond, you know [nod, nod]. A little joke I like to make is that we are a cabinet of the Red House—” he waited for me to laugh, so I chuckled, “—the Red House, as opposed to the White House, you know? So, when you are standing at your station—I believe you will be assigned to lane ten or twelve—when you are standing, you will want to smile and ask if our customer has found everything they were looking for. Obviously, you will want to make sure you attend to every waiting guest as well. You can say 'I will be right with you!' This is very important. Otherwise the customer may just give up and walk out the front door. Another important task—and this is key so please be listening, many a good son has fallen because they did not follow this commandment—only engage in conversation with our customer when it is appropriate.”

And if I knew anything about check-out lanes in department stores, this meant never. Splendid!

“And because we are a community, your tasks will not merely be subjected to the check-out lanes. On occasion, you will be required to work on the floor. You will be required to stock, answer questions about new electronics or clothing in our various departments, and vacuum the rugs. With that—” he flapped a packet in my face and set it down before me “—please fill out this survey which will determine how well you can adapt yourself to a loving community and we will call you with your results in the next couple days. Maybe soon you, too, will be a red-clad member of the hearty Targgy family.”

He folded his hands together around his belly and leaned back. I filled out the survey and within a week, I was a red-clad member of the hearty Targgy family. But I will admit to some hesitation during application procedures. One question at the bottom of the third page of the survey, complimented by the proverbial check box, stuck in my gut —“have you ever been convicted of a felony?”—perfectly harmless question, perfectly rational. If not for the patrol vehicle I saw cruising mildly past my abode the morning of my interview, I would have swept past the question without giving it a second thought. I never took notice of civic authority in the way I did that morning. As I unlocked the door to my beige Ford Escort, aptly practicing my paparazzi parry with a sack of sand cushioned in the crook of my left arm, the menacing orca-white auto passed my driveway. He stared, I stared, eyes locked in an intimate but shadowy gaze. Just as he reached the bottom of the hill, he made a U-turn, motored back up, and disappeared the way he came. Any psychoanalyst and law enforcement dignitary will tell you about superimposed guilt—that is, phantom guilt where there is none to be felt. But, my friends, I believed I was perhaps guilty of something, guilty of giving in, guilty guilty guilty—oh dear god, the word clangs in my ear like a repetitive drum. And in the moment, do not forget this, I had an urge so distinct, so clear, so precise that I wonder to this day what stopped me from acting on it. Me, running back into the house, swiping Shota12's photo, and handing it to the police officer in the street, saying, men, I have lain waste to this little cherub. Arrest me, put me on death row—gas me, if you must! Just stop me before I do it

again. But, instead of turning myself in to potentially fatal consequences, I got in my car and drove to the Target in Brooklyn Park.

Into the fourteen days of my employment, my acquaintance with that same employee mentioned earlier, a puffy, short-legged, olive-skinned babushka, became inevitable. This woman—whose name I cannot now recall (see, my friends?)—introduced herself to me on the first of those days, obviously forgetting that we had already met. When she spoke, she sounded like what I imagine a flying fish might sound like were such a fish able to speak. She came up to me from behind near the end of my shift with a half-full bottle of Corona and hip-checked me into the scanner on lane ten.

“So,” she gurgled through gulps of beer, “are you seeing anyone?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact.” I said. I did not tell the whole truth, understandably. I simply said my faunlet was a twenty-four year old pastor's daughter named Arie—or Anna; I forget now which I said—with whom I had shared wholesome relations for five tender months at the age of twelve, but her father, whom she affectionately called daddy, sent her away to a boarding school in Crete, Illinois. Many years later, she fell in love with another man—Theo, I believe I said—who was a member of the Army, or the National Guard, or whatever. He was stationed at a military base on an island nearby, but after marrying my sweetheart Arie/Anna he was transferred to a camp in southern Florida. Of course she went with him. They married! There they fostered three beautiful boys until Theo was sent to Afghanistan and died in combat. I believe I told the babushka for the purpose of cultivating pathos that the troops never returned his body and, just like his body, my lovely Arie, my blue golden Anna, never came back home. She remains in Florida to this day. I told the babushka that I just recently rehabilitated correspondence with Arie/Anna and that the pitiful broad hoped I might join her but alas—said with an appropriate droop of the brow—I must work to raise money so that I can reach her.

This story was not composed on the spot, of course. I planned it a while back, what I might say should I get so overexcited about my love for Shota¹² that I must tell someone and, of course, I

borrowed storytelling strategies from the Classics. As I recited my script to the bumbly woman, I was enigmatically struck by a scorching jealousy. The possibility that my melodiously curved faunlet had found someone else, nearer both in age—he did, after all, complain that I was not younger—and nearer in distance was a plausible concern. A cuckold! I am a cuckold, of all things! Honestly, I would have preferred he had been swept off his feet by a deluge!

I finished the story and, with nothing left to say, I changed subjects, “Is it quite legal for you to be drinking on the clock?”

As a rejoinder, she downed the rest of her Corona, pinched my buttocks lovingly with a bandaged wrist, and said see me tomorrow. She waddled away, a loose string of diamonds jingling about her cronish neck. And I have no more strength to speak of her at the moment—just do not forget her. The horrid woman shall make her unpleasant return in due time. I have provided below a characterization for those of you who are impatient. Otherwise, skip ahead (unfortunately, my friends, I have memorized my tale *with* the following characterization; you have no choice but to listen): the babushka liked to balk. On later afternoons, during the crests of our few and minor breathers, she waddled down with me—uninvited—to the break room which was a scatologically dark cave behind a heavy red door. There was one box of flickering fluorescents that sang in the proverbial but pointless buzz. As I made my coffee—two creams, half a bag of Sugar in the Raw, and three grand whirls with the stick—she always took the liberty to remark on my troubles in that folksy canter of hers by steering, as she was wont to do, the conversation back to herself over the open bottle of a Corona. And she endlessly monologued on the history of her Palestinian family, her great-great-grandsomethings and her uncountable siblings. “*Antaa fyn ya Aisha, habibtī? Alya? Hashim?*” She would cry dramatically and look at the wall. “I miss them dearly. Do you know I have not been near them in many months? We are ... a broken family.”

Strangely—and I am not sure if this is important—I recall her telling me that she married a Finn

who helped move her entire living family to the United States in some ancient time and here she remains. When she was not lamenting about the state of her familial relations, she was touching me in uncomfortable places. Apparently, the babushka was a cougar who truly showed her gums.

Naturally, I put in a complaint with Mr. John T. Anderson.

Now, back to important things: three more months as a member of the hearty Targgy family passed. I spent the first and last hours of every day driving through increasingly larger torrents of rainfall. At some point during a particularly blustery week when local meteorologists were predicting severe thunderstorms and even the chance of a tornado, an errant tit hit the mechanism at the bottom of my passenger's side windshield wiper. Logically, I think I would have survived without it, but you cannot imagine the visual incongruence of one wiper wiping and the other looking like an overdramatic widow posing on a fainting couch. Really, it was worse than participating in a fatal collision with another vehicle. So, on a green-skied Saturday, I went to a local car mechanic to restore the vehicle's symmetry. There is where it occurred to me, when I wrote the greasy man a check, that I was making \$5.15 per hour at the Target. If I worked nine hours a day, six days a week excluding Saturday or Sunday—which is all the seven-layered cake would allow me (“although I appreciate your devotion, comrade”)—I would make \$556.20 at the end of every bi-weekly period and that meant a very lousy annual—

Oh confound it! I could barely do basic math in my head without being interrupted with thoughts of Shota12 interrupted. Anytime this happened, I dropped what I was doing, went into the bathroom stalls, and masturbated uncontrollably.

11

One evening, while I stood thinking of my captivating cupid behind the register at lane twelve, prepared to go masturbate uncontrollably in the loo, the babushka from Palestine—whose appearances were never rare enough—shimmied over in all her glorious robustness and, you guessed it, a bottle of Corona in hand. I thought she must have just showered in the bathroom sink. She placed her soaking

arms across the little red table on which guests signed their receipts. I cannot imagine what she had against the table.

“My sister,” she began, “lives in Karlstad up north and she is very sick, you know—”

“And I live here and I am very sick of you.”

Yes, yes, I was aware of my bitter candor, but the woman's casual disposition so frustrated me (it was a place of business, my friends!) that I physically convulsed and climaxed in my pants. Yes, one would think that her presence might predicate the opposite, that my lust might be extinguished single-handedly. In fact, I wonder, my friends, thinking about it now, if this had been the case, perhaps I would have begun preferring her company. We might even have become good friends, friends who sat side-by-side on a porch drinking Corona under the moonlight! But the woman's constant yammering made sure I always lost control. So, there I was with pants full of warm jelly and a striking urge to vomit.

“What put a beet in your basket?” She asked with a flick of her wrist. Before I could respond, she continued. “No, you know what you need? A good swim in a pool. Come with me to the Y in New Hope tonight [a swig and another swig]. Take off those clothes and relax. I cannot swim myself, but I can make sure you do not drown—do you know, I used to be a lifeguard there? Yes, with my brother, Tarek [swig swig]. But he left sometime ago and, well, these old bones.” Then she cackled and waved her arms in my face. Drips of water congealed on the scanner. “He is in Karlstad with the rest of my family, do you know that? And it seems they are very happy up there. I try to visit as often as I can, but these old bones, these old bones.”

“Certainly, you do not need to gloat about your bones.” I said, shifting uncomfortably on the plastic black mat. Saliva surged onto my tongue and I stepped away from my booth. “Now, if you will excuse me.”

But the babushka followed me to the bathroom, and leaned right up against the stall in which I so thoroughly puked. And all the while she monologued obliviously about brothers and sisters and wives

and husbands, nephews, aunts, second cousins once removed, and in-laws. Then suddenly she stopped talking and, for a moment, relief swept through my ailing belly, but then I saw her shadow limping back and forth under the opening in the door. Why had she stopped?

“Hey, I know what it is.” She said with a touch of melancholy, more affecting than I had ever expected her sadness to be. Nonetheless, I impatiently clasped and tapped the surrounding porcelain—oh, the affirming chill of the ever-pearly, ever-cleansing American Standard! What *would* I do without you? Footnote: to be said in the same sparkly way a housewife might in a 60s ad campaign for toiletries—“I love the way it makes me feel!” I flushed my waste, hoping to drown out whatever it was the babushka woman knew, but alas her voice came through the rushing fresh-water stream.

“You stop by my house sometime, you will see. It is a ramshackle bungalow off Lyndale and twenty-sixth, easy to miss. Paint is peeling—these old bones—and I have two kitty-cats, a Maine coon named Aba and a chocolate calico named Daphne. They like to shed, so you just bring clothes you do not mind getting hairy. But you stop by my house and you will see. I have framed photos everywhere, on the hearth, in the kitchen, plenty on the roll-up secretary desk—which was there when I moved in, I do not use it—and they are all bright smiling faces. My nephew and his sister playing on a swing set in summer. Khala Fatima sharing a hot dog with her son. My father, smoking, giving his granddaughter a ride on his wheelchair. My wedding photo. Maternity. They remind me I have a family. Somewhere nearby—”

“Why are you talking?” I said with a resounding reverb in the toilet bowl.

“When I moved down to the city, who knows why I left Karlstad. I certainly do not.” She chuckled. “But who knows why anybody ever leaves anyway, huh? Sometimes they just go and there is nothing you can do to get them back. I would forget her, Hector. Focus on what you have.”

My name is not Hector. But I did not correct her since she was on her way out. She tossed her empty Corona in the receptacle and clop-clopped away.

I started bringing Shota's Polaroid to the Target because I could no longer bare to live nine hours a day without seeing his face. I knit a pocket on the inside of my hearty Targgy vest—shoddy, but it would do—and kept the photo there. Between guests at the register, or stacking packages of boy's underwear in the clothing department, I would sneak him out and look. However, suffice to say, this did not quell my lust—nor did it help my visibly strained work ethic.

On a cloudy night during one of my closing shifts in May, I returned from a trip to the bathroom to find Mr. John T. Anderson, the all-knowing cake, waiting for me by the adult dungarees.

“Ah, yes, Mr. Anderson,” I began, “I would like to follow-up on an employee complaint and request that you consider terminating her immediately—”

He lifted his arm and put it around my neck. He breathed in and we looked at a wall of half-price jeans and 30% off sweaties.

“Son,” the cake began. “You know I want my friends and family to be happy. We are a team. I have said it before. Do I need to say it again? We are a community, you know [nod, nod]. On the clock, I forget about anyone who is not working and focus on the people around me. Everything I do is for you. But we are also human and humans, on occasion, must relieve themselves, rid themselves of everything wasteful, yes? And we should be able to talk about these kinds of things.”

I nodded. His tone strained paternal, a “well, ma boy” but one he was not used to implementing—rather adorable, in fact. And before he continued, he walked me down an aisle of Hanes socks and Fruit of the Loom underthings. Then he stopped and stood with his arm around me for several slow minutes, poking the packages of unorderedly underthings back into place. I really quite appreciated his sense of structure my friends. Size ten, size eight, briefs and boxers. Open season for the ducks.

“You know, when I was your age, I had a touch of urinary incontinence that always put me in a tight spot with the bullies. Mom made me wear an electronic thingamajig to bed at night that was

supposed to keep me from peeing in the sheets. The thing started vibrating my left thigh if it felt a hint a moisture, but that was the thing, you know? [nod, nod] Yeah, I had to pee my pants a little just for it to work and I was a heavy sleeper—oh yeah. I sure was. Darn thing never stopped me. I just kept on peeing the bed.”

He clapped my shoulder again and again. I expect it was a conditional reflex he unconsciously employed whenever he was uncomfortable—no doubt, a systemic response to the responsibilities of marriage.

“I want what is best for you.” He said, adopting a breathiness that, if I can be honest for a minute, put me into a gentle mood. “So, you will listen when I say, get yourself some adult diapers.”

I was speechless.

“They work!” He said, marking the spasm in my left deltoid. “If you are worried about your dignity, there is nothing to be ashamed of. There is a little crunch in your step when you walk, but no one else will notice. You want me to give you a sample or two? Try a few brands out? I like the Prevail, but that is because they have an adjustable waist. You might want something softer or cheaper like Depend or Wings—new brand, pretty fandangled technology in them. What do you say? I will bring over a couple tomorrow and we can trade in the break room when no one is looking, yeah? You seem unconvinced. No need to be uncomfortable about it. Let me show you how they work.”

Before I could react, he walked me down the make-up aisle, past the scanners, and down the hall towards the break room.

“I will just give you a little peek.” He said. “There is really nothing to be ashamed of.”

Then he tried pushing the door open, but it would not budge.

“Darn this thing.” He mumbled and tried again, nothing doing. All he could manage was a few centimeters before something forced the door shut again. “There seems to be ... a blockage ... hello? Is somebody in there? Hello?”

There was no response.

“It would be darn nice of you to let us in, hey?”

He waved me over and I helped him push. When there was enough space, he squeezed his head into the room and—

“Oh geeze.” He said. He popped his head back out into the hall. “Mr. Humdrum seems to have hung himself. Well, come, come, help me in now.”

We pushed the door with all our might until there was enough space for the cake to get inside—which was a feat, let me tell you. The door slammed shut when he made it through the crack. The sound of a chair sliding across the floor, some funny wrapping noise, and a thump. He opened the door for me and invited me in.

A beetle-eyed bulbous man was sitting casually in front of the door. Wrapped tightly around his neck was a blue hose. Mr. Anderson must have removed the ceiling tiles and unwrapped the hose from there. He knelt down and examined the noose.

“You know what that is?” He said, unwrapping the coil. “That is a Teknor Apex hose. No wonder it is our best-selling brand! Well, there is nothing for it. Gotta get this fella out of here and make sure no one finds out about this. By the smell of it he died not a few moments ago.”

“But sir—”

“Do you suppose he opened it in here?” He said. “We might be able to sell the darn thing still if we can find the box. Ah!”

Mr. Anderson picked up the octagonal box from underneath the table, re-coiled the hose back inside with the delicacy of a clockmaker, and folded the box back into perfect condition.

“There. Now, help me lift him, will you? I strained my back the other day after leaning down to clean up some leftover casserole. I do not think I will be able to handle lifting a person.”

I dug my hand underneath Mr. Humdrum's swollen arms and pulled him forward while Mr.

Anderson opened the door. We dragged him out into the hall. Mr. Anderson placed the hose on Mr. Humdrum's swollen tummy. It started sliding down but caught on the cadaver's posthumous erection.

“Where are we taking him, sir?” I asked.

“Into the warehouse. I got a guy for this kind of thing—uff da, fella is heavy!”

Before we walked out into the store, we checked for any lingering employees. None to be found. We marched Mr. Humdrum's bulbous swelling cadaver across the floor, past the bicycles, past the board games with the recently stocked boxes of *Apples to Apples* and *Jenga*, and then past the garden section—here, Mr. Anderson deposited the hose onto the appropriate shelf. We passed through the large grey warehouse doors and made our way to the delivery gate which was currently shut.

“All right, place him here.” Mr. Anderson instructed. “I will go open the gate and you strip him of his uniform. We need to make sure we get that back for our next employee. Shame. I just do not understand. He had a wife, six kids—he was even lucky enough to land another job as TCF clerk in the Cub Foods next door! I just do not get it. My, my, our lives are much drearier than his. But, you know what I always say. We are a community. But this does not bode well for the hearty Targy family. Ah well. I just do not understand it. Sweep it under the rug!”

Mr. Anderson opened the gate. The machinery rang like gunfire through my ears. I started with the vest first, then the pants. When he was down to his underwear, Mr. Anderson came around and helped me fold the uniform. We set it aside. Then we lifted Mr. Humdrum and—*one, two, three!*—rolled him down the ramp. He landed with a flop on the concrete outside.

Mr. Anderson clapped his hands together and put an arm around my shoulder. In the other hand, he took out his cellular device and I watched him punch in a few numbers.

“All righty then. Easy, huh?” He said and lifted the phone to his ear. “Oh hey! Yeah, we got another one over here for you. He is under gate two. Yeah, sounds good, Clarence. Thanks. Bye—oh, hey, how is the family? Tiffany finally get her ex-husband's ashes yet? Oh, dontcha know!”

This went on for several minutes.

When Mr. Anderson hung up the phone, he walked me out to the floor.

“Well, got that taken care of.” He said. “All right, what was I saying? Oh yes, I will bring you some of my diapers. You can try them out. But no more extended bathroom breaks, son!”

And, with a clap on the shoulder, the cake marched away.

Well, there was nothing for it. You heard the man. And I knew that behind the benevolent facade in which he just partook, Mr. John T. Anderson was a doing-needs-done kind of man and was therefore not afraid to excommunicate his children. I had to shape up! Yes, no more nine-daily orgasms in the bathroom. I would work until I was dead if it meant I could finally land in Pahokee. But how could I control myself until I returned to the sanctity and privacy of my home?

The answer was right in front of me, of course. During the course of Mr. Humdrum's odyssey from break room to tomb, I may have gone erect at the sight of his body sitting up against the big red door; however, when Mr. Anderson had us hauling the cadaver into the warehouse, my member dwindled with every step. I was completely flaccid with no hope of seduction by the time Mr. Humdrum's carcass rolled down the ramp, out of my life forever. And when Mr. Anderson called the guy—Clarence! convincing Clarence!—I might as well have been a eunuch. What a boner-exterminating thrill it all was! (My friends, let me breathe for a minute, it is all so exciting.)

But what really saved my career as cashier was being able to construct imaginary cover-ups in my head at the time of stimulation. I think it was the thought of dismembering Shota12's sinfully neglectful parents and stacking the body parts in the walls, the floorboards—all the generic repositories of murder mystery fame—that finally did it.

I tested this coping mechanism out a few times the next day while I was shopping for groceries at the nearby Cub Foods. I grabbed my cart, checked my pocket for Shota12's Polaroid, and went on my way through the fruit. I made my way past honeydew, hackberries, honey crisps (homicide, homicide,

homicide). I picked up a couple Family sized boxes of Special-K with those sliced and sour strawberries (dig and dig and diggity-dig). I do not think I need to tell you with what I associated the spaghetti sauce. What else did I need? I had forgotten my list at home. No matter! No matter! I could not have been more clean. The trick worked fine if not better at the Target. Whenever I felt the blood flow beneath my waist at the cash register, working with a guest, or stocking racks with purple shirts and Levi pants, I would simply close my eyes and smile. Then, when all passed, I would open them and say, “Did you find everything you were looking for today, ma'am?” And yes, I know what you are wondering, it even worked with the babushka woman. Oh yes. She gabbled on and I fired at her in my head, Chatty Cathy none the wiser.

As another year passed—what year are we? 2003? Ah, I missed the passing millennium. More of the same, more of the same. Seven and twenty became eight and twenty. As another year passed, Shota¹² had yet to return to WBS, but I managed to stick to a convincingly productive schedule. In the mornings, I would check the web for his presence. Then I would go to work, think of the dead, and return later in the afternoon or in the evening—depending on my shift—and masturbate, regurgitate, masturbate, regurgitate. On pay day, I cashed my checks and stuffed accruing funds into a jar by my computer—it was an idea I got from various television shows and montages. If I saw the money physically piling up, it was easier to believe I was progressing.

This is not to say that my expedition was not without its slumps. During one incident, my old computer contracted a virus—the proverbial Trojan or such—quite inexplicable. I honestly have no clue how it got there. But one night, I was browsing Google for images of executions—just to inspire my coping mechanism, you understand—and suddenly Google started searching for regrettably illegal pornography. I do not know how it happened. Then the computer was assaulted with link upon link upon link, flashing screens, and a blip. I burned the computer in my backyard because it was the reasonable thing to do and dug about two-thirds of the way into my savings for a new Power Mac with a

800 MHz processor featuring 256 MB RAM and 40 GB hard drive ... I had no idea what any of it meant, but I quite enjoyed the minimalism of the design. I can assure you that I used that computer for nothing but WBS content—on account of the fact that, the morning after, I woke to the alarming sound of an authoritative knock on my door only to realize it was merely a lingering fragment of my night-time fantasies.

Then there was that fateful day in March when I went to the hospital. During a raucous masturbation session, I made the mistake of kneeling down and leaning my waist over the lip of the open toilet bowl. In a rush to do my business, I lackadaisically—which, as you should know by now, is a manner of doing things which I utterly detest—flipped up the heavy seat cover without checking its stability—which is a careless oversight in any context. In order to achieve climax, like an animated buck I regret to say, I began thrusting into the porcelain, and the seat crashed down upon the already minimal length of my erected member. There was a pop and a surgery. The result: permanent damage to the shape and quality of my urethra which made it excruciatingly painful to masturbate—and not to mention urinate. Oh, let this be a lesson to you readers: the penis will retaliate! But I had to masturbate. I had no choice. So, for the next month of rest, I continued in the same way as before, at the expense of my pain; however, the pain made the climax less enjoyable and that was a plus. The true expense was the money which I had to give in monthly installments of a considerable sum I am not at all well in relaying to you here. The memory is *that* disappointing. Any hope of getting down to Pahokee before my little lovely boy was no longer little nor lovely was transparent if any still remained. For all intents and purposes, however, he was still twelve-years-old to me and always would be.

When I returned to work the following April, I spent several weeks standing at the registers with no external obligations, much to the chagrin of the cake who requested he be given a doctor's note. So I had Dr. Caca write me a doctor's note saying that excessive motion may result in a ruptured uterine sack. When I handed it over, Mr. Anderson put his arms around me in a way that I assume was meant to

be a hug of some sort and said he could not imagine the suffering through which I have gone, “What, with your incontinence and now this. I cannot imagine.” Pat, pat. He drew a palm up to the back of my head and massaged it gently.

Hitherto, you have known me to be a pessimist—in fact, I have even been guilty of driving one-handed, surrendering to the nyctalopic road of destiny's construction—but I left the Target that day in great spirits. I rolled my window down. The snow from that winter was delicately sliding into the gutters with the roadside rivers. Psithurism through blooming hawthorns, buds on the hyacinths in Mrs. Next-Door-Neighbor's cross-the-street conservatory, and a conspiracy of ravens in the air. Grand crepuscular rays booming from the sky. When I unlocked my front door, I saw my wreath remained from Christmas. Brown and grey—but what the hey; I left it up. What a fresh, fresh day it was! My destiny felt narrow as an arrow. Alas, it was a taste, just a taste and perhaps the last I will ever have. (What a thing to have said, my friends.)

Sam thought it wildly entertaining, perhaps, to have me fall in love as I did with Mr. John T. Anderson and then take him swiftly away. I know what you must be thinking: oh dear god, what could possibly happen now? Will the cake reject him? Will he engage in relations with the pastry—as they say, have his cake and eat it too—and will Mrs. John Anderson uncover the illicit affair? Will he forget about his beloved Shota¹²? Not to worry on that last. I never forgot about Shota¹², much as I tried. The boy-child was always in the back of my mind, but for once everything felt balanced—even the Polaroid began to fade. Unfortunately, not fast enough.

I picked a peck of hyacinths from Mrs. Next-Door-Neighbor's garden and returned to the Target the very next day which was my day off. I wanted to see the cake, my darling Mr. John T. Anderson, and give him my gift. As I got out of my car, a thread from my hearty Targgy family vest caught on the window crank and went unnoticed until I was halfway across the parking lot. I detected, however, no abnormality in the state of my dress. I cut the thread and went inside.

I had never been captivated by a figure of his stature, but as I slipped in and out of the aisles, dragging my fingers along stainless steel tea pots, stacks of individually marked spoons worth one dollar a piece, and the newly expanded grocery selection—everything was remarkable to me. The way he lifted his billowing forearms to count the Target's stock of English muffins or the way he hobbled side to side as he penguined past the pomelos. I followed him throughout the store as he went about performing his managerial role. I was so struck by something of a fugue state that I inadvertently bumped into him as he was inspecting the frozen cow hides. The hyacinths caught between us and flattened.

“Ah, you.” He said. “Just in time. Do me a favor and restock—” he flipped through his authoritative clipboard “—the dog food, please. We are running low on beefy Kibbles 'n Bits. There should be some in the back, if you do not mind.”

And without waiting for an answer, he strode down towards the Styrofoam packages of ground chuck.

“Mr. Anderson—” I said, holding out the flowers.

“Oh, yes, of course,” he said, turning to me, fiddling with his glasses. I do not mind telling you I thought I looked with that beaten bouquet quite pathetic in their reflection—pathetic, but bold. Is that possible? “You ... it is you. You have an injury. Why are you ... oh no—” he dropped his clip board and grabbed my shoulders. “Do not tell me you are turning in your resignation. Who put you up to this? Was it the Wal-Mart in Fridley? Did they threaten you? Did they touch you? Oh geeze—”

“It is my day off, sir.” I said, pulling the mangled flowers back to my chest.

“Then why are you here?” He paused, then he kicked his heel. “Oh, yes! Of course. Follow me, comrade.”

With another kick of the heel he led me to the upstairs office, rummaged through his desk drawer, and pulled out a blue container of Prevail briefs. He thrust them towards me.

“Go on.” He said. “They are breathable. It says so, right on the box. Take them home and try

them out. It will be our little secret of course.”

Before I could pocket the hyacinths, the container was pushed into my chest. I let the flowers drop and took the Prevails.

The cake clapped me on the shoulder, “Now, go home and get some sleep, you know? What are off-days for but to charge-on for the next shift? That is a little play on words I say around here. Keeps up the moral.”

I followed him back out into the store, waved goodbye, walked to my car, tossed the briefs in the back, and forgot about them. I went home and checked WBS for Shota12's presence. I knew he was gone, but the act of logging in, setting my username, and scrolling through the list of available prepubescents had become an inscrutably teleological element of my daily schedule. What else would I do with my time for the rest of my interminable life? Keep picking hyacinths and crushing them between Mr. John T. Anderson and myself? Well, actually, that does sound titillating. Yes, in fact, if we are positioned just right—

Suddenly, my living room filled with the sound of a squawking peacock and I thought for a second that my house was under attack until I turned and saw the blinking light of my telephone. There it was in all its mighty glory, ringing! I danced! It was him! I zip-zooed my way to the phone, picked it up, and held it to my ear.

“Yellow?” I said stupidly.

There was an indiscernible whimpering on the other end. It was not a pretty noise.

“Hello, I meant! Apologies.” I said, trying to conjure the etiquette of phone conversation.

“I gave you my Prevails!” Mr. John T. Anderson roared.

I brought the phone away from my ear and eyed it as if it were at fault for my darling sweet's sudden amplification.

“You sound upset.” I said.

“You ... you are darn tooting I am upset.” He replied. “I thought we were family, comrade.”

He told me I better come to his office—“or in ten minutes, whenever works for you” but that I really have no choice in the matter. Was this some kinky foreplay? Had he seen the flowers? I hoped it would be, of course, some student/teacher BDSM, he is the master, I am the slave, type of camaraderie—in fact, I was curious about trying out a particular brand of vibrating ball gag I had seen on the net the other day—but there was an underlying atmosphere to this whole situation, a foggy augury that I cannot quite explain except to say that the sky had gone the dark of twilight and I did not like to drive at night. My curiosity, however, trumped this particular concern. Perhaps I would not be coming home that night!

I arrived at the Target in Brooklyn Park. It had started to thunder and the wind had picked up violently, tossing this and that around the parking lot. The proverbial shopping carts were scattering all across the pavement like squeaking red mice. I passed through the sliding doors with some difficulty, made my way to the back hall, and went up the stairs to Mr. John T. Anderson's office. When I opened the door, I was greeted by the thinning back of his head as he was pacing around his desk. I called his name, but he seemed to be mumbling inaudibly to himself. He had something in his hands. I repeated myself. He stopped dramatically, back to me, and then swiftly turned around. His glasses had snapped, his face was disfigured by over-baked cheeks, and he was unable to look in my eyes.

“Well!” He said as if he had just discovered the killer's identity. “What in the heck is *this*?”

He flapped a small rectangular piece of paper in the air and slammed it on the metal desk.

I slipped into the office and closed the door. I think I must have said something along the lines of whatever do you mean, but I cannot remember. This was an emotional moment in my life. You will understand if I cannot remember every detail; it went by so quickly.

“I cannot wrap my mind around this, comrade. I thought we were family. I shared with you my deepest darkest secrets and you go around and do something like this. Oh, I have been turning it around

and around in my head all afternoon, you know [nod, nod]. I have. Wondering what to do, what to do. So, what do we do about it, eh?"

He sat down and pulled out his hair. Then he slapped his meaty palms on the desk. So meaty. So large.

"Well." He said again and reached for the phone. "You know, I will have to contact the authorities about this. This simply will not do in our family, no sir. I thought you were one of the good ones, you know? The survey said you would be, but I suppose even surveys make errors in character."

I stepped forward as he was dialing. It was one of those rotary dialers. Once or twice he fumbled his fingers around and had to start again—"gosh darnnit", "oh geeze"—which gave me time to sit and pluck the square piece of paper from the surface of his desk.

But that square piece of paper was not a piece of paper. It was a Polaroid.

I looked at the inside of my hearty Targgy vest and found that the inside pocket had come undone. Instantly my trachea seized. A dense and painful sense of rubatosis inflicted my inner ear. I remember feeling very hot and very cold all at once and none of it was pleasant. The world had grown bigger than my head.

"You are ..." I stammered, trying to act casually, which I had never done before. "You are ruining my life."

Let me take a moment to explain this last bit of speech: I was trying to remember how double-H in dear Vladimir's carousel of carousal acted when his wife had discovered the journals that revealed all his secrets. Surely, the scene had happened and surely double-H had acted quite reasonably. Sadly, although I wish I had what double-H had—and feel as though Sam is constantly trying to write me into double-H's life and failing every step of the way—I often forget that I am not double-H and would prefer not to be double-H and therefore my attempts in the moment to be sound and innocent are very often futile. Yet I went on because I really had no other choice. "Let us, let us be civilized. Please, Mr.

Anderson, let us be ... you are hallucinating.”

“No, afraid not, comrade.” He said, still fumbling with the phone, rather improbably. “No, you have truly screwed the pooch this time. There is no turning back from this one—gosh darn this thing anyway. Where is my cellphone?”

He dropped the receiver anywhere and gave himself a pat down.

“In my car. It is in my car.”

He stood up and left the office at a professional pace. I pocketed the Polaroid in my pants and followed him.

We marched out onto the lobby as though everything were different, as though we were on some very important business—Costco had beaten them in quarterly sales of ibuprofen! Wal-Mart was just named most ethical company of the year!

Once outside, I saw the wind and storm had picked up, but it was the wind that was the worst. A horrible time to be outside, indeed. But I followed my darling cake anyway. At several points across the pavement, an errant cart had nearly knocked me down. They were crashing into vehicles all over the place. The lot was a horrid fest of car alarms. We went to the very end where Mr. Anderson had parked so inconveniently—but considerately for his guests, I suppose—and as he was yanking the keys out of his wallet, a thunderbolt smacked right into the ground not more than a mile away. He dropped his keys in a fright and had to get on his knees to look for them under the car.

I stood there watching him, quite unsure whether or not I should help spell my own humdrum doomsday—well, you can expect that I would go to jail, but you cannot expect that my story would make the news. A man with a Polaroid? What a thrilling headline, that! I would register, serve my time, and then what? Where would I go? What would I do? I would be in the most extreme form of trapped imaginable and, frankly, no one else would give a damn.

My deep strawberry cake found his keys and stood back up, relieved it seemed. He successfully

met lock with key and turned. He struggled with the door and grabbed his cellphone which was laying on the passenger's side seat. He stepped out into the middle of the parking lot and took his phone in both hands, but I imagine it was very difficult for the pudgy fingers to press any one button in such weather conditions. I approached him and offered my hand to help him dial. He pulled his arms away and looked at me in the eye.

“No!” He said. “I gave you my diapers, you monster!”

I tried for the phone again.

“I do not need your help!” He said and pulled away. “Now hand over the evidence!”

He held one hand out. As if I would give him my most prized and most dangerous possession.

What was he thinking?

But, in a moment, we were both fighting for, I am not sure what, the phone? the Polaroid? I quite enjoyed the feeling of his pudgy pig fingers attempting to stick themselves in my pants, digging around for Shota12, but the experience did not last very long. At some point, he did, in fact, manage to get his hands on my little lovely boy. I snagged it back but it was all for naught. The wind came and swiped the Polaroid right from between my fingers. It flew away, out of my life forever.

There was a moment during which we looked at each other and shared an intense opiate gaze and, briefly, I felt not anger, not hopelessness, but a light relief—and, not to mention, a deep adoration for the cake. He had, for lack of a better word, saved me. Then, from quite out of nowhere, an errant hubcap whizzed by and thoroughly severed his spindly neck. At first I was not quite sure what happened, but then Mr. John T. Anderson's head—his cherry on top!—slipped from its bust and—everything flopped lifelessly—

PART TWO

"I do believe I have forgotten what happens next. Really, I should have expected this; it is always as far as I ever get on my memory. I shall be going on along swimmingly and when it seems I shall finally make it forward I draw a blank in the sand. Say, it would not destroy the illusion if I were to take a look-see at, for lack of a better word, the script, would it? My friends? What ... what are you two doing? What is that?"

The tile setters are looking at Dionysus who has his left fist out, concealed by the flat of his right hand.

Heads, the tile setters say.

Dionysus removes his right hand to reveal the tile setter's penny. Up close, I can see that it is unmarked—that is to say, blank. Blank on both sides, in fact. Scuffed out or such.

"Have you been playing that all this time?" I ask.

Dionysus giggles and flips the coin again.

"That is enough." I say and catch the coin mid-air.

The tile setters urge me to call it.

"Why does it matter? Heads, tails, it could be either way—neither side is either side."

I flip the coin in their direction. One of the tile setters catches it and turns to his friend. Call it. Heads. He reveals. Nothing.

"Stop that." I say and turn to Dionysus. "Now, my script, please."

Dionysus shuffles around his pockets. He halts and lifts out a handful of sand.

"Why do you have sand in your pocket?"

He shrugs and keeps digging, further than his pockets go. Suddenly, he points to the air—ah ha!—and pulls out a smattering of paper shreds.

"What have you done?" I cry and try to catch the shreds as he drops them. "My words! My

words! I have nothing left to say! Oh, what does it matter. Neither of you are listening anyway.”

No, say the tile setters, go on, go on, and they resume their pointless game.

“Of course, now when I cannot speak, speak you say!”

Go on, go on.

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Well, I recall a mannequin at some point. One night, I was vacuuming my way through the women's brassieres. The rug was something-something red, but all this is completely unrelated—really, my friends, I cannot recall the next line. Mr. John T. Anderson's head—his cherry on top!—slipped from its bust and—everything flopped lifelessly, lifelessly, lifelessly ... well, he died. A detail or two may be from here on left out, but the facts remain: I did not need to appear as a witness to anything. I called Clarence from Mr. Anderson's cellular device—convincing Clarence! He did not ask any questions except to ask how the weather was—you see, he was in another part of the world. Antwerp, I believe. Getting Tiffany's measurements. He said he would send his guy, Thomas, over in a bit.

I got in my Ford and searched for the Polaroid. At some point that evening, I gave up and went home. The Anderson family held a wake some time later which I did not attend—I meant to, really I did, but there was a lot of traffic that day—and the higher-ups at the Target in Brooklyn Center—no, Park, Brooklyn Park—they replaced Mr. Anderson with a Mr. Clyde who was not from around here and I hated him. I do not remember why. And that is all I have left. I do not remember the point. I do not remember the conclusion. I simply cannot go on.

—however, if you are interested, I seem to recall another story, quite irrelevant but at least it is something to listen to. Yes, in fact, I remember most of the details of a road trip I went on a few months after. But this actually does start with the mannequin, that Michelangelic boy-thing in the clothing department. If I may set the scene, just to jumpstart my memory, bear with me: Eyes. Potaguth curves, waiting in the clouds—those billboards of the perfect-faced faunlets on the walls. Lucid blue-starred

blonds in little green swimwear, marigolds, California poppies, delicious brunettes in faded slacks that matched perfectly the bend of their knees. Those words return to me, my friends. But it was the mannequin that meant the most.

Oh, and, even before that—apologies; this is important too—there was that beastly babushka woman who was following me down the aisles as I vacuumed through the women's unmentionables—the brassieres. She was drinking a different kind of beer. Or perhaps it was the same brand, just a different flavor.

“Can you believe it?” She said between gulps of the stuff. I half-expected she might talk about Mr. Anderson, but no. She wanted to talk about her beer. And while she did, she was doing the same thing you two are doing—that is, flipping her bottle cap, catching it in her palm, and asking me to call it. Over and over. I never did, so she called it for me. You two should know I really hate that game. She continued speaking, content to merely flip now: “This other stuff, less alcohol, Lisa in the pharmacy said I could lose weight, something, something, you know the way she is [which I most absolutely did not], told me to lay off the alcohol, told her it was not going to happen, whole family has been drunk since the stone age, something, something, husband, something, something, cousin, another Arabic word—”

I must apologize for this sloppy dialogue, but I cannot remember every word this woman said at every step of the way and really I do not think the details are important here. On and on she went. From now on, any time she has dialogue, just assume that she finds a way to talk about all the family she had *ad infinitum*. I resented all her family.

In order to make this apparent, I asked her if she had ever lifted a finger around the place and then questioned out loud why Mr. Anderson had not fired her when he had the chance. She shrugged and said Mr. Anderson fired her several months ago, now she just comes to chat with me, and with that she tapped her jewel covered fingers on a silver rack of summer skirts and said she had to go feed her cats, something about inviting me to have a beer with her, liking that she had someone to talk to and

that she was not used to people listening to her. In response, I turned the vacuum towards her shoes and nudged her away.

“Oh, you are probably busy.” She yelled over the vacuum and was about to do me a good by leaving, but instead she turned on her heel and continued: “By the way, I think I mentioned the other day my sister in Karlstad? Well, she is getting on—are we not all—” ah, yes, she chuckled here, “but I would like to go see her before she passes away and I do not like making the trip alone. So, I was wondering—”

This time, I rammed the vacuum into her feet. She nodded quietly and disappeared out of my sight.

I remember, after she left, vacuuming the same little corner of rug by the boy's apparel, looking at those models in the sky, well after closing. Then my eyes fell on Michelangelo's masterpiece. A stunning work of plaster, or fiberglass, whichever, clothed in a blue/black striped hoodie and a pair of dangling tartan shorts, just on the edge of his fragile hips. I propped the vacuum up against a circular rack of pajamas and walked over to the pearl-skinned faunlet. I felt him up. His clothes were so small, my friends. I wrapped my fingers around his wrists. I do not think I need to say how disgusted I was with myself, quite aware that it was possible I was being watched—always watched, my friends—but at the same time I was replete with ... oh, I cannot explain it. A fragile curiosity? An unspoken objective correlative? Well, really, for no reason at all, I plucked the boy from his pedestal, dismembered him, and brought him home with me in a paper Target bag.

When I brought him inside, I screwed him back together, put his shorts back on, and placed him beside me on the bed. I turned off the lights and then I big-spooned him—I believe this is the term—under the covers and drifted off. I removed my pants, and thrust forward deeply. I pecked his faceless, reflective cheek. I stroked his smooth button-less belly. I shifted him on top of me, removed his little clothes, up and down, and then—

Well, out of nowhere, there was a knock at the front door. At this hour? Yes, but you will understand in a second. At first, I froze, quite certain this was it. Here they were. The authorities. Come to take me to my final destination. But you know, I finally got out of bed, put on my pants, and walked down the stairs, trying to construct, oh, any number of plausible excuses that I might state to the coppers. As you should have well expected, my friends, I was again not ready to leave this life quite yet thanks to my new pearl-skinned paramour. He was not Shota¹². He was not my callipygian cupid. He was not my captivating catamite, my love, my love, my love—but he was touchable, at the very least.

When I opened the door, there was nothing but the hollow sound of the wind.

I closed the door and returned to my paramour—whose body I had placed beneath the bed, of course, just in case the authorities had come to ransack the room. I laid back on the bed, removed our clothes, mounted him along my hips, and thrust up and down like before. I tried and tried, my friends, to reach a climax, but for some reason nothing came. In fact, I was only half cocked—ha! And it became progressively harder to stay afloat. I drowned in my own sweat, my friends. In fact, I tried so hard that I woke up in the morning with bruises all around my hips.

I gave up. I tossed the mannequin at the wall, cried, and shook myself uncontrollably as many times as possible. For no reason other than to hold something warm.

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Now, although I despise having to do so, a brief word on Dionysus. I believe he is relevant here and only in this instance. After this, there will be no more of him—though I expect he will try, as he tries and has tried, with all his might to commandeer this tale. Friends, we must not let him win.

My bathroom curtains caught fire a week after acquiring my pearl-skinned paramour. Well, I wanted to take a bath with him. He was very loving, very curious, and always concerned for my health. So, I planned us a special night. Doilies on the table, candlelight, tuberose and jasmine bath bombs that I bought from the Target for only \$9.95! But the mannequin liked Mr. Bubbles best—blue, not pink,

though I could not understand the difference. He enjoyed observing the iridescent spheres float around my knees. When we were done, I dried him off with a hairdryer which shorted and sparked and sent a trail of flames up to the fancy embroidery dangling over the windows here, you see? It was an inferno, my friends. Everything turned black. The damage was absurd. It destroyed my pretty paramour—a baby crisp in the ash. I also have come to realize that perhaps some untreated damage in the floorboards may be to blame for the floor cracking and such.

Then I came upon the androgynous Dionysus as a quasi-replacement. But do not ask how or why or when. I do not remember. I cannot recall the earliest memory of our cohabitation, as it were. Perhaps I have had him all along. Indeed, epistemologically, he might as well have been around for the breadth of my existence. There is nothing to prove otherwise. At some point, anxious over forgetting Shota12's face, I took a Sharpie and recreated his likeness to the best of my ability here on my puppet's head—what do you two think? Well, no, I tried to rub it off several weeks ago.

But he has been making headway in the game of power between the affianced, as it were. Living with someone else for as long as I have lived with him has a way of turning the tides. That meek little voice in the corner asking where you have been all night, and you say stretching my legs down Valders Street or with the guys in St. Louis Park—which I of course never said—and then that is the end of it. This soon becomes castigation and, if not indignation, then passive-aggression. Where my pearl-skinned paramour was kind, obedient, considerate—an all-around perfect imitation of Shota12 and therefore nothing like him—Dionysus is, well, let me illustrate: the other morning I was reading *King Lear*. As it happens, I was late ... what was I late for? Something, surely. Late for the sake of being late, I suppose. I was late. The proverbial clock continued blinking blue in my peripheries and I reasoned that if I could not see the clock I would no longer be late. So, I tossed some salt in my eyes and returned to *Lear*. Yes, yes, of course I could not read if I was blind. Indeed, I thoroughly believed my life to be over, thinking that I would never regain my vision. I kindly asked Dionysus to lead me to the edge of my stairs so that I could

fall and kill myself. He helped me off my mid-century sofa where I had been reading and brought me to the top of the stairs. After declaring my defeat—Sam! Oh, Sam! I will never forgive you for not existing!—I took a step forward and then there was a bleak silence for a time. And I thought is this death? Well, no, it could not be death if I could still contemplate nothing.

My sight returned to me and I found myself not at the stairs but in front of the bathroom mirror. Then Dionysus bashed me in the head with his cricket bat repeatedly as though he were Pulcinella's wife and I, the proverbial Pulcinella. He is a very harlequin and he pulls these kinds of pranks on me daily. And that is all you must know about this thing, my puppet, my pet. Not one word more.

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In the early spring of 2003 on a surprisingly cloudy Friday morning—I say “surprisingly” with sarcasm; every day since Mr. Anderson's decapitation has been without sun—the Palestinian babushka—Sali! Yes, that was her name. Sali. Not that it matters much. Well, Sali had yet to die. When I went to return the crumpled pile of ashened plastic that was once my pearl-skinned paramour—I was going to leave it by the doors when Clarence refused to take care of him for me—Sali, with a bottle of corona, appeared from behind one of those large concrete cherries at the entrance.

“Hello, good looking [glug glug].” She said.

“Oh hello.” I said.

I dropped the remains and started my trek swiftly back to my car. Sali followed.

“I was wondering if you have given any thought to bringing me to Karlstad.” She asked.

“No.” I said.

“It would mean a lot to me if you went.”

“It would mean a lot to me if I did not.”

“If you drove me, I would be glad to help you pay for half your trip to Florida, if that is still something you are working towards. It would be my pleasure.” She said this as though certain it would

change my mind.

“How can you afford that?” I said, honestly tempted. “You have no job.”

“I won pull-tabs last week at the Lyndale Tap House.”

I considered for a moment the thought of being in a car with her for nearly 350 miles ... I do not know, my friends. Roll-down windows, a lack of air conditioning, a burnt out stereo. Countryside uninterrupted, nauseating toilets in the every-so-often filler station. The proverbial cow.

“Have you ever been to a Zoroastrian excarnation ceremony?” She asked.

“No and I never expect I shall.” I said.

We passed a runaway cart. I pushed it back into its place amongst other waiting carts and continued on my way. Sali insisted on staying at least one step behind me, kept trying to grab my shoulder with her bandaged wrist, telling me to slow down, bouncing along in her yellow polyester yoga pants. When I reached my Ford Escort, I climbed into the driver's seat and, just as Sali reached to touch me, I slammed the door on her wrist. I did not do it on purpose, my friends. Do not sit there with your judgmental looking-downs at your uninteresting hands. She screamed and collapsed onto the pavement. Her Corona shattered and she screamed some more. With little to no enthusiasm, I observed her broken, floppy hand. The bandages had come undone.

“Why would you do this?” She screamed, flapping her hand in my face.

I closed the door. She stood to her feet and began flapping her broken hand against my window, each hollow slap elicited a wince of pain in the corners of her lipsticked cheek.

“Please quit it.” I said. “You will scratch the glass with all your jewelry.”

She went around and crawled onto the hood and flapped her hand on my windshield.

I threatened to call the authorities.

“You see those security cameras?” I said, pointing up at the light poles around the parking lot.

“They will take a look at the content and will have you arrested for harassment.”

She kept flapping her hand, everywhere, just everywhere my friends, and screaming—as if *she* had anything to be screaming about, my god.

Sali rolled around onto the passenger side of my vehicle and started knocking on the window. Let me in, let me in right now. Oh, friends, if you thought I disliked her before, the Sali to come was enough to make me contemplate constructing my own catacomb.

I do not remember unlocking the passenger side door, but somehow it had opened—or it was already open, or something greater than myself had opened it—and suddenly Sali was in my car directing me to bring her to Karlstad—“at once!” And do you know what she did? She started flapping me with that broken appendage of hers, the rubbery mole-covered mass. It was ... annoying, my friends. It made me feel as though I were being disciplined, being put in the proverbial time-out like I was a misbehaving preschooler. So I did what she said. Well, no, at first I started driving down to the North Memorial Hospital when she flapped me in the face again—

“No! Karlstad!” She cried. “Now!”

I did not question her. In fact, quite frankly, after witnessing Mr. John T. Anderson's decapitation by way of errant hubcap, I stopped questioning why things ever happened in the first place. You, too, would do well to be satisfied with the absurdity of never knowing, as I have become.

“Perhaps I was meant to break your wrist.” I said. “Who knows? If things continue in the same manner, I may very well break every bone in your body and then what will you be? As everyone I suppose eventually becomes—some enviously sooner than later—a worthless pile of broken bones.”

“I have done my best to be kind.” Sali said. “To be courteous, to be humble, to be something-something, compliant, something-something—” She listed off an obnoxious number of adjectives throughout this unnecessary speech of hers and continued. “Do not mistake me for a fool. *You* are a motherfucker, an intolerably cruel and pedantic child.”

“You deserve to be hanged.” I said, digging at the leather on the steering wheel.

“You better not dare to crash this car.”

“I *will* crash this car and then you and I will both be happily dead and I will never have to care about whether or not I hear another living thing because I will be dead. I will!”

“If you would like to die so much, then do it. No one is stopping you. I bet everyone you have ever met is encouraging you to do so anyway. So, go on. Go on.”

“Not until I am satisfied.”

“So then. You are also an entitled motherfucker.”

We hit a period of silence and, simultaneously, a strange stretch of traffic passing through Maple Grove—it was only ten o'clock and rush hour did not start until four. I did not know what was going on with the world. I do not remember the sun.

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Eventually, we hit a pleasantly continuous motion—albeit, behind a gigantic orange semi-truck called Schneider which was issuing a dense black smoke from its exhaust. I will skip ahead a few miles—let us see, we were heading northwest on the I-94, exit 202-201 coming up on the right ... exit 194—

“Hello, a Target!” cried Sali as we passed through Monticello, excitedly as if she had not just been red at the ears a moment ago. “And your threats are hollow.”

“What?”

She laughed as if we were taking shots at one another like old friends. “That thing you said earlier, about crashing the car and then saying that you would not kill yourself until you were satisfied. Hey, how about a game of ABCs?”

“No, I do not like games.”

“I will start ... ”

Some more silence as we went alongside the utility wires, still lagging behind Schneider, and then out of nowhere—

“Asphalt!” Sali shrieked and chuckled. “All right your turn.”

“I am not playing.”

“You have to play.”

“Who says?”

“You are in a moving vehicle and I am your only company.”

I glanced at the gas dial.

“If you do not play, I will play for you. Let us see ... barn. All right, my turn again.”

Throughout my life, I assumed that my conversations had simply been sometimes stodgy, sometimes succinct, and sometimes without existence entirely because they were conversations for which I had not been ready. Driving to Karlstad with babushka woman whose name was Sali and who liked to play games as much, it seemed, as everyone around me, I reached a point at which the way of the world became clear to me: my life is being written for me by a talentless fool, one who has not the heuristics to compose subtle, witty, and compelling dialogue—that, or he enjoys torturing me. Not convinced? Well, listen to this: I *did* end up reading a little more of dear Vladimir's *Lolita*—not much further, however. Although, I did read far enough to learn that double-H ended up going on a road trip of similar displeasures. The difference? He got to share it with his beautiful nymphet all across the country whereas I got to share my car with a thousand-year-old Zarathustrian alcoholic. Not to mention all the pranks to which I have already been victim. Yes, let us see how this fellow fares—a Horace here, a Polaroid there, and a permanently damaged urethra, ah ha ha! Yes, how humorous! Why is he so cruel to me? I would just as soon kill myself—*good night, good night!*—but I imagine I will live until I am old and rotten—beardless, my friends! Beardless!

“Creek, on that sign back there. Silver Creek. All right, you go.”

“I do not wish to play. I already said. I hate games.”

In response, Sali flapped her hand in my face.

“For God's sake, D! There, in taxidermy, on our left.”

“You cannot just use a letter from the middle of a word. That is against the rules.”

“That seems incredibly arbitrary.”

We took exit 178 at Clearwater and stopped for gas at a (depot, exit, furniture, grass) Holiday where I purchased some gummy Life Savers and Sali bought a Hershey's—very specifically without the almonds—and a breakfast sandwich. When we got back on highway 10 (intersection), she realized she forgot to heat her sandwich and asked that we turn around. I told her we would stop at another gas station somewhere else and she could use the microwave there. She argued that they would think she would be accused of shoplifting. I said no. She flapped her hand in my face and we turned around so she could heat up her sandwich.

(jippy, kippy, lippy, Mississippi)

At a BP in Motley, Sali requested we stop to pick up a pack of Corona. I told her there was no drinking in my car. She flapped her hand at me. We bought the beer.

(national oars

pizza

queen rest store

toilet

unit van white

Xerox)

At one in the afternoon, we stopped at a Mobil in the small town of Perham where everything smelled heavy with dog food as a consequence of the Tuffy's factory on Main Street. Sali insisted this be our last stop before Karlstad. I went to use the bathroom and told Sali to wait by the car. I relieved myself—which was not so much relief as it was a passion march to Mount Calvary, what with my damaged urethra. When I returned to the car of course Sali was nowhere to be found. She had gone on

a waltz down the street towards a semi-large and wholly unpleasant crowd of people who were standing in an ambiguous circle cheering something on. Surprised by the fact that people actually lived there, I followed her, but only to drag her back. When I caught up, she was standing in a rare gap amongst the crowd.

They gathered around a row of plump and wild children watching turtles race—ha! There could not be a better metaphor.

“Little boys do not stay young forever.” Sali said with a touch of schmaltz.

I grabbed her by the cuff and forced her back to the car.

“I was watching that.” She said.

I drove and drove. Thinking about a group of people watching turtles race had been enough to entertain me for the next few miles, but—as so often happens—laughter turned to a sucking chest wound of impenetrable despondency.

(yellow zipper)

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Sali started gabbing about her family again—“it seems like forever ago since I last saw them”—and the chaotic endlessness of it all made me wish I had fixed my stereo when I had the chance.

“What was the point of all that?” I asked, not to initiate conversation but to shut her up. “The game I mean. Going around, calling all the little details we see.”

“To entertain ourselves.” She said.

I lost track of what I was doing at the wheel and, somewhere between Mahnomen and Thief River Falls, I became quite lost. I suggested stopping at the next gas station. I expected it would be a Cenex since I had already seen six of them on the way to Karlstad, but Sali insisted we push on, anxiously pawing at her muumuu—she had so many family members to whom she would like to say hello and kiss before the day was done!

"I have not seen them in such a long time." She repeated. "It will have been nearly a decade."

"It just occurred to me that you have been repeating yourself this whole time but I had not noticed until just now because I have not been listening." I said.

"I do not speak for you to listen." She snapped.

"Then why do you speak at all?"

"To pass the time."

"I am stopping at the next gas station."

She flapped her hand in my face and hit my nose a few times.

"I am trying to drive."

This did not repel her.

"You are going to get us in a crash and we are all going to die." I said.

Flap, flap, flap.

I pulled over and grabbed her wrist. She squirmed in ostensible pain.

"Really, would you prefer to be murdered?" I said. "You cannot keep flapping your armlet-spangled appendage in my face every time something does not go your way or this trip will quickly turn into the beginning of an Agatha Christie novel."

Thinking that would be the last word—the great end-all-be-all line of dialogue which usually ends the scene—I released Sali's wrist, but instead of being silent she slapped me in the face and called me a monster and continued saying things.

I stopped at the next Cenex against a torrent of Sali's flaps and left the car running as I went to ask the cashier where we were. Now, my friends, this was a mistake, but hindsight is twenty/twenty. First of all, there was no cashier to be found; the station was closed. Next minute, I turn around, and there goes my car, pathetically strolling for the highway entrance like an old man on Dulcolax. I took a step forward, thinking, yes, I could easily catch the car before it slipped out onto the road into the path

of a fat black Toyota, but then I thought about Sali, who must have switched the gear, and I stopped moving altogether. What to do, what to do ...

Well, time made the decision for me. Ford and Toyota met in a metallic collision and the car went on a spin cycle for the ditch across the street. Unsurprisingly, the Toyota squealed away at an unconscionable speed, quite undamaged. And then as the motor faded out, I was greeted with a happy quiet. There was not a sound in the air. My friends, the topography itself was silent. The cycle of corn stalks so common to the area had not come in just yet, so there was dirt, plain and lifeless dirt, as far as the eye could see. The highway went left and right and, with the sky as overcast as it was, one could not tell which way was which. I convinced myself that the Toyota would come right back around from where it first appeared as if it had been driving on an Escheresque bow. Even the deep rumble of the shifting earth went silent. What difference would it have made were I the one to be so unceremoniously crushed to death in the Ford? This was death. Right here. Alone.

But, if you still believe in a God who is merciful, who is just, who is good, then this will change your mind: Sali, who in this great world I thought for sure had died, popped her head up over the ditch like a meerkat and waddled her way back to me with nothing but a limp and an attitude.

“I told you not to stop.” She said.

She plucked a Corona from one of the folds of her muumuu and drank.

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Sali tried her good thumb at hitchhiking for the next hour while I sat on the side of the road by my incapacitated vehicle, buried in the mud of a late Spring cleansing. I would have sat inside as the front seats were still virtually accessible, but it smelled of spilled Corona from Sali's shattered six-pack and I could not be sure I would not be sitting on broken glass. Exactly three vehicles passed in that time: a red hatchback with license plate CUINHVN, a torn-up old Jeep Wagoneer with a gash in its right taillight, and a blue Sedan carrying a family on vacation—husband, wife, two shirtless boys in swimwear

and floaties. They gave us not so much as a nod and even seemed to speed up as they drove by. We must have looked like buffoons.

Sali came around after said hour had ended to complain that I should have brought emergency water. I told her that at this point it might simply be smarter to start guzzling gasoline. She poked around what she could of the back seats of my Ford and she called my name. I looked over. She had discovered the forgotten pack of adult diapers I tossed back there on the day of Mr. Anderson's decapitation and was holding them up as if I had been looking for them.

"You can put those back where you found them now." I said. "Or toss them away."

"You do not need them?" She said—seemingly sincerely.

"I do not."

She brought them over.

"Come on now." She said. "Is it that you need help replacing them? Because you are speaking with a woman who has something-something years of experience in cleaning, powdering, and strapping her little baby cousins, little baby nieces, little baby sons—"

I snatched the Prevails from her and chucked them into the sky.

"Well." She said in a huff and looked out yonder. "It seems there is no luck in hitchhiking today."

She said something about having to walk the rest of the way.

"Are you insane?" I said.

"It is not that much further."

"Three hours ago, you told me to turn into a river. I do not believe you know where we are."

Then a low and distant grumble. No, not thunder, just John Deere. A heavy rusted row-crop cultivator, green and yellow, appeared from one end of the sky, making its incomparable march towards us, the exhaust pipe, flashing yellow lights—but it was not the tractor that is worth taking time to describe, my friends, it was the tractor's driver. Now, really, do bear with me here of all places,

gentlemen: an ageless androgynite dressed in the vestments of a clown. A chalk-white coat, a neck ruff, various black baubles, and a dark rubber cap—a very Pedrolino! Even the face was white with powder, festooned by various monochromatic accents. I remember it well, my friends.

With a stoic glare, the Pedrolinic creature tractored along.

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I do not remember what transpired between then and the next part, but somehow Sali and I ended up passengers of this ridiculous chauffeur. We sat on either side of him, shoulder-to-shoulder, quite snug, and initiated an argument over where it was we were to head next. I insisted the thing take us to the nearest police station, but tenacious Sali of course was resolute that we make it to Karlstad before the sun goes down. As we argued, the creature started the tractor forward and it seemed we were on our way somewhere, wherever. In the meantime, I continued:

“I do not give a fig about your expurgation or your family.” I said. “I give a fig about making it back home without a court order. I cannot simply abandon the vehicle, you know.”

“It was your fault for stopping.” Sali said. “I told you not to—”

“You listen here, now. I have been trying for the last several years to earn enough money to purchase a flight to Pahokee and I will simply never make it if I continue losing money to hospital bills, lawsuits, and legal violations—and look now! I am heading in entirely the wrong direction!”

Sali flapped her hand as if to say Jesus wept.

“Do you not have any values?” I said.

“Values?” She said.

“Yes, primarily compassion for your fellow man. I have values. I have goals, too. You know, goals? A reason to be? Perhaps you would not be so lonely if you had a reason to live. Oh, what is the point of speaking to you. You do not listen—what is the point of speaking at all? Words simply have no meaning anymore!”

“Then perhaps you should stop being simply.”

I glanced at the side mirror.

Sali started monologuing to our driver who seemed entirely unaffected by her gibber-gabber. He stayed silent during this entire trip and I trust I need not detail what exactly Sali was saying—“You know my sister has a tractor as well. Well, she inherited the farm from *abi* when he got the gout from something-something ... ” Five miles out of a town called Newfolden—which was so sparse it could hardly be said to exist—Sali did something miraculous: talked about me.

“He has never left the state.” She said. “And he has never gone more than twenty miles from his own home, but now he is coming up with me to my sister's farm in Karlstad to keep me company. Have you ever been to an excogitation ceremony?”

I did not know where she got the idea that I had never been more than twenty miles from home, but the more I discussed the fact with myself as we tractored along the more I came to realize she was just nearly right. Stanford was the exception.

Then she mentioned my parents at some point and with that I could not let her go on.

“Are you quite finished?” I yelled over the tractor engine.

“Honestly, you have changed a lot since we first met.” She said, leaning forward so she could see me past the driver. “You are even quite uglier than I ever imagined you could be. What an ugly child you must have been.”

“I do not like this kind of talk.”

“What a lovely day to be old.” Sali said. “Do you remember what you were like as a boy? You must have had your mother at her wit's end—no wonder everyone you know is dead.”

“I do not remember much of my childhood.” I said. “It is unmemorable and now it is gone. Yes, I could have enjoyed everything, you know. I could have enjoyed everything. I did not and do not want it back. You old people, I resent you for being so old. Having the satisfaction of a snow white beard. It

cannot come fast enough for me. I cannot wait for everything to change for the better. If only life was shorter, if only I had one year left, but I may have twenty, I may have forty! Dear God, what shall I do with forty? Sit in my house and rest and, on occasion, eat and use the toilet? Oh, you old people and your elderliness. What great secret did you have to be able to let go of your youth? Come, come, die already and mock me.”

After dropping us off a few hours later at the sign for Karlstad, our driver chugged away unceremoniously, but I watched it until the dark at the horizon overtook the silhouette. There were no trees up here, no hills, no buildings—very very flat, my friends. Just mud, power lines, and puddles of persistent snow. I unconsciously followed Sali down a dirt road with fecal matter in the ditch, around a corner where the sign had fallen—flatter and flatter and flatter.

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We did not make it to the farm until twilight. At the end of a muddy driveway was a three-door byre built a few yards from a trailer home. On the opposite end of this patchy square was what remained, I suppose, of a much larger home. Concrete foundations and blackened pillars. Beside it, a pit full of septic runoff and a large outhouse—

“Oh, the sauna!” Sali squealed, stepping up to a jog. “*Mieheni* built it when *osrati* bought this land in 1955.”

“I do not like all these languages you speak.” I said.

“How I would love to hop right inside in nothing but my birthday suit! We would all go in, splash the stones until it was a good ninety Celsius in there and see who could sit on the top for the longest. Then we would rush out to the lake there and hop in on cold winter days. The most refreshing hop you have ever had!”

“I did not ask for your life story.” I said.

Sali and I stood in the gray and purple drizzle of approaching nightfall and it dawned on me how

alone we were.

“Well, now that we are here! Listen, you, I have come all the way to Karlstad with you. Where are the festivities of your exploitation ceremony?”

“My sister should be inside.”

“Where is your sister?”

Sali nodded her head towards the trailer house and welcomed me inside. Lights off. The distinct smell of feces and sulfur? Putrefaction! The buzzing of flies! Zoroastrian is to hygiene as nirvana is to postmodernism, I suppose.

“Oh.” Sali said and dropped to the floor as if every muscle in her legs had abandoned her. “I thought I would be able to handle seeing her in this condition.”

“What condition is that?” I asked.

She told me to pull the light in the middle of the room which, from her place on the floor, she could not reach. I waved my hand in the dark and found a string. The light made a gentle pop and everything was revealed. A stove, a muddy welcome mat, a 15-inch television on a checkered fold-up table, a seeping stoma bag attached to the belly of a browning corpse sleeping on the pull-out.

“Ah.” I said, erect and quite unsurprised by anything.

Sali instructed me to help her carry the corpse outside.

“What are we going to do with it?” I said—with a startling and bouncy anticipation as my erection slowly deflated.

“Grab her by the neck ... ” She said.

But gently. She did not want any part of her sister to fall off and the skin was most tender. I slipped my palms under the body's collarbone without hesitation and lifted without feeling much but gelatin. The body's hair was curly, white, and vaporous, as if I could wave my fingers through and scatter it away like smoke. The eyes had by this time—

Oh, I also asked how long had the corpse been there. Sali said three days.

—the eyes had by this time gone cold and green. Its mouth was gapping, as if it had been bored in its last few minutes alive.

We carried the cadaver outside, a bounce in my step. Sali tugged me along, this way and that, over tufts of grass upon which I variously tripped. Sali stopped us by the outhouse—oh, excuse me, the *sauna*—and instructed me to lay the body amongst a few lumps in the ground that I had not seen before.

“What are we doing?” I said. My member inflated once again.

“This is part of the ceremony.” She said.

“But what are you hiding her from?” I said, thinking of Mr. Humdrum.

“What are you talking about? We are just burning her body and letting it sit for a while.”

Then Sali went back to trailer for a box of matches and told me to grab some firewood from the pile of logs inside the sauna. I selected a few twigs from the ground when she disappeared and used the time in this much longed for silence to observe the body. Its head was remarkably thin, wrapped in copper skin. One of its arms had fallen down by its sides mid-transport. I knelt and folded the arm back onto its bosom. I left my hand on the fragile wrist. I thought of my ivory paramour and longed for Shota12's photo. Its hollow face reminded me of mother's in the end. At that moment, I had the strangest desire to embrace the thing—even with my erection, which was breathing full force.

“You should know I look for you in everyone I see.” I said. “And, although you may have decided it is best to stay silent, I prefer to believe that I will see you again and that dialogue with you at least is still conceivable.”

“ ... ”

“I do not suppose you are punishing me?”

“ ... ”

“Your silence confuses me. I hope you are aware of that. It makes me question what is at the end of the book. Sometimes I think I have it all figured out and then something comes along to tell me, no, that is not right. Well, I want to see you again, you want to see me again, but you will just have to wait until I know for sure what I will get before I get there. You just wait.”

“ ... ”

“Surely, you tell me what it was about the end that father could not wait for.”

“ ... ”

Sali returned with her matchbook and a tin can of gasoline. She asked me where I put the wood and I pointed her to the faggot by her sister's feet. She flapped me in the back of the head and ordered me to grab real logs. I did this without question.

Sali had me grab enough logs to surround her sister's copper cadaver. Then she doused it in gas, and set it aflame. The fire was soon a gentle behemoth, reflecting in the septic lake. When I stepped back, the light reached around the lot and I saw the lumps by which we set Sali's sister were a part of two grand rings around the septic water hole. The grass here was brown and dead and even black in places.

“The Zoroastrian ritual is to burn our dead on dakhmas.” Sali said. “But this old body never got around to building one, so we chose to burn them around the lake. Traditionally, you are supposed to put men on an outer ring, women and children in the center. Everything happened so fast. Before we knew it, it was just me and her. We just did not have time to think about it.”

Some of the lumps on the inner circle were smaller than the others.

“We used to lime the bones and leave them out to bleach in the sun, but something-something, something-something earth, something-something, words words words ... in any case, it was good to see them all. I do not expect I could make the trip again.”

She said she knew her sister had passed when she did not pick up the phone.

“Her health was already failing anyway. Sometimes the hardest part is waiting, but when the time comes, you just throw the body on the fire and let the ashes float away in the wind.”

“I do not like how you complicate my life.”

The fire crackled. Her sister's body burned.

“My father killed himself when I was twelve.” I said. “He slit his wrists on the toilet, right in front of me, if you can believe it. I walked in on him, but he kept going anyway—”

“Oh, shut up.” She said.

I continued talking anyway, my friends, telling her the same story from before—only it was a touch messier without having it planned out like I do now; however, I think that was the last time I ever tried improvising. I stopped speaking when I realized Sali had roamed off in a dark direction somewhere else. To this day I do not know to where she disappeared. I simply stood in the growing light of the fire until it died off the next morning. Stubborn ashes.

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“How did I end up getting home, you ask?” I say.

No, we do not, the tile setters say.

“Well, I started walking.” I go on. “In the gloss of the dawn, my friends. Then that clown on the tractor came around. It gave me a lift until the nearest Jefferson Lines bus station in a town called Grand Forks. As you can expect, we did not say a word to one another for the entire ride. We focused ahead on the lovely lovely sky and looked at each other just once when I disembarked. Then the long bus home. I have remained here ever since. I suppose to conclude the previous story whose resolution I could not recall: I never went to Pahokee. I never spoke with Shota¹² again. And my life has been one non-event after another.

“To illustrate: last night, I read a new auto-biography called *Memoirs of a Male Patriarchy* by one Reynolds Schlemmer who was born German, but lived in Moscow until he was in his thirties at

which point he moved to the United States to start a business in sock making called *Hats*. And he wrote the whole book in German, but the translator—Frederick Edison—put translations in footnotes. So I read the footnotes and found the German to be far more interesting than the text itself. And I cannot read German. This is a problem, my friends. I do not think I got very much out of it, except a few words to read to pass the time. It was a horrid book. Last week, I watched Mrs. Next-Door-Neighbor from my bedroom window. She was planting more of her lady slippers and a fresh batch of orange perennials. At some point she tripped on her garden hose and never got up. I went to the bathroom after that and flipped through a copy of *Travel Weekly's* top five most exciting insurance agencies to visit before you die. Four of them were in Omaha. And, last Saturday, I tried my hand at making a fancy *mélange* that no one saw me eat—which defeats the purpose of making a *mélange*, do you not agree? To top it all off, my friends, I have been cursed with permanent priapism and it is hardly even visible. See? It has been such a bother that I have considered chopping my member right off. So, yes, I suppose I am breaching that age where I must either do something exciting or kill myself. And, listen to this, my friends, two days ago I finally had to accept that my vision was going—and I had excellent vision many years ago, my friends, excellent, the best!—but I had to accept it was fading when I realized my arm was not long enough to read the label on my amitriptyline, two in the morning, two at night—and I have incredibly long arms, as you can see, the longest! I was about to swallow the entire bottle, but when I closed my eyes and tried to pour them down my gullet, Dionysus had caught every single pill. Then he crushed them up and blew the dust out the window. So, Dionysus will not let me die and he seems to think the most exciting thing I could possibly accomplish at this age is to molest a twelve-year-old boy. So, tell me, given what you know about me, what should I do?"

The tile setters are massaging one another's feet.

"Excuse me." I say.

They look up.

“Well?”

Well what, they say.

“Truly, this is impossible.”

What is impossible, they say.

“Neither choice seems sufficient enough, to me—especially if nobody is listening.”

Why do you not kill the parents, they ask bluntly.

“Kill who?”

Dionysus bonks me on the head with his cricket bat.

“Oh, yes, Shota12's neglectful excuse for parents, you mean, but they are entirely irrelevant at this point. It is inarguable that my little lovely boy has either died from malnutrition—or some similar neglectful practice—or has become an aging bull. There is no saving him.”

It is not about saving him, they say. In any case, it seems far more entertaining than your other options and you would be doing the world a service.

“Yes, yes, I suppose. Much more preferable than molesting a twelve-year-old in any case.”

But what do we know, they say, we are just tile setters.

“That is also true. And I have never with any seriousness considered murdering anyone—only to satisfy my imagination so that this dreadful prick might dissolve—ah! Do you suppose if I murder these people that my prick might dissolve entirely? That is to say, melt right off or fold right in?”

The tile setters shrug. Possibly.

“It seems to me that the positives outweigh the negatives. Even dear Vladimir gave double-H someone to kill. And those parents deserve execution, of course. Well, we have certainly considered this from all angles. It really is black-and-white, is it not, my friends?”

Do you still have his address?

“Of course I still have his address. Do you suppose his parents still live there?”

Oh, most definitely.

“It will be wonderful to go to Pahokee after all these years. But suppose I do it with a gun—”

The tile setters smile and nod twice quickly.

“—and the gun jams.”

Say you get on the plane and your plane crashes. Only then will you know it was not meant to be, but you might make it to Pahokee safe and sound. Besides, did you not say yourself that you had no choice over your actions? You are a galley slave, for better or worse. Tonight, you may molest a twelve-year-old. Tonight, you may kill yourself. Tonight, you may go to Pahokee and, tonight, you may not. Tonight, you may fire a gun and, tonight, it may jam. One thing in this life is certain: you will either murder or you won't.

“Tile setters, but rational tile setters indeed.”

What are you waiting for?

“I do not know.”

We waited.

“Ah,” I said, “the most random thought has just popped into my head. The name *Hamlet* is not too far off from *Humbert*, do you hear that? Hamlet, Humbert, Hector, Henry ... ”

Go on.

“Ah, my friends. My friends, my friends.” I say. “When you return to whomever it is you see at the end of the day, you tell them for whom you worked. You tell them, ‘this silly young so-and-so, he lived,’ I suppose something like that would do.”

EPILOGUE

I practice drawing my rifle on the shores of the queerly baptized Lake Okeechobee in Pahokee. While I do, Dionysus juggles the bullets. Indeed, the puppet insisted he come along and I could hardly refuse him. Although he caused a serious ruckus on the plane when he would not stop kicking the seat in front of us which was occupied by an elderly aviophobic. As if this alone was not enough, he kept hitting the attendant request because he liked to see the light blink on and off when she came around to ask how she could help us. Then he spent the last leg of the trip poking a newborn in an attempt to make it cry and tallying his points with a Sharpie on the forehead of a dozing man beside us.

When we landed in West Palm Beach on the twelfth of December, there followed a 57-minute drive to Pahokee (if I cruised along at an experimental 68 miles per hour) in a rental car from Enterprise. Along the way, we stopped at a dreary barred-up building that was once a boutique for antiques—the remnants of which could be seen in the patterns of faded wood in the glass display cases (contrary to the lengthwise pattern of the current colonists), the inoperable chandelier dangling in cobs from the ceiling, and the Victorian curtain rods over the windows. The store owner was a jean-jacketed grey-bearded fellow named Mike whose friendly demeanor surprised me—and his amiability even more-so—but what was truly startling was the way he fidgeted, the way his eyes moved left and right, the way he seemed to scratch at the hair in his ears and mumble to himself when I browsed the fine selection of black chums. When Dionysus was satisfied with what he saw, we approached Mike at the counter. His eyes were closed and his fingers were crossed. I said I was in the market for a gun. His eyes popped open and he waved his arms up.

“Thank god!” He said. He moved around the counter to shake my hand. “I was hoping you would say that.”

I told him that my experience with firearms was amateur at best and that I could not tell a revolver from a shotgun, a Colt from a Smith, a Magnum P.I. from a Hawaii Five-O. He said he knew just

the thing we needed and brought me over to a pinned-up rack chock full of tagged semi-automatics. Then he just stood there.

“You are not going to introduce us to any of them?” I asked. “They are very pretty.”

“I do not like to touch the things, if you do not mind.” He sighed.

I plucked an obsidian beauty from the display. It was heavier than I thought it would be. All the weight felt like it was coming from the barrel. Dionysus ran his hand across it. I asked him what he thought. He shook his head.

I tried another, one with a brown-marbled handle. Dionysus wanted to hold it. He aimed it up at an antique fainting couch in the corner.

“That there is a Glock 20.” Mike said. “But you just let me know if you want to know anything else—whoa! Careful with that thing.”

Dionysus had simply placed the pistol back on the rack.

We tested out a few more and when we finally made our decision—a “classic”, I guess—Mike brought us back to the counter and rang up the price. He asked for our ID. I told him that would be impossible since Dionysus was a puppet. He said whatever and opened the cash register.

“That will be fifteen-hundred seventy-seven.” He said.

I said we did not have that much money. He said he could lower it—“Every gun sold is another gun I do not have to be around. Name your price, sirs.”

Dionysus suggested a couple hundred. Mike nodded and took the cash.

“Now, you two sure you do not want to buy a second? Just in case you need protection from the first, I mean.” Mike gruffed. “You never know about these things.”

I told him one would do.

“I can give you a deal.” He pleaded. “Buy one, get one, hey?”

Dionysus and I waltzed on back to our car.

Before we stopped at the beach for target practice, Dionysus wanted to observe the quality of the locale. Along South Lake Avenue, the buildings themselves appeared rundown, uninhabited, deserted, but the lots beside them were quite lively: it seemed the circus was in town! Dionysus told me to slow down so we could have a better look. Crowds of colorfully dressed circus folk, hopping through grand fiery rings, leaping out of little yellow cars, popping out of cannons—acrobats in diamond-checked tights and baubled hats lifted one another off the ground and tossed themselves through the sky. On the corner of Bacom Point and Begonia, a beefy ringmaster with a long thin mustache was pontificating for a crowd made of cardboard, behind him a large elephant in a pink petticoat balanced on a rubber ball. Next to a banana yellow building labelled “Poppa Jimmy's” was a trio of large pickle barrels. Erupting from the tops of these seemingly endless barrels were a dozen or so funny figures, clowns in tasteful rags and purple ties too large for their necks. All the while, at the local chamber of commerce, a gorilla was playing a short waltz on an amplified piano—the same playful tune over and over and over. The score read Liszt. Nearby, a gaggle of circus hands—the typical five-o'clock shadow and loose-fitting slacks—were getting quite drunk on jugs of wine.

We parked along the beach which was decorated in multi-colored ribbon and circus fare: cotton candy, corn dogs, popcorn. Right along the edge of Lake Okeechobee.

“Dionysus,” I say as we step out of the car, “Do you think Shota¹² might be somewhere in and amongst these players? What do you suppose they are doing here? Practicing, I suppose. What a place for practice.”

Dionysus shrugs and loads the pistol.

“What are you doing?” I say.

He aims it up at one of the circus hands tapping his foot to the music and watching the lake from the curb. He looks over, hums, and looks back at the water.

I take the pistol from Dionysus and shove it in my pants. I draw it a few times (“where is my little

lovely boy,” I say, each time with a different inflection).

“Or do you think I should have it already drawn by the time they open the door?” I ask.

Dionysus mimes drawing the gun.

“Excellent choice, my friend. This will be quite the event, you know. I do not think I have ever been half as excited as I am now. If only Shota12 were here to see me kill his parents.”

Dionysus taps his wrist as if he has a watch. I nod.

We return to the car and make our way for Shota12's old home on what is called Muck City Road. Along the way, Dionysus practices aiming the pistol at passing clowns. I laugh. I laugh—Hamlet's hellish laugh! I take a right, and coast past an apartment complex with a cigarette littered lawn across the street, Solo cups, Trojans, debauchery. A few more clowns sitting on benches here and there, smoking away. Was Shota12 brought up amongst this?

“There is his house!” I say. Dionysus whips around—he had been *pew-pew!*ing at a few mimes practicing their death scenes on the corner.

We pull up along the curb and my scriptwriter gives me the opportunity to just sit there and look at it. All this time. Nearly twenty-five years. Oh, yes. I see now. Shota12's home is a decrepit yet symmetrical bungalow. The driveway is empty and the open garage is empty which means his parents are not home. Off on some business trip, no doubt. So, I drive forward to the next decrepit home and cut the engine. I watch through the rearview mirror. Dionysus plays with the pistol.

A day and a half passes and nothing has changed. The clowns who were in the vacant lot yesterday are in the vacant lot today—although it seems a few had disappeared only to come back again and at one point there came through a troupe of bearded babies, strongmen, and double-headed ballerinas. I am hot and I am hungry and I have not slept. The distant waltz continues playing. I found it difficult to manage my member around as it seemed to have grown since we began the stakeout.

“I see why Shota12 wanted to leave this unsightly carousel.” I say to Dionysus. “Well, you know,

the more I look at it, the more I look at it, it is not quite sensible, is it? It is rather chaotic, in fact. What are those clowns doing out there anyway? What are they waiting for?"

I look in the rearview mirror to check on the status of Shota12's house.

"Oh my god!" I scream.

My face seems to have been painted white, peppered in black diamonds around my eyes. I touch my cheek and the illusion disappears. All a hallucination! Yes, of course. There it is, my beautiful familiar face. Breathe, breathe—

At that moment, a brown clunker happens by and pulls up Shota12's driveway. It rides into the garage and disappears behind the closing door. I wait just long enough to make sure his parents have entered the home. Then there is movement in the front left window. Time come!

"Dionysus, the pistol, please." I say and hold out my hand, but it seems Dionysus has disappeared and in his place the pistol fits firmly in my grasp. "Ah."

I get out of the car and walk through the wire gate, decorated in vines and marigolds. The parents have not cut their grass in years. I nearly trip on the lengthened blades walking towards the door. They are probably not accustomed to mowing the lawn themselves after having for so many years watched Shota12 do it for them like a Ramses and wife to the slaves. Relentless! And the lack of freshly cut grass can only mean one of two things: that Shota12 had indeed escaped long ago—praise be!—or that his father and mother had so neglected him, he finally croaked. I do not mind admitting there was a peppy part of me fully expecting to see him though—that, in fact, he would be the one to open the door. What would he say to my new face?

I knock on the door and aim the pistol at the door. My energy is far too high to keep it in my pants and, if his parents try to run, what then? No, better to be safe than sorry.

"Where is my little lovely boy?" I whisper.

Footsteps. Who will it be? His mother or his father? Either one will do.

“Where is my little lovely boy?”

The door opens and I make to speak but the words erupt as the squeak of an adolescent.

In the sightline of my gun stands a bowl of a woman in a pink lace muumuu that reminds me of Sali. Sali Two. Re-Sali. The pathetic woman screams, trips backwards, and cracks her head on the wall behind her. She falls to the floor with her hands up.

“Oh mother Mary! Mother mother Mary, praise! Mary be praised!” She says. “Be my guiding spirit unto the promised land!”

I take a step inside, keeping my pistol aimed at the mother.

“Where is he?” I say again, this time a touch more coherently.

“Please, dear Mary!” She says. “Though I may walk in darkness ... Lord Jesus is my shepherd; I may fear no—”

I stuff the gun in the scoop of her cheeks.

“Now, you listen here.” I say. “You tell me where you have my boy and you will die a lot faster than you would otherwise. Come now.”

“Nooooo, no,” she breathes, “I do not know where your boy is. I never took any boy from anyone. I go to church! Mother Mary, please!”

“If you have taken him—” I say and press the gun further into her cheek.

“No, you have the wrong house!” She says. “Please, mother Mary, you got the wrong house.”

I lower the gun an inch.

“What do you mean?”

“You want the place another mile east of here. It is a small block of houses—you cannot miss them! Please! If anyone took your son, they would have.”

“Is there a forwarding address his parents left you?”

“Please, mother mother Mary.”

“Did they leave you a forwarding address?” I ask.

“What are you talking about? This house has been mine all my life. No one lived in it but me and my dear departed Albert. Please, they took your son. I know they did. They do it all the time.”

I stand and look outside.

“He is my lover, not my son.” I say.

“Then you will fit right in with the rest of them.” She says and slips onto her side, a slick ball of sweat.

I return to my rental vehicle and start the engine. I pull out onto Muck City Road. I drive east along the side of a water filled trench. Fields of sugar cane and corn. When I cross a railroad track, I spy a grand plume of smoke coming from one of the sugar cane farms in the distance, past a cobwebbed line of palm trees. Their branches look like the outstretched limbs of terrifying noodle men. A gull tosses itself around the smoke. The smoke almost looks like a cloud, one that is always *about* to pour, like some purgatorial wasteland. I am far from the circus now.

I turn into a community of similarly designed homes. It is the only town for miles. It must be the place Re-Sali was directing me towards. And there is a peculiar contrariness to the atmosphere of this village as compared to central Pahokee. Where Pahokee's curbs are inundated by wine and circus folk, the curbs here are smooth and clean like a freshly born baby's bottom. There is a healthy variety of trees, all daydreamable trees. Picnic tables. Ah! What design! What order! Every house is the same pastel stuccoed box, a modest suburbia. Jeeps, Fords, Chevys, Toyotas in the various driveways. I pass an empty school bus—oh! breath to my heart! So, children live here, too?

I lose myself in the orderliness of this little plot of land. In a state of euphoria, my instinct carries me along until I find myself parked on the side of the road by a yellow house. The driveway is filled with cars and the all the windows have been curtained shut. No better place for villains to hide.

The ground is firm when I step out of the car. I go up to the door and knock three times. I aim

the gun in front of me as the door opens,

“Where is my little lovely boy?” I say.

“What do you think you are doing with that thing?” Says the man on the other side of the threshold. He is a thin haired wisp of a man with arms like driftwood, but he successfully slaps my gun back down, an unexpected act which frankly terrifies me into submission. How did he do that? Slap my gun down?

“Wait until the party starts, huh?” He says in a hoarse whisper. “Get inside. You're late.”

He pulls me inside and locks the door. The room is but four walls, a hallway, and a roof. Signs of furniture in damaged echoes on the floor and cracks in the paint.

“They've already started going through the procedure, so you better get your butt in there.” The doorman says and points me down the darkened hall. “Last door on the left.”

I thank him for some reason and walk down the hall. On my right is the entrance to what looks like a kitchen, also completely empty save for the casual appliances—an oven and a two-door fridge. On the walls are remnants of picture frames and various holes in which I assume nails once held tenancy. No one seems to seem to live here. Once again, I have made an error in judgment.

I open the last door on the left and a burst of light brighter than the Florida sun hits me in the face. The room is full of life-sized teddy bears. Each one is equipped with a large black rifle and, upon my interruption, they turn them all on me at once. I drop my pistol and hold up my hands.

“Who is he?” Says one of the teddies in a muffled gruff. He plucks his head off and reveals underneath the scrawny face of a middle-aged man.

“He *looks* like one of us.” Says another teddy, lowering his gun and lifting his head likewise. This man is pudgy faced with shiny forehead space to spare. “Yes, he could be an accountant in South Bay, don't you think?”

“Isn't he Rebecca's dad?” Says yet another teddy. “Yes, I think I've seen him with his wife at tee-

ball. How are you doing? How is—Martha, right?”

“Look at that bald spot!” The pudgy faced man says. “It's bigger than mine, huh?”

“You still beat us all out on jowls, Phil.”

“I do.” Phil says. “What's the size of those pores on his nose? Do you think they're bigger than yours, Frank?”

“No way.” Says the teddy who is presumably Frank. He pulls off his head and reveals his face. A similarly pathetic mug with a heavy freckled nose. “I'm the pore-man of Pahokee and always will be.”

“This is exciting!” Says Phil. “Where does your family live? Why haven't we seen you at the annual middle-age-a-thon? We've got to get you there next September.”

“No, no, Phil, it's in August this year. We had to move it up on account of Hank's colorectal surgery, remember?”

“Wow! What an eventful year this will be!”

“Enough of this worthless jibber jabber.” Says a teddy in the back. This one shuffles his way around a gun-covered table and removes his head. This man has a wider jaw and a pair of thick spectacles. He shoves the length of his rifle in my gut. “Let's figure out who this fellow is. He may look like us, but he may be a spy. Keep your hands up!”

I did not realize my arms had started to fall.

“Who are you?” Asks the man who I can only presume is their leader.

I explain that I am merely looking for my little lovely boy and insist that I am not a spy.

“You are a father then. Where are you stationed? Belle Glade? Okeelanta? Are you out-of-state? I circulated private memos to a very select circle of trusted parties—which one of you slipped? Our entire operation may be in jeopardy if this got out.”

I ask what he means by operation.

“We are a coalition of concerned middle-aged men who have been collectively struck by an

unexpected sense of ennui. What have we decided to do about it, you ask? Take a look at this—”

He directs me towards the table where underneath the pile of guns is a map of the township. They have drawn various arrows in red all across the grid in no particular direction, it seems. He places a finger down on our location.

“This is our location. In a little under an hour, we are going to storm out and gun down every kid-diddling resident of this godforsaken village. Are you in?”

“How can we be sure he isn't one of them?” Says one of the teddies.

I tell them they can be sure I am not one of anything.

“He knows our plan now. See how I did that, Phil? He'll either do what we say or we'll have to kill him.”

“Can he be trusted? What if he shoots us all down the moment he gets his hands on one of these babies?” Says another teddy in the back who raises his paw to speak.

“We aren't going to give him a gun.” Says the leader teddy. “Besides, the most he could shoot is one or two of you before one of us gets him in the back.”

“But that would still be one or two of us dead.”

“Then at least your lives will be worth it! Listen, what did you think we were getting ourselves into when we decided to carry out justice against this town of child predators? Did you expect we would *all* get out of this alive? Casualties are to be expected. Your brothers are going into battle whether or not you like it. Would you have them die? or would you rather live the rest of your life as a coward? My god, do you even know how war works?”

“Do *you* know how war works?”

“Do not patronize me. I am a professor with tenure; I know precisely how war works.”

“You're the only one who wanted to go through with this. We were content with our lives before you showed up—”

“You were not content. You were miserable. What exactly is it that you do again, Frank? Fix printers at the H&R Block in Belle Glade? Look at yourself. You know what your problem is? You don't have any drive. But a man has got to have his drive.” He turns to me. “Look at this lot. Look at them. Oh, people like them make me excessively impatient.” He turns back to the crowd of teddy bears. “You all complain about how dismal and dreary your lives are. You wait for the weekend to go to the bar, you mow the lawn, you have little money, and you heave responsibility for your suffering onto these ambiguous almighties. You say I just don't have the talent—ha! Even if you do, you sit there nonetheless and play your little guitar, sing your little songs, write your little books, and wait for the show to give you a chance, to validate you on talent alone—pah! as if talent has gotten anyone anywhere.” He turns to me. “Listen to this. Are you listening? Talent is the greatest conspiracy ever conceived. It tricks people into thinking they are worthless or it fools them into thinking they have an inevitable destiny. Both judgments lead to stagnation. No, it is work, *hard-work*, and time, that separates the masters from the slaves. Luckily, I came along and formed a militia out of these nincompoops, give them some reprieve from their boring boring lives. Now, does anyone else have anything to say?”

One of the teddies raises their paw.

“Yes, Rick?”

“That's all well and good.” Says Rick. “But what about him?”

The professor turns to me.

“Now, the coalition does not entirely trust you. But I do. Know why? Because I saw it in your eyes the moment you walked in—determination! A fire! An impenetrable thirst for excitement that only fellow scholars share. We are one and the same, you and I. So, tell me, where was it you achieved your doctorate's? West coast? East? The University of Pennsylvania? Harvard? Dear god, do not tell me you went further north than that.”

I tell him I went to Stanford.

“Ah! A fellow cardinal! Tell me, when was it last you gazed upon the Farm? Perhaps we were colleagues without even realizing. Do they still read my work over there?”

I come up with a graduating year on the spot in order to appear genuine.

“Ha! See, boys?” He raises an arm and slaps me on the back. “I knew we could trust him. They would never accept a sexual predator at Stanford.”

Then he breaks into song.

“Where the rolling foothills rise, up the mountains higher! Come, come, my friend. Join me! Let us be nostalgic together! Where at eve the Coast Range lies—oh, glory days! The alma matter. Delicious to relive them again. Believe it or not, the lives these unmotivated uneducated degenerates lead, wallowing in a cesspool of never-ending torpidity—I used to think that was my fate. You see, my father—who I loved very much—was a high school drop-out who attempted to be a car dealer. He thought it would be easy. Told me everyday how it didn't take an Einstein to sell a Porsche. But the man was not a people person. Couldn't sell a single car. You know what he did when he got fired? You'd think he might go out and educate himself, learn the trade, work to change, but he didn't. He just sat there like a loaf on the sofa every day watching television and eating pretzels. I know what you are thinking: is the pretzel a symbol of infinite lethargy? It most certainly is! But then he tried his hand at the stock market and I thought perhaps everything would change. Instead, he lost all our money, gave up and called it a scam and was back to eating pretzels again. The man was never impressed with my own accomplishments either. One day, I came home from high school and showed him a project I had been working on—I was going to be a car dealer, but a successful car dealer! I was going to change the world! So I made a presentation on successful car dealing. He looked at me and said high school, huh? What are they teaching you there? How to be funny? You going to comedy school? Whole lotta good your education is doing you. This is not very funny, making fun of your old man like this.”

The professor steps forward, staring at nothing in particular on the wall. Quite dramatic.

“You know, my father died a nobody.” He continued. “Well, that wasn't going to be my fate. A man must achieve a sense of personal freedom and move on from the mistakes of his past. I wanted something entirely different from my father, a meaningful job, an exciting career, something with which I could be sure to win! So I went and got myself a degree in philosophy. Then I pursued my doctorates, just like you, my friend, and now look at me! Ha! You won't find me a sad sack on a sofa, no sir! And it occurred to me a few months ago—while I was teaching a course on the phenomenology of multitasking—that I was an intelligent man. I said to myself, you are selling yourself short here, trying to influence a small percentage of the Floridian population. You could be out here, taking action! Doing something exciting! It is precisely then when I came across a curious article in the Miami Herald concerning a minister near Pahokee who had begun some sort of refuge for deranged felons convicted of predatory infractions of the sexual variety. I perused his website, amassed a gentle collection of public reactions by way of Facebook and Twitter—no one was happy about this little predatory sanctuary. Nor was I, as a matter of fact, but you know what angered me most, fellow cardinal? No one was *doing* anything about it. They were all complaining, but no one did more than lift a finger and point and accuse and, my friend, it was infuriating! It was as if no one was reading my books! Listen to this. March 2015, so-called concerned parents staged a protest all along Muck City Road, pitched tents, punctured the skies with their picket signs—and then what? September of the same year, they organized a public rally just outside of Wellington. January, Belle Glade. February, Bryant. April, Loxahatchee! Same thing, over and over again. No more than marches down a deserted street, like clowns with rubber noses. I surmise it gave them the illusion of activity, to protest. But what was their protest actually doing, my friend, my fellow cardinal? Nothing! Their loxa-haw-hee governor, you know what he said? Hold on here, I have his record somewhere—”

The professor goes to the table and shifts around some papers under the preposterously large pile of guns.

“Ah! Here it is. Take a look at this.”

He hands me a cut-out from the Miami Herald dated four weeks back. It reads that the so-called minister who apparently cultivated this sodomic sump of depravity was within his legal rights to provide sanctuary for anyone he wanted as long as his guests observed Florida's residency restriction laws for previously committed sex offenders. My veins tingle. I continue reading. According to the paper, any sex offender whose victim was under the age of eighteen is not to reside anywhere within one-thousand feet of schools or places in which children are known to congregate such as local playgrounds and swimming pools. Apparently, the minister is also unable to discriminate against non-sex offending house hunters who wish to live in the area, but is however allowed to ban children from the premises.

I ask the professor why there was a school bus in the street.

“A plot by one of the residents to lure children here, of course!” He says and snatches the paper from me.

I am curious if there are any children within the area, but before I can ask, he continues,

“As you can see, surprisingly, the government is not much better at taking affirmative action. The best they can do is send a predator through the all-mighty, revolutionary, oh-so-honorable American prison system! You see? This is why people who should otherwise be perfectly healthy adults turn to violent crimes, murdering their parents, shooting up department stores—let's just toss them in prison and be done with them forever! That is the easy way out, after all. But is it an answer? I say no! I say, instead of tossing these people into prison first chance we get—these people who so clearly need our help, I might add—we should kill them on the spot! Anyway, they are worth a bit of excitement. Don't you think? It's just the thing to get you all off your butts.”

I ask why the teddy bear suits.

“It's their symbol, my friend. The image of a teddy bear. This is all very serious, you see—”

At this moment, one of the headless teddies who has been looking down the barrel of their gun

loses his grip with his paws. The rifle falls and a great hoopla follows. The rest of the teddy bears shriek and hop onto fold-up chairs. Admittedly, I jump too.

“Dammit!” The professor slobbers. “Someone gorilla glue that gun to his hands before he drops it again and kills us all.”

The disgraced teddy picks up his gun and apologizes.

“Well there.” Says the professor, apparently calm again. “He is forgiven, you see? My friend, it is of the utmost importance that you realize there is nothing that cannot be forgiven. Our pasts need not define us in the present. You *can* change who you are. So, what do you say, my fellow Cardinal? Shall we go give these unforgiveable beasts an electrifying comeuppance?”

I tap my chin.

“Liberty and union, one and inseparable, now and forever!” Says the professor. “Come, come—make your life worth something. Be the hero, my cardinal, my friend. Or I'll have Frank here blow your brains out.”

I say it does not seem like I have much a choice.

“In the end, my friend, the only decisive act is death.” The professor says. “That is the law of our reality.”

He steps around me, picks up the teddy bear head, and holds it out to me. Giant reflective button eyes and pink gaping mouth. I reach out and fondle its ear.

We march out through the hall and through the front door. The professor points me and a couple other teddied fellows down the street. I turn with my firearm and start jogging with my brethren. In the light of the day, on the corner of the block, I see a callipygian cupid in cargo shorts, bending down in the grass.

My darling, my Shota, my little lovely boy.

BIOGRAPHY OF THE AUTHOR

Cody is a candidate for the Master of Arts degree in English from the University of Maine in May 2018.