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# Love Stories

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A thesis Submitted to The Graduate School at the University of Missouri – St. Louis in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree.

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Advisory Committee

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## Abstract

This collection of short stories is entitled "Love Stories." There are two shorter pieces, seven and thirteen pages respectively, two medium-length pieces, twenty-three pages, and one longer piece of thirty-six pages to bring the total to five stories at one hundred two pages.

These stories all concern 'love' in the conventional sense of the word, focusing particularly on the love between two people. They explore 'love' in unusual or fantastic ways. Most of the stories are science fiction-esque, with one more realist in manner. The use of future technologies or extrapolations of current technologies and societal elements work to express the theme of love in a way that moves beyond the classic depiction of romance.

These stories involve a man and his stream-of-consciousness as he stands at the altar before marriage, two people evolving at different rates and the challenges this provides to their love, a virtual relationship between a young man and a pornographic webcam model, the futile efforts of a lowly star port attendant and a rich woman, and the relationship between two people in a post-apocalyptic society where the classes have segregated.

## Sentence

When Anton went to the wedding he stood teetering nervously, pocketing his tongue in his cheek and surveying the bright murmuring church around him in a long slow ponder that rested idly on everyone present, first the ushers sidling up and down rows trying their hand at the delicate art of seating the guests in order of importance, sluicing the aisles adroitly as if they were outside hire and not a combination of Anton's and Marliese's friends and distant family who were just outside the cut line in regards to who gets to stand on the altar and who is merely usher, and since Marliese having had the wedding planned since childhood was adamant to the point of fiery stamped small feet that she only wanted three bridesmaids, Anton had had to grudgingly give up his dream of having his ten best friends up there with him arrayed behind like an elegant tuxedoed posse, and now they were all these dubious ushers, dubious only to Anton because on the outside behind their lapelled carnations they bore a convincing air of complicit professionalism, but secretly Anton knew they hadn't practiced much and it must have been the Cuervo Silver, plentifully provided but terrible and tasting like a dirty ass and burning down the throat like ignited fuel, that was making them move so smoothly and confidently up and down the aisles, some of them in front now talking, as Marliese no longer had any parents of her own to entertain, to Anton's mother who was wearing her own bright new gown that Anton wondered fleetingly how much his father had sprung for, softly quivering in a mix of maternal excitement and the beginning of an imperceptible quake that accompanies familial separation that in his mother's case would resonate from shoulder to shoulder, redoubling slowly throughout the

ceremony and building to culminate at the most inopportune time near the end and bring forth a deluge that Anton knew was programmed by nature, just as he knew it was his duty as the only child to bring forth those tears, elephant tears, as his father would say, big and fat and dripping out of those lacquered eyes in a heavy spill of mascara and eyeliner, tracing paintbrushlike down her face to meet the swift rebuff of makeup-checked Kleenexes, and the fervent snorts which would draw glances of annoyance from his father, who would reach impatiently into his suit coat and pull out his semi-fine Egyptian handkerchief, one that did not say D&G in the corner as he had packed two for this very occasion, the precise practiced hunt of two fingered stab into suit coat for the kerchief accompanied by a swift pan of his eyes flicking around the lenses of his glasses to see if anyone was looking at them, because even though it was his wife honking and blowing at her own son's wedding, it was still embarrassing to be happening when they were trying to read vows, and Anton's mind now whirred from this daydream over to the vows he had written, had written because Marliese had said how romantic it would be if he wrote his own vows and she had figured he could because Anton owned a store called *Engraveables, by Anton*, and often thought of witty or charming inscriptions for trophies and medals on display that would entice directors of athletics or contest-makers to purchase celebratory wares for their own ceremonies, and after all wasn't that the same thing, and Anton had said no it was not the same but scratched out his own vows anyway which were shitty and would be interrupted by his mother's honking sob like a duck call, and he felt the paper on which he had written already dissolving into linty flakes as his clammy hands bit away at it, and Anton regretted not having a rosin bag right there in his pocket to Hoover up the moisture, since he should be out there right now on the mound anyway, basking on the rubber in the late Spring heat, air soft and scented and without the bite and stick of mid-summer swelter, throwing a deadly seventy-nine mph's to those

guys from Harry and Bill's Athletic who thought they were hot shit because they ran a sporting goods store but who were big and soft and ran with heaving ungainly hips and couldn't hit a basketball with a driver, although it didn't matter because he hadn't seen those guys recently anyway, not for weeks because he'd been pulled along for dinner with friends of hers he was supposed to befriend now, or to meet with someone about these invitations, and what flavors of cake should we serve at the reception and oh my god burgundy and grey and/or silver with maybe some tan accents would be perfect colors for the wedding don't you think and Anton had said yes sure to whatever colors she jumped between because it was a long day and month and his ankles and knees screeched more every second he was on them and otherwise his back moaned from all the sitting and now the windows scattering light at the wedding were decked in these solemn silent colors, colors that oppress and swallow the refractions, unlike the lime green and white baseball uniforms of Anton's team lined up for pregame stretches and outlined by the sun's bright glint ricocheting off the left field fence, and now his hands were moist and perspiring all because he had written his own vows all because Marliese had thoroughly wrung her eyes out when one night they watched a Lifetime flick called Charlie's Shore, which was something about a guy who had been nearly crippled by a shark after a surfing accident just before his wedding, and with big bronze arms he had wheeled himself up the aisle at a beach wedding and waited on a tanned hairless leg with his foot submerged in fine white sands and read out a vow he had written himself while he was in the hospital and they were waiting for him to live or die, and Anton remembered this because this was where he woke up when Marliese snagged his arms with hers and had said with a catch in her voice baby isn't that so romantic and Anton said oh yeah, even though he had fallen asleep, and Marliese said hey that would be so romantic if you would do that for me, and weakly Anton had said what, get bitten by a shark ha

ha, and after that certain tilted-head look from Marliese that managed to condense all his lengthy post-engagement sins into two roiling blue irises, he sat penning away sweatily chewing his lip and eyeing the calendar with gut dreading the inevitable day more for this moment of soul baring than any other of a handful of reasons, and now because of all these tears and wetness he was up here about to be embarrassed without his notes and again he reminded himself to quit churning the slip in his fingers, and to distract himself he turned back out to the audience which was mostly seated now with a few coughs here and a few high pitched squeals of recognition there as one of Marliese's old friends ran into another in a violent Alvin and the Chipmunks explosion of supersonic zeal, and he saw his own grandmother sitting right in front of these old friends, calmly smiling and wearing her usual face of benign observation, saying hello and nodding politely and already forgetting what was going on, and Anton wondered what that was like to have lived and loved and gotten married and then been widowed and then BOOM forgetting about it all, and was love really for forever at that point, and he thought briefly of the gleaming band of forever he bought that was now stowed in the questionable grimy front pocket of his cousin's four-year-old, stowed there and secured by Anton's own hand with a safety pin and his cousin Anne saying what if he pricks himself trying to unclip that and Anton saying come on he's smarter than that but really it didn't matter to him, because that wedding band cost a full eight g's, yeah man, like he had told his friend Gil after he bought it, eight g's, his fingers splayed out in deer's antler expression of value in front of Gil's face, from Cartier man, gem-set in platinum with like 1.5 total carats, none of that Zales bullshit, and Gil had whistled a long low appreciative exhalation and asked is she worth it and Anton at that moment with the ring resting luxuriously in his palm, and his heart just as light had said absolutely, but now at the altar he was thinking eight g's man, the price of a down payment on a gently used Porsche Carrera, light blue

with gray interior, those 2000's with the first 2.7L engine, or a Benz C 280, the older kind but not too ancient, like the Kompressor, with an inline six that'll get up and go, the kind of car Marliese said he didn't need, had said, I mean can we afford premium gas and recommended the Prius, charming in its own green way but sorely lacking in the awesome department, like so many other things happening recently, things like rec league and Sunday night football and sizzling brats at cookouts and poker brought to a standstill as a respectable responsibility became required of him, responsibility echoed in the straight but weirdly arched lines of a Prius, and then looking further into the future, and almost fainting, Anton saw that monstrous eventual and disgusting minivan hover before his eyes, with its burgeoning rust and squealing breaks that were constantly going to be of the utmost priority to remedy for the safety of the daily compartment of sticky children, and suddenly in his future he was not frolicking in sun splashed meadows and kissing his beautiful bride, weaving daisy chains and eating picnicked fare, his a ham with spicy mayonnaise like usual except of course for Marliese always pushing wheat bread and mustard and the oxymoronic tofu steak burger, but he was no longer in that dappled verdant meadow in his mind's eye nor was he glowing beneath the tourist-bustling streetlights of an Amsterdam or Tokyo downtown, lovingly clutching his mate as the whirl of foreign tongues and contraptions of cars careen by, nor some other exotic locale alone with the one he loved versus the world, no, in this certain destiny he was perpetually flying by the desolate industrialism of I-65 in a ratty Windstar with no horsepower and several messy and sickly and blaring infants in the back pushing his thoughts from his head, bleeding the man he had been through sound-punched holes in his skin, and again Anton shook his head and tried to survey the people around him, the ones who by their very presence affirmed his undying love for Marliese, who he *had* loved ever since they met at the rooftop on Halloween back that year and sat on the rain licked



edge of the city kicking their legs against the towering graffitied wall, sometimes clambering down the ladder ass first back to the party and upending more than once at the bottom of the stairwell together in the search for more booze, tangling and untangling in between episodes of her entire life to which Anton had not responded with any details of his own quixotic biography because he had learned long ago that that's how you get the girl, and he knew then that this was the girl he was going to *get* and the anticipation of knowing her fraught his limbs which he disguised as shivering in the late October air, eventually looping one flanneled arm around her narrow shoulders before the end of the night and cradling both beers in his off hand as she tucked one palm into her armpit to keep warm, and informed her sentences with pantomimes from the other hand, pausing to pull her sleeve over her palm and wipe her nose periodically which Anton found both disgusting and endearing, and which occurred more frequently the night two years later when she spoke of her parents and especially her father dead and buried and how she had not ever really *had* anyone at all and let Anton know accidentally that he could never leave her which Anton did not find alarming but rather touching and quiet, adult and responsible, Anton feeling like a dutiful medic pulling survivors from the swarm, but he wanted to pull her, loved pulling her desperately and knowing that her ease of mind was what he lived for, which he had always believed without question, even now as he tried to focus on two old aunts in scary black as organs sprang to life and he looked up the main long stretching aisle to the front of the church where the two doors opened proudly, displaying Marliese on her uncle's arm, holding one hand onto the hem of her Empire dress near her supple waist and the small train whisking along behind in reptilian fashion, and Anton looked with budding semi-horror into those paralyzing asp eyes which locked him in place, and his tongue came rough and dry sticking to his lip, and faster than he could remember what was supposed to happen next Marliese was there at the front

beaming at him and he tensely grinning back, and it was too late now, it was all too late, when suddenly she radiant and beatific took his hands in hers and the soothing ivory of her grasp overwhelmed him once again, took him back to the beginning as she always could with magic and fairy dust buoying his heart outward, growing larger and surrounding her, her eyes softening their stance but not their grip, that grip of which he never wanted to be free, the remorse of the thought hanging swordlike above him and always threatening to fall but never falling and she always saving him even as he was sure of his own messianic properties, rollicking and dubious now, for it was always her and suddenly he heard himself haltingly reading off a soggy paper words he forgot he had written, and then still later he at the same time both spoke and received the longest most beautiful sentence of his life:

“I do.”

## Clucked

One of them chicken fuckers whooped my ass, whipped me up and down the block like nobody never done before. He come walking out the store like they always do dressed up as near as I figured what a chicken supposed to look like, hands full o them brown boxes crammed with fried chicken, and turnt left like they always do to latch the door and I got one of em there, right behind the chicken building where I knew on account of watching that nobody come out of after the last chicken bastard came out to deliver the boxes, and I was ready to let him know what I had to tell him and take that chicken. Something hard wrapped round my ankle and he snatched it hard and about broke my foot. I got real mad then and started kicking at him, digging that shoe heel with the steel plate I fount in the junk round town and nailed on to save my sole. One o two good times I got him, I dunno how hard I really hit him, since I was layin down and he was backin up. But I got him and thought he had enough of me and I turnt to get up and go when he laid into me with that cane, all on my backside and legs and feet and hips. Seemed like every time I got up he laid a string on fire on me that broke me right back down.

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First time I scuffled one I was powerful hungry on account of my not eating dogs no more and there wasn't no food round, even strawberries, which was always round here. I never had Peep food before but I knew about that chicken they had in them boxes, and I been eating

animals, except not dogs no more, so I figured I could eat some of that chicken Smells so good coming out the smokestacks above the building. The building with the chicken is big n white and there's some other ones I heard. They have pipes on the top of em always smoking and smelling good and giving good dreams if you slept close, which most of us don't on account of the lights shined out at night, when if you open your eyes after they been closed awhile you go blind. Nobody want to wake up and see white forever. You can't see you as good as dead and might well as walk into them tunnels and let them Crays have at you.

Back then I followed him a couple days, surprised he went out o the middle city, by the line what on one side we stay and on the other they stay. Wasn't good to try and get that chicken in near the other Peeps, so I planned for the edge.

I heard once bout a Peep getting jumped by a group of us who got caught and I heard the Peeps kicked their heads in and left us there with open dents and we got up and walked round but the next day the sun burned right down into those dents and cooked brains to mush. Better to have a Cray or two scavenging with you and you all hit em together, which don't never happen on account of a Cray is likely to turn on you if you get nothing from the Peeps that day. Plus there was dogs everywhere to eat, skinny but everywhere and all kinds of us like my friend Billygoat running round killing em and eating em up. But I couldn't eat them no more on account of when Billygoat kicked that one dog and every time he kicked him that dog screamed at me for help and I knew he was wanting me to go over there and save him but Billygoat had got that look where he stayed in himself, kicking and if you went up he'd kick the shit out of you too. So I had to stand there and Billygoat kicked this one longer than usual on account of missing the first head bash, dog screams sounding like my name, and he kicked that dog inside out.

That chicken bastard I was following back then ducked behind all the broke rusty cars and he went up the street and turnt but when I got there he was gone. I went up and down the street and didn't see him nowhere and somehow I felt happy about that even though I was hungrier than them skinny dogs down by the mud pond.

But when I turnt round he was right there walking out a gate where behind was apartments and boxcubes for the Peeps. We clashed eyes a second and I seen him not trusting me but I made as if I wasn't going do nothing anyway and strolled past him all careful and ignoring him, pretending to go back to hunting in the gutter for some glass or some plastic what I could trade to Johinto for some food.

He walked right on by me and stopped and I heard his scraping feet stop scraping the chipped up sidewalk and I felt the hot sun throwing his shadow over mine and making the gutter dark. I turnt to the side and made to keep on walking and pretending to look but that chicken hit me so powerful in the nose like a punch from Johinto the Squint who'd punch you with both his eyes closed, or at least that's what it looked like and you wouldn't see him looking at you looking at him, and just when you was done looking him over and ready to jump on his sleepy ass for whatever was in his pockets he reared back and got you good with them eyes still closed and he hit you once and you'd go to sleep or get your eye caved in and then Johinto would take whatever was in your pockets. Except for me who didn't hit him after I looked him up and down when he was on his corner cause I ain't too easy going hit one o us that's sleeping.

But anyway that chicken hit me like Johinto and hurt my stomach and set my mouth all wet. And I turnt to the chicken boy having full clean clothes and wet looking hair all tied up on his clean head like he lived in soap. He was looking at me like he been for a minute, I guess like I was a wolf and he was a settler and sooner or later one of us have to kill the other one except I

didn't feel like that. All I felt was scared a little of him getting more Peeps to fix me up good, but I felt hungrier than a baby you find from time to time laying in the alley who's mouth if you put smashed strawberries in there grabs em right down like a sinkhole. And then you take that baby to the building ringing bells where the Peeps go in and you leave it real quiet on the steps since our babies and baby Peeps look near enough the same anyway, and you poke it a little to make it be loud and then you leave and neither one of you is dead yet for another day.

We stood there looking at each other for a minute and I got the idea that he never seen someone like me before, which is crazy cause we are spread everywhere in this city. But he may not of seen one on account of the rules of us not talking to Peeps or hurting them or else they shoot you in the face with a light and your brain melts, I heard.

I looked at him and he looked at me and I saw on his face a face I'd seen a lot when I was scavenging with Billygoat, right before he kicked that dying dog about ten times to finish it dying and then he cooked it. Dogs is usually hard to catch but Billygoat knew which sick ones you could eat and which you couldn't on account of looking in their mouths somehow and knowing. One time I said we could kill him fast with a rock and I about did it even though right before it I stopped being hungry, and Billygoat stopped me fast and shuffled over to the dog as not to scare it and when it put out its tongue he kicked it real hard and real fast and just kept kicking it and at the end it was skin and bones and blood all piled up and blood drainin to the gutter and I wasn't hungry no more. After that I didn't see Billygoat again when he was alive.

But I seen him today in the chicken bastard's face which was Billygoat's face as he kicked them dogs and I knew then how that chicken bastard thought bout me. Somehow him standing there like that made me sad for him, I don't know why. Probably cause of how I knew

how he seen me and how small his thoughts must have been but also probably because I knew I was fixing to hurt him.

That hunger was fierce and unnatural. I wasn't able to contain myself and so I asked if I could have little taste. I tolt him I was starving. He spitted a puh sound and got wet on my lip.

Right then I decided to take the chicken seeing as no one was around, us or Peeps and seeing how he was, and I reached for it and he tussled me but even though I ain't fought a whole lot when I was a Little Prime, on account of me being more a sneaky kind, I still did some fighting and I knew from that he wasn't no fighter. To make it easy I reached down and grabbed a rock and held him off and tapped him on his noggin. He gave me that chicken and I ran away fast as a motherfucker.

My first bite of the chicken I'll never forget. At first I didn't know what it was at all, even if it was an animal, on account of some crusty brown outside. The brown crusty was like a case and when you peeled it off you got some meat like on a dog except chicken meat turnt out to be white. It tasted almost like all the meats I ever had put together except this one wasn't runny and there wasn't no blood and the meat fell apart like sand in your mouth and filled all them cracks in your mouth with that warm smoke taste chicken turnt out to have.

It was a whole sight better than dogs, even the fat one we caught a long time ago by accident in a broken fence and which Billygoat had kicked too. That was a good one.

Peeps stay mostly in the middle of the city, around where you got to wait behind the chicken building and track them chicken bastards with the boxes making them rounds and sometimes they went out to the edge of the middle city where you could pounce em and mostly

they didn't and if they stayed in the middle city you was probably going to be hungry that night. Peeps stay in buildings in town but they got windows and doors to come popping out of if you made a move on one of them chicken carriers.

And sometimes when you followed them you heard what happened in them buildings where the Peeps hid. You heard them talking loud and moving round. And you heard them laughing inside the buildings and you wondered what was going on in there and what Peeps do in there all mixed up with each other. They got the chicken so we knew they wasn't eating each other. But there was screams in there sometimes you heard through the windows like the screams we make sometimes. And curling round the door when they opened it for the chicken bastard with his hot chicken slapping your nose was sounds like the muzak Billygoat made with that pipe he put in his mouth, but more than that and different sounding but the same still. Sometimes I was hungry and following a chicken bastard but after I heard that muzak curling round the door one time I sometimes let the chicken bastard go to try and hear it again cause the first time I got filled up with some awful sad like I was thirsty and I hated it but always felt like I had to have that sad again and again till my chest wouldn't hold no more and it got so heavy it caved the earth and pulled me down there too.

When I do get em I'm a ghost and walk right up and grab that box of chicken even before them chicken bastards asked me the fuck I'm doing. Then you rap em real hard but not too hard right on the nose or the eye and run like a fucker and they never catch you on account of not knowing the paths and roads and back lots with little tunnels running under and through piles of junk that we don't want but use for the walls of them tunnels. Them tunnels is dangerous though since some Crays like to hide in there and get you and have you up something grossly. One time I stepped in a pile and put my hand down and felt wet slats of ribs and squishy and I knew that



one of us had been ate. That is why you got to have someone with you, but not someone like Billygoat.

I was mostly alone and been alright and lucky except for one time when I found a little one and he followed me around and we ate together a couple times except one day when I woke up he was gone and his sack was there so I never knew what happened. Sometimes you heard about little ones getting ate too but I never been that hungry and besides, our own meat ain't good anyway. Sometimes I have a memory or a dream and I'm sitting there with a foot in my hand and the toes like berries coming off except some are missing cause a couple of us been passing that foot back and forth. Whenever this come knocking on my mind I leave it right out there as something I ain't going back to and to tell the truth I ain't even sure that really happened or not.

After that little one I don't use them tunnels no more, but the chicken bastards can't never get me anyhow, on account of my being born and bred on the steaming concrete and not the in the cold blocks that Peeps barely come out of, except to go to the building with bells and of course these chicken fuckers. Sometimes other Peeps walking down roads but they go real quick and duck down quick into other buildings on account of not wanting to be outside. They usually step real fast away if we come within a block.

You ain't hear too much from other ones of us living in the city though you do see one or two sometimes but mostly we keep to ourselves. I heard a long time ago we and Peeps both lived in the city but now mostly we live in the wildness out past the city and into the sun and the brown sand and thirsty ponds. I met one of us under the bridge by the mud pond and he tolt me about trees that got two different fruits on them and you walked up and took one and ate it right

there and another if you wanted to. He told me you can't always find em but they was out there and they was good. I asked him why he came here and he didn't say a truthful answer and so I figured he never been a day out the city limits and made this story up about the wildness.

I was born here underneath and on the edge of the Peeps and if you was born in the city, you stayed. I wondered if there was Peeps in the wildness. Or if us out there even knew about Peeps. Most of us only come into the city on accident mostly, or was born here. Nobody I knew ever went out.

One time I was just making to hit his hands and rap the chicken right out and grab it up and go. But I got scared. Somewhere between the wind rattling the chimes above and the steaming concrete below it happened to me like a rabbit hopping once real big in my chest and staying there wadded up in my throat. The chicken bastard pulled out a hooked metal cane and raised it at me. Said they been looking and waiting for me. Called me a fucker puke and I hit him hard as I could in his hand with my stick and I heard it whack and felt the end of the stick pressing into his bones like an empty tin can that dents instead of throwing your stick right back at you.

He dropped the chicken but I didn't make a go for it cause he wasn't done yet and he ain't scared easy neither. He ripped off his bird wings and bird helmet real fast with one hand and I got a whack in there while he was doing this.

A-one-a-two, a-one-a-two, he hit me like that, ratatat tap and my eyes black and big flashes cutting in and reds and blues and greens smearing together and tumbling all over each other, and somewhere in the distance my own breathy awws and oofs going on with the thuds

and fore long I was just laying there, flames burning up and down my body. Fore I gone down I got one last crack on his face and felt that nose give like his hand.

When I woke up it was like a fire between my legs, burning with white hot nails all shoved around in there. Something wasn't right and I threw up all my food which I didn't have much of in me anyway. I threw it all up and then I threw up some food I didn't know was in me and then after that I threw up green slime that I didn't know where it come from but it felt like the inside of my stomach, which I didn't worry about on account of the torture in between my legs and the hot nails pushing themselves up through my legs to my belly. And then I put my hand down there when I could and made sure of what I already knew.

My nads were round but soft like rotten fruit, and I could feel them unraveling, and I heaved again but the puke started down low below my stomach and cause of the pain it stopped pressing up.

That set me off something fierce, and I laid round bout a dozen or two sunrises, and planned it. The harder I thought about it the more hot and wild I got inside and I thought of how it was supposed to be before, back when us or Peeps hatched chickens when they pleased. When we wasn't having to live in crumbling powdery apartments and under sheets and scavenge for berries and eat dogs that trusted us with dry tongues like leaves. And how after The Accident, they took the land the food and the buildings and kicked us all out, I heard. I supposed they took what belonged to them that came before me and killed all the our food except for the strawberries which you could still find if you knew where to look. But mostly, I thought of the Little Primes I might a had without a broke nutsack and how even if this world wasn't the same

good one as before, it still wasn't right of no Peeps to take them out of here. I took that steel plate off my shoe and scraped it on the concrete to sharpen it.

I was going to kill that chicken fucker. But only after he knew why he was dying.

I kept my eye open for them, it seemed like most the chicken bastards ain't come out very much no more, and when they did they come out in more than one. One thing I wished I paid more attention to were signs.

The Peeps had hanged a whole lot a signs and papers up round the border of the middle of the city with what took me a minute to see as a drawing of one of us.

The face hanged there on the walls and posts round and you could tell it was us cause the way the hair was drew real wildlike and beard hair scraggling out wild the way Peeps think we look but really not all of us has hair. Under the picture was some of them Peep letters and words that I couldn't read.

I knew one sign from the big painted slashes covered around where I stayed in some powdery crumbling concrete buildings where nobody else much goes yet and that were covered with one mark looked like 'X'. This was put right over the Prime's face and I knew if it had to do with crumbling and falling buildings and nobody else there then it had to mean something bad.

It seemed easy to see looking back but since I knew no Peep tongue, I didn't think much of it.

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Today, I waited behind the building and seen him again. Too late and too close I got before I realized it wasn't him but a different chicken fucker. He looked behind me at the post

and that picture hanging everywhere of one of us and then all a sudden that drawing came together and I seen my face stuck up on there, flipping in the wind.

Real quick while there was time I tried to tell him what I meant, tried to tell him that he stole my kids and my parents, and not just me but a whole bunch a us, stacked on top of each other, living in the tunnels and shacks and concrete boxes going to powder and most of all in the wildness outside the city. I tried telling him that I hated him yet somehow we was alike and so I also didn't hate him.

He looked at me like he knew who I was but didn't know me. He was bout to call for the others. The right side of my smile curved off and flattened. And that was when he hooked my feet and laid them strings of fire all over me. And there wasn't nothing else I could do at that point but bring out the baby shiv and swing at him.

After that there wasn't much happened except I got my knife out and stuck it in him fore he could twitch. Got him right in the gut where some I heard opened a dog and tugged up and plucked the beating heart and ate it right away, on account of the strength hearts give you. except this time this chicken bastard knew what to do. On account of me not realizing their papers had me on it, I didn't expect the fuckers to be ready and which this one was. He spun round popping right off my knife and I barely heard the schluck sound and felt one hot drop fly up off my knife to my face and then the ice burn of his own blade flicked into my side and it was more pain than from any asskicking and from my crushed nads and everything. Pain so white and dazzling your knees buckle and when you buckle you shear yourself just a little bit more till his knife is in to the hilt and he can't yank it but every time he tries you just die a little bit faster when all those little jerks dice you up inside and finally you realize the only answer is to remember your own knife, and the only thing you can aim it at is his own face right there under yours and above his

arms still tugging at the knife, and you jab it right in one dark eye and wonder in the middle of the agony if your face is like Billygoat's and cause you leave the knife in there after one jab and don't twist him up all sick you know that your face is your own still. And all this going through my head fore we laid there on two sides of the spilled chicken. We was both fucked.

After a while but before everything faded was some Little Primes creeping round the corner and looking at us and looking at the chicken wondering what they should do. I didn't have strength to tell them anything much and didn't know what to say if I did. But I knew they shouldn't have to see us like this and I knew at the same time that they had seen us and they couldn't unsee us and that this was all part of it and had been long as I remembered. But also I felt that sad creeping back, shivering up my spine and through my belly, drowning out the pains flinging through my chest and coating me.

And somewhere in the back of my head I smelled that chicken and saw them little ones digging in the box and I laid there and watched them awhile. They ate a little of the chicken real fast and they crammed that chicken into every pocket they had, which wasn't much on account of em having hardly no clothes but I saw em trying and one little one standing in the middle of it all eating with his eyes closed like Johinto.

It was like I was raisin up slowly and I could see down to where we was laying, me and the chicken bastard and the higher I got the more I could see and then I could see all the paths and roads and trashes and tunnels leading around and I knew I knew every one of those lines right there, could trace any path like a finger on my palm. I kept flying up and I saw them other chicken buildings which I heard bout but never seen and one more time that chicken smell slapped me right in the nose and the throat and mouth and I seen that little one standing between me and the chicken bastard, one of us and one of them Peeps laying there leaking and sighing

both of us and watching him eat and somehow cause of this we was all the same. And the chicken bastard knew it too, knew it deep down, and he always did, and all the Peeps knew that too and after that I kept right on flying up into the sky and underneath me I heard them bells ringing down at that corner and I thought of Johinto squinting down there somewhere, punching someone who was going to punch him, and of hungry dogs and of that very first first chicken bastard, and I thought about that baby who wasn't dead yet and wouldn't ever be anymore and of Billygoat, who I tried not to think of, or tried to remember instead Billygoat's muzak or just his pipe and nothing else.

And the bells were ringing and round them the muzak, always the muzak behind and beneath and round and lifting, calling to me and filling me with that thirsty sad to overflowing like that time when the rains came so hard and fast they filled the mud ponds, turned them inside out, and for one day they was clear.

## Departures

She didn't come into the starport so much as *appeared*, slammed broadly into being, all points, swoops and softness and shoulders, limbs akimbo framing triangles of dull white light from the windowed facade behind. My hand froze in the middle of handing back a boarding chip and I watched her for awhile, or as long as it took me to see her.

Her eyes first, blue but not close enough to see what kind of blue and framed lightly with eyeliner, the kind of line a woman wears when she's tired and her flight's early and she wants to look desirable but not edible. Her cheeks had that slack softness and mature beauty of a woman's later battered twenties, casting their luminous sheen through the mundane bustling world. The kind of face when the taut gets pliant and yet somehow seems more firm, cheek bones and jaws with their fluid lilted ins and outs so fine you have to trace with your fingertips to perceive.

She commanded space and attention without seeming to want to, and her eyes met mine with a deadpan "*Yes, I know you were looking at me, and now you know I know, and I don't care,*" and flicked changelessly away, contemplating the vista beyond the three window walls comprising the starport. I leaned fidgetingly back and forth, trying to create a disturbance in her peripheral that would encourage another glance. Out of my frame a man came into the picture, leaning and scowling. This seemed to upset her.



I felt a hand brush mine and looked down to realize the woman I'd been helping was trying to remove her boarding chip from my fingers. Her mouth moved but I hadn't heard anything.

"Sorry," I said, quickly unclasping my hand and dropping the chip. Instinctively I reached down for and accidentally kicked it, sending it sprawling somewhere on the other side of the desk. "Sorry," I said again. With a sigh the woman leaned down and palmed it, looking pointedly at me in the interlude.

I looked back up searching for the girl, or woman really, but she had disappeared.

Although the starport isn't busy on Mondays, there is a period of bustle during the late morning. The people wound around the stiles, a sighing shifting queue filled with mutters and no conversation. I had seen them all before. *Why do you travel?* I wanted to ask them. The murmuring din constantly backgrounded by the low baritone rumble of the rockets.

The rockets launched supersonically and furrowed the atmosphere, blasting from the mouths of their tunnels like corks out of champagne, rising high above the horizon and scratching their jet streams on the ceiling of the world. I used to sit and watch them fly, wait until they had started up and then run out to the observation window. Each time the tower cleared one, it rumbled slowly to the tunnels, backed in like loading dock like an old-fashioned musket. A series of explosions armed the cannon, kinetic energy bottling up and steaming to critical release. Through the observation window's nose grease and fingerprints, one end of the tunnel bay began to glow, cylindrical and deadly like a cigarette. The ground shook imperceptibly, paused, and the world waited with drawn hesitant breath like the second before a diver launches off the board, and then suddenly BLAM, the rocket, loud and forceful with the reverberation of God slamming

a door in Heaven, sharp enough to split ears even through the yard-thick glass. In the space of a blink the ship becomes just that, vanishing small and black into the distance. The glass is tinted so the blast doesn't burn the retinas of people watching, and even though, the luminosity and roar accompanying the launches are invasive enough so that it takes years of practice to show no response to either.

Then the girl and her boyfriend stood in line. They fired rapid low whispers back and forth, anger darting out of their mouths and off the edges of their words, sibilant stabs and concussive syllables creating the tiny percussion lovers' arguments have all of their own. The boyfriend seemed somehow elegant and at the same time unkempt and haphazard, shirt tactfully crumpled with several days' creases. But next to her he looked like a serf, an unseemly but necessary servant.

The steam coming from him belied the visual hierarchy. I could virtually feel the burn of words he spat. As he spoke he leaned in closer to her, scowl deepening under his lip and volume rising steadily, cresting in cadence and dropping again, an endless cycling barrage.

*"murmur murmur...think so? mmm...whatever ...Can't believe I..mm...WAY HERE WITH YOU!"*

*"...murmur murmur.."*

"Maybe I will!"

I turned my attention back and another woman startled me. She impatiently waved her chip at me.

"I'm so sorry." I said.

She pursed her eyes above flared her nostrils and I fought the urge to laugh. A foreign desire to flick the chip right back in her face shuddered over me. I had been working here too long. It was usually easy to feign polite subservience.

“Going to Hubblestation, ma’am?” I asked, trying not to seem invasive, ingratiation accompanied by smile. She looked at me strangely. What a ridiculous question.

“Yes.”

“Must be nice this time of year?”

“Not really. It’s space.”

Idiot.

She plucked the pass from my hand where I had been covertly withholding it, keeping it from the space between that suggested it was her turn to action, to reach me in the middle. She hadn't waited. Her cross of the midpoint was an aggressive faux pas. She gave me a prim smile but her eyes didn't reach me, gaze resting somewhere in the middle.

I sometimes tried to pry concrete information about these lands from travelers. A man from the Moon recommended me some cuisine and gave me his card in case I should ever make it out there. Another regaled me with his tales of treks up Olympus Mons. “*Three* times Mount Everest,” from behind a trio of hairy fingers. I’m not sure why I asked. It was all there in holovids and tripdrips, from Antigua to Miranda and beyond. I softly strode the sands of Venus and the Sea of Tranquility, fished the Upper Yangtze. In the Amazon I dodged piranhas and grasped gasping for rushing slender resilient vines as I careened down the rapids. I hiked Everest and Mons Huygens and Kilimanjaro, flushed a toilet in Tazmania to see if the water’s spin

reversed, which it hadn't. Of course this could be a programming glitch. Whatever I wanted to see I had visited in hologram, and for the full sensory experience, splurged some credits on the tripdrip. But it wasn't the same as being there, and I wanted nothing more than to strap myself to one of these rockets and fly away to anywhere.

The girl and her boyfriend stepped up, not arguing now, but not talking. I avoided his gaze and wiped his chip and handed it to him all in one motion, and he took it roughly and strode off to the bar.

And there she stood. In front of me and breathy and ethereal, I could hardly see her as I swiped her chip. The monitor read Destination: Arcadia. Looking away, I was suddenly overcome with shame.

She was from the station built halfway between the moon and the earth, intended originally as a depot and refueling stop, but now a luxury space-resort. Billionaires went there a few times in a lifetime.

Arcadia incited a sense of wonder in me, but also a forlorn apathy. With my degree I had expected to go into journalism, or broadcasting. But like all of us wide-eyed students, nose sniffing the sensational future around the corner, my self-estimations proved wrong. Multiple submissions of resume and equal rejections. No newschannel, licensed blog or data longue would take me. Not even the audio-only's. Who would anyway, in a sea of endless voices? Unpaid freelancing for some anonmous yakker. Maybe a teen starting a video series, just tasting the tang of free comm money. Or more likely someone with minimum exposure to show for themselves after a life's toil.

A warm thin-haired man from a lightly trafficked space squinted into Skype saw something he liked. But I was offered an unpaid internship, which I couldn't afford to take. A menial slot opened up and they called me in and then offered.

“Can’t this all be done by computer?” I asked, upon learning my duties. Having never been in the starport before, I felt like some kind of backwoods Huck Finn bumbling around.

“Of course. We need the human interaction, though.”

“Wouldn’t it be faster to just scan everyone and have them punch their tickets, making customers happier in the long run?”

“People tend to be at ease when they are taken care of by humans. There’s a warmth we bring to the travel industry which not only helps keep customers with our company, but keeps them satisfied on a deeper, *human* level,” he emphasized. I wondered if he'd ever got there.

“People don’t want faster. They want connection.”

And now this angelic being was waiting for her chip from me, and would blast off the planet without a second thought. What could I say to her to make her remember me?

And that was it. I felt my stare unsettling her and she raised her eyebrows. Not in a malicious way, but in a *what else were you wanting to ask* kind of way. Feeling accosted and unprepared, I started and my voice caught. I heard myself asking what time her flight was, even though it was painted broadly in digital letters on the departures board. She gestured to it, and I tried to let her know something through the looks.

As she left I I imagined I was a stagecoach hand from the 1800's, who could actually ride a horse had something enough over the lady guests to engage them. As she turned she dropped her glove and I watched it slow motion tumble to the floor, bouncing off her small tight butt, and

it fluttered to the ground and unfurled, all five fingers opening limp like an invitation. I rounded the edge of the desk and started to go grab it, and our fingers met. I gave a curt nod and returned straight-backed around the desk. I was still on duty, after all.

What caused this hallucination, I found out after returning, was that she *had* actually dropped something.

I ducked out as soon as there was space and grabbed an important looking card with officious numbers on it. Thankfully my shift was ending soon, and I could catch her before she left. Behind the desk whiling the last few minutes of my shift I found myself breathing it, inhaling the soft leathery perfume scent. The voyeurism filled me with acute carnal desire reminiscent of the time I got a pron on my server. There were drip prons on the down low, where your virtual footprint was concealed and if you were good enough to find them, on the illicit servers and p2p's, nude lithe women splaying around and inviting you, crooking fingers and stroking the air palms up, and if you were lucky you got a tripdrip that mimicked a real orgasm, so that when you hunched gasping and throbbing it was all real, the sweaty neck and lank brown hair splashing down her back and the rolling lilt of muscles spasming under your palm and the girl's saliva wet on your fingers.

At Gate C wing it took all of five seconds to find her. Though passengers were sparse, it wasn't the lack of distraction which gave her away, but rather her aura breathing through the room, a beatific mist that swept the corridors and arched to the ceiling of the seating area. As soon as I got there I perceived this mist and my eyes moved to her of their own volition. I strode up, heart pounding, and displayed the paper.

Her eyes lit, possibly with alarm, and she took it.

“Here.” I blurted. Late and barbaric.

Then she looked at me closer and with some recognition, deflecting her guard. But not all the way. “It's just my flights and code numbers. In case my pad was stolen. You're the guy from the...”

“Departures desks.” I kicked myself for not looking at the card or expecting this obvious information.

“Ah. Right.” Her hair was longer and more luminous than I had thought, shining softly in a gold sheen that seemed to hover somewhere about an inch off of her head. Her lips were moist and full, at least the bottom one, and small lines around the corners of her mouth and their lack of correction pleased me. But up close I saw she was set equivocally in a certain pattern, a pattern I couldn't subsume and one I'd broached in a conspicuous way. Perfunctorily, “Thank you. Where did I drop it?”

Who was I but a lowly attendant. That was my job, to pick up after her, to serve her and be nothing more than a footnote of a stopover in Metro.

“In the -” I stopped and calculated the risk of telling her exactly how long I had been following her, afraid that my deed would instigate a host of suspicions and ooze creep. My irrational demonic side insinuated she might be impressed or touched. Might be happy to know that someone beside her frumpish man was looking out for her. “It was in the hall,” I compromised. “I saw it much later, after you left when I finished my shift. Much later. After my shift was over.”

She pulled the glove on slowly, absentmindedly, turned her palms around and weighed the air. Her other hand was uncovered and her palm was slender, pinkly white. I knew the softness of that kind of hand, the same softness of an inner thigh or belly, right below the waistline. It was a tender, sensual gesture, and I felt it in my legs. I could feel tension and electricity between us.

There was something in the soft rose pout of her lower lip pushing under the thinner top, the knowing and older eyes that felt so sightful, and the infant crevasses branching subtly from her eyes and around her mouth. Something about the light makeup, the yuppyish bedhead and seeming apathy to appearances made me hungry with longing. I didn't believe in love at first sight, but my soul rumbled more than the roaring jets that warmed to spew rockets across the galaxy.

Her hair had fallen over her eye and she sat there, not moving it. I wanted to do *something* before I left and almost crazily reached out and brushed it away when the PA buzzed and I heard the automated voice announcing an upcoming launch. I pretended to listen, created space and time to breathe.

When you watched the takeoff, right after the flashing eruption, a strange otherworldly feeling came over you where perceptions seemed to compress and also expand. Even though the ship was moving at multi-mach speeds, the still blur in the sky gave everything else the impression of slowing down. It was moment frozen in time, your ears filtered the sound of the environment and your eyes caught one frame of the ship moving through air, then it was gone.

Raul the janitor watched every launch and called it the blur.



“Every time man.” He nodded sagely. “I see it every day and it still throws me. Makes you really think.” Think about what, I did not know. It was more that it made you *feel*. It made you feel the improbable shrinking of time, implied a transgression of nature for humans to move that fast, and to reconcile this within ourselves we had to invent and describe this thing that happened.

Wanderlust got the better of me eventually, and I couldn’t watch the rockets launch without feeling a keen sense of sorrow and loss. I asked Raul if he’d ever go to the stars.

“I’m saving up,” he said. “Like everyone else.”

“Where are you aiming?”

“Well at this rate I’ll be lucky if I can afford the moon in twenty years.” He placed his hand over his heart. “If the ticker lasts, that is.”

“I’d love to make it to Mars.”

He laughed. “By the time you retire they’ll have colonies on Venus and Ganymede, Io and Europa.” he rattled off the names of celestial bodies with a reverence I’d never heard. We both knew our odds at these trips. I wished fervently for Raul to find some eventual shred of satisfaction. He seemed to read my thoughts. “Arcadia would be nice.” Anywhere would be nice.

“He’s threatening not to come with me.”

We had moved beyond the introductory stage and seamlessly into the personal. “Vincent can be such a dick sometimes, you know?”

I thought I understood what that meant in her language, her sphere.. She played with a fraying strand of cloth on her pocket. I nodded, tongue swollen and heart vibrating, a kind of unplaceable grief pushing me to bask and soak up energy before she left.

Vincent was threatening to stay behind. She didn't seem perturbed.

“You think he’ll stay here?”

“Yeah right!” She laughed. “I wish. I mean I'm kidding but he hates this place. He's probably getting sloshed. He was born here.” she added, “No, I’ll probably be stuck with him, at least until Arcadia. Which is so small I’ll see him every day and...” She tailed off, thinking I'd be bored. Maybe I was supposed to be. I tried feign it and politely feign interest on top of that. I leaned in, all ears and groin.

Maybe I was too eager, for she withdrew slightly. “How long have you been working here?” The small talk could either be positive or the beginning of a dismissal.

“Six months two days seven hours forty-three minutes I said, checking my pocketab as if to verify.

She lunged into laughter, all gums and big white teeth and nestled tongue. She reached out and touched my knee with a zap. I laughed with her.

The PA dinged alive again and announced the ship to Arcadia would be boarding in an hour. Beatrice glanced around, looking for Vincent. I saw in her eyes a resolve not to seek him too strongly. I remembered he was drinking his brains out.

The fortuitousness of the situation impressed itself upon me, filled me with an inkling. A small scheme that hatched, grew wings and flew up to the top of my head. It flapped around, all I

could think about. That and her, sitting there so small and slender looking, one creamy shoulder pressing out of her neckline. She looked vulnerable and unreachable all at once, a paper doll that might flutter away in the wind. I wanted to wrap her up and crush her. And I barely knew her name.

After the announcement, there was a mutual understanding that we would part ways, except I now knew not permanently. I wanted to detect wistfulness in her posture; part of her wanted me to stay. I had to go, though, fast. *I will come back for you*, I thought.

She held out the card once more. “Thank you.”

\* \* \*

Vincent sat at the bar, hunched over, shirt untucked and rattling an ice cube in his glass. Looking as rough as earlier, there was also a strength to him now, a burliness not of physique but of aura and power. I don’t know if it was his drunkenness or my crazy plan that made him seem so formidable. I thought back to the girl and how close we or I had come to love and how badly I wanted to see Arcadia, and not just see it, but see it with her.

I pulled out my pocketab and swiped angrily at it, jabbed it emphatically with textual fury. “Bitch,” I muttered, under my breath but loud enough for him to hear me. I walked over near him as if distracted, tried to make my seat next to him seem random and unseen, even though there were plenty of places to sit along the glistening counter.

He had heard me, but he wasn’t drunk enough to care yet. The bar was louder than it seemed from the outside, as if the chatter and roars breached the bar’s exit and were descended on by an aural umbrella, clamping down the decibels immediately. The result was a pent-in

miniature cacophony, a clutter and swirl of voices and silverware, glasses knocking and swishing faucet jet.

I had been in here once, when Raul was staying late one night vacuuming. But I had only stood by the door and observed the seats and booths and rows upon rows of gleaming glass bottles.

Then Stoler addressed me: “Girl problems?”

“Yeah. Hella girl problems man.”

He nodded approvingly. His eyes had a hard time and I could smell several drinks in him. “Me too. S’ppose to be going to Arcadia.”

We talked and in fifteen minutes I felt I learned most of everything there probably was to learn about him. Between rounds I kept an eye on the clock. There was a slight delay in the launch, but not much. When he mentioned it again it was with disdain. He said he didn’t even want to go anymore.

It was time. I put on my face of apologetic hesitancy. “I’ve always wanted to go. It’s just that...” I paused for effect and let him predict what I was going to say. “You know, I mean, I just started this job and have loans and stuff. But someday.” I added in a rush.

He gestured and another drink came. He gave the bartender a nod, shivered his hands on his forearms and it grew warmer.

He tilted his beer to his lips and eyed me sidelong. “You should definitely go.”

I thought that was the end, didn't know how else to broach the subject of his impending breakup, and lack of connection to Arcadia, and the sizzling priceless chip that rode in his pocket that he'd be better off never using. "Yeah, I'd go in a heartbeat." Even if it meant deportation.

His eyes grew eerily sober, and his gaze held the gravity of pre-surgery. Maybe this was some game for him. He knew what he was bestowing. It was a look I was sure he'd worn many times, a look that accompanied reciprocal favors and decisive actions.

"Ya know," he began. My heart quickened.

"You could just use my chip." He threw the suggestion out there casually, let it flop and gasp on the bar between us. And this was the moment where everything slowed down, this was the blur. In microseconds I experienced the range of human joy, almost hugging him. I composed my face lest I betray and ruin what would come next. To fortify myself I took a large swig. With his hand he dug the chip out of his pocket. He held it up to the light, twirled it. I'd seen them all before, but this one looked different. The grey pockmarked edges like the sides of antique postage stamps, ruby insignia on the middle designating Startropolis, the horrible mashing name of our city and "starport" some bureaucratic oaf had conjured up that had unfortunately stuck. The insignia gleamed and the ruby glass seemed on fire. He tilted the chip in the light, and met my eyes. His brusque manner became cool and smooth and dripped out of him like liquid. It was an effortless grace and callousness at the same time. It was intoxicating.

"What's if I gave you my boarding chip?" He slurred. He partly stifled a belch, leaning back, red watery eyes rolling to the doorway. "Fuck that bitch," he said. "You wanna go to Arcadia?"

"What are you going to do?"

“Hah!” he said. “Stay here.” He pointed out the window toward the dense neon urbanity of Metropolis. “Or there. Or go somewhere else. Let her sit thousands of miles away without me .”

“Don’t you have family on Arcadia?”

“Nope.”

“Job?”

His look suggested I was a silly boy, and I felt like one at that moment, an unremarkable toddler tugging at the sleeves of greater, real men. “No,” he said.

It could happen. I would just get deported if no one was hiring up there. I ignored the fine that would take a lifetime to pay off. I took a second look at his clothes. I wasn’t an expert in couture, but I could see the cut and fit of his shirt, though wrinkled, was specifically designed for him. The jacket slung over the back of his chair gleamed. I hadn’t noticed before, but his wrist was marked with the black bar of immense credit. He saw me looking and moved his wrist to his pants, which were made of some tan stretching soft material, possibly byssus. The shoes looked like genuine shark, something which could get you arrested. “Nice.” I pointed at his shoes.

“They’re okay.” There was a little less warmth and camaraderie in his eye, replaced by a type of disgust, I realized that my youth was the only thing keeping him from displaying this telltale sneer toward me at all times. Flattering him was useless. Just take it and run.

The bartender hovered nearby, excited by his tips. He had been exhausted before. I wondered briefly about his position, and I supposed it was for similar reasons that I still had a

job. A program could measure out two ounces of rum, two parts of grapefruit or zest a lemon or pinch some bitters, but a human here made more sense.

“Think I can get a job there?”

“Oh yeah.” He said readily. “They’re always looking for help.”

“How much are hotels?”

“The fuck, I dunno man,” he shrugged.

Something was different now and I didn't care. That wanderlust was deep and thirstful, like the only thing that would satisfy me would be to swallow the earth. *Fuck it*, I thought.

\* \* \*

Rounding the corner of gate C, propelled by the chip and space's calling maw I almost ran into an old trembling man, his huffing exertion barely audible even though the hallway was empty. His hand was wrinkled and saggy, capped with black nails and gnarled around the ebony curve of his cane. His scratchy burlap voice asked me in broken English where the rocket schedules were. I gestured frantically and described the way, certain he would forget and have to ask someone else anyway.

“You see,” he said in better English, “it’s my son.” I nodded impatiently, pointing sharply down the hall away from me. His face creased in consternation. I wanted to strike him. The old fuck was keeping me from Beatrice. Where was his caretaker? He must have seen it in my eyes, my livid instantaneous pseudo-hate, and as he turned to go I ripped my service jacket off. No more interruptions. Much later, unbeckoned, the thought of G-Forces on the old man stuck me. They could have kill him. The lulled somber sadness in his face guilted me. It had been

important to him that he caught his trip. Federal law rigorously advised the elderly not to rocket, and we rarely booked anyone over 70. The casualties were rare, but they did happen. What had that man been going to see? What had prompted this man to eschew safety and desperately fling himself through space at speeds which all but ensured his death? I wished I had taken the time, called him sir or something, that I made mine the last friendly face he might ever see.

At Gate Wing C I was tempted to seek out Beatrice, to catch her eye and surprise her, but even with my reckless courage I didn't have anything to make her comfortable. What could I offer her anyway? Nothing. For a moment the thought came to me that I was throwing myself away to a place whose return ticket I couldn't afford all for a girl but I realized I wasn't so silly as that. Something bigger and more eternal drove me.

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I checked my credit for the millionth time. My entire life savings, pitiful. But not insignificant in terms of a vacation. A possibly permanent vacation if Stoler was half-right about jobs. Nevermind the fine, was I going to wait fifteen years to go legitimately? I'd be like Raul, sitting there wondering later why I didn't use this opportunity.

Beatrice's flowing mane raised itself above the bent heads of the crowd and she scanned the starport for him, putting slender fingers to her face and drawing a V down around her lips to her chin. She whipped her head back and as the last boarding call came turned resolutely to the rocket. Soon after I followed her inside, and chose a seat quickly, keeping my head lowered.



After the course was plotted and the ship shot, there wasn't much steering. Here they had left the duty to the computers. A ceremonial pilot greeted the fliers on the way in. Appearances and stability. He would at least monitor the equipment. Even if he wanted to he couldn't assume total control of the ship.

The chair flipped a black plastic mask over my eyes, and everything clutched. I wondered vaguely if my eyes would pop out without the mask. Soft rubber buds fitted themselves in my ears. The mask started hissing, and I relaxed almost instantly. I hadn't known about the gas, though it made sense. A low rumble started somewhere inside and under me and dragged down my rattling body. The earbuds weren't blocking all of the noise, and the high whine of the engines preceded the ignition of glycerin. The series of mini explosions began and built to a crescendo. In the second before the Olympian BANG and the accompanying flash I drew my breath and waited. And I felt it like a giant had kicked me in the back. As we climbed I couldn't breathe, and before I passed out I heard the interlocking and hissing of the mask reading my vitals, and felt a sense of calm.

When I woke, my chest felt compressed enough to pop through the back of my chair, my breath nonexistent and every muscle taut and wired but smashed by the momentum. Then it was over. We were free hurtling toward the horizon. I could feel that slight coasting-on-ice. Around me I smelled the dry papery cabin mixed with hairspray, and heard the soft rustling of someone's music.

After we landed, in the chute between the rocket and the terminal, everything settled and I remembered how to see. I had to get used to the gravity. In the green room I vomited along with several others.

The gray carpet with its blue specks and the corrugated gunmetal bordering the passages were familiar. Their rounded portholes were a different kind of rubber, but otherwise the cut and thickness of the plastic windows lining the chute looked the same. Stepping into the vast cool terminal I was surprised by the hush and lull before realizing that today was still Monday, after all, and travel must be light everywhere if it was light in Metropolis. A handful of sleek visitors milled in the common areas.

The port's window slides were closed and a sodden gray ceiling spanned the sector into which I emerged. The effect was not unlike the permanently overcast skies of Metropolis, but I knew that outside the building the sky dazzling. Looking around for Beatrice, lost in the resounding greyness, I realized again the silliness of my fantasies. And that I hadn't ever really believed them. It wasn't Beatrice that jolted me here, it was Stoler.

Not only were we alike, but I had a strong yearning to *be* him. More than the succulent wealth and jet-setting planet hopping, I wanted his power and surly disrespect. I wanted that vantage. To look down at the masses and say, *you may have this opportunity*. To be able to maroon stupid boys on a whim. I wanted his careless disdain for losing his woman. I had wanted to have her, and then lose her. The flippant way he discarded her. To turn down a girl like Beatrice! Jealousy and childish rage mingled in my blood and cheeks. I didn't not recognize what possessed me.

When I was a kid and my parents were alive I felt it but hadn't understood then, either. Giving and taking away. A long legged spider along the walk, my friend pointing it out to examine. She reaches out and grabs it, dangling in the air, loose legs trying to catch purchase against her finger and thumb. I reach out too, taking one of the legs. By accident it breaks off and

we both drop it. It scurries along, and curious to see its resilience I catch it and pull off another leg, and set it down. And then another. It still moves swiftly but lurchingly, teetering away as fast as it can move. She palms it and tips it into my hands again. I tear off two more legs and now it is a slow sprawling tripod. With two legs left it paddles around in a semicircle, and with one it twitches feebly in place. Certain this is the end, I pull off the last leg, leaving nothing but the outsized jaws. It's crawling with its mandibles, dragging itself along in halting scuffles, like a man in war after a grenade takes off his legs. After awhile I press my thumb flat on him, feel the moist *spitch* and see his brown guts leaking out from under my thumb.

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In the bathroom the white tiles glared at me with the same intensity and abruptness. Seven stalls, three urinals. The center urinal with a half-melted sanitary cake, pink and lopsided. I could almost see it diminish under my piss.

I don't know whose face I was expecting at the sink. My own greeted me, nonplussed and flat and neutral. I tilted my head to the side, looked into my throat and examined the silver caps on my teeth. I flipped my tongue out and raised it, thrashed it from side to side. I grimaced and growled, yanking my facial musculature into something different. Anything to show me what I hadn't seen before.

The same grey-white hand dryer stared at me, and as it roared to life I decided instead to wipe my hands on my jeans. I felt the rectangular hardness of the starport-issued boxcutting knife in my pocket, specifically designed to fall apart with an EMP pulse, and reached in and slowly retrieved it. My wet hand turned my pocket halfway inside out and my thumb slipped moistly on the catch before the blade *shlipped* up, refracting my reflection again, this time

magnifying my eye and distorting my face which still sat in the mirror behind my raised hand. I tested the cool edge of the knife, felt its keen sliver and the raw power of a primitive tool. I pressed the tip of my thumb harder on it, playing chicken with the blade, seeing how hard it would let me push before it sliced. A thin red line ran swiftly down the edge before I even felt the cut. I brought my hand away and licked it. In the mirror my eyes were still deadpan and uninterested. I furrowed my brow, trying to give emotion to my reflection. I ran my hand through my hair, paused with a fistful and raised it off my scalp. My eyes widened as the skin of my scalp pulled at my forehead. A nameless fury welled within me and I felt my knuckles grow white with tension. I raised the knife and drug it decisively across the brink of my hair, almost before I could think of it. I let the hair go and it dropped limply back. My jaw pulsed like a fish's gill and that was the only change, aside from my bangs. Then I was clutching my locks and slicing and slicing. The straight black strands fell everywhere, into the sink and on the floor, checking the tiles. I wondered fleetingly if my hair was the first to touch this floor. Then it was finished.

From somewhere in the distant past: *Smile with your eyes*, my grade school teacher was telling me. And I did. It started in my eyes and the tiny muscles around them and the stubbly cheeks underneath. The smile bled into my mouth and soul and then I was laughing. The joy seized me, rollicking through my veins and hands, fighting to erupt out of my body and I let it go.

A man walked in as I was in the later throes of laughter, my mirth quietly subsided like a lapping tide. He stopped, hand on his fly, and assessed me. I saw myself as he saw me, wild-haired and crazed with a spot of blood on my lip, bent over a sink and pounding the knife. The image he'd seen sent me into convulsions again and when I opened my eyes he was gone.

\* \* \*

I stayed the first night in the starport and the next week in the cheapest place, which still visibly drained my credits. I tried to enjoy the sites, most activities out of my financial range. I spent most nights out lying on the turf and looking at the sky, with Earth magnanimously drifting by, and told myself it was worth it just for this. It was clear there was no work. I'd finally have to throw myself at the mercy of the officials. I approached a man who looked in charge at the starport, one who wore a uniform instead of the usual accoutrement of various shaven rare animals that seemed to be the fashion of choice on Arcadia. What happened next was another one of those things you never understand, another blur that pops into your field of vision and disrupts the flow of life, one of those times that becomes a touchstone for future memories, a stopping place for your mind on the way back.

Simply, I said, "I've just moved here. From Earth."

He was unimpressed. I told him.

At the end of it, I'd given him approximately the whole shebang, embarrassed and humiliated.

"You came here for a *job*?" he asked incredulously, eyeing my clothes and hair.

"Not exactly." Seeing that wasn't enough, I added, "I actually came here for a girl. With a girl, I mean. She's gone now." Anything for pity and mercy.

He held up a hand and stopped me, I wondered if he'd summon the troops and have me arrested yet. But instead he smiled vaguely. He'd seen it all before, but for some reason my case became an exception.

He weighed me in an age-old seemingly wise way. He knew I was illegitimate. But magically he said, "Alright. Well, I'll tell you what. He gestured to his left. I saw rows of brown

sloping desks similar to the ones on Earth. “We need some chippers on the weekends. You have a lot of experience. No one here wants to take a part time ticket job. You can start there and we’ll see after that. Maybe you can stay until you make enough to go home. If you want, of course.

I thought back of Earth and the starport and Metropolis and my parents’ graves far, far below. I thought of Raul and the split second I stopped to tell him, and the sorrowful, haunting gaze he gave me upon learning where I was going. “Make sure you *love* it,” he whispered fiercely.

“I will, I will, Raul,” I had said. The excitement crested again making me giddy and weak-kneed. In the midst of the zeal I had felt Raul’s aching insatiable sadness, and I patted his shoulder. “I’m sure you’ll make it out there. I’ll let you know all about it if not.”

“If you come back,” he said.

“We know I’m coming back, Raul.”

“We’ll see,” he said. “Maybe I’ll come out there some time.”

“You bring that bum ticker anytime.” I flicked his chest and apologized for it. “You’ll make it. That baby’s lasted this long. It can take a little G-force.”

“I really don’t give two shits,” he’d said, turning away. On the tarmac stood the rocket, engines purring, ready to back into the launch tunnel. Its gleaming white and blue body stretching back, back, and its tail disappearing into the clinging sun on the edge of the world.

Raul had turned back, resolute. “I’m not scared at all.”

## The Speed of Time

### Yesterday

When it started happening to Maribel, she came outside and stared at me, eyebrows raised and mouth flopping open and closed.

"What?" I asked her, peering over my cupped hands and bringing the charge to the end of a nicostick.

The late autumn air whipped around the house and circled tighter, frigid and exacerbating her trembling. Her eyes glinted warily, and spooked me. My hands dipped and then floated toward her of their own power. "What?" I croaked.

She swallowed and set her jaw, and with the slump of her shoulders something inside her gave. She darted her tongue across her lip and fixed her gaze behind my shoulder to the skyline.

"It's happening to me." The wind wafted hair around her shoulders and splashed into my face and turned me to stone. The next moments disappeared somewhere, secreted themselves in my mind. It had finally happened to one of us.

Time had been speeding up very slowly for some people for years now. It started a decade ago when a scientist published his piece, *The Time of Nature*. He was speeding up, he said. With his age he wasn't experiencing the loss of reaction time, something was happening. Everyone around him was murching through, steps longer and slow. His perception and experience of time itself was changing. Soon others would experience it.

"Of course," our doctor said when we came in, pausing, suspending the stylus above his tablet, "We'll need the data."

"Data," I echoed, nodding.

"Yes, you know, for research." His wide blue eyes pitied me, conjuring empathy out of the space between us. I returned his look, wondering how many augments he'd had on his eyes. One for color. And one for vision. Did they have one for conveying feelings, and instilling certainty and comfort into a gaze?

"So...?" He cleared his throat, raising his eyebrows, asking me if I was all there.

"Yes. Yes, sorry. I understand." I looked at Maribel, who nodded meekly.

"Very good." He turned his attention back to the tablet, chewing the inside of his lip. The stylus slid swiftly across the surface, penning the fates of me and Maribel in an effortless script. I wondered what he was writing. Maribel craned her neck unsubtly to communicate our silent query. She is brazen in these small ways. I wanted to lean over and kiss her bare shoulder right there. As if hearing our thoughts, the doctor looked up and smiled. "Just checking some boxes. You know."



The next year the scientists had published more articles, each one more sobering and foreboding. Still, most people weren't noticing a thing. But more people slowly sped up. Synapses firing with rapidity, limbs swinging adroitly. The following months were a mad scramble as the masses writhed, rushing to and fro, consulting doctors, scientists and priests. The churches filled with white shellshocked faces looking for some reassurance that the world was not ending, or some absolution if faced with the inevitability that it was. Congregations massed, and cults formed, pseudo-scientific to doomsday to Christian Fundamentalists. Where before there had been a declination of spirituality and divine belief there now was a global sense of penance, and whole nations prostrated themselves before God. And then it came for us.

The natural instinct was to oppose this change, find a cure for the increasing speed of perception. There were scientific movements in the world to decipher and prohibit this acceleration. The university where I taught was part of the research, and offered experimental therapy to faculty and spouses. Maribel and I didn't take long to decide we would participate. She would, at least. I had remained unscathed, for now.

"Will you be okay?" I asked her, watching them suit her up the first day. She looked like an astronaut, and an inkling of the trials to come disturbed me.

They took her toward the tubes and as the cart wheeled away she snuck one arm out of the rubber suit, waving a feeble thumb's up around the back of the assistant. The doors flapped shut before the orderly made a move to push her arm back into the encasing.

When they let me see her it was going on night, the sun edging downward, flinging its last desperate rays around the horizon to grasp a precious few seconds. The Sun too, was fighting a war with Time.

The far flung sky darkened over the rooftops of the suburbs, and the aircars swooshed outside the windows in the late afternoon rush hour traffic. Careening storage vehicles blasted the wide window of the sickbay with their displaced air, sending imperceptible shudders through the frame. This wing of the hospital faced away from downtown, joining the east sides of a thousand buildings looking outward from the heart of the city. A natural band of traffic had evolved around the perimeter of the city, ringing the skyscrapers and pulsing with life. Amazing, that in these times one of the comforting things people clung to was the idea of work, of seeing industry as ever more fulfilling and essential. No matter the rate of the time, people would still need food and clothing. At least probably.

Maribel slept and I resisted the urge to rush to her side, and instead crossed to the wall and pressed my fingers on the sensor to dim the windows, imagining I was a motorist flying by and seeing myself, small and static in a corner of the wide glass panel, framed like an ant in the great bay of countless other windows, a pixel in a screen on a wall of screens, as far as the eye could see. My eyes met the driver's of a delivery tank, and before it blasted by, I felt myself briefly alive in someone's mind before being swallowed up by the darkening window. I wondered if they would ask themselves why I was in the hospital. I wondered if maybe they were rushing to get home to someone, someone like Maribel.

She lay on her side and I crawled into the bed with her, shimmying between the bright, tight sheets and finding the familiar space above her waist to slip my arm through. She felt

thinner somehow, lighter, the skin stretched tighter and bones in her hands jutting in eager presses against the confines of her skin. As far as I knew the procedure didn't involve intensive physicality, but she slept deeply with full breaths, bare lips holding instead of reflecting the light. I pressed myself to her, filling the spaces her body curved around with my own. I moved my arm under hers and clasped her collarbone. Nestled behind her, tracing the lobe of her ear with my nose, I felt our body heat mingling in a current between us, I had to squeeze her, absorb her body into mine, or else I might lose her. The tang of vomit was in the air around her lips and on her breath. *What's happened to you?*

When she came to, I was asleep and she nudged me, turning around and pressing her front to mine with her arms clasped together between us. In the morning she is most beautiful, hair in natty ringlets she hasn't noticed yet.

"They gave me this serum." Maribel turned away from me, lifted her hair and exposed a small square patch they had shaved. A round hole like a rivet stared back at me and I gasped.

"They had to inject something directly into my brain."

"My God."

She turned back to face me and briefly echoed my look with her own face.

"I know," she said, bringing her hand to my face and cupping my cheek. Her thumb moved back and forth, caressing the worry and fear out of my face. "It's only for a while."

"How long?"

"Hopefully soon I'll be back to noticing things in regular old motion, like you."

I felt nauseous and the bile on her breath the night before came back vividly. I protested, "But they didn't tell us about that serum."

"They didn't tell us a lot. It's still mostly classified. There's stuff I don't even know."

The idea of impending torturous treatment was almost too much to bear.

We went back to the hospital over the next few weeks, and each time they took Maribel from me they returned her in worse shape. Finally it ended when she emerged bedraggled and pitiful. Someone had slashed her open and bled all the vibrancy out. Soon she would disintegrate and fade away, empty as a paper sack. I hated it.

She whispered to me. "You know what I hate more? I hate that if we don't do this, then we'll drift further apart. No one knows how fast things will be."

But at the end of it all, after the sleepless nights, and dried vomit ringing the inside of the toilet the day she told me her brain was melting, after all of this, nothing.

"Is it at least stopped from getting worse?"

"I'm afraid not."

After a while, people realized that nature herself accelerated at a steady clip. People's speed of thought matched the acceleration on the cosmic level. Scientists who hadn't changed observed more rapid decay of isotopes, incrementally faster pathways of heavenly bodies. But to the changed people nothing was different on the grand scale. Their pace matched the spin of the planets, and the mean speed with which animals kited around. The conclusion was that the heavens, the winds and rain were accelerating somehow, and the answer was to get everyone perceiving at the same rate. This meant *facilitating* the change instead of repressing.

Evolution lies dormant, in every cell, in every atom of every plant and animal, and when the time comes, emerges in all its glory. Was this what happened to the rocks? Were they living creatures, billions of years old who had never sped up, and then been passed by with the next phase of evolution? My own synapses fired dully in my head, pressing through heavy banks of air.

“Lots of people haven't started adjusting yet, and with the general consensus moving toward the change as being inevitable and inexorable, we've reallocated most of our resources to this pursuit. That is, ‘jumpstarting’ the brain, if you will. Right now the rate of time’s increasing speed is slow, and it’s been steady. We should have plenty of time to find an answer. Of course as a member of the faculty you can freely participate in this study. It will give your wife a break, certainly,” was the doctor’s attempt at levity.

Wife. Images of Maribel and me materialized in my mind. We had just started our thirties, and we were supposed to finish them out, glide through middle age as our children grew older, had children of their own. We would marvel at all of the people we managed to add to the world. And finally, there I would be, tenured and bespectacled, eschewing the cornea implants for the retro eyebands that I could see making a comeback. In my retirement I would sit at an old-fashioned desk made of real wood, penning my memoirs with perhaps even an actual pencil. At any time I could rise and come up behind Maribel, snake my arms around her waist, aim her toward the window, rest my chin on her shoulder and look out over the bay. Wife. Now there was a chance we would have none of that.

“There is a small issue.” He hesitated, and I told him to spit it out, surprised by my own brusqueness. “There’s just not any room right now.”

"We were here first!" I protested, sensing that sometime ago this would have been childish, but instinctively feeling that now gentility and decorum were afterthoughts.

"I know, he said, shifting in his seat and scratching an imaginary itch behind his ear, putting on an air of bleary, and ultimately powerless, proprietorship, suggesting with his body language that he had done all he could, and it was really out of his hands now. He showed me his palms. "Look, I can bump you up the list. But do you think you're the only ones who want to be the same? My own wife -" he stopped and in the silence that hung among us he suddenly became real, flesh and blood, and our next shared glance held mutual sorrow. "I'm sorry."

"Yes," And under my breath, "Aren't we all?"

"There's good news, though. There's been a small measure of success already. *Already*," he emphasized. The doctor continued, talking fast. "It's amazing, really. All they do is a quick serum injection - no, not in the brain," he hastened, seeing my face darken. "In the arm, the old-fashioned way. And only because they can't synthesize the serum into something digestible. Then they basically zap your brain with a low voltage." He talked animatedly, waving his hands, almost dropping the stylus. I thought of his wife, and this made his description more palpable, his empathetic concern genuine.

He continued, "They've done amazing things in Britain, there's a lab that has managed to incite meta-velocitation – that's what we're calling it, in groups of people who haven't changed at a ninety percent success rate. In certain populations they've gotten some favorable return even in groups of people not genetically predisposed. There was an entire family - and after the last treatment, bam! Jumpstarted. I'll be taking the treatment myself soon." I wondered if any doctors

would stay behind at the speed of perception of those who couldn't be jumpstarted. Or if some themselves would be incapable.

“But how long will it take to get into the program?” The need in my voice must have seeped to his heart, and was working on his conscience, now malleable, pliant.

Through lack of funds and time, no pun intended, we have resorted to contracting private scientists and institutions to develop this technique.”

He let this sink in and I noticed that he didn't intend to pause for drama, but the stop came naturally, stretching the space between his words and creating organic anticipation. At what point in the future would the intricacies of communication break down, his pause eventually registering as nothing more than a blip in a string of words? Furthermore, would people's words eventually come in a rushing tide from their mouths, rendering communication between the adjusted and the non-adjusted impossible?

“I have a colleague who is conducting research, and I may be able to get him to take you on. You'd have to pay him a lot, though, if that's something you can do.”

Maribel and I looked at each other, fairly burbling with relief. We would clean out our savings for the chance. The three of us shared a smile, passed it back and forth.

That night we lay in bed with the sheets tangled between us, breathing heavily but content. I stared up at the ceiling and charged a nicostick, inhaling deeply. It was the first one I'd enjoyed in a long time.

"Give me that," Maribel said, and plucked it from my lips. She inhaled and puckered her face in distaste, handing it back. "Never mind."

## Today

The electricity zips through my brain, expanding and moving through my chest in a jagged fan, rushing out from under my nails into thin air. For a second, everything is dim and scattered, like looking through the screen on an oldschool storm door. The second burst hits, flaying my nerves with a million tiny fire whips, each lash carving from the inside out.

When I can breathe again, the shapes of the room ooze into focus. I taste the metallic afterbite, and my teeth ache at their cores like I've been chewing aluminum foil. The roaring static has vacated my ears, and I hear the panel swish open and the doctor's heavy footsteps amplify across the room.

"Well?" he says, smiling. "How was it today?"

"Shitty, like always."

He checks his smile, and hesitation makes small movements around his lips. The serum I had been given gives my gut vertigo and the room jitters, walls pushing one another.

"Sorry," I mutter. He should know better. It's been three weeks, and the progressive intensity of the treatment is obvious.

"Of course," he says, dismissing my curtness with a splayed backhand to the air. "Are you ready?" he checks his watch. He gives me a paternal smile that assures me it is alright to be



unenthused. He helps me get off the bed by pushing the small of my back, and under the hospital gown I feel foolish and weak, like a child.

Needing to affirm my utility, I affix the electrodes myself, even the one on the back of my neck, which must be exactly below my brain stem.

“Very good,” he observes, cold fingers adjusting one node behind my ear.

Inside the helmet the familiar red screen appears, blinking as the nodes pick up my brainwaves. The supersonic squeal rings in my ears, rises, disappears somewhere beyond my capacities. My ears twitch, shifting to follow the noise. Did they do that before?

“Ok, use those buttons again – can you hear me? use those buttons again and try to pick them as quickly as you can.

A series of monochromatic images, shapes and outlines, splashes across the screen, flicking by like shuffled cards. I’m to press a button if any of the random images repeats. From what I gather, this tests my speed of perception as well as rudimentary cognitive abilities. I see the squares and press the buttons, but I do not know if I am fast enough.

“Did any images repeat?” Dr. asks, from somewhere far away. I’m lost inside the helmet, thinking of other things.

“Well?” Anxiously.

My mind struggles into the present, all creaking wheels and groaning pulleys. “Not sure.” I say.

With a sniff, he stubs his eyeband up farther onto the bridge of his nose. Above the frame, his perpetual crease deepens. I hear disappointment in the whoosh of air from his nostrils.

“Well, look at this,” he says, like always.

The chronometer spins and throws spheres of light into the air, juggling photons like disco balls. “Too many,” I say. My voice cracks, and the doctor shuffles things around on his tablet. A jumpstarted person will see the colors *before* they mix – will see a band of red and blue before it becomes purple, and so on. I have yet to see any primary colors.

Then one day when I go to the clinic, Maribel is with me. Dr. whirls around the corner, toting equipment and data cells in his arms. People sprint around, unhooking things, putting them into wooden boxes.

“Bad time,” he says, and I think this is supposed to be a joke.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, obviously, we’re shutting down.” He makes a move to scuttle around me.

“Hey!” I almost shout at him, barring his way. “You need to tell me what’s going on.”

For a moment his haste is forgotten as he inclines his head toward me, and issues a quick shake of incredulity. “You haven’t heard?” He doesn’t let my silence linger much before saying, “There’s been an event. People are speeding up.”

“Yes-” I begin to remind him that it has been this way for quite a while.

He cuts me off, slicing his open hand side to side in admonition. “No! Even faster! We’re on the brink, or something. The cusp of evolution. Something has happened, we’ve reached a tipping point. It’s chaos right now.

“Tipping point?”

“Yeah, people are leaping ahead of the curve, jumping far, far ahead of the rate which they had been. You really don’t know? There are people already out there who are at the highest speed, who are already at the speed that everything will eventually end up. It’s been happening since last night. Soon everyone who can will be the same ultrasonic speed.” I had been pointedly keeping the holovision off, and somehow had missed the news. There is genuine fear in his face when he says, “Be careful. It’s been crazy dangerous.

“We got a tip last night,” he leans over, looking shiftily into the middle distance behind me, “*they’re coming here.*”

“For what? Who?”

“For the research!” he looks at me as if I possess a surplus noses. “This stuff is all classified.” He lifts his arms. “There are, I don’t know, *gangs*, of these people out there, and some of them would love to get their hands on this private research.”

He hops into a groundtruck and I chase him and scream until they stop.

“What about my data?” I pant into the window.

He hesitates, tapping the box in his lap. “Here,” he decides, and tosses me a datacell. “I guess it doesn’t matter now anyway.”

Minutes later, walking back home, I hear them, the quick lithe *screets* of shoes on the slick pavement interspersed with rapid breaths and I can almost taste their exhales as they come upon us. My head is not even all the way swung around, and what I can make out is a fast flitting shadow before there's impact to my left shoulder and I tumble forward.

Maribel twitches, moves with rocket speed and I am taken aback at how swiftly she responds, almost before I can register what is happening. Maribel's leg sweeps out and up, her arms and head afterward ducking down in the defensive posture we learned in self-defense class. *Once executed, roll backward and resume defensive posture.* Liquid drips down onto my wrist where I scraped it, and I remember the blade I carry with me.

"NO!" Screams Maribel, as I swing great clumsy knifing haymakers at the assailants. I'm fooled into believing a position of power by not getting immediately hit, even though my lunges cleave only air. In the corner of my eye I see Maribel's pocketlance dancing toward one of the shadows, carving the air and leaving arcs where she swings, distracting me from the attack.

*Thupp!* My back ignites and I'm surprised that I do not see my kidney come flying out of my stomach. I drop to my knee, spinning with the knife and trying to see clearly, but a dry heave interrupts me and the second blow knocks the knife out of my hand. My hand is crushed, skin torn, and glistening like a ruby. I cannot move my fingers and my hand stays half closed, dangling lifelessly from my arm. The pain in my back is unbearable, and I fall on my face, puking orange. For a moment, through waves of pain, I can finally see one's face, arm cocked back in a death blow. He wears a plastic mouth guard and his icy eyes impale me. Between us,

the air suddenly cackles and an orange blur hums by. A klaxxon sounds briefly, and medpolice shout from up the sidewalk. Then he is gone.

Maribel holds me by the time the medpolice get there. My mouth is rusty with the salt of blood, and the inside of my lip is almost bitten through. My tongue flips against the chunk of hanging lip, and another heave rockets acid bile into my nasal passages and mouth, getting into my wound. A bright hot fire erupts in my mouth and spreads through my body, pain seeping into the cracks between my bones, needles in all my pores.

“Can we give him something?” They ask. Maribel says something, her hand gingerly touching my face, not staying in one place for too long. I’m losing consciousness and as I fade out I feel a poke in my arm, and a warm tide swells slowly and fills my body as the narcotics sweep through.

The medpolice work swiftly, concertedly, patching my lip and hand with adept, surgical precision. They use lasers on the smaller wounds, melting the skin together. The needle for the stitches feels like a pinch compared to earlier. “Make sure he doesn’t move this.”

“I’ve been getting faster,” she says, later, confirming the doctor’s news. “As fast as the guys who came after us.” She jumps around with her sentences, speaking fast. Everything’s changing even more than before. It is like some clock in the earth ticks, and now all the nature, all of us, the offspring of all the organisms and atoms and isotopes on earth, have suddenly morphed at once. Except me. She says, “I guess the tide hit all at once last night, and the majority of people started accelerating at this new rapid pace. But that part doesn’t really seem to matter right now anyway.”

It matters to me. Maribel hovers beyond my field of view, a stranger. Her very DNA answers to some unknown foul overlord, clockworks in an alien machine. I feel my scarce grasp of her slipping even more, and within my mounting frustration the urge to destroy thrums through me, charging and wild. I need to express to Maribel my cumulative pain, and to do this I make her feel it.

I explode. My good fist pounds the table of its own accord, punctuating the pauses in my words, sending shock waves rippling through my skeleton. My jaw pops and I feel overwhelming helplessness, and estrangement from the only thing I love. “Why?!”

“What the hell can we *do* about it?” Maribel cries, moving her palms up and down, weighing parcels of air. Something is there, bristling and unutterable.

I let what I feel as betrayal well inside me, red hot and boiling latently in my muscles, rushing to the surface. Not utilized earlier in the attack, it resurfaces, re-purposed and absolute, and manifesting itself, a mangled, gurgling growl somewhere between scream and sob. I willingly assume she's been hiding this big jump for a while.

“So you just get faster and I seem to you to get slower. How many fucking times did you lay there and fake an orgasm, then, huh? Looking at me, plugging away like an idiot, slow and shuffling?” I picture myself brutish, feral and rutting against her in slow motion, pained ecstasy frozen on my face. All this time I thought we had been savoring our dwindling mutual perceptions, only to find they had faded long ago.

She says in a small voice. “You know it only got this fast recently. Don’t you realize how hard it was for me?”

“Hard? You’re the one who’s keeping up with nature! Why the fuck do you deserve to evolve? It should be me!” and as I say the words I know they’re stupid, meaningless. “What the hell have you got that I don’t? Nothing!”

“It’s not *my* fault!” Her words hit me back, she turning on her heel. She moves to the door. “You think I like moving slowly just so you can keep up, that I enjoy listening to your words crawl out? For once, for the love of God, I want to be able to walk at a normal speed!” As soon as she says it I know she regrets it, wants to snatch the words back out of the air.

When she has left the room my lividness cools, and in her wake I feel nothing at all. Alone, pain seeps in, dripping through the nanospaces between my cells, coating every square inch of my insides. I dig my datacell out of my pocket with my other hand, fling it across the room. It smashes into the wall and bursts, skittering in pieces across the linoleum.

I had been helpless and drifting during the attack, a small child in a man’s world. My injured hand clenches, and I relish the pain, and squeeze it again to punish myself. I watch the wounds reopen, the stitches unravel and the laser burns stretch open, skin tearing in tenuous lattices like melted cheese. The need to vomit materializes, and dizzily I lean over and let it out. It slaps to the floor and for an instant I see myself as I am, useless. I shake without restraint, letting go to the gravity pulling my body down, down.

I lie prostrate and puked on when Maribel comes back. The small click rouses me from my fog. Somewhere in my periphery my hand pulses and reminds me I am alive, each heartbeat a piercing shard, climbing further up my arm until I am conscious.

“My God.” Maribel says, putting her arms around me, avoiding the wet stains on my shirt. “Oh,” she says, squeezing me to herself before she walks to the sink to wash me off, and

my hand attaches itself to her shirt, grips and tugs her back. I put myself into my words and say, “I love you, you know.”

Later, in the kitchen picking up the strewn bits of datacell and plugging them into the receiver, I find myself pouring over the graphs, the salvaged data accumulated in my experiments. My reaction time had not even gotten a nanosecond faster. All for nothing. And now I would never catch her. But I still want her to stay with me, to sit and watch the sun rise like we used to do, drinking all night and squinting blearily when it nudges into the sky. Our legs dangle off the edge of the roof, and we lay back on the pillows we brought and cross each other’s ankles. Before the sun shed its girdle entirely, we would sleep. I wonder how many more mornings I will greet before some decisions are made. If I saw it through her eyes, I thought, how fast would the sun rise then?

The holovision proclaims, in a voice that is noticeably faster, almost hard for me to understand, “Most people after the tipping point all seem to be finally experiencing the world at the finishing rate of perception. Nature has caught up, for most.” The blurred black twitches that were people come back to me, haunt the air around me. “We think that this is the terminal speed of time, and once we all get there, we will be okay. Every mind, every seed of nature has an internal clock, and as the shifting rumbles of earth readied herself for mach speeds, so did it presage the tipping point. Before this, the previous years of *slowly* increasing speed were just nature gearing up and readying, gathering energy for her momentous leap forward to the present rate of increase.”

We have always known that the galaxies the furthest from us are speeding away at faster and faster speeds. Maybe once a galaxy reaches a certain age, it evolves, or rather, once a galaxy



has reached a certain distance from the center and origin of Time. Maybe The Milky Way hit that point. A galaxy gathers speed and flings itself further away from its origins, not because of any explainable human physics but because the next phase of existence starts for it.

And now, how would I fit myself into this hostile, barren landscape?

“The Universe is far more vast and inscrutable than we thought,” the holovision drones.

The wind creaks the house and the tinny muted roar of hovercars zipping through the airplanes keeps me awake. In my arms, Maribel sleeps fitfully, rapid breaths whispering in time with the traffic flying above us. If I didn't change, eventually a day for me would be a hundred for her, and while I slept she would age another hundred. What kind of life was that?

I brush the stray hairs to the side, and tuck them behind her ear like I always have. The true velocity with which she moves now, unmasked, will soon hardly afford me the time to see her, I feel, and I don't want to forget how she looks. I trace her face, dragging the pad of my thumb across her brow, coarser than most, brown unruly hairs near the nose growing in defiance to the grain. I bring my lips together on her brow, smelling soap and linen, and my heart drops like an elevator. I draw ovals around her eyes with the tip of my finger, tracing the bridge of her nose with my knuckle. I outline her lips, press mine to hers. Do my arms wrap around fast enough for comfort, or do they close sluggishly, and my grasp just an interminable, human vice? I close my eyes and smell her like a garden and imagine verdant, emerald places where dandelions bloom overnight and not within minutes.

“What will we do tomorrow, and the next day, and the next?” I ask, mostly to myself.

## Tomorrow

“Do you still love me?” I will ask her, praying she understands me. Tears will streak down her face like rain on a windshield and drip off her chin, falling faster than I had ever seen.

She’ll nod, head seizing rapidly, and I’ll tell she is trying to keep her momentum slowed down enough to communicate to me her love. Eventually, we will communicate in writing, each sentence taking me a month to write, and her a nanosecond to respond.

The speed of the adjusted will be too great for the unadjusted to bear. Time will stretch its momentum imperceptibly for most, but for some broken ones like me the minutes will pass swiftly, days and nights strobing by. A mandate will pass, restricting the unadjusted. They will speak to the subject of comingling between adjusted and non-adjusted. “It will be most disconcerting,” they will say. “For both parties.” One future day the unadjusted will seemingly stand frozen in space, interrupting the flow of life. To the unadjusted all life would eventually be is an array of dazzling auras and flitting shadows, nothing solid, everything temporal. Then Maribel will flit by in imperceptible dashes, even if she tries to slow down.

“There is a place,” they will say to us. “Where you can’t even see the outside. It’ll be good for you.”

“Do they let people visit?” She will ask, transcribing the conversation for me.

She would have to stand there for hours for me to see her, but I know that she would. Her hands will move lightly over my face, brushing like the wind.

They will say, “It would be most disconcerting, for both parties.”

I will say over and over how I cannot live without Maribel, nor she without me, and in the uncomfortable silence that will follow, they will try to build answers for us out of their words, while I hold on to her, and fail. Eventually physics will conquer, and we will no longer have even that. They will tell us, “It’s really for the safety of the people. You could sneeze, and that velocity would kill him, you know.”

“But he’s not hurting anyone!”

“Yet.”

Eventually they will come and ask if I’ve been committed. She will say that I have been transported to a facility.

“Which facility?”

She will give them the name of one, and they will check the database later, away from her, at a more delicate time. We will use this time to fly low, to go on the lam, Maribel driving, the traffic unnavigable with my prior-human eyes and reflexes.

Eventually we will realize that the speed of our perception has created a canyon between us more vast than any spatial separation. We will be together, but not at all. Maribel will one day put the hovercar down on some building, stumble out, unable to look at me, and let them take me. I will go willingly.

**OR**

She will look at me one day, coming out of the bathroom with the natal wand and speaking to me the way she does with her eyes and not words. She will have to hold the expression on her face long enough for me to process it, but when I do, I will melt and the gnarled muscles throughout my body will unclench themselves.

We will hear about a cryogenics lab, deep in the throbbing center of the city, where they will suspend me until they figure out how to jumpstart my brain, to reunite me with my wife and son, or daughter.

We will speed to the center, under the cover of night, hawking to the beating heart of the metropolis. We will procrastinate, stay a night, or two, or three in a hotel, our suite towering blackly over the cityscape. We will hold each other until it is dark, standing before the wide pane, pinpricked among the windows thrown across the face of the hotel, somewhere in the scattered, pulsing, winking lights, ever changing and always moving. We'll venture out and share our last evening together. Maribel will slow her gait and I will speed mine and for a time we'll be able to stride hand in hand and forget that soon we must leave.

We'll take the elevator back up, one of the old ones that hasn't been converted to the new speed of humans. We'll punch the button slowly, savoring our time on the ground floor, relishing the pause in momentum before we ascend, and all the still moments we have, moments void of motion where there's no relative speed to remind us how far apart we are. We'll rise majestically over the city, sprawling and bluish black - the streets like arteries pumping people and to and fro; the higher we climb the further the extent we will see, until the city no longer grows and perpetuates itself to the horizon, but focuses and gathers itself more tightly to its center, huddling its denizens, city and populace breathing and moving fluidly as one, with the last stubborn

holdouts like myself on the outside of whirling time, bereft and gawking. At the very top we'll look through the roof to the darkened heavens, each dotted cluster in the night sky another turbulent whorl of stars, individual solar systems wreaking their own havoc on their life forms.

“This ride took forever,” she will say. “But I wish it lasted longer.”

“I can arrange that.” I will push the pearl inlaid button, and the doors will compress. The city will swim with lights, and as we clutch each other, will rise to meet us.

## Disintegrate

I'm in the process of scratching out a line on a dvd case, crushing the rocks to dust under my license when Justine starts taking off her clothes and running her little tongue over bright lips, and since I've paid an assload for this public show and don't want to miss a second, I hurry and push a rolled twenty in my nose and snort heartily, chunks and all. Coke makes me lewd and horny as a band kid in a dark bus covered with the deep night, whispering under tented jackets. I notice and say things dripping in sex, and I can't help it.

Not that long ago I stumbled upon this website where girls undress in front of webcams. There are a few models I like, but my favorite is Justine - her cam name is actually "JustTeen" as in, just a teen, but I call her by her real name. She looks the part, like a teen that is, all skinny but burgeoning and pert little breasts nubbed with perfect-size nipples like halves of pencil erasers protruding out of their ferrules. Today she's looking delicious, rising to her knees on her bed, brunette hair thick and full and washing down to her belly, the spray of strands half-covering her boobs as she grins coquettishly and inserts a thumb into her waistline, tugging it down and letting us see the tip of her landing strip, thick and dark, wide as a dollar bill, unlike other models who leave some pubes there in a thin little impersonal line, or none at all. The hair on her snatch is full and warm, and a raging desire to bury my face in it nearly brings me to pre-ejaculation. 'Oh, gratuitous coke!' I think to myself. 'I won't be needing my tubing today,' and I unclench my dick to stave off the deluge, keeping the blood there by tracing softly with my fingers from

the base to the head, which has shrunk from its swollen plum size to a soft spongy quarter-sized nub, and try to wait for the show to start, but the coke's making it hard to concentrate on anything but the most X-rated of details.

Times like these I need a distraction and I read the front page of Wikipedia that I've learned keep open in another tab. Today's featured article reads, '*Banksia cuneata* is an endangered species of flowering plant in the Proteaceae family...' Perfect. I caress myself, wondering if anyone else supports half-boners while reading the encyclopedia.

Justine is wrapping up her pitch and I'm waiting for others to contribute to the public show, as I've already given my lot of tokens. I'm tempted to dig into my online wallet to expedite things, but I remember how low my drug stash is, and how much money I have to drop on Coolly in a little while, and how I've been spending the money my uncle left when he died a little too freely, and I decide to wait for others to finish raising the money. Patience.

JustTeen: Just 200 more tokens guys come on

The shit hits, piling on top of the previous bumps, and I feel it low and feisty in my bowels, loosening them in the telltale gut-rattle that always accompanies good coke. Confidence blooms widely in my chest as I breathe in, and I feel collected and put-together. My focus is immaculate and the right side of my mouth is grinding involuntarily, which is a good sign since I just bought this twenty sack and you never know exactly how good your stuff is going to be. The minor anxiety is overwhelmed by the need to *do something*, which in this setting morphs into my thirsty urge to do *someone*. I'm back to watching her cam, but now my cock's somewhat at half-mast and I flag it impatiently. Coke makes you go all night, but desensitizes and draws the blood away from your hard-on if you quit using the erection.

Justine's turning around and looking over her shoulder, slipping both hands under the soft white fabric of her panties and flitting the elastic band up and down giving a slideshow peep of the thin flickering crack of her ass. That does it and the crowd pitches in with the tokens which light up the chat room, accompanied by .gif's of clapping hands, laughing monkeys, or animated stick figures popping huge boners. The room is celebratory and fraternal, hearty congrats offered to those who have paid. Justine dutifully obliges.

In one diving graceful bend she slips her underwear off and bends over, giving the best angle of everything at once, and you can feel the collective psychic gasp of a hundred horny dudes, and hear the fleshy taps of hundreds of hands starting to pump.

Since this is a public show, Justine won't do anything gratuitous, just play with herself a little bit and maybe fake an orgasm. But she's made a decent amount of money and the "lite" show, accessible to everyone, is worth every penny.

Stage lights glint brightly off her shoulders as she turns, and the small eagle tattooed on her side rotates with her, gliding across the screen, leading a velvety-dark navel nestled in a soft brown belly. She brings her finger to the corner of her mouth and ducks her head, guiding the shining tip of her nail down a softly jutting clavicle, tracing the small nipple-capped hills of her breasts and hiding the other hand between her legs, fingers woven through the clipped, rectangular bush that protrudes shyly around the edges and between her fingers. I look at her face, searching for a fleeting sadness, a slight dissatisfaction bleeding through her sensual, controlled haze, anticipating the climax but knowing that I will feel through the thrill of orgasm the inevitable weight of us coming together, and apart, ending both alone and tired and spent. I wonder if she feels as empty as I do afterward, something akin to hunger but not quite, and I



want to see what she does after the shows when she waves and clicks the camera and the window to her world grows dark. I want to know if she cries, if those pale luminous shoulders heave quietly on the other side of the web. I want her to shiver in my arms as tears roll down her face.

When the show is over Justine says:

JustTeen: Im havin a private show later for the big tippers. its a special one. U kno who you are lemme kno if u think you belong.

People say

: Helllz yeah

: wat time;?

JustTeen: Around 8 central

: fap fap fap

I've been wanting an invite to a private show for a while but haven't scored one and here she is, having open tryouts. I think of the money I've been dropping on her the past few weeks. It can't hurt to see. I send her a message on the chat wall, watching her face in the video that accompanies the chat, studying to see what registers. The red lips frown when she sees my message. I type, since the viewers can't converse with a mic:

Marvelust: Hey I think I belong

JustTeen: Hey there your new

Marvelust: ya a little

JustTeen: Let me look up your donation history then

Marvelust: ok

JustTeen: Just a sec

Marvelust: Take yuor time bb

“Ok,” she says, addressing the camera. “I think you qualify, Marv.” She smiles, eyes flaming brighter for emphasis, “Welcome to my room! I see you’ve only been here for about a month.”

“Six weeks,” I say to myself, absentmindedly. One of those moments drifting in time, seeing myself from the outside just for a hair. An annoying prickle, like a gnat you can never kill, hovers around my ear reminding me in unpleasant whispers that I may be getting too fucked up to see and hear straight. Or it could be my computer, I think, or maybe it’s because I haven’t eaten lately. Ever since my uncle got sick and stopped cooking I’ve had to learn to make my own food. In the few weeks since his death I’ve just been ordering out, irresponsibly stewarding the small fund he left me. But I don’t ever feel like cooking.

I halfway try to rekindle an interest in the puzzling missing letters, but I don’t care about this nonsense anymore, and the momentum of that mental track is gone because my mind feels foggy now and I’m deflating as the coke wears off. I’m no longer enlightened. My surroundings aren’t bright and my chest isn’t swelling with an odd mixture of trust and desire and anticipation.

Marvelust: It’s ok bb see you later tonight?

JustTeen: ok Marv see you. Make sure to be on time!

I used my whole bag of coke for this session, so I go outside and load up a bowl of some bammer weed and hope to get high for a comedown so my soul doesn't feel like shit and I can think straight for the rest of the day. I breathe it in deeply, letting it simmer in that excruciating tickle that scratches your lungs from the inside. Coughing relieves me and drinking the warm night air gives me a burst of adrenaline. The first loosening ripples of the weed spread outward from my chest to all my extremities, decompressing my clenched muscles in the equivalent of a warm massage. I can smell the clipped grass and flowers, an earthy miasma unveiling its presence with the aid of the marijuana. It's not too cool and dry and the air whistles overhead as it sluices through the limbs, shivering the leaves and knocking loose a few whose landing during the gustless interludes can be heard soft but distinct, like a sheaf of paper dropping into a folder.

I feel my jaw slacken, and realize my teeth have been clenched all day. A load lightens from my back, and my thoughts trail upward with it.

Be on time? Justine was punctual, this girl. One of the things that drew my attention to Justine after I found this site was her sense of order, her cool calm ease and the assured manner with which she handled the men, sultry smirk demanding and cajoling large sums of money from us without seeming to. She was clean and well-groomed, and beautiful, and had a high def cam that caught the quality of the fabric in her scarves, the satiny sheen of six hundred count Egyptian cotton on her bed. I longed to wriggle between those sheets, to burrow away with her on Saturday mornings and remain buried all day.

On this site I'm into the clean girls, the youthful, exuberant girls. Girls with brains that can do anything but choose to lounge pulling knees to their chests under bright lights and

wriggling under the intense, famished stares of unknown men. In a way I feel responsible to care for these girls who are too young to know better, to know that these men are not their friends, to know that they would just as easily see them fucked as be fucked, men who want nothing of trust or companionship or even proprietorship, just cold hard constant and thrusting and fucking.

These girls were young, making a buck while majoring in economics or resort management, and I wanted to find them, to grab them by their faces and to pull them close to me to whisper fiercely that no one deserved as much of them as they were giving away and that I would save them from themselves and hold them forever and love them so they wouldn't need to do it anymore.

I'm pretty high now, feeling articulate and contemplative in the way that always makes me think of when I started college - before I took a break a couple years ago to take of my Uncle Tino before he died, when I talked in long erudite exultations, preening and exercising my vocab, expelling ten-letter words and flexing my intellectual mettle, before his money was diverted from my tuition to his treatment. I had low credit and a lower GPA, and when the opportunity came to nobly bow out of school after my uncle's stroke, I took it. But when I smoke weed, I am reminded that I'm able to go back at any time, and I know I will. Recently a side effect of taking more drugs has been an increased desire to know things, a blazing interest and addiction to the acquisition of knowledge, and I find myself sitting and reading articles for hours on end. I bide my time between porn and knowledge, which makes me uncomfortable, as if I was violating some natural hierarchy of human activity.

I call Coolly, who answers in his usual snuffling gravelly whisper.

“What's up.” I say.

“Not shit, you?”

“Same shit bro. You good?” I modify my speech to the idiosyncratic cadence and sounds which are the dialect of the underbelly in my city.

“Yeah. Whatchu need?” he rasps.

“A eighth of that kush from last time.”

“Aight, come through.”

I say, after some deliberation, “And some them one things if you got them again,”

I had to calculate my drug fund, which was plumper than it had ever been. My uncle Tino had had a little money left, not much, but since it was only him and me in the whole world he left it to me, and it would supplement me until I found a job. I would have a stricter drug budget soon, of course. And cut down on my recent accumulating habits. But after the summer, when I went back to school.

“They the blues ones. 650’s.”

“Damn.”

“I know. You still want them?”

I’m a little over this week’s budget, and with the over-expenditures from last week, I should be more careful. But I have been keeping utilities low. I know how to run a house from spending the last year and a half as my uncle’s caretaker. Our small split-level is paid for, the house my uncle had taken my mother into when I was a boy. She was his baby sister and when she left one morning and never came back he was stuck with me, a twelve-year-old on the

cusp of manhood, having never known anything about my father, except that he was black, maybe, and the curious alchemy of that - plus as my uncle Tino would say, since he couldn't pinpoint our ancestry, a "fusion of Asians"- accounted for my narrowed eyes and afro.

I remember our last days together, Uncle Tino sitting and watching tv most of the time, despondently squeezing a Porky Pig-head stress ball to strengthen his left hand. In this memory he has his usual strand of drool dripping to his chest that has been there, in a continuous silver glistening thread, since the stroke. Since his left hand stopped being able to hold Kleenexes and his mouth stopped feeling crumbs hanging from his dry lips.

Although he is weeks dead I catch myself subconsciously wiping him off, careful not to wake him up, and rattling the Pepsi on his folding table to see if he needs a new one. Part of me feels guilty for letting him eat the foods he wanted, even though the doctors said not to. That the food could kill him seemed to validate our dietary trespasses. How could I deny him a cheeseburger or a soda that could be his last?

Having never had any children of his own, and being many years older than me, my uncle didn't know how to be a brother to me, much less a father. He did his best but my adventurous spirit won out, and by thirteen I had smoked and drank and chewed tobacco whenever I wanted. It made me sick though, I was just addicted to the freedom. By eighteen I had moved on, permanently, it turned out, and was smoking weed on a daily basis and some other stuff on the side. Past twenty, drugs became a necessity just to keep me and my uncle alive, and it was always only me and him that we knew of, making him my father.

Although I don't know my father, I remember my mother first telling me about him.

"He was a Cherokee Indian," My mother nodded, looking sage in the dimming glow of the sun. A curl had slipped from the handkerchief she wore, bobbing with the movements of her head and flicking against her cheek. "Big and tall and dark, he used to wear cowboy boots when he was working around the yard, light brown and busted boots to go with his busted jeans. I always told him to get new ones, you know," she smiled at me, reaching to wave the tips of her fingers around in my hair. "But he always said, 'No, these took ten years to break in.' And there wasn't any reasoning with your dad either." She pulled heavily on her cigarette, ember blossoming in the late air, illuminating the last swirling specks of a dry day, and I thought I saw a tear sparkle down her dusty face,



I got on painkillers heavily when I started taking care of my uncle in earnest, when towards the end he couldn't do much of anything.

I would peek in on Uncle Tino and see the rise and fall of his chest and hear the wheezing of air forcing its way through cramped, shrinking nasal passages. I could almost feel the sheer screaming effort of blood wrangling through narrowing, clogged veins. A long thin whistle issued from his mouth, the comfortable tail end of a snore, and for some reason I thought of him relaxing his bowels, and wondered if he shit himself again.

When he was sick in the beginning I would help him to the bathroom and then leave. The day he first sat down to pee and held my shirt as I turned to go was the beginning of the end, I

knew. He wouldn't say anything in these times, both of us stoically accepting the duty, his excruciating dependency infinitely more painful than my ministrations, I knew.

He didn't have good insurance and Medicare sent around a therapist once a week, but it wasn't enough, even though I kept the exercises up as best I could. Sometimes he wouldn't let me and we lounged dejected in the living room, he stubbornly refusing to lift a barbell or walk to the end of the drive, and me letting him because on one hand he deserved to do whatever he wanted and on the other hand because I was a lazy fuck.

But I wiped the shit out of his ass and off the toilet seat and changed him. With painkillers I could help him into the shower, onto the chair and lift his leg when he needed to soap his balls. I could drag a sopping dishcloth across his shoulders. I could prop him up straight and we would both soak in the warm spray, Uncle Tino with his head lifted as high he could into the wet, and me, fully clothed, ducking away. I felt new, strange things when I was high around my uncle. A type of grief and paternal fondness came over me when I held my uncle's pants away from his body and tucked his shirt in and he playfully elbowed me, trying to get me to lose my balance, and when I ran a comb through his damp, thin hair. After Uncle Tino, I wanted to keep on feeling and feeling more than I felt when sober. I wanted to make life interesting. So I kept up some habits.

I wanted to feel the pulse of the world beat in me so I could feel in tune. To pay such close select attention to emotional weights in all things that I extrapolated their essences with more ease - doubling the tender grief of pruning a hedge or the illuminating inspiration of cleaning house, increasing my capacity for *feeling*, having tones come alive and animate themselves in a part of my brain, taking over, contributing to an overall internal aesthetic, a



filtering of data and stimuli from my sensory organs to customize my own reception of world, to make it a place where the anticipation of tomorrow left you breathless, and where there was courage to get up and save some waning part of day, to withhold the dusk for a moment longer in a triumphant grasp, choking the sun by its throat and saying for once: “I’ve got you now, fucker.”



It’s night now and I’m waiting around for the private show to start, contemplating what drugs I should do.

In Private show there are only a couple guys, designated by the model, and there is no chat room, so no one can talk to each other. You pay beforehand, a sometimes an exorbitant sum, depending on the show, and the babe does her thing. Most girls reserve private group for the heavy, big money makers. Anal, fisting, lesbian loving and stuff like that. Nasty shit too, like coprophilia, although I’ve only heard of one girl on here that does that. Not my bag.

I started looking at porn at a young age, and since my Uncle Tino was clueless about the internet I could roam free wherever I wanted. I plundered the vast wasteland of forbidden knowledge and taboo subjects, stumbling into late night chat rooms full of trannies or people pretending to be, making my way to thumbnail galleries of girls of every imaginable race and creed. By the time I was in my late teens I was burnt out on porn. I had seen it all. From softcore posing to bestiality to bondage; I’d seen masturbation, hirsute, monster cocks, midgets, Asians,

Indians, Mexicans and black girls, I'd seen black girls with white dudes and white dudes sandwiching brown girls, orgies, double teams, sex in changing rooms, bathrooms and phone booths, amateurs and pros, lesbians licking each other in public, girls whipping men in diapers, and a hundred Japanese couples going at it in a giant room.

But then it all got boring. I needed more and more. I was desensitized, but couldn't go without gratification. Porn became an oppressing routine. Then I found JustTeen. She was a special girl. She looked like a girl who didn't know herself at all, like a girl who needed saving, and I wanted to be with her and know her life, and paradoxically at the same time I wanted to see her naked for money, to pay her and dominate her anonymously.

She was rough and moody and unpredictable as the path of a dropped marble. She wore glasses sometimes, to play the part of a schoolgirl, and plaid skirts, and she would talk about books or films or whatever in a way that let you know she was in college and going places, eventually. Or she'd come out naughty and rude, already naked when her cam came on, grinding desperately on a dildo for half as much money as she had the night before.

On these angry nights I cared for her intensely, could feel deep down that she was unhappy, could see it in the shaded, closed abysses of her eyes. We often came together, my grunts interspersing her high pitched, groaning exhalations; sometimes I felt as if I stood on the edge of that gulf, and looking into her eyes was like trying to fling a rope across a canyon. She was Midwestern, with that Midwestern calm stoic grace, but she was also dark and exotic, a blend of races of which she said she didn't know the ratio. We were the same, in that way, and I felt as if I could love her.

For the show, I debate taking some of the vicodin, but an orgasm on painkillers is not necessarily one of the best, nothing compared to ecstasy and whippets. I remember I have some of the silver nitrous cylinders in my room and rush over while my computer boots. I fling myself under the bed and root around until I find what I am looking for, a shoebox with my whippet supply, rattling and clinking invitingly as I draw it out. I slap a canister in the cracker and insert the end into the balloon, twisting the cracker and hearing the pop as it releases the nitrous, filling the balloon to capacity, which I remove and bring with me to the other room, pinching the end to keep the gas from escaping. On the way I scoop up my tubing from my bag, which wraps around your neck like a noose and cuts the flow of blood, intensifying the ejaculation, making it a thrilling, pulsing toe-tap with death, like the devil's wife herself is sucking you off. Masturbating with one hand while holding a balloon shut with the other while pulling tighter at intervals on the tube around your neck is about as hard as it sounds. But Justine's performance hopefully will be the sexiest thing I have seen in a while, so I want to have the most intense orgasm possible.

Weirdly, my thoughts drift to my uncle Tino's last days, and I wonder how it will be when I am that old, and have had a stroke and am now unable to move my hand or make a fist to masturbate, let alone the trouble of getting it up. Had Uncle Tino even known what it meant to be horny anymore?

Getting and preparing the nitrous has made me a little late, so I'm prepared to enter with Justine part of the way through some rigorous sexual ordeal, maybe a fuck machine pumping inexorably into and out of her writhing body, or some reverse-cowgirl atop a vibrating sybian saddle, but there's no such luck when the video loads.

Instead Justine's sitting in her chair rocking back and forth, writing something on a notepad. The lights are dim, unlike the usual bright white illumination of her spotlights. The confusing scene is serene, tranquil as a clearing in emerald woods. Justine's not talking, and coupled with the absence of a chat wall, the silence is disconcerting. I wonder how many are watching, probably not much, and feel a thrilling buzz at having been selected.

Justine rises from her desk and stretches, bending over, but she's still wearing baggy pants and a long-sleeve shirt. She ambles across the room and opens her closet, feigning contemplation with a finger to her lips. She reaches in and tests the fabric of a terrycloth robe between her fingers. She does not once look at the camera.

Suddenly I understand her silence and meandering. She's letting us pretend to peep in on her while she dresses or tries on clothes and somehow ends up on the bed fingering herself. My heart jumps and I inhale quickly.

There is a lusty sentry in all males that swallows guiltily and continually casts about for slips in a woman's concealments, the droop of a neckline glimpsed briefly, the flipping hems of skirts at eye level drawing lines of sight up flights of stairs or diving between smooth uncrossing legs; and the penultimate fantasy of this seeking gaze is to be a free and untethered pair of eyes hung in a corner, a gaze sliding through cracks of partially shut doors, resting behind shower curtains, and left to rove and ravage without touching - I'm unable to tear my eyes away.

Under Justine's door the light checkers and the thrill of someone walking by her door in such close vicinity is even more erotic. Is it her boyfriend? Does he know she does this when he's around? The thought of her roommates, unsuspecting of what went on in here is driving me wild. I pull the tubing around my neck and get it into position. Turning to my other hand, I take

a deep hit off the balloon, pulling in the sweet nitrous gas, and expel it back into the balloon, re-inflating it. I take a hit of the recycled air and then let it out and let the balloon go. It splutters, cartwheeling off the wall.

Justine has pulled a sweatshirt from a drawer and considers it intently. There are some geometric shapes, a triangle and another symbol, and she flings it away from her.

The black of shoes flickers under her door, and again. Then they come to a stop and stay there. I had assumed Justine lived with people but I'm now uncomfortable by their standing outside her door. Justine's oblivious, selecting a turquoise blouse from her wardrobe and holding it against her chest, looking into the mirror. In the mirror I see her eyes flicker to the computer screen, and back. She is not without her narcissism and wants to see the way she looks to us. The feet are still at the door. Justine strolls to the vanity, laying the blouse on her bed along the way. Something is wrong, and I feel it before it happens.

Justine has the volume low, so when the door splinters and flings itself open all I hear is a dull pop and see two blurred figures rushing in. Justine gives a little shriek and turns right into a fist belonging to a man wearing a pillowcase with holes cut in it. The other wears a red ski mask.

I want my erection to die like a flag fading in breaks of the wind so I tuck it away and rip off the tubing still cinching my neck and sit forward, feeling my mouth distend. One guy's straddling her butt, adjusting the pillow case tied around his head, pushing Justine down with the tips of his fingers on one hand embedding her back like points of a star, weighing her down. The other man comes into focus and grabs the camera, turning it and focusing on the action, looking back and forth between Justine and the computer screen out of my view which depicts what the webcam sees. Unsatisfied, he brings it closer, setting it on the edge of the desk Justine uses for

her homework, the desk where countless times she's posed spread-eagled on top or bent over the side of, dildoing herself away with Mr. Indestructible, her great monster black cock dildo that costs a fortune to see her use but is always worth it, for us at least.

Both men are holding her down, Ski Mask at the top near her shoulders, and Pillow Case behind her, astride her rear. He slaps her buttocks and although the sound is low I can hear Justine whimper, see her cheek muscles spasm in profile as she sobs.

With a flourish Pillow Case rips her panties off, and the sound of the cloth tearing makes it through the repressed volume. I can hear her wailing now, and bile rises like an ember in my throat but I'm frozen, smelling the cold sour fear in my armpits, unable to look away. At regular intervals Justine times her kicks to strike out all at once, and on one of the tries it works and frees her legs. But the men are too strong, and can corral the soft stretching legs, can meatily clench the curving calves with one hand on each, settling her flails without resorting to the knife which Ski Mask has produced and is coaxing Justine's head up with the tip of, dragging the flat of the blade to her lips and pushing it in, moving it around like a toothbrush. He wraps one hand around the back of her head and turns his face to the camera and two shining black eyes look me full in the face, with his tongue flicking moist and serpentine through the hole of his mask. *Flip-flip-flip-flip-flip-flip.*

Before it's over I'm scrambling for my phone, and at first my tongue melds to the roof of my mouth.

"I need to report a rape." I say, hearing the sticky peel of my mouth opening.

"What's your name?"

“It’s online,” I say, breathing fast. “A rape on the internet.” My heart slams blood through my body, and I can feel it beating in my head, trying to punch its way through my eardrums.

“Calm down, sir.”

“Yes-”

“What’s your name?”

“Marv,” I say.

“Marv what?”

“Ellis.”

“Where are you?”

I tell her and she transfers me to someone who transfers me to someone and finally I tell them the story, everything except the drugs and the auto-asphyxiation and the flipping tongue through the hole in the ski mask.

At the end all they say is, “This is on a porn site? Did you consider it was staged?”

I hadn't really and for the next moments it seems plausible after I hang up. It probably was. But would Justine do that of her own accord? I'd heard stories of chicks in Romania or Belarus who were forced to perform in dingy rooms for low pay, or because of some other kind of debt. Justine could be one of those.

I remain frozen for a long time, and I feel a numbness starting to ripple its way from my waist, transforming me into a nerveless pile of flesh.



It is a strange feeling to watch something out of your control happen, to see the pathways of action unfold without your resistance and the sudden surprising onset of whatever it is roots you to the spot.

Before the stroke, every morning at six my uncle was up, sliding his feet into paper Japanese slippers he kept by his bed. He ate rice for breakfast and always insisted on using chopsticks. When he wasn't working on a project for a client, he kept on his toes by watching martial arts movies. He showed me how to sauté chicken in vinegar and soy sauce, and place it half-submerged in olive oil, which was better for you, he said. As he cooked, he licked his fingers, frowning in approval. He would hold one of his fingers out solemnly, covered in the brown sauce, and the first time he did this I thought he was serious, and leaned forward in trepidation, timidly peeking my tongue out - which he promptly flicked, and laughed. "Never lick another man's fingers," he said, as his not-insubstantial girth vibrated with glee.

He was always happiest when he cooked, killing himself a little more with each meal, whistling while he battered chicken dumplings and rolled cream cheese rangoons. He had barely reached sixty when it all caught up with him.

His stroke happened when one time he hefted a frying pan, flinging the egg noodles in the air with his signature flair, and then he jerked, catching himself on the stove with one hand. "SSsssstt!" He spat, simultaneously drawing his hand away from the flame and dropping the pan as he used his left hand to catch himself.



He put his right hand to his other shoulder and with pinched features ducked his head , as if stifling a hiccup or keeping in a painful burp. The noodles had flown over the range and were now simmering nakedly, soy sauce shooting off the burners with leaping pops. I didn't know what to do and before I could react my uncle froze me with a look of quizzical terror, squinting and working his jaws up and down in an effort to speak to me.

“Bluh” he said. He tilted sideways, trying to raise his left arm to the wall for support. Tripping over his own feet he staggered into the wall and a paper slipper rocketed off his foot. I lept across the room and caught him before he slid to the floor. I lowered him gently and called for an ambulance, shaking.

The doctor said he must have had one before, a small one, and had he been weak in his left hand or arm before this? My uncle said no but looked away.



It's been a day and I haven't been able to sleep. I haven't heard anything on the news and I've spent the better part of the wee chirping hours of the morning submerged in local news reports from around the Midwest. But without anything concrete, it feels like a waste of time. I email the website and within hours get a reply saying the matter has been drawn to their attention and they are investigating and it might have been staged. And they add, thank you. “You're welcome.” I think. Fuck you.

I feel like I should take something to calm down and help me concentrate at the same time, so I take out the blue vicodins I got earlier. The 650's are as bad as they sound, with six hundred milligrams of acetaminophen in them. I need about five to feel much of anything, all that chemical mixed with my other drugs is shitty for my liver, so with these tylenol-ridden vicodins I have to perform an extraction. I take my stone and pound the pills to power on a chopping board. I heat up water and dissolve the power into it. I freeze the water just enough to barely have ice, and the white powder collected at the bottom is the hydrocodone, which I down eagerly.

Narcotics give me somewhat of an altruistic bend, and I used to always take them before I had to bathe my uncle or take him to the bathroom, to make it more bearable. This concern for him precludes the eruption of euphoria and purposefulness that comes from any opiates, whether subs or pills, and I can feel the slow warm tickle spread evenly through my stomach and up my spine.

But narcotics also make me think laterally when it comes to problem solving, letting the issue cook in the back of my mind while doing something comfortable. Later in the day, riding a high warm wave of billowing, pillowy rest that I can finally indulge, I have an inkling of an idea, and I rush to the site to check Justine's profile. Just as I remembered, she has a small section devoted to the various small productions, amateur softcore recordings. There's no news again, and no information from the site, and so I feed my amateur detective and buy all the videos, searching for some clue as to her whereabouts.

In the first movie, called Backyard Shenanigans, she's swinging in back some some expansive house, white and rolling out of the frame. In the distance I can see the back porch, and

one or two people crossing the view. Between the comfortable rolling gaits and hurried but sure bobs of those more quickly in and out of the frame, I guess these are mostly women. In the video, Justine's swinging languorously, drooping backward and letting a flash of her panties flit into the screen. She's wearing a yellow sundress, so it must be summer – or late fall if this is a sorority and the figures that I think are girls roaming the porches are her roommates. There is a soft song playing, and I turn up the volume and realize Justine is also speaking, soft voice flowing with gilded words.

“...day today. I feel like swinging out here all day.”

The sunlight dapples her body and dress in a chiaroscuro lattice, and the light checking her cheeks gives her face texture and life of its own, animated and flicking from one subtextual expression to another. A guileless smile and toss of hair flicking before her face, wiping and replacing those benign beckoning features with hungry jade eyes piercing from the shadows as the swing recedes into the shade of the tree. A soft droop of full, rouged lip, and a self-effacing drag of a slippered heel in the dirt as she comes back to me, checking and slowing her swing.

“Don't you feel like playing outside today?” She asks. Sadly, I do not. I do take another bump off the edge of a credit card, and sniff it down my throat, feeling the cold numbness creep up my nasal passages in reverse. The tip of my nose feels false and doesn't move when I flex it. A calm focus descends on me and I study the video intently.

“I do.” She is removing her socks with her feet, scraping her toes against the inside of her leg to the fabric and peeling it off. I follow the curve of her calve to the hem of her panties, which wait patiently to be removed. People still move in the background, but they are too far

away to see if they can see. Something about other girls being there is makes me uncomfortable, as if I should be seeing something I'm not. What is wrong with this picture?

She pushes the sides of the sundress in, her arms curling first around the chain links of the swing, then palms grasping and pulling inward as she uses her elbows to rotate the swing back and forth, exhibiting one side of her strapless bra, and then the other.

She flips the cups down abruptly, exposing her nipples. "It's pretty warm out," she says. She thumbs one nipple until it stands alert. Sighing, she walks her fingers down to her thigh, letting them trace gently inward in circular passes that creep closer to her underwear. She flicks one finger forward, drawing a line up the middle of her crotch, legs splayed now and face wearing a proud defiant smirk. In this moment she knows she has us, whoever is watching, and it's hard for me to remember she could be dead and stop myself from coaxing the rest of the length out of my stiffening penis. She never removes her clothes again in this one, only fishes in her panties, groaning and letting quick peeks of her snatch as she pulls the fabric away.

I watch it again and hunt for clues, but all I seem to gather from this one is that she's at a sorority, possibly. Why is that a problem?

The next video is called Mr. Bubbles, and she steps into the frame already naked. She bends over to start the tap, making sure to provide that angle everyone always seems to want. She sits on the edge and lathers her right leg, producing a razor. Straddling the tub, she shaves first one leg, then the other. She adjusts the camera, squaring the lens in front of her vagina, which she lathers. She's about to start when the door raps, and someone puts their head in.

Justine is surprised but takes it in stride. The volume on this one, too, is recorded low. The other person says something about Nolan, or Olo. Justine shakes her head and motions for

the other girl to leave. “Are you sure?” the other girl says, distinctly. “Yes,” I half-hear Justine. And it sounds like, “De nada.” Or it could have been “Prada.”

The person leaves and Justine shaves and showers, with minimal masturbation. She converses a little on the merits of morning showers vs. nighttime. “I don’t like to get into bed dirty. Unless, of course, you know.” She giggles.

The next video takes place in her bedroom. She’s changing into all of her bras and panties, and there are a lot of them. She parades one around the room, and then the other, but no one comes to the door. She doesn’t make any phone calls or hold up any signs of the school she goes to.



There is a dying tree in front of our house, naked and skinned and projecting half-snapped branches into the sky. It is sturdy, though half leafless, enough to hold the tree house that my mother and I labored over one hot summer. Remnants of the house hang like flotsam in the waving branches.

“Dammit!” My mom hit her thumb with the hammer, dropping it to the grass below.  
“Sorry baby.”

“It’s ok.”

“Baby, I’m just not good at this.”

“Maybe we should call Uncle Tino.”

“Ha!” My mom snorted. “Like he could even-” She stopped, looking at me. “You know what? Maybe you’re right.”

“Uncle Tino doesn’t really build things, though, does he?”

“Not really. He built a wooden chest in about like eighth grade - I think he still has it.” She sucked her thumb. “Do you want to call him?”

I said, “Yeah, but I also kind of want to build it ourselves. So it can be just ours.”

“We can do it baby. We just need time. Mommy needs to rest.” She breathed heavily in a manner that I can say now was disproportional to the effort she had exerted climbing down the ladder, and sat on the bottom step, bringing a cigarette to her mouth.

“Sometimes I wish Dad was here,” I said.

She paused with the lighter brought up to her chin, flame flickering almost imperceptibly in the light of day.

She said, “He would have been good at this, you know.”

“Yeah, I bet.”

“He was a carpenter. From Mexico. He had a tattoo, ‘Made in Mexico’, and he stamped that on the things he built.”

“I thought you said he was a Cherokee.”

“Oh no, no. He was Mexican. He had a little goatee and slicked-back hair and he always dressed real sharp. He would come home sometimes late at night and still look good in his suit. Even if it was a little wrinkled.”

“But, mom - ”

“Hmm?” She still breathed laboriously.

“You said he was an Indian. Remember he was tall and dark and wore his cowboy boots.”

My mom laughed, lips twitching her cigarette. “No, honey, you must be confused. He was dark and tall though. He was Mexican straight from Mexico and sometimes he did wear cowboy boots.”



I'm thinking about the possibilities of my father being Mexican when it comes to me that the interruption in the Mr. Bubbles video might have been a dinner invitation. The words did have a Latin inflection, now that I think about it. I do searches on Google of Antonio's, Pancho's, Bolo's and any other "O's" I can think of. I combine them with enchilada and nada and tortada.

Hours pass before I blearily stumble onto a restaurant's menu called Manolo's that serves empanadas, it's their specialty. A live cable of excitement attempts to thrill through my body but

instead straightens my spine slowly, before I realize after a few more internet searches that Manolo's has several locations. But I have a new task. The next several hours I spend referencing Manolo's and nearby campuses.

I do the last of my coke and even take the last Adderall I had been saving for something special. The pill kicks in as I'm nearing the last Midwestern Manolo's. When tallied, there are 15 campuses with Manolo's in driving range. It's still too many.

My uncle would tell me something about dedication if he were alive.

Although he hadn't been born in America, and moved here in his toddler years, my uncle had chosen to adhere to the mysterious and unknown "Asian" in blood. My grandmother had been Laos, and married my uncle's father for a greencard, leaving him soon thereafter, taking Tino with her. My mother's father had been an accident, a cursory urban fling, and whose identity had never even been accurately assigned. My uncle had replaced his own father, an amalgam of all the Asian types he knew. He kept what he thought were Asian values of persistence and self-reliance, resourcefulness. He had tried to pass these down to me, to establish and try to instill in me a sense of order and precision in my life, a purpose. I remember him explaining my lineage one time when he could still talk.

"It doesn't matter anyway--" he paused, eliciting a croupy cough behind a handkerchief he had brought to his mouth. He furrowed his brow out of concern for me. "You're American." As he spoke, a glob of bloody mucus dripped off his lip and he grimaced. I wiped it with my sleeve.

"Well I know *that*," I said, propping a pillow more sturdily behind him. "But what am I really?"



"You're American. I already told you." After a minute, "And you're Asian."

"I'm only half. Don't even know what half."

"I know, but that's all you need."

"I'm a mutt. Even worse."

"You cannot change that," Uncle Tino cuffed my cheek warmly. "You'll get stuck. Don't be like your mother. Pieces fall out of people like that."

Before the last piece dropped my mother called my uncle one last time and my previous life started fraying around the ends, my uncle and I settling into the new knowledge that I would soon be his son from now on.

"Marikit! When will you be home? Your son -!" He had turned, sensing me eavesdropping and spotting my face squeezed between the stairs' banisters. "Go to bed!" he snarled, snapping his fingers and jabbing one toward upstairs. Then he strode outside and I could hear his voice through the walls, muffled and murmurous, then rising to barks propelling the tail ends of his sentences in to me. "...not right! ...yesterday! ...*exactly!*" Then the murmur again and when the kitchen door slammed to signal his return I scampered up the stairs.

After the stroke my uncle changed. His lip drooped and he limped. He needed help with everything more and more as time went on.

I was instructed by the doctor to make sure he used his squeeze ball every day to strengthen his hand, and seeing him fumbling with it one day after being so strong for this long, I was filled with a fury I couldn't contain, a momentary flash of hatred, unable to locate its origin. It had something to do with my uncle and his squeeze ball, and I lunged at him, half-high and

unable to gauge my own strength. “One!” I said, grasping his hand under mine and squeezing for all it was worth. He gasped in pain as I said, “One, two, three!”

One time I thought ludicrously that he had been outside and slipped when I smelled it, speckled on his leg from the top to bottom and I had found him as he tried to struggle into the shower by himself and wash it off. There were little dots of it from the kitchen to the bathroom and the sight of it all made me vomit, and I turned away from my uncle, the fiery biting bile rocketed into my nasal passages and the hot chunks I swallowed in an effort to keep him from more shame than was already there, to not let him see that I was sick because of him, but I couldn't, and I vomited all over the floor and swallowed some.

Sometimes his filth disgusted me and I found myself at times wishing he would die. Or I wished one morning I would wake up and he would be well, either one. And then I felt guilty and did a lot of drugs to not feel guilty and to feel better about everything, and to be able to wake up at six to check his breathing, to be jovial while smelling the pus oozing out of sores on his back as I tugged a sweatshirt onto him, to feel more in tune as I struggled to lace shoes over his swollen feet and to give me strength to support him when we went on a walk. In the last days living with my uncle felt like an endless exhale.

One morning I woke up and I knew I had killed him. I had slept through his struggles, not heard his whimpers or the warm slush of thick blood glopping through his nostrils as they flailed to bring life in. I hadn't felt the miniscule vibrations of his shuddering chest through the thin wood connecting our rooms. I could have slept in his room. I don't know what I was on, something, some combination and I remember I passed out and I woke to find him lukewarm and drawn, face curled down to his chest and mouth drooping blithely. I had killed him with my

inattention, had murdered him in cold blood with my indifference. His face was concentrated, brows pulled in as if he were thinking.

His face was lined and wrinkled and seemed to have aged more than he should, morphing into a topographic map of rivers and valleys of his life, and I felt the sense that each crease told of a universe, bending in with the movements of his face to etch a lifetime of in joy and suffering. And I drowned myself deeper and deeper.

Again now I make the tired vow that I'm going to cut back, I'm only using to get through everything. Only until I can do something to make him realize that I am going places, too. To show him self-reliance and resourcefulness, wherever he is. Only until I save Justine.

It's on the millionth review of the videos that I catch it. As Justine swings, her eyes flick to the edge of the screen. Someone's hand jerks into the frame and disappears, and a split second later a bright object darts into the screen and swiftly vanishes. Someone was shooting this video. I pause and rewatch the scene several more times before I see the orange blur is attached to a lanyard; it's the swinging end of a type of necklace or keychain. In one lucky pause I can see it clearly, hard edged and straight, bright orange, partly out of the frame. It could be a capital letter. Maybe an "H". When I was in college I had a little plastic "W" for my school. It was attached to a lanyard with a whistle.

Everything melts away. I go back through the list of schools and find what I'm looking for.

And there's a Manolo's there. And their symbol is a capital, square-edged "I". It's Illinois. I plan on leaving in the morning.



I get there after a four hour drive, locking up and bringing a light bag. I packed some clothes and my tools and some drugs, all the traveling necessities I'll ever need. I am luckily prepared for the sheer amount of Greek Houses here. A quick Google search has provided me with a list of Greek Houses on campus, and even kindly supplied a distinction between the fraternities and sororities. But which one? I study the map and decide to visit the first one, but upon getting there I realize there'd be no clues except...a swing in the back! I run around the edge of the building but to my chagrin find no swing, and no porch at all.

The next sorority has no swing, but I notice the delta symbol, a triangle, and it brings to mind a sweater I saw of Justine's, and shuddering I remember what had happened mere seconds after she chucked it across the room.

After a couple hours I find a sorority with a delta and a swing in back.

I glance up at the Greek letters above the door and shake my head. Pi Delta. If I could do it, anyone could find her, too. I feel as if I have known all along what this was coming to, had been preparing myself for the day when these girls would be exploited, when the internet would bare their souls to the feeding mass. Sure, the encryption on the hosting site would be fine, and the IP would trace to that network, but what about the clues the girls left themselves? I had found myself at Justine's doorstep, with only a bit of detecting.

Something has been bothering me, though. Instead of feeling triumphant there is a creeping wariness crawling through my skin.



I'm sitting on a bench in front of the sorority, making plans on how to interview the girls within when I finally see Justine.

I can tell by the swinging bob of her head that it is her, even from the rear. I remember the countless times I've seen that silhouette bob, seen the facile light and gentle curve of that neck and I know without a doubt it is Justine.

"Justine! Justine!" I'm breathless and running up behind her.

At the mention of her name she whirls around, and I see the most terror I have ever seen on someone's face, her eyelids reaching for her brows and she scuttles backward against the black iron wrought fence surrounding her sorority.

"How do you know that name?!" she hisses. She backs farther away from me.

"Justine," I say, "Justine it's a long story but –"

I am cut off by her scream. "That's not my name! What the fuck are you *doing* here?"

People have stopped to watch us and Justine turns to run but I say "WAIT!"

Justine stops in mid-lurch and fixes a metallic gaze on me.

I open my arms. “Look, I – I saw what...happened.”

Her face registers nothing.

“A few days ago?” I say.

Something dawns on her, rippling her facial muscles as the realization transmutes through her cheeks, forehead and mouth, a slackening that replaces her guardedness only briefly, and I feel in that one small moment that we are connected, that she understands and that now everything will be okay. She will know how glad I am to see her. She will hug me now.

She turns and looks at me, issuing a *pluht* of contempt which smacks out of her mouth and bites me in the heart. Justine is incredulous, “It was a show! You fucking retard sick bastard it was a show and you knew that!” Every syllable rings true and phonetic, but I don’t understand.

“But I saw you,” I say, disbelieving. “...I saw you crying.”

“What?” say a man and Justine together. Looking over, I notice a plainclothesman who must have just arrived, alerted by her screaming.

“Thank God,” Justine says to him. “This guy is trying to kill me, or something.”

The policeman looks uncertain.

“You were crying.” I say again. “And you haven’t been online in awhile.”

“I made it clear that was a show.” Justine snaps her fingers. “That’s why the site contacted me! Because of you!” She answers my other question, “I haven’t even logged back on since then. I can’t do it every day. They probably sent you an email or something.”

“But you don’t *need* to,” I say, pleading. “You understand that, right? Whoever’s making you do this, it’s okay. Tell him!” I gesture hard at the police but the words flutter and drop out of my mouth like a badly thrown crude paper plane.

“Why do you think I do this? I do it because I *like* it. Idiot!” Her voice rises and her face flushes with the familiar blood I know goes there in moments of passion, and I think to myself how weird it is to be inciting this blush from her as opposed to the other, ecstatic ones. Disappointment pricks deeper with every sentence. She says, louder, killing me, “I *enjoy* fucking myself in front of people! How did you not realize that? This is what I *do*.”

“No,” I say. I shake my head vigorously. I feel the spaces gathering in my head, amassing in a landslide. No way.

The cop looks at me keenly, measuring me with his eyes. I see them flick to my pack.

Justine is repulsed.

The cop and Justine continue to look at me strangely and finally Justine says, “That was a show you fucking creep. You knew that going in. Who the fuck are you anyway?”

I fumble with my pack. “Marv.”

You’re a sicko, Marv. I don’t know how you found me.”

“Is this true?” asks the cop. “You stalked her here?”

“Not exactly,” I say. “I mean I watched her videos and then found her -”

The cop seems to have heard enough. “You mind if I take a look at that?” he’s gesturing toward my bag.

I shrug, wanting to convey openness and he reaches for my bag. My mind is slow and it takes me a while to remember my gear and I open my mouth to protest but it's too late and the cop's got my balloon in his gloved hand, which he shakes at at me. He reaches in, and his hand emerges grasping a cock ring and some KY Fire gel. He looks at the items, puts two and two together to come up with five, and abruptly drops them back in the pack, wiping his hand on his shirtfront. "What's that?" he asks.

"Just my stuff."

He pokes his flashlight into my sack and uncovers my whippets, which to my knowledge aren't illegal. A little further rooting divulges my rattling handcuffs and he upends the sack, sending everything tumbling out: My burned Dvd's of Justine, my rubber hose, my condoms and handheld mirror. The hose flops sinuously.

It looks worse than it is.

"I *knew* it!" Justine wails. "Oh, God!"

"Step over here." The policeman orders me, hand on his hip. His eyes have gone from wary appraisal to cagey hostility.

I have no choice but to oblige, and I try to tell him my story again. Now holes have moved like disease through my words and I feel everything slipping out, my synapses rocketing dully into the clouds between my ears.

I say, "I told you, I was watching a show and I didn't realize it was a planned rape." I try desperately for a way out, no longer believing what I'm saying. I thought she was getting hurt!"

He cuts me off, shaking his head and gesturing at the pile of evidence. "What the hell."



It's getting hot and the sun slams whitely off the pavement, stabbing me in the eyes.



“What are we mom?”

“What are you talking about, baby?”

“Like where are we from, what *race* are we?” I had asked, using a word I recently acquired from school.

“Well we’re different. I’m Asian and you’re half bl- African American.” I remember her testing the term. It wasn’t until later that I even distinguished different types of Asians, but by then my mom was gone and I couldn’t ask her which.

“So my dad was black.”

"Yeah," she said. She lit her cigarette and blew a little in my direction before catching herself and jerking her head to the side. She fluttered her hand in my face. "Sorry, baby, don't breathe yet - but yeah, your dad was black. You're two halves, and a whole lot of perfect."

"Oh." I said. I didn't wonder or care if she remembered the other races she'd said he was. Maybe she didn't know. But black felt right.

“Is your hair black or brown?” The policeman asks. I say black. I’m in the car and he fills out information. Another police car's tires crunch nearby. I’ve been booked for possession of cocaine and I guess possibly stalking.

I look at him holding my stash bag and I think of Justine, or whoever she is, highstepping away as fast as her legs can convey her away from scum. “You need help,” she says in my mind to me, calling back over her shoulder as her heel scrapes on the concrete and I catch the echoing timeless scrape of her foot dragging under a swing somewhere where the splash of light meets dark.