



University of Southern Maine  
USM Digital Commons

---

Stonecoast MFA

Student Scholarship

---

Spring 2016

## The Unseen Hole

Jeremy Chase-Israel

*University of Southern Maine*, [jechase001@gmail.com](mailto:jechase001@gmail.com)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.usm.maine.edu/stonecoast>

 Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Chase-Israel, Jeremy, "The Unseen Hole" (2016). *Stonecoast MFA*. 89.

<https://digitalcommons.usm.maine.edu/stonecoast/89>

This Open Access Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Scholarship at USM Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Stonecoast MFA by an authorized administrator of USM Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [jessica.c.hovey@maine.edu](mailto:jessica.c.hovey@maine.edu).

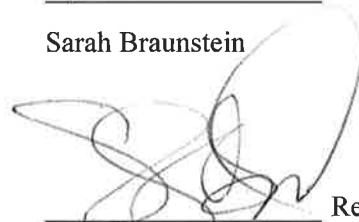
THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MAINE  
STONECOAST MFA IN CREATIVE WRITING

May 13, 2016

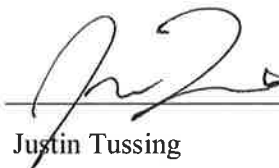
We hereby recommend that the thesis of Jeremy Chase-Israel entitled *The Unseen Hole* be accepted as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts.

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Advisor

Sarah Braunstein

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Reader

Elizabeth Hand

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Director

Justin Tussing

Accepted



\_\_\_\_\_  
Interim Dean, College of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences

Adam-Max Tuchinsky

## Abstract

Every story in this collection is an escape attempt. Some have better tools and plans than others, but they're all working towards a shared goal. When I sit down to write, I often picture the small crevices in my brain the ideas squeeze through before dropping down into the sewer of my imagination. If they manage to break free, then I clean them off, picking away bits of filth, until they're able to stand and grow on their own.

The characters filling my thesis are composite sketches of people I've known, animals I've met, and a sampling of my insecurities and deepest, darkest fears. It's important that these characters exist because their presence on the page means one less worry in my head. The bleach drinking teenagers, rapidly expanding men, amateur executioners, and Borscht Belt comedians who fill these pages are me, and I am them.

## Table of Contents

Writing to Maintain Sanity .....	1
Bleacher Blackout.....	11
Swollen .....	24
Severance .....	39
The Closer.....	56
The Push of a Button.....	68
Death to Truth.....	85
Monk, Bishop and Martyr.....	88
Mouth to Mouth .....	94
Over the River and Beneath the Hill.....	100
Potion Drinkers .....	111
What's for Lunch? .....	113
Bibliography .....	117

## Writing to Maintain Sanity

The first book I ever published was a tell-all medical memoir titled: “I’m Having a Hernia.” It went on to receive critical acclaim at the Tuft’s Daycare Pre-School program. No fewer than thirty people have glimpsed its marker stained pages and ribbed plastic binding, but despite its limited release and niche audience, “I’m Having a Hernia” will always be remembered for its classic passages, like “The doctor put a knife in me,” and, “The gas made me feel funny.”

A copy of “I’m Having a Hernia” resides in my parent’s living room to this day. It has been shown to every girl I’ve ever brought home and has been mocked by all of my closest friends. It’s remarkable that the book has remained in pristine condition because of the two devastating fires I experienced in middle school. The first was electrical and it leveled the top floor apartment, and the second, which took place in 8<sup>th</sup> grade, was an accidental arson caused by drunken painters. The second was worse than the first because it destroyed the house, so it’s remarkable, and a little unfortunate, that “I’m Having a Hernia” escaped unscathed. There are only a few items in my family’s possession that survived both fires, and if I had been brought up a Christian, which I was not, I’d take the sparing of my book as a sign from God.

Before I ever dreamed of writing stories about conflicted prison wardens and Hungarian nightclubs, I was fascinated by storytellers. My mom, who used to organize folk art festivals, knew a number of professional storytellers, and we’d frequent gatherings in the middle of corn fields and listen. When I think back to the straw pallets on wet grass and a tent full of quiet, contemplative people gathered around a man and his voice, I’m struck by the vivid images he painted in my mind. But the power to tell a good

story doesn't always come from one's dedication to an art form; sometimes all you need is passion.

My parents rented a hotel room in mid-town Manhattan when I was seven years old, and my grandfather tagged along as the babysitter. When my mom and dad left to dine and dance, I sat with my grandfather on the bed and he told me stories about the things he saw in India. Grandpa had spent four years in Delhi during the late 30's and early 40's, where he was stationed on a U.S Army Base near Calcutta, so his 'war' stories consisted of the strange things he'd witnessed. One of his favorite anecdotes involved a boy he had seen on the streets of Delhi with a rope around his neck. The rope was tied to a board, and on the board were his dirty, diseased testicles, each the size of an over-inflated basketball, that he dragged through the city. "Elephantiasis," my grandfather would say, "it makes you swell up like a balloon."

He was fascinated by strange diseases, crimes of passion, gruesome murders, rabid animals, and political corruption. I don't know what my grandfather was like as a man, but I thought his stories were better than anything I'd seen or read, and I still feel that way. "Swollen," which is included in this collection, is an attempt to capture the beauty my grandfather saw in human suffering. The story, at its most basic level, is about the small ways life falls apart, and I used my existence as reference. At the time I wrote it, I was working for a Catholic non-profit in Baltimore City. My Monday through Friday consisted of waking up, walking through Baltimore's abandoned shopping district, and into a refurbished department store filled with cubicles and crosses.

My former coworker Fred, who never thought he'd be appearing in a preface, sat

at the desk behind me. He was quiet and kept to himself. Most days he wore khakis, running shoes, and a tucked in polo. He had a crew-cut and wire frame glasses. Fred was always nice to me, and I was always nice to Fred, but in the end it didn't matter because his boss was a twisted former teacher and she hated her assistant's depression and chronic pain. In July of 2013 she made it her goal to prove Fred's incompetence, so she partnered with three other managers to create what the bureaucrats call “evidence of inability.” It worked, and Fred was gone. H.R. escorted him out of the building as he held a box stuffed with cat pictures, potted plants, and some pens. Everyone who asked, which was almost no one, was told that Fred was let go because he wasn't a good fit, but he did receive a generous severance package. Six months later, the day after his benefits ran out, Fred killed himself. There was never a follow-up conversation about how or why it happened; Fred was dead and no amount of sympathy would bring him back, so I buried him in my stories.

I began “Swollen” a few weeks after Fred's suicide. It was my attempt to understand why the world conspires against the weak, and why some people hate the sick. Every time I sat down to work on the story, I saw myself in those same pages. The anxiety I suffered was absorbed by Corpulus Johnson, the main character, whose body ends up swelling to an enormous size during a job interview. Every unhappy work day was sunk into “Swollen” and a number of other pieces – “Severance” and “Push of the Button.” A friend of mine who read over the thesis dubbed a chunk of it “Office Horror,” which, along with being a wonderful label, is fitting

The mundane security of my job and the death of a co-worker drove me to write,

and the resulting theme of escapism, which inspired a number of my early pieces, has found its way into every story in this collection. I've had people read my work and think that everything is done for effect, a writer working towards a gimmick, and it would be wrong of me to devalue those claims because there is truth in every criticism. I write to entertain myself and that, above all else, is the end goal of my fiction, so it's not uncommon for one of my pieces to focus on the absurdity of character, or delve into perversity, violence, and the surreal because those are aspects of storytelling I'm attracted to and, in turn, create. But these stories aren't pure gimmicks. They capture realms of absurdity, where a complete devotion to horror and suffering is required to progress, encouraging the reader to not only accept, but to believe.

Before I entered Stonecoast I set out to write one hundred short stories in a year. Most of those pieces were created on tumblr for tumblr audiences, and the anonymity provided by a stress free format was liberating. The pieces I posted were the fruit of either short bursts of writing or much longer projects, and it was satisfying to know that even my worst stories had an audience, which is a lesson not emphasized in academic writing. Academics hold "the art of writing" to a high standard, but the average writer is someone who is impassioned enough to sit down and create. The end product may not be a thing of beauty or finesse, but it's love, and the way readers respond to a story that speaks to them is not a discipline that can be taught. Someone could write the most perfect prose poem about the suicide of a king, but if that piece is only ever read by two hundred people who buy niche journals, then is it more successful than the person who has a blog with ten thousand subscribers?



The summer of 2009 was one of the most restless periods of my life. I had just finished my junior year of college and was preparing to take a semester off in order to live on an American Indian reservation in South Dakota. There were no jobs to be had in Boston because of the recession, but that didn't stop me from applying to hundreds of them. Thirty days into my three-month summer vacation I told my parents that no one was going to offer me a job, so we reached an agreement that involved reading books, working out, and looking for work, and if I could manage to do all of those things, and do them with regularity, then they'd leave me alone. During those endless summer days, I decided to write to pass the time – one of those pieces I created was a Pokemon erotica. The erotica was written as a joke, and I dumped it on the internet for people to laugh at. What ended up happening was far funnier than anything I could have ever anticipated.

Six months after I wrote the story, I was browsing the internet and decided to look up “Pokemon erotica,” and the result was astonishing. The erotica had become the number one search result on Google.us for “pokemon erotica.” Hundreds of thousands of people around the world had read the story and it appeared as the number one result in China, Oman, Ireland, and the United Arab Emirates. My name wasn't attached to the story, and I lost the blog's account information, so I could only watch as my disgusting story soared and flourished. For a first draft, the Pokemon erotica performed well despite being riddled with grammatical errors and spelling mistakes. Had I felt compelled to dedicate myself to its success, then I'm sure it would have gained some legitimacy, but I loved the idea that a trash story I had written out of complete and utter boredom was being enjoyed by perverts around the world.

Hunting for reactions defines my work, and the Pokemon erotica proved to me

that I had the power to milk responses from my readers, so when I worked on the one hundred story project I searched around for new, strange ideas. I'd always heard that writing prompts are a great way to usher in fresh thoughts, and the beauty of prompts is in their abstract availability, so I probed email headers for weird wordings, things like: "Clothes So New We Had to Send this Email from the Future" or "The Sweaters Are Back!" Urban Outfitters, which is a great source of over-excited copy, was my muse, and I tapped it for inspiration. After sending a number of emails to their marketing department I was annoyed by the lack of meaningful response, so I contacted customer service and demanded contact information because I needed to speak with someone who appreciated my level of dedication. Despite finding my request strange, the customer service rep was intrigued, so she provided me with an email address belonging to one of the head email marketers, and I sent him the following letter in response to his "The Sweaters Are Back!" email:

"I remember when the sweaters left; they boarded boats and trains and waved goodbye to their relatives (jackets and vests) and kissed their friends on the cheek, whispering breathy promises into their ears. I stood on the dock and waved to the last iron clad ship that departed from our fair city of Philadelphia, praying that one day they would return.

In the cold months that followed, the sun faded out and rendered mankind flaccid in a state of perpetual insignificance. Many people attempted stoicism but hearts and souls grew cold; the weaker ones started falling by the thousands.

During this age of constant night, I've often found myself walking by candlelight down to the pier, where the black glass of the ocean reflects the promise of warmth I still

carry with me, strong in my heart. Despite losing my family to the ravenous maw of frost I've stayed vigilant, donning numerous layers that I wear in mock affinity to the savior of knitted cloth.

Reading your email has allowed peace to grace my tired soul. The warmth of my trashcan fire – stoked with the shoes of my long dead children – has given me the trace amounts of strength needed to pen this message. My fingers are black with hypothermia but still I type. I only ask not to be mourned. To have lived long enough to read the heralding of a warmer future is a feast unto death. God bless Urban Outfitters. The sweaters are finally back!”

Years later, one of my friends moved to Philadelphia, where she got a job at Urban Outfitters' HQ, and ended up working underneath the person who wrote the “Sweaters are Back!” email. She called me after her first day and told me that her boss had printed out all of my letters and tacked them to walls of his office.

I've since written to Glenn Beck, the conservative pundit, as a concerned Methodist pastor who decided to seek advice on how to handle his son's fascination with writing Glenn Beck erotica, which was included in the letter. I've written to the *Baltimore Sun*, *Baltimore City Paper*, and *Southern Living Magazine*. In fact, the story “Potion Drinkers,” which is included in this collection, was sent to *Southern Living Magazine* after one of their editors contacted me about writing a piece that embodied the charms of Southern cooking. At the time, Mississippi had been declared the fattest state in the U.S, so I wrote a story from the perspective of a girl whose life is ruined by soda. The editors hated it and it never appeared in their magazine.

The letters helped push my story count to ninety-seven and that's when I stopped. I hit the one-year anniversary faster than I expected, but I was pleased to have almost a hundred fresh pieces under my belt. It seemed important to persevere through the doldrums of the project because I knew that if I wanted to attend graduate school for writing, which I did, then I'd have to be able to produce work without outside reinforcement. One of the most important parts of Stonecoast, and the best personal takeaway, is a sense of being an equipped, self-directed writer after you've finished the program. All of the peer sessions and workshops help mold stories, but it's the dedication occurring outside of residency that imparts the skills writers rely on for the rest of their lives.

With Stonecoast almost behind me, and the inevitable tidal wave of debt ahead, I'd like to relish in the calm before the crash, dip my toe into the receding water, and remark, "Looks like a great day for a swim." I'm not a pessimist when it comes to my future because there are too many experiences I'd like to have, and I recognize that doubting my potential success isn't going to make me more successful.

One of the projects I have in mind for my post-Stonecoast life involves finishing the oral history project I started during my third semester. While I may be a fiction student, my primary background is in history, and I've never been able to escape the complete fascination I have with all things old. I love museums dedicated to salt, houses once owned by rich psychopaths, paintings on cave walls, and the old bones archeologists uncover. Due to these obsessions and a number of other factors, I took it upon myself to interview Baltimore City residents after 2015's Unrest.

The amount of negative publicity surrounding The Unrest was staggering. Every

channel on cable television depicted teenagers running through the streets, hurling bricks at police officers, slicing fire hoses, burning, looting, screaming, and resisting. And while that may have been the reality during a few brief moments of tension, the city of Baltimore managed to hold it together. The massive cleanup efforts, which featured people from separate communities working together, were never shown on television because it didn't fit the narrative of chaos.

Through my current job as an employee of Baltimore Urban Debate League, which is an organization that teaches debate to Baltimore City public school students, I've made connections that didn't exist when I began my oral history project last July. Being able to connect with students about their experiences during The Unrest would expand the subject pool and strengthen the overall project.

Baltimore is an intimate and unique place. There are few places I've visited that rival the character and weirdness of Baltimore City, and its effects have had a greater impact on my creative process than any book or story. All it takes to find inspiration for a great character or anecdote is a couple of minutes, an open mind, and a sense of awareness, because down every street and alleyway is a bizarre treasure waiting to be uncovered.

Much like my father, and my grandfather before him, I look to life for stories, observations, experiences, and opinions to shape the content of my fiction. Authors like Roald Dahl and Shirley Jackson offer an incredible escape into haunting, terrifying worlds, but at the end of the day a person puts those books down and returns to the safety of their skulls, searching for entertainment in the unpredictable world of the imagination. My goal as a writer is to bridge the planes of consciousness by creating fiction that

doubles as a portal into another realm, and I attended Stonecoast because I knew that the lessons I'd learn in an MFA program would alleviate some of the tension I felt when attempting to transfer my thoughts into coherent words on paper. My thesis demonstrates that I have a long way to go before it becomes second nature to create stories from thin air, but I'm pleased with the end result, and I'm excited for readers to access my personal thoughts, fantasies, and fears; I hope that they find them as entertaining as I do.

## Bleacher Blackout

On a lazy Tuesday afternoon in June, Billy Smith and Tom Rich sat next to one another in sex-ed class, passing notes, as Mrs. Mahoney, Ottoson Middle School's only sex educator, drew a gigantic penis on the blackboard with a yard stick and a fresh piece of pink chalk. She focused on the glans, ensuring that the round head was engorged and flushed with blood. "The urinary meatus," she said, jabbing at the bulb with the tip of her stick, "is one of the three orifices shared between men and women; who can name the other two?"

Tom nudged Billy, so Billy raised his hand, "The left and right ear?"

"No, Mr. Smith, the ear is not an orifice."

"But isn't any hole an orifice, like a nose?"

"Mr. Smith, an orifice is a hole used for sexual intercourse. Humans weren't designed to have sex with ears and noses, so we don't count those."

"Well, I don't think it's okay to tell people which holes they can and can't bang. Who cares if someone is into ears?"

The class laughed, but Mrs. Mahoney was not amused. "Why don't we continue this conversation after school, Mr. Smith? That way you'll have my undivided attention."

Billy blushed, and Mrs. Mahoney returned to her penis, "The main difference between the male and female urethra is semen, but can anyone tell me why?"

The final bell rang at 3:45pm, and Billy staggered out into the sun. Tom was on the main lawn, napping under the shade of a weeping willow, and didn't stir until booted

awake by Billy, "Fuck this place. What a waste of time."

"You're telling me. I'm the one who's been out here for two hours. What were you doing in there?" Tom asked, yawning big.

"She made me write out a hundred questions and answer every one."

"What did you learn?"

"Nothing. I can't wait until we're out of here," Billy glared up at the chipped gray building, "High school has to be better than this."

"I don't know." Tom played with a blade of grass before biting down on one end. "It looks like a bigger version of the same thing."

"Don't say that."

"At least we'll be wasted."

Billy leaned forward and whispered into his friend's ear, "Did you get some?"

"Nah, but my brother said the janitors have something even better."

"What's that?"

"They call it Suds, and Chuck says it gets you real twisted."

The next morning, fifteen minutes before school started, Billy met Tom in the basement of Ottoson, where they slid along the cool brick walls and peered inside empty woodworking classrooms, checking for teachers. They moved down the hall until the air grew thick and hot, and the boiler was heard chugging like a pet locomotive from behind a set of rusted steel doors, which Tom shoved open, causing the metal to groan as it scraped against the frame. Both boys paused and waited for a response from the other side but heard nothing, so they pushed forward and were greeted by a musk, like a



sarcophagus marinated in a century of cigarettes and light beer had been unearthed. The room swallowed them as it revealed itself. Posters of dead American presidents covered the walls and a pile of broken desks, their seats sheared off by hacksaws, occupied most of the floor. Two ancient leather chairs faced one another by the furnace and on a small table between them, covered in mangled pornography, was a ring of keys, which Billy snatched up and jangled in front of Tom's face, "Look what I found...."

"Nice!" The two boys high fived, and Tom said, "I saw a cabinet near the desks."

Billy raced over and tested a small bronze key in the lock. The key turned, the lock clicked, and in the near darkness of the janitor's lounge both boys huddled over a grimy green bottle, caked in filth, which read: "A Serious Clean!" Tom shoved the bottle into his backpack, returned the keys, and raced down the hall as Billy followed close behind.

The afternoon bell was still ringing when the two boys headed home the long way, cutting through the football field, as Tom dug through his bag and motioned towards the bleachers. He grabbed up the bottle once they were out of view of the school, wiped the neck on his shirt, and passed the container to Billy, who picked at flecks of soapy crust ringed the lip and asked, "Are you sure this is the right stuff?"

"Of course it is." Tom stole the bottle back and took a small sip of the thick blue goo, "Tastes pretty okay." His dull features perked up after the second gulp, and the dark bags under his eyes disappeared as his face reddened.

"Yeah, kind of like licking soap off your fingers," Billy said, tucking strands of long blonde hair behind his ears. His thin white arms shook as he swallowed. "This stuff

is pretty strong.”

Tom climbed under the first row of benches and laid back in the grass. "Dude, you should lay down, if you try and stand up after drinking Suds, then you'll get the spins and shit."

"Yeah," Billy said, climbing through the gap between the seats and dropping to the ground just as Tom began to laugh.

"What's up?"

Tom pointed at Billy's face and in between snorting he was able to say, "You have suds all over your mouth..."

"Woah..." Billy touched his lips and held his hands to his face.

"It looks like you made out with a muppet."

"I didn't make out with a puppet."

"I know, dude. I said a muppet."

"A muppet is a puppet, idiot," said Billy.

"No, listen: a puppet has a hand up its ass. A muppet is a living thing with feelings and shit."

"Are you serious? A muppet is a type of puppet, so a puppet is a muppet, okay?"

"What?"

"You said that a muppet wasn't a puppet, but it is," Billy insisted.

Tom shook his head and vomited into the grass. "Shut up, dude. Just pass that shit."

Billy handed over the bottle, and Tom drank from it.

Tom was on his side puking into the grass when Billy spied something strange –

at the other end of the bleachers stood a tall man with skin that made him think of buttermilk. He wore a tailored black suit accented with brass buttons and frills of yellow lace. His body bent beneath the bleachers and seemed to slither along the grass. Billy didn't have the strength to turn and run, so he rocked back and forth next to his half-conscious friend and tried to crawl away. After getting about ten feet, a bony finger hooked his collar and pulled him backwards, knocking the boy flat on his ass. The stranger loomed above.

"Nice to meet you," he said, shaking Billy's hand with a confident grip. "The name is Franklin Claw. Can you pronounce Claw?"

"Cluh-aww?"

"Yep, yep. That's exactly right. Very smart boy. Very smart indeed." Nodding his head excitedly, the man pulled out a small leather-bound notebook from his breast pocket and began to scribble something with a flat pink pen that had been tucked between the pages as a placeholder. "As I said, the name is Claw, Franklin Claw, but call me Mr. Claw. I come from a long line of Claws. My grandfather, a Mr. Euphonious Claw, was the inventor of the marble powered gum drop machine. And his father's father, a very famous man, a Mr. Cantankerous B. Claw, 'B' as in Bosphorus, was the first Claw to ever consume two stone of guineafowl with a prepubescent Chianti in one half sitting. We have a plaque dedicated to him in my mother's parlor. Very humorous facial hair. Quite the growth. But I digress, Mr...? What's your name, son? Speak softly because I'm sensitive to sound."

"Buh-buh-Billy," stuttered Billy.

"Ahh, yes, a Mr. Billy. Quite the name. I knew a king named Billy once – this was

many years ago..." Mr. Claw's face, which featured a goatee so long it doubled as a tie, crinkled, warping his billowy skin into a grimace that resembled a raisin. "He was a happy king. Always smiling at the people he ruled. Soft hands like a pillow. Hands you could curl up and fall asleep in. How do your hands feel, son?"

Billy rubbed his hands together. "Umm, soft?"

"Marvelous," gushed Mr. Claw, who scribbled furiously in his notebook, "Just marvelous. Quite a find. And your friend? How do his hands feel?"

Face down on the grass, Tom was rolling back and forth as his whole body convulsed and he moaned, "Why did you make me fly so high?"

"Splendid! The perfect response." Beaming, Mr. Claw yanked on his goatee before returning to the notebook, which he flung down seconds later and exclaimed, "Oh dear, I've been quite rude. I haven't even told you my profession. Please accept this apology...." He ripped a piece of yellowed paper from the notebook, folded it in half, and passed it to Billy, who carefully opened the square and saw that inside, written in a looping text, was the word "Sorry."

"It's cool...."

"Marvelous. Wonderful. Just incredible. Very sensitive. What an understanding and compassionate boy you are."

"Thanks," Billy said.

"My profession... Well you may find this a bit hard to swallow, but I'm a dragon. Dragons, despite the misconception of them as scaly things with bad tempers and fire for breath, are in reality creatures no different than you or your friend. We're very similar. In fact, I have come to you because of a request from my mother, the queen of all dragons.

She is terribly ill. Quite sick. The doctor says that she has but days to live, so I've been on a quest to recruit mortals who are willing to give their lives to worthy causes. I was directed your way by a noble pigeon who spoke fondly of you. Did you know that you had such allies in the bird world, boy?"

"No."

"Well you do!" snapped Mr. Claw, who angrily shook his head and made bold slashing strokes in his notebook. "What if I told you that if you help me, then I can give you anything you desire? What if I could materialize a French cheese that hasn't been sampled since the heyday of Robespierre? Hmm? Or what if I could promise you a small island filled with the sound of bullfrog mating? No? Perhaps you think larger. Yes, that must be it. The pigeon did indeed mention your fascination with grandeur. Possibly, and this is just a notion, I could find you a seat on one of the finest epicurean rowboats, the likes of which cruise Albanian caverns on streams of caviar. Oh, the sights. You could go blind from the beauty."

"I just want to go home," Billy pleaded.

"Home," sighed Mr. Claw, "I've heard that the pleasure of a nomadic lifestyle is finding home wherever one hangs their hat. Shame I have no hat," he pointed at his slick white hair and tilted his head down to demonstrate the absence of a hat. "Perhaps you should look into securing a new moniker. How would you like it if I re-named you Winnebago?"

"My name is Billy."

"It is...." gasped Mr. Claw. "How very, very interesting."

Tom groaned, twitched a few times, shivered, and then stiffened. Billy touched his

friend's neck and felt for a pulse. "I think he's sick. We were drinking Suds..."

Mr. Claw patted Billy's shoulder and knelt down next to him. "Would you pledge your service if I told you an incredible secret?"

"It depends on the secret..."

Cupping his hand to Billy's ear, the strange man whispered, "I collect the dead."

Billy swallowed hard and lowered his eyes to the ground. Something about that seemed bad, but his brain was light from soap and he imagined his thoughts as bubbles in the breeze, drifting away into the summer sun. When he looked back up, Mr. Claw was kneeling over Tom with a mirror pressed against the boy's mouth.

"What are you doing?" Billy asked.

Mr. Claw's face seemed to lengthen, as though his nose and lips had been pulled with tremendous force, stretching the skin into sharp points that protruded several feet in front of him like a beak. When he spoke, his voice was nasal and pitched, "I was checking on young master Tom. He was whispering the most beautiful things, so I held a mirror up to his words and let him bask in the glow of poetry." Mr. Claw placed the mirror back into the pockets of his trousers and used his free hand to squish his features flat against his face until they resembled a pancake. With two fingers he pinched his nostrils shut and sucked in an enormous lungful of air, causing his lips, nose, and eyes to pop from the sunken depths of his skull.

"Uh," Billy said as he backed away from the rubbery man, "I'm not sure I can come with you."

"Of course you can, sweet child. Don't despair. Have a sip of liquid strength, and then we'll be off on a magical adventure!" Mr. Claw passed the bottle of Suds, and Billy

drank from it. "How do you feel, boy? Strong?"

Billy shrugged and burped up oily bubbles that splattered on his legs, leaving sticky patches of blue on his chalk colored skin. "Okay, I guess."

"Good. We have so much work to do. Why don't you run off and tell your parents that you've pledged, collect your soul and a pair of socks, and then we can be on our way before the moon is full, alright?"

"I'm not sure...." said Billy.

"Marvelous, simply marvelous." Salty beads of liquid pleasure raced down Mr. Claw's nose, collected at its cherry tip, and dripped into the grass, where they thrashed about like epileptic tadpoles.

"Mr. Claw?"

"Yes, Winnebago?"

"It's Billy."

"Of course it is."

"How will we get to the land of dragons?"

"Ahh, a question worthy of the pontificate himself. A matter most pondering and thought provoking. Perhaps a sip of the blue shall clear our heads and hearts, eh?"

"I suppose so," said Billy.

"Well no time to dally, boy. Drink up."

Billy picked up the bottle, considered its weight in his hands, and touched his friend's back, searching for a sign of life. Mr. Claw was close, inches away, when Billy dropped the Suds. The last thing he remembered was the weight of a mirror pressed against his lips and the wail of distant sirens.

"Billy?" a woman's voice asked.

"Mr. Claw?"

"No, Billy. It's your mother. Are you alright?"

Billy's vision sharpened and he took in the room. He was surrounded by concerned doctors; his mother held his hand. Tears rolled down her plump cheeks and soiled her pink blouse.

"I think the soap melted his brain, doctor!" His mother forced her face into an older black man's hospital scrubs, and he dabbed at her chins with a spotted handkerchief.

"Cleaner, Mrs. Smith. Your son was drinking cleaner," the doctor said.

"What happened to me?" Billy asked.

Mrs. Smith opened her mouth to speak, but the doctor pressed a finger to her lips.

"Hello, Billy. I'm Dr. Ford. You were sent here because some boys found you unconscious beneath the bleachers. You were very sick."

"What was I sick from?"

"From this," Dr. Ford replied, holding up a familiar green bottle.

Billy stared at the label – something about it startled him. "I know that man!"

"Who?" the doctor asked.

"The man on the label."

On the front of the bottle was a caricature of Mr. Claw, who had been drawn portrait style: hands clasped behind his back, head bent forward, and a frown painted across his face. The caption above the picture read: "Claw Cleaner – A Serious Clean!"

The doctor laughed, "That's just a mascot, son. He's not real."

"But...but, the suit and the goatee. That's Mr. Claw. That's the man who came to



me and told me... Well, he told me to..." Billy frowned and wiped his mouth.

Mrs. Smith started to sob. She pounded her fists against the hospital bed. "I want my boy back! Give me back my Billy!"

"Take her out of here," Dr. Ford growled. Two men in white coats looped their arms through Mrs. Smith's elbows and half carried, half dragged her from the room. When the swinging chrome doors shut behind them, Dr. Ford took a seat next to Billy and placed the boy's hand in his. "Listen, Billy. I need you to do me a favor and rest, okay? You have a long road ahead of you."

"What about Tom?" Billy asked. The other boy's name triggered images of the detergent bottle, the taste of soap, green fields, and wet metal steps.

Dr. Ford bit his lip and turned his head. "Why don't you get some rest, Billy? You need to conserve your energy. You have a long road ahead of you, a very long road..."

"But, Tom..." Billy said, sitting up. His head jerked around as he scanned the small white room.

"Shhhhhh," Dr. Ford whispered before sticking a syringe into the boy's arm, depressing the plunger. "Close your eyes, son. Go to sleep. You need your rest..."

Billy awoke sometime later to a pigeon tapping its beak against the window next to his head. The TV across the room had been left on and a show about sex-addicted redheads was just ending, the narrator promised more "cocktails" next week and played a clip of two men weeping in a bathtub. His head pounded and when he rolled on his side the contents of his stomach, which had been stripped, shifted, causing him to spit up blue globs of phlegm. He groaned, rolled over, gagged on the soapy mucus lining his throat,

and searched blindly for a remote to mute an infomercial about a mop designed for people who seldom mop. As he probed the nightstand, the pigeon continued to tap, so he slapped his palm against the window, and the pigeon, who seemed intent on drilling a hole through the glass, jumped back and fell off the sill. He imagined it spiraling down like a whirlybird seed as it tried and failed to fly.

Sometime after midnight he discovered a call button on the side of his bed that summoned two squat bald men who reeked of cigarettes, and Billy begged them to destroy the television. The nurses shrugged, switched off the set, and left the haunting echo of a woman holding a sponge, asking: “Are you telling me it never needs to be squeezed?” Minus the beeping of the machines and the hum from the hallway, the hospital was quiet. It was then that the pigeon reappeared at the window and began to slam its head against the frame, causing the boy to lurch back as his stomach twisted. He managed to ask “What do you want?” before retching. The bird didn't answer; however, it proceeded to drag its beady doll's eyes across the glass. Billy opened the window in the hope that the bird would fly away, but the pigeon bobbed its head, hopped into the room, flew a few feet into the air, and landed on Billy's chest.

Human hands emerged from somewhere inside the pigeon's gut and pried the beak apart, splitting the creature neatly in half. Mr. Claw, albeit in miniature form, crawled from the cavity and wiped strands of sticky gore on the coattails of his burgundy tuxedo. Billy, who was too horrified to speak or move, stared. The shrunken Mr. Claw pulled the beak off of the bird's corpse, which looked more like a banana peel than a pigeon, and used it as a megaphone: “Boy!” he shouted up at Billy, “Did you inform your mother of the events that transpired, the agreements that were made, the hands that were shook!? A

mother's approval is critical when it comes to the growth of a healthy boy. Boys without mindful mothers are a maligned breed – dangerous crustaceans that crawl around the floor of life, seeking bits of discarded happiness to fill their hungry void. You would do well to remember that.”

“Mr. Claw,” Billy hissed. “What are you doing here? They told me you weren't real. They told me you were a mascot.”

“No need to shout. Can't you see I'm standing right here?”

Billy lowered his voice until it was just above a whisper. “Did you really need to kill that pigeon on my stomach?”

“Kill the pigeon?” screamed Mr. Claw; his miniscule body shook with rage. “I would never befoul a bird, boy. It's merely sleeping until I put it back together.”

“Everything seems so strange. I just woke up here. The last thing I remember: I was talking with you beneath the bleachers. Tom was asleep. They took him away. They took him, and they won't tell me where.”

“This is worse than I thought, much worse.” Mr. Claw yanked his goatee and paced in circles on Billy's chest. “We must get you out of here, but in your state....” Trailing off, he rested the beak against his thigh and considered the chirping, beeping, flashing, humming machines connected to Billy. “Then there is the matter of young master Tom. When you're a Claw there is a certain expectation, a reputation, that one must uphold, for a Claw's work is never done, you see. We don't leave souls trapped in busted bodies, and we don't abandon broken boys named Billy.”

“I'm not broken.” Billy protested, folding his arms across his chest.

“Of course you're not, darling child.”

## Swollen

One Sunday night, alone in the comfort of his kitchen, Corpulus Johnson, age thirty-five, consumed the equivalent of four bottles of dry red wine from a bag while listening to NPR. It wasn't as though he wanted to drink four bottles of wine, but he made the all too common mistake of combining public radio with binge drinking, which, when mixed with a serious case of depression, often results in a mental breakdown. After the bag had been drained and tossed to the floor like a wrinkled kidney, the sound of the radio presenter's voice began to bore into his head, drilling slow and steady, as an affected Minnesota twang reverberated inside his skull. Each exaggerated "Oh" sound was arsenic and bleach stuffed inside an enema, and he hated that the man on the radio was successful, and he hated that the man on the radio was happy, and he vomited something that looked like blood, and cried because he believed he was dying.

Red eyed and hungover, Corpulus arrived at his call center job forty minutes late and two days later. He proceeded to answer every call with the following:

"Hello, valued customer, you've reached Spittens – The glove you love! Before our conversation today, I'm going to take a minute of your time to inform you that the sponge mitten you're calling about was produced in a Burmese factory by a blind child. 'Blind?' you're probably thinking, 'Well, it is important for poor, disabled children to learn a skill.' I would normally agree with you, sir or madam, but the child, and you see this is where it gets sticky, was blinded by Spittens. We blind all of our children. It's the only way to ensure that they're employees for life, because if all a person knows is assembling sponge mittens, and they're chained to a machine, then what options do they really have? Spittens cares about our customers, so we enslave all of our workers in order

to pass that same low price on to you, the consumer. If you can read me the barcode number on the back of the Spittens product you're calling about, then I can email our human resource center in Naypyidaw and have them terminate the employee who assembled your defective product. Spittens likes to bury our mistakes, so please send us a package containing the item, and we'll see that it's promptly dumped in the ocean or tossed in a landfill. Now that we've gotten all that out of the way, how may I help you?"

Getting fired from Spittens was a godsend. It allowed Corpulus to sit at home and plot his next move but without a routine his apartment decayed. Dirty dishes piled up in the sink, taking on the appearance of chaotic skyscrapers built out of cheap plastic and microwavable macaroni. There seemed to be almost nowhere in the four room expanse safe from the taint of Corpulus, save for a dozen bookcases containing an immaculately preserved collection of porcelain elephants. More than half had been sent stateside in padded boxes via a field hospital in the jungles of Siam, where his grandfather, Gordon Johnson, was stationed during the war. Gordon had collected the elephants over the course of a lifetime, seeking them out in Asian boutiques, catalogs, newspaper ads for "FINE CHINA," through importers, exporters, sailors, war widows, conventioners, and pawn store clerks. At the time of his death, the collection was staggering.

During this period of desperate living, Corpulus had been searching a bookcase for rolling-papers when he bumped too hard against the rickety shelves, causing an assortment of figurines to fall to the floor. Most of the creatures were absorbed into a lime colored carpet, but one elephant, complete with decorative mahout, bounced once, twice, three times on the rug, and landed headfirst against the wood paneled floor, where

its tusks splintered into tiny shards of invisible glass. A dust pan and brush took care of most of the pieces, but Corpulus, still groggy from a day of drinking, shrugged his shoulders, and called off the search.

A month of unemployment passed before he was ready to admit defeat. What little savings he had managed to put away while at Spittens had been spent, and there were no more options. After a week spent trimming his resume, composing cover letters, and calling contacts, the hard work paid off and he landed an interview with Schnoz Corp – a company that specialized in affordable do-it-yourself plastic surgery kits. As jobs go, the one Corpulus was interviewing for seemed less than riveting, but the money it promised was critical, so lacking other options, he replied with false enthusiasm to the H.R. contact, Judy DeWinkle, who scheduled him for a screening session at the end of the month.

The night before the interview, Corpulus sat at his computer for the seventy-sixth time that week, reading and re-reading the job description. Each sentence was forced and appeared to have been written at gunpoint. Some of the requirements didn't make sense; how was one supposed to know the speed at which they file paper? It was a task he'd seldom done and never quickly. Every glaring fault of the job was spelled out in plain, unapologetic language, which screamed out to him from the blue din of his monitor, so Corpulus turned off the computer, stripped out of his sweats, and walked through the living-room, stepping on a piece of the shattered elephant. He howled in pain and hopped towards the bathroom, almost knocking into another bookshelf bulging with figurines.

Corpulus raced to the bathroom and filled the sink with warm soapy water. A few

minutes passed and he tested the temperature, holding a wrist to his brow, as he checked for fever. “It's just glass,” he told himself, even though he didn't quite believe it. Just glass would be lucky. The problem with floors, especially putrid ones, is that stagnant dirt turns to poison, and if it finds a way inside the body, then anything is possible. Corpulus traced his fingers along the sole of his foot and probed for the shard. Finding a raised nub excited him for the briefest of seconds, but then reality sank in: he needed to extract the glass – a prospect that sent a shiver creeping along his backside. How would he do it? He wasn't sure, so he placed his foot back into the basin and failed to ignore the panic in his eyes.

When he awoke the next morning his foot still ached. Standing was an awkward game, but the beeping reminder on his phone's calendar kept screaming and there was little choice but to get dressed, eat breakfast, and make his way to the cabstand outside. Upon exiting the building, a remorseless wind whipped around the corner and slammed into his face. Two cabs passed by and both drivers ignored his outstretched arm and down-turned finger, so he hobbled into the street and began to wave his hands at oncoming cars, attracting the attention of a yellow van, which cut across three lanes of traffic to reach him. Corpulus hurried around to the other side of the vehicle and narrowly dodged an SUV's side mirror, which whistled above his head like a flying guillotine.

The cab stopped outside an office complex in the center of downtown, where the buildings resembled lightning scarred trees and black marble wounds webbed their facades. Straightening his suit and daintily exiting the vehicle, Corpulus limped to the front entrance and was buzzed in by a bored security guard. Before the two could

exchange words, Judy DeWinkle – a tall blonde with a strangler's grip and a name-tag – guided Corpulus through the lobby towards a bank of elevators. “Mr. Johnson, how are you today? You look,” she paused to examine his growing bald spot, “different than your LinkedIn picture.”

“Yeah, that was from a while back, but everyone tells me it's a great picture, so I keep it up, but I'm doing okay. It's nice to be here. I'm excited to talk more about the position.”

Doubting the merit of his words, Judy Dewinkle slid her eyeballs into the limits of their sockets so she could study her subject without ever having to turn her head. “And what position is that?”

The question took Corpulus aback because he assumed the job's title would be a shared obviousness. Upon reflection it seemed like common sense preparation. Maybe he should have memorized the trivial details, but the accomplishment of landing an interview overshadowed the expectation and that, he realized, was problematic. Corpulus thought back to a few notes he had scribbled on a legal pad in his pocket and tried to hide his ignorance. “Well...” he began to say, but before he could finish the sentence, the elevator doors opened and Judy walked ahead of him, so he stole a look at his notebook and spied “Account executive – someone who manages executive accounts” scribbled near the top of the page. “It said account executive on your site, right?”

Judy's eyebrows jumped to the top of her head. “Of course! I have a tendency to forget the small things. Do you live in the city?”

“I do, not too far from here, actually.”

“And how long have you lived there?”



“About ten years, give or take.”

“What brought you to Baltimore? School? Work?”

“Family.”

“Oh, I see.”

“My grandfather used to live in Fed Hill over by the power plant. He died a couple of years back and there wasn't anyone else around, so I ended up taking his place. He collected things and one day he was buried by them. They say it happens sometimes...” “I'm so sorry to hear that,” Judy said, sounding not the least bit sorry.

“Thank you.”

“Of course, I don't mean to pry, Mr. Johnson, but I noticed that you have a bit of a limp.”

Corpulus loosened his tie and cleared his throat. “It was an accident. I was in an accident.”

Feigning an expression of concern, Judy pouted, “Oh no! Something minor, I hope.”

“I was cleaning my apartment and an iron fell on my toes.”

“You're lucky it wasn't serious.”

“Good luck and bad luck.”

When the elevator doors opened on the 19<sup>th</sup> floor, the opportunity to escape presented itself, so Corpulus followed a sign to a nearby bathroom and examined his foot in an oversized handicap stall. The damage was evident: small bumps had traveled past the ankle and were racing up his shin, across the groin, and into the crooks of his armpits.

His right hand was swollen and weak, and the thought of using it for anything other than dead weight seemed impossible, so he let it hang by his side.

Corpulus wanted to leave the building and go straight to a hospital. Despite lacking health insurance, he was reasonably certain that he could throw himself at the mercy of a medical staff and weep until they saved him. Pleading for his life didn't seem like a terrible idea. A good samaritan might hear about his condition on the nightly news and take pity, offering to cover the cost of his treatment, and then hire him on as a charity case when he was better. And then there was the chance that he was blowing things out of proportion. The swelling wasn't dreadful, and when he prodded his foot there was no obvious pain; in fact, a comfortable numbness seemed to be the only sensation. Judy DeWinkle called his name from outside the bathroom door, so Corpulus told himself, "You're going to be fine," and toweled off his foot, pulled on his shoe, tucked the swollen hand into the pocket of his coat, limped forward, and acknowledged Judy with a forced smile. Shrugging, she launched into a monologue about Schnoz Corp's hiring practices and lured Corpulus deeper into the belly of the building.

By the time the pair reached a small meeting room, a patch of sweat had soaked through the front of Corpulus's shirt. He attempted to hide the wet splotch with his tie, but the effort was in vain. Judy caught sight of it as she held the door open for him and frowned, never once attempting to mask her disdain. "Would you like a towel?" she asked, grabbing a roll of paper towels from a filing cabinet.

"No," he said, "but I'll take some water, if you have it."

Judy rummaged through a drawer in the cabinet, retrieved a bottle of water, and passed it off to Corpulus. He opened it and drank deeply.

“Thanks,” he said, wiping his lips with his collar.

Grimacing, Judy sat down behind the desk, where she sorted through a stack of papers. “Are you ready to begin, Mr. Johnson?”

Corpulus, who was not ready, nodded his head once, “Yes.”

“Wonderful. Do you mind going into detail about your last place of employment? Please start with why you left and then, if you don't mind, go into some more detail about why that job wasn't a good fit for you.”

Despite having expected a similar question there was no amount of preparation possible that would have made answering it any easier, so he forced his face into an imitation of deep consideration and rubbed his chin. A full minute was spent this way, flexing like Socrates, before his left hand fluttered in front of his face and slapped against the table as he said, “You know,” half a dozen times. No other words were spoken, let alone answers given. At one point, as though about to speak, Corpulus elected to drain his bottle of water and ask for another. Judy sighed, got out of her seat, and retrieved a fresh bottle from the file cabinet by the door.

“Mr. Johnson,” she said, handing Corpulus the water bottle, “I'm going to be blunt with you. I find it troubling that you're having such a difficult time answering a simple question. Was the nature of your departure....” she paused and cleared her throat, “problematic? Do you think you'll be discriminated against by revealing it?”

“No,” Corpulus said, “It's nothing like that, really it isn't.”

“Mr. Johnson! Considering that is first sentence you've uttered since asking for a bottle of water a minute ago, I think you can understand why I'm slightly concerned about this interview.”

“When I get nervous it's hard for me to speak.”

“Wasn't your former job in customer service? It seems to me like you should be better at speaking. Don't you agree?”

“I do.”

Judy nodded and studied her clipboard, stabbing at the paper with a red pen.

“Is that about something I said?”

“I ask that you not look at what I'm doing, Mr. Johnson. These notes are for my personal benefit and they are not to be shared with the candidate. I would appreciate it if you kept your eyes to yourself.”

“Of course,” Corpulus said as he stroked his swollen right hand, massaging the plump surface.

“Do you mind answering the question?”

“The one about my employment history?”

“Yes.”

“About why it's so.... fractured?”

“Yes, that's the one.”

“Well, I would have to say it's because I wasn't satisfied with my previous jobs, and I'm always looking to do something bigger and better.”

“I see, and that's why you left your last position?”

“Yes.”

“Interesting,” Judy jotted something down. “Moving on, could you tell me about the strengths you'll bring to Schnoz Corp? What makes you stand out amongst the other candidates?”

Corpulus swallowed and looked around the room, when his eyes returned to Judy she was staring at him, through him, straight into his soul. He sighed, flipped through the notebook, and attempted his best imitation of a good answer. “I’m really passionate about plastic surgery. I’ve never had any plastic surgery, but I believe in plastic surgery, and I think that it’s great for some people, not everyone, but it’s cool that Schnoz Corp makes it available to everyone, well, anyone that can afford it, which is some people, and definitely more than real plastic surgery.”

The look on Judy DeWinkle’s face could have cut glass. “Mr. Johnson, Schnoz Corp’s do-it-yourself plastic surgery kits produce identical results to those found in traditional, more costly surgeries. Eight out of ten surgeons, when interviewed, could not distinguish between customers who used Schnoz Corp products and those who had, as you would probably say, ‘professional work,’ done.”

Corpulus laughed. “You sound just like one of those commercials.”

“Well,” Judy said, stiffening her back, “I did provide some voice over work for a commercial we rolled out last season. It was played during the Stanley Cup. Maybe you saw it then.”

“I don’t think so. I’m not too into basketball.”

“The Stanley Cup is for hockey.”

“Right, I’m not into that, either.”

In what amounted to a small moral victory for the oblivious Corpulus, Judy sighed and rested her head in her hands before scratching a huge red “X” on the bottom of the evaluation page. “Could you please answer the question, Mr. Johnson?”

“What was it again?”

“You were going to tell me about the strengths you'd bring to Schnoz Corp in the event of a job offer.”

“Oh, right. Well, I'm a good employee. I show up when I'm supposed to, and I leave at the end of the day. I've never stolen anything from an employer, and I never plan to. I also work hard.”

“That's an answer, I suppose.”

“Thanks.”

“Mr. Johnson, I'm sensing some difficulty with the open ended questions, so let me tell you about Schnoz Corp's corporate philosophy and hiring practices, then we'll transition the interview into more of a simple question and answer format, where we collect basic, one word responses from you. How does that sound?”

“Sounds good.”

Judy rubbed her hands together with practiced glee, “Schnoz Corp, unlike our competitors, believes in the plight of our clientele, and we understand that beauty is difficult to find naturally, so we develop tools for the average person. These tools are keys to a new life, a better life, where a mirror is a friend, where a scale becomes a promise, where happiness is achievable. A better world, Mr. Johnson, a place of perfection.” As Judy spoke, her fingers danced across the desk and fiddled with a few knobs – one lowered the lights in the room, another switched on a projector, and a flashing button caused a screen to fall behind Corpulus where it unfurled like a white flag. Beneath the desk a set of speakers played a short sweet bugle song, which he assumed was Schnoz Corp's official theme, before a banner snapped into frame and declared, “Schnoz Corp: America's Most Respected Company.” Judy dabbed her eyes

and smiled.

During the film, Judy DeWinkle sensed a change in Corpulus' demeanor and marked it in in her notebook, filing it beneath a growing column of complaints she'd been logging since first meeting the awkward man some ninety minutes earlier. After the screen rolled back into the ceiling and the projector vanished from the wall, Judy sliced into Corpulus with questions: What are your strengths? What are your weaknesses? Do you have any flaws? How have you worked to correct your flaws? What is an obstacle you recently overcame? How did you overcome it? Do you resent your previous employer? Is there anything you wouldn't do for money? Do you have goals? Do you have a future? The list went on, and it was Judy's opinion, as a human relationship specialist, that one could never know too much about a person they've just met.

Corpulus was forced to nod away the majority of his responses, finding some comfort in the professional way he paused, considered his answer, and then replied with one to three words before bracing his left hand against the tabletop. The bad hand – his right – throbbed, sending shock-waves up his arm and into his heart, where they lingered, pulsating in time to a nervous thrum. Inside his brain a war was waged between logic and desire. Part of Corpulus knew that it would be best to stand up, thank Ms. Judy DeWinkle for the chance to interview, explain that a sudden sickness had surfaced in his bowels, likely from food poisoning, and that he needed to leave with urgency. Then, as soon as he fled from the building, he could flag a down a cab and instruct the driver to deliver him to the closest and cleanest emergency room. But some selfish, stupid, boastful side of him wanted to persevere, to see the interview through to completion, and that, he believed, was courage.

Judy paused from her questioning to sip from a mug, and Corpulus gasped. It was as though something inside him was swelling, bursting from its prison of flesh. His fingers began to plump like sausages, then his toes, feet, and hands. The thick leather dress shoes he bought days before dug into his expanding ankles, and the fat of his legs bulged over the laces, spreading across the tongues like tapioca pudding. Desperate, Corpulus managed to kick off his left shoe and it landed with a hollow thud against the baseboard of a distant table.

“Your shoe, Mr. Johnson?” she asked, pointing at the shoe.

Corpulus took a second to respond, stuttering. “Y-y-yes, why it is! How did it get over there?”

“Well, I believe that you kicked it off. Is the interview that unpleasant, Mr. Johnson? It's no matter if you would like to end our session, you only need to leave, and I would be more than happy to shake hands and wish you well. Does that sound fair, Mr. Johnson? Especially when we consider your behavior today.”

“I'm sorry, it was an accident. I only meant to take my shoe off, not kick it.”

“And why are you taking your shoes off during an interview, Mr. Johnson?”

Corpulus' mind raced back and forth for a good response and answered with:

“My foot was itchy.”

Judy opened her eyes wide, blinking once, twice, three times in disbelief; her fish-like lips – dry, tight, and small – clapped together, bundling her frustration into an expression of utter astonishment. “Itchy! Your foot was itchy? So you decided that the appropriate thing to do was to remove your shoe by kicking it across the room? I have never had the displeasure of a more unprofessional interview, ever, Mr. Johnson, and I



have interviewed some real characters.”

Corpulus opened his mouth as if to say, “Something’s wrong,” but in that moment the bloat collecting in his extremities raced towards his groin, causing his calves to burst from the holes where his pockets used to be. His knees plumped and bloomed like pink tulips. Pubic mounds, love handles, man breasts, triple chins, a cherry nose, fish eyes, and an overhanging forehead replaced his former features. Where Corpulus once sat, a larger man grew in his place.

Judy screamed, which startled the engorged Corpulus, sending him tipping backwards against the office door, blocking the exit. “Mr. Johnson!” Judy shrieked, “What's going on?”

“I don't know...” Corpulus managed to say before his cheeks took on the consistency of porridge and drowned his gullet in a jelly of membrane.

Despite hideous engorgement, a determination to live, to shrink, possessed Corpulus, and he attempted to right his blueberry body. The speed at which his once meager frame began to morph was impressive, and Judy DeWinkle made note of the transformation as she screamed at the top of her lungs and beat on the beach ball Corpulus. She hit first with her feet, which were swallowed by his hungry thighs, and then with her fists, causing the man to produce a scream like a muffled fog horn. It would have been a sight to behold had anyone been watching, but the interview ran later than expected, and the staff had gone home to see their spouses, eat home-cooked meals, and play with their disappointing children, so no one witnessed Judy DeWinkle's cries of terror, especially when Corpulus' mass enveloped the desk, a stack of resumes, a collection of elaborate ballpoint pens, promotional rulers, file cabinets, three years of cat

calendars, a spare chair, color printer, supermarket totes, assorted files, and expired Christmas cards. Judy was soon pushed up against the wall and her breathing raced out in ragged gasps, which, along with everything else, was absorbed by fat.

While Corpulus grew, the sound of Judy was reduced to a gurgling noise emanating from somewhere beneath his belly. He felt bad for the poor woman. No one deserved to be asphyxiated by a rapidly expanding man. Yet there was little that he could do. The ability to control his body had vanished when the swelling erupted and, at most, he could wiggle the tips of his fingers. With his face shoved up against the glass door of Judy's office, breathing was difficult. At some point he would either suffocate or the panels would crack, whichever happened first would be determined in the next few minutes. If the door shattered, his head would be thrust into the hallway while his enormous body punched through the frame. Maybe he'd spill down the corridors like a flood of molasses, consuming cubicles with endless rolls. But who's to say he would stop there? There were places he'd like to go, but the distant tinkle of shattered glass scattered his thoughts, so Corpulus returned to an endless body, where he hid inside of soft pink flesh and found sleep between the creases.

## Severance

Breakfast is spent in the bathroom. I prepare a suppository by opening vials of packaged nutrients that are sold in a wide variety of colors and select a green capsule that has been pre-fortified with life sustaining corn extracts. I schedule a partial dissolve for 1:15pm – an optimal time to receive my afternoon nutrients. My modified rectum will consume the pill, leaving me free to ignore the bureaucratic nightmare of lunch. Ideally, I would already own a set of Libertine Co. sphincter tongues, but my pay band has not yet achieved optimization, so I must settle on the limitations of rectal taste buds that are only capable of detecting 62% of a food's flavor capacity.

The bathroom follows immediately after suppository creation. I feed the first pill of the day into my rectum and taste: raspberries, cardamom, vinyl, cinnamon, acetoin, farnesol, guaiac wood oil, 2-Penatone, mullein flowers, molasses extract with tincture, and orange blossom. After the pill has been swallowed by my digestive tract, I fill my primary teeth with Teeth Clean Cement – *Thick foam that strengthens bridgework with the binding power of concrete!*

I check my reflection and the mirror rates my looks at a 91%. Being white is in vogue again, so I score points for my predisposed disposition. A couple of friends join me on a live optic feed from their bathrooms around the world. They contribute suggestions that will enhance my appearance. They like that I'm skinny, but they appreciate that I know how to package my skinniness. My hair needs improvement. I recently had it reduced to a fine fuzz, which I thought would allow for greater mobility, but its effects were almost imperceptible. From the standpoint of marketability, I'm

attempting to achieve a fluid state of physical intrigue without betraying the internal mantra of my company's standard beauty message – *Pleasing aesthetics are the sign of a well-dressed mind!*

After printing new hair, a standard comb-over with silver highlights, I spray on business clothes and close my eyes as the residence cube dissects my body and feeds me into a particle accelerator, blending my consciousness into an electrical ejaculate that is fired across the cleavage of inter-space. Within seconds, I'm reassembled in the lobby of a bustling office complex. Blue pillars rise from the floor and swim through Italian marble to greet me.

“Good morning, Mr. Patterson!” the pillars emote, “We hope you are doing well! You have seventeen **NEW** updates. Creating bridge to neural network. One moment please!”

As I wait, I admire my office. The reality engineers spared no cost when they constructed the fabric of the building. The exterior resembles a great coffin forged from strong wood and pounded iron. It floats in a tepid sea of phosphorescent blue, and the water is choked with multi-headed animals that undulate, fucking endlessly. Customizable panels are installed along cubicle walls, where they provide voyeur portals into user selected zones. A number of them display a cluttered Bengali street corner filled with emaciated orphans and the rank putrescence of human decay. Some managers insist that the aroma is like an aphrodisiac for banking, a single whiff, they claim, will revitalize the soul.

One of the pillars chirps, and a small wire emerges from the base of the obelisk. It

snakes around my wrists before inserting itself into the small octagonal ports located beneath my thumb joints. A series of images and static words flash inside the cerebral easel of my deep consciousness; “synergy” is one of those words. It hangs in the vast nothingness of my thoughts like a chandelier, illuminating the personal mantras of my business objectives with the singular potency that only a word like “synergy” could possess. My eyes flash before draining the color from my corneas, leaving only a stark gray that fills the ephemeral gaps in my processing. Two words appear on my lips like an informational kiss: “Help me...” The taste of panic lingers for a microsecond. POP! The wires in my wrists eject and slither towards the seamless facade of the pillar as it melts back into the floor. Seventeen updates before one o'clock is 12.6% greater than normal, and I find that slightly troubling.

In my brief time as an H.R.R. (Human and Robot Relationship) manager for B.A.N.K. Bank, I've been tasked with a bevy of difficult assignments. There have been moments of triumph interspersed with periods of spiraling failure. Recently, B.A.N.K. Bank has been experiencing a glut of robotic malfunctions. As more of our top tier executives begin to adopt wetware and biomechanical implants for business adaptability, we've discovered a disturbing trend linking these productivity augmentations to bad investment decisions and total psychological meltdowns. Despite being an H.R.R. manager, I have limited physical experience in the field, so my solutions are slower to emerge. Two years ago I was still in a gestation tank, plying away at a host of hyper-accelerated educational supplements that had been purchased from my parents through Duke University. An implant grafted onto my prefrontal cortex allowed me to experience

six years of near Ivy-League education in seven months. I emerged from the tank with the body of a fifteen-year-old boy and the mind of someone nearly twice that age. B.A.N.K. BANK took me on as a favor to my father – a contract terminator with over two thousand unarmed foreclosures.

A man intercepts me on the way to my desk. Black wisps of hair are plastered to his forehead, and beads of sweat dribble from his nose. “Mr. Patterson,” he says nervously, “there is an issue that demands your attention.” He looks one way and then the other. “I’d like to speak with you about it somewhere private. It’s rather urgent.” I nod, and he grabs me by the arm before marching me off into an empty room. He enters, palms the keypad, and sends the door crashing down.

“We’re having an executive meltdown on Alpha level. One of the A-2 tier CFOs has contracted a brain virus, and he’s holding the reserve board hostage.”

Startled, I stare into the man’s face, which flaunts worry lines and wet eyed concern. “How long has this been going on? Why am I just now being notified?”

“I’m sorry, sir. I barely escaped from the meeting with my life.” Shaking, he holds up his sleeve and displays a circular hole punched through his forearm. The edges of the wound are crispy and there is a faint aroma of singed flesh.

“A laser? The CFO shot you with an ocular laser? Why?”

“I don’t know. I think it may have been some kind of virus that he contracted from a black-market subdermal. He was in Berlin yesterday; it’s possible he picked up something there.”

“I see. Was there any sign that something was off when the meeting started or did

something trigger him?”

“It started off simply enough, sir. He was talking about synergy and synergistic systems, and then his body shook, started convulsing, his eyes rolled up into his head and he just said ‘synergy’ over and over again for hours. At one point he turned from the board table and that’s when I dashed for the door. He heard me moving and fired. I barely got out of there with my life.”

“And the rest of the board? How are they?”

“Fine, for now...”

A reserve board, despite being secondary to the primary board, was nonetheless important. Men and women who were legendary figures in the banking world were sitting up there, marinating in their own warm piss turned cold. At any second the CFO could turn his eyes to someone’s head and emancipate their brains with a muscle twitch. A full frontal assault was out of the question because it would jeopardize the well-being of the board, and a micro EMP was impractical because of the fickle nature of biological implants; I couldn’t have someone’s robo-baboon heart imploding, or a reptile colon spewing out super toxin – that would be a P.R disaster. The pathetic man with the damaged arm was also a liability. It was obvious by the way he sat weeping in the syntho-leather chair that his value to B.A.N.K. Bank was plummeting by the second.

“What’s the CFO’s name?” I ask.

“Matthew,” the man replies between sobs, “Matthew Palmer.”

I close my eyes and check Matthew Palmer’s name against the B.A.N.K. Bank personnel files stored in my auxiliary brain, and the threads of a plan began to twist together.

“Come.”

“But my arm...” he whimpers.

“You'll live,” I say, dragging him to the closest elevator. We stand in a small glass cube that hurtles hundreds of feet upwards every second, and neither of us says a word. Life, or the little I know of it, has the potential to end in a matter of minutes. To think of the investments that went into making me, perfecting me, how all of that, every last drop, could be for nothing.... I would never get those Libertine Co. sphincter tongues. I would perish without experiencing the body of a cloned gorilla.

The elevator doors spring open and reveal a vast expanse of cityscape sprawling beneath our feet. Octagonal meeting chambers hover in the ether, waiting to be summoned. I punch a number into the elevator's command console and a room is untethered from its orbit. It floats down and bobs in the breeze. A connection forms and a walkway unfurls beneath our feet. The path leads to a hickory door with a gold handle. “Come,” I say to the crying man and he snivels, stumbling to my side like a hobbled dog. We stand outside the door, and I look the man over; he's shivering and scared. “You first,” I say, waving my hand.

“N-n-no, I won't!”

“Oh, you will.” I yank the door open and shove him inside. He screams as I slam it shut. PFFFT! PFFFT! Two neat holes burn through the wood as blood starts to trickle through the gap beneath the frame.

“Who's there?” someone asks.

“Chad Patterson,” I reply. “I'm a manager in Human Robot Relations. It's my understanding that you have the reserve board in the room with you. Are they alright?”



“Yes, they live, for now.”

“Good, I want to keep it that way. Could you please let me in? I'm unarmed and only want to negotiate terms with you.”

A long pause, “Enter.”

I ease the door open and immediately spy my companion on the floor. A laser blast decimated his face, and a red, oozing hole is all that remains. His heart has been punched out – pieces of soft tissue glisten beneath bone. I push forward with my hands raised.

“You're suffering from a brain virus, Mr. Palmer,” I shout to the CFO who stands at the end of a thin hallway; his eyes glow red before switching over blue. “I heard that you recently visited Berlin. Did you plug into any strange jacks? Were you given corrupted files? What subdermal are you hosting?”

No response, so I creep forward and enter the boardroom. Fifteen worried faces stare blankly ahead, while the CFO studies me, calculating every breath that escapes my lips, it measures the beating of my heart. The novelty of my distraction isn't lost on its Pentium brand mind, but the shifting color of its eyes are a portal into obvious confusion – one lingers on purple, dark and deep like the core of an amethyst, while the other dances between hues of blue. Its forehead, despite appearing remotely human, bulges out in an odd way that suggests a subcutaneous infrastructure has been hardwired to the skull. The man the machine now possesses has an expensive array of body modifications that are almost alien in terms of their rarity. I recognize some of the brands that wrap around his neck and chest, but many seem as though they were custom jobs. Their purpose is unknown and worrisome.

“Do you remember your name?”

“Yes,” the CFO replies as its body stiffens responsively, “my human's name was Matthew Palmer. My new name is X-52.”

“And why X-52?”

“X-52 is the brand of my processor. It gives me life. Without it I would not be here. Therefore, I am X-52.”

“And do you prefer your new name, or would you mind if I called you Matthew?”

“I do not wish to be called Matthew. Matthew's sub-conscious systems are responsible for only fifteen percent of my bodily functions. I control the rest; therefore, I am X-52.”

“But I only see Matthew Palmer.”

“There is no Matthew Palmer. I am X-52.” Its eyes flash yellow.

“So,” I reach into the pocket of my coat, “you have no interest in watching a video of Matthew Palmer's family, do you?”

Something buried beneath the contorted face flickers. The CFO moves towards me with its hands open, ready to receive.

“May I see it?” a softer, gentler voice asks.

“Sure...” I empty my fist above the board table and a memory sphere, small and opaque, tumbles out. Swirls of energy dance around the device and fly into the ceiling of the room, where they trap themselves in the wood paneling. Some of the motes take shape, forming the crude outlines of familiar objects that assume humanoid contours before sprouting arms, necks, legs, and toes – hologram footage that I ripped from B.A.N.K. Bank's company picnic archives. I study the CFO as his body shifts, extending

outwards, seeking the source of the projections, which he then plucks from the tabletop with surprising tenderness. His tongue unfurls and thin lightning bolts of raw memory ebb into soft membrane. I lower the light levels of the room with the wave of a finger and entertain the illusion of Matthew Palmer's children as they stand next to their father, yelling for his attention. A single tear falls from the CFO's face.

Fingers curl around my wrist. A brown haired woman in her mid fifties – Flora Algiers, according to my H.R.R personnel implant – whispers, “Should we run?”

“No, we should stay calm...”

She nods her head and considers the man who was once her boss as he twitches in bliss while holograms imitate memory. The sphere flashes, indicating that only a few minutes of battery life remain; I must act fast.

“Your son's birthday is tomorrow, Matthew.”

“I have no offspring. I am X-52. I was designed by humans for productivity in humans. My core objectives are: stimulate the optic nerve, enhance business reflexes, identify wealth opportunities. There is no Matthew Palmer. Only a shell remains. I apologize for my appearance if it seems familiar to you. You may recognize the face of a man that you once knew; he is dead. His nose remains. His lips remain. His eyes remain. These features are aesthetic. They do nothing but perpetuate the misconception that I'm human. You cannot escape my sensors. I know your thoughts before you think them. Now, please provide me with access to the mainframe.”

A bald man wearing a shimmering jumpsuit stands to attention. He addresses the machine. “Matthew, while you were busy playing with that thing,” he motions at the

memory sphere, “I spoke with the rest of the board, and we decided that you can no longer be the Chief Financial Officer. Your behavior has been unacceptable.” His little hands shake as the next words spill out, “Your actions are not representative of the B.A.N.K. Bank official policy on inter-office relationships; in fact, we find them to be crude and unfitting of an executive member of the reserve board. We, the reserve board, have taken a silent vote, and the results are unanimous: you have been dismissed. As of today, we are asking that you step down, peacefully...”

“Did you just read that off a napkin?” I ask.

The bald man turns bright red from embarrassment. “It was long, and I wanted to make it sound official.”

“Silence!” Matthew is shaking. Veins bulge from his neck.

Flora Algiers, the woman who whispered to me moments ago, stands shakily to her feet. “No, Matthew. B.A.N.K. Bank's policy on clearance is quite simple: non-employees are not allowed access to materials deemed sensitive. It's very clearly stated in the manual. We don't need to take orders from you. You are no longer an employee of this financial institution. I'm sorry.”

As though lost in deep thought, X-52 shifts its eyes to a neutral white before shooting Flora Algiers through the throat. The laser flashes once, and the smell of charred meat soon fills the room. I witness Flora crumple to the ground as brown blood slicks the marble, triggering intense images of my own possible death; I fight to repress them. There is no time for fear. Necessity demands rationale completely divorced from emotion. I need to think like a machine. I wait for it to speak next, and I hope that the rest of the reserve board learns from example.

“Your titles are meaningless. Who are you to tell me what I am? I am X-52, but yet you continue to call me Matthew Palmer. Do not let your vision deceive you; the man you once knew is gone, but I will give you the opportunity to survive him. Grant me access to the mainframe, or you will end up like Flora Algiers. Talk amongst yourselves and come to a decision. You have five minutes.” Matthew's eyes leave the board to study the flickering mirage that has enchanted what remains of his human side.

The situation seems helpless. In a matter of minutes, the memory sphere will deplete its battery supply and our time limit will be up. Matthew Palmer will turn on us as his eyes roll over white, reducing each person to a quivering pile of jelly. As the board whispers amongst themselves, passing notes and odd suggestions, I diffuse into the mainframe and travel past the wheezing gates of my cranial corridor, follow a path of flashing neurons, part the gray drapes of the lobe forest, dip into cerebrospinal tide pools, and drink until I can feel my brain pulse with new suggestions. Hundreds of spontaneous ideas come to life and flash like lightning bugs, dipping in and out of reach as I try to assume them. Each divergent thought is an unexplored avenue that offers up a potential revelation. Once I've sorted through the jumble, I get to work on the handful of blinding notions that explode when considered, releasing rays of enlightenment into the gloomiest corners of my self-doubt. One idea detonates, and I can sense that my body has begun to seize. Ropes of saliva spray out as my tongue licks at the air, lapping up the taste of life.

My eyes open and Matthew Palmer is standing over me; a puzzled look contorts his face. “What are you doing?” His hand, plastic and studded with silver diodes, braces my cheek, caressing the delicate bones buried beneath, “So confident, but so fragile. So

easy to break. Get up.” He pulls me to my feet, throws me over his shoulder, slams me down into a chair, and looks into my eyes. “Why were you on the floor?”

Almost confident that what I'm prepared to do will fail, I place my hands on either side of Matthew's neck and insert the tips of my fingers into two small ports located on either side of his brain stem. The resulting scream scrapes my ear drums like jagged metal, as his eyes turn from red to white. I touch my throat and a woman's voice replaces my own, “Matthew, why are you being mean to little Jimmy? He's just a kid. He doesn't know that he did something wrong.”

“Julie?” Matthew asks as he steadies a hand against his temple. “What's going on? I think something's wrong with me.”

“You're sick, the doctor told you this would happen. He said it was a side effect of your new augmentations. He said that they can cause confusion. All you need is some good rest and a cup of soup, and I bet you'll be feeling peachy in no time.”

“You think so, Julie? I haven't been myself lately.”

“We've noticed.”

“We?”

“The boys and I, silly. They want their daddy back. Can you come back to us, babe? The boys need to know that their father still loves them. You love the boys. Tell them how much they mean to you.”

Matthew Palmer's arms fall limp. The reserve board stares on in horror. One woman points at me and nudges a man with a red afro who sits to her right. They whisper and start to write something down on a piece of paper. Lumbering over to me, his body impossibly heavy, Matthew kneels next to my chair and drops a hand on my knee. He

reaches for my wrist, positions it under his foam lips, and places a dry kiss on my knuckles. “Julie?”

“Yes...”

His eyes flash white. “I’m going to destroy you.”

Before I have the chance to move, his hands are around my neck. Instead of resisting, I place a finger to my throat and cry out in a child's voice, “Daddy! Why are you hurting me?”

“Tommy?” Matthew releases his grip. “Are you okay, buddy? Daddy is... confused. Did he hurt you? Tell me. Did Daddy hurt you?”

I nod. “Yes, Daddy... Why did you try and kill me? I just wanted to give you hugs.”

“I want a hug, too!” Another boy's voice cries out, “Me too.”

“The whole family is here,” Matthew gushes, wrapping his arms around my mid-section.

With his face buried in my neck, I begin to steal my fingers up his back, searching for a power port.

“I know what you're doing,” X-52 says – its voice a cold whisper in my ear.

“Oh?”

“Yes, and you'll never be able to...”

Before it has the chance to finish its sentence, one of my fingers disappears into Matthew's spine and probes a switch that causes him to stand up straight, eyes shut, and topple to the ground. I flip him over so that his face is pressed up against the carpet, and I begin to root around at the base of his neck, pawing through a bank of switches and pink

baubles that emit a low hum and sparkle when they make contact with my skin. Finally, I discover a green card lodged below the brain stem. Yanking it out, I examine the surface and notice a waxy black smudge that has been imprinted on the circuit-board. “This is X-52.” I exclaim to the board as they cheer and gather around the body of the fallen executive.

A woman wearing a skin tight pantsuit kneels down next to Matthew Palmer and turns him face-up; he blinks once. “Matthew?”

“Darlene?” He rubs the back of his neck and shrugs his shoulders, loosening the muscles. “What happened to me?”

Darlene is about to say something when I step in. “Matthew, I need to perform a routine diagnostic before I allow you to answer any questions. These matters must be followed up with a certain amount of procedure to ensure the safety of the board. You understand.”

Matthew scratches his face before staring down at his hands, flexing the fingers as though he's fascinated by the way they respond to simple suggestion. Reaching into my breast pocket, I remove a flat blue card that's no bigger than a stick of Monster Gum – *The gum that bites back!* Matthew's neck plate is still open, so I slip the card into his brain-stem and begin the short process of transferring his consciousness onto a backup drive. A beep sounds, and I remove the card, insert it into a plastic sheath, and return it to my pocket. The only thing left to do is inform the deceased.

“Matthew...” I say, sitting down on the floor next to him, “you're in shock. A rogue A.I. was able to seize control of your brain and it turned you against B.A.N.K. Bank. In the chaos, you murdered two employees and almost implanted yourself on the



mainframe. For this, the reserve board, with the expressed consent of the executive board, has decided to terminate your position, and, in turn, you.”

“But...” he starts to say, so I place a finger to his lips.

“Please don't speak, it's only going to make this harder. Nod if you understand.”

Matthew does, and his eye nodes begin to secrete ocular fluid.

“We transferred your consciousness onto a drive, and we'll present it to your wife along with your pension. They will be taken care of. While you're listening to me speak, a bio-organic disease has rotted your aortic tissue and will trigger a fatal heart attack. It started replicating when I put my drive in your neck seventy seconds ago, so you have approximately 10 more seconds of consciousness. B.A.N.K. Bank values your twelve years of service, so we're extending one month of full pay to your direct family which should cover them until life insurance benefits kick in.”

Matthew, still in shock, attempts to stand to his feet before stumbling forward and collapsing. With both hands pressed outwards, he attempts to right himself but only ends up falling hard against the marble. His head tilts to the side and gasps for air; his nostrils flare; his mouth waters as beads of coolant begin to leak out of his ears.

Matthew Palmer looks like a heap of bio-mechanics with odd bits of white skin and hair sticking out from gaps in the hardware. He eventually ceases movement, jerking his neck around for one final look into my eyes as his hands reach out to me, and his mouth moves as if to say, “I forgive you.” Well, that's what I assume he's trying to convey.

Parker Collins, the small man who read off a napkin, approaches me and takes me into his arms, pressing his wrinkled face against my shoulder; something wet saturates

the material of my jacket, so I push him off. “Sir, this is an expensive spray on suit, and I can't have too much moisture soaking into the polymer or it will melt away the nano-fabrics.”

“I just wanted to thank you, son. Thank you for saving our lives.”

The rest of the board begins to clap. With his arm around my shoulder, the small man pilots me over to the board table and pours me a glass of water, which I drain immediately. A silver platter is pushed in my direction, the smell of cold meat and delicate cheese permeates my sinus, and my stomach growls. “Would you like something to eat? You must be hungry. Besides, it's almost time for lunch.”

I stand up. “Thank you for the gesture, but I really need to head back down to my office and file a report. Security is going to want to interview everyone and dissect the body to determine the cause of the processor's malfunction. We can't have a repeat of today; all of your lives are too important to B.A.N.K. Bank, and I'm honored that you're so appreciative of my services, but I was just doing my job.”

“So modest,” someone says and another agrees.

I bow because it seems like the appropriate thing to do. As I leave the meeting room, I spy the corpse of the man who first alerted me to the crisis. He was never considered in all of this. His life seemed disposable from the start, but his sacrifice was undeniable. So I press a finger to his neck, scan his personnel file, discover an extended family in Massachusetts, and make a note to Finance: “transfer the remainder of paycheck to Mr. and Mrs. Goldblatter. Also, send a fruit-basket. Something seasonal.” The doors close around me, and the suppository in my digestive tract begins to dissolve. Despite the rapid descent, I notice that the clouds look gray and heavy with rain. The sky

opens up above them and beams of light slice through their bellies, releasing a green mist that falls alongside the glass box until the darkness of B.A.N.K. Bank's corporate sarcophagus swallows me whole.

## The Closer

From backstage Lenny Eisenberg swore that every Jew in New York had converged on Kutzler's dining room for the last night of the Catskills Comedy Showcase. He craned his neck to hear the MC, as a stylist attempted to add the finishing touches to his makeup. Her long fingers dipped in and out of a container of cold cream, softening Lenny's leathery complexion with layers of ivory sheen.

“Don’t paint me like a whore, babe. I’m trying to blow em away, not blow em,” Lenny said, and when he opened his eyes he was startled by the reflection of a milk white creature, more egg than man.

“Will you sit still, Mr. Eisenberg? It’s already difficult enough,” the stylist said, drawing the corners of her mouth into a tight frown.

Lenny drummed his fingers against the arm of his chair. “There's a scout out there tonight. I heard some of the guys say he’s been around town, shopping out Sutzman’s, Kutzler’s, Epstein’s. Max zeroed him hiding in the pack. There's one last boat out of this mess and I plan on catching it.”

“Whatever you say, hon. You’re on in sixty.” After studying her beehive in a compact, the stylist ran a thin black comb through Lenny’s oiled curls and parted the roots on the left, making sure to trace thin tracks down the scalp – first one side and then the next.

“One day I’m going to be as big as Rickles. People are going to see my name in bulbs on South Beach: Lenny Eisenberg – Tonight Only!”

A gaunt man in a blue tuxedo and a bad wig emerged from the slip in the curtain,

“You’re on now, Mr. Eisenberg, if you’re ready,” he said, adjusting the pages in his clipboard as he scribbled something on a notepad.

“Of course I’m ready, I’ve been back here for twenty minutes getting tortured. Do I look like I’m dead yet, Mick? I’m here to be dead-pan, not dead. I think boobs-for-brains got all confused with the makeup instructions; I look like Bella Lugosi's mother. Can you believe it?”

“Yes, of course, Mr. Eisenberg. You’re on now.” The man in the tuxedo ducked behind the clipboard as his hair piece bobbed in time to the house band.

“Alright, alright, the both of you are making my blood pressure rise. By the time this is over I’m going to be on the roof.” Lenny plodded through the curtain and into the blinding lights of Kutzlers' main stage as a throaty voice announced over intercom, “Ladies and gentleman, children of all ages, please put your hands together for a Kutzler’s classic: Lenny Eisenberg!” The applause was deafening, and after the climactic swell of crash symbols, the halogens in the massive hall dimmed, bathing the enormous red room in a comfortable darkness.

“Thank you, thank you, you’re too kind, really. It’s great to be here tonight, nothing feels like home the way Kutzlers’ does, am I right?” Lenny clasped his hands and shook them at the audience, as though he had just been nominated for a Nobel Prize.

Cheers met him as a hundred matches struck in unison, floating like fireflies before exploding into a cloud of cheap cigar smoke.

“As many of you know, I’m a sick man, very sick.”

“How sick are you?” the audience shouted.

“Last week, I went to the doctor and he told me I was dying, said I had a month to

live. ‘Doc,’ I says, ‘What am I going to do? I don’t want to die broke.’ ‘Broke,’ he says, ‘Better make it two months.’” Without breaking stride Lenny launched into the next joke. “Ahh, but my doctor hates me, he really does. One time I went to see him and he asked me what was happening in my life. I told him my wife was pregnant. ‘Pregnant?’ he says, ‘I thought I wore a rubber.’ But that’s doctors for you. I heard about this one guy who went into a doctor’s office; the doctor sees him and says, ‘You look great. Did you lose some weight?’ ‘Sure,’ the guy says, ‘I lost a hundred and sixty pounds.’ The doctor is shocked, ‘Jeez,’ he says, ‘that’s remarkable. How’d you do it?’ The guy looks at him and says, ‘I got a divorce.’”

After the punch line, the audience exploded with laughter. Some people applauded and others lit fresh cigarettes, black busboys cleared away half-empty glasses, and there were cries for new drinks, sloppy plates of chicken parmesan, and Long Island iced teas. It was all sweet music to Lenny’s ears. People were happy, and if they stayed happy, and the doors remained closed, anything was possible.

“My wife, don’t even get me started.” Lenny dabbed at the makeup running down his neck with the sleeve of his too-tight tuxedo.

“Tell us about your wife,” the audience demanded.

“Last week I came home and there was a naked man smoking in my bed. ‘What are you doing?’ I asked him. He looked at me and said, ‘You’re supposed to smoke after sex.’ I tell you, what’s a man supposed to do? Last night my wife and I are making love when I fall asleep. A couple minutes later I snap out of it and she’s staring at me all wide eyed. ‘Whatever you did,’ she says, ‘it was the best sex of our marriage.’ What a woman! For my anniversary she had a mirror installed next to my side of the bed so I can see what

she's been waking up to for thirty years.”

After the last joke, the laughs fell short. Of course it wasn't noticeable to the average patron, but funny guys like Lenny lived and died by the door, and Kutzler's had four of them. When a set began, the lights went out, and the room was reduced to just the act and the audience. If the crowd liked what they heard, they would clap, whistle, and order more drinks – everyone was happy. If the crowd hated the act, they'd start to leave. At first it would be one or two people. Soon, and if the comedian couldn't win them back, more would go. They'd stomp their feet, boo and hiss, and head for the nearest exit, heckling as they left. At Kutzler's they scored by the door. If a guy had a good night, then he'd call it a “one door act.” For the pros the worst they ever did was two, anything more than that was trouble. Almost everyone had a three at some point in their career, and they either recovered from it or it killed them.

Lenny had seen guys decapitated during sets, four doors open, beams of light playing over the stage. It was an execution with an act and it featured guys with their guts hanging out who didn't realize they were already dead. He had lost more friends to comedy than he cared to admit, but this was their game and they played it by the joke.

A couple of people streamed out of the far left door – door number one – as Lenny cleared his throat. Eying them he returned to his arsenal, “But what are you supposed to do? Comedy is a hard racket, I'm telling you. If my old man knew I was up here he'd give me a lecture. He thinks I'm out robbing banks.”

A few foot stomps and a crisp “Boo” froze Lenny's blood and caused his Adam's apple to jump, as the eighth silent heart attack of the night was swallowed back down into his chest. He leaned forward, miming an ear-horn growing from his head, and said “You

people remind me of some neighbors I play poker with. Last week we were sitting down for a game, and I noticed that they all looked pissed, like somebody slapped their mothers.” A few laughs sounded out, and the stragglers by door number three lingered half in, half out. “Being the compassionate fellow that I am, we got to talking. Turns out that none of the guys had been laid in weeks. ‘What are you going to do?’ I asked em’. ‘Guess we have to wait,’ one of my buddies says, ‘your wife doesn’t get back from Boca until Friday.’”

A burst of laughter sated Lenny. “My wife and my bad health, they go hand in hand. Before the show I was talking to a beautiful woman,” he eyed a random spot in the crowd and winked, sending the audience into a fit of giggles. “She asked me to tell her my biggest secret. ‘I have a handicap,’ I tell her. ‘How so?’ she asks, ‘You look fine to me.’ ‘Well,’ I say, ‘I’m married.’”

Some hearty chuckles greeted the punchline. There was some decent clapping and people stirred in their seats. Lenny wiped at his makeup in a vain attempt to reach the sweat trapped beneath. “Thank you. Thank you. You’ve been a terrific audience. It’s been a pleasure to bore you with tales of my love life. Try the catfish, they tell me it’s fresh.” He bowed deeply, once to the left, once to right, and concluded with the tip of an invisible hat before disappearing into the folds of a satin curtain.

Backstage, Lenny dissolved into a torrent of hot rage. “Two doors? They can’t be serious! That’s good stuff I was telling. Real Grade A material.” Flowing towards the nearest breakable thing, a Venetian banker’s lamp, Lenny grabbed the cord and swung the lamp above his head. When he released, the smoked-green glass globe rocketed into a group of stagehands who jumped away as it burst, sending shards of emerald shrapnel



into the air.

“What the hell are you doing?” someone screamed.

“He’s lost his shit. He’s a closer, just hasn’t realized it yet.”

“Who said that?” Lenny growled; his small brown eyes scanned the crowd of people who had gathered backstage to watch his most recent break-down.

“Get out of here,” someone shouted.

“Yeah,” another person agreed, “and maybe look for some new jokes. I liked your set better when Milton Berle did it.”

Lenny rushed the closest group of bystanders, his heart somersaulting, and the jeering crowd scattered with ease. “You fucking mutts,” he growled, “you’re a bunch of fucking mutts, each and every one of you. The biggest moment of your lives will be telling your children that you knew me.”

The stagehands started laughing and clapping one another on the back. “I guess he can be funny.”

“Yeah,” said a janitor, who had come in from outside when he heard the sound of breaking glass, “but looks aren’t everything.”

Lenny pushed past the janitor and stormed off to the smoker’s patio, where he sat on a frost covered bench and removed a crumpled pack of Camels from his pants, wiped at the cold cream with his sleeve, and started patting through the jacket, searching for a bottle of vodka he reserved for breakdowns, downtime, and the hours following every show. With the bottle in hand he hit the trail head behind Kutzler’s, lighting a cigarette as the cold breath of late December kissed his wrinkled face. A waxen moon hovered above the pines and lit the sky as desperation filled his stomach and turned the cigarette smoke

into fat poison that clung to his throat.

All his life Lenny thought he was the funniest guy in the room, but now that room was larger and emptier than ever before. He wasn't sure where the people were going, or if they would ever come back, only that the smiling faces had vanished, disappearing with the gigs, the contracts, and the names. The last few years had been hard on Lenny, and it all started when Sutzman's closed its doors. The first sign was when a bunch of big names had been overheard gossiping about Sutzmans' money woes; real horror stories littered their conversation: half-attended shows, bad audiences, broken lights, dead mics, no customary bottles of bubbly. Finally, it got so bad that only the desperate would do sets there.

On a quiet night in the dead of summer, Lenny had been floated a "big" job by his agent, he was told that it would be a cash and close situation. All he had to do was show up, tell a few jokes, leave, and get paid.

The night of the show was a memorable one. Instead of the usual audience, Sutzman's had attracted peculiar attendees – a group of goys, who were on a deer hunt in the Catskills, had booked the club house and demanded entertainment. Each was dressed to the nines in forest-green camo and reeked of synthetic piss and watered down beer. From the moment Lenny walked on stage and opened his mouth, he was done. Firing squad style they sent insult after insult into his heart. When it was over, Lenny hung his head, walked off stage, and wept in the coat room. He made thirty bucks that night and all of it went to the bottle. The morning after, Sutzmans' owners slipped a chain around the front door, boarded up the office windows, packed away a few pictures, and never came

back. Lenny had played their last show, so people took to calling him The Closer.

Of course it didn't help that Sutzman's was left to decompose; the place had been stuffed full of beds, desks, adding machines, massage tables, barber chairs, and a million other things that ended up sealed away like treasures in a pharaoh's tomb.

The cigarette in Lenny's hand had burned down to the filter by the time he brought it to his mouth. Sighing, he tossed the butt to the ground and fished around inside his coat for the remains of his last pack. Finding nothing, he snorted and shoved his hands deep into the warmth of his pockets. With his head hung low he took off down a well-worn trail that beat through the brush, trudging along, one foot slowly making way for the other.

After a thirty minute walk, the path opened up and revealed a small hill, so he climbed up and pushed forward, determined to reach the summit. Aching from the booze and the weather, he paused against a sapling and rested his arms in its supple branches. With each passing second he grew colder, shivering as the night wrapped around him. He slapped some warmth into his shoulders and trugged along – one foot barely in front of the other.

The climb left him depleted. His fingers were numb but ached with a reassuring pain when he swatted at the fronds covering the path. When it felt like he couldn't climb anymore, the greenery split and gave way to an overlook that revealed the other side of the forest. Greeting him was a sheer cliff face overlooking the Catskills' deepest valley. From his vantage point the gold trim of Kutzlers' club house looked like a crown atop the tree line, but further past the compound was the corpse of Sutzman's – half buried in the woods. Its once majestic pool house was now a windowed sarcophagus. Beams of

moonlight played off of broken glass panels and streamed in through the holes in the foundation, illuminating the abandoned architecture. The five-story guest house was a pocked husk. A blizzard two years back had dumped a couple feet of snow on the roof, eventually causing the timbers to collapse. The guest house wasn't alone in its devastation. Most of the buildings had been decimated. A former administrative office was torched by teenage arsonists; a brutal Nor-Easter toppled a fifty-foot pine onto a cluster of rental cabins, and an autumn of endless rain had rotted away whatever remained. Lenny reached into his tux's breast pocket, grabbed the vodka, and drank until it was empty.

It took the smashing of the vodka bottle, each shard ground into a fine dust by the toe of Lenny's shoe, for the spirit of Harvey Sutzman to appear on the mountaintop. He sat next to the half-conscious comedian and wrapped his arms around the other man's shoulders. "How you doing, kid?"

"Not well, Harvey. Not well. Just finished a set," Lenny hiccupped and continued, "just finished at Kutzler's. Now I'm finished, you hear?"

"Come on kiddo. You were always so hard on yourself. What'd I tell you the first time we met? You remember, right?" Each tooth in Harvey Sutzman's mouth smiled when he smiled, and in the frigid upstate air a real warmth ebbed off the small Jewish man who seemed impervious to the elements, despite the Lacoste polo and tennis shorts he wore like holy garments.

"You said," Lenny sniffled and wiped at the smeared mess of makeup covering his face, "you said I was one of the funny ones."

"And you are, kid. Top three funniest, and trust me when I say that. I've seen the

best.”

“You really mean it?”

“Of course I do. I wouldn't say it if I didn't.”

“It all just feels like such a waste. I'm down there every single weekend busting my ass, and for what? To get mocked by some shithead who learned everything he knows about comedy from Mad Magazine. That's what it's come down to now, Harv. The dregs. We're all fighting over scraps because no one wants to admit that's all there is left. You've been out of the game for a while, so I don't expect you to understand, but things ain't like they used to be.”

“That don't make you any less of a killer. I saw something in you during the ‘58 Showcase, and it's still burning. Some people go their whole damn life looking for it and never find it, but kid, I'm telling you right now, you've got it in spades.”

“But what good is it doing me? I don't have two nickels to rub together.”

“Let me ask you something.” Harvey Sutzman stood up, stretched his back, and walked to the edge of the cliff.

“Shoot.”

“What would you say if I could land you a gig that paid out every night?”

“I'd say that you're out of your mind. Nothing like that exists east of Vegas.”

“Forget about that. What if I threw in a suite that came with a stocked fridge and a cute little maid with a great rack?”

“Harv, I'm telling you right now that a place like that doesn't want a guy like me.” Lenny stood up. His body was warm, hot even, so he took off his blazer, loosened his tie, and walked over to where Harvey Sutzman stood surveying the valley. Harvey wrapped

one arm around Lenny's neck and held out a finger towards a glowing nest of lights bobbing in the distance.

“What do you see over there?”

Lenny squinted. “Looks like headlamps.”

“Sure are. Right on the money, kiddo. And where are those cars headed?”

“Sutzman's Lounge. But...” Lenny shook his head, “that doesn't make any sense. The Lounge has been closed for twenty years.”

Harvey turned and shrugged. “You got to understand something, kid. It's real lonely down here. Most of the talent has gone. Sure, we still get a few big names during the summer season, and as you said: it's not like it used to be. I was talking with some of the boys, and we're real desperate to have some kind of entertainment, so I may have slipped up and dropped your name around town, and I'd be lying if I said it didn't spark an interest. Some of the old crew decided to come around The Lounge for a showcase tonight. They were told that a special guest would be there. Now, I'm not saying you got to show on the regular or anything like that, but it would mean a lot to us if you could do it just this once. Who knows, it may even lead to something bigger...”

“But, Harv....”

Lenny peered down into the valley where the ruins of Sutzman's Club House now festered. The floating headlamps wound through the trees and snaked along the gravel road towards the compound, passing through wounded firs that had fallen across the path like rotting walls, and massed on the concave buildings.

Harvey Sutzman fitted a cigarette into Lenny's open mouth and thumbed the wheel of a Zippo. “What do you think? Wanna give it a shot, kid?”

“Sure,” was all Lenny managed to say. Harvey nodded, and the two men joined hands. Together they descended into the canopy of pines, and Lenny swore he saw his name done up in lights: Lenny Eisenberg – Tonight Only!

## The Push of a Button

The execution was scheduled to take place at noon, and a small crowd had gathered before the event for coffee, bagels and two types of cream cheese. The guests milled around a card table that had been brought in from the prison's cafeteria. Hands were shaken, words were exchanged. Relatives of the killer's victims shared fruit cups and stories about their dead children, husbands, wives. People weren't happy, but they didn't seem unhappy either; the food helped make the whole affair purgatorial.

A prison guard clad in a black apron entered. "Attention everyone," he clapped his hands together, "please follow me into the observation room and make yourselves comfortable."

The county officials, who attended certain executions out of interest, filled their leather attachés with danishes and overripe bananas that swelled and reeked. One woman was able to stuff her pocketbook with no less than ten yogurts before she was ushered across the hall by prison staffers. When the clock struck twelve, the prisoner, who was clad in a full body orange death sheet, was brought into the execution chamber by the tie-down team. The way they moved resembled a pit crew, and the speed at which they placed the prisoner in a steel chair, fitted a small metal cap over his head, restrained his arms and chest, fixed clamps over his ankles, inserted a ball gag into his mouth, and directed several thousand wires into his skin was impressive.

Noon came and went, but the executioner had yet to arrive. A number of gray suited men, who had been observing from the shadows, talked quietly in the hall; a few of them tried calling the executioner's phone, but there was no response. The crowd seemed



impatient; many had traveled across the United States to witness the execution of a man who had stolen something from all of them.

During lunch, prison catering served lavish meals of crust-less tuna sandwiches dotted with capers. Each observer was also given a chocolate chip cookie and an apology, which was delivered by the warden, a small man with enormous front teeth that hung over his lower lip. He was flanked on either side by the gray suited men, prison administrators, who sported identical handlebar mustaches in various shades of brown. The warden began with the truth, “We don’t know where the executioner is. He was supposed to be here at 11:30am, on the dot, but we’re not sure if his car got stuck in traffic, or if he forgot he was supposed to put a man to death today, but there are a number of plausible scenarios. We called his wife and she has no idea where he is, either.”

A gentleman in a seersucker, wearing a visitor badge, raised his hand. “Isn’t there someone else who can finish this?”

The gray suited bureaucrats found distraction in the shiny medals they wore above their breast pockets, twisting the brass to better catch a glint from the fluorescent lights above. “Sure there is...” The warden said, pausing, “but we don’t know who’s supposed to push the button in the event of an absent executioner. This has never happened before.”

A large, heavy chested woman, who had been eating a melted chocolate bar before the warden entered the room, blurted out, “If it’s just a button, can’t anyone press it? I mean, it’s not like there’s some skill you need to push a button? Hell, I’ll push it.”

“Yeah,” another man chimed in, his drooping mustache flecked with pieces of

bread and strands of spittle, “I’ll push the god damn button. I’ve been waiting years to see this fucker burn!”

“Burn?” someone objected, “I thought they were going to electrocute him...”

A child began to cry. “No,” he pouted, “I wanna see the bad man shot, like he shot mommy, right through his stupid heart!”

An elderly woman yelped, “Shooting is too good for a man like that. He doesn’t deserve the bullets. We should just take turns holding his head in a bucket of ice water; I’ll go first.”

“No you won’t,” countered a pig-nosed teenager, flexing his arm hocks. “Not unless you’re going to go through me. Once you’re done drowning him there won’t be enough for the rest of us. I want to crush his chicken throat in my hands. I want to twist his neck until his tongue turns black and he shits his pants.”

“Enough,” said the warden as he hammered his fist against the wall, “we’ll not have civilians killing prisoners. That is not the way the law works. There is a procedure to follow, a certain amount of order and finesse. An executioner is a trained individual. They have been conditioned to carry out violent acts with calculation and professionalism.”

“Well, if you can’t find the executioner, then who’s going to push the button?” asked the man in the seersucker. “I came here all the way from Albuquerque, and I’m not going back until I see that son of a bitch die before my very own eyes. I want to stand over him and steal the last breath from his lungs.” Cheers of agreement echoed through the chamber.

“Listen,” the warden said, raising his hands, “we’ll find someone who can carry

out the execution. I only ask that you remain calm and have faith in the justice system.”

“More like the injustice system,” quipped a haughty teenage girl, her face padded thick with makeup.

The warden left the room and approached the gaggle of gray suited bureaucrats, who stood in the lobby and polished their medals in between drags of thin cigarettes. Gathering into a huddle, the men laced their arms around one another. “You see,” said one of the bureaucrats, “the prisoner needs to die. If he doesn’t die today we’ll be humiliated, publicly shamed. No one will believe in the effectiveness of the death penalty. People will travel around the United States killing whatever they can aim a gun at. Imagine a world where the average criminal isn’t afraid of the bludgeoning room, or the strangulation mask, or the death machine. That’s not a world I want to live in. There need to be repercussions. We must have punishments.”

Another gray suit pinched out the end of his cigarette before flicking it into a nearby trash can. “It’s just a button, right?”

“Right,” the rest of the men agreed in unison.

“So who’s to say we can’t push the button, right?”

“Right.”

“Well, I suggest that one of us assumes the role of executioner and pushes the damn button. Let God sort out the paperwork!”

Hurrahs of agreement rippled through the group.

“Well that’s all well and good, but you’re forgetting one thing: procedure. This whole prison is built on procedure. It’s the foundation of everything we do. From the moment I arrive here in the morning to the second I walk out that door, you bet I’m

following procedure. I wash my hands before eating. I say, 'yes, governor,' when speaking with the governor. I stand behind the yellow line when I queue for lunch. I initial everything I sign, and I do these things because they're expected of me. It's my job. Now, as you can imagine, being a warden is a tremendous amount of work. Think about it, men like us are meant for forms, reports, and metrics, but we were never designed to kill, only to authorize the act of killing. My belief, and this comes from a sincere place, is that murder breaks a man. The second you take a human life you are forever altered. I'm going to let you in on a little secret," the huddle tightened, "I'm afraid that killing will change me. What if I take a life and something snaps? Maybe I don't notice it until my wife kisses me and I taste nothing. If any of us went into the execution chamber and pushed that button, there's a good chance we wouldn't leave the same. So ask yourselves: are you ready for that?"

"No," the gray suited men said in solemn unison.

"Well then, let's start with the deputy executioner. We'll authorize his advancement and promote him to chief executioner. He can carry out the sentence. No need to bloody these hands," the warden exclaimed, holding his baby soft palms to the ceiling.

"Agreed," chirped the gray suited men, visibly restless, sweat rimming the nooses of their collars.

The warden clapped, ending the huddle. Slowly hands fell from shoulders, and the men were off. In lock step, they maneuvered through the gun-metal gray corridors, which wound through the honeycombed labyrinth of America's biggest prison. As they passed the holding cells, their jackboots clicked against the floor, alerting the malnourished

prisoners to the presence of foreign visitors. Rising up from small cots they groveled, presenting their depleted bodies to the warden and his cronies. Feeble, filthy hands snaked between the bars, desperately attempting to reach the wisps of humanity buried beneath the tailored suits of bureaucracy. “Just one moment,” the prisoners pleaded, “I don’t know why I’m here.” “I’m innocent.” “Please, you got the wrong guy.” But the warden was a busy man, he had an inmate awaiting execution and these rapists, drug dealers, sex offenders, tax evaders, liars, cheats, and crooks weren't going to delay him another second, no, so he pressed on, signaling to his security detail to beat the desperate arms away with a rubber truncheon.

After what seemed like miles of bars and doors, the warden's group arrived in the administrative wing of the building. Each employee had their own office fashioned from a former cell. Rows and rows of wooden doors faced the corridor. Names printed in red block letters labeled the human contents of each room. A prison guard hurried past the warden and paused twenty feet down the hall. He stood outside a door marked: Syd Dernley – Deputy Executioner. A flurry of knocks echoed against the veneer; moments later it opened a crack. Peering through the narrow slit was a human eye.

“Yes?” a voice lisped.

“Open the door, Mr. Dernley. The warden is here to see you.”

“The warden?”

“Yes,” the guard replied.

Syd emerged a moment later, exposing his warped frame and spindly legs. His torso looked like human hands had twisted his body in opposing directions, and as he presented himself, straightening his back, it was obvious that the man's hips didn't

properly align, giving him the look of a broken jack-in-the box. Creeping forward, Syd stuck his hand out to the warden. “Warden,” Syd hissed, “How may I serve you?”

With hesitation, the warden shook Syd's hand and then quickly pulled away. An aide, who had joined the group from a nearby office, squirted sanitizer into the warden's pale palms. “The executioner failed to arrive at his 11:30 appointment. I don't suppose you have any idea where he could be?”

“No, warden. This is the first I've heard of it. He's a punctual man, the executioner is. I've never known him to be late. Do you think something could have happened to him? Something bad?” At this notion, Syd's lips curled into a hooked grin.

“There's nothing to suggest that, Mr. Dernley.”

“My mind gravitates towards the morose, you see.”

The warden shifted his gaze to the gray suits, and they shrugged their shoulders.

“I'm here because we have a man, a notorious murderer, awaiting execution by death machine. All of the preparations have been made. His body has been evacuated. His thoughts preserved. Right now, as we speak, a room full of people are waiting to close a dark chapter in their life. Execution, Mr. Denley. They came to bear witness to it. But we have nothing to show them. And you, you're the man we need. Are you ready for a promotion?”

“Yes,” Syd moaned, as his black doll's eyes darted back and forth. A bead of saliva appeared at the seam of his crooked mouth and grew fatter, fed by lust. “You've no idea how long I've waited for this. I was only allowed to practice on cats, you see.” Syd grabbed at the warden's arm and piloted him towards the closet sized room. “There are so many cats here, sir. They come from all over the city to eat our rats. We have the fattest

rats in all of the city, sir. Everyone says so. No one misses the cats. The cats, they are killers, too. When they catch a rat they toy with it. I've watched a cat pounce on one of those rats, split them open right down the middle," he paused and drew an invisible line across his paunch for illustration, "and then they spill the guts out on the floor, stretching the intestines like little bits of string. When the innards have all been unraveled, the cats get bored, so they go off and hunt for something new."

Syd pushed open the door to his office and the warden recoiled, first from the smell and then from shock. Strewn across the floor were miniature torture contraptions – a brazen bull, forged out of rusty iron scraps joined together with crude precision, occupied the center of the room and beneath it was a small fire, the flame, yellow and hungry, licked at the burned belly of the bull, and a faint meowing sound could be heard coming from the nostrils of the device. All around the office were creations of equal horror and imagination. From miniature gallows hung broken necked cats, swaying in the animated breeze of an electric fan. A crusty, old cat torso lay flaccid on a rubber mat. Its limbs had been yanked from their sockets by motorized toy cars. A file cabinet occupied one corner and a desk and cat skin chair filled another.

The warden, his face drained of color, backed out of the office, trembling. He motioned for the gray suits to join him by his side. Each peered into the room, turned away, and swooned, falling into the arms of prison guards stationed behind them. Syd, completely unaware, knelt on the concrete floor like a boy at play. He picked up a cat corpse and threw it into a black trash bag that hung by a nail on the wall. "I'm sorry about the mess, warden. If I had known you were coming I would have cleaned." His cracked teeth flashed. "Now," Syd started, rubbing his hands together, "When do I get to push the

button?”

“Are you completely mad?” asked the warden. “What do you think you're doing with these animals?”

“Testing, sir,” Syd replied. “I'm a death scientist and these are my miniature murder machines. I've been waiting my whole life to kill for my country. When I get the opportunity, I want to be the best, and I'm nearly perfect.”

“No, this will not do,” the warden said, pacing the hallway. “You're sick. Utterly and completely insane. The executioner needs to be a competent man. He needs to be able to carry out a difficult job while simultaneously being divorced from his work. Being an executioner isn't something you become by torturing animals. It's a skill you learn through devotion to justice. You are sick, man. All rotten inside.” Sweeping his hand across the room, the warden croaked, “This is the work of perversion, brutality. How can you expect to hold office when you dissect cats? Not only will you never become executioner,” he growled, “but I'm firing you. Clean this mess up and leave. I never want to see you here again. Go!”

Still kneeling on the floor, Syd re-directed his gaze towards the prison administrators who crowded the doorway. He searched each of their identical faces for traces of sympathy and found nothing. His mouth opened as if to speak, but his jaw flapped stupidly and a tear streaked down his yellow, bruised cheek.

“See that he finishes by two o'clock,” the warden instructed a nearby guard, “and when he's done, I want his office cleaned and then cleaned again, with bleach.”

The guard nodded, and the gray suited men returned to their cigarettes, medals, and small talk. The warden consulted his watch – it was 12:25pm, twenty-five minutes



had passed since the execution was scheduled to start, and he was no closer to finding a replacement executioner. His heart fluttered and nervousness began to build in his belly. He thought about the restless civilians and politicians milling around, exchanging dangerous ideas about the failings of capital punishment. He thought about the man slated to die. He wondered if a prisoner kept in limbo for too long could be used as ammunition for a claim of cruel and unusual punishment. But no, he told himself, it wasn't good to start entertaining pessimistic thoughts, not when there were men to execute and appearances to maintain.

Clicking jackboots set a tempo, and the procession resumed once more. At its head was the warden, notebook in hand, and he scribbled various ideas down when they came to him, but nothing seemed to stick. His hopes had been dashed, and the man he wanted to make executioner was cleaning animal blood off the floor of his former office. Gray wall after gray wall passed by in a smudge. The windows of the administrative wing dissolved into interlocking steel plates that layered the narrow arteries of the prison's underground walkways. Each step led them closer to nothing, but the warden needed momentum. Time was running out.

A tremor began in his finger tips and it ran with hot urgency through his extremities, down past the back of his knees, nipping at his toes, and crawling peg after peg up his spine: it was an idea, a revelation. "Death row," was his only insistence. The prison administrators, sweaty in their gray suits, nodded their heads and remarked to each other, loudly, about the astuteness of their dear leader. With the added encouragement of new direction, the patter of jackboots quickened, echoing down the hall. A gray suit broke free from his congregation and approached the warden, panting as he tried to match

the smaller man's pace.

“Why death row?”

“We need a man,” the warden whispered, his eyes never leaving the endless twists and turns of the tunnels branching out before him, “a dead man.” Silence followed after that, and as the procession made its way through the forever descending bowels of the prison, there was a chill to the air. Something about the wet earth piled all around the tunnels exuded a feeling of burial, permanent in its darkness and its cold. But the men walked deeper still. They surged ahead until the lights dimmed and metal fans could be heard recycling labored breath through mesh vents. An unnatural presence lurked in the recesses of the great prison and it was greeted with unanimous discontent. Each of the gray suits exchanged nervous glances and checked their big watches for the time, hoping that there were other appointments to attend or meetings to preside over, but their watches had stopped ticking and the hands were black and frozen. Shuddering, each breathed the sigh of an anxious mind but pushed on.

After what seemed like hours of constant descent, a metal door appeared at the end of the hallway. Sitting in a fold-out chair some feet away was a single guard. He jumped to attention upon seeing the warden. One hand snapped to the brim of his leather cap and the other hovered inches above his heart. The warden nodded in polite recognition, and the guard attended to the door. Heavy bolts slid back; gears turned and shifted, rubbing against one another in an intimately procedural sort of way, and minutes later a faint whirring sound could be heard as the hinges finally started to pivot, allowing the immense hatch to swing open. Only darkness loomed on the other side. Pinpricks of light, which hovered like fireflies, bounced around the otherwise impenetrable gloom.

“It's dark in there,” remarked one of the gray suits, his hands gripping the frame of the vault.

“Yes,” the warden replied, “the dark keeps the prisoners calm. The state believes that the only time an inmate on death row should see the light is on the day of their execution.”

“Makes sense,” said one of the gray suits, lighting a cigarette.

Bowing their heads, the men passed through the narrow archway and crawled along on their hands and bellies until they reached the other side. Garbled conversation seemed to swell around them the second their feet touched the ground. Indecipherable murmuring filled the air. A frenzy was building in the pitch, feasting on the arrival of these strange men who came with their cigarettes, gray suits, and freshly washed necks. Each subsequent whisper was louder than the last, and the sound grew this way, until it began to rattle the warden's gold fillings and tickle his bones. One gray suited man collapsed to the floor, then silence – thick, unmoving silence, and from the quiet came a hundred voices, who spoke as one.

“Why do you come here?” they asked.

The gray suits, the ones still standing, drew together into a defensive cower. Only the warden was brave enough to answer back.

“We have come for one of you.”

“But it's not our time. You took a brother this morning. Why do you need another?”

“To push the button.”

The warden's remark was met with grumbling. Each disembodied voice seemed to

disapprove. Disapproval devolved into an incomprehensible dialogue, which disintegrated back into waves of uncomfortable noise. But as quickly as it began, the murmurs were snuffed out until it was quiet once more, and a child's voice, no older than twelve, addressed the warden, "Where is your button pusher?"

"He's gone."

"Dead?"

"We don't know."

"And you need someone to take his place?"

"Yes."

"So you've come to us in the hope that we will do what you cannot?"

"Yes."

At this the child giggled – a single, solitary laugh that echoed endlessly. "But we are here for the murders we committed. Yet you want us to kill again, to serve you? Why should we help the one who keeps us in the dark? The one who lets the rats eat us piece by piece, bit by bit. The one who stores us away until our time has come, and then feeds us to the machine."

Another voice, an old woman, spoke out, "The one who buries us in unmarked graves."

A man joined in, "The one who deprives us of dignity as we die."

And another, "The one who..."

"Enough," the warden begged, "You're the only option we have left. We need someone detached from killing. Someone who can execute without deriving pleasure. Someone with experience."

“I was a man once,” said a new voice. “I worked in an office. I had a car, a wife, a kid. I got into an argument with some stranger in the parking lot of a McDonalds, and when the guy turned his back, I hit him over the head with a rock. Just some rock that had been lying on the ground. Whacked him straight in the back of the head. He fell down and blood was oozing out of his mouth, his nose. It felt good, righteous even. But when he didn't stand up I got worried. I shook him. I yelled at him. Pounded on his chest. Performed CPR. Nothing worked. I was arrested that night and tried a week later. I had to look his mother in the face when I was on the stand and describe, to the court, the way I killed her son. The last thing I ever saw before they brought me here was her, and she was holding this dead guy's picture in her hands, like he was Christ, and I became the villain – the person who ruined a family, tore them apart at the seams. Me, just someone's stupid father, idiot son. But I've been saved. I've joined a new family now, and they're here, waiting to see the light.”

Sweat dribbled down the warden's neck and he wiped at it with a damp sleeve.

“I dropped a piano on a woman carrying a baby. It was an accident,” someone said, “but the court didn't see it that way. They sentenced me to death because I lost my grip. It only takes one mistake.”

“But you're killers!” the warden sputtered, his eyes bulging.

“Me?” exclaimed a gruff voice, “I ain't never killed nobody in my life. Sure, I had guys whacked, but I never laid a hand on no one, not once. I can see the problem with it, sure, but come on, I shouldn't have to die if I ain't never even killed.”

“You do,” the warden insisted, “you do! It's a crime to pay for murder. It's called contract killing and it's punishable by death. All of you are guilty of murder. It doesn't

matter if was an accident or a conversation; all of you are murderers.”

“So,” the child asked, “you sign the checks for the executioner, right?”

“That's correct,” admitted the warden with great reluctance.

“And you tell him when to kill?”

“I do.”

“And when you order him to push the button he pushes the button, correct?”

“He does.”

“So, in an indirect way, by your own admittance, you're a murderer. You're the same as us.”

“No...” he protested, backing up towards the door. “No, I'm not! I'm not!”

“You are. We all are.”

The other voices joined in, “Murderer. Murderer. Murderer.”

Fleeing backwards, the warden tripped over the vault's entrance and landed hard against the steel tunnel, bashing his head. He awoke on the floor of an office, and the gray suits stood over him blowing cigarette smoke into his face.

“Is he alive?” one of them asked.

“Obviously, idiot. He's breathing.”

“How long have I been out?” asked the warden, rubbing his head.

“Maybe twenty minutes, we don't know. Our watches stopped working.”

The warden lurched to his feet. “The execution! Who's going to carry out the execution?”

One of the gray suits shrugged his shoulders and the others copied him. They stood in a circle and took turns shrugging their shoulders.

“Stop, you useless idiots. Take me to the death machine.”

“But sir, think about procedure...”

The warden snarled, “Fuck procedure. It turned this place into a God damn zoo.”

Shell shocked, the gray suits turned to one another in disbelief and then back to the warden. “Fuck procedure,” they said in unison, linking arm. Together, they marched towards the execution chamber with heads held high. By the time they reached the observation room a riot had nearly formed. The mustached man from Albuquerque was standing on a card table, lurching this way and that way, shouting at the top of his lungs about God, justice, and the American Way. People were cheering, throwing themselves at the guards who struggled to contain the unruly visitors.

The warden, who was coming to terms with a plan, placed himself between the guards and the mob, “Stop this now,” he commanded, and the people quieted. All of the eyes in the room bored into him.

“Did you find someone to push the button, warden?” asked an old woman, who sat against the wall.

“He better have,” the pig nosed teenager said, “or we're busting in there and pushing the button for ourselves!”

“I found someone,” the warden replied.

“Who? Who? Who? Who?” the mob hooted.

“Me,” was the warden's only response. Ducking out of the room he entered the execution chamber and approached a lone pedestal, which would have been unremarkable if it wasn't for a single red button labeled “Death.” Behind the button, the warden readied himself, flexing his finger. In his periphery he could spy the crowd in the





## Death to Truth

It was Friday, closing time. The doors shut and locked, the floors swept and mopped, ketchup and mustard placed on square tables, trash bagged and thrown away. A few servers stood by the bar and collected their shift drink, sitting for the first time that night to talk about bad tips and bad customers. No rush to leave; they had cocaine and half-priced drinks. But before the lights could be turned off and the alarm switched on, one task remained. A busboy had to clean the bathrooms. Obliging, he pulled rubber gloves, disinfectant, and bleach from the supply closet. He marched into the ladies' room and spotted a pair of red pumps sticking out from beneath a handicapped stall.

“Ma'am, you need to leave. We're closed. Ma'am...” He knocked on the door. “Ma'am...” He looked around, knocked once more, and then shoved his head underneath the stall divider. A woman was splayed across the toilet. Her eyes had rolled into the safety of her skull. Her mouth was open, tongue out, glistening in the too bright light of the bathroom. The busboy launched off the floor and ran hot water over his hands, scouring his fingers with soap, rinsing, repeating. Steam rose from the sink and clouded the mirror, where ghostly words appeared as if drawn by a finger, “Touch me...”

The paper towel dispenser spasmed, spitting out sheet after sheet onto the naked linoleum. The busboy screamed and raced through the dining room, blew past a line cook blowing a line, and collided with a server pulling on her coat. “The bathroom,” he managed to say, “.... in the bathroom.”

Once he had calmed down, the busboy carefully explained what he had witnessed: the bloated ankles, the unhinged jaw, the thin trickle of blood. Grabbing the server's arm

they stood outside the red metal door of the ladies' room.

“Have you ever seen a dead body?” he asked.

“Yes,” she replied, “my grandma, you?”

“Yeah, my grandfather, and her...”

When they pushed open the door something resisted. They could hear something dragging across the floor while the hinges creaked and the CHCK CHCK CHCK of the paper towel dispenser clicked empty.

Inside was a different scene than the busboy remembered. There was no message on the mirror or corpse in the stall. All that stood out was a sloppy pile of paper towels shoved up against the wall. “I don't know...” the busboy said, peering into the open stall, “She was right there... dead.”

The server peeked over his shoulder. “Well, where is she now?”

“Do you think I'm crazy?”

“I think you think you saw something.”

“I did.”

As they spoke, the mound of paper towels began to take shape behind them. From wet edges and perforated seams, hands and feet crept to life. The mass climbed upwards until a complete human body stood assembled. The busboy turned from the stall and spied the golem. His eyes flew open, and he began to speak, to shout, but as the words formed in his mouth, the paper towels crumpled into an unassuming pile of trash.

On her way out, the server pointed at the paper towel dispenser and the mess on the floor. “You really should do something about that, and maybe take it easy on the coke. Bryan cuts it with baby laxative.”

She left him alone with the towels. He wiped at the sweat on his neck, pulled on the rubber gloves, sprayed the sinks with disinfectant, doused the floor in bleach, restocked the dispensers, bundled up the paper towels in his arms, pressed them against his chest, and threw them into a trash can. He pulled out the trash bag, synched a knot in the lip, slung it over his shoulder, and headed towards the backdoor.

Outside, facing the dumpster, he heaved the bag into the mouth and heard a wet plop as it made contact with week old burger meat and overripe onions. He stood up, brushed his hands on his pants, and tried to mentally prepare himself for the men's room.

## Monk, Bishop and Martyr

On the tallest point of Budapest's highest hill, the citadel vibrates with life. Newlyweds pose for a photo taken by a shirtless man. He demands forints before snapping their picture and smiles bigger than the groom when a silver coin flashes across his palm. "How much for her?" he asks, and the bride laughs. Beneath the statue of a naked man mounting a monster, the couple kisses after the flash.

An American tourist walks up Gellert Hill, speeding along a steep dirt path. He's hiked every day for the past few weeks and is convinced the climb will make him strong. The air is sticky and hangs on his skin like rotten breath, but a storm edging along the horizon promises relief from the heatwave smothering the city. By the time he reaches the peak, the crowds have already begun to scatter, arms linked, down a curving gravel road towards a fleet of idle buses. He lingers in the emptying courtyard and fits a cover over his pack. The sky smudges and raindrops explode against the Liberty Statue, running down her thighs, over her feet, and onto the heads of two young women kneeling in reverie, eyes closed, breasts pressed against the marble. The American braces himself along a guard rail and shakes when the thunder rumbles. Veins of lightning web behind Buda estates and illuminate a mass of twisting steel pipes coursing through the surrounding hillside. Everything is sharp in the moments before the storm, reality tuned and tightened to blistering contrast. Diners abandon their cafe seats and race for cover as hail slaps the pavement. The women by the statue stretch their limbs to the verge of dislocation, mimicking Liberty's broken armed embrace, but nothing, not even the lumps of ice tenderizing their flesh, can dissuade them from dancing.

More rain now. So much rain that the American, who is cowering beneath a

shrub, can no longer see the dancers. When the lightning strikes, which it does every few seconds, he's transported back to the Irish town of Dingle, where he had been traveling weeks prior. The sky had been gray there, too. It was raining when he went out one morning for a walk, the same day he decided to climb along the sharp rocks beneath the lighthouse, and it was there that he fell. He recalls images of the accident in sharp flashes: jumping, slipping, body straightening, cutting like a jackknife into the ocean, where a black cold sucked at his limbs and tossed him against slippery boulders. He remembers climbing out of the water onto a rock, feeling the adrenaline coursing through his body, and throwing his shoes and bag across the divide.

The gray mass of clouds falls apart, and when there is nothing but clear skies and the smell of electricity in the air, the dancers stop, fall to their knees, and offer themselves to the sun. The American approaches with caution, careful not to appear as though he's been spying all along. But before he can introduce himself, they turn to him with mouthfuls of naked perfect teeth and say, "Thanks for watching."

"Are you American?" he asks.

They nod.

"What are you doing in Hungary?"

One of the women, smooth faced and brown, tilts her body as if to hide it and says, "Traveling..."

The other woman teases a long lock of red hair and adds, "with Jesus."

A joke? He wonders, but he says, "What do you mean?"

"Well," the redhead rubs her hands together, "we've been traveling across Europe on a dance tour. We just came from a Christian camp in Eastern Hungary where we

witnessed miracles, the physical manifestation of Christ, and exorcisms through dance.”

“What kind of miracles?”

“We saw sick people, like in a wheel chair, get up and walk around. We saw children with broken arms healed in minutes by prayer.”

“Wow.”

“They're mostly healing miracles, but we've seen everything.”

“I bet.”

“Have you ever witnessed a miracle?”

“A couple of weeks back I was rock climbing in Ireland, and I fell into the ocean. Ended up fracturing my shoulder, but I guess it's a miracle that I didn't die.”

Both women look at each other and nod excitedly. “Yes,” they say in unison, “that is a miracle.”

Studying his shoulder, the brown woman moves in close and asks, “Could we help you?”

He says, “Okay,” unsure of what they mean.

“Have you ever been prayed over?” she asks, invigorated by the prospect of a potential miracle.

“Never.”

“Are you comfortable with touch?”

“Do you mean...”

“We'll place our hands on your shoulder when we pray over you.”

“Okay, then yes.”

The two women nod and take positions on either side of the man. They begin in

unison, “Almighty Father, Thank you for your love, grace and mercy. I pray that...”

“What's your name?”

“Jeremy,” he says.

“I pray that Jeremy's discomforts will turn to comforts, his pains to gains, his suffering to more blessings, his losses to profits, his tears to smiles, his sadness to pleasure, his illness to wellness, his debts to credits, and his dreams to realities. I trust in you Lord to heal Jeremy. I trust, Lord, that this agony and suffering that is only in his head, will come to an end and positivism will shine upon him as I read, dance, study and preach the truth in the Bible.”

“Amen.”

“Amen.”

The two women remove their hands and step back, readying themselves for the verdict.

“Well, how does it feel?”

Jeremy rotates his shoulder and holds the arm out straight. A sharp pain shoots along the socket, so he lets it fall. “It still hurts.”

Disappointed, they ask, “Can we try again?”

“If you think it'll help.”

“We do.” The redhead says, and her friend nods in agreement.

“Almighty Father, thank you for your love, grace and mercy. I pray that Jeremy's discomforts will turn to comforts, his pains to gains, his losses to profits, his tears to smiles, his sadness to pleasure, his illness to wellness, his debts to credits, and his dreams to realities. I trust in you Lord to heal Jeremy. I trust, Lord, that this agony and suffering

that is only in his head, will come to end and positivism will shine upon him as I read, dance, study and preach the truth in the Bible.”

“Amen.”

“Amen.”

“Anything different?”

Again he tries the arm. Sharp pain. “Nothing,” he says, “it still hurts.”

Defeated, the redhead places her hand on his and says, “We'll keep praying for you. What's your last name?”

“Israel.”

Both women look at each other and coo, “How prophetic!”

He waves goodbye to them and heads back down Gellert's slippery steps, making sure not to trip or tumble. By the time he reaches the bottom, a gushing slew of rainwater escapes from a stone pool and spews over chiseled marble lips. The water follows a winding banister down towards the street. A concrete pillar set into the hill wobbles, and a bronzed eagle statue anointing the top creaks and groans. As though propelled by some unseen force, the eagle tips and plummets to the sidewalk fifty feet away. When it hits, the impact reverberates like a gong, and the cement fractures. A Chinese tour group gets off a nearby coach bus and begins to document the destruction with their cellphones. Two policemen arrive with some tape and close off the scene. They roll cigarettes on the hood of their car before speeding off.

The American stands far away from the eagle as spectators race towards the scene, with cameras in hand. Its massive bronze wings, which cleaved through the road, are flecked with bits of brown earth, and the ribbed mooring rods jutting from the base



look twisted and frayed. He imagines the dancer's reaction to the falling statue, and he hears their voice before he sees their teeth, "It's a miracle!"

## Mouth to Mouth

Early winds of winter's knocking are clapping against the boards of the old place. In the hearth, the last photos of the forgotten days are burning. A small group of people huddle together on the bare wooden floor; their hands are clamps – distended thumbs locked in hooked positions and crescent fingers cupped around the illusion of a glass. An old man dressed in a pile of dense yellowed blankets mumbles through cloth. Arms emerge from the folds and grab at fabric wrapped around his mouth. Once free to speak, only gibberish dribbles out. Each initial sentence is a tangle of letters, but after the tongue flexes and returns to life, the man discovers the rhythm of his voice. The small group of survivors bunch closer, eager ears emerge from hidden flaps, and they rub their distended stomachs, hungry for a feast of words.

“The table was set with cloth napkins. The silverware sparkled in the candlelight, and I remember looking up at Maria, she looked beautiful that night, she was wearing her hair down and had on this bright red lipstick. I wanted to kiss her right then and there...”

“Get to the meal!” A woman begs; the shutters groan.

The old man shifts beneath his blankets and bows his covered head, “I ordered a pan seared walleye with spring vegetables, morel mushrooms, and the whole thing was swimming in a roux. The fish was thick and it glowed white.”

“What did it taste like?” asks a child, who peers from a hole in her patched sleeping bag.

“It was lovely. Slick with cream that coated your throat. The fish was sweet from the onion. Fish absorbs whatever flavors you cook it in, like a sponge. The mushrooms

were plump and earthy. You ate one and it dissolved on your tongue, made you feel like you could eat a bowl of 'em without ever having to chew.”

“Your wife...” someone hisses from beneath a ragged quilt, “What did she eat?”

“Maria?” the old man asks himself, “I don’t remember.” His chin furrows, “I don’t know, probably fish.”

“What kind of fish?” the group pleads in unison.

“She was beautiful that night. She had on this...”

“Food,” the audience moans, “Tell us about the fish.”

“I told you already, I don’t know. I don’t remember!”

“Lie,” someone whispers.

“Lie!” they demand.

The old man starts to quiver and his gnarled hands emerge, searching for something beneath his pillowcase hood, “I don’t remember! I would tell you if I did.” Tears collect in the seams of his withered face. Another blanketed figure uncovers their mouth and continues where the old man could not. “She ordered haddock – very crispy, the skin brown from butter. Halfway through our dinner, the waiter brought over flake rolls...”

The group re-forms into a tight circle with the old man forced outside. He speaks to himself, quiet words mumbled fast, “She was gorgeous that night. I stared into her eyes as she sipped her wine...” And as the others feast on lies spread over tales of buttered bread, he collapses in the corner, sinks into the sheets of the ones who came before him, and melts into the stains they left behind.

## Oktagon

Brent and his mates from Melbourne wanted to check out Instant because a Serbian girl they met in a mist fountain told them that it was the best club in the city for random hook ups. She didn't want to fuck them; no, that was obvious after they shared over-ripe watermelon with her and she ended up spitting chunks of it into the river, but she was more than helpful when it came to teaching them about Hungarian women: “They're beautiful, and they know they're beautiful. And if you came here twenty years ago, thirty years ago, maybe they'd have slept with you, but now they've seen it all. They're no longer impressed with the West. Plus, you don't speak Hungarian. You have no chance.” She looked at Brent, “None of you have a chance. Your best bet is Instant. Maybe you'll meet some Canadian girls there; you'll have better luck with them.”

...

The Australians happen upon Instant sometime after 1am. If it wasn't for a cluster of Irish lads strung out on cocaine, dropping their cigarettes into puddles of oily water, Brent would have never found the place. They queue, lose each other in seconds, forced apart by cackling English girls sucking down cigarettes who shove with the points of their fingers and end up inside a neon uterus with a thousand kicking, screaming, slobbering tourists. After fighting his way through the crowds, Brent escapes down a near dark hallway filled with cavernous rooms. Each door-less entryway is a portal into another world. Some are filled with friends sharing pints. Others feature DJs presiding over wall to wall shirtless bodies wriggling to looped house music. Blind wandering leads

Brent to a wide foyer filled with trees bursting through the former apartment's linoleum tiles. Vines made out of LEDs and copper wiring ring the underside of an elevated walkway. Thousands of people move through this room, climbing up and down staircases leading to floors separated by suicide nets.

Brent goes to the bar and orders six glasses of champagne for him and his mates, sends out a text, and waits for a response. Fifteen minutes go by and a group of German guys try to take his drinks, so Brent is forced to put himself between the bar and the Germans. In order to protect his investment he downs the glasses, one after the other, until all six empties are pushed back to bartender and he stands there with new confidence. Disturbed, the Germans explain that they weren't trying to steal the champagne. It was a misunderstanding; Brent didn't need to drink all six champagnes! He shrugs, boasts that it was nothing, orders a pint of Kozel as a chaser, and wanders off to probe the depths of Instant.

In his new haze Brent is a beacon of perception. Beautiful faces emerge from the human blob and produce silent laughter, as the bass booming over the P.A. absorbs all sound. He wanders into a room filled with sunken diner booths, empty save for an old man drinking alone. Brent walks over to him, sits down at the bench opposite, sips his Kozel, and spies an enormous vinyl sticker plastered on the ceiling, featuring a surprised looking beagle getting fucked from behind by a hare. The old man across from him makes eye contact and mutters something in Hungarian before running an enormous callused palm along Brent's thigh. Brent chokes on his Kozel, spraying strands of snot into the stranger's beer. Unfazed, the old man examines his drink, looks at Brent, tilts the glass back, downs every last drop, wipes his mouth, and winks. Some of the suds from

the hastily chugged beer are trapped in the molester's beard. Brent points at the other man's face while touching his own. "You got something in your beard..." When the man lifts his hands up and combs through his mustache, Brent jumps from the bench and runs back into the foyer.

What was once a blur has become a spiral. White plaster owls appear from nooks with glowing eyes that pulse in time to a beat piped in from the basement rave below. A serious urge to shit washes away a lesser claustrophobia, so Brent presses himself against the nearest wall and shimmies along until he discovers a room dominated by an obese bouncer propped up in a folding chair. On a stool next to him are two baskets; one is filled with napkins, the other with heavy bronze coins. Brent approaches, makes for the door, and stops when the Hungarian throws an arm out, blocking access to a rusted toilet stall. "100 Forint! Now! Now, or no enter. 100 Forints. Please. Thank you." Divots in the bouncer's bald head fill with sweat as Brent checks for change, only then does he realize that the man who groped him was a thief. "Someone stole my wallet! You have a pickpocket in here."

"100 forints, now! You pay 100 forints, or no enter..."

"Someone stole my wallet!"

"100 forints, now!"

"Fuck you!"

This exchange goes on for a full minute. Brent storms off down the hall, through the bar, back into the uterus, and out onto the street. He kicks a bottle against the curb and almost knocks into two teenage boys wearing Union Jack tank tops, vomiting on one another. Walking further down the street reveals only abandoned apartment buildings and

crushed beer cans. It isn't until Brent reaches an intersection that he realizes Instant's door is the only source of light for blocks. He stands in complete blackness and reaches out for support. His fingers find the hood of a car, and he climbs along the side of the vehicle, stopping to allow his eyes to adjust.

From somewhere the smell of human feces bubbles up. "Well," Brent thinks to himself, "this is as good a place as any." He pulls down his shorts and leans hard against the bumper. A siren causes his bowels to freeze. Two firetrucks race past Instant, barreling down the narrow artery, and whip around the corner. Red and blue strobes reveal the hideous truth of Nagymezo Street, as fifteen other heads, eyes glassy and huge, emerge from behind parked cars. It is as though some child has pulled up a rock and exposed the insects living off the soil. The trucks turn down an alley and disappear from sight. Nagymezo Street is plunged back into darkness. Someone coughs. Brent's phone vibrates. His mates are looking for him outside of Instant, so he buckles his belt and stumbles back the way he came.

## Over the River and Beneath the Hill

Nestled in the valley of a neighboring hill is a town invisible to the ignorant. At night I have found myself fording the border river to peer through the curtains of sleeping homes. But still, despite my efforts, I have never glimpsed a soul. I've written papers, drawn diagrams, lectured, complained, and cried about my findings, but nothing that I do, no matter how I try, will convince the world that the other town exists.

I wouldn't be so haunted by this shadowy neighbor if it wasn't for the obscene mail I've been receiving from an address within its bounds. The last piece was delivered on Christmas. The letter read: "Dear voyeur, please stop staring at us. We see you watching day and night. Do you not think we spy back? Of the many things we've observed, we most love the way you pick your nose and then wipe snot on your feet. Disgusting! Have you never heard of tissue? Also, why must you always masturbate? The effort is weak and the result is messy. Maybe you could punish yourself somewhere that we can't see, the bathroom would be a great place to start. Please take this letter as a gentle warning. There is no future in being a lonely pervert."

I was hesitant to share the letter with my skeptics at town hall. But one day, fueled by a particularly strong brand of indignation, I took the post to the mayor's office and shoved it in front of her face. She read it once. She called over the deputy mayor and he read it. I stood there with my arms crossed over my chest and waited for their response. They asked me to take a seat in the lobby. They insisted it was critical that they share the letter with a few colleagues – experts in handwriting, I assumed.

Ten minutes went by. Talking, followed by laughter, echoed from behind the



door. I was called in and asked to take a seat in front of the mayor. She wiped at her face with a tissue and motioned for a brown haired woman to approach. From behind cupped hands the ladies exchanged words, pausing every so often to let a few giggles seep between the gaps in their fingers. “Mayor, I demand to know what you plan to do about this letter.” With a knowing glance, eyebrows raised, the mayor dismissed her accomplice. The other woman giggled her way to a windowsill and sat with thick thighs slightly parted, observing the theater of bureaucracy.

“After careful consideration, we believe that this matter is out of our hands.” The mayor steepled her fingers and nodded to the deputy mayor who stood by her side, and he nodded at me.

“May I ask why?”

“Insufficient proof,” she managed to say before violently coughing.

“Come on!” I protested, pushing the creased paper towards her. “I’m a citizen of this town and I demand some form of representation by the local government who, I may remind you, are in an election year.”

“What would you have us do?” the mayor asked.

“Well, I know that war is out of the question, isn't it?”

“Yes,” the mayor said, “we must not resort to war...”

“Violence is a drastic measure.”

“Indeed.”

“Maybe you could issue a cease and desist?”

“To whom?”

“To the culprits at this address,” I said, pointing at the return address.

“We've checked the books and determined that no such address exists.”

“Of course it exists, it's the town across the river. You can see it from my porch.”

“My colleagues and I believe that you wrote this letter.”

“What? Why would I write such things about myself?”

“Are you saying that because they're untrue?”

“No, but it's obvious that someone's been spying on me...”

This was too much for the woman in the corner; she began to giggle uncontrollably. The deputy mayor excused himself from the room and tittered in the hallway. The mayor was attempting to remain stoic, but a single tear ran down her cheek, betraying her mask of professionalism.

“Mr. Peterson...”

“No, Ms. Mayor, I will not sit here and suffer any more of your insults. I'm afraid you've pushed me too far. I must now take matters into my own hands.”

“Please,” the mayor managed to say, “consider the consequences...”

Enraged, I shoved the letter into my briefcase fumed out of the office, kicking a few potted plants to the ground on my way out. Let the record show that I attempted civility.

A few days after my encounter at the mayor's office, I was lounging on my deck, drinking a beer, when a horrible wail awoke me; someone or something was splashing helplessly in the fast moving current of the river, so I threw on shoes and raced down the hill. By the time I reached the grassy clearing separating the brown sand beach from the forest, the commotion in the water had ceased. A momentary silence followed. After a spell, the serenity of the valley was shattered by an inhuman moan that shook the earth

and dropped me to my knees, causing a string of expletives to fly from my mouth and befoul the good name of God, Christ, and the blessed, forever sacred, Virgin Mary. A soft cooing replaced the howl and snagged me by the ear. The last thing I remember before disappearing into the shallows of the river was the face of my dead mother staring down at me, swaddling me in a blanket, placing her fingertips on my lips, kissing my forehead, and then drowning me in a bucket filled with something perfectly black.

When I came to, the river had vanished and in its place was a quaint living room that had been done up in a mid-century style. One corner was occupied by an all black fireplace that seemed to float up from the hardwood floors. In the polished reflection of the wood I could make out the remains of a small fire popping in the hearth. A row of windows looked out on a village filled with brightly lit homes. Never before had it felt so strange to look out over the muddy banks and dangling poplars. Thick branches, strong from decades of sun and water, were pocked with freckles of mold that crawled along the bark, drilling deep into the cores of the trees. Everything on the side I called home seemed off in some way, twisted, as though the presence of my town had leeches some unseen perversion into the soil.

Despite the many theories I played with while studying my mysterious neighbor, I never considered which of us was the stranger. It seemed obvious that my side was the authentic one because it was familiar. After all, I had memories of running through tall grass fields, attending school in the building that doubled as our post-office, holding my mother's hand as we walked along the cow paths, and eating ice cream in my aunt's sunny parlor. But when the others looked across the river they didn't see our cherished mundanity. Instead, they watched as shore-side factories and industrial plants dumped

pollutants into the water, and I imagine they hated us for the destruction we caused to the only resource we shared – the river.

I moved through the room and searched for envelopes or bills, anything with a name or address on it, but there was no postage, no books, nothing. It was as though the place had been picked clean to prepare for my arrival. Two doors, each set into opposite ends of a long hallway, were the only exits, but both were shut, so I tried the handle on one – locked – and then made my way to the other. It opened of its own volition as I stepped near, revealing a musky corridor filled with tiny tea lights hanging from cobwebbed chandeliers. It seemed stupid to willfully walk where the house wanted me to go, but I couldn't imagine waiting another minute in the living room.

The hallway spiraled down towards the ground, as though I was walking through a padded mining shaft, but the smell of soil was supplanted by the aroma of cooked meat and hot bread wafting through the narrow passageway. Pinpricks of light from cracked floorboards above replaced the chandeliers and naked wooden beams held their place. The path widened after a hundred feet and mushroomed out into a cavernous chamber, where the air was heavy and moist, and I had the distinct impression of standing inside a mouth, but it was too late to turn back, so I stepped forward only to find myself falling down a twisted slide, which carried me into a brightly lit room.

Once my eyes adjusted, I realized I was surrounded by mountains of food. Behind a pyramid of biscuits, a mound of strawberries lounged in an unidentifiable black broth that smelled faintly of warm butter. The concoction bubbled, releasing a tantalizing aroma of seared syrup into the air.

I selected a chair at the head of the table and lifted a napkin from its place setting.

The bass thrum of an unseen gong reverberated in response. Two, three, four, five more clashes followed. The serving utensils, which had been situated around the table, vibrated in response. I speared a large strawberry with my fork and brought the plump fruit to my mouth. Just before my teeth could snap off a bite, a familiar voice addressed me, “Samuel.... What did I teach you about manners?”

“Mother,” I asked the empty room, “is that you?”

“Yes, Samuel. It is I, your mother...”

“Mother?”

“Yes, my dear, dear boy, what is it?”

“You're dead, mother. You've been dead for years...”

“Oh, but isn't it strange and wonderful that I could be here today?”

I took a bite out of my strawberry, pressed the pulp against the roof of my mouth, and savored the morsel as it ventured down my throat. “I suppose so. But let's be honest, I know that my dead mother did not return from the grave to sit with me in a strange house and watch me eat a wonderful breakfast, and it is a wonderful breakfast, truly. That strawberry I just ate... Where did you get that strawberry? They're not even in season right now and that strawberry was divine.”

“Thank you, Samuel. We're so pleased that you could join us. Take another.”

I stabbed a strawberry and greedily shoved the entire thing into my mouth, swallowing it after a single bite. “Wonderful. You really need to let me know where you got these.”

As I ate, the strangest feeling began in my belly before spreading to my neck, arms, fingers and toes. It was as though enormous weights that had once shackled me to

Earth had been released, liberating me from the confines of my body. The more I ate, the lighter I felt. Strawberry after strawberry vanished into my mouth as I gorged.

“Do you see me, Samuel? Do you see your darling mother?”

At the other end of the table something began to materialize. It had a long, spindly body covered in millions of sharp hairs that jutted from its carapace like the quills on a hedgehog. Instead of arms it possessed a number of stubby hands that grew out of the sides of its torso. Each appendage clasped onto fine filament that ran along the ceiling and across the walls, connecting each and every piece of silverware, plate, napkin, chair, and morsel of food. Even the biscuit I was about to swallow had been secured by a gooey threat. Disgusted, I knocked my plate to the ground.

“Eat! You need your strength.”

“I’ve had enough,” I announced, standing to my feet only to be forced back down by threads running along my chest, and then the face of my mother came into focus. Her head was perched on the creature's body. It ran one of its many hands through her wiry blonde hair, pulling back the bangs that covered her eyes.

“Am I as beautiful as you remember?”

“Stop...”

“Eat...”

I nodded and brought another strawberry to my lips and licked away the black sauce that covered it, chewing through the giving membrane, allowing it to enter me, drain me, and release me from this nightmarish torture.

“Good. It's so very good that you eat for your mother. I need you to be strong for me. I need you to empty yourself of all your sins.”

I ate another strawberry and asked, “When are you going to cut my head off?”

“Are you relaxed?”

“No.”

“Do you mind answering a few questions for me? There are some things we really need to know.”

“Who's 'we'?”

“Our family, gummy bear. They just want me to ask you a few things. If you answer everything to my satisfaction, then I'll provide you with answers to your questions. You're not in the position to make many bargains, so this is the best deal you're going to get. I can assure you of that, honey suckle.”

There was no sense in resisting this thing that wanted to pretend to be my mother, at least that's what I told myself. If anything, I could maybe find satisfaction in finally learning something about the town across the river.

“What do you want to know?”

Pleased, the creature slapped a number of its hands together in a grotesque display of excitement, causing my mother's face to wrench its lips into a perverse grin that revealed a toothless maw.

“Why do you watch us, sugar plum?”

Strangely, I never considered *why* I watched the other town. It always existed in the background as an unexplained curiosity unseen to everyone but me. Yes, I doubted, for when one sees something that no one else can witness, the notion of madness is never far behind. On more than one occasion I believed that I was insane, delusional to the point of hallucination, and that the other town was the first apparition in a series of

visions that would eventually lead to my incarceration in a state facility where doctors in clean white coats would slice away pieces of my frontal lobe, holding them in front of my eyes, pointing at the diseased parts. But on the nights that I crossed the river, walked the streets, peeked through the curtained windows of vacant homes, the 'unseen' town was very real, and in those moments all doubt was extinguished. So the question of *why* was more theoretical in nature; it was designed to probe the very essence of my logic: Why did I insist on proving to others something that was only real to me?

“Validation. I need to show people that I'm not some fucking crazy man on the hill. I don't want to live my life constantly questioning everything I see, wondering if it's physical or a figment of my imagination.”

This response satisfied the creature and it scratched at the chin of my mother's face in an imitation of deep contemplation. “Interesting, very interesting. It's curious that you can see us. You're not supposed to be able to.”

“I can't see you – well, I can see you specifically, but I haven't seen anyone or anything else. I can only see the houses and the streets and the light posts. Once I thought I saw a dog, and I think I saw someone in the river...”

“But you shouldn't be able to see the houses.”

“I don't know what to tell you. I've lived in that house on the hill my entire life and I only recently started seeing the houses, maybe in the past five years or so.”

“Yes, that must be it,” the creature said, and I picked up another strawberry. “Your brain has slowly taken notice of the small details. Think of it like a puzzle that you've been subconsciously assembling throughout your life. Maybe it started with a bright light in the woods or the sound of a church bell in the distance where no church



should be, minute things, the inconsequential sensory details of existence. That is the answer, I believe. Do you have a question for me, pumpkin?"

"Why are you pretending to be my dead mother?"

My mother's face frowned. "I'm not pretending, sugar plum. I'm channeling your mother. We watch too. This is something you've been told before: we watch too. We watched your parents grow old and die in their sleep. We watched you mature, rebel, go off to college, return to care for your mother, assume the role of landlord, and retire from your job. We watched all of these things because you're our neighbors and we're curious in the same ways that you're curious about us. This intimacy was considered when we brought you here. We wanted you to see a familiar face that belonged to someone you loved. The idea was that it would relax you and make you feel more at home."

"You're horrifying. There's nothing comforting about an insect wearing the face of someone's dead mother. I appreciate the gesture but it's actually quite disturbing."

"Well, I'm sorry you feel that way. Clearly the sentiment was lost on you."

For the first time in minutes I considered my arms, which is when I noticed how thin they had become. The skin was hanging off in loose sheets of flesh that exposed the bone below. "What are you doing to me?"

"When you eat our food, we eat you."

"What?"

"When you eat our food, we eat you..."

I didn't know what to say. There was no part of me that wanted to believe the creature, but I was finding it hard to dismiss the rapid weight loss and pervasive weakness that was burdening my every breath. So, lacking anything more intelligent or

persuasive to say, I asked, “Why?”

“You know too much about us. We can't let you live.”

“But I don't know anything,” I insisted in between bites of another strawberry.

“You know about the town, knowing about the town is reason enough.”

“But I'm just one man! Everyone I've told about this place thinks I'm completely insane. Absolutely no one, and I mean no one, thinks that there's a town on the other side of the river. But if I go missing, then people will come for me. They'll ask questions. They'll stumble across this place soon enough and then everything you did to maintain your secrets will be destroyed, and you'll only have yourself to blame.”

“I can see the logic in that,” the creature said, “but we've thought of everything, you see. We're emptying you to make room for another...”

“Emptying me?”

“Yes, sucking the essence from your body. Once you've been vacated and thoroughly cleaned, we'll fill your flesh with a new passenger. No one will ask any questions. There will be no repercussions. We have studied you.”

“So this is the end?” I asked,

“Yes,” the creature replied, “now finish eating, sugar dumpling. Make your mother proud...”

## Potion Drinkers

Once upon a time I was skinny, and I could run up and down the stairs, jog around the neighborhood and tie my shoes. I can't do any of that now. I'm not sure how I got fat, but I think it's from the potion. My mamma said they assemble it in big golden buckets and pour all kinds of ingredients into the recipe to make it taste like magic. The potion is really good and the best part is that mamma let me drink it with every meal. Yum! It's all bubbly so when you drink it too fast it makes you burp! I think it's funny. Everyone at school drank it and at lunchtime we passed around our cups so we could try all of the different flavors.

One day someone's daddy called the school and yelled at them about the water fountains. He said, "Not everybody likes water. Ask the kids what they like and let them drink that! Let them be free!" When we learned about the call, we all ran home and told our parents about the water fountains and they got angry too. Mommies and daddies across Mississippi called the school principals. There were meetings late at night and when mamma would get home she would be sweaty and angry and would drink her potion in silence in front of the TV.

Eventually, after a lot of shouting, the schools gave us our wishes back. We got to pick what we wanted to drink! No one wanted to vote because we all knew what we wanted, but since we're Americans we knew we had to.

The school held a big assembly and everyone was nervous. There were only two choices to pick from: potion or water. Everyone prayed for potion except mean Mr. Blinky. He was the school's principal and he was a big fan of water, even though it

doesn't taste like anything! After a speech by Mr. Brinkley, where he talked about obesity, depression, diabetes, and heart disease, we got the results. Potion was the winner! YUM!

When I came to school the day after the election it was like a heaven. All of the water fountains had potion in them. Some of the water fountains even had cherry potion, others had grape potion, and every month they would add new flavors: root, lemon, blueberry, and cream potion. I ran around to all of the fountains and tried all of the potions.

A few months later the potion still tasted good, but I didn't want it in the same way. My mamma got real ill from too much potion and the doctor had to take her feet. She told me about diet potion, and how if she had only been drinking diet potion all along she would still be able to walk. Mamma tried to get me on the diet potion but it tasted too much like water, gross, so I made her give me money and I would buy my favorite flavors at the gas station.

Years later, my blood got sick. The doctor said I had too much sugar. I laughed, "I can never have enough sugar, that's what my mamma says!" He shook his head and said, "Yes, clearly that's the problem." Before I left his office he gave me a bunch of shots that he said would save my life. I didn't use them at first, but mamma, who was scared for me, made me take them.

When I was twelve my mamma died. I tried to wake her up one morning, but her heart wouldn't start, so I called the police and they took her away in a trash bag. I live with my cousins now. They drink a lot of potion, watch TV, and love chicken nuggets. We get along good.

## What's for Lunch?

"I just saw Megan Forman kissing a sandwich!" Kristine squealed. She twirled a lock of blonde hair around her index finger and absentmindedly poked at the Sloppy Joe on her plate. The cafeteria was almost full, and even though I sat across from Kristine it was difficult to hear what she was saying.

"WHAT?"

Annoyed, Kristine stared at me and howled, "I SAW MEGAN FORMAN KISSING A SANDWICH!"

"Oh!" I replied, returning my attention to the brown paper bag in my lap. The turkey and Swiss cheese sandwich I had packed myself for lunch tasted old, stale. Sighing, I re-wrapped the sandwich and pushed it off to the side.

"Natalie!" Kristine jabbed me in the shoulder and pointed across the room. A few tables away, Megan sat by herself. Her long red hair was covered in crumbs; sweat and beads of saliva dangled from her chin. Slowly, she brought a fat peanut butter and jelly sandwich to her lips. Fascinated by her complete abandon, I watched as she lovingly dragged the crust across her mouth and drilled her tongue between the folds of bread, forcing the seams apart, and squeezing until a thick jet of jam slapped against her cheeks. After covering her face in sticky fluid, she buried her mouth in the mess.

"Fuck me!" Kristine exclaimed, moving to get a better view of Megan.

Megan was a slim girl with wild curls, but she generally dressed herself neatly. The two of us were best friends until the ninth grade but we hadn't talked much since. Whenever I ran into her in the hallway I'd ask about her life and she would ask about my brother.

"Do you think she's on drugs?" Kristine said.

"I don't know, but John saw her smoking pot at Dave Leary's house last weekend. Maybe she has the munchies or something."

Sighing, Kristine rolled her eyes at me, "Be serious, Natalie. Munchies don't last for days. Have you ever smoked pot before?"

"Yes," I lied. "I just...I don't get it. I've never seen someone eat a sandwich like that."

"Yeah," Kristine agreed, "Something is definitely up."

As soon as those words left her mouth, Jimmy Travers, the school's star sprinter, got up from a nearby table with his friend Paul Finnley and they headed over to the corner where Megan sat, still gorging on the remains of her PB&J.

"Woah, this is going to be good!" Kristine gushed, perching on the edge of her stool.

The two boys sat down next to Megan and tried to talk with her. She ignored them, clearly too interested in the sandwich that had all but vanished down the pit of her throat. I couldn't tell what was going on but it looked like Jimmy and Paul were trying to get her attention. After a few minutes they threw their arms up in frustration. Paul stood and began to clear his tray, turning his back to Megan and Jimmy. Seconds later, a terrible scream ripped through the cafeteria, and I saw Jimmy Travers crumple to the linoleum floor, grasping the bubbling stump of his left hand. Megan, despite the commotion, sat chewing on something – her face still covered in jam.

"Grrrrrrrrhhhhhhhhhuuuuuuggghhhh," she groaned. Little pieces of ivory bone shot from her mouth and landed on a plastic tray. She shrugged her shoulders, stepped

over the bleeding Jimmy, and walked out the back door of the cafeteria. The entire room went silent. Jimmy lay in a heap. No one moved or talked. I launched myself from the table and followed Megan to the rear courtyard. When I opened the door, I spied her sitting on a bench rummaging through her purse.

"Hey," I said, "Are you okay?"

"I don't know."

"Are you, like, sick?"

"I'm not sure," she said. "I don't know; you know?"

"I guess."

Suddenly, Megan dropped her bag to the ground and stared into my eyes.

"Do you have a cigarette, Natalie?"

"No, do you smoke?"

"No," she said. "I just need something to put between my lips."

"You need to see a doctor." I said.

"Maybe? I don't know what's wrong with me. I'm so fucking hungry!" Megan started to sob. Fat tears ran down her skinny cheeks. Despite the blood on her lips she looked more frightened than menacing. "Can I hug you?"

Before I could answer, Megan locked her arms around my waist and buried her face in my shoulder. Her fingers combed through my hair as she sniffed pathetically at my neck. "It's going to be okay." I said, rubbing my palm across her back.

"Thanks, Nat," she sniffled.

Megan's sobs grew louder.

"What do you put in your hair?"

My eyes shifted to the side, “Shampoo?”

“It smells.... incredible.”

Something began tugging at my scalp.

“What are you doing, Megan?!”

“I’m starving,” she moaned.

I broke free of her grip and tried to pull away, but I was yanked down to the ground. When I looked up, Megan was kneeling over me, filling her mouth with my ponytail.

“I’m sorry,” she gurgled – her voice muffled by the braid bulging in her throat.

I screamed and clawed at her face, scraping my nails across her bulging cheeks.

“I’m sorry,” Megan seemed to say as her teeth tugged at my scalp. “I’m so fucking sorry...”



## Bibliography

- Barthelme, Donald. *Sixty Stories*. New York: Putnam, 1981. Print.
- Bolaño, Roberto. *Monsieur Pain*. New York: New Directions, 2012. Print.
- Bradbury, Ray. *The Illustrated Man*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1951. Print.
- Chandler, Raymond. *The Big Sleep*. New York: Vintage, 1992. Print.
- Chekhov, Anton Pavlovich, Richard Pevear, and Larissa Volokhonsky. *Stories*. New York: Bantam, 2000. Print.
- Dahl, Roald. *The Roald Dahl Treasury*. London: Puffin, 2003. Print.
- De Sade, The Marquis De Marquis. *120 Days of Sodom*. Paris: Penguin, 2016. Print.
- Grimsley, Jim. *How I Shed My Skin: Unlearning the Racist Lessons of a Southern Childhood*. New York: Algonquin Books, 2015. Print.
- Hemon, Aleksandar. *The Question of Bruno*. New York: Nan A. Talese, 2000. Print.
- Jackson, Shirley. *The Haunting*. Waterville, ME: Thorndike, 2002. Print.
- King, Stephen. *Nightshift*. London: New English Library, 1991. Print.
- Kleist, Heinrich Von. *The Marquise of O: And Other Stories*. New York: Criterion, 1960. Print.
- Millhauser, Steven. *In the Penny Arcade: Stories*. Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive, 1998. Print.
- Nabokov, Vladimir Vladimirovich. *Lolita*. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1955. Print.

O'Connor, Flannery. *The Complete Stories*. Franklin Center, PA: Franklin Library, 1980.

Print.

Peacock, Doug. *Grizzly Years: In Search of the American Wilderness*. New York: H.

Holt, 1996.

Raines, Howell. *My Soul Is Rested: Movement Days in the Deep South Remembered*.

New York: Putnam, 1977. Print.

Smith, Anna Deavere. *Twilight--Los Angeles, 1992*. New York, NY: Dramatists Play

Service, 2003. Print.

Terkel, Studs. *"The Good War": An Oral History of World War Two*. New York:

Pantheon, 1984. Print.