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Soon To Be A Major Motion Picture

by

Danny McGarr McCarthy

A thesis submitted to the Department of English of the State University of New York

College at Brockport, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

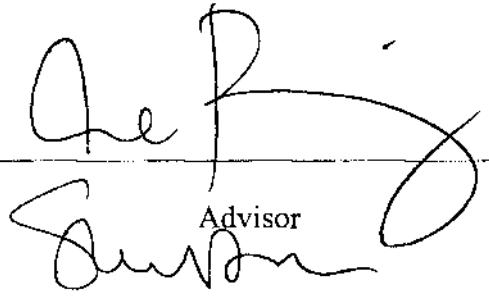
Master of Arts

May 5, 2005

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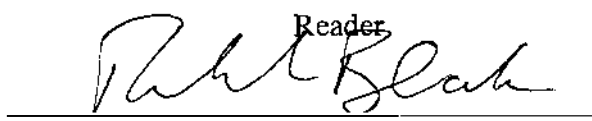
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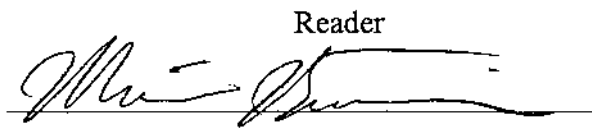
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Reader

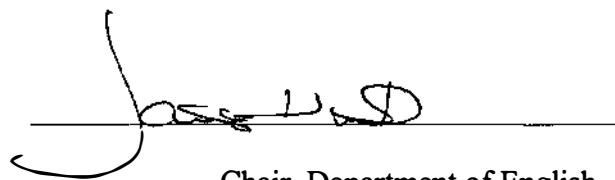
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Reader

8-23-05

Coordinator, Graduate Committee



Chair, Department of English

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“Dream is not a revelation. If the dream affords the dreamer some light on himself, it is not the person with closed eyes that makes the discovery but the person with open eyes lucid enough to fit thoughts together. Dream—a scintillating mirage surrounded by shadow—is essentially poetry.”

Michel Leiris (1901-90) anthropologist and author.

For Sam

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Abstract

Soon To Be A Major Motion Picture is almost the first twenty thousand words of a novel. These five chapters detail Calvin Green's discovery that his dreams are being shown at the Aztec Theater in Denver, CO. Clearly, the novel has supernatural elements, and it offers a voice in the magical realism genre. However, along with the fantastic aspects of the story are a series of probing questions into the nature of artifice, privacy, and celebrity.

I would like to thank the English Department here at SUNY Brockport. In particular, I would like to extend a special gratitude to a few notable people who had a significant impact on my time here: John Curry, Bernie Graham, Barb Le Savoy, and in particular Anne Panning. Thank you is not enough.

Introduction

Other people's dreams are not interesting. The absurdity that fascinates and entertains the dreamer, the surprising connections between conceivable concepts, is exactly what the unfortunate audience finds boring. For those who listen, dreams are bad stories. Still, the realities of life are mundane. John Gardner claims that nothing is inherently interesting (42). John Berryman says, "Life, friends, is boring. We must not say so" (16). Photographic verisimilitude in fiction does not make a story interesting. The challenge of storytelling is inventing a dream that will fascinate an audience as much as their own dreams do. This is achieved by creating a fiction that is at once foreign, and yet vaguely familiar.

In his introduction to *McSweeney's Enchanted Chamber of Astonishing Stories*, Michael Chabon describes storytelling as one of two forms: either the local farmer crafting parables to define the inner truths of the world that is familiar, or the foreign traveler describing the unfamiliar worlds outside the boundaries of the society (x). These two forms of storytelling blend in magical realism. The story becomes a description of the familiar with a fantastic element that makes the story foreign, unreal, or imaginative. The storyteller becomes a spinner of yarns similar to the tradition of the tall tale. The exaggerated elements become farcical, joyful, and it is within this play that the storyteller is challenged to have a purpose beyond entertainment. The storyteller must reveal some element of the native society that is covert, or hidden, and can only be revealed by folding back the conceptual reality.

My thesis, *Soon To Be A Major Motion Picture*, is the story of Calvin Green Jr. who is having his dreams shown at the Aztec Theater in Denver, Colorado. Calvin is a failed poet, struggling through the waning period of his post-adolescence. His hobbies are self-destructive, as are his personal relationships. When Calvin is first faced with the reality of having his dreams shown at a movie theater, he is understandably upset and confused. However, due to the level of psychological distance that Calvin has placed between himself and his environment, he eventually yields to the Aztec, and Calvin allows the movies to be shown. He chooses to do this because of the lack of consideration for his own privacy. In Calvin's mind, he has nothing to hide, yet the reality is that Calvin is hiding everything. He believes he is in touch with his subconscious, but what he is actually in touch with is his protective consciousness. When his subconscious begins to express itself in his dreams he is bothered by what is repressed, and what is truly absurd. Another conflict that Calvin faces is that whether the dreams are senseless or symbolic representations of his psychological mind, culpability is forced on him by his public and private society. Ultimately, the decline of his social structure, the abandonment of his mentor (Wellington Smith), and a physical attack lead Calvin to pursue the causes of his dreams being shown at the Aztec.

The thesis is the first five chapters of the novel. It progresses through the expository portion of the book, leading to the first major conflict—Calvin's parents watching his dream films. As a segment of a larger piece, this portion opens the discussion of the major themes that will be interpreted. For example: what

responsibility does the dreamer have to his/her own dreams; what portion of our own personalities do we invent; how do our subconscious selves, unfiltered, affect an audience?

Calvin's search for explanation mirrors his internal exploration. In this way *Soon To Be A Major Motion Picture* is a monomyth. These five chapters represent the first arc in which the hero is presented in the world of light, challenged, and initiated into the quest. Accordingly, every scene takes place in daylight. Calvin's neurotic anguish is his quarter-life crisis. In spite of Jung's archetypal trigger being the mid-life crisis (Haule 354), Calvin's twenty-something despair triggers his quest. According to Joseph Campbell's model, the hero must initially refuse the challenge of his quest. Calvin's refusal of the challenge, his decision to let the Aztec show the movies, follows his movement into the darkness, represented by the movie theater. However, following the lurid details of his dream being publicized in front of his parents, Calvin takes on the responsibility of the quest and is forced to find his aid to the cause.

Wellington Smith fulfills this role by being the earnest poet that Calvin wishes he could be. Wellington has control of his environment through his trust-fund, making him beyond the standard motivator of capital, which often motivates Calvin (e.g. the bars he frequents, his substitute teaching, the affordable down parka). Wellington's devotion to John Berryman's *The Dream Songs* makes him a doyen of Calvin's quest through his mastery of poetry/dream/psychology. Calvin depends on Wellington as a guide through the world of shadow. When Calvin is abandoned by

Wellington, after he discovers Calvin's pedestrian relationship with the films, Calvin is forced to proceed alone and face himself.

Also, Calvin, though pursuing an explanation to his dreams being shown at the Aztec, is tempted by the moderate fame that he receives. He begins to fall victim to the succubus of celebrity, represented by the columnist who interviews him for the *Denver Post*. Calvin has dealt with her in previous poetry workshops in the community, and knows that she hates his poetry, but decides to agree to the interview on the request of Paula Abbundai, the assistant manager at the Aztec. Calvin is tempted by the success of his dream films because of his failures in poetry. Yet, this decision ends ruinously when the interviewer, fed up with Calvin's misdirection, writes a scathing article in the entertainment column of the paper.

Finally, in the tradition of the monomyth, Calvin's relationship with his father, Big Cal, is crucial. Big Cal is a representation of the stoic Protestant ethic that is at war with Calvin's neurosis and malaise. When Big Cal abandons Calvin, after witnessing one of Calvin's dreams with heavy incestuous/homosexual overtones, Wellington replaces the role of father for Calvin. However, as the relationship between Calvin and Wellington evolves, a homosocial paradigm is created, in which Calvin feels comfortable admitting that he has no responsibility in the production of his dream films. Despondent, Calvin continues to search for an explanation to his dream/films alone until Wellington's suicide opens a revelation into the split between the dual selves. Wellington's life was a form of artifice, evidenced by his willingness to perform a symbolic death, shooting himself at the continental divide, completing

Berryman's suicide attempt. Calvin must decide whether his life is a form of artifice, made socially ruinous by the alienating nature of his dream/films, or a single act tragically destined to wallow in artistic failure.

In the tradition of Dasheill Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon* (the detective genre as quest), Calvin is Sam Spade on the trail of the mystery of why his dreams are being shown at the Aztec Theater. Fitting with the conventions of this genre are his slow-witted partner (Frank/Archer), his femme fatale (Paula Abbundai/Brigid O'Shaughnassey), and outside agents adding pressure (Mary Green and Big Cal/Joel Cairo and Kasper Gutman). Likewise, the mystery that Calvin is forced to figure out is dependent upon an internal, as well as external, conflict. Calvin is interested in discovering the cause of the supernatural device of the story. However, before he can get an answer, he must explore himself, and discover the hindrances of his personality. The dream/films are ancillary to his self-discovery. Calvin is a flawed character, and an untrustworthy narrator. He is wrapped tightly in protective irony, represented by the physical distance he puts between himself and others with his enormous parka, but he must unravel that protection to get at the core motivations for his behavior.

While it is a detective story, there is the magical realism device that must be addressed as well. Carrie Brown says, "many writers of magical realism have chosen to begin right away by establishing the amplified world of their fiction; the advantage is that the reader will understand from the start the dimensions of the fictional universe presented" (222). This is how *Soon To Be A Major Motion Picture* begins.

Calvin is out of his private element; he is in the public sphere walking to watch his dream/film for the first time when a harbinger presents itself. Bernie, an apologetic homeless man, frightens Calvin because Bernie represents true suffering, a plight that Calvin shares, but is too derisive to acknowledge that his suffering is less than Bernie's. Calvin is afraid of defining himself, because if he does he will be pushed toward action. Calvin cannot face himself in the mirror, because he is repelled by what he knows he will see.

Chapter 2 is written as a fictional encyclopedia excerpt with extensive footnotes. This is meant to be ironic; however, the irony is double-coded. Calvin, as the narrator of this story, is making a joke of himself by placing his life in the format of great biographies, in the tradition of classical models of heroes. Calvin, the narrator, is intentionally trying to diffuse this sincerity by acknowledging his own failings. Yet, in the wake of contemporary revisionist interpretations of the hero and anti-hero (e.g. Harvey Pekar, the noir detective, Warhol's Everyman), Calvin is celebrating himself as worthy of consideration, ironic or otherwise. The existence of the text, the existence of the joke, is an act of hubris. Calvin is trying to be self-deprecating, but the inherent truth of the speech act, the false biography, negates the intended purpose (the joke) and reveals Calvin's true psychological make-up. Calvin consciously knows that his achievements are not worthy of merit, but subconsciously he believes that despite this, he is worthy of attention for doing nothing but being himself.

Raymond Carver says, “Too often ‘experimentation’ is a license to be careless, silly, or imitative in writing” (575). While I agree with Carver’s concern of form usurping content, I find solace in the innovations of authors like Rock Moody, Dave Eggers, and Steven Millhauser. For example, in Moody’s story “Ineluctable Modality of the Vaginal,” his narrator approaches the decline of her relationship, and the realizations of the failings of her academic protection and posturing, by addressing the reader in the first paragraph with the truth. “[B]ut then again we weren’t really arguing about that, not about French psychoanalysis, not about *petit object a*” (247). Granted, “Wilkie Fahnstock: *The Boxed Set*” is a more experimental story in form than “Ineluctable Modality of the Vaginal” in *Demonology*; however, I believe that the negation process of the quote reveals more about the narrator than the intended meaning, allowing the audience to share in the developing criticism of the story with the author. Likewise, Eggers’s self-interview in *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (183-237) or the multiple lenses of Millhauser’s *Edwin Mullhouse* are examples of the narrator reflecting a face at the audience that allows the audience an opportunity to involve themselves in the text. The audience becomes an active judge in the events as they unfold.

In discussing the research of Leon Festinger, Lauren Slater says, “The disjunction between what one believes and the factual evidence is highly uncomfortable, like scratching on slate” (117). This discussion of cognitive dissonance relates to fiction through the balance between the audience and the text. The text is a fiction; the audience understands this; the truth must be interpretable

beyond the lie. While Dostoevsky's Raskolnikov attempts to rationalize his crime, the audience can recognize the lie, but only by the audience's interpretation of morality. On the other hand, Moody's stylistic decision to use a scholar of Luce Irigaray to narrate the decline of her relationship, using the same language of protection that has caused the conflict of the story, reveals a level of insight and play that allows the audience to approach the story on a lateral plateau, rather than one of paternalistic control. I enjoy this level of give and take between an author and an audience, as I believe that it is inviting and joyful. Ultimately, even the saddest story should be joyful in the opportunity to experience a truth. I do agree with Carver's trepidation toward experimentation; however, I believe that acknowledging the failings of the process of storytelling is essential to proper storytelling. Like a philosophical argument, the opposition must be addressed and rebutted.

The relationship with the monomyth is imperative to the story. The traditional archetype is necessary to ground the reader in a familiar structure, particularly when the central plot point is as nebulous as dream. However, as John Gardner points out, "Fiction does its work by creating a dream in the reader's mind" (31). In other words, all stories elaborate mental incarnations. The invention of the story is created by a union between the storyteller and the audience. If that union is disrupted the story falls apart. Attempting to convince an audience that a protagonist's dreams are being shown at a local movie theater is a challenge. However, if the story is recognizable through universal themes, the magical realist elements are embraced rather than rejected. Gardner also points out, "Human beings can hardly move without models

for their behavior, and from the beginning of time, in all probability, we have known no greater purveyor of models than story-telling” (86). The archetypes are familiar because we have been told the stories before. The trick is to make them slightly new; however, this should not be achieved through gimmick.

While the dream sequences of *Soon To Be A Major Motion Picture* break from the traditional narrative format (switching to screenplay) this is not gimmick because it is an attempt to provide an objective point of view of the dream/films by relieving Calvin of the responsibility of interpretation. Calvin’s insight into the dreams would force the audience to question the truth of the films by acknowledging that Calvin, as the dreamer, has a prejudiced perspective compared to the audience receiving the text fresh. If Calvin were to describe his own dreams, the levels of his sarcasm would filter through the descriptions, and the text would become a game. Yet, the dreams need to simulate an actual dream and find a necessary place within the text. As Freud points out, “The content of the dream is very much shorter than the thoughts of which I regard it as a substitute; and analysis has revealed that the instigator of the dream was an unimportant event of the evening before I dreamed it” (26). A dream is a difficult entity to grasp accurately in a linear text.

It is futile to address dreams in artifice without mentioning Surrealism:

The mind of the dreaming man is fully satisfied with whatever happens to it. The agonizing question of possibility does not arise. Kill, plunder more quickly, love as much as you wish. And if you die, are you not sure of being roused from the dead? Let yourself be led.

Events will not tolerate deferment. You have no name. Everything Is
inestimably easy. (Breton)

This, the third maxim of the Surrealist manifesto, indicates the separation between the waking personality, and the dream state. While the call to arms is intended to express a form of de-universalism, it is representative of Calvin's inability to grasp the merit of his dream/films. Calvin's despair stagnates and keeps him from actually pursuing any of his goals. Even though he has a clear focus, the pursuit of the cause of his dream/films, his psychological protection keeps him from finding the answers he wants. According to Baudrillard, "Surrealism was still in solidarity with the realism it contested, but which it doubled and ruptured in the imaginary... The hyperreal represents a much more advanced phase insofar as it effaces the contradiction of the real and the imaginary" (454). Ultimately, Calvin is a hyperreal character. He is a consistently reproducing figure of himself. The only core truth of Calvin is his urge to adapt and avoid confrontation.

Soon To Be A Major Motion Picture is chiasmic, which plays with the three elements of artifice: author/text/audience. Calvin is a failed poet; he is an author with a text and no audience. Calvin's dreams become popular among a cult following in Denver; the text has an audience with no author. The dreams are not Calvin's property. He cannot control their production, or subject matter. Calvin has no authorial control. Instead, the Aztec has Calvin sign away rights to the films, making Calvin's dreams their property. Calvin's dreams are owned by the Aztec. This loss of control frustrates Calvin and he wants to pursue the cause of this anomaly.

Clearly, the book has the possibility of falling into a common trap of untrained authors—the kaleidoscopic genre (exactly what Carver describes as disconcerting about experimentation). Too often first books are described in sixty-thousand word tags, striking them immediately into the burdensome pot of eager amateurs trying to disguise a lack of story with stylistic games and slick devices. It would be hard to defend *Soon To Be A Major Motion Picture*, a book that attempts to tell a detective genre story as a monomyth about a hyperreal character trying to deduce why his dreams are being shown at a local theater, against the claim of disguising lack of story with stylistic games and slick devices. However, Michael Chabon says:

The genre known (more imprecisely than any other) as ‘literary fiction’ has rules and conventions of its own: the primacy of a unified point of view; letters and their liability to being read or intercepted. And many of literary fiction’s greatest practitioners, from Jane Austen to Angela Carter, Salman Rushdie to Steven Millhauser, display a parallel awareness of the genre’s history and conventions, and derive equivalent power and capacity to delight from flouting, mocking, inverting, manhandling, from breaking or ignoring the rules. (xi)

He goes on to point out the storyteller, the archetypal creator of myth, exists on the boundaries. Chabon identifies this character as Trickster, mentioning that all civilizations, Indianapolis excepted, were created at the strand, the place where convergence happens. Genre is a definition that allows an audience to ignore their shoes. Trickster can be extremely upsetting to the status quo. John Gardner says,

“One way of undermining fictions’ harmful effects is the writing of metafiction” (87). Certainly in a story as playful as *Soon To Be A Major Motion Picture*, an opportunity to explore Calvin’s ironic protection through an exploration of the author’s psychology was tempting. But as Raymond Carver points out, “*The World According to Garp* is, of course, the world according to John Irving” (574). Ultimately, the places and people I choose to focus on reveals as much about me as it does about Calvin.

My relationship with this thesis is considerable. It has evolved with me as a writer. It was the central purpose for my decision to come to SUNY College at Brockport and work with the creative writers. I look forward to finishing it but not with exhaustion—satisfaction. Certainly, something about my relationship with Calvin has been trying to be said for a long time. I want to know what that something is.

Chapter 1

“This is flat,” she said to the bartender, swirling the oily beer around in her pint glass. The bartender left to pour her a new draught. The rising bursts of aggressive conversation, the hollow clink of flat-bottomed glasses, the heavy clunk of full beer bottles, and the booming juke-box of the Falling Rock, a particularly deplorable meat market that catered to the waning libidinous middle managers of the telemarketing industry, rose to a deafening volume. It was always packed by five, happy hour, with patrons, sweating through their cheap ties and Haggard Oxfords, celebrating Fridays with the fervency of a genuine pursuit of escape. I was there because I, like them, knew one irreversible truth: home is a terrible place to go to escape.

It was January in Denver at the Falling Rock Brewery—a misnomer since the copper vats behind the bar were strictly ornamental. The setting sun turned the sweating windows steel blue. Christmas lights still lit the empty glass trays. Along the bar, men in black wool jackets waited for the harried bartender to serve the drink special faster, so they could find their friends, take off their ties, and stuff them in the pockets of their zippered jackets. I agreed to meet my roommate Frank there because I had been paid that day. Typically I avoided the Falling Rock. Frank hadn’t shown up yet. I reached into the pocket of my parka, and twisted the cap off the beer I’d smuggled in. The girl waiting for her new draught heard the gaseous fizz. She looked at me, quickly looked back to the bartender, and slowly turned back toward

me. “Your movie—I saw it today at the Aztec,” she said, combing a strand of hair around her tiny ear.

“I don’t understand.” I didn’t make movies. I thought she was going to rat me out about the smuggled beer.

“Aren’t you that guy from the short movie at the Aztec?”

“I don’t think so.” I leaned in to listen. She started describing a movie that she had seen that afternoon. I dropped the beer cap on the floor. She described the dream I’d had the night before.

“That’s your movie, right?”

“That was my dream last night?”

My roommate Frank walked up next to her. She noticed him, and said, “Oh my God, he’s in it too.” She was confused, and asked, “Were you making fun of me?” Her tiny ears lifted and her forehead folded as she snatched her faux fur purse and fresh beer and backed away from us.

Frank watched her go, leaning across the bar with a crumpled ten dollar bill for the bartender’s attention. “What’d she want?” Frank asked.

“She said she had seen my dream at the Aztec.”

“That’s the worst pick-up line I’ve ever heard—what a freak—go after her.”

“How could she know what my dream was?” I approached the tiny-eared girl, and she stopped talking to her friend. I said, “Could you explain this to me, again?”

“Right—So, I bought a ticket for *Lord Westerbeary’s Night Out* and I was there early, and I was like the only one in the theater. And then the lights got dim,

you know, and I was waiting for the previews, and then instead of the previews there is this carnival tent in a field, and I'm still like okay, it's a Pepsi commercial, you know, and then you're in the street and there are snakes on your arms, and I'm like this is the weirdest fucking commercial I ever saw, and then your friend there is in a car, and then he's on the ceiling of a gymnasium, and I'm still like," she opened her mouth and coughed silently, "Yeah, and then there are these street lights that get red. It's that movie, the one you're in."

"I never made any movie like that."

"Well, then your twin and his twin are in a movie at the Aztec Theater." She pointed to Frank, who smiled at us and coughed out some of the beer he was trying to swallow. When I looked back to ask another question, she had walked away. I told Frank about what she had said, and despite putting his beer down when I mentioned that he was in the movie too, he was uninterested.

"Let's go see the movie," I said to Frank.

"You want to waste your Friday on a movie?" he said, dismissively turning his stool back to the bar.

I slept on the paisley couch that night. When I woke up I could hear Frank's nasal snore through the open door of his bedroom, and I tried to remember my dream: something outside in the woods. It was almost noon, which meant that I could go see for myself. I'd checked show times in the City guide at the Falling Rock the night before when Frank got into an argument with the bartender because he couldn't hear his songs on the jukebox.

On my way to the theater, a homeless man sprinted towards me on Broadway screaming, “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry.” I knew him as Bernie, the penitent homeless man. His T-shirt collar was stretched to his nipples and looked like it had been dipped in tar. He wasn’t wearing a coat. His thin forearms were pink and the black hairs stood out like glowing antennae. I stopped and stared at the cracked sidewalk. I was frightened of Bernie in a profound way, like he had slipped into some alternative dimension, or consciousness. Bernie’s apologies seemed too doomsdayish, in the way that the placard carrying harbingers of Irwin Allen movies are only funny because of their accidental foresight.

Whenever Bernie was near I became paralytic and watched the ground. A foolish predisposition of mine valued the derelicts of society as shamanistic, rather than psychopathic, so I watched the crud-filled cracks on Broadway, and I waited for Bernie to obtain spiritual enlightenment, turn to me and lucidly say, “You, Calvin Green, you are a bad person.” He ran past me instead.

I picked up my head and walked towards the Aztec. Something about the streets in Denver reminded me of Clinton, New York in April—snow had melted, the puddles were dried, but the street sweepers hadn’t picked up the crap yet. Denver’s streets are like the kitchen floor of an apartment with cats— scattered kitty litter everywhere. The dirt eventually dries into a dust that hangs in the thin mountain air. Kicking through a dust cloud that my previous step had created, I looked at the mirror windows of the Wells Fargo building along Broadway and became mesmerized by my reflection.

Used to the dusty streets of downtown Denver as I was, in the context of downtown Denver, I wasn't used to seeing myself yet. It surprised me when I looked at store windows, saw my reflection, and realized I was in Denver. There I was in the window, across the street from the Janus building, staring at what I was looking at. The saw-tooth design of the vertical windows replayed my approach in a loop. I was far away, walking closer, closer, and back to the distance I started at, even though I kept walking in a straight line along Broadway, kicking the dust, watching my reflection in the Wells Fargo windows.

The Aztec Theater was an independent theater on Broadway. Its marquee was old, not as old as its retro design was meant to evoke, but old enough to blink and snap in and out of life. The art nouveau architecture was renovated following the indie film explosion of the late-eighties, and cracks in the painted brick hieroglyphics on the alleyway wall marred the suburban zeitgeist of arthouse cinema. The same design, contemporary pharaoh, was on the worn carpet in the lobby. The threads held together well, as industrial carpets tend to—too long to maintain the vibrant color, too long to necessitate a new rug. The maroon and yellow carpet clashed with the hospital green walls, but pretentious foreign film posters disguised this well: I bought a ticket and went inside.

The floor of the theater was black mold, like tile foundation, the same ubiquitous adhesive as every theater floor. In the empty theater I found the most unassuming seat I could; I knew it well: two-thirds down on the left against the wall. It was far enough down that most people would fear neck strains, but far enough

away from the screen that I could see everything, and to the left because most people are right handed and tend to head in that direction, and against the wall because a popular misconception is that their peripheral view is bothered by the angle at which they are looking at the screen. Also, I chose the wall so that I could insulate myself by placing my down parka in the seat next to me, hugging myself between a vacant seat and the stapled waves of the fabric wall. Yes, it was barely noon, and the chances of this showing of the three-week-old British sex-farce romp, *Lord Westerbeary's Night Out*, starring Colin Firth, being heavily attended were slim. Yes, even on a cold January Saturday no one would be as earnest as I was to get up and get to the Aztec Theater by noon. And yes, the worst thing in the world would not be to watch a movie with someone in close proximity, but cognitive neuroses are guarded with extreme prejudice.

The movie theater is my temple. It is a holy experience, a religious ceremony, a wholly private moment in a public space. There is such unity at a screening that it is even better than church. At church I have fifty other things going on in my mind: *why don't I have any money? Why am I substitute teaching? Why haven't I been writing more, why are my parents so mad at me? Why is Frank such a shitty friend? Why is the girl kneeling in front of me wearing a thong to church? Have these masses gotten longer*, and so on. The screen is a pulpit, only with better images. I don't have to imagine; it happens for me on the screen. I love watching movies because they make everyone focused on a shared experience, and yet they don't allow us to share that experience. I hate it when the audience cheers, or claps, or shouts out

to Will Smith as he punches the alien. I hate it when the audience becomes interactive with the show. I like to maintain that fourth wall. I like that fourth wall to be made of the strongest foundation imaginable. My eternally optimistic mother tells me, as all second grade teachers do, “You can do whatever you want.” She then goes on to explore options: *maybe you can get a job where you talk to people at bars, or maybe you could do something with movies, you like movies.* I have a reverence for watching movies that, in my darkest Jungian shadow, even surpasses my love of poetry. And I can’t create what I love without destroying the mystery of why I love it.

The armrests at the Aztec are too close together. I waited and chewed on the torn ticket. After fifteen minutes, I’d eaten the ticket, and no one showed up. The lights dimmed. I love watching movies alone in the theater. It has happened to me once before at *Tucker: The Man and His Dream*, while my parents escorted my grandmother around a mall.

I heard the projector start up, and a picture faded in. There were no credits, or warnings.

EXT. a suburban backyard with no sky.

Fade into a shot of feet walking. Rising, a picture of the environment comes into focus. It’s an indistinguishable backyard with a lone air conditioner, abandoned. BABY, a naked infant, walks around the back of the air conditioner that is attached to nothing. The edges of the image blur into blackness. The film is in a stuttered pace,

as though every other frame of the film is missing. DEER gallops by, and BABY falls to all fours and starts galloping with DEER.

DEER

What are you running on?

BABY

I lost the ground's color?

Cut to galloping BABY, who wraps his arms around DEER's hind quarters and wrestles DEER to the ground. DEER's hindquarters are made of carpet.

Cut to a close up of BABY; bugs start crawling out of BABY's mouth. The bugs continue to spill until they cover DEER's hindquarter and move like a wave, making a new bed of grass in the backyard. The bugs are bright green.

Cut to DEER, trying to jerk free, stuck in the bed of bug grass. DEER shakes antlers towards the missing sky. Stars appear, and DEER's antlers turn into growing trees. The trees grow gray leaves.

Cut to BABY, who smiles at DEER. BABY's teeth become wings, and BABY flies into the sky, over the gray-leaved trees growing out of DEER's antlers.

Cut to the sky as BABY flies above the bug grass lawn. The white stars are enormous and sharply contrast with the bright green bed of bug grass. EAGLE flies up next to BABY and looks into BABY's eyes.

EAGLE(subtitles)

That looks like a nice place to land.

Cut to BABY, flying with teeth wings, nodding. BABY swoops onto a plateau high above the bug grass lawn. BABY can see trees rippling far below. The plateau falls out from under BABY, who grows the teeth wings back and continues to fly. EAGLE approaches again.

EAGLE(subtitles)

I'm very proud of you.

EAGLE and BABY continue to fly, though EAGLE and BABY hug in midair. Fade out.

It was like looking at a picture you'd forgotten was ever taken. It was vaguely familiar, but the point of view was different. You were no longer looking at the camera. You were now looking at the product. It had a sideways sense of déjà vu. You knew what was going to happen, but you didn't know why.

How do you admit something like that to yourself? Life is full of strange slips and uneven enumerations that appear and disappear as quickly, but we move along

with our lives. Like watching a truck run a red light, moments before you pass through the intersection, it is a division of mathematics that makes you either dead or simply say— that was close. I knew that I had just watched my dream. How do you admit something like that? Was it actually my dream, or had I dreamed I watched my dreams at the Aztec? I knew I had seen a baby hug an eagle in midair, but I knew that I owned that image. I decided to speak to management.

I left Colin Firth on the screen fumbling through the introduction to the girl he would marry in ninety minutes, only no audience would see it. I talked to the girl in the box office, and she told me to call Paula, the assistant manager, on the box office phone; Paula was curt. I explained who I was, and she told me that she didn't see any reason to get together. This was when I got angry. Everyone seemed to act like showing my dreams as movies was no big deal. In fact, the part that was bothering me the most was that on the phone with Paula, and after the attitude that I got from the girl in the box office, I was beginning to believe that it *was* no big deal. I insisted that Paula and I get together, and she told me that the earliest she could meet with me was on Tuesday evening. I asked for the morning, partially as an excuse to take a day off of work. She agreed on Tuesday afternoon.

I hustled home to tell Frank, who was less concerned. I hopped through the kitchen, refusing to sit as he made coffee in his underwear and V-neck shirt, blowing into his hands and placing them between his thighs, still shaking Friday night out of his blood-shot eyes.

“Wait, so there isn't someone who looks like you in these movies?” he asked.

“No, I wasn’t in this one, but it is still my dream. I had that dream last night—I think.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, what do you really remember about your dream from last night, Frank?” Frank blacked out a lot. A majority of nights would be myth to him by morning. He just went along with the ride, much in the same way that he would if he woke up in some compromising position: *I’m wearing a dress and sleeping in a dumpster; guess I should get out and go to work.*

“I know what you mean. I was at lunch last Wednesday, and this girl was giving me this disgusted look, and I was like what the fuck, and then I thought, I must have said something to her at the Falling Rock.”

“No, it’s my dream that is the movie.”

Frank poured himself another cup of coffee and handed me the comics from the *Post*. He sat down at the tiny tin table we called the breakfast nook. I figured he was done talking about it when he started reading the front page, so I took out a pen and started coloring in Jeffy from *The Family Circus*. Frank put his cup down and steam spilled out of his mouth as he said, “You know, I had something like this happen to me once. I had dreamed that I was an FBI agent who was hired to take down the mob from the inside, on a suicide mission. Next thing you know *Donnie Brasco*. It was so fucking weird, it freaked me out. I thought I had ESP—I never told anyone that.”

“No, these are my dreams. I’m not dreaming about other things I have picked up subconsciously.”

“Isn’t that exactly what a dream is?”

“Regardless, mine are being shown on a movie screen.”

“Fuck it, then I think it sounds cool. I’d love to watch my dreams. Do you know how much more sex I have in my dreams than in real life?” Frank continued to describe the benefits of interactive pornography, and I started coloring in Dilbert.

“Would you go watch this with me?” I asked Frank.

“No, I don’t want to.”

Frank finished his coffee, took a shower, and came out of the bathroom to turn on the college basketball game. He opened a beer, and stood in front of the television in his towel. His body was getting softer. Too many nights at the Falling Rock had made his chest an awkward balance between athletic and cherubic—ill-defined.

Tuesday afternoon could not have come soon enough. After another night in LoDo with Frank, I woke up on Sunday and went back to the Aztec. Again, another subjectless dream. This time it was just colors and words, but people were watching; there were people in the theater. I ignored all the calls to substitute that night, and as Frank ironed a pair of slacks from the hamper for work the next day, I inked in the faces of all the pictures in the Sunday paper.

On Monday, the phone started ringing at 5:00 am with calls to substitute. The problem was that it was an automated system, so it never stopped. Plus, we had an old answering machine that recorded on cassette, so after three rings Frank’s message

would come on— *You've reached Frank and Calvin. Leave a message, and you can bet your ass, you'll get a call back*— followed by the automated voice— *This is the Denver Public School system's telephone directing system calling for (pause) Calvin Green* (spoken ruinously slow in my voice). On days that I decided to not go to work, without having a reason to not go to work, these calls would come consistent for three hours. Frank would start shouting for me to get up by 6:00, or at least take the phone off the hook. By 7:00 his alarm would go off, and he would shower, kick the phone over, and leave for work. I would lie in bed, and pretend that none of it was happening, as I did on that Monday. I had to get to the Aztec and see what was happening; maybe I'd be in one of these movies, and I couldn't miss it..

A girl at the box office asked if I wanted an application. I was thinking that I was becoming obsessed as I took my seat next to the wall. I decided that I would cancel my appointment with Paula the next day. I thought, maybe Frank was right. These movies were familiar, but maybe that was what the appeal of the movies were. They grabbed some aspect of the collective unconscious. The lights dimmed.

INT. the back of a white Econoline van.

CALVIN and SENATOR FRED DALTON THOMPSON are smoking a hookah while a formless cloud drives the van through a slippery rainstorm. CALVIN is wearing a tuxedo. SENATOR FRED DALTON THOMPSON has seven foot arms.

SENATOR FRED DALTON THOMPSON

That was a big win for the team tonight. I didn't think that they were going to pull it out.

CALVIN

I need to call my Dad; I think that he needs a balloon.

SENATOR FRED DALTON THOMPSON

There he is. Why don't you ask him?

Cut to EXT. a country road in the middle of a rain storm. The rain turns to snow. The snow collects in the shape of a barn, and a barn appears. The white Econoline van swerves toward the barn, slides, and smashes into the side of the barn.

Cut to INT. the loft of the barn. CALVIN and SENATOR FRED DALTON THOMPSON sit around a fire like a sweat lodge. An unseen phone rings.

SENATOR FRED DALTON THOMPSON

You better get it. It's for you.

Cut to CALVIN, who picks up a phone that has materialized in his hand. A VOICE at the other end is saying hello.

CALVIN

Hello?

VOICE

Calvin, I'm glad I got you. Your father's dead.

Paula Abbundai was the assistant manager of the Aztec Theater. She had short dark hair and a ruddy nose. She wore clay jewelry that made an enormous racket. Her office was thrown together out of the ruins of the former employee smoking lounge. The ashtrays were gone, but the smell was still pungent. Her flimsy desk was cluttered with a mountain of papers, magazines, post-its, and books. This mess piled high above the puce office phone that was clinging to the side of the desk. The remains of her lunch balanced on top of the pile. The desk was four legs and a top. Paula sat at a computer chair, the back twisted to lean as forward as possible. Even when she was resting back she looked like she was about to lunge over the mess on the desk and attack who she was talking to.

She was finishing a call when I let myself into her office. She motioned for me to have a seat. I pulled up a chair from the vacant table nearest the door. The oxblood chair was old. A scar had cracked the leather, and some of the stuffing had been pulled. This added a violent appearance to the already angry looking chair. The wound bled itchy foam against the backs of my hands as I brushed off crumbs from the seat's last occupant. The foam immediately made my hands blotchy, and I wiped them repeatedly on my jeans.

Everything in this office looked like the result of conflict. Gummy duct tape held wires off the frayed industrial carpet. The molding had been tacked piecemeal to the corners to cover cracks. Posters breathed, billowing out from the holes they were

hung to cover. And Paula, Paula may have been diminutive, but she had a toughness that went deeper than a Napoleon complex.

She hung up the phone and started talking before her eyes had rested on me.

“So, what are we going to do with these movies?”

“I just want to know what’s going on.”

“First, as I’m sure you already have, we contacted our representatives and we have established that this material was not published, copyrighted, nor was it the trademark of any recognized association. We, as an Independent, simply distributed the footage, within our rights, and at the risk of losing advertising revenue, with no intention of profit or gain.”

I rubbed my hands together quickly. “I just want to know what it is. What is it?”

“You’re the auteur.”

“No, that’s just it, I’m not.”

“That’s interesting, Cal, and I’m glad to hear you say that. I think that we have the ability to make this a mutually beneficial endeavor for the both of us.”

“Please tell me what these movies are—”

“Please let me finish. As I was saying, we are prepared to offer our services to you. However, as I mentioned, in accordance with any sort of litigation, or copyright laws, we cannot offer you any sort of financial compensation. What we can offer you is a freelance distributor contract. This means that we will agree to show your movies. That is the good news for the both of us. However, we cannot sponsor,

or provide any sort of financial backing for, these projects. That might be construed as a negative for you; however, we believe that if you have been so clearly dedicated for the last several months, this meager issue should be no reason for you to stop making these movies, after all, it is your art. Instead, what we will do is archive this footage in a fashion that will maintain the film quality in the instance that you ever choose to distribute this material on your own. Of course, if this is the case, and we do not initiate the sale of these films, there will be a warehousing fee, but that, again, will be minimal, concerning whatever deal you may strike with a fellow distributor.”

“Paula, I think that these movies might be my dreams. I am not making these movies. I think they are my dreams coming into reality, on the screen, for real. Now, how my dreams have been documented on a strip of celluloid—“

“Actually, it isn’t celluloid.”

I sighed and fell back into the oxblood chair.

Paula pulled a ream of legal paper out from behind her desk and let me hold it. The front page had a spot for my signature and date, followed by the signatures of Paula, and the head of the Aztec Theater, Irene DiPaulo. “So, what do you think?”

I left the ream of onion skin on her mess of a desk. I walked down the rotting back steps of the office, into the main lobby. Two girls in the ticket booth were getting prepared to start their shift. They were examining each other’s hair. They had highlighted platinum streaks in the black dye. As I passed they applauded, and the one on the left started whooping, punching the side of the booth—recognition.

I strolled out into the winter sun from under the shadow of the Aztec and looked back. The afternoon sky was melting into a deep purple cloud that allowed my eyes to adjust, and for a moment, see into space without the help of night. In the blue border between horizon and home, between the skyscrapers of downtown Denver, Bernie streaked by still in sprint.

Chapter 2

The morning of my college graduation I was kneeling on the front lawn of Root House when my poetry professor Juniper D'Angelo approached me and said, "Kevin, always remember that poetry is the language of truth. If you remember that, you'll find your voice, and that is all the poet can wish for."

My name is Calvin Green, not Kevin. Juniper was wrong on another facet, as well: the poet can wish for far more than finding a voice.

My biography reads like a catalogue of mediocrity. I imagine Peter Graves walking towards the camera on the *A&E Biography* set, set to look like a study, saying, "Tonight, Calvin Green Jr., a life." Curtis Mayfield kicks in beneath a collage of SoundBites from the exhaustive interviews compiled:

Frank (Roommate): Yeah, he's okay.

Mary (Calvin's mother): I always knew he was going to do something.

Anne Waldman (Poet): He was a dharma monster.

But, whenever the narrator is cued to speak, I can only imagine my voice.

Calvin Green Jr. Dates of interest

February 4, 1980 *born**

*—I was born in Kentucky, but I don't really remember anything about it. My father was working with Xerox, and he was transferred to Stanford, CT when I was two. He was a very serious man and he hated his job. The stoicism that had been bred in him through a staunch Midwestern Irish Catholic upbringing determined

that he would endure the misery that was his professional life, and this sacrifice would be worth the satisfaction and joy provided by his family. Unfortunately, my enormous head reeked so much havoc on my mother's birth canal that an immediate surgery followed my delivery, and despite the doctor's best efforts, she wasn't able to have any more children. To be an only child is a significant enough psychological malady for a juvenile to deal with, let alone having your father move four times before you graduate high school. I can't say that I was lonely, but I listed my mother Mary as my best friend in kindergarten. My social interactions were often limited to either over-compensatory closeness with people I barely knew, or distant disinterest towards people out of a fear of having them grow close and having to move again.

It seemed that every place we lived, at least every place I went to school, I would make the flaccid promise to stay in touch, and make the more paltry effort to get stationary and try to write to my friend Brendan Carney in New Hampshire about how lonely I was in New Jersey, only to be writing a year later about my new friend Tim Donaldson in Rochester. These correspondences read like a running joke, the punchline only being provided by the subtext of my own past. They were like junior high diaries: the length of entries decreasing exponentially after the first valiant effort to document a life. I make it sound worse than it really was; if we'd stayed in one place I'd probably have had a friend overhaul about every five years regardless. The moving only guaranteed that I was going to get guilt-fueled Christmas bonanzas every few years from my parents.

In 1995, the order came from Xerox Square to move my father, Big Cal, back to Connecticut, but he decided to retire instead. This thought, the refusal of a direct order, was analogous to a religious conversion in my father's mind; and though I didn't appreciate it then—I was too busy smoking fairground tickets with Frank—the aftermath of the decision did impact me greatly. He started teaching classes at the local community college, and by the time I had graduated from high school he was an assistant professor in Oswego, which led to contacts at Hamilton, which greased the skids for my acceptance in the business department, despite full knowledge that I would be transferring to English once I got there. It was understood that I wanted to be a writer.

September 1987 *receives praise for writing from second grade teacher***

**—My first homework assignment came in the second grade. It was a crossword puzzle about dinosaurs, and despite all the scientific knowledge that the Brontosaurus was not a real dinosaur, it was the 5-star word. I did this first homework assignment by the flickering light of the television tube. I think it was *Hooperman*. At this period of my life I was watching eight hours of television a day. I didn't think anything was wrong with that. The television was a ubiquitous appliance in our home. Every bedroom and room with a couch, the kitchen and basement, were all equipped with a television, and often more than three were on at one time.

In this environment I saw a lot of shows, and by the time that I was in second grade my craze was for the remakes of *The Twilight Zone*. So, one day in class our teacher asked us to write a story. I was in the Learning Center, which was the last stop before you were shipped off to special school, which in the non-inclusive age of my elementary education, essentially meant Attica prep. We wrote on round scraps of paper and used posture supportive pencils. I sat between the smelly kid, Steven, and the girl with bladder control issues, Rory. I know these facts now because I have distance and cruelty. I had neither of these things on the day I am describing. I had no malice, and I had no pencil. I borrowed one from Steven. It was sticky; again, a description that seemed perfectly normal to me then. Mrs. Fountain asked us to write a story. I thought for a while about telling a hard-boiled detective story; very noir—but I couldn't spell Paulie. Instead, I wrote down what I had watched on television the night before. It was an episode of *The Twilight Zone* called "Shadow Play," where Peter Coyote is on death row and is being continually executed. An hour later I was with the school psychologist and my mother was being called to see if I was a savant. I couldn't get my shoes on the right feet, but apparently I had a preternatural ability to string perfectly structured politically macabre stories together on a whim. My mother eventually blew the whistle on my plagiarism before I ended up in George Plimpton's office. Still, the recitals of Rod Serling proved to be my ticket out of the Learning Center, and ability to begin judging Steven as the smelly kid, and Rory as the girl with bladder control problems.

This was also the birth of my yearnings to be a writer. As the Learning Center implies, I had a rough time in academic settings through grade school. My ability to retrieve one-liners from the sit-coms that I soaked in made some people believe one of the greatest hoaxes ever perpetrated by the average student. This hoax was that I was simply too smart, and was actually bored by school. I wasn't bored; I was dumb, and capable of pantomiming James Burrows. Twelve years and an army of tutors weren't going to change the fact that I was never going to get algebra. If I was too smart, wouldn't I have devised a system that would allow me to coast through school in a fashion much more catered to self-preservation than sweating out every quiz, test, and report card? Didn't they (they being the army of counselors and tutors that tried desperately to curry confidence in spite of the material presence of poor standardized test grades) think that an appropriate question might be, why, if you are so brilliant and capable of getting straight A's, do you choose to fail most subjects except English, when this behavior is so evidently counterproductive? No, they chose not to offer that question because I believe that deep down they knew the answer, as well as I did. I was simply a mediocre student who struggled with most subjects but coasted through English, not because of any preternatural ability with the humanities and language, but because English teachers are by nature easy graders. Besides, why destroy my tenuous confidence, when all they had to do was wait out the eventual graduation, and allow the real world to chew me up and spit me out. Still, there was one sincere proponent of my abilities throughout my academic career, and that was my mother, Mary.

May 1996

*attends Breadloaf Young Writers Conference****

***—My mother sat at the dining room table, watching me as I filled out the application to Breadloaf. When Mr. Robertson, my high school English teacher, gave me the application I had never heard of it. I had no idea that it was a very well respected writing colony in Vermont. The brochure mentioned Robert Frost, and I'd read "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" countless times in grade school and high school. Out of the catalogue of unfamiliar names, literary monoliths of contemporary writing, the most intriguing piece to me was the opportunity to see the place where the exteriors were shot for *Newhart*. Still, I filled out the application because out of all the other students, Mr. Robertson had chosen me. It was flattering and an opportunity that I was excited about. I was accepted, and towards the end of my junior year my parents drove me up to Vermont for the four-day Breadloaf Young Writers.

On Saturday morning the playwriting seminar was dragging on in its typically boring fashion. Sitting beneath a giant buttonwood tree, we listened to the playwright extol the virtues of strong visual cues. I was selected to demonstrate how appearance affects the audience's understanding of a character. He stood me up in front of the squatting class and asked, "He walks on stage. He says nothing. What do we already know?"

"He's a fake," one girl said.

"How so?" the playwright asked, stroking his Trotskyite beard.

“Well,” she said with a sigh, “he’s wearing hiking boots, but he’s obviously never worked out. His shirt looks haggard, but too haggard, like he purposefully roughs it up so that it looks older than it really is. His shorts have patches on them—why? If he can afford to beat up a Polo shirt and leather hiking boots, can’t he afford new shorts? His hair is supposed to be long, but it isn’t really long, but the way that he tries to flare out his pre-pubescent sideburns makes me think that he thinks he looks like Neil Young. But he doesn’t look like Neil Young. He’s trying too hard to be something he’s not.”

I looked to the playwright pleadingly—*something, say something to stop this*. “What else?” he asked. Another girl snickered, and my knees felt like they were being bent by gravity. I hoped the snicker would offer some levity to the attack I had just suffered, and allow the mean girl to apologize, off-handedly or not. But she didn’t. She believed everything that she had said. She wasn’t sorry for hurting my feelings. Worse still, it seemed as though the playwright wasn’t sorry either. It seemed as though all of these people weren’t bothered by the attack. I had just been called a fake, and it hurt, because it was completely true. She was absolutely right on every count.

In the vacuous haze of mental processing, as I stood waiting for more judgment, I saw myself—fresh haircut after my father had dragged me to the barber—scuffing the cuffs of the new plaid Polo shirt with a rock three months earlier—I saw myself sewing the patches onto the shorts, though there were no holes underneath—I saw myself buying overpriced hiking boots at the mall and limping

through the high school hallways as blisters birthed themselves on my feet. The playwright asked, “Nothing else?”

Was he cruel? Could he not see? I wanted to scream at the girl: *Oh yeah, well that witch outfit lets me know that you suffered miserably in junior high school because your breasts developed too early making you the victim of the sweaty-palmed chapped-lipped malcontents, like sticky Steven, who pulled at them with lagging tongues, and what’s more, I’m glad. I’m glad that this forced you to hate your body and hide it under death shrouds that symbolically reference and foretell a lifetime of cat husbandry and lithium.* But, I didn’t. I simply stood there.

“No one has anything else to say?”

“I think he’s nice,” one girl said.

“Why?”

“I don’t know. I just do.”

“Well, I’m talking more along the lines of what he looks like,” the playwright continued without telling me to sit. I slowly knelt back down to the ground. No one would even look at me for the rest of the seminar. Afterwards the playwright pulled me aside. “I hope that wasn’t too rough. I picked you because you looked like you could take it.” What that meant, I still don’t know. Did he think that I was as confident as the rest of these blowhards? Did he think that I *was* a fake and needed to be told? Did he think that I wasn’t a fake, and was confident enough not to be bothered by the verbal assaults of that morbid succubus? Regardless, I spent the rest

of the weekend in my room, and wandering along the Robert Frost trail, avoiding everyone who made an effort to approach me.

The Breadloaf experience was both a blessing and a curse. It allowed me a window into a world that I truly had no understanding of. It allowed me to see what a community of writers was like. My family didn't read. We weren't interested in literature. But this early encouragement, to be immediately married to disappointment, loaded me with the blinded rage to pursue writing in college. I had been accepted. That was their first mistake (they being the sepulchres of literature that wanted to keep me out of their wine and cheese party). I had done something that someone believed was worthy of merit. The rest of the nay-sayers were only insecure people who needed to weed out the meek to make room for the limited success that was conditional to a literary career. I was going to show that mean witch beneath the buttonwood tree that I had what it took to be a great writer. I was going to go to college and destroy the writing department with the force of nature that was I. It showed me what an exclusionary environment the literary world truly was. And with this new foresight I went, a little more derisive and acerbic, into college.

August 1998

*enters Hamilton College*****

****—As I mentioned, Hamilton College only accepted me because I had connections. Big Cal had called in a favor from a friend of a friend, and with his Rotary pals from Xerox, I got a scholarship. The satisfying part about Hamilton was that I wasn't as over my head as I thought I would be. The school had tradition, and

all the accoutrements that went along with an excessively over-priced private school education. Fortunately, however, the rising drug traffic in upper crust boarding schools meant that my peers were mostly too stoned to be as condescending as Frank had led me to believe that they would be. Aside from the burn-out population, was the obsessive-compulsive contingent: dosed in anti-depressants, too manic to sit still, let alone have any consideration for me, because the demons being battled were larger than any threat my vacant expression could impose.

I started out as a playwright. The writing classes went well, and I won an award for a one-act play I'd written—*The Alchemy of My Misery is Mutable*. It was performed, and bombed miserably. Failing at writing funny is analogous to premature ejaculation. The text flies out there, and you look eagerly to the audience, wishing against instinct that some satisfaction had transferred, and realizing that your efforts, which were simply the best you could do at that time, have disappointed, you slither into the bog of self-deprecation. Big Cal and Mary sat nervously through the performance, confused as to whether the audience wasn't laughing because they didn't want to miss a line, or if contemporary theater found audience responses rude. They were not capable of fathoming that the play was simply bad. This was the first and last time Big Cal would ever spend a night at the theater.

The next semester I started my poetry workshop. Juniper D'Angelo was an old woman; her excessive jewelry jingled beneath the several scarves she wore to veil the spider veins on her arms. She spoke like she was out of breath or in love, frequently flinging her white hair with her ornamental fingers, and on the first day of

class, the first exercise she assigned was to write a classified ad for a job posting for a poet. This was my response:

Wanted

Annoyingly morbid malcontent needed for Ken Burns documentaries and Democratic Presidential Inaugurations. Must be too lazy to write prose, and too abstract to write songs. Must be willing to commit suicide as a means of boosting market sales. No heterosexuals.

Juniper asked for these to be handed in. She informed the class that this was how she planned on taking attendance. It was the first day, and I was already about to make enemies with the professor. Instead, I decided to chicken out. I'd take the absence and be there every other day after that.

I was there every day after that. The elegiac jeremiad of Juniper's lectures started to reshape my understanding of poetry. Hamilton was Ezra Pound's old school; though I knew nothing about Ezra Pound, I knew that was a name I should have known. So, I started to research poetry, and eventually, like most testosterone producing despondents, discovered the Beats. I fell madly in love with the hyper-Romantic notion of life as poetry. I started wearing ragged juxtapositions (striped pajama pants and double breasted blazers) and stopped watching television. I tried rolling my own cigarettes, and upon failing at this, started smoking filterless Camels. I created an Epicurean facsimile of myself, and cowardly toyed with the ominous possibility of posthumous success.

May 2002

*graduates from Hamilton College with a B.A. ******

*****—Four years later my skin was scales. My half-assed efforts into de-evolving into the beast Dr. Johnson describes in the epigram of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* had given me poor health, but not poor enough to cure me of the bane of being a bullshit living poet. Instead, all my forays into the self-indulgence of Rimbaud-esque living left me with a weight problem, hemorrhoids, and not one single college friend. I was also left with the burden of tackling the world with a baccalaureate in poetry. I asked Juniper for her contact information. Even though she'd gotten my name wrong on graduation morning, and even though she had rarely returned any of the poems I gave for her perusal, and even though she'd forgotten to send in the recommendation forms to three of the seven schools I was rejected from four M.F.A. programs, it didn't mean that I couldn't use her for networking.

At that point my parents were living in Eagle, CO. It was a ski resort town, and they loved it. Big Cal was teaching in Boulder, Mary in Big Creek, an elementary school in the mountains about twenty minutes outside of Denver. I'd visited on breaks through school, but the message was being sent. The migratory nature of our triumvirate had ended and returned to its original root dyad. Every time I'd return to Clinton, I'd have a new box of things Mary and Big Cal felt I needed to have. By graduation my room was warehousing my children's books.

June 2005

*moves to Denver******

*****—Various locals who have been in Denver longer than the Broncos mention strange exclusionary facts. One decrepit fellow substitute teacher tells me that when she moved to Denver in 1960 the state population was smaller than the population of Denver today. She'll then open her face of oatmeal into an atavistic smile, and I don't know what she's remembering, but it's gone.

The eighties were a bad time for Denver. The drug epidemic hit the urban districts around Lower Downtown specifically hard. This societal disintegration was further ignored by a mass migration of neo-hippy hemp factories that moved to Colorado in search of whatever red heron lured them from their student loans and bachelor pads in the rooms above their parents' garages. By the end of the century, though, Denver was undergoing rejuvenation. LoDo was revived for the Saturday afternoon sports enthusiast and Friday night happy hour. Wash Park maintained its role as trendy epicenter of American co-opted French: bistro, café, cliché. Cherry Creek flushed money into the city through generic and shameless corporate commodification. Even Capitol Hill saw an insurgence of youthful patrons due to the influx of young Wells Fargo and Janus employees, Frank among them. It truly was a glorious time for Denver, save the bane of tourist saturation— the Five Points.

I met Frank before my freshman year in high school in Rochester, NY. Being blessed by Frank's friendship was an invitation to a true high school experience. Due to Big Cal's frequent relocations, I'd missed out on spin the bottle and slumber parties in junior high, but I was primed for the high school education of Frank's

normalcy—shotgunning beers, smoking oregano that someone's older brother sold us, skeeching on black ice, waiting for girls who hadn't actually said they'd ever come, pee rings, and whippets—a proper education.

When Frank, who had graduated from Syracuse the year I graduated from Hamilton, asked if I wanted to move with him to Denver to get jobs and go skiing, I said why not. Three years later we were still in the same dilapidated apartment on Downing St., the Five Points, the last area not affected by Denver's gentrification.

The Five Points was named after the senseless city planning that organized a 45°-angle shift in the street direction after the centralized industrial downtown population spread into the north Downing St. neighborhood, formerly reserved for the Mexican population. A street map of the Five Points looks like an exploding stairway as each intersection heading into downtown from the northwest is jammed with a five-way turn. Broadway ends unceremoniously, only to be resurrected three streets to the left. Seventeenth Street suddenly becomes a one-way in the opposite direction, and upon realizing this you are forced onto Park which takes you directly east, towards 70, for no apparent reason at all. I had lived in the Five Points for three years, and I have figured out my own system for how to get around, but I still had no discernable clue as to where I was going, or what I was doing.

Three years ago Frank and I thought we were the luckiest people in the world. We had a yard, free parking, a washer and dryer, and cheap rent. On the first morning in our new home I was setting up the coffee maker. I heard a commotion outside, and there, in the street, a man in a pristine over-sized white T-shirt beat a

junkie three times his size with a garbage can. Though I hadn't spent a lot of time in crack neighborhoods, it didn't take me long to assess the situation. The pencil-thin garbage can-throwing aggressor was the dealer, and the beaten junkie was his client, and the gawking white-bread chicken-shit in the upstairs apartment window was me. At first I was deathly afraid to leave the house. Frank, of course, had no concern; Frank never had any concern. He took it all in stride. This was the difference between Frank and me. I worried about everything. Even when I didn't have something to worry about, I would find something to worry about. Frank used to think this was boring, and would throw out the obvious solution, as though it had no ramifications, and it used to make me insane, but if I dwelled on the stressor, he'd say it was boring and change the topic.

These dreams were something to be worried about. When I tried to explain the Fred Thompson dream to Frank, he ignored it. He told me he was tired. My cuticles were bleeding; my hands were sweating; I'd paid to see Lord Westerbeary's Night Out five times. And now, Paula Abbundai was confirming that I was not losing my mind, that these movies were not a Jungian experiment, but actually my dreams, and I knew that Frank was going to *poo poo* this too. And I was mad, and I was tired, and I was scared.

For A&E's Biography, I'm Peter Graves.

Chapter 3

After my meeting with Paula, I dropped into the deep paisley couch in my apartment. I didn't take off my parka. My hands still itched from the rip in the oxblood chair, and I wiped them on my jeans. I tilted my head sideways and saw that the answering machine was blinking. I sighed (calls were rarely good news these days), pressed the button, and Mary's voice echoed through the empty apartment: "Hi Calvin, it's your Mom. I was wondering, since I have the week off, maybe we could get together for lunch if you had some free time. If not, that's okay. Give me a call either way. I know you're probably busy, but give me a call, alright bye-bye." The nylon hood of my parka pressed against my cheek. I reached for the phone and tried to remember their new cell phone number. I lifted a bowl of hardened egg noodles and congealed butter, and found the number scribbled on a page of the Denver City Guide, between the inked faces of the Knights of Columbus and the word puzzle I made out of an article about school budgets. I dialed.

"Hello."

"Mom, it's Calvin."

"Oh hi, were you working?"

"Uh-huh." It was a harmless lie. I wasn't asking for money anymore, so I just wanted to expedite this portion of the conversation. Besides, I was looking forward to the meal she'd buy if we did have lunch, and if I mentioned that I didn't work on Tuesday, I couldn't in good conscience sit across from her at lunch on

Wednesday; well, I could, but she wouldn't let me. So we made plans for lunch at Cheyenne's the next day. I hung up, put the phone down, and picked up the paper to memorize her new cell phone number. It was written over the Etc. section of the events calendar, an obscure sliver of the City guide that announced poetry readings, which was when I remembered that Juniper D'Angelo was reading at a coffeeshop that afternoon. Naropa had hired her as a writer in residence at the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics in Boulder nine months ago. I was waiting to have good news to report before I went to see her; nine months and no good news to mention.

I'd been so distracted by the Aztec movies that I'd completely forgotten about Juniper's reading. I was troubled by my conversation with Paula. She had placed me in a position that I couldn't understand. I felt like I had been outsmarted, which was quite possible. If I signed the onion skin I was saying that the movies were mine. How could I prove that the films were mine, when they actually weren't? Still, how could they not be my movies, when they were depicting my dreams actually happening on a screen. Can you call that imagination? Who owns it? I didn't want to invest too much into the late Capitalist notion of commodity art, but somehow my dreams were being shown at the Aztec, and I didn't know how or why. I was a poet, not a filmmaker.

I thought about this as I walked to the reading. Poetry had no place in film. Every attempt that I'd ever seen trying to fuse the two art forms failed. The movies always chased after Romantic art as life metaphors that were completely aggrandizing

and inauthentic. Nerdy little toadies spouting lines from memory, no one could do that for real, and if they could, the last word I'd use to describe it is sexy. And every time a poet tried to do film, the poetry couldn't get beyond the stood-up aspect of James Cameron being handed half a billion dollars to make a date movie, while the only poetry you can buy at Barnes and Noble is Dante and Homer. Sure, critics of both try to mend fences, by describing poems as panoramic or films as poetic, but neither poetry nor film should ever get into bed together. It would be like the neo-feminist butch lesbian screwing the varsity quarterback date rapist; they both lose something intrinsic to their identity.

The Juniper D' Angelo reading was far from sold out. Still, a modest enough crowd had arrived during the post-lunch rush to make me feel as though I should hide in the corner. It was at LUX, a coffee shop that was too spacious for poetry readings. People came in and sat down before they realized that something was about to begin. Once they discovered that it was a poetry reading most stood up and ordered their drink to go.

LUX had been a car dealership in the fifties, and most of the architecture maintained the style of the time. Inside sleek silver lines rolled gleaming streaks of light across the two-story windows that faced Broadway. The sharp furniture angled forbiddingly across the smooth tiled floor. Over-sized, over-priced heavily-caffeinated drinks were served meticulously. There was not a stain in the entire building, save the four feet around the cream and sugar service station.

The makeshift stage, a piece of wood on four other pieces of wood, was covered with a loud rug. I suppose the rug was intended to offer some sort of quaintness to the sterile mechanical feel of LUX, but it just looked out of place. A podium with a dim light held the microphone. A white-spikey-haired man fumbled with a microphone. He would whisper into it, and the amplifier would shout back and ricochet off every polished surface in the industrial coffee shop. He would put his thumbs in his tight vest pockets, step back, and try again, and again the deafening sound of his tiny voice would blast into the audience.

The front row joked with the troubled emcee. I'd taken workshops with a few of them at Naropa in Boulder, and I detested them. They made references to obscure artists, and had opinions about *Ulysses*. They loved their smug inside jokes, and nuances, and exclusivity. After failing to earn an invitation to their cocktail parties at BMoCA, I concluded that they were what I hated about literary scenes—didn't they have jobs?

I was dangerously excited to see Juniper. My eyes scanned the room for other former students. If I'd seen a fellow classmate I would have felt like a mascot, but because I was the only Hamilton representative, it meant that I had somehow obtained the inside scoop, via the City news guide. The last time I had spoken with Juniper was on the phone over a year ago, just after the last round of grad school applications went out. I imagined her dark office, lit by one sixty-watt bulb, with the shades drawn, a Degas painting, torn from a glossy magazine, would be tacked to the wall. I asked her what she thought of my portfolio. She made suggestions; unfortunately, it

was too late. I made myself believe that her suggestions were wrong, and waited patiently for the top eleven writing programs in the country to tell me no thank you.

I wanted Juniper to see me and ask me how everything was going. Recently Big Cal had taken to criticizing her efforts as a mentor, and I had started to become very defensive. Primarily because if Juniper was a crappy mentor, then where did that put me in terms of being her protégé?

I played with the cigarette box in the pocket of my parka. I was thinking about the poems in my satchel. I had brought about twelve hours worth of reading, even though the ad in the City guide said the reading would be followed by a brief open mic. I wanted Juniper to notice me in the crowd and ask me to come up. I wanted her to do it in front of everyone, into the microphone, and I would act embarrassed and get up and go to the microphone and read, and it would be a glowing success. And the woman in the front row, the one who panned my poem "Diane" in a volunteer workshop at Naropa, would grimace because she knew that her poems were trash and mine had mass appeal. This woman had called me a misogynist and told me that "Diane" was untruthful. She had come to LUX after me and sat in the one free seat in the gagging front row review.

I sat in the last row. A couple, trying to excuse their weekend debauchery with a cultural event, sat nervously in front of me, like waiting for confession: man slumped, and woman perched eagerly for knowledge. Their guilt brought them here, and their time was their penance. I was one of two people in the last row. The other was someone who I had seen several times before.

There are people who you don't know. These are most of the people in the world. They have lives, and not in a solipsistic way but in a real way, they have lives that will not intersect with yours, and when you read that one of them has died you sigh because death is sad. Then there are people you know. This breakdown is far more complicated. Most obvious would be people who know you, and who you know. Friends and family. You regard each other, and take interest in one another's lives. If something happens you're affected. However, the same is true with celebrities. You know them, though they don't know you. You've read their bio in *People*, and you have discovered that they went to the same college as the quarterback from your football team. So, in the instance that you should find yourself in a swanky L.A. star-studded lunch, and meet Rob Lowe, you can say—my roommate Frank spent the night in a Dayton jail—and know that because his family is from Dayton, the two of you are inextricably attached. Then there are the people who you know, but don't, the people who you can recognize. You pass by one another enough times that the presumption of interaction has passed, and the element of opportunity to engage one another has ended. With these people there is a strange urge to invite them in, but desperate fear of letting them too close.

The only other person in the last row was a member of the latter group. I had seen him several times. We always seemed to be sheepishly hugging the same walls of every afternoon literary event in Denver. He was unusually tall and thin. His head hung off his shoulders like a drooping weed. He had a thicket of curly red hair, and fist-sized Adam's apple. He wore a long trench coat. It was an ankle-length Soviet

military coat, double breasted, olive green. The ornaments had been stripped, and one original button remained. Yet, we never talked; better to hold onto the friends that you have, than risk picking up another Frank.

The spiky-haired emcee started his speech. “The volatility of Juniper D’Angelo’s poetry is a meditation in what it means to be on the underside of a blade of grass. While distance allows us to believe in the comfort of such a position, point of reference reminds us that grass, like Juniper’s words, have points, and can cut. Juniper has received several awards in her expansive and impressive career. She has written lines as perfect as, ‘from a bombshell/the sap dripped off her, onto me.’ Can’t you just taste that?” He continued, though the microphone did not. The front row review chortled and snapped at their ears to awaken the emcee to the technical difficulties. He did not look up from his prepared notes until he was finished, when he mouthed *did you hear me*, and everyone shook their heads. He spoke up, and the mic kicked in as Juniper’s name was drowned out by feedback.

She slowly approached the stage from behind the bathroom veranda. Her white hair was dyed black. I didn’t know what her natural color was as a girl, but it wasn’t black. She looked like someone had dressed her in an effort to embarrass her: an orange afghan and neon turtleneck with purple lipstick. Her wrinkled face had been slathered in cream to hide the age, which was utterly palpable. Without saying a word she broke into her poems, speaking into the podium lamp, rather than the microphone. The emcee tried to reposition the microphone. Juniper demanded to know what he was doing. He explained, and she snorted, “Does this mean I have to

start again?" The front row review cheered her on, and she huffed, "Fine." Eight monotonous minutes later she shifted her volume to bark, "I'm tired, so you read now, I'll read again if I feel like it," and sat down. The emcee climbed the makeshift stage, a little red, a little relieved.

"I suppose now, we have an opportunity for anyone who would like to read their own stuff."

I waited for a few minutes, but no one seemed to be moving. The bored couple zipped their jackets in front of me. I pulled my satchel to my chest. Opened it, and took a piece of paper. I read the first line of the poem "Diane", saying it to myself (*Dressed in the outfit you wore to your daughter's fourth wedding, you slur razors in words off your shit-dipped uvula*), and started to stand, "Oh it looks like we have someone," the emcee said, "No, it looks like we have someone already, thank you." I looked around and down the opposite aisle the curly haired thin man was already approaching the stage. I slinked back to my seat, hoping Juniper hadn't spotted my aborted trip to the microphone. She hadn't. I'm not certain she was awake. The thin man stepped on the stage with a smooth swooping gesture. At the microphone he undid his trench coat, and the cinched shirt elongated his gauntness. He spoke quietly, introducing his poem; "This is a poem based on the Manet painting, and a time when I had some trouble. It is called, 'The Absinthe Drinker.'" Then, without any paper, he bellowed out his poem. It was amazing, about a drunk tank, I think.

The front row applauded. I applauded, and settled deep into my folding chair, deep into my parka. The emcee took the steps, and I hoped that my fear could not be smelled over the cinnamon and nutmeg at the service station. I wanted him to forget my aborted attempt to perform. He did not. Looking straight at me, he said, “All set?” The woman who called me a misogynist spun to the back row to see who he was talking to. She stared at me, as did everyone. I wanted her to turn to her friend and make a snide remark, so that I could be filled with venomous rage, enough to approach the stage and destroy the art of performance poetry by drawing my line in the sand, and declaring my voice for the future of American Poetry. But this was not the 6 Gallery, and I wasn’t going to draw a line in any sand. Everyone was too polite. “C’mon, don’t be shy, I see the poems in your hand,” the emcee said. I looked down at “Diane.” I wanted to stuff it in my jacket pocket, but there was no time for that now. “No?” The emcee asked. The interrogative nature of the question emasculated me. The crowd’s face pleaded—*it’s open mic, don’t take it so serious; if it means that much, get up there, or you’ll clearly regret it, and we’re not really listening anyway.*

Two girls got up instead. One read three haikus; the other read a chant poem about her period. The emcee thanked Juniper and we applauded ourselves like kindergartners. The couple sprinted for the door, happy to have the clear conscience to get completely smashed at the happy hour set to start at the Falling Rock, and have sweaty blacked-out sex by midnight. The front row review sat as though the reading had never started, or ended, adjacent to one another because they needed no audience

for their urbane conversation. I stood up, and Juniper was shaking a couple hands. I limped toward her, hoping that we would talk. The thin man approached me, fingering the only original button on his jacket, and said, “It’s too bad you didn’t read; I would have liked to have heard your poems; your movies are really exceptional; interesting to see how they affect your poetry.”

He spoke fast, and I nodded because I needed the compliment.

“They have a great feel to them, the way they seem to incorporate so much reference, like Warhol, Dali, Lynch, and yet, none of it is superfluous. In fact, I was watching Cocteau’s *Blood of the Poet*, and now I understand the masturbation sequence from one of your movies I saw about a month ago. Not to mention the settings are so mundane, and yet strangely off. Were you heavily influenced by Cocteau? Because they are Surreal, yet suburban; they’re Sur-burb-real”

“I don’t make movies.”

“How do you mean?”

“I don’t make movies.”

“I get it—I get it now—stick with that, that works.”

Juniper spun around, reached out her jingling hands, and with a broad smile said, “Kevin, how are you?” The thin man seemed impressed that Juniper knew my name.

Chapter 4

Cheyenne's was a quiet bistro along the trendiest section of the 16th St. mall. It was densely decorated with the work of local artists, and hats and gloves from the days when ladies wore hats and gloves. I was there early for my lunch with Mary. She had the week off from teaching in Big Creek. The handful of rickety crowded tables in the dining room shook with excited conversation. People laughed and spilled coffee out of their painted cups, into their ubiquitous shopping bags. The easy listening radio station harmonized with the percussive rhythms of silver against glass and the swinging kitchen door that made a click when it reached the molting doorframe.

The waitress wore a ribbed black T-shirt and a large white tablecloth as an apron. The neutral tones of the uniform matched the background of check-patterned linoleum that ran underneath the splashes of oriental carpet and tapestry. The wait staff was supposed to blend in, which is exactly what I was trying to do. She escorted me to a table to wait for Mary. "By the way, I love your movies," the waitress said.

"Oh, thank you. But those aren't really mine." I thought about my conversation with the thin man the night before. He seemed to be quite a fan, and I couldn't understand why. I hated it when Frank would try to tell me his dreams. I couldn't imagine how dull it would be if he tried to show me one.

"Wow, I know what you mean. That is a really great answer; I'm a painter." She pointed to one of the watercolors on the wall as she filled my glass. I crossed my

legs, a subconscious pose of an impressionist painting I suppose, and knocked the weak-legged table, spilling the water.

“Oh my God, I’m so sorry; did I do that?” she said.

“It’s okay, don’t worry about it,” I said.

“God, look at me, trying to point out my painting, like an idiot.”

“Well, which one is it?”

“It’s next to the black-veiled hat. I’ll get something to clean this up.” She hurried off.

Mary appeared over the waitress’s shoulder and sat down, using the wine list to sweep some of the water away from her lap. She placed the wine list at a ninety-degree angle, placed her hand on her silverware, pulled the napkin out from underneath, and lay it in her lap. We were about to have *life talk*. *Life talk* was an extremely emotive facet of our relationship. It was rooted in a time when I was much younger and Mary would spend hours a day at the dining room table trying to teach me to read after Ms. Arnold recommended that I be held back. Mary would warm me up by getting us talking about things that I liked. I would meander through my fascination with *Ducktales*, and the other cartoons that I was watching in the morning before going to school. I ended up in the Learning Center, instead. This give and take was documented in an essay that I wrote for Mr. Robertson, spurring him to recommend me for Breadloaf.

These conversations dissipated after I went to college, to the point that we would speak bimonthly. Following graduation, conversations between us took on a

new form: *life talk*. She was still teaching me lessons, only these were more abstract than Hop on Pop. *Life talk* was essentially a judging session in which Mary, sometimes with the accompaniment of Big Cal, would explain to me exactly what a mess I was making of my life by wasting my time trying to figure out what I wanted to do when I grew up. This was a problem I was familiar with, but it was also a problem that I didn't necessarily care to address, primarily because I was uncertain as to the cause, and therefore uncertain as to cure.

"So, how are you doing?" I asked.

"I'm fine, looking forward to a vacation, and you?"

"How is Dad?"

"He's great. He just got his results from the doctor and they don't think he needs an angioplasty." I couldn't remember if I was supposed to know that, or not. If I'd been told, I had forgotten. "Oh, he wanted me to tell you that he put fifty dollars in your account. It's real nice to have a week off." It was nice to know that teachers, real teachers, hated work just as much as substitute teachers, or businessmen for that matter. "So, how are you doing?" she asked again.

"I'm great. So, what are you doing this week?" I asked.

"Having lunch with my lady friends," she used her diminutive voice to express that she recognized the banality of her plans, yet her excitement over these banal plans was clear. Mary wanted to retire. "Oh, and if the weather is nice tomorrow, like it's supposed to be, I'm playing golf, all sorts of things that you'd think are boring." Looking around sharply, she leaned in to whisper, like a teenage

tourist on her first date whose appreciation was a secret, and said, “I love this place, don’t you?” She leaned back and looked like Mary again. “So how are you?”

“I’m doing fine.”

Mary placed her elbows on the table and clasped her hands. “Yeah, really.” She had enormous eyes that always looked wet. Since she moved to Colorado, she dumped gallons of drops into them to keep them moist.

“That seems like a directed rejoinder.”

“I suppose it is.”

The waitress returned, she took our orders. I had a salmon on a cedar plank. Mary had a salad. “So what your father and I were thinking...” She got that out and I decided I needed to be on the offensive in this *life talk*.

There are moments when it is best to be on the defensive for *life talk*, when it is best to simply sit and listen (e.g. when I threw up at Thanksgiving because I was too drunk; the time I had to borrow \$500 to get the electricity turned back on in the Downing St. apartment; the time I overslept and my parents had to call a taxi to get them from Eagle to the airport—a flight they eventually missed). Stay on the defensive, listen to their criticism, and don’t talk too much. Often during these *life talks*, if I sat quietly long-enough, Big Cal would start to list a set of demands that he had not okayed with Mary and she would stop the lecture early (haircut, better job, any job, cleaner car, mowed lawn, different shirt, new apartment, old apartment, move home, move out, do the dishes, eat dinner, stop taking food from home, and so on). However, in other cases, less motivated *life talks*, if I took the offensive I could

steer the direction of the conversation and actually come out on top. This was one of these situations. The only reason this *life talk* was happening in the first place was because Mary had the week off, and the matter of what to do with Calvin Jr. was unresolved.

“I was offered a long-term sub job yesterday.” It was lie—I didn’t even work on Tuesday—I’d had a meeting with Paula Abbundai and watched Juniper D’Angelo read. However, the lie had a necessary theme to it. Things were desperate. My mother was willing to risk the fine dining experience and elegant affordable vegetarian fare of Cheyenne’s for the fervent pursuit of this life talk. She didn’t want to have a nice lunch. She had an agenda. Something had happened. I assumed Big Cal had warmed her up, and got her real nasty and prepared. She was wasting one of fifteen potential meals out during her spring break to address the shambles of my life.

“I filled out a bunch of applications for jobs.” It was the sloppy play, and poorly considered. Fortunately, she wasn’t listening to me.

“I was talking to a lady who came to teach the class poetry.”

“Why didn’t you ask me?”

“It’s through the school, Honey. But she said that there really isn’t such a thing as a professional poet. Did you know that? That is they don’t exist, they have to supplement their income somehow. Most of them teach in colleges. Or, some of them have enough credibility that they can teach without getting a Masters, or Master of Fine Arts; you’d know better than me. The point is, it seems that a life doing what

it is you want to do means you are going to need more school, so maybe you should consider more school.”

The ironies of my lies were beginning to make my eyes hurt. She got it fine. Yes, it is hard work to be a poet, unless of course, you become a poet like me. Shiftless, lazy, boring, and unsuccessful.

The poet who studies the craft, the market, works with a mentor at a university, and reaches out to the community and universe as a whole was something else. I simply wanted to have an excuse to cry in public, and poet seemed like an appropriately nebulous term to make the average person say, “Oh” and walk away. She understood the idea perfectly. I was clutching to something that was never going to happen, and using Horatio Alger against her. I had reworked the myth away from Big Cal’s translation towards a desperately fatalistic and lazy interpretation. *If I live in a slum and write poems for eighty years, Faye Dunaway will come steal corn with me, and I’ll beat up the obvious bravado of Frank Stallone.* She got it fine. I was clinging to some neo-beat faith that the life was the poetry, and the product was ancillary to the suffering involved in its production. She was completely right, but I wasn’t going to let something like being completely right get in the way of my indignation.

“You just don’t get it.” I slung my head. Mary sighed and looked away.

“Listen, I understand what it is that you’re saying. I want you to recognize that your father and I are not out to get you. We’re supporting you, and we will support whatever your decision may be, but,” Mary reached across the table and took

my chin. Her cold hands shocked me when she touched my chin to look at her. She said, “you haven’t made any decisions. I think you need to figure out where it is you’re going Cal, because this doesn’t seem to be working.” She let my face go, and my head drooped, surveying the stain on the fly of the jeans I was wearing. “I think we caused a scene,” she said.

The waitress was on her way over to our table, crouching a bit and walking sideways. She said, “I’m sorry, but are you really his mother?”

“Yes, you don’t see a similarity? Ooh, maybe I could be young enough to be his date, what’d you think Cal?”

“And Maude loves Harold,” I said, leaning back in my chair.

“No, I just didn’t know if you were an actor,” the waitress continued, “I just think that is *so* cool, that you star in your son’s movies. That is so interesting.”

“What is this, Cal?”

“There are these movies that were showing down at the Aztec. I don’t really understand what it was exactly, something with a dream I had.”

Mary cocked her head. “What are they?”

“I think they’re my dreams.”

The waitress jumped in. “They’re great; they are really artistic and experimental, and to find out that you actually are his mother and that he cast you as his mother really makes that even more interesting.”

“And I’m in these?” Mary said as she looked at me suspiciously.

“And then there was the one with the lasso, and the elephants, and the one with Joe Montana.” The waitress thought over how many other pieces of this series she had seen, apparently she was an avid Aztec buff, but the disconcerting part of her description was that the three primary objects that she described were clear phallic symbols in my consciousness, which made me nervous as to what exactly most of Denver was watching me do with my mother.

“Explain this again, Cal.”

“I think they’re my dreams, and they’re being shown as short films at the Aztec before the features.”

“What exactly does that mean?”

“The feature movie is the movie you go to see, that you pay money for a ticket to see. Before that, when the previews play?”

“Yeah,” Mary said, and the waitress nodded along.

“Before that, they dim the lights and in-between the advertisements they show these short films that are somehow recreations of my dreams.”

“You’re making movies now?” Mary asked. The excitement in her voice was unfamiliar. “I always told you— you should be making movies.” She didn’t say it, but I think she was thinking—*thank god, he’s finally given up the hopeless martyrdom of poetry*. She knocked over a salt shaker as she grabbed my hand from across the table. Again, the temperature of her hands shocked me; they were like ice. Mary turned to the waitress and said, “You know, when he was young we used to just sit him in front of the television for hours and hours; once he even got into trouble for

stealing plots from his favorite shows and using them as stories in his classes; I thought I was such a terrible mother, but now I see it was just training.”

“They really are great,” the waitress said. “Can I get you some more water?”

I would like to say that I didn’t know it then, but I did. I would like to say that I was naïve and couldn’t imagine how this could go poorly, but that would be another lie. I think back to that lunch at Cheyenne’s, and while I wasn’t making great decisions at that point in my life, I don’t think any were as bad as my decision to not immediately snuff out these movies from the beginning. I should have actively pursued Paula and threatened to sue. I should have told the waitress, the girl at the Falling Rock, the thin guy from Juniper’s reading, that they were confused and I didn’t make movies. I should have never told Frank. I should have immediately explained to Mary, grabbed her frozen hands, and explained to her that I had no idea what was going on. Perhaps, I should have just ignored the movies altogether. But, I didn’t. The maw of poor decision making drooled neediness all over our rickety table at Cheyenne’s that afternoon.

“So Cal, when do I get to see one of these movies?”

“What’re you doing Friday?”

Chapter 5

The photograph was in a tin frame and hung in the vestibule of our apartment. I was staring at it, wearing a button-down shirt, breathing angrily into my hands, thinking about the day I'd had.

In the photograph, I look like a dead confederate soldier. A molding French Foreign Legion hat teeters on the greasy long hair matted to my face. A chinstrap beard, like Thoreau, decapitates my head from the motley outfit. Frank is next to me. His face is red with laughter, and his T-shirt is too small, stolen out of my closet. His expression is that of a child caught drawing on the walls, which he would later do that night, but the eyes are hollow and vacant, emotionless, guiltless. The photograph was taken the last time Frank visited me, my junior year at Hamilton. We have our arms around each other, and I am pointing a finger at the camera. Frank has his free hand in a pocket. It is a picture of two friends enjoying each other's company. The moment that these two people would freely admit that the other was their best friend. The photograph captures an honest emotion—friendship.

The picture was taken my junior year in college on my birthday. I was alone, and going out where I might know a handful of people at a bar that I frequented. I knew these quasi-friends by name, but they only knew me as the guy who wore pajama pants. This was acceptable, because in Clinton, NY being allowed to drink in a bar in pajama pants without getting beat up is a feat in itself. Before I had finished off the obligatory twelve pack at my apartment, the doorbell rang, and it was Frank.

In two hours Frank had wrangled a birthday party for me from the various other occupants of the apartment complex I was living in. It was college housing, so the attraction of a free keg essentially brought the guests, but I hadn't ever tried to go out and commingle with my neighbors. It took Frank to corral everyone into the celebration of my birthday. By eleven o'clock (the time that the picture was taken) there were forty people in my one bedroom apartment. Most of them didn't know my name, but that was despite the fact that Frank had thrown me the best birthday party I had ever had.

At three Frank started to do dick tricks: a particularly offensive revue, reserved for the point in the night when Frank realized that he was not going to have sex, and therefore should expose himself to disgust every woman in the vicinity to diffuse every other male's opportunity to coerce sex as well. He twisted it and contorted it, blew air into it through straws, swung it in a circular motion, tucked it between his legs, spread its scrotum, and yanked at it until every woman at the birthday party had gone home. At this time Frank started to try to turn my refrigerator upside down. After succeeding, he smashed my coffeetable, and used the legs as javelins to slam holes in the drywall. He then picked up the empty keg, and attempted to run through the wall that divided the living room from the kitchen. My last memory of Frank that night was driving through the parking lot of the apartment complex with a fire extinguisher riding shotgun, blowing the powdery coolant on all the parked cars, just before he swerved into downtown Clinton, drunkenly headed

home to Syracuse. I turned away from the screeching tires, and though I heard the clang of the extinguisher against the street, I didn't look back.

Frank and I had a friendship based on rationalizations. I would rationalize his inability to treat a friend as anything other than a punching bag, and he would rationalize my inability to ever actually help him out of a jam, or the several fights his personality ever got him into, or the countless times he needed money for bail as a trade for accidentally setting my bed on fire, which he would end up doing— just before snatching the fire extinguisher off my college apartment building wall—just after we had our picture taken to document our friendship.

As I glowered at the picture, I thought about all of this and blew into my pink hands. The photograph on the wall captures an honest moment, but it doesn't capture the entire truth. It's as one-dimensional as a photograph can be. It has no history, no context. It fails to recognize that twelve hours after the photograph was taken I would not speak to Frank for fifteen months. When one of my neighbors stopped by with the picture and asked if Frank was coming back, he (the neighbor) was not celebrating the friendship that is captured in the photograph, he just wanted another free keg to throw through the caulked wall of my apartment. Nevertheless, I held onto the photograph. Three months before I graduated Frank called, and as though the fifteen months of silence had never existed we went right back to our old trends. Why? Because it was simply easier. I wasn't about to castigate Frank as being a bad friend, because I was an equally bad friend. This was what our relationship was based on, our ability to screw each other.

So, out of options, I moved with Frank to Denver, we bought a frame at Target and as we hung up the photograph in the vestibule of our apartment we never mentioned the fifteen months of silence, because that is simply what shitty friends do. And I was comfortable with this. Frank got a job as a telemarketer. His paychecks were solid, and he helped me out, in a shameless effort to buy a drinking buddy. I pitched in when I could, but my schedule was designed to do as little work as possible because I hated substitute teaching so badly. Our relationship blossomed into a new level of immaturity, one where we would go out in Denver under the guise of two pals, and immediately disintegrate into reclusive depressive and aging flamboyant lothario.

I left my lunch with Mary at Cheyenne's that afternoon excited about the prospect of having my dreams shown at the Aztec. At that point in my life I was shameless enough to have nothing to hide from the public. I didn't have a girlfriend to make jealous, Mary had given me the green light, and Frank was about the only friend I had, and with the fistfuls of shit he'd served me over the years, I was ready to run the risk of damaging that relationship.

After lunch I walked down to the Aztec, into Paula Abbundai's chaotic office, and I demanded that she continue to show my movies. I signed the onion skin, and she quickly snatched it up. She picked up the phone, raised one eyebrow, expecting me to leave, but I sat down in the oxblood chair, instead. I said, "Paula, tell me a little bit about these movies."

“Okay. I actually don’t know where they came from; you’d have to tell me who your distributor is.”

“What do you mean, you don’t know where they came from?”

“I didn’t know where they came from initially. What I heard was that they started showing up one morning, and that is all that I know. Irene kept telling us to toss them in the trash, and so I did. Then she started watching them. Then she started showing them at this film festival we did a few months ago. After that she told us to show them before the previews, just for fun. All I know is that I come into work, and a reel of film is sitting by the back door, and that is the one we show in theater 1 that day.”

“Do you believe that the movies are my dreams?”

“Calvin, I don’t care.”

I went home and got Frank. He drove me to the Aztec, bought our tickets, and sat down after I placed my parka in the seat between us. I was nervous, because I didn’t know if I’d made the right decision. Frank wouldn’t shut up. He kept telling me inane movie facts that everyone knew. “Did you know that Rosebud is Citizen Kane’s sled? Did you know Marilyn Monroe was supposed to play Holly Golightly? Did you know *F.I.S.T.* was based on Jimmy Hoffa’s life?” The lights dimmed and this time, in the darkness, the short was preceded with—a film by Calvin Green.

INT. CALVIN’S high school bedroom.

Fade in on CALVIN sitting at his desk in an A-framed bedroom. Posters of musicians hang on the walls, a two-liter soda bottle has been utilized as a spittoon, Though it is night, no lights are on, yet, the room is lit by a blue glow. A deer walks behind CALVIN, who does not look up, though he can see the deer through the back of his head. When he turns around TRUMAN CAPOTE is sitting behind CALVIN, instead of the deer. CALVIN turns back around, again facing his desk, and through the back of his head he sees the deer, but when he turns around again it is TRUMAN CAPOTE, this time wearing an eye patch.

TRUMAN CAPOTE

Do you know anything about absinthe?

CALVIN

I like white cigars.

TRUMAN CAPOTE

That hardly qualifies. I was shooting a gun once, and it paid for my shoes.

Can you imagine what a treat it was?

CALVIN

No, I can't imagine that. I hope our friends don't find out.

MARY drives a car through the second story window, and climbs out carrying a sleeve of combs. TRUMAN CAPOTE, now reverted back to the deer, takes the sleeve from her and gallops through the gaping hole in the bedroom wall.

MARY

You're going to need those, go after them, now.

CALVIN

What's the point, you'll get more.

MARY

You're a coward

CALVIN

What's the point, you'll get more.

MARY

You're a coward

CALVIN disappears.

Cut to the middle of the ocean. CALVIN can't keep his head above water, but the sides of the ocean are getting closer. CALVIN keeps sinking beneath the water, and trying to get his hands on the nearing horizon.

Fade out.

“That’s this guy right here,” Frank shouted in the theater, and he started to applaud. Slowly, the applause caught on, and soon a whistle came from the back, and everyone was cheering. I stood and bowed, and when I sat back down, amidst the continuing ovation, Frank said, “Do we have to stay for the movie now?”

Twenty minutes later I was crammed into a booth at Gov's Park, on Frank's cell phone, telling my parents to get to Denver tomorrow night for the latest premiere of my dreams. Sure, *The Alchemy of My Misery is Mutable* was a ruinous disaster, but these movies were a proven success. They agreed to come down, and while they were still trying to get information out of me, the noise of the bar behind me made any actual conversation impossible.

Wednesday nights at Gov's Park was wing night which meant that it would be crowded, and Frank tried to use his newfound celebrity to his benefit. Though it would not be the standard operating procedure of a true lady's man to comb the wing joints for a woman of the evening, Frank found this demographic an adequate fit for his shapeless midsection and tendency to get too drunk to properly slur pick-up lines.

The architectural flaw of Gov's Park is that it is sectioned too small. Areas can get about three people and a pitcher into them before you have to start joining tables, or straddling people at the bar. Frank and I sat alone while we tried to contact everyone we knew. This took an upsettingly short time. Then we set to drinking. The thing about Frank was that he wasn't interested in the movies. He wanted to ask a few leading questions, but I realized after about an hour, he didn't think that I had anything to do with the films, and he didn't care at all. Of course, by this time, Frank had made eyes with a girl at the bar. He asked me to get another pitcher, and when I returned, she was at our table, wing sauce in her nails, too full to squeeze aside and let me sit. Frank suggested I stand, so she could have a seat, and began regaling her with stories of what it was to know the doyenne of the arthouse zeitgeist of Denver. She

hadn't been over to the Aztec in a while, and didn't know what Frank was talking about, or who I was. Frank suggested we play pool. However, they were only playing singles at the pool table, so he gave me a dollar.

At ten o'clock I was drunk, too drunk to still be playing pool. But my table was now occupied by Sally and Bethany, the girls that sat down when Frank switched tables to be closer to the wings girl and her friends, a fact I hadn't realized until after I had tried to retrieve my parka from Sally and Bethany. Finding Frank, I asked when we were going. Frank told me he was too drunk to drive. He suggested I go back and talk to Sally and Bethany. I tried to find Frank's keys in his pants' pockets and said, "Bring her if you want, if she'll come."

Frank said something, I couldn't hear, the Nuggets game was too loud, and he leered at me, and his face made me sympathize with whoever had the misfortune of being seduced by Frank. He resembled a date rapist more than a Don Juan. I took my hands out of his pockets because the heat of his breath was making me nauseated. I watched another game of pool. I didn't even have money down for the next game. When the guys at the pool table turned and asked if I was up, I threw up a bit in my mouth, and went to find Frank. Naturally, he had left with the wings girl. He had left with my parka, also.

I pushed into the freezing mountain air and pulled my T-shirt over my head as a hood. As I walked past the enormous windows of Gov's Park, the pool players pointed at me and laughed. I tried to run away, but I got lost. I'd been in Denver for a few years, but I still wasn't capable of navigating myself properly through Capitol

Hill. I rubbed my arms wildly. And breathed into my hands. Behind I could hear, “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry.” Bernie, arms as pink as mine, sprinted up the steep sidewalk along Logan Street. I stopped and stared at the ground. He ran by, and I decided to go into the next open place and get a cab.

The next available place was an upscale chain hotel, complete with lobby uniformly decorated to look like Peter Graves’s study on *A&E’s Biography*. I walked into the bar. Frozen sober, I decided to have a quick one; however, the bartender didn’t agree with my self-assessment and refused to serve me. He did so with such distaste that the entire hotel staff refused to call me a cab. Being dragged back into the frozen night, a voice stopped the scuffle, and I turned to see the thin man from Juniper’s reading. He exhaled visibly through his nose, and he adjusted the long coat on his shoulders. “You need a ride somewhere?” he asked.

I got into his car. It was already warm. I tried desperately hard not to let my head fall against the passenger door as he pulled away. “Thanks for the ride.”

“What did you say?”

I straightened myself up, and said, “Thank you for giving me a ride.”

“Where do you live?”

“What’s the worst part of Denver?”

He guessed right, and started toward Downing St.

“So, what were you up to tonight?”

“Latest premiere.”

“Yeah, how’d it go?”

“I think Truman Capote slipped into my subconscious through the—“

“I can’t understand you, you’re slurring.”

“What were you doing at that hotel?”

“I had dinner with my dad.”

“I had lunch with my mom.”

“I sympathize, comrade,” the thin man said.

We pulled up to my apartment, and I thanked him for the ride. “Listen,” he said. “Since we’ve bypassed the question of *do* you drink, maybe we should get one sometime.”

“Yeah, that’d be great. What’s your name?”

“Wellington Smith,” he said.

On my way inside, I stopped, clapped my hands together and took a long look at the picture of Frank and I in the vestibule of our apartment. I checked his bedroom, and he wasn’t there. I sat down on his bed, and waited for him to get home. I reached into the bedside table drawer and took out a book of matches. I went into the kitchen, gathered a pile of inked over newspapers, and brought them into Frank’s room. I crumpled them into a pyramid on his bed, sat down, lit a match, and watched it burn until the flame hit my fingers, thinking about how much of a mess setting Frank’s bed on fire would make.

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