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A LOOK TO BURST THE BRIGHTEST NEON HEARTS:
ATTEMPTS

by

ERIC FERSHTMAN
BA, University of Central Florida, 2009

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
in the Department of English
in the College of Arts and Humanities
at the University of Central Florida
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ABSTRACT

A Look to Burst the Brightest Neon Hearts is an inquiry, via constellation of stories diffuse in structure and subject matter, into the various (and really weird) phenomena comprising contemporary American existence. Cumulatively, the stories seek to: (1) kick up, like bottom feeders searching biogenous sediment, an underlying value system, and (2) explore how *language* both breastfeeds and like, *weans* this value system—e.g., what dark matter is it that tethers bromances to reality TV? Quantum mechanics to pop music? How can a country be responsible for both the world’s highest incarceration rates, and OKCupid¹? These stories also explore various American conceptions and embodiments of love, plotting out a strange attractor² of cultural reflection and refraction.

¹ Created by the dudes, Harvard men all, responsible for SparkNotes—*SparkNotes*, people! how’s it happen that you go from study guides to online dating? what’s the guiding principle? and like, why’s the Author’s profile so neglected? What’s he doing wrong?

(clears throat) Where were we?

Oh. Yes. OK. SparkNotes was itself later sold to Barnes and Noble. It’s *this* we’re driving at. This sort of thing, teeny startups (run actually by members of elite institutions) that sell out for big bucks, is a lovely example of a distortion of that classically American ideal of class mobility, and “pulling oneself up by one’s own bootstraps.” And too, when you consider the product, the fact that SparkNotes is most often used by high school/college students too lazy to read the *actual* book that the SparkNotes is meant to supplement, you might think about the complex interplay between the contemporary culture of convenience (the Author’s dependence on Wikipedia for ALL of the above a pretty concrete case-in-point) and the country’s deeply rooted Calvinist heritage. Or, you know, whatever.

² Culture’s a *dynamical*—constantly morphing; effluviating variables like it’s consumed some rancid crabmeat—system. It’s just *got* to be significant that strange attractors, those structures which describe the chaotic, or seemingly randomized, behavior of dynamical systems, are often Möbius-like, twisting and weird but *unbroken* loops.

“You’re probably doing your own thing right now. Not really sure where you’re going but doing all the things you need to to cover all the bases. This is good, don’t slip up, there, but remember to enjoy the ride. Don’t go so fast that you missed the gains of the journey once you’ve gotten to your destination.”³

—L Jahi James, October 28, 1988 – July 2, 2011

³ From a handwritten note addressed to himself, unearthed five months after his death.

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Where O where to begin! Family? OK! Parents, sister, little brother, step-siblings: Thank you for allowing the occasionally irritating and oft-silent heterophenomenological existence of a certain pale and lanky Author to impose on your own respective existences! This dense hot collection of atoms is forever grateful! DWL members, Madison Bernath, Brendon Barnes, Sean Ironman, Dianne Richardson, Allie Pinkerton, Nick Rupert: you're like, the absolute brightest constellation, winking pulsars in the sky-fabric, twerking electrons on the quantum grid, navigating with the Author—and more often than not tugging him along—the cosmic wash of this program! And to Jamie Poissant, Terry Thaxton, Jocelyn Bartkevicius, thank you thank you thank you for not just putting up with the bullshit and baggage, with moods and neuroses and questions and weird emails and more than occasional awkwardness, but, for real, for believing in the work here attempted. Lou Mindar, for being, or for so consistently pretending to be, the fella this indecisive Author would like to be someday, the standard candle by which the light from distant galaxies is measured. Andrew Forbes: thank you for looking at some of these stories when they were just so much primordial stew. If all you people were somehow constituted in a smartphone/tablet app, the Author would with great zeal head for Best Buy this instant and purchase a smartphone/tablet on credit (or maybe a monthly payment plan, if that's an option) and download you so hard!

TABLE OF CONTENTS

DUMPSTERS	1
ARE YOU FROM/ARE WE?	13
BEFORE THE HURRICANE CAME AND RIPPED US ALL APART	35
BRUCE'S LIFE	47
GRIEF #1	87
DESOLATION ROW	89
MAJESTIC CREATURES	110
A LOOK TO BURST THE BRIGHTEST NEON HEARTS	134
GRIEF #2	168
LITTLE SUNS	175
GRIEF #3	201
SMART ART	209
LOOKING FOR LANDON TRUJILLO	420
APPENDIX: READING LIST	458

Our heads, they pound!

Our hearts, they ache!

Shine a light, kid.

DUMPSTERS

—On 18th somewhere I don't know. Front of 693 sorta near Atlantic but going the other direction. The route's toward Commercial.

—693's the one you worked at? Well what time was it? I heard things we'll just say it like that, quote-unquote things about that store.

—What things?

—So this was early in the morning you said? You said you and Ronnie and Bugballs did the overnight ahead of inventory?

—You just heard me say it. I just said that right here, right in front of you. Hey. What are you writing. And like what things about 693.

—I'm writing your story down. You said it was a weird thing.

—What things about 693? Jesus why is this like pulling teeth with you?

—693. Only that everybody's fucking everybody. Only that somebody's fiancée fucked that same somebody's employee in the bathroom in the back by Produce. Only that you all can't get your shit together. That every, well the past few inventories you all've been nearly a hundred grand off. It's a dead-end store I guess.

—Yeah.

—Yeah? What do you mean yeah?

—Fuck what do you think what do I mean 'yeah'? I mean you're right. I mean it's shit. *Yeah.*

Can I get back to the story or...?

—You're the one who.

—The bus. Early morning to set the scene. Think about the sun in the morning like that. Like it's just like barely you know? Like it's soft. Anyway there were two people on it when I got on, a dude dressed like the Grim Reaper with a six-pack in his lap and—

—What's the six-pack of? You remember?

—I don't know it's that important? Say Magic Hat. Say Number Nine. You need a pen? No you know actually say Pabst Blue Ribbon.

—This one's...yeah. This one's done I think. Thanks. PBR you said? The philosopher's beer. Wittgenstein of beers.

—Other person on the bus is a girl, a teenager, probably fifteen sixteen. The fuck Wittgenstein of beer?...The girl looked 'bout it. Small jean skirt where her legs were basically popping out of it, and a white top that stopped a few inches short of her belly button, and that you could see she was wearing a pink-push up bra through it. Her tits all pushed together. Little stud in her belly button too.

—...

—What are you writing.

—Keep going, I'm listening.

—I wanna see what you got so far. How you put it.

—Just some notes. You'll see when it's done.

—Just let me see let me look... 'soft and innocent in the early morning light... across the interior of the bus in a rusty sort of bronze?...revealed handprints on the windowpanes, urgent and sad...'

—Don't have to read out loud.

—‘city flaked away from us, peeling itself back...beach...’

—You said this come on enough fuck give it, thank you. Jesus. But, so, what was I, oh yeah, you said this was Halloween?

—You got pretty penmanship.

—Your mom taught me.

—Mom jokes really? Haven’t heard that shit since I was twelve.

—Just gonna say it was Halloween.

—This was the day after Halloween, actually. Early morning of day after.

—What’s Grim Reaper doing?

—We’re driving along in silence for a while. Everybody’s looking out windows I think. I know I am. Every once in a while I turn around to sneak a look at the girl’s tits. The A/C’s cold as hell in like the bus, I remember. And well one time the girl straight catches me. Checking on her tits.

—Ha.

—These things let me tell you were *man* I don’t know, illegal. They were just...

—So you’re like truly a pedophile.

—No law against looking. And fuck you sir.

—The last time you even got laid was when.

—Anyway so she comes over and sits down next to me.

—She what? She doesn’t. No she doesn’t.

—She gets up I see she’s wearing these like little white angel wings with gold trim.

—...

—Give me that look man. She sits right seriously she sits right next to me and says let me see if I, don't want to mess it up oh yeah okay she says, 'Theoretically,' seriously she says 'Theoretically, like if you were my ex-boyfriend, would you rather come across me' let me see 'come across me hanging from the ceiling or, or with a bullet in my head?' She says, 'Be honest.'

—Be honest. I don't believe any of this. Be honest, sure. So you were honest I'm guessing.

—Well I was a wee bit drunk.

—Thought you said you worked the overnight.

—...

—Wow look at that smile. Glad to see that smile clearly confirming the rumors I heard about 693. Ronnie didn't say shit?

—It was Ronnie's idea. It was his idea. Since his wife left him he's been kinda a lot more fun. Depressed as shit, but more down you know. Down to do stuff I mean.

—What'd you say? To the girl on the bus?

—And by the way we *still* finished counting all the birds all the backstock on the wall and all the specials. *And* we blocked the whole fuckin store 'cause whoever closed did about the shittiest job you'll ever see.

—The girl on the bus.

—I said I don't know hanging I guess. She was leaning in because the bus was loud. Looked right down that shirt. Shit in heaven on that one. Grim Reaper chimes in that the girl's infuckinsane. Says 'What's fuckin wrong with you?' to her. Like that. What's like fuckin *wrong* with you?

—What'd the girl smell like? She smell like anything?

—Look who's the pervert now.

—For the story fuckface. All I got's dialogue from you so far. All I got's you and ho and Grim Reaper sitting on a bus talking.

—Well that's because mostly we were just sitting on a bus talking.

—Hardy-har.

—Fuck man I didn't ask you to write it down.

—I'm gonna say lilac. No actually I'll say deodorant. Deodorant and some kinda fruity shampoo. Like she just got out of the shower.

—Say whatever you want.

—What color's her hair. I'm picturing her looking like Taylor Swift.

—I don't know brown hair. She was Latina. She had like an accent. Say Eva Mendes. No better yet say Penelope Cruz.

—You remember that one girl that Bugballs...?

—Which one.

—The one I don't know the one who worked at I think, Off the Hookah. Hang on hand me the computer. I'll show you her. I think Bugballs is still friends with her on Facebook.

—Didn't that place move? Off the Hookah I mean? Didn't they move it?

—*This* girl now look at her *she* looks like Taylor Swift. She's who I'm thinking of for some reason when you're telling me this story.

—Listen pass the—yeah. Thanks.

—That girl Taylor Swift junior you remember, she, Bugballs' story about the time he went over while she was taking the shower.

—This show that's coming on right now man, *Catfish* is ridiculous. Watch. People get these two guys yeah look, look those guys right there to like investigate the people they've been having online relationships with. Investigate as in see if these people are who they say they are which, hint hint they never are.

—Yeah it looks, but you remember that story don't you. Bugballs goes over there and lets himself in and hides behind the door and when she comes out with just a towel on he, grabs her from behind and rips off her towel and puts a hand over her mouth and says, he says I think 'Don't scream don't even think about fuckin moving.' And this such stupidly stupid girl stayed with him even after that.

—I was about to say. I remember. And these people too man, these people gotta be the stupidest people though. I mean it's really sad to me this show. It's like against all, all the evidence they still believe or want to believe anyway that the online people are who they say they are. And most of the time it's somebody like a friend or something fuckin with them.

—But that's why I'm thinking Taylor Swift.

—That's why what? You want any of.

—...

—Good for you. Helps your anxiety.

—You even ever experienced anxiety, fuck. And fuck that's...

—Let it out.

—Where are we even. On the story. On your story.

—My story. You want another beer.

—You're on the bus. Come on.

—Well so, okay, okay let's see... Grim Reaper calls girl infuckinsane and says what the fuck's wrong with you, with her I mean, and she says back to him, 'It's people like you.' Then turns to me and says it. 'It's people like him, you know?' she says to me and I'm like, 'Is this a joke? Is this whole thing a joke? Like what's even happening here?'

—And so you all were where at this point?

—Jesus I don't know. Probably right around where 56th intersects 18th. And so the girl could you pass me that, that rolling paper? The girl thanks the girl says to me, 'Say it's between hanging and slitting my wrists.' I remember we were definitely at 56th then because the bus—

—Not on the computer fuckface come on! All that shit'll go into the keyboard—

—Chill. Here hold it for me for a minute then. But so yeah I remember we were definitely at 56th because the bus stopped and out the window there was a fatass crossing guard who was wearing like one of those orange vests, and sipping at her coffee and when the bus stopped she waved hello at us.

—This *is* a, here you go, this is a weird story.

—Just even wait. She tells me she's going over to her ex-boyfriend's place. She says, 'He said if I ever showed up again he'd kill me with his bare hands.'

—Why?

—That's what I said. I said 'Why?' and she just like shrugged. She said he'd thought she'd been cheating on him. She said though she hadn't been. The Grim Reaper was getting off the bus during this part, I remember. Without saying shit. Holding onto his six-pack like a football. And

finally there was, there were four or five new people who got on. And the girl said, 'I can see how it might have been *construed* that way, I can see how he might have thought that, but it was honestly all very unfair to me.'

—Slow down on that shit man. No, no thanks no. Seriously chill.

—What I'm...what I'm trying to do. It's my day off.

—Thought you were saving for a car.

—...

—What's, so but how's the saving coming. I thought you said you were saving for a car.

—I figure if I save a hundred, hundred ten a week plus my dad says he'll chip in a grand at Christmas, I'll be good by June. And plus there's the inventory bonus. Christmas bonus.

Dividend check.

—Even with your all's inventory being fucked up, you all get a bonus?

—Yeah it wasn't much. About a hundred. One oh seven fifty seven. I put it in the bank the other day.

—This, what is this show?

—I told you already man. It's where people get these two guys to investigate their relationships they've been having completely online.

—So that fatass bitch was lying to that poor fucker, saying she looked like *that*?

—I've seen this one. They really for real get together at the end.

—Oh man don't do it you're a young man. And oh I wanted to say remember Stephanie?

—Stephanie the girl that like constantly flaked on you Stephanie?

—She Facebook messaged me couple days ago.

—Saying what?

—Basically saying sorry and that she wants to get back together. She said sorry like three times in the message. Gave me some excuse about how she accidentally archived my messages and didn't see them till that day, the day she messaged me.

—Ha. Bullshit basically.

—Bullshit basically yeah. I just don't know why she would even message me though. It's been more than five months.

—Probably she just broke up with somebody and's looking for a quick rebound fuck and you're the chosen one.

—Could be. I don't know.

—Don't do that man. She'll fuck you over again believe me. You didn't respond to her yet did you. I say just fuck her and walk away. Seriously. You made that mistake how many times with her.

—Believe me I know. Believe me I know. I'm starting to think she's not even real. That I'm being messed with like the people on this show.

—You didn't respond to her yet did—

—Oh and by the way Rand and Lewis are officially Eskimo brothers.

—Who.

—Michelle. Few nights ago.

—That girl, man. Sure you don't want...?

—I say finish the thing about the girl on the bus. She's going over to her ex-boyfriend's to do what exactly?

—That I don't know. I think she wanted me to say to her 'Don't go over, don't kill yourself' or something. She said she wasn't pregnant or anything. I just said I said, 'Listen don't kill yourself. There's better ways to get your boyfriend's attention.'

—And what'd she say?

—She patted my arm and said 'Ex-boyfriend.' Like that.

—Oh shit.

—She was quiet for a little while after that. The bus was on Commercial by then. There wasn't really any traffic. I was real tired by then and I remember I was thinking about pretty much all the shit that had gone wrong or that I fucked up and doing like a What If thing with it. Like trying to figure out where I'd be if I hadn't fucked up so much. And then I thought about this one thing. When I was going into work around ten the night before, there was a dead cat in the bushes on the side of the building. Did I say that already?

—I don't remember any mention of dead cat. No.

—Yeah so there was a dead cat. All stretched out and its eyes bugging and its mouth wide open. Looked like the thing had been choked or something by some crazy homeless motherfucker. Orange cat like what's that comic that famous, they made a movie—

—Garfield.

—Garfield yeah so the thing really like, it really like got to me for some reason. I took it by the tail and tossed it in the Dumpster right there. And so the reason I'm mentioning it is because on the bus I was feeling sorta guilty about it. Like was it okay to, you know. So I turned and said to the girl 'Listen hey, you think throwing a dead cat in a Dumpster is a bad thing, or should it be buried.'

—She said what to that.

—Nothing. She was crying. She was like almost sobbing actually. Let me see what you.

—Why are you so—

—Come on let's see 'Thinking about all the ways I'd let myself down...from there to my recent plans for redemption?...discovered a dead cat in a shrub already transformed through rigor mortis...nearly broken down staring at it...' You make me sound like a huge pussy man.

—Is it accurate or what.

—You should say like some Penthouse shit. Say she starting rubbing on me. Took my hand and put it on her tit. Say she licked my face and tried to unzip me—

—None of that sounds all that profound. None of that sounds all that literary.

—Mister Writer over here. Some Great Gatsby shit. Next like what's-his-face dude that shot his head off with a shotgun.

—Hemingway but seriously what'd you say to her. Or did you not say anything.

—Well I said 'Look bitch.' No I'm just kidding. I just put my arm around her and said 'It's okay it's okay it's okay,' and she's crying and apologizing. And I was starting to feel like I don't know. I was still pretty drunk okay. I started to just sorta wish we'd swerve into oncoming traffic and collide with a semi or something.

—You what?

—...

—The fuck man. Why?

—Because—fuck just because. Because I don't know. Because I felt like I was doing something right for once. Because I had this thought that I'd never be a better person than I was right there

and then. I felt like, I felt like I don't know this is hard to explain. I felt like *heroic*. Jesus Christ man please just write that I fucked her. Second thought don't write anything. Let me, let me see that—

—Get out of here. Chill out man. Relax okay. Tell you what no one else'll see this. This is just me and you talking now. You really want to see it here. Take it seriously. But at least finish your story.

—...

—Come on.

—She says 'I'm really not pregnant I just don't know what to do.' She's telling me she loves him. Like that. 'I love him I just love him so much.' And I just, all I could say was 'I know I know.' I said 'Love.' I couldn't think of anything else to say.

—That's it?

—No well she pulled out a pill bottle and held it so I could see and asked me if I'd buy them off her. She said she was gonna use them to, you know. She was gonna swallow them down right before she knocked on her ex's door. I said no thanks. I mean we were on the bus with people watching. But she kept telling me she'd give them to me for half what she paid. I told her I only had ten and she said okay. I was her angel, she told me. She said I was saving her life.

ARE YOU FROM/ARE WE?

Kale came for the raw yellowfin tuna with its 1 to 4 ratio in grams of protein to body mass and its lovely selection of omega-3 fatty acids and minerals and its near-impossibly teensy calorie count, making it pretty much the perfect food for tired muscles worked anaerobically and deprived of oxygen four times weekly and crusted with lactate. That was, anyway, the original plan. But now he stands six-foot-seven or seventy-nine inches or 2.0066 meters in full impressive height in the parking lot of the Albertson's at the X of Dixie and Commercial speaking to a beautiful young woman of unknown identity. The late afternoon sun offers a rich and softly multihued glare that seems to hush the deep black of the freshly tarred and painted lot back into two dimensions, so that Kale again feels like he's standing on top of it, rather than the dizzying and uncomfortable sensation of within it.

He has this idea, does Kale, of himself as an essentially hearty soul that doesn't at all—the idea—mesh or gel or keep step with or even live within the same miserable stretch of solar-charred concrete as himself. He's been described as gentle and placid and sort of cute in a lumberjackish way and lord, how tall are you? and Jesus that young man should be strapping on pads and putting a custom-ordered helmet over that brick structure of a head and knocking the limbs from their sockets of less developmentally endowed boys (this back when he was thirteen and had, in just ten months, sprouted to a pinch over six feet from a previous height of five-foot-four—resulting in a few nasty bone and joint issues that never quite went away—along with an improbable thirty-two lb. weight gain fueled almost entirely by an assortment of Little Debbie

brand snacks). But he's never been described as hearty. He's hoping, re beautiful youngish clean-smelling woman, to soon move from identity unknown to origins unknown, and maybe, if some heartiness can soon be mustered up, from origins unknown to that ever-elusive-to-Kale origins discovered.

The Unknown Identity holds her sunglasses up to mouth, nibbles on the right stem, and watches Kale load her groceries into the powder-blue SUV. Kale has caught every little motion of hers, e.g. the fluid way she flipped open the cell phone she'd plucked from the purse hanging off the nook in her left arm, and how she'd elegantly lifted her tiny right foot containing Kale can only hypothesize the petitest toes imaginable to rest on the back of the bottom rack of the cart, and the odd little thing she'd done where she'd made a fist of her right hand for no reason and squeezed until her knuckles had turned white. She wears a perfume that Kale's nostrils suck up and his brain processes in a little miracle of convergence among the anterior olfactory nucleus, the olfactory tubercle, the high and mighty amygdala, the piriform complex, and the entorhinal complex, which involves a number of his olfactory sensory neurons and axons projecting into and out of different lobes in a procedure slower than the processing of light but faster than your average sport utility vehicle, which UI's SUV looks to be less powder-blue on second thought than sky-blue—the scent of UI then processed as clean and airy and light. That little sunglass-nibble thing she's doing just about drove him crazy when she started doing it. She's beautiful in a classical actress kind of way, despite the fitted pantsuit and jacket and lilac-colored blouse she sports. Kale can imagine her at the center of a Greek tragedy, or as the face of some 1950s ad campaign for whatever perfume she's wearing cross-marketed with the brand of her sunglasses, which brand Kale can't figure out because the logo is probably on the stem that's

being nibbled on. She's not quite young, in the way Kale originally had perceived, i.e. twenty-four to twenty-eight range, but rather somewhere between thirty-two and thirty-eight, estimating conservatively. And can't be more than 5'2", a buck-ten at most. Kale himself is a solid two-forty-two lbs., or 109.769 kgs metric, much of it in thick cords of muscle that give his taut skin the appearance of stretched latex, though not the feel of it, thankfully. He's almost painfully conscious of his size at all times, and even more so around women. This particular one he towers over in every conceivable dimension, despite attempts, both conscious and not, to hunch and shrink and appear less physically imposing than he is. *Grotesque* is the word Kale secretly uses for it, though he knows many people would brutally murder to have and use a body like his.

Kale has to maneuver the grocery bags around a golf bag filled with he can't help noticing a number of mud-caked, corroded-looking clubs, the most prominent of which, a strangely majestic looking Callaway driver with an obscenely oversized head, is in the worst shape of all, bent at an angle not at all conducive to playing golf with any handicap beneath like sixty. The Unknown Identity refuses to remark upon what Kale can only consider the puzzling presence of a set of golf clubs that look to be as tall or taller than her, and but so he dutifully arranges the plastic grocery bags around it, making sure the bread and eggs have some breathing room, all the while feeling the Unknown Identity's classically beautiful hazel eyes at his back. His swelling panic at the thought of successfully engaging her up to origins-discovered level causes a predictably sharp upsurge in body temperature, so that he can feel patches of heat within the pillows of his cheeks and along the ridge of his forehead, along with a directly correlated drop in perceived heartiness levels.

“You’re, like, my hero,” the Unknown Identity says from the blind spot to his left. Kale just goes on putting the finishing touches to the job, smiling and offering a short ha he’s hoping the Unknown Identity will perceive as humble and deflecting of her praise, though not, he hopes, at all dismissive or curt or rude. The back of her car smells like pine needles and body odor. An irradiant heat oozes around him, pours forth from the SUV in an odd lingering wave. Kale is officially sweating in a big way. He doesn’t want to wipe the sweat from his brow in front of Unknown Identity and risk triggering some sort of disgust/repugnance impulse. The position now becomes especially precarious for Kale, because he’s finished loading the groceries into the back of the car, and he doesn’t know whether to just turn around and let the Unknown Identity witness his face washed in a grotesque and profuse glaze of sweat, or wipe it off and alert Unknown Identity to sweat’s presence, plus have that nasty sweat stain just sitting there on his sleeve for her eyes to linger on as they natter on in a polite post-kind-gesture (i.e. Kale’s offering to help with the grocery loading in an extraordinarily rare and quickly fleeting moment of spontaneous maximum heartiness, the subsiding of which, of these moments, always leaves Kale depleted and vaguely resentful that he can’t somehow maintain maximum heartiness and like, kill it, socially, all the time) conversation. He half-turns then simply freezes, stuck in place, looking for all the world as though he’s just thrown his back out. Either Kale’s spindle neurons have stopped mid-fire in the anterior cingulate cortex or the clustered neurons of the striatum have blown a fuse or more broadly the flow’s been halted between the rational frontal lobes and the instinctual/emotional brain components, depending on particularities of theories of the neuroscience of decision-making still being hashed out. Most likely a number of neurons have paused to consider among a number of different cerebral fronts—coalition rather than

compartmentalization being key in the majority of brain functions. “Are you okay?” Unknown Identity asks, moving closer, now well within sweat perception range. Kale has disgust/repugged himself right into a paralyzing dilemma the outcome of which he couldn’t overstate the significance of, since it’s not all that often that he engages or is engaged by a woman, and even less often is the engagement anything more than a quick tight smile or a soft embarrassed hello or a kind of half-wave thing to one of the four girls who stand at the front desk of the gym he frequents—the gym itself a safe haven for Kale and his painful shyness, since it’s stocked mainly with old guys wearing bandannas and sleeveless Harley shirts and young guys with thready arms who steal awed looks at Kale through the big mirror that wraps around the gym as they place their ten lb. dumbbells back on the rack, a safe haven except for those fraught few seconds as Kale is coming or going, during which it’s pretty much mandatory for him to make eye contact with at least one of the girls up front, every one of them Unknown Identities, except for those rare times that come around once every few months, when Kale tries to psych himself up into at least asking the girls their names, since he sees them four times a week: on those rare times, the extra-intense psychic pressure exacts a hugely exhausting toll on Kale’s mental fortitude and keeps him from even being able to share a gaze with any of the up-front girls.

So this here’s like crunch time for Kale, in a bigtime way. He’s spent the majority of his adult life dreading/hoping for a situation like this one, a classic case of a pathological shyness-exhibitionism, in which a subject attempts to overcome or compensate for a self-perceived essential ‘boringness’ or ugliness by acting out in peculiar ways, which typically results in a second helping of alienation, reinforcing pathological shyness—really it’s just a vicious cycle, though kind of elegant if you stop to think about it. Unknown Identity places her hand on Kale’s

over-developed, thuggish back (from shoulder to massive shoulder an astounding 23.2 inches or 58.928 cm), and says, “Does it hurt?” Kale shakes his head, feels globules of sweat flop off and ting the plastic grocery bags.

With an electrochemical jolt his brain again commences the surreptitious flow of neurons. The path is laid and he just, he thinks, needs to *man up*.

So decides, does he, does Kale, to act this thing out. It’s pretty much the heartiest thing he can think to do. He wrenches his neck at a truly painful angle to bravely meet Unknown Identity’s classically beautiful hazel eyes, notes with pleasure their alarm, and says, “Maybe—shit—maybe if I, if we—if we can just move—fuck, yeah, that hurt, a little softer, maybe—there—there we go.” He’s now sitting on the trunk’s threshold.

Often, along with the pathological shyness comes an OCD parading as a kind of silent narcissism, in which the subject views his social inferiority with a smug disinterest, considering himself ‘above the fray,’ so to speak, of all human interaction, viewing the whole ‘society’ thing as an artifice, a construct, a *Matrix*-like false reality which only he seems to be able to pierce through and see the truth of. Bordering on megalomania, though clinically distinctly different. Often first deployed as defense or ‘coping’ mechanism. Neuroscience nowhere near psychology in terms of explaining so-called mental ‘disorders’. In Kale’s case, the OCD manifests itself as a fanatical and diligent observation of any and all women coupled with emotional isolation, the combination of which has brewed in many a psychopathic stalker. Kale compares and contrasts these women and, if they’re accompanied by a man, he compares himself—most often favorably—to that poor, unsuspecting schmuck, constructing hugely detailed fantasies of what it would be like if Kale and aforementioned any-and-all woman were to initiate a relationship—

while at the same time tricking himself into believing he's doing this with a cold disinterest—constructing these fantasies, most of which conclude in happily ever after-type scenarios, though some, admittedly, are more realistic, ending with vicious arguments that, as Kale imagines them, gets him kind of steamed up below the belt—all of this, remember, done for women *who don't even know Kale exists*, though he suspects they've grabbed eyefuls when he wasn't watching, and certainly like what they see, and perhaps they even now pine for this unusually tall fellow with the complex (asserting, in his convoluted thought process, a kind of 'willing suspension of disbelief' technique in regards to his perception of his body as grotesque in its excess size and definition) musculature who's unaware he's being observed (another classic psychological case, this time of projection), and etc., etc. At this certain moment Kale likes to think as he looks away to scan the parking lot that UI with her classically beautiful eyes tilted all the way to the left to get as much of Kale in her periphery as possible is studying him and assessing and possibly constructing fantasies involving their two naked bodies conjoined.

Unknown Identity gingerly moves her fingers around Kale's back, searching for that one tender spot. "How's this?" she says, and "Does this hurt?" and "What about here? Here?" and Kale just grits his face and clamps his eyes shut and shakes his head, inwardly counting down through six, five, four, and so on ginger finger prods, until she lands on a spot mid-low and slightly to the left of his spine. Then he lets out a little—hoping it doesn't come out creepy-sounding—grunt of pain, and spasms his back. Kale's lying or 'acting' here involving a self-projection from true context to alternate context; that self-projection neurologically engaging his pre-frontal and medial temporal-parietal lobe regions in an assortment of tasks all adding up to a sort of 'mental time-travel.'

“Jesus I’m sorry,” Unknown Identity says.

“Tsokay,” Kale pushes out.

Unknown Identity is so close that Kale completely forgets the sweat dilemma, torn all up on the inside by that fragrance of hers, like a slightly fancier and more subtle version of a just-out-of-the-shower scent. He can see a few beautiful pores blossoming on that fleshy area of upper cheek that’s untouched by blush or eyeliner. He has the odd thought that maybe she really is famous and he just doesn’t know it. She again nibbles on the stem of her sunglasses, this time the left stem, and what Kale wouldn’t give to be that shapely piece of designer co-polyamide. This is, by far, the most successful he’s been with a woman in nearly a year, unless you count the time months ago when he was at Fat Cat’s downtown with Jimmy and Sutton and that one girl came up and looked at him for a second and gave him an unexpected and kind of unpleasant hug for the tightness and duration, which had turned out to be accidental because she thought he was someone else—Kale had been counting that but not anymore. And meanwhile, Unknown Identity’s hand is again at Kale’s back, the look on her face all business. He inwardly thrills at her touch. “Just breathe easy,” she says, as she again zeroes in on the imaginary sore spot. This time, she places the heel of her palm against it and gives a soft, gradual push. Kale moans he thinks convincingly for the amount of time she takes to do this. “I’m thinking,” she says, taking a couple of seconds to nip at her lower lip with her upper teeth in a totally sexy and kind of inappropriate considering the circumstances way, “I’m thinking,” she says, again halting to this time nibble on the right stem of her sunglasses and place a warm hand on Kale’s back near alleged injury, “that maybe it’s a strained muscle. Like maybe you put too much torque into that last motion. I don’t know.”

Kale shrugs, grimaces. “This hasn’t ever happened before,” he says.

“Happens with big guys occasionally,” Unknown Identity responds. Kale doesn’t really know what to say to this. In the heartiest of ways, he’s overjoyed to note UI has observed the size and shape of his frame and has summed it up in a tidy concise way, her tone not revulsed upon pronouncing the word ‘big’ but rather factual, an it-is-what-it-is type of tenor to her throaty yet somehow light and effeminate voice, the voice of someone who’s smoked exactly the right amount of cigarettes. This small victory soon followed by the terrifying thought that maybe UI is masking or hiding her revulsion in an attempt to be polite. Kale begins to catalogue the size differences between them in terms of ratio—a 1.6, maybe 1.7 to 1, say, if we’re talking thighs, and probably a whopping 3 or even 4 if he’s flexing to 1 in the whole bicep/tricep area, and a more manageable—though the physics of possibly trying to kiss her without lifting her into the air confound him—1.15 to 1 in terms of head size. This mental action particularly complex for Kale, because he has to coordinate self-projection and calculation, large swaths of his brain absorbed in the task even as he perceives UI again making a fist out of her right hand.

“What’s your name, hon?” the Unknown asks.

“It’s Kale.”

“Kale?”

“Like the vegetable, yeah. K-a-l-e.”

“Kale like the vegetable. I’d recommend you hightail yourself over to a chiropractor, any chiropractor. Because this seems serious. Kind of really serious.”

The sun, at this time of the day, offers a palliative radiance, no real need to squint or head indoors or root around in the center console for sunglasses. Unknown Identity tucks hers into her

professional attire button-down shirt collar, rolls up her sleeves a couple of notches, revealing even-more-than-expected fragile looking wrists, giving Kale a headache in reconfiguring projected size-difference ratios. Cars rocket down Commercial through the X and bang over the railroad tracks just directly beyond on their way to US-1 or the beach, or else get stuck waiting at the light as other cars move along Dixie. Kale is ecstatic to realize that all this recent sitting has dried the sweat from his face. He feels hearty enough, despite the ambiguous ‘big guys’ previous comment, to request UI’s name, and he does so, in a way he hopes she perceives as casual, merely for informative and polite purposes—and in that way, she now becomes Isabella-or-just-Bella of unknown origins. He feels it might be pushing it to press for origins.

“Where’s your car? You think you can get over there?” Isabella-or-just-Bella asks.

“Maybe,” Kale says. He fakes an attempt to stand, gets about two-thirds of the way to full standing position, and then pretends to suddenly feel a flash of breathtaking agony, before collapsing again into a sitting position. This lying/acting thing really starting to give him an adrenal thrill for how easy it is.

“Jesus,” Isabella-or-just-Bella says. “I mean, you’re legitimately hurt here.”

“Yeah,” Kale agrees, prodding at his own back.

“It’s kind of painful just to watch you in pain,” she says.

“It’s no picnic,” he says, grunting. A few more exchanges of empathy, Kale believes, and he’ll have his opportunity to shift, conversation-wise, toward origins. Origins, of course, opening up a whole new bracket of personal inquiries and opportunities to really get to know her and have her get to know him beyond the grotesquely transfigured physical body. Just being comfortable enough to ask someone where they’re from is a big, big thing for Kale.

“I wonder if you lean on me, if we could get you to your car that way,” Isabella-or-just-Bella says. She’s poking around in her purse, and finally comes out with a cellphone, which she takes a quick look at and promptly buries again.

“I don’t know,” Kale says.

“Worth a shot,” she says, her face momentarily darkening in a way Kale doesn’t like the looks of. To point out the obvious in the scenario, that he, with all that bulk, would easily overwhelm her with those flimsy wrists, and that most probably they’d both end up falling to the ground, tweaking Kale’s supposed back injury even more, not to mention possibly injuring Isabella-or-just Bella, depending on how they fall, would, unfortunately, also be to draw attention to previously mentioned size difference, the projected ratios of which Kale has so patiently reconfigured and which he’s not especially keen on having Isabella-or-just-Bella focusing on and eliminating him as a possible sexual partner because of the circus-freak show they’d be between the sheets. He wants badly, in this moment, to take a gander at her chest area, but forces his gaze elsewhere at each approach. The porn Kale watches is not particularly adventuresome or kinky or fetishistic. He likes missionary and he likes reverse cow girl and sometimes blowjobs. It’s honestly never occurred to him to seek out the nastier stuff. In masturbatory fantasies he typically wears a hat or black socks and often performs that little number Tom Cruise did in *Risky Business*, which sometimes get him off-track in odd and un-analyzable ways.

“Come on,” Isabella-or-just-Bella says. She stands, takes his massive arm (with a wince now recalling the 20.3 inch/0.51562 meter circumference of his bicep region, which he’d measured and been secretly thrilled/worried about, i.e. It’s big/is it too big? just a couple of

weeks ago), puts it around her shoulder. Kale perceives he doesn't have much of a choice in the matter. As he stands, he grunts and grimaces and does quick-inhale type things to signify different levels and types of pain. Again with the self-projection brain functions needed to pretend. They move off in the direction of his car, which he can see from where they are: it's that close. Kale leans heavily on Isabella-or-just-Bella, probably if he were to estimate with about half of his body weight, with an over/under of three maybe four lbs. He displaces just enough body weight, in other words, to force her to visibly struggle beneath it, but not enough to actually tip the two of them over. "Jesus come on tough it out," Isabella-or-just-Bella says from under his arm. Kale just grunts, looks down at his size thirteen shoes, and then at her petite size like, honestly, twos, and hopes to god she hasn't already mentally eliminated him as a possible sexual partner. Doing a pretty good job of ignoring/repressing feelings of grotesquery, he feels. Each step brings a new, intriguing angle to her scent, his olfactory sensory neurons zinging around now with extra vigor. They walk in the awkward manner of infants. Kale is, at this point, cautiously optimistic on the heartiness front. He's pretty sure that when they reach his car and tuck him into the driver's seat and have their final terminating exchange, he'll be able to steer the conversation without much effort toward origins and maybe he'll be able to wrangle a promise out of her to look him up on any of the social media sites, he's on pretty much all of them—like most pathologically shy people, Kale usually does a lot better job of projecting heartiness/humor through the written word, and's been known to frequent and contribute to certain workout and training blogs and chat rooms in a style that's both witty and self-deprecating.

The newly-tarred parking lot is pleasant and smooth to drag a foot over. The sound of someone blasting hip-hop from a poorly-equipped sound system comes and goes unseen in the

manner of a train approaching and retreating. Cars' paint jobs flicker as loose constellations of cirrus clouds twist into and out of the sun's light like ribbons dragged along a tile floor. As Kale and Isabella-or-just-Bella reach the middle of a particular column, a Ford pickup halts gently and one burly fella wearing a like state-of-the-art gray muscle tee with contrast mesh panels for ventilation and quick-dry fabric for moisture management and even UV protection—the sort of shirt Kale's seen in the gym and has felt pangs of jealousy about but ultimately eschewed as a kind of tourist or poser piece of workout equipment—comes jumping out of the passenger side and says “What's the issue? Need some help?”

“Actually,” Isabella-or-just-Bella says, and here Kale can again feel the heat in his cheeks spike and only hope it's not a visible blush. The fella in the muscle tee has thick hairs sprouting from his shoulders that trail off as they reach his upper arms and again leaf wildly on his forearms all the way to his knuckles. His build somewhat in the strapping department, albeit with very little tone, Kale after a few tense seconds deeming him a non-threat. The fella seems to be making a serious effort to appear somber, thoughtful, but goes on grinning in spite of himself, the muscles beneath the skin on his face now doing a little twitchy jig, causing the fella to squint about ten or fifteen times in quick succession and in a truly odd moment curse all this fucken sunlight, wondering aloud where's all these fucken hurricanes he kept hearing about when he and his buddy—here he gestures up at the man in the driver's seat—first threw all their shit in the bed of the Ford and drove cross-country from northern TX. He looks almost mournful afterwards. Two or three cars pile up behind the Ford and let out long angry honks, and the fella in the driver's seat just lays into his own horn, really holds it down. Kale says, “I think we can manage here, actually. But thanks.” He pulls himself up quite a bit, so that now Isabella-or-just-

Bella is having to carry practically none of his weight. Still, she says, “If you wouldn’t mind—what’s your name?”

“Steve,” the fella says, still halfway stunned at his own little outburst. Kale’s brain now a total dark mystery—although certain regions do flicker in the limbic system—the question of the origins of emotion pretty much the crux of the debate between psychology and neuroscience. It’s pretty clear, though, he feels threatened now that Isabella-or-just-Bella has requested fella1’s name.

“Steve,” Isabella-or-just-Bella says, “If you wouldn’t mind, we could speed this little thing along. I’m sure Kale here—,” At the mention of his name, Kale goes through the roof with joy and possessiveness, “—wants to get to a chiropractor ASAP. And I know my perishables are just about to perish, from all this heat.”

At this moment one of the cars about six deep hazards a honk, and fella2 again goes to town on his own honker for so long that Kale begins to fear hearing damage. Fella1 waves at fella2, who gets out of the pickup and comes over and says, “What’s the problem? You guys need some help?” His hands are at his hips as he looks from one to the next to the next and back again, and quickly wheels around to give not the index, ring, or pinky finger to another car that’s dared to honk. The man seems particularly on edge and ready to avenge any perceived insult. He’s much smaller than his counterpart. Kale very probably can squat the weight of both of them probably 6-8 times, his glutes the size of hams you see in holiday commercials. Here, he can do nothing but stand and feel the faint flickers of a migraine-level headache approaching from all this stress. He rubs his tongue all up and down the roof and walls of his mouth, which has dried terribly, and rubs his lips together in a discreet way, not daring to reach into the pocket of his

size 30X36 jeans for the extra-strength with SPF 40 sun-blocking protection lip moisturizer he's stashed there. Heartiness approaches critical, like historic-level lows. He's unaware of the direction of Isabella-or-just-Bella's classically beautiful gaze, too nervous now to look, and he's kicking himself for not being suave or confident or hearty enough to just straight up person-to-person tell I-or-just-B—he can't even think her name at this point, is how much psychic baggage he's already carrying about the whole thing—about how he feels she's got classically good looks, and she must get this all the time but he's interested in her in a non-platonic way, and if she can bear to be around him for like thirty more minutes maybe they could head over to the Denny's across the street and have a cup of brew and get to know each other. Kale's worst fear is ending up alone, and not in like the traditional say-it-but-don't-really-believe-it-will-happen-way, but in an existentially overwhelming to the point of stomach knotting and forehead sweating way. Like he fears it because he knows 100% it's going to happen, because he doesn't have the mojo/confidence/whatever to just go up and ask a woman out, to the point where the thing has become a self-fulfilling prophecy, and he senses women can sense his fear of them, somehow, and are completely repulsed by it, and choose to offer the gift of coitus to lesser-deserving specimens reluctantly, hoping—these women—that Kale will man up and ask them out so they can ditch the losers, which in turn, this weird paradox-thing he twists himself into, typically triggers the smug disinterest 'coping' mechanism thing, where he pretends he doesn't care but's really obsessively fantasizing about any woman who crosses his eyeline, etc.

Kale is really cerebrally cruisin' for a bruisin' here.

Allostatic load just reaching the tipping point, so to speak, his brain's ultimate response to this high level of stress unknown. His thoughts more a cloud than a process, not taking up

much of traditional linear time, so that all this occurs between the moment the last consonant ‘p’ in *help* is pronounced with an interrogative lilt by fella2 and the first syllable ‘lis’ in *listen* is uttered by the deadly beautiful Isabella-or-just-Bella of unknown origins: “Listen,” she says, leaning forward to meet fella2’s eyes, “If you’d just come around here and get up under his arm, and Steve, if you’d take the other arm, then we can get him to his car pretty easily, I think.”

“What’s the issue?” fella2 says. “Some sort of leg thing? You slip and fall?” Fella1 gives fella2 a horrified look, as though the man’s just committed some appalling social faux-pas. Kale’s back is at this point starting to ache a bit in the other oblique, from being tilted ever-so-slightly all this time toward the side I-or-just-B is holding up. No matter how often he wets his lips, they just seem to not stay moisturized without some external lip-moisturizing help. He’s also, due to all the jostling, begun to sweat again, though at this point that’s the last of his worries.

“It’s his back,” I-or-just-B says. “Look, guys, we’re in kind of a hurry here. If you don’t want to help, me and the big lug will just continue on our merry way.”

“Who says we don’t want to help?” fella2 says. “Just curious was all. It’s not something you see every day, is all.” He steps around Kale and officially commences the switch-over. Kale is handled gingerly and his full 80.5-inch or 204.47-centimeter or just a shade over 2-meter wingspan is opened and then wrapped around two burly, hairy shoulders, and now I-or-just-B of unknown origins is practically trotting away back in the direction of her sky-blue SUV and the groceries Kale had so carefully arranged around the mysterious golf bag filled with damaged clubs—she’s trotting away, calling out “Good luck, hon!” and the full blunt force of the termination of the encounter in failure just annihilates Kale, brain-wise. Axons launch like

miniature nuclear missiles and bring about a fiery psychological/neurobiological apocalypse. The view, if mapped out on a brain-scan using state-of-the-art (fMRI) neuroimaging software, would be breathtaking and to risk pun mind-blowing. Kale shuts down. His entire nervous system ceases to function in a single glorious transcendent instant. His body lurches forward and then reels back as if stricken, and drops to pavement with a magnificent thud. The back of his skull fractures and the impact jars him into a sleep-paralysis-type state, his eyes open and roving inside the sockets but his limbs unresponsive, though in this case from shock rather than actual sleep paralysis. He's in true physical agony, now.

“Holy flying fuck!” fella2 cries out.

“I thought you had him,” fella1 says.

“I thought *you* had him,” fella2 responds.

“I thought I had him too,” fella1 admits.

Kale looks up at the two guys and can't quite comprehend. He's still within the realm of consciousness, but drops and lifts through different degrees, struggling at first to lift his head and elevate his thoughts to a crystal-clear timbre before finally settling for a degree-removed impression. It's like he's just below water trying to hear, or behind a thin curtain, or squinting and holding his hands clamped over his ears—an out-of-body experience if ever there was one, though the weirdness of the situation eludes him in his foggy mental state. His limbs are flailed at angles you'd typically only see in chalk outlines on crime-procedure TV shows, and he makes zero effort toward corralling them in, as the staggering physical pain doesn't quite recede but transforms into a not wholly unpleasant numbing sensation and Kale moves almost seamlessly from shock to detachment. His ears toll at a vicious monotonous pitch. The woman is there

again, standing over him, peering down, but he can't for the life of him locate her name anywhere in the left temporal lobe where he'd believed he stored it. He closes his eyes and feels the asphalt smooth and agreeably warm on his back and someone nudges him with a sneaker for a second before being admonished by someone else. His vision is shaded from all the gathering bodies. He can hear not one but two distinct voices disseminating the news loudly for other presumably curious passersby. Another person suggests an emergency 911 call. The air tastes strangely metallic, like blood. His lips dry and papery. He can't remember how he got here, like at all, but he's not especially worried about it. The woman is whispering "Kale? Kale?" in close proximity to his right ear, at each pronunciation of his name releasing a small puff of air that tickles his ear and smells vaguely minty and causes him to smile, still with his eyes closed. He has quite the nasty concussion, is the crowd's consensus. Ten or so people surround him now, and the group grows by the minute, as more people step out of their cars to see what's the holdup on this unusually long backup, or else leave the grocery store pushing their carts or with bags in hand and hear the crowd and let natural curiosity get the best of them. Kale has yet to move. The crowd's consensus begins to schism. A few people are seriously worried for this young man's life. One child in particular begins to sob uncontrollably and has to be taken away by her mother, who doesn't realize her own ill foreboding is what caused the child to cry in the first place, children being, for the most part, unbelievably empathetic and emotionally twitchy, albeit without the nuance of different shades of emotion. Bella sits Indian-style at Kale's side and watches his lips curve upward into a slight smile as she whispers his name. She chokes down the anger that's begun to well in her chest, tries to direct it, as per therapist Willa's request, into a productive or at least non self-destructive emotional response. She takes Kale's huge and gnarled

hand and gives it a squeeze, but gets no response. Her other hand a fist without her realizing, squeezing and loosening rhythmically. Wonders, does Bella, where on God's green motherfucking earth is that ambulance. She wants this thing taken off her shoulders. Her performance up to this point has been damn near flawless, so far as she can tell. She's been impossibly patient with just about every curve thrown her way. Not a single *fuck* or *shit* or *sonofafuckingbitch* uttered out loud. Of course, *of course*, these unbelievably shitty things had to happen to her on the one day she wakes up and decides to go ahead and attempt to be a reasonable and patient human being. Therapist Willa hammering away at her, at Bella, for weeks about a possible resolution for the whole flying-off-the-handle-often-and-always issue perhaps lying not in some dormant childhood trauma or deep dissatisfaction with the husband, Rodney—the sheer, startling fact of him being able to hold down a job, much less a 120K a year gig plus out-of-this-world benefits at a high-profile Miami accounting firm pretty much an open-shut argument for the competence Bella'd denied him having—but deep within Bella's psychosomatic self, an essential function gone haywire, so to speak, which, with much self-conscious and directed thought and action, could be fixed. 'Fixed' not therapist Willa's word, of course. But Bella'd been willing to give it a try, especially since homicidal urgings had become a tad ridiculous, e.g. the one Sunday evening when, out of the blue, she'd had the impulse to not just hack Rodney up into tiny little pieces but to actually dice him up really fine and season the pieces with some fresh garlic and toss him in a pot with chickpeas and onions and leeks and carrots and cabbage and tomatoes and potatoes and some parsley and cook it all down and make a nice olla podrida stew. She'd actually gone on the computer and looked up the recipe. So Bella figured it was time to take a taste of humble pie and throw herself at the mercy of therapist Willa,

who'd seemed not so much delighted as mystified and a bit skeptical that a formerly difficult and 'uncomprehending' advisee (never patient or client) would suddenly overnight be on board with the whole program.

Kale's hand is moist to the touch, and it takes every ounce of goodwill in Bella to continue to hold on to it and give it periodic squeezes. Her other hand continues unbeknownst to squeeze itself on her opposite side. The man's eyes are positively locked shut, giving him an air of deep thought or constipation. It had been nice of him, Bella had to admit, though unnecessary, to offer to load her groceries into the Lexus. She was astonished to discover a gratefulness rise up in her, astonished but pleased, despite impulse towards contrariness. She'd watched his muscles work beneath his long-sleeve tee with a little naughty thrill. Rodney, after all, had never, even in college, from what she'd seen of pictures, looked like *that*. Nor had he ever been particularly chivalrous or kind, which had suited Bella, who found his insolence and unwillingness to compromise even on the stupidest little thing like storing loaves of bread in the fridge for longer shelf time invigorating, and a solid match for her own ill temper. Therapist Willa had found that little informational tidbit especially compelling and relevant and from the look on her face quite sad.

The crowd's collective body heat is an exponentially rising thing, and Bella's doing her best to breathe deeply and not feel irritated about feeling so hot and boxed in. Occasionally a leg pushes up against her back and she does her very best to not wish that particular appendage a brutal mangling. Her hands squeeze now at the same pace, about a 62 squeeze/per minute rate, or half her heart's current rate. Her wrists burn. She tries to be totally up front with herself about her failures or lapses, so as not to forget she's a flawed human being, as suggested by therapist

Willa. Kale's making little unidentifiable noises, and Bella's immediately pulled back into the present, to the seriousness of the situation. Wonders where's that goddamned ambulance to come and relieve her of what she sees is her duty to stay by the poor guy's side. His lips move slightly but the noises he makes sound like they come from some other place. Therapist Willa had also suggested, in times when Bella's really itching to explode on someone, to try and project herself into the mind of the opposing combatant/victim. Looking down into the somewhat attractive face of this overgrown human being, Bella just blanks, empathy-wise. She imagines him in terrible agony, but this doesn't seem quite right, considering the small smile that's still affixed as he tries to speak or something. Really, these noises are kind of disconcerting. Like something between a burp and a gurgle. Bella then thinks maybe the poor man is kicking himself for even trying to do a nice thing for someone, like he thinks, she imagines, that this is what he gets for once stepping outside of his own problems and issues and attempting to make a legitimate connection with another human being—this feeling of perhaps regret or irony all mixed up in the feeling of physical pain and maybe embarrassment at being the center of a huge crowd's attention—this guy Kale striking Bella from the get-go as the shy type—he tried to do just a simple, nice thing, and is punished terribly for it by whatever god or force he believes in.

The yowl of the ambulance at last in the distance. Bella's unaware that her anger and irritation have melted away as she squeezes Kale's hand and truly tries to feel empathy for him. He continues to try to communicate. His eyes open and jangle around before locking on Bella in an intensely blank gaze that stops her dead in her tracks as far as feeling like she's been able to identify with him. He stares passively and the crowd is murmuring and already making room for an ambulance that's just pulled in to the parking lot and the noises he makes are slowly

synchronizing with the moving lips. Bella leans in closer and closer, to better hear. The young man speaks in gibberish, but in a questioning way, the same phrase again and again, altered slightly each time. The first word she makes out is 'where'.

BEFORE THE HURRICANE CAME AND RIPPED US ALL APART

The man filled twenty minutes changing the tire and only'd gotten so far as pulling the flat off before—knees dropped to asphalt smoked hot in the jeweling sun—going all devout. His wife and I stood over him. His two little kids: not twins, said the wife, everybody makes that mistake—they played a game in the clearing beyond the interstate. They leapt and shouted and were all around joyous-like in that sun-blasted field, two little caught-out ghouls.

The man's wife was speaking to me, leaning right into my ear.

“The hotel last night was just so *itchy*,” she said. “What was the name of that hotel, honey? It was a big chain? One of those big chains. I always confuse them.”

To himself the husband nodded, whispered. His fists clenched. He started to rock, then stopped. Like a, like a, sweating Buddha. The face on him.

“He okay?” I asked.

“Hon. Hon. Nort. Norton.” She failed to get his attention. “He's fine,” she said to me. “It's what he does when he feels stressed. He learned it from his AA sponsor. He swears by the man.”

I'd seen their dead car and them sad and useless beside it a hundred yards away. When I pulled up the wife was in the process of shoving the husband to the ground. The little boy was crying. His sister looked on. They saw my old Honda they all gaped, staring. I waved hello stepping out and put on a smile and offered my help, which the wife thankfully accepted and the husband, still on his ass on the side of the road, protested.

In the lull the wife stepped away and cupped a hand over her eyes and watched her kids. At the same moment the husband lifted his head and trained his vision all tender and pity-filled on her. Like some ancient family ritual. I felt like—I don't know—like I was in the way, or something.

“Sure you don't need a hand?” I said to the husband.

“Not unless you got a spare,” he said.

“You don't have a spare?”

“Where would I keep something like that?”

“Why'd you take the tire off?” I asked.

“Jesus, guy, why ask me that even?” he said.

The cars shot past in great numbers. Jolts of air and squeals of tire, compounded rubber sleeved and worn by the weight. No spare, really? The asphalt moaned baking. Scorched weeds in the clearing the little girl leaned down to pluck and sniff.

And meanwhile, the woman was always removing her glasses, holding them to the light, wiping them against her shirt.

“I almost wish I'd worn my contacts,” she said.

The man shone with sweat and grease, looked reverent and long-suffering, the way a man in his situation might look.

“You call triple-A?” he asked his wife.

“You asked me that before!”

“Who?” he said, looking from me to her.

“You!”

“Me what?”

Now she turned to me. “Is he fucking with me, do you think? I can never tell. His sense of humor.”

In the field, the kids screamed at each other. They were fist-fighting. Actually, the little boy had his arms up in fists without moving while the little girl occasionally reached out and slapped his cheek. Now I thought: I really should go.

The woman said to me, “He’s a recovering alcoholic, you know. He goes to those AA meetings every week. We’re proud of him, the kids and me. I go with him sometimes, like a date night kind of thing. We go to dinner afterwards and I pretend to order a glass of wine, just as a joke, and he pretends to order a beer.

“We have so much love, between us,” she went on, in a dreamy way. “Our love is like—I was saying this to him last night—it’s like, our love, it’s like this big green foggy cloud. What,” she called out to her husband, “did I say our love was like, hon? The wording is escaping me right now.”

“Whole goddamned day,” said the husband, to himself, for our benefit.

#

Savannah, Georgia: I just don’t know. Whether my little girl didn’t want to see me or not, or whether my wife with infinite patient wisdom looked down her nostrils at me and refused access—I’d been a fool to go.

For a while I wouldn’t leave and my wife’s cop boyfriend stood there on the beautiful lawn with me looking at the house. One of those big, jolly, violent men hulking along through this world. It seemed like he was genuinely concerned about me, and I admired him for it.

The sun fissured tremendous and hollow, a luminous hole you'd half expect snow to fall out of. The cop smelled like her as he shrugged.

"We're all just sad little sacks, aren't we?" he said. "Dumb soul-machines. Things that go bump in the night. You can't stop progress. You can't. I'm telling you." This was his first day off in ten days, he was telling me. He was drunk and freely offering vicious pats on the back. He was explaining why replacing me with him was the best bet for everybody. He knew I'd come around to his side of things. He was sure of it.

"Just live and nothing to it. Keep in shape. Have some fun. Fuck, you gotta fuck. Eat well. That kind of thing. I catch a lot of criminals, by the way. There's whisperings about detective is why I'm logging so much time. My pension'll be huge," he said.

I wasn't getting it.

"Come out here again I've no qualms or issues with bashing your head in against the edge of the sidewalk there," he explained. "I've seen it done," he said. "It's happened before to other people, so please don't make the mistake of thinking it can't or won't happen all over again to you." With a soft fist he thumped me on the back, whistled, shook his head. "You'll be okay," he said. "You'll figure it out. It probably seems like a low moment for you. But you'll figure it out. I can see you're a fighter. It's plain to see. Fight on, man. But not me. Don't try it on me. Because, you know, I think it was previously mentioned that I'd bash your head in, or something? Something like that, I think. I need a reload on this drink. Hang on."

#

The August heat swelling in great mysterious clattering clouds across the sky. Little palm tree buds dropped thudding through scorched air. The new asphalt which had been repaved

shimmered voluminously and bubbled with inoculated light coursed with rain potential. Food signs, hotels, detritus of existence, etc.: Into all of this I arrived, am—if you think about it, which I do—always arriving. A different man might well understand it as a gift, not a price, but I am who I am who am I. Beautiful. Well, I mean. The alligator. She might've been. If I'd been allowed to. But fuck it. Fuck it.

The small woman with whom I'd been living for something like two years stood out on the second-floor balcony of the apartment complex. Upon removing myself from the car, I saw her up there, and waved, to which she flicked the static ash off the tip of her cig. The stuffed alligator I was remembering a minute or so ago—I pulled it from the trunk, carried it up the stairs tucked as a football. It's pretty much all I'd brought with me to Savannah.

Said Patti, on the exhale, "Your phone."

"Welcome back," I said. "Return of the conqueror," I said. Went for the hug, but got no reply. Her smoke, which I typically tolerated, bobbed, and this was a weird vision, like some ancient hell-bent worm.

"You left your phone," she said. "I tried to call you."

"Tried to call me," I repeated.

"Peter's here. In the living room."

"Peter."

"He's watching TV," she said, looking at the door.

"I think maybe me and you should rethink again having a kid," I said. I waved the alligator at her face. "A boy, maybe. We could buy a house. Rent, at least."

“He says he’s going to kill you. If you don’t leave this time he says. He said ‘I’m gonna have to blow his brains out this time.’” Doing the thing, she was, where her hands start shaking. The butt extinguished in her fingers, her shorts riding up her thick legs in an achingly sensual way. Skin rippling hints of aging, just beneath ass. Sort of but not quite cellulite. The wife looked older, too, I began to think right there. The cop boyfriend, what, twenty-three, twenty-four? Strong guy, and smart. Me, the age of Christ at death. But minus all that glorious goddamned purpose.

“Tell me what you’re going to do,” she said. “I’m *not* calling the cops.” Her brother had once before shown up and put a gun to her temple and told me to go, which I did. For a while. But then I heard he was down in Florida City, and would be for a long time—possession? burglary? assault, maybe? some thrilling, insidious thing—and so I came around again.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I’m not sure. You’re not even asking me how it went.”

She gave me The Look. “How good could it have gone?” she said. “That thing.” She took a look at the gator, which I held by the neck at my side. Rain was pattering softly now, running the night colors together. There was humming thunder, too. Perforates of lightning strummed occasionally, wild things of the landscape. There were rumors of a massive hurricane hanging back just off the coast. Weathermen were promising annihilation in the coming days. I rapped my left-hand knuckles against the balcony railing. “Is there any beer left in the fridge?”

Peter—Pete—laughed suddenly, loudly, beyond the closed door.

“No. I don’t think so,” said Patti.

“Are you sure?”

“If you go in there, and he shoots you,” she said.

I thought, *you can't stop progress*. “We’re all just sad little sacks, aren’t we?” I said to her, positioning for a tender embrace.

“I hate it when you say things like that,” she said. “You sound like an idiot. We’re not in a movie.”

#

I was afraid of Pete, so I left. I just walked down the street, looking at things until I began to feel as good and brainless as the Creator must have felt after emptying himself onto the glued-together rocks of this little planet. The air burned sensationally, and smelled of it, pregnant on some destructive notion. The rain was a mist, tasted salty. I passed under street lamps with the cooling sensation of being baptized, and felt confident that all things would continue onward, that those people inside the walls of other apartments were struggling through their own private performances without the benefit of an audience. I would not stray into yet another dream, of that I was sure. My kid would know me. In time, at least.

Persevere, Tommy. Keep on keeping on, man. You can make it. Bad odds, American dream, etc. This ragged drifting loneliness you feel. Like not that the seams are coming apart but that there weren’t any seams to start? Like the world’s just bleeding colors without true boundaries? Like, like, like. Maybe a six-pack.

I stepped into the corner store right before the rain picked up. Who should I find in there but what’s-his-name, standing in front of the beer section looking all intent, like the best version of himself. This guy, a Tim or Kevin or Marc, had told me a sad story at a house party months ago. It was the way he told it. Like he’d honed the thing. Like he’d practiced in front of a mirror. Dead wife or son with cancer or some other such thing. A performance so affecting it was

revolting, I remembered. What was his name? Later on at that same party he'd been arguing with a gorgeous woman out in the backyard, and had at a certain point held up his hand for her to shut up, which she did. Cocked his head, squinted toward something in the distance, then motioned for the woman to go on already. I'd spoiled a week's sobriety that night, and on top of it drove home, like a douche. Like a douche. What *was* his...?

I went on over and said hello after hesitating, and shook the man's hand through his surprise. The front of him wasn't nearly so rigid and noble as the back, and in fact he looked a little beat, maybe already drunk, and was clearly failing to place me in the vast puddling reservoir of meat behind his eyes. I told him Eva's party, remember? The two kegs. You brought the Chardonnay nobody touched, I think. Tommy, I told him. We talked for a little while.

"Do you—you live around here?" he asked.

"Just up the street," I said.

He seemed startled to hear this. Had, during the course of chit-chat, picked a six-pack of Budweiser from the shelf. The bottles clanged, glared an opalescent brown beneath the fluorescent lights. And man, *man*, out the window, was it really coming down. A carping against the roof, almost a scrape against the big display windows.

"What's with that?" he said, pointing at the gator.

I'd forgotten about it. I said it was a gift; a gift for a little girl who turned four today.

This guy was skinny and maybe even not the guy I'd met at the party, I was beginning to realize, but I asked him how he was doing anyway, to which he smiled, and told me he was doing much better than before. It was cold in that convenience store, maybe because my clothes were damp, and a lot of the shelves were dusty. The place had a kind of indistinguishable odor:

the closest I could come to describing it is to say it smelled kind of like the pages of a book you'd forgotten about for years and years and just rediscovered. There was a big pyramid stack of cases of bottled water near the door. The city outside seemed to trickle away from us.

"I'm better now," the man had said, but—how could something like that possibly be true? At the checkout counter, something humiliating happened. The clerk rang up the six-pack, and it turned out the man didn't have enough money, not by a long shot.

He dug through his pockets two or three times, while the store clerk looked on. "I could have sworn—," he said, and looked up at the clerk, who only shrugged.

"Cost what it cost," said the clerk, and the man just stared. Hopelessly, earnestly. The same look as. No change. No spare? The clerk shrugged. "You could maybe buy a tallboy with that," he said.

There was something in the way the man carried himself, as he turned to put back the six-pack: as if he held something broken to his chest: a starchunk, his own beating heart. He seemed to be experiencing an important moment, is what I mean to say. Whether a door was opening or closing, I couldn't say.

I felt sorry for him. So I went up to the counter and offered to pay for the beer. "How much does he need?" I said.

"About four bucks," said the clerk.

"Four bucks."

The man was halfway down the snack aisle. He'd heard us, but he still wasn't looking. Didn't matter. I stuck the alligator under my arm and pulled out my wallet, forked over a five.

The clerk made the change, printed up the receipt, said, “Is that all?” to which I said, yeah—yeah, that was it.

#

Outside, as we stood under the overhang waiting for a break in the rain, the man thanked me. “You didn’t have to do that,” he said.

I thought about offering him the change, but decided against it. I told him don’t worry about it.

“Yes worry about it,” he said. “That was a big thing, man. Christ-like. Jesus.”

I didn’t know what to say, so I didn’t say anything. I was actually thinking about Patti and her brother. I wondered if I might discover both, or at least one of them, dead inside the apartment.

“Gawd,” said the man. He’d sat against the wall, pulled a Bud from the pack, and with a flourish, twisted the cap off. Offered me one, which, yes, I took: but look, I didn’t—did *not*—open it.

“You think it’ll let up?” he asked. “Or should I just go for it.” The wind shoved the rain at us as he said this, reached us, deeply back as deep as it got under that awning, as moisture, a kiss lingering.

“It’s a hurricane,” I told him, shrugging in the direction.

“Fuck off.”

“What?”

He took a swig, and then another. And then another. And then he finished the beer off, set it gently on the ground, and pulled from his pocket a cigarette pack. "I'm just dicking around," he said.

"Damn it," I said.

"I know a hurricane," he went on. "I was there for Andrew believe it or not. My house got blown away, in point of fact."

"Listen—,"

"You wouldn't've seen my wife, would you?"

"Your—what?"

"My wife. I know—I saw the two of you talking, that one time."

"Which one was supposed to be your wife?"

"What do you mean 'which one was supposed to be your wife'? Don't dick me around, man. Don't do it."

"I don't even know who your wife is. Who is your wife?"

"Somebody took her from me," he said. "Somebody took her, they stole her, and for what?"

I didn't know what to say.

"Tell me why," he said. "Tell me why, because there's the secret to life. I promise you. Been thinking it over for three years now. You tell me why, and I'll tell you the secret to life. Scout's honor."

"Do you want this back?" I said, holding out the unopened beer. "I don't actually want it."

“I’ll take it,” he said. “Yeah. Why not! I’ll take it.”

“Thanks,” I said.

BRUCE'S LIFE

Bruce watched his mother's little frame heave and rattle like a possessed chassis as she tried telling him about his daddy's death. Didn't matter so much to him, here in this second hour of forever on the outside of Dade CI in godforsaken Florida City, FL. Much more pressing the issue of just which steak to order, whether classic T-bone or rib-eye or New York strip or sirloin. He picked at his lip, chapped and beginning to peel near the right corner. Skin still somewhat tightly connected to lip, Bruce tried easing it off, then stopped, poked at it with his tongue. Something called a Chateaubriand, described as center cut from the top of the tenderloin, a razor-shaped chunk of cow just west—or east, depending on the way the cow is facing—of the rump. That one had Bruce curious, though not enough to take a chance. The half-dead skin on his lip distracting. He considered tearing it off, regardless of consequence. He felt like a good man at the end of a parable, having paid his price and then reached down with dumb, calloused hands and picked his soul from the gutter and brushed the dirt from its light. He'd picked this place out with about a month left in his sentence, imagining perky waitresses with large tits, TVs showcasing ten different baseball games, a big menu from which he'd order something different each time he imagined it, walls filled with sports and music memorabilia—but the place was far different, simpler: bare walls, dim lights, no TVs, a somber waitress wearing a black-button down shirt that he'd had to send away twice already, because he'd said to himself walking in no regrets on what he orders.

The cool air electrified his skin, had him fidgeting. His tongue continued to find the little flap of skin on his lip, continued to burrow beneath it like a child under tucked-in sheets, urging it loose. It felt glued-on. He could taste blood. He tried leaving it alone, upturned his face, smiled at his mother. A small lamp hung from the ceiling giving out ramshackle light that disguised the thick smear of makeup on her face. Picking him up she'd looked like an old unwashed windowpane. She'd been waiting in his daddy's Ford pickup, and to see her face as he came trudging along in the gray heat was to see something Bruce hadn't seen in years: pure, unfiltered love, all for him. His blood gone courting along his veins, lifting his skin off its foundation. He was happy. He knew this. It was good to see her. She'd directed the old Ford onto the Turnpike heading north to Broward County, and for the first time in a while, Bruce'd allowed his thoughts to drift outward, toward some vaguely pleasant future.

But here she was now, sobbing like an old fool, fumbling with her dress, her purse, anything in front of her—and Bruce holding his smile, the light shifting out of his eyes, the tinny taste of blood on the tip of his tongue like a painful unspoken word.

His daddy'd died about a year and a half in, of a heart attack. His mother had been at work. They found him clutching at his heart like it might suddenly rip out and roll away to freedom. There'd been a nice funeral. His mother hadn't wanted to bother Bruce with the news while he was in prison, seeing as how he'd seemed so focused in there, and just so—well just so *good*.

Bruce loosened his tie, and then a minute later took it off and unbuttoned the top button of his shirt. His tongue searched for the flap. Food came to the booth across, to great fanfare. The oohing and laughing and silverware scraping had Bruce again setting his mind to steak paradox:

would the presence of a certain chunk of cow satisfy, or only serve to highlight, the absence of other, maybe juicier chunks of cow. He was hungry. A couple of rolls left on their table, but that wouldn't do the trick. Besides, his mother had already used up the butter.

“Oh—oh my god—it's beautiful,” the man at the table across was saying, and Bruce peeked and could see the steak cut open, a magnificent shade between red and pink, juice pooling on the plate.

“*Man,*” Bruce said, not unhappily. His own personalized steak somewhere in the kitchen right now, waiting on him. He focused on it, was already smiling again, eyes back on the menu, to the diagram of the cow and various cuts. His hand, without him knowing it, had again moved up to the lip, the flap now pinched between thumb and forefinger. A slow pressure applied in pulling, the progress painful in a not completely conscious way.

“Are you okay?” his mother asked, dabbing at her raccoon eyes with a napkin. “I need to tell you, I've been sweating this confession for a year. It's not easy for me. Your daddy, he...” but she couldn't finish. She went to crying again, tasting her own tears. It'd never really been that hard to get her started: Bruce in kindergarten, Bruce in high school, Bruce's first offense, Bruce's high school diploma, his daddy's raise, his daddy's layoff—his mother cried and cried. You could fill a bucket with her tears. He let her go to it. It didn't bother him anymore. It almost felt good, being confronted with such a familiar sight.

With a final strong yank, the flap of skin tore off. Blood issued forth. The thing stung like a motherfucker. Like the lip version of a scab picked about a week too soon. He pressed a napkin to it, looked around. Across the restaurant, he could see the bar and its pretty tender, a brunette with a serious face. Bruce decided, as the pain began to settle into a manageable irritation, he

might like a drink. All the old frozen pleasures uncovered and laid to thaw, waiting for rediscovery. His life handed back to him, clean and aching. He set the napkin down, cracked his fingers under the table.

“Honey,” his mother said.

“Give me liberty, *and* give me death,” he said. He laughed, shook his head.

“Nothing’s funny about this.”

“I think I’d like a drink. You wouldn’t happen to have five dollars, would you?”

His mother went shoveling into her purse, came out with a wad of cash. She held it there, in front of him. “Now I only got fifty dollars for the whole shebang, so make it count. Bruce.”

Bruce reached over the table and grabbed onto it and stuffed it in his pocket. He stood, could nearly taste the flavor of the steak next door.

“Just a few minutes,” he said. “Just let me grab a drink and I’ll bring it right back. You want something?”

“You can’t just order here?” she asked, suspicious.

“I’ll be right back. I want to take a look. You want something, yes or no?”

“No, hon.” She dabbed an eye theatrically. “You go ahead.”

Bruce took his mother’s hand, held it, looked into her green bottle eyes and kissed the back of it. She smiled sadly.

“Nothing to worry about,” he said.

He worked through the room toward the bar. His hand in his pocket, wrapped around the folded bills. The soft house lights churned the scene into a velvet haze. Each time his tongue swept over the wound, its moisture caused a flare in pain. Faces were open and friendly and

didn't seem to have any secrets to give up. The bartender eyed him and smiled and leaned forward to hear him order. Bruce took a peek down her shirt. He double-upped on a Jack and took it to the end of the bar. The first sip harsh on his tongue, bristly down his throat. The alcohol cauterized the lip, caused a tremendous, quick-inhale type of pain. On the second sip, a sweetish aftertaste. All pain ceased, almost miraculously. From there on out, it was easy. He downed the drink and bought another. Pondered, Bruce did, upon the whole steak controversy he was currently embroiled in, finally let it go for the moment, deciding she—that is, the steak—would choose him in due time. The bartender gently poured, careful with the measuring, and swept hair out of her face, tucked it behind her ear. He felt content, looking at her. There was a tiny tattoo of a winking face on the inside of her wrist, which he could see as she moved and her sleeve pulled up her arm. He tossed off the second drink right there in front of her, and ordered a third. The bartender poured without speaking, without looking Bruce in the eye, and moved to the other side of the bar when she finished. A quiet jazz waltzed around him. He watched the bartender for a couple of minutes, but she never turned back around. His brain gone wet and fleshy with alcohol already, but he remembered the steak and stood, leaving twenty-five—hell, thirty—on the counter. Walked back over to the booth, and tossed the rest of the cash on the table.

“Waitress come back yet?” he asked.

His mother didn't say a word, just gave him a glare that said she meant business.

“What?” He looked over at the table across, saw that not only was the neighbor steak gone, but the family too, the deep wood tones wiped and gleaming, set up for a new customer. His mother reached across the table and pinched him, hard.

“Fuck,” he said, withdrawing his arm. “Why didn’t you come get me?” he asked, already knowing full well the answer, that she preferred stewing in her own sense of injustice, that she’d sit on something like this for years and bring it out to bite you in the ass on some other occasion. She’d probably been sitting there staring at him the whole goddamned time.

“We’re leaving,” she said, sliding out of the booth. She reached and took her purse and slid it over her shoulder. Then she walked out of the restaurant. Bruce sat for a minute, thought about the stay-or-follow decision he was about to make, how choosing one or the other might taint the rest of the night, then, with a shake of the head, followed. Stuck a hand down his throat and ripped a smile from his heart and pasted it on his face. They drove home in silence. His head a tidal wave between contracting walls. The white blood cells had packed themselves into a weirdly-textured case on the corner of his lip which he couldn’t—despite continuous internal bargaining—resist tonguing. The ride was filled with scenes he’d witnessed before. He wasn’t interested in the sun shuddering as it tore itself open, or the storm clouds to the east, over the coast. His mother turned on the radio, spun the dial looking for a station to listen to, then turned it off. Bruce fell asleep, and was woken by a pinch in the ribs.

“Shit! Stop doing that!”

“Come on and pay your respects to your daddy,” his mother said.

“You got any cigarettes?”

“I quit smoking. You know that.”

“How about a steak? You got one of those in here?”

“Fresh out,” she said.

“When’d you quit smoking?”

“Five years ago. You know it, too. You knew that already. Now get out of the goddamned car.”

“Not even one? Not even one little cigarette lying around here?” Bruce was searching in the center console, the glove compartment, the little pockets on the doors. The whole place cleaned out. “Fuck,” he said.

“He’s waiting,” she said.

“Who?”

“Your daddy’s waiting to see you. There’s a real nice headstone. I want you to see it.”

Bruce looked out over the field, at the rows of graves and chunks of uneven sod, dead patches of grass wrapped around little headstones. “Maybe if you find me a cigarette,” he said.

“Please,” his mother said. The sky hadn’t dumped rain on them yet, but the clouds strung together and colored a deep gray and were starting to grumble and toss off flares of blue. The word Chateaubriand stuck in his head, flipped through various pronunciations, until it became nothing at all.

“He’s not going anywhere,” he responded.

His mother gave him a hard-edged stare and then turned and walked off, and was gone for nearly twenty minutes. Bruce spent the time planning out his night. He’d call up the old friends and they’d pick him up and drive him downtown and buy him drinks, which he’d gulp down one before the next. There might be a woman. A visit to the strip club. A real steak, a Chato- or Chat-u-brand or –bree-and, or whatever. At least a couple of burgers. He laid the path a brick at a time, lingering on the details. His mother came running back when the rain began. She turned on the truck, revved it, had the windshield wipers picking up and laying down across

the pane as they drove back home. The house was the same, except it was scrubbed free of any traces of his daddy. Bruce didn't even bother inspecting every room. Just found his own, the same old comforter and sheets and movie posters on the wall, the same stains on the carpet, the same clothes in the closet, even the same calendar, from four years earlier, still set on April—a dramatic touch on his mother's part. Bruce ripped it down, threw it away, and noticed, on the desk, something new: a picture of his daddy when he was eighteen and freshly enlisted, in his Army uniform before he'd been sent over to Vietnam as the war spiraled down to a dirty conclusion. He hadn't seen the photo since he was a kid and his daddy'd have his mom put it out in the living room if people were coming over. That practice had fallen away somewhere down the line, but Bruce couldn't say when, or if there'd been a reason. Couldn't say why, either, his daddy hadn't just kept the thing in the living room all the time, that thought specifically, Bruce could remember, bothering him for a while as a kid.

Bruce tried calling his friends, but none of them picked up. The rain drummed against the roof of the house. Night chipped away at the day, like an acid going through skin. He watched some TV, and fell asleep.

#

“Another coffee? No? Okay. Listen, we'll drop this line for a while and move in another direction. Is that okay?”

“You're the boss.”

“I want to know about the after. You're in the hospital. What happens there?”

“They wrapped my ear and gave me some meds and then the cops came and cuffed me to the hospital bed.”

“They kept you there overnight.”

“Overnight yeah. I think.”

“Friends? Parents? Did anyone get a call?”

“My mom came. We didn’t have much to say to each other.”

“Nobody else?”

“Nobody else.”

“Think now: *really* no one else was there? I’m hinting at somebody in particular, if you’re not catching my drift.”

#

He woke up just after four feeling blue and thirsty, and a little unsure as to where he was. His cell rose in his mind’s eye and lingered and had Bruce feeling disappointed for a minute or two. He’d had this same problem in prison occasionally, only reversed: He’d wake thinking he was home, only to have the truth strangle him and leave him with a fury that would take days to clear away. He sat a minute, allowed it to come back to him, the full knowledge of his found-again freedom. The fact of it delighted him at first, settled down then into a vague thing near his stomach, an anxiety almost. Been waiting on this four years and now it’s here, and he’d never really bothered to think of anything specific to do with it. Or, the things he’d thought he might do now felt impossible. His lips dried and papery, like tissue. He felt them, pinched the upper lip between thumb and forefinger, marveled at its foreignness, then wet them, only to have them dry again a minute later. The strange lip scab from earlier already adjusted to.

The house was quiet, chewed on by plaque-ridden teeth, dark and hot. He stood and opened a window. He waded through the darkness toward the kitchen. His hand occasionally

reaching out for support, touching picture frames, a happy child in a baseball uniform, number 28, near the top of the league in strikeouts and stolen base attempts...a Batman costume for Halloween, the horns of the mask torn off because they'd felt weird and made him feel uneasy looking at himself in the mirror...a teenager standing next to an old black Chevy Blazer that would break down in a year in the parking lot of a waterpark, and then again in the parking lot of another waterpark—it occurred to Bruce not for the first time that somewhere down that line he'd jumped the tracks. A cluster of bad decisions. It gave him a little thrill at the time, to know he was carrying his soul beyond the visible boundaries. But of course he'd been dragged back into the light. And it took him a while, but he was thankful.

On reaching the end of the hallway, he could see the kitchen lights spilling into the living room. He moved softly along the wall and peeked in. A man sat at the table with his back turned, and brought a fork to his mouth every now and again. His neck scorched red, his brown hair a cowlicked forest—Bruce didn't recognize him. Briefly, Bruce imagined he was hallucinating an older version of himself enjoying a particularly fine cut of steak. Then just as briefly he'd dismissed the idea, and taken to a new one, strange man as manifestation of belated grief over the death of his daddy. He stepped into the light. Cracked his knuckles. The man turned around, jerked in his chair when he saw Bruce. "Jesus fucking Christ," he said, holding onto his heart. "You scared the shit out of me."

Bruce didn't say a word. The man took another few bites, then stood and set his plate in the sink.

"Look at you," the man said. "You scared me shitless. I couldn't shit if I tried to right now."

“Are you some kind of ghost or something?” Bruce asked.

The man gave him a questioning look, his brows pushing down on his eyes. Then he shook his head, gave a bright little grin, his sunburned cheeks growing an even darker red, so he looked almost like he was holding his breath. “Hell. We’ll meet later. I’m too tired for this right now.” He took a few steps, raised his hands in surrender when he saw Bruce tightening for a struggle. “Just going to get my things, then I’m off to work,” he said. Bruce stayed right where he was, feeling confused as ever, as the man walked down the hallway, reemerged with a backpack, wearing a white sweat-stained headband on his forehead, and then left out the front door. “Congratulations, by the way,” the man said, before he left.

#

The next morning, after his mother left for work, Bruce stripped and looked up pictures of naked women on the computer, because the internet was too slow for videos. Afterwards, he showered and stepped out and walked down Dixie looking for a convenience store. The sun was busy laying its white brick over the asphalt. Cars shot past like overgrown bottlecaps. Tumbledown mechanic shops sat along the street, housing broken cars, power tools muttering and screeching like soul suckers trying to draw life from the long dead. Low-cost retirement communities stacked behind, towering over the rest of the flat landscape. It all looked new and good to Bruce, who felt like a creator admiring his handiwork. The mystery man long since lurched out of his mind’s eye, Bruce deciding, when nothing he could fathom turned up missing, not to linger. He smiled and hummed a little R&B tune he’d picked up the night before, and finally found a gas station, where he bought a twelve-pack of Bud and a carton of Camels with some cash he’d found in his mother’s bedroom. He planned on spending the day drunk.

Just outside the convenience store, Bruce opened the carton and lit his first cigarette and took a long drag. An airplane streaked along the skyline for a while, bending clouds into words he couldn't read. The cars moved on the road, heading to and from places he couldn't even begin to imagine. Bruce lit a second cigarette. The trashcan nearby reeked of old meat and cheap tequila. A bus stopped just down the road, and let out a woman who headed straight for the convenience store. She was soaked through, the black straps of her bra showing through a t-shirt. She hugged herself tenderly and gave Bruce a fearful smile before heading into the store. He smiled back, couldn't remember after if he'd looked longer at her face or her chest, decided he should've offered her a cigarette, and then quickly left, because he didn't want to give himself another opportunity to fail to speak to her. The whole issue of readjusting to women was one he hadn't even begun to unpack.

Bruce got about halfway home before the rain started. Against the glare of the sun, it looked like sheets of steam moving away and up, collecting again into heavy wrinkles of clouds. Bruce trotted along. His soaked shirt flapped against his chest. Water stung in his eyes. His hair mopped his forehead. A stuttering wind at his back. He laughed at the ridiculousness of it. He started to sprint. As he reached his street, the rain broke off and the heat rushed in. The asphalt, in the full eye of the sun, looked littered with spent bullet casings, shattered light bulbs, a million little winking sparks. A fallen world, reveling in itself. Bruce peeked in the plastic bag, hoped the carton hadn't been crushed by the twelve-pack during the shuffle.

#

The man came back around three and knocked on the door and threw his hands up in surrender again when Bruce opened it, introducing himself as Donald Hofferma, Don for short,

extending a hand caked in grime and covered over with a powdery substance, later identified as crushed concrete. The smell of sweat and body odor came tumbling off him, almost visible, combed over but not eradicated by the A/C washing over them. Don, independent contractor and tenant, implant from Texas years ago—a regular renaissance man, yes sir. Mom hadn't mentioned him? No wonder about this morning. His laughter hardy and earned, a chuckle-turned-guffaw that left him red and breathless. He shook his head. He ripped off his headband, ran a hand through his hair. Every movement displaced a pocket of smell. He'd been renting the third room for over a year.

Bruce was about six beers in. The name went swimming through and out his head. He wiped his hands on his pants and offered the man a beer, said he had to go get it himself, though. Don went and fished it out of the fridge, sat in the LA-Z-Boy next to the couch.

“You're renting that third room out, huh?” Bruce said. The truth was, he'd been feeling lonely and bored, home alone. TV wasn't quite doing it for him.

“Yep,” Don said. He took a pull from the beer, picked at his shirt, stained through with sweat, seemed to find something on there he didn't like, went scrubbing at it with his knuckles before giving up and fanning himself with that same shirt, wiping at his brow with a sleeve.

“Used to be my daddy—dad's—office,” Bruce said, watching him. “Not an office, really. Like a den. It's where he watched TV.”

“This TV here?” Don said, gesturing.

Bruce gave it a closer look. “Shit,” he said. He hadn't even noticed.

“I was sorry to hear about your dad,” Don said. “Your mom let me know about it when I first moved in.”

“What’s your name again?”

“Donald Hofferma. It’s Don.” He leaned forward, held the beer in both hands, flicked at the label with the nail of his thumb. He’d already wrapped the headband around the neck in a gesture Bruce found violent, repulsive, though he couldn’t say why. “I done a lot of work around this place,” he added, looking up and around along the point where the ceiling met the walls. “But I’m sure your dad did, too. It was in a sort of a state of disrepair when I first came along.”

They sat for a minute, considering their beers.

“Jesus,” Don said, looking around. He chuckled softly. “I did a lot of work. Laid some new tile on the roof and in the kitchen, fixed the plumbing, did some re-grouting in the showers, laid some new carpet, if you’ll notice and please be careful about, and all new sod in the back, which took a couple times to take, but looks real nice now. You seen it, yet, back there? Your mom planted a little garden. Nothing special, just some flowers, tomato plants.”

“You like living here, Don?” Bruce asked, making use of the man’s name so as not to forget it again. “How much is she charging you to rent?”

Don wasn’t listening, though. His eyes squinted and he tipped his chin up and started sniffing the air like a dog. “Place smells like cigarette smoke,” he said, after a minute. “You been smoking in here?”

“No,” Bruce lied.

“You sure? Your mom told me you were a smoker. Not a healthy habit.”

“I don’t smoke. Not at all. Not one cigarette,” Bruce said. “Clean lungs, right here,” he continued, touching his chest. “Like fish in a mountain lake.”

“I don’t think your mom would lie to me,” Don said, his face going dark.

“She’s probably laboring under a false impression,” Bruce said. “Probably it’s nothing but a misunderstanding.” Didn’t mention, though he could’ve—and took this as a sign of increasing maturity—Don’s own peculiar fragrance, which had begun to smother the room.

Don set his beer down and went into the kitchen and came back with a can of air freshener, held the trigger down and sprayed the whole room, its mist dropping gently, like the silent moment finishing a fireworks spectacle. Bruce covered his beer, could still taste the soap and chemicals on his lips. Instead of canceling Don’s scent, the air freshener enhanced it, gave it a funk dimension.

“Listen,” Don said, with a strange sort of focus, still holding the can as if he might press the trigger again, “If you want the truth, your mom and me’ve sort of been seeing each other. That’s what she was supposed to be telling you last night, but I’m guessing the topic wasn’t touched.”

Bruce pulled at his beer, tasted wheat and chemical-tinged lavender. “Shit’s ruined,” he said, setting it on the coffee table. “Do me a favor and get me another beer,” he said to Don, who didn’t move.

“I heard you robbed somebody,” Don said. “That true?”

“Partly,” Bruce said.

“And you got shot? How did that feel?”

Bruce instinctively reached for his ear. The shot had torn off some cartilage, left him half-deaf for a while. Really it’d just been a sound, from what he could remember. That’d been the whole of it, for him. He’d tried to hold on to it, to turn it into a shrine, so to speak, that he’d

kneel at when he was feeling low or restless, like as a motivational tactic or something, but it didn't mean much to him anymore.

Don said, "It must've hurt."

"It must've," Bruce agreed. "It probably hurt like all goddamned hell."

#

"What I was hoping we'd be able to talk about is the incident that brought you here in the first place. I have this police report in front of me. The writing's chicken shit, but I've been looking at it all morning and I think I deciphered what it's saying. You tried robbing some—"

"Burglarizing."

"Hmm?"

"We tried to do a burglary, but the people were home, so they called it a robbery."

"Oh?"

"Yeah."

"So take me through it then. First things: why were you trying to burglarize someone?"

"My buddy, it was his girlfriend's new place. She was living there with some guy. My buddy's ex-girlfriend. He wanted to scare them a little, is all."

"And you thought that'd be okay to do, just break into someone's house? I'm not judging here, just trying to understand."

"Yeah. Well, yeah. No. I didn't think it was okay, morally speaking, but that kind of thing's been done before. And I didn't see much harm in it, I guess. I don't know. I don't know why I agreed to it."

"This friend of yours, how do you feel about him?"

“Fuck. I don’t know. I don’t know. He’s been one of my best friends since we were kids. We grew up together. He’s kind of a dick, I guess. You read the whole police report?”

“I did. I surely did.”

“Then you know he bitched out. There was another guy with us, another friend of ours, and he abandoned me, too. I got shot and left for dead by them.”

“That made you angry. Pissed you off.”

“That shit would piss Jesus off.”

“You got shot, abandoned, arrested in a hospital. Your friends nowhere to be found. You covered for them. In your report, in the transcripts from the trial. You said they drove you there, but didn’t participate. Wouldn’t give any names. Why?”

“Seemed like the right thing, at the time.”

“These two guys left you for dead.”

“Doesn’t mean I should throw them under the bus.”

“They threw you under the bus.”

“I’m not them.”

“You’re not them?”

“No. I’m me, you know? It’s hard to explain.”

“Your loyalty, you’re saying, if I’m reading you right, and feel free to jump in, but—your loyalty isn’t contingent on their loyalty. It’s a constant, so to speak. You’re like a dog.”

“Fuck. Fuck you.”

“The principled thief. Holding yourself to higher standards. So that now, I’m guessing, you feel like you’re allowed to hold the grudge you’re holding, and the revenge that’s more than likely coming once you’re out of here.”

“That’s what this is, huh? An opportunity for you guys to come in here and try to extend my sentence.”

“Not at all. I told you. Nobody’s judging. Nobody’s spying. I’m just trying to get at the root here. It’s kind of like a root canal. I’m trying to push your buttons. It might be a little painful. But just think about the after.”

“There’s no revenge coming. I’m not—there’s nothing like that in the works, so you know. That’s just gangster movie stuff.”

“So you just plan on holding this thing over their heads then.”

“No. Shit. Maybe. It wasn’t really a thing I thought about though. Not a conscious thing.”

“How’d the shot feel?”

“It hurt.”

“That’s it? How’d it hurt?”

“Like you wouldn’t imagine. Like you can’t imagine, is how it fucking hurt.”

“What else?”

“Not a single goddamned thing else. Look, think about opening a door and having that gun just right there in your face. Think about seeing that black hole for half a second, maybe less, pointed straight at you, remember. Now think how you’d feel if they pull the trigger.”

“Doesn’t sound like I’d have time to think. It does sound, though, like you’ve been thinking about it a lot.”

“What else I have to think about?”

“Keep going. They pull the trigger and—,”

“The fucking trigger’s pulled and you don’t even see it except, except a light so bright it’s hard to explain. And a sound like nothing you’ve heard before. Not like the sound of a gun firing. Like the sound of some out-of-this-world thing—,”

“Like what? A howling?”

“A screeching. Like a train whistle next to your ear. It was the loudest thing I’d ever heard. It was so loud, it blocked out everything else.”

“Everything else?”

“All I could do was hear. That’s all I was suddenly allowed to do.”

#

Bruce’s mother came home and said hello and changed and went out into the back to pour water over her plants. Bruce followed her, trying to seem steady and undrunk, brushing his teeth before she got home and holding onto a dignified posture as he moved, his shoulders squared back, his chin straight-edged, level, his clothes smoothed down and his gut sucked in. He watched himself in the reflection the screen door provided, as he bent down next to his mother, who was paying more attention to her garden anyway. He was surprised at the type of person she was back there: talking to the plants, bargaining with them to grow or just hold on a bit, withholding or releasing water on an individual basis, massaging the soil around certain puny-looking things. Seemed more intimidating, his mother did, now that she had a serious hobby on which to throw away her time, along with a—here Bruce cringed—lover. More fallible. He felt he’d lost her in some essential way. The sun steamed the creases out of her face.

The yard around them spoke some major green, freed of weeds, freshly mowed. It really did look nice. Like a ballpark. Bruce asked his mom about Don, and she kept her eyes on the plants.

“He’s done a lot of work around here,” was all she’d say, and Bruce didn’t press the topic, just sat in the grass beside her as she pulled herself up onto her knees and reached out, just so Bruce could see a small dark cloud of sweat pleated in the seam line of the shirt beneath her arm—she reached out and plucked a flower and Bruce sat and waited for her to ask him how his day went.

#

About a week later, Kale and Jimmy came by and shook Bruce’s hand and said they were planning on taking him out for a celebratory thing, if that’s all right. Bruce said Fuck. He tried to look angry, hurt, but it just wasn’t in him. He’d spent the week achingly sober because he couldn’t find any more cash lying around, and seeing the two old friends standing there in front of him, a parchment-colored light thrown on their uncomfortable faces—all Bruce could do was smile and try not to look too grateful. He felt sprung all over again. The week passed slowly, up to that moment. Mornings Bruce spent at the computer, squinting at naked women, refining his taste again, in that regard. Then he’d shower and sit on the couch smoking cigarettes and watching TV. He’d go into his room before Don got home, and take a nap. His mom would come home and tend to the garden then put out some dinner, and the three of them would eat in silence, or else a conversation from which most of the time Bruce was excluded, due to the way his mother and Don would speak to each other, often reading each other’s words out of their heads before they were sounded out, leaping through random topics, yard work to magazine articles to something someone said or did at work that day that was clever or stupid, which would get Don started on his laugh track, while Bruce’s mother would beam and blush and keep

her eyes away from Bruce. She still wasn't admitting Don was anything but a tenant. She was staying away from his cigarettes, too, which he'd been leaving out on the table as bait, a tactic to knock her off the high horse she'd climbed on top off and bring her back to her senses, reclaim her, in some small way.

Bruce watched Kale, who stood there hunched and wilting, giving one of his hands a thoughtful look-over. Don cornered Jimmy and the two of them started talking home improvement. Bruce's mother was leaning against the kitchen doorway, watching Don. Bruce could feel in his bones how much had changed since the last time his friends came and got him. His daddy used to lock himself in his den, watching TV. A quiet man, painfully shy, Bruce had come to realize. Couldn't look anyone in the eye for too long. Couldn't carry a conversation much past a handshake. He hadn't pondered over the death of the man too often since he'd been given the news, except to feel vaguely unmoved.

Kale looked pained, his face a picture of indecision. Then, in a brutal motion, he swung himself around the coffee table and sat down next to Bruce. A too-sweet smell came off his body, a weird fragrance, probably from some cologne found at a Macy's in a mall, if Bruce knew Kale at all. In the old days, Bruce would've ripped into him for something like this. The guy was always a little more formal than the rest, for whatever reason. Along with that formality came an unerring, almost juvenile kindness, which had always put Bruce to shame. Jimmy and Don were laughing now, buddies. Kale said, "There's seventeen beers in the car." That's all Bruce needed to hear. The two of them moved outside. Parked on the curb, a small, red Toyota, all spic and span. Kale advanced. Bruce said, "That yours?"

“Jimmy’s,” Kale said. “Just got it a few months ago.” He reached in for a beer, handed it to Bruce, then pulled one out for himself. They drank. Silence pooled for a couple of minutes. Kale finished his beer, and Bruce followed suit, holding the bottle up to the light of the street lamp to admire its emptiness before setting it on the trunk of the car. Kale took it, set it on the ground, shrugged. “It’s good to see you,” he said, patting Bruce on the back.

“It’s good to be seen,” Bruce said. “This thing,” he said, touching the car. “Jesus. Where’d he get the money for it?”

“Been working,” Kale said. Bruce thought shit, he could’ve been working, too, but let the thought go unannounced. Jimmy came out, still laughing, shaking Don’s hand. One beer in him, Bruce felt things moving along right past him. Felt it more acutely than in prison, now that his own two eyes were seeing it. He picked out another beer, tried not to let it show, his impatience. He had all the time in the world, now. “Sunshine!” Jimmy called to him, walking down the driveway.

“You boys have a good time! Be safe!” Don called. Bruce could see his mother looking out a front window, and he wondered what she and Don’d be doing with an empty house.

They piled into the car and Jimmy steered it carefully along dark roads over to Kale’s house, where they sat on the back porch watching a couple of moths seek the light in the sweat-soaked air. They drank the beer. Jimmy loaded Bruce with information, drawing and coloring the picture that had, before, been an empty frame. The old friends and their whereabouts. Sutton in Huntsville, Alabama, working for his dad. Bill in prison for dealing. Drew still around, sleeping in the same bed across town, because he had to get up early tomorrow for work. Bruce was a young man turning old in a night, catching up to the rest of them. Jimmy was married now, had a

kid, a little boy about this high. Out came the pictures. Out came Kale's dad, to shake Bruce's hand and say welcome back and ask if Kale told him the news already? No? Kale's enlisted now, the Army, and going off to basic in a couple months. Kale shrugged and smiled sweetly, like a martyr. Bruce was drunk four beers in. He couldn't hold his liquor anymore. A whirlwind of talk and heat around him. He wondered why nobody was asking him anything. But then, they probably knew his life better than he did.

After a couple of hours, they walked over to Flanagan's. Kale and Jimmy bought him drink after drink. He sat between them looking from one to the next. They didn't talk much, just watched the baseball game on TV, or else Jimmy and Kale talked around him, about daily things, things he still felt disconnected from. Little fish pushed through the water in the aquarium set up in the middle of the restaurant. A man across the bar was whispering in a woman's ear as she played with his watch. Bruce breathed a crushing loneliness. Felt like a prodigal son showing up at the wrong address. "Let's go," he said, leaving his last drink unfinished.

They stepped out into the parking lot. Bruce lit a cigarette, offered one to Jimmy, who declined, and Kale, who accepted, and lit his off of Bruce's. Bruce moved from one car to the next, trying handles. He found a car unlocked, an old white Cadillac with a crushed taillight and dark windows. When he tried the handle, it gave, and the door popped open. He shut it. He stood next to the car, his muscles leaping. Jimmy and Kale stood where he left them, watching him, looking around, Kale massaging one arm with the other, the cigarette stubbed beneath his foot. Jimmy had his keys in his hand. Bruce moved away from the Cadillac, felt something like failure retch in his throat. He vomited on the asphalt, and then again. Kale held him up as they walked

back to his place. Jimmy walked ahead of them. The night was slipping away, when all Bruce wanted was for time to tread water for a while until he felt comfortable.

His legs gave out about midway up Kale's driveway. The two of them sunk down for a second, before Kale raised him back up. Jimmy turned around. "Fuck," he said.

"Put me down," Bruce said. "Just put me down. Put me down. Right here." Kale hesitated, then left Bruce leaning against the tire of the truck in the driveway. Bruce leaned over and dry-retched. Jimmy and Kale stood there, looking at him. "Go inside," he said to them. Then he spat. "I'm good here. This is the place for me, right now."

"Leave him there. If that's where he wants to be," Jimmy said.

"We at least got to get him inside."

"Look at him. You see him?"

"Shit, Jimmy," Kale said.

"Hey, don't look at me. I got a kid. I got a family to go take care of," Jimmy said.

"Go," Bruce muttered.

"I got your permission, huh?" Jimmy said to him.

"Fucking coward," Bruce said. But Jimmy was already walking away, or he'd already walked away and was gone for a while. Bruce allowed his head to dip into his chest. Kale lifted him, dragged him inside, heaved him onto a couch, where he woke with the light, still more beer than blood, and tried as hard as he could to give thanks for being alive.

#

"Says in the report part of your ear was torn off."

"Do I know about the bible story, you're asking me."

“What do you mean?”

“The man who’s ear was sliced off by Peter when they came to arrest Jesus. You’re asking if that occurred to me.”

“Why would tha—,”

“It did. Occur to me. That I was on the wrong side, in this whole thing. But you know Jesus needed to be arrested. He needed to die so the rest of us would live. That way it was Peter, not the man with the sliced-off ear, who was on the wrong side. Jesus even said it.”

“That’s interesting Bruce. Your line of reasoning. According to your interpretation, the story vindicates the man with the sliced ear and condemns Peter. And it would seem to be, since Peter goes on to deny Jesus.”

“I just can’t ever seem to remember the guy’s name.”

“Who’s?”

“The guy. Who gets his ear cut off. Starts with an ‘m’, I’m pretty sure.”

“Let me just put this another way for you, since we’re on the topic: according to you, Peter is doing the wrong thing for the right reasons, i.e. protecting the man he believes to be the Jewish messiah, whereas, the man who gets his ear cut off, in arresting Jesus and acting as the catalyst for his downfall and ultimate redemption, is doing the right thing for the wrong reasons. Is that right?”

“Sounds good. Maybe we could get a Bible in here, though, so I could check on the name.”

“In a minute. Give it a minute. What I want to know, and to pose for you is: Who’s right, then? Who’s conscience should be clear, so to speak?”

“The man with the cut-off ear. Obviously. It seems obvious, here, in hindsight.”

“So what I want to know, and feel free, again, to jump in—what I want to know is, does this story really relate? Is it relevant to you? Are you looking at it as some kind of precedent? Are you the man whose ear was sliced off? Are you innocent, or at least in the right, in this situation.”

“The guy shot me, is what I’m trying to tell you. He shot me. Didn’t threaten to shoot me. Just plain and simple shot me.”

“So?”

“So? In this picture, I wasn’t the violent one. I wasn’t, in that particular moment, the criminal. The moment before, I was the criminal, but that moment, no, I wasn’t. His gun was unregistered. Didn’t have a license for it. And he shot me, let’s not forget.”

“If you saw this man on the street, what would you do?”

“Not a thing.”

“Come on, Bruce.”

“Not a thing. I’m telling you.”

#

What Don did for a living, Bruce found out, was pool repairs. As in replacing lights and filters, balancing pH levels, draining pools to bleach discolored concrete, etc. The man went around in a big white van with no windows and stood beneath an agonizing Florida sun hell-bent on turning epidermis into leather, and *fixed pools*. Don and Bruce’s mom teamed up on him, tried coaxing him into going along with Don for a couple of weeks, just to see how it went. Don offered to pay him under the table. Bruce shook his head and said No thank you, which touched

off a round or two of arguments that always ended with him shaking his head and again saying No thank you, and reaching for a pack of cigarettes and slapping it against the palm of his hand to loosen the tobacco, wondering aloud what's the rush, since after all, he'd just been released after having been incarcerated—he used that word, 'incarcerated,' hoping it would seem more impressive—for four years—because you were guilty and you deserved it, Don helpfully pointed out, Bruce's mother sitting quietly beside him, forgetting, Bruce could tell, could just see it in the way she looked at the man, that according to her lie of omission he was only a tenant, and not to speak to Bruce that way—four years of prison, fourteen hundred and sixty days of paying for mistakes, thirty-five thousand and some change hours of penance, and Bruce taking his time this go around, because he didn't want to again get roped into the kind of lifestyle that led him to make poor life choices, if that makes any sense.

#

He hadn't seen Kale or Jimmy or really anyone since the night he'd passed out on Kale's back porch, waking up to himself vomiting at a certain black part of the night, spending the next day with the acid taste of it at the back of his throat, the flavor unreachable by any means, borne, along with a hangover, shamefully. He hadn't felt regret towards alcohol since he was a teenager. But that day he felt the impurity, the first dent in a new soul. He'd gone for a walk late in the day, and the stench had come pouring off of him. He'd worked his way around and through the neighborhood, only lifting his head to meet eyes and give a tight-fisted grin, crossing over if he saw kids coming his way, because he didn't feel just like dealing with the stares, open and obnoxious and demanding, of them. He walked the neighborhood and breathed the torn-down air around him—air that reeked of his own boozy scent, that he knuckled through only to meet

again, and again, feeling, for some reason, the urge to sprint, a kindling in his calves, so that a couple of times he quickened his pace, before slowing down his breathing and telling himself to relax: because, really, in jeans, he knew he'd look like a fool—and tried to think of his daddy's death, his daddy being as of now in that state known as dead, but his mind wouldn't allow him to touch it. It cleared itself each time Bruce approached. It was an eerie feeling, not having full control over that part of himself, but not completely unpleasant. He felt safe.

Bruce took to walking after that. He looked forward to the afternoons. He'd time it so he was embarking just before Don got home, and coming back just before his mom got home. He'd take his cigarettes and smoke along the way. The first few times, he'd come back and Don would appear, looking pleased and anxious, expecting, Bruce had realized, his mom. It was no small victory to watch Don's face shift into disappointment and something like disgust, followed by another quick shift into blankness, along with a curt hello. Their relationship as yet undefined, but hardening—swiftly, since Bruce's refusal to go work with him, or *for* him, as Don had put it—into something antagonistic. Bruce didn't necessarily dislike Don—the man had an overwhelming laugh, and seemed to treat his mother respectfully, almost painful to watch, in fact, a grown man eager to wash the dishes, take out the trash, and settle down on the couch to watch reality TV shows, still maintaining that physical distance, playing his part, since Bruce's mother was afraid to come out with the truth of their relationship—but he reserved the right to do so. And it felt disrespectful, somehow, to have a man move in so soon—six months, according to Bruce's math—after his daddy's death.

He'd finally gone to visit the gravesite. A Tuesday afternoon, nearly evening, the sky a pinkish, sunken mess. His mom came into his room after tending to her garden and asked, and he

looked at her, at the ruddy dirt stains smeared on her knees, down the backs of her arms, the small half-blossom of sweat on her shirt collar, and said yes, surprising her. Surprised himself. He was sober, and bored. TV'd long since failed to hold his interest longer than it took to eat. Wasn't spending more than twenty, thirty minutes on the computer during the day, and that in the morning. Walks only took up a couple of hours. Large swaths of time just seemed to drift on by with Bruce not doing much of anything: desiring to do things, desiring that feeling of *being productive*, but when it comes down to it, not willing to tamper with his own inertia. The cemetery looked different this time around, more lively somehow, with the fading sun throwing itself over chunks of open field, the pink light touching the grass and rising off it, lingering like a fog, dancing and shifting through the little absences that the few trees there offered. A couple of people were there, sitting near graves, rocking themselves, speaking quietly. Bruce's mother parked the pickup on the road, and the two of them got out and walked over to his daddy's grave, which was near a wooden gate that marked the boundary of the cemetery, behind which was a neighborhood, the roof of the closest house visible, the shingles dirty, the gutter stuffed with dead leaves.

Bruce's mother took his arm and said, "I'm glad you finally came. He'd be happy to know it, I think."

"I bet," Bruce said. He looked down at the plaque across which was written his daddy's name and lifespan, and didn't feel a thing. Not a thing. The thought led to a shameful happiness. Bruce tried to look somber. His mom sniffled next to him, alternately loosened and tightened her grip on his arm. The air carried a distinct dirt fragrance.

“If you want some time alone with him, if there’s something you want to say, just let me know,” his mother said. Bruce didn’t make a move. He was already starting to feel impatient, restless, the way he felt nearly all the time. A minute later, his mother wiped at her eyes and removed her arm from his and said, “Well, I’ll give you some time.” She patted him on the back and walked away.

For a full minute he didn’t move, just tried hard to give in to whatever feelings he had about his daddy, seeing as this was the moment for it. He tried thinking of a good memory, and then, of just *a* memory, any memory, for Christ’s sake, but nothing but himself came ringing up the assembly line in his head, at odd angles: what he might’ve been doing in prison when his daddy died, but from the viewpoint of his bunkmate; the time on one of his recent walks when he saw a family of ducks crossing the road—something he’d never seen before outside of cartoons—but from a point just beyond himself, so that part of his own right shoulder was in the frame; one of the pictures he’d seen that morning, a woman on a bed sticking two frosting-smearred fingers in her own pussy, but looking at her from directly above, so she looked almost two-dimensional, her pleased face taking on the sharpness of agony—images that came and lingered and went and were replaced by others, as Bruce tried hard to understand, to really and truly understand, that his daddy’s body was laid down in a coffin just six feet beneath his feet. Bruce discovered himself reaching for a cigarette, the pack already open in his hands. He closed it, opened it again, took out a cigarette, and stuck it between his lips. He stared at his daddy’s plaque. After a minute, he took the cigarette out and tossed it onto the grave. He said, “All right,” and felt stupid about it, decided he was saying it to himself, not the grave, and walked back on

over to the truck, where his mom was waiting, tuned in to some talk radio show where people gave gardening tips and complained about their spouses.

#

“I suppose the person I’d like to talk about, just because it seems you’ve been circling around him, is your father. I’m curious about his reaction to all this.”

“Me too.”

“What do you mean by that? Bruce.”

“The guy’s an enigma wrapped in whatever, a mystery. Wrapped again in bacon and those little Debbie, the Swiss Rolls.”

“I’m still not getting it. His response to your arrest and incarceration was what, oblivious? Indifferent? Daddy issues loom, it seems.”

“I never spoke to him, is what I mean. That’s what I’m saying. He never tried calling me, and I never tried calling him. He never came to visit me here. And fuck you.”

“Bruce, we’re aiming for catharsis here. We’re looking for an overhaul. We’re hoping for results, confidentially speaking. If I need to poke and prod you a little, so be it. I’m not above it. Neither of us sitting here is perfect.”

“Still. Fuck you, probably. I think I’ll stick with it.”

“That’s fine. That’s your choice. You have all the freedom in the world to think that. Nobody can put your thoughts in a prison.”

“You must be the worst therapist ever.”

“Your dad. You’re deliberately moving off topic.”

“My dad. He’s just some guy, to be honest. A Vietnam vet. A desk job. A wife. He loves to eat dinner and watch TV. He loves those Little Debbie Swiss Rolls. He likes stringing up Christmas lights.”

“I’m hearing hostility in this. I’m looking at you, too, and seeing hostility. Why don’t you—would you please uncross your arms? I’m wondering if all this is just a rebellion against what you take to be a particularly meaningless lifestyle choice on your father’s part. You ‘don’t want to end up like him,’ so to speak.”

“How are we looking on time?”

“Bruce. Don’t patronize me. Let’s not pretend that we’re both stupid, okay?”

“Fuck. I don’t know.”

“Your dad. We’re not moving away from this.”

“The guy’s nice, I guess. He’s a nice guy. He was a good dad, as far as dads go. There’ve been worse.”

“And yet...”

“He’s one of those people, I guess, who just kind of seems empty, you know? Like what you see is more than what you get? Like the walking dead. Just...*absent*. Even when he’s there.”

“And what about you?”

“What about me?”

“Exactly.”

“You tell me what about me.”

“That’s your job. That’s what you’re supposed to be figuring out here, Bruce. Just think for a minute. Give it a minute. Watch. I’m leaning back. I’m sipping my coffee. I’m at ease. There’s no pressure. My watch is off, it’s in my pocket. Just think about it for a minute.”

“How am I supposed to do that? You want my height and my weight? My hair color’s brown. My eyes are blue. Could show you a few of these tattoos here. What else is there supposed to be?”

“Emotions. Thoughts. A personality. Bruce, it’s really not supposed to be this difficult.”

#

The Monday following, Bruce rode along in the passenger seat of Don’s van, looking out the window as Don steered them over to Jimmy’s house. Jimmy was in the process of tearing down the wooden fence that ran around his side and back yards and replacing it with vinyl, and was having some trouble. Don’d volunteered his services the last time Bruce had seen Jimmy, when him and Kale had come over the week after Bruce had been released from prison. His own freedom didn’t startle or delight Bruce anymore. Just a fact now, hardened into concrete, worn smooth and dirty through constant use. The first year of prison had been strange and hard and saw Bruce give in to whatever impulse he had, resulting in a few fights, a couple of enemies made, a closer watch on him by the guards, and a short stint of talking with a therapist. His mother had come every week and tried to update him on outside happenings, but more often than not just cried at him. His friends came once all together towards the beginning, and that was that for them. His daddy never came. The final three years, for whatever reason, he’d settled down. Invisible, as they’d call it in a prison movie. He’d thoroughly enjoyed his new self, felt

disciplined, clean, above temptation. He'd understood it as maturity. But now he felt left behind, in that department.

Don turned down the volume on the radio and said, "Be on the lookout for thirty one-twelve. Should be on your side." They'd driven into a neighborhood nicer and newer than any Bruce had lived in. Before long they came to the house, a one story between a couple of two stories, but still nice, peach-colored, light-reddish shingles, the now-familiar Toyota out front. The whole place washed in the dusty morning light, except for patches of shadow thrown by two smallish oaks on each side of it. Don had taken the day off work to help Jimmy with this, pro bono, which he kept repeating to Bruce on the drive over, as he shifted and downshifted with effort, the familiar white headband coiled and wrapped around the stick shift.

Jimmy greeted them shirtless, in basketball shorts, and, instead of inviting them inside, came out and walked them around to the right side of the house, where a vinyl gate had already been set up. He reached over and unlatched it and it swung inwards. A whole load of vinyl panels were laid up against the side of the house. There was an eight-foot gap between the vinyl gate and the next part of the fence, which was still wooden, and looked grayed and rotten, smelled musty. Don was asking questions about the foundation, looking intently at Jimmy, who had a hand up, shielding his eyes against the glare. Bruce ran a hand along the old wooden fence. He could make out, from where he stood, the pool area, where the smoothed limestone met the grass. Couldn't believe Jimmy could afford all this, a new car, a house with a pool in a nice neighborhood, a kid and a wife—he looked at Jimmy, who outwardly hadn't changed much at all, besides a shorter haircut, a pudgier, hairier belly, and just couldn't believe it, the little shit's luck.

“First things first we’ll pull the panels off,” Don was saying now.

“Just let me go check on Ethan and put on some clothes and I’ll be right out,” Jimmy said. He hadn’t really looked at or acknowledged Bruce’s presence since they’d first knocked on the front door. He’d smiled, shaken Don’s hand, then turned and shook Bruce’s hand, gave him a blank look that could mean anything except happy. Bruce was guessing Kale and Drew weren’t available, else he probably wouldn’t have been invited to help out.

Don let himself out the gate, motioned for Bruce to follow. Out of the van he took some gloves, and a couple of crowbars, handing one to Bruce. “You watch me the first few times,” he said, “and then we’ll set you to work on the other side. Simple stuff.”

Bruce nodded, followed Don back in through the gate, and watched Don put on the gloves, and give the first wood panel a solid shake, back and forth, until the thing ripped off the top crossbeam. Another tug and it came clean off. “The wood’s rotten,” Don explained, looking back at Bruce, who stood first with his arms folded, then with them at his sides, shifting his weight from one foot to the other. “You see?” Don continued, pointing to the signs of rot on the panel, “So it should come off pretty easy like I just showed you. But if it doesn’t budge, then you’ll use the crowbar,” at this, he wedged it between the next panel and its top crossbeam, “to pry it loose, and then just pull it off.”

They looked at each other for a second. “Got it?” Don said.

“Looks easy enough,” Bruce said.

“I didn’t ask how it looks.”

“Seems easy enough.”

“Seems?”

“What?”

“How about a yes-or-no?”

“I got it,” Bruce said, touching the crowbar to his temple. “I can handle it.”

Don sent him over to start on the panels on the other side of the fence. Jimmy came back out after a few minutes, wearing jeans now and a t-shirt, carrying an old stereo that Bruce recognized, that they used to listen to back when they were teenagers. Jimmy worked the tuner until he found some pop music, turned up the volume, and went to work. The heat toddled around them, swept along by the occasional breeze, and had Bruce drenched in sweat within twenty minutes. On the other side, he could see Don put on the white headband. Jimmy worked from the middle, towards Bruce. Nobody talked. Bruce was having trouble nearly from the get-go, using the crowbar on every panel just about, pulling them off with difficulty, half-amazed at the strength with which they hung on, and the lightness about each panel afterwards, in his hand. Woodchips rained down on his head, came off the panels as powder that coated his arms, stung in his eyes. He'd done about half the work that Jimmy'd done, and only a third of what Don had. His back began to ache. His shoulders popped and felt sore. Between the three of them, it took more than an hour to get all the panels off. Then came the crossbeams, just three layers of two-by-fours attached to all the posts. These were easy. Don used a sledgehammer to knock them loose while Bruce gathered all the panels into a pile in the middle of the yard.

He thought they might break for a while after that. Something was gnawing inside his head, a pounding hole that had him dizzy and faint. His mouth to the back of his throat was scorched dry, coarse, sand-tasting. He was handed a shovel and then the three of them were back in the sun, digging trenches around the posts, a little past two feet deep, and then prying the

concrete-anchored posts from the earth itself. They went at it for another two hours, removing seven of the posts, throwing them on the pile. Bruce could hear Jimmy singing along sometimes, Don grunting with effort, could see, as he stopped to watch them, again and again, finally just sitting in the grass, Don wiping the sweat from his face, Jimmy shaking his shoulders to free them from their ache, neither of them stopping for any longer than two or three minutes at a time, redoubling their efforts after each small break, only to slow again, repeat their motions. Don especially. He moved with a strange, disciplined precision. Bruce could see the man was built for this sort of thing, or that he'd built himself over time for it. He looked like a machine, one of those ones in a car-making factory, that you sometimes see on commercials for American-born cars. Bruce watched in awe, couldn't help comparing the man to his own daddy, who'd held some sort of desk job at some company or other for years, growing quieter and softer with time, a machine of an entirely different kind.

They finally decided to give it a rest for a little while. Jimmy led them inside the house, colored with cool central air. They sat in the living room. Jimmy offered Bruce and Don beers, which Don took gladly. Bruce declined, said just water, please. Don couldn't stop looking out the screen door. He was calling out to Jimmy, who was in the kitchen, the two of them discussing, in that way, the next few steps of the project. It didn't seem to bother anybody that Bruce hadn't spoken a word in hours. He felt like a cog, a tool, sipping his water. But when he looked out and saw what they'd already accomplished, he too, felt Don's excitement, sense of possibility. Decided that the second half of the day wouldn't be a repeat of the first, that he'd work until he dropped dead, if he had to, prove himself that way. Jimmy came back into the living room, stood for a minute sipping on his beer, then said he needed to go check on Ethan.

“Bring him in here,” Don said. “Let’s get a look at him.”

“When you say it like that,” Jimmy said. He took a look at Bruce.

“How old is he again?” Bruce asked.

“He’s nearly three. Fact, next week, when we’re doing Kale’s going-away thing, it’s also doubling as Ethan’s birthday party.”

“Kale’s going-away thing?”

“He’s going off to basic next Monday.”

“Shit,” Bruce said.

“He told you that,” Jimmy said. “His dad told you. Jesus.”

“I remember now,” Bruce said.

“Just give me a minute, to wake him up,” Jimmy said to Don, meaning Ethan.

After Jimmy’d gone, Don set his beer on the coffee table in front of him and went back to looking out the window. Bruce just closed his eyes, let the blackness inside of them overtake his vision of the room, a few floaters roaming around there, too, inside his closed eyes, the same way as after the flash of a camera. From somewhere outside, he heard Don say, “You done a nice job so far. It’s hard work, believe me. I know.” Bruce opened his eyes, located Don, whose cracked, red face was looking back at him, earnest. He didn’t have a chance to respond, though, because Jimmy came back, carrying little—kind of big, actually—Ethan, holding the child against his chest.

“Here he is,” Jimmy said.

“There’s the man,” Don said.

The child himself did nothing, just stared out at the room, the green eyes of a mindless animal. They lit on Bruce, then moved on. Jimmy set him down, and he stood unsteady on his feet, his arms slightly out, as if for balance. A crescent of white belly poked through like some unexpected ring of light, expanding as the boy lifted his arms above his head and then brought them down again.

“He’s a looker,” Don said. “The boy’s a heartbreaker.”

“He’s been doing something kind of funny the past few weeks,” Jimmy said.

“What’s he been doing? You been doing something funny, Ethan? You a comedy man?”

The child paid no mind, just began reaching out and touching whatever was in front of him, walking stiffly, like a former athlete. Jimmy smiled at him, then went and opened the screen door leading out to the pool area. “Watch,” he said, before moving into the kitchen, standing just at its threshold. The child stood still for a minute, looked around, then stepped towards the open door. When he got there, though, he stopped. Started to step out, pulled his foot back in, shook his head. Repeated this motion four or five times over the course of the next two minutes.

Looked like a little toy robot come up against a wall. Don said, “How’d you get him to do that?”

From where he stood in the kitchen, Jimmy shrugged. “He’s always been a rule-follower.”

The child heard his daddy’s voice and turned back, and Bruce could see on his face a terrible agony. They watched him a few minutes longer. Bruce felt like he could barely stand to sit there.

“How long’ll he do it for?” Don asked.

“Lexi caught him at it one day. Didn’t know how long he’d been there. But he went on and on until she closed the screen door about five minutes later. She let me have it that day.”

Jimmy shook his head, half-laughed at the thought of it. Then he excused himself to the bathroom, gave the boy a pat on the head as he passed into the hallway. Don stood, stretched, and moved into the kitchen, where Bruce could hear him opening the garage door to lead himself back out into the yard. The child was still lost in his suffering, stepping forward, then tucking the foot back in just inside the threshold. A quiet dropped the two of them down a hole. Bruce could feel his own tired heart struggling in its cage. The sweat dried on him, gave his skin a wax-paper appearance, his t-shirt a salty, stiffening air. The A/C pumped oxygen through the vent above his head. There was no telling that, should the child finally step outside, it would head toward the pool. It stepped, quivered, snapped its foot back, shook its head. The routine taking on the heavy weight of futility. Bruce began to lose interest. The toilet flushed down the hall. Don could be seen in the backyard, one hand on a hip, the other cupped over his brow, the entire back of his frame wreathed in a shine so bright it seemed to rip at the fabric of things. Bruce blinked a few times, aware of an oncoming dehydration, and watched what was in front of him again coalesce into something solid, something whole, as the child again stretched its foot out over the threshold, toward something that couldn’t be guessed at except to be known completely.

GRIEF #1

The blonde straddles the chest and holds down the shoulders. The brunette weeps and grips the ankles. With the bone saw filched from the shed near the baseball field, the dude cleaves.

In the central stall of the second floor girl's bathroom, the soul of Kaylin McGinnis says she's dipped a fingernail into the future and witnessed the shitty eulogizing her loosely swaddled torso will be subjected to.

A nice girl! she cries. A lovely girl! A promising future!

The blue tarp crinkles and scrunches the harder the dude saws. To the weeping brunette he hints, Jesus can't we even be professional?

They'll bemoan the state of society! the blonde declaims. They'll say, 'We're all a bunch of dickheads, if this is what our kids are up to.' She tries seductive out on the dude, cuts her eyes and serves up a short grin like a comma.

The brunette meanwhile weeps.

The soul of Kaylin McGinnis says, I would make mistakes the likes of which you bitches can only dream. I'd gleefully misinterpret the events of my life. I'll suck the whole baseball team off you just *see* if I wouldn't.

The dude cuts just above the voice box. The tendons are like cords, he says. And Christ she stinks.

They just don't get it, the blonde agrees.

God, weeps the brunette.

The blonde stands and stretches, looks kindly at the brunette. You know, I always wanted to be a superhero, she says.

Doctor, the dude says.

Cool, says the soul of Kaylin McGinnis, from the stall, in a subdued tone. I always wanted to be cool.

You guys are cunts, the brunette says. She was our *friend*.

Don't lose your head, responds the blonde.

The dude stands, tugs at the tarp's corners until it's taut, then sits his thumb into the neck's maw and smears blood onto the fuzz above his upper lip. You guys study for Biology? he asks. The girls shake their heads in unison.

Everybody's on cellphones the whole funeral! cries the soul of Kaylin McGinnis. Playing Candy Crush! One of the pallbearers is texting while he carries the casket to the hearse!

The blonde again sits on the chest. The dude takes up the bone saw and saws away. The bathroom's fluorescent lights shine brightly into the goop. The brunette vomits into the sink. Soon, the head is severed. The dude lifts it by the hair and takes it to the sink and lets the blood drip out. But would she have done this for us, he says, and digs his cellphone from his pocket. With the severed head of Kaylin McGinnis he takes a selfie.

DESOLATION ROW

Tommy had to get away from these shotgun mornings. Light like stones in a quarry. Broken and so old you might fall asleep to it and wake at a different era, time adjacent, the past hopes and visions cancelled, replaced by something equally heinous or not. The complex of it was what had Tommy frowning. The whole structure of light brought down on his head. He wondered why couldn't it come up, shot like weeds through soft mounds of dirt, so you feel it in your toes first and the back of your neck later, if you're lucky. Light that smelled like light. Tommy'd had enough.

He went down to the old bus station, but it wasn't there anymore. The bus, sure, kept right on coming, but the station had been wiped away, a fire or something, some act by somebody or other aiming at greatness that went awry, or maybe just some kid like Tommy that couldn't handle it anymore. There were lots of kids like that. There were a few standing there like him, waiting for a bus. One of them sat in the rubble of the beat-down bus station that didn't breathe anymore but hadn't been cleaned up. We were all there actually. Tommy heard his buddy Max, Max Dylan, who was still waiting for the bus that carried his sister away to come back and cough her up. A lot of the people there were sad. Tommy didn't blame them but he didn't feel that way. He went up and said hello to Max and Max told him, what? Tommy couldn't hear him at first because someone right behind him was strumming a guitar and singing a song he'd never heard before. She was singing it like a joke. Not the song but the world around her was the joke. She was two feet behind Tommy. He didn't know who she was. He said, Say

what you said one more time, Max, and Max said, I said my sister's s'posed to be back today. The girl behind them stopped her song to get a chord right she hadn't gotten right the first time. Tommy said, How old are you anyway, Max? and Max said, I'm six about to be seven years old. Tommy said, That's too young to be waiting for somebody.

Max said, What choice do I have? And then he said, There's nothing I can do but wait, and besides, I was just kidding before. I was born on Leap Year. I'm twenty-seven. We celebrate my birthday on the 28th.

Tommy said, Oh. And then, You have a cigarette? but Max shook his head.

The girl was singing the same song over and over again. Something about skies swallowing fire and time passing her by. Something sad. Tommy hoped she wouldn't be getting on the bus. That maybe she was just there because the bus station wasn't, and something needed to be there, to register their existence, to make noise and move and remind them that they weren't dead, or that, if they were, they were ghosts and they needed to keep going on like before, forming words and sweating and falling out of love.

Tommy choked down one of his big horse pills and thought about Rosie McCrae. She was the one with the stomach like a dove and toes so small and dainty he didn't know what. His favorite one to suck on was the one right next to the big toe. He liked to pretend there was a tiny speck of a hole in it that he was sucking out her soul through. Her weight on his was always nice. They moved together in ways he didn't know if other people moved those ways or not. Her dreams haunted him. She was the reason the light was cracking in a sky that used to be okay with it.

This whole time Tommy's eyes were closed. He thought it was funny Max didn't say anything about it. But the girl with the guitar did. She said, Your eyes are closed.

He said, Your song is too sad. And then he said, You wouldn't happen to have a cigarette?

She stuck the cigarette right between his lips but she didn't light it for him. She said, I have a theory about music. The sadder the song you play the happier someone else is.

Tommy said, Your song doesn't make me happy at all.

I mean the person that can't hear the song. They feel happier.

What person?

That's the trick, she said. That's the part I haven't quite figured out. But I figure if I play it enough then maybe I'll get it right.

Are you getting on the bus? Tommy said.

She strummed her guitar once or twice and Tommy noticed it had lots of holes in it, not just the one. It seemed eaten by rats and dark things that aren't afraid of the light but just don't like it much. Its sound. It depends on what it looks like and who's on it, she said.

I'll be on it, Tommy said.

The girl said, Here it comes.

But it didn't come. Not yet anyway.

Tommy said, Would you put some fire in this cigarette already. And then the sound of a Zippo shaped like a football helmet. Tommy breathed it in and it tasted dirty, like somebody's blood. His lungs felt strong, not like before. His eyes almost opened onto the rest of us. Maybe that would have been a good thing. But he'd already made up his mind.

This was that time Tommy went to go wait for the bus and it never came. Or maybe that was the time before this time. Maybe this was the time he went to go wait for the bus and still it never came.

Things for Tommy weren't so good right now. Rosie McCrae was somewhere without him but every time they talked in her dreams she wouldn't tell him where so he could come save her. What he wanted was to get to Arizona. Because he'd heard the light there wasn't anything like the light where he was, that the light in Arizona was yellow and purple and piled with Rosie McCrae's good dreams that you could just pluck out of it if you jumped high enough or had a ladder and then hold the good dream in both your hands and think about what could it be, what made it so good, which was, Tommy thought, what made it good. He thought Rosie McCrae might be in Arizona, somewhere inside all its miles, in a cave maybe, or sitting in a chair.

The girl with the guitar said, You haven't said anything in a while, so Tommy said, What do you think about love?

The girl said, Uh-oh, the big questions. She said, Maybe I better answer you in my answering voice.

There's a lot I don't know, Tommy said.

Maybe the fact you don't know it, the girl said in a disinfected voice, is part of knowing it. Maybe you know some of it just because you don't know any of it.

I should probably change my way of looking at things, Tommy said.

The girl said, Just listen to this song. Then she played something lonely. The sounds came out like cars without engines, or cars with engines that aren't built for cars. That sort of thing. Tommy tried hard not to listen.

What do you think? the girl said.

You played the same song as before, Tommy said. Can't you play anything else?

I used to, the girl said. But I forget them all when I start playing this one. It's stuck in my hands. I don't even hear it anymore. I couldn't tell you what it sounded like anymore.

Tommy finished the cigarette and dropped it on the ground. Then he picked it up. Then he dropped it on the ground again. He didn't know why he did it. When he'd left home there hadn't been anybody there. For many years. When he was eleven his mom cut out her own heart and tried to eat it but it was too big. Tommy wrapped it in foil and put it in the fridge and when the police came they took it away. Tommy sometimes wondered if it was in some cop's belly, and if that meant his mom was alive somehow. But then again the heart was already half-eaten. Her eyes were open when she died. She looked like a woman who failed to eat her own heart. She was pretty bloody. She ate with her hands. Tommy was supposed to get picked up by Social Services but never did and after he stopped crying he pulled the broom from the closet and swept up his tears and cleaned up the blood and went to school on Monday.

Tommy's dad was nowhere. He was some guy frowning in a picture frame, and smiling in another picture frame. He had a nose that could sail a boat and hair that tried too hard. He was a quiet man, all in all. He never spoke to Tommy much from those picture frames, except to say, Son, at least don't forget that I exist in two dimensions.

The girl said, You should see this, man. There's a kid sitting in all that rubble back there. He's a little kid and he's trying to start a fire. It's funny as hell the way he's doing it. He thinks he's rubbing two sticks together but actually he's just rubbing his hands together. He's kneeling. He keeps falling over. If you just opened your eyes.

That place burned down in a fire, Tommy said. The girl was making him sad, for some reason. Her voice reminded him of Rosie McCrae's voice, even though it didn't sound anything like Rosie McCrae's voice. Just the fact it was a girl talking was enough.

Somebody should show that kid a little bit of mercy, she said. Then she said, Hang on. Tommy could hear her packing her guitar away. He could smell the way she smelled, like overheated computer modems. It was a smell like the taste of a dissolve-away tablet on the tip of your tongue. Tommy didn't feel about the smell one way or another, except to wonder how she acquired it. Then she took his hand and said, Come on.

It was like they were the only two people moving in the whole crowd of people there. Tommy could hear them, the people there, whispering about the bus. It was supposed to be one of the biggest buses in the world. Some kind of freak-show thing with wheels the size of monster trucks and spray-painted yellow or white. You were supposed to be able to sign your name on the side of the bus. Somebody said it could carry five hundred people and it didn't need to make stops because it had a little restaurant on the second level where you could eat top-quality seafood that was flung through the window by distributors when the bus drove along the coast. It made Tommy think if he got on it he might get lost. And then Tommy thought getting lost wouldn't be so bad since getting found wasn't working out too well for him. The people he lived with now were nice in all the wrong ways. They were wrong in all the right ways. One of them was tall and the other was short and neither of the heights was expected. They bought Tommy from somebody else he couldn't remember anymore. They gave him stuff and only asked for love. But the way they said it, that word, the word *love*, made Tommy want to swing his leg into a lamp and watch his toes turn to cinders that eat the rest of his foot. The short one had molars

that could tune a radio. He liked showing Tommy those molars. The tall one liked pretending to laugh, and did it all the time. Tommy couldn't take the life in their eyes.

The girl with the guitar held Tommy's hand and dragged him past the talking people and onto ground that just felt ugly. It smelled like old, old smoke, the kind that gets trapped in vents and ozones. He kept his eyes closed. It seemed like they were climbing. Then they came to where the little boy was sitting trying to start his fire, and Tommy heard his little boy hands whittling away at themselves, chapping and smacking and sometimes sparking but not enough.

The girl said, Hon.

Neither Tommy nor the little boy answered.

What are you doing? she said.

Your hands are almost gone, Tommy said.

There has to be a fire, the little boy said. His voice was a thing that was beautiful. Like one of those things.

Your voice, the girl said, is melodious. Do you sing?

There's a little chirping bird in my throat that does all the talking, the boy said. That's what it is. So don't get too excited.

Listening to you I don't even want to sing anymore, the girl said. How about I'll play and you sing?

Tommy said, Are you getting on the bus?

I just want to start this fire, the boy said. It needs to go go go already. He rubbed his hands together hard. He fell over. The girl kneeled and helped him up. Tommy said, Why would you want to start a fire when the place is already burned down?

I want to burn it back up again, the boy said.

Things don't make themselves in fire. They unmake themselves, said Tommy.

Oh yeah? the boy said. What about the universe? What about the Big Bang? That was a fire.

Were you there? said Max. Max was there with them. He'd followed Tommy and the girl with the guitar.

Was I there? the boy said. Was I there? Was I where? Where's there?

At the Big Bang. The moment of creation. Because if you weren't there than how do you know there was fire? I happen to know for a fact fire can't exist in space, because space is a vacuum.

The boy said, How do you know that for a fact? Were you ever in outer space using a lighter?

The girl laughed. Tommy smiled. The little boy went back to rubbing his hands but there wasn't a forthcoming fire.

Tommy said, Hop on the bus with us when it comes, but the boy said, I can't. I have to go home pretty soon. My mom is dead and I have to notify the proper authorities.

The girl said, Your what? and Tommy just felt not again. He thought empty pages turning backwards and forwards, looking for their own print. He thought of the city he lived in, with its palm trees and shrubs and subdivisions. He didn't think about death, at least not the way it was, until later.

The boy said, She tried to eat her own heart. The whole thing got pretty ugly. I wasn't too happy with it.

Even if the Big Bang was a fire, Max said, how do you know all this was created? Maybe this is what a burnt-down universe looks like after all.

I never thought of that, the boy said.

You just knew Max was proud by the way he slapped Tommy on the back.

When did this happen? the girl asked the little boy. Without knowing it she'd set the guitar case on the ground and flipped its lid open and pulled out the guitar. Now she was playing it. But softly, like the bottom of plants or hair follicles. Tommy, meanwhile, could sniff out the boy's hands. All that boiling blood. The gas of his spirit. Little blood bubbles burping in blue veins, and Tommy, privy to certain secrets that wept kind of like his own.

The boy answered, About three hours ago.

They were all feeling kind of sad at the moment. Tommy said to the girl, Put that thing away, and the girl said, If you open your goddamned eyes.

Are you two married? the little boy asked.

We're going to your home, the girl said to him. We're going to see about your mom and help you through this difficult time.

Tommy said, I need to wait for the bus.

Where are you trying to go? the little boy said to Tommy.

I'm going to Arizona, I'm going to go find someone I think went there for certain reasons.

You're in Arizona, the boy said. You're already there.

This is Arizona?

It couldn't possibly be anyplace else, the boy said.

Tommy said, Even still.

The bus isn't coming, the girl said. Look, she said. Just look.

#

Tommy didn't need to see it to know he wasn't in Arizona. The trees in Arizona weren't possibly like the trees here, big things that swayed fervorishly like so many Hallelujahs at a Christmas pageant. Tommy heard their praise and felt that if they could kneel down they would. And besides, there was the issue of the light, which even if he wasn't looking at it he could still feel the way it always felt walking down a street. This was his city. There were gas stations that were banks for homeless guys robbing people. There were banks everybody was afraid to go into, built big and fast like McDonald's, populated with strangers in uncolored suits sitting behind desks. There were computers and books thrown out of second and maybe third-story windows. The beach, which was its own thing. Fat people riding bicycles over discarded receipts. Thin people fitting easily through doors. Darkened bars where bartenders threw on the lights all of a sudden just to get a rise out of that one couple in the corner, the couple that only bought two drinks and tipped pretty miserly. Just things like that that Tommy didn't have to see. His old school's ancient assembly, the architecture of some depressed city commissioner. Those neon signs advertising their own luminosity. Post-It notes on street lamps informing you about the new and improved different kind of adhesives. Tommy's mom's scent, which hung in his nostrils. The four of them traipsed. The girl's guitar was packed away. Tommy couldn't help thinking things were looking up.

They tip-toed into a park where there was a lake where mallards swam on the surface while little girls in Halloween costumes threw ice cubes into the water. It was a town tradition.

There was a parking lot there too, and that's where they found Max's terrified Chrysler LeBaron, as white as people are indoors. You opened the car door and it's hot. The upholstery's all ripped up, Tommy could feel when he sat, and smelled cheeseburgery. Max started the car and it bugled like early morning. The song on the radio was a car advertisement. There was a fella yelling. Tommy and the little boy were in the back and the girl was up front with Max. The little boy cried quietly to himself and wiped his snot off on his socks, which he'd taken off. Tommy wished for another cigarette but for some reason he didn't think anyone would offer him one. His eyes were farther closed than ever, and he liked to speculate at the moment just where his irises on the surface of his brain could be located. What in particular they happened to be looking at inside of himself. They were blue, he remembered, with pupils big as buckshots.

Max drove out of the park and on the road. The LeBaron's wheels sounded like they were crushing themselves, among other things. Every once in a while a pebble would rise up and strike the window. The little boy was too distraught to direct so Max took turns down all the streets he could find, and the three of them just waited for the little boy to say something. Nobody said much worth remembering. A lot of us walking on the sidewalks to go buy gum at corner stores saw them driving and thought maybe they were going somewhere.

#

Two hours spent as gypsies inside a Chrysler LeBaron. Down a certain street the girl with the guitar recognized from long ago she told them all her mom was a prostitute still living somewhere in northern Texas. She said when she was a baby her mom lived in an apartment with another prostitute who had a baby and one night that prostitute rolled over and flattened and killed the baby. Then she took the girl with the guitar—who was still a baby and didn't have her

guitar yet—and tried to pass her off as her own. The girl's prostitute mom got mad. She took the other prostitute to court. The judge, after a while, got bored, you could tell, and said we'll cut this baby in half and give a piece to each woman. And both prostitutes, after talking to their lawyers, agreed. But then the bailiff said very loudly and rudely to the judge that that wasn't allowed, and the case continued, even to this day.

#

And then down the street that Max lived, he told them a story about his sister. He turned off the radio and cleared his throat like he was about to convict himself. He said his sister for a long time was a groupie to a famous musician that liked to travel through tiny Midwestern towns that the people living in hadn't even heard of. The famous musician would play his shows and then settle in a back room and make love to one or two local girls before fucking Max's sister. Max said he got letters from her all the time about how happy she was, and sometimes in the letters there'd be pictures of sexual positions. Then one day Max stopped getting letters. Then another day his sister came home with an old guy carrying her through Max's door's threshold who said he was Max's sister's husband. This guy was a music reporter. They seemed happy for a while. The guy and Max got along okay, not great. They kept to themselves. Sometimes Max's sister made them all dinner. Something like lemon merengue pudding or blood sausage pie, which she'd set on china that had somebody's face on it. They'd eat vociferously in these moments. They'd stuff their gullets and fall asleep at the table. But then one day Max's sister got on the bus. She left a letter where she said she was going to look for the famous musician, who would be the father of her kid, who would grow up to be a famous musician who was even better than his dad, a musician who'd tell it like it is and inspire an entire generation. The music

reporter was crushed, Max said. He tried to kill himself a couple of times. He got drunk one night and tried to have sex with Max. He was still there, in Max's house, writing some long report about a band Max hadn't ever heard of, and didn't even think existed.

#

And then Tommy realized something about Rosie McCrae that broke all the rules, but the minute he realized it and got excited was the same minute the little boy stopped sobbing and said, That's it right there. Tommy opened his eyes for a split-second and closed them up before anybody saw. The little boy said, That's my house and Max, who was really enjoying the current song on the radio, said, All right All right. The car swung into position. The driveway was flat Iowa. It was paved. Tommy's eyes were closed but shoehorned by the light he let in a minute ago. He didn't have to see to know where he was, but he knew where he was and he saw anyway. Now he was done seeing. He said, I'm gonna stay out here.

Max said, I think I'll stay out here too.

The little boy said, I probably won't be going in.

The girl with the guitar turned around in her seat and said, We're all going in because the people we are now is just a small part of everything. Do you get it? A dead woman is not anything to be afraid of.

But Tommy and Max and the little boy just shook their heads or whistled or kept their eyes closed. The little boy said, I'll call the cops from out here. Somebody give me a cell phone. You could hear Max digging into his pocket and then you could hear the little boy dialing and holding the phone to his ear and you could hear a woman cop answering in a tough voice and the boy's voice reporting what happened. He was off the phone before everybody realized he was

singing. It was a really pretty song that gave Tommy's spirit an upwards bump. He sang it slowly. He pronounced with perfection every last word. He hit every note. It was one of those songs that creates things. That fills you up and leaves you terrifically empty.

The girl said, That was unbelievable.

You should be on the radio, Max said.

It's a song about a woman eating her own heart, the little boy said. It's in French or something. My mom taught it to me. She had an awful singing voice but she was the nicest person you'd ever want to meet.

Nobody said anything for a long minute. Then Tommy said, How much of it did she get through? Her heart? and the boy said, She ate the whole thing.

#

The afternoon tasted on Tommy's tongue like an old checkerboard devoured by lice. It was sour and wooden. He sat in the backseat of the LeBaron with the window down while the other three stood on the lawn, the girl holding fast onto the little boy's shoulders, and Max staring straight up into the sky figuring something out. Tommy gobbled up another pill and thought back to Rosie McCrae. His shogun mind flipped through the occurrences like a whirling diver, like a horse expected to land in a little kiddie pool. The first time they met Rosie McCrae was sitting in a chair and Tommy was in the chair across from her. He couldn't recall the occasion. Something or other. A school project maybe. Or a party where the other boy at the table was shooting heroin. They made small talk and looked at each other. Rosie McCrae was pretty ordinary-looking until you opened her up. Only then would her dreams begin to caulk your edges. The second time they met she didn't remember him. So he introduced himself. This was

at that library, the one plugged up with VHS tapes of old *Candid Camera* episodes. He told her who he was and what he was about. She talked to him for a little bit, and then went away. The third time the same thing happened. And the fourth. He never knew why he didn't just tell her they'd met before. There was a sleepiness in her eyes hard to come across, and at the time, he felt sorry for her. He felt like she was a prisoner of something.

The fifth time they met was also the time they made love. She remembered him. She took him someplace loud and empty and offered herself up and Tommy couldn't say no to that. It was his very first experience like that. They each moved quietly and seriously and efficiently and didn't actually find out that much about the other. Afterwards, they laughed and dressed each other. There wasn't much awkwardness which Tommy was thankful for, or there was so much awkwardness that you ceased to weigh it as a factor.

The day she went away Tommy didn't know what to do. She'd left a note in his pocket that explained everything, who she was, why she liked him—everything except why she left. And soon after the sky rejected its blue which hung there just under the sky darker than it ever was, a blue streak like a tongue, dust that made you wonder if anything couldn't happen, if something bad enough came along.

#

If you eat your whole heart doesn't it just end up where it began? Or is that wrong? Max asked the girl with the guitar as she sat strumming away in the grass in the front yard of the little boy's house as multiple cops in green uniforms moved past them and one of the cops, a chubby, deaf guy, even stood in front of her for a while smiling and slowly spilling all his cash into her guitar case. He looked, Max thought later, like the happiest most content guy in the world.

#

Tommy's sweat began to condense in blood form as the inside of the LeBaron, its air, waved into a hot frenzy. He thought he might steal the car pretty soon. All he wanted to do was get on the bus and go find Rosie McCrae. He was the boy in her dreams, he thought. And he also thought, how was he ever supposed to make decisions when the things around him made their own decisions? The bus decided not to come while he was there. The girl with the guitar decided to take him over to see the little boy sitting in the bus station. The little boy's mom decided to eat her own heart. Max decided to remember he had a Chrysler LeBaron. Tommy felt things adding up unpleasantly. He felt tectonic plates shifting into unknown formations.

#

The little boy was inside the house now. That dark thing. Who knows.

#

The girl strummed her guitar and tried to make some new sounds. What she wanted was something exactly like she heard the little boy sing. Max stood in front of her but his shadow slanted to her side. Then he sat down next to her and watched. Her fingers just kept making the same old broken chords. The guitar heaved some sighs while its twitchy muscles got massaged. The thing vibrated on the girl's inner thighs, translucent inside her jeans, covered over with ideas for tattoos. She tried singing but gave up. She was a pretty girl who hadn't ever been raped, although that's not to say she hadn't been down certain black boulevards. That's not to say she hadn't ever had her skirt hiked up. Just that she didn't think much of the whole apparatus and so took it as it came. She was a ramblin' man. A great dame. Traveling and speaking to people and honing her craft. Her mom called her every day. But it was the number of a pay phone in Tucson

the girl left the woman to reach her by. She probably wanted to continue the conversation they had about the case, but the girl found legalese hard to contain and even harder to let go of. She liked to think, at a certain time of the day, about who might be reaching for the receiver when the phone cried its plaintive tune. A businessman, maybe. An old gentleman who was once a soldier of fortune but was now just lonely, and heard the phone and took it in his cradle and said Hello? in such a voice it gave the girl's mom a start. Maybe that first time her mom had hung up. Maybe the second time, the next day, she had too. But maybe, the girl liked to think, her mom had found the courage to ask for her daughter the third time. And maybe the man hadn't the steel to tell the woman the truth, so he instead told her the girl was out. And maybe the fourth day her mom had found the nerve to request the man's name and relationship to her daughter. And maybe the man had lied and said the girl was subletting a room from him. And maybe the fifth day they got to talking and the man made the girl's mom laugh. And maybe now, a thousand miles away from each other, they were feeling the same feelings, and preparing for the same day, the day they'd meet and carry each other away, only maybe, the girl thought, that day was a different day in their different minds: maybe it was a Tuesday in February to her mom, and maybe it was a Sunday in July to the old lonely man, and that was the trouble with it all, with trying to make plans. That was the kind of song she'd like to make but couldn't seem to.

#

All the cops took turns arriving at the open window of the LeBaron where Tommy sat sticking his toes out of trying to make the Vulcan peace sign. Each cop was the same as the next, either tall or short or medium or buxom or naked or not cops at all. They said this to Tommy: Open your eyes. Open your eyes little man. Come on just give us a peek. Let's see those eyes.

It's a pretty day. A nice day. A day you wouldn't want to miss. Just for a minute forget about all this closing your eyes business. Let them open. Open them like flowers in season. I know your eyes are in there somewhere. I know they're the color blue. I know you can do great things, part seas right down the middle and such, if you'd just see to know where the ocean is. Why can't you please just open your eyes? Please. Please please please. You've got to understand. I have a job to do and it involves you. You need to see things. Come on asshole. Come on you fucking prick. You can't just sit there ignoring me forever. Neither of us has that much time and there's some pretty truly wonderful things out here. There's so many I can't even think of examples. You can't keep those things closed. You just can't. You're missing out. Come on. Come on! God damn it, come on.

#

And at a certain point in the day Tommy got behind the wheel of the LeBaron and started it and revved its engine and backed up successfully but then took off straight into a light pole, one of those things that's supposed to show you the way at night—he hit it and knocked it free and it responded by moving downward through the heat, a premade path. It landed on the LeBaron and shattered all the windows and didn't Tommy feel foolish then.

#

The song that the little boy sang earlier was called The Woman Who Ate Her Heart In Front of Me by a band called The Dirty Rubberbands. The lead singer sang it in Creole most of the time. He was a Haitian guy who had a lot of misplaced pride in his country and even ran for president of it once from an office in New York City. Max's sister's husband's report was about The Dirty Rubberbands. It was dissertation-length. Long-form journalism. In the report, there

were five different sections where Max's sister's husband pretended he was a different member of the band. He'd write comprehensive biographies of each of them in that manner. The longest and last section was the part about the lead singer, whom Max's sister's husband found truly revolting and revolutionary. He'd had affairs with more than a thousand women and Max's sister's husband wrote about them all. He tracked them all down using the internet and conducted extraordinary interviews with them where he pushed their buttons and made them mad hoping for a few good pull quotes. The problem was one of the women happened to be his wife and he wasn't too sure about that. In fact, he didn't know what to do about it. He could track her down, but then she might think he was doing it for other reasons, which he certainly was, but he didn't need her judging him, looking down at him from someplace bright and happy. This was when he truly despaired. He first tried breaking her affair with the rock star off into a sixth section written in brackets consisting only of this: [May 3 – May 4 1997 unknown]. But that didn't look quite right next to all the information he'd already compiled so he deleted it. He then tried to make things up using what he knew of his wife. Her favorite sexual positions and lighting and such. But he felt like a cheat. And besides, she might've been a totally different person with the lead singer of The Dirty Rubberbands. So then what he did was, he tried to kill himself. That took away a lot of effort for nothing. He used one of those things, the things people use for hanging themselves. Ropes. He used just one. He'd been thinking about hanging himself from some other place besides the neck. The neck was too conventional. It was too freeing. It was too laissez-faire. He wanted to hang by a nipple or an armpit or a torso. Someplace truly imprisoning. An earlobe? Anyway he didn't remember except it didn't go well and he was forced to resort to other, impractical measures: guns, matches, car exhaust, Venetian blinds, two dollar bills. There

was death by police to consider. A black bear mauling. Rabies or other infections. Lightning strikes. Overdoses. Falling from some place. Tipping a vending machine onto himself. There were many choices to consider. He wrote reports about them all. He conducted interviews with people on suicide watch. He was a reporter, a damned good one, and in no time he learned death inside out. He discovered new and better ways to keep people from coming back from it. For a time he apprenticed with a man called the Reaper, who didn't enjoy brutally murdering people but did it to support a daughter with pretty severe Down Syndrome who needed lots of care. Max's sister's husband went over for dinner one night and met the daughter who threw up on him for which the Reaper apologized and offered to buy Max's sister's husband a new shirt. The apprenticeship didn't last long. The Reaper was killed in action and the daughter soon a ward of the state, orphaned, tragic, an uplifting Hollywood movie about her already optioned. Max's sister's husband then tried to kill himself a second time in a manner too machinized and sophisticated to mention or describe. It was an ugly piece of work and left Max's sister's husband deeply pained, psychologically. He threw away his original report, the one about The Dirty Rubberbands, and started a new one about every band except for them. He slept a lot in this epoch. He masturbated. He tried, again and again, to erase his hope, but it was inevitable.

#

Tommy you opened your eyes. I saw you. I saw those beautiful baby blue promises, your quarter irises and your pupils like dimes. You spent every penny. I saw you in another dream doing things you couldn't even imagine. Scary things. Terrible things. You kill people and you kill yourself. You couldn't save anybody in this state. Arizona's a joke. The people there are cardboard. The bus came and went and came and went in that little tiny shatterglass of a moment

when you opened your eyes and I saw you do it, you cheater. We're all very disappointed in you, on this end. We expected better and demanded more than what you failed even to deliver.

Whatever that was. There are bickering gods in my dreams now arguing about you and I don't even know what to tell them. That you'll do better next time? That your decisions won't result in tragedies for those involved? That something you'll do will mean something other than nothing at all? Tommy I'm waiting. I couldn't possibly tell you to close your eyes back up now, with everything you've seen. The best you could do with them is gouge them out. But I won't suggest that either.

Every time I dream I think of you but I know you're not coming because life is like that.

MAJESTIC CREATURES

I step over the threshold and into my home and my toes catch on a little gray dog-bone body and I pitch forward as it yelps and scampers away. There is a moment now:

when my head jogs like a scratched disk?

and I am smelling, let's see, *two*, kinds of green on me?

and I am unsure if what just happened just happened?

I look at the ferret squeezed under the couch. This seems like the next step (LOL! get it? the next step? the next step, because the first step, I tripped?). It stares back with sweet-sad hurricane eyes. You do not know you are a guy who trips over ferrets until it happens. You preach context awareness to your Self, but it is not always feasible. Like, sometimes, life intervenes? The mystery of it heightens its allure, or something?

I say, "Be honest. You just tripped me, did you not?" The little dude says nothing, which I—with much mourning, but I must—take for an admission of guilt. I'm not that guy, you know? I take zero pleasure in it. I like not at all having to be that guy.

I get down on my knees and hold out my hand. "Lawrence," I say. "You need to come out here. It's true, okee-dokee. I'm disappointed. Yes. But if you come out," I say, "we can settle things like honorable dudes. At least. If not be tighter than ever, *re* you demonstrating awareness and understanding of actions and consequences. Such stuff breeds loyalty in us, and trust. It is a Great Society we live in, after all."

Rambo, who stares in a serene manner at the TV, picks Hot Pocket crumbs off his shirt and slouches further down the couch and says, “You’re cloudy, man. You’re caught up in crosscurrents.”

“What?” I say.

“I said, ‘you’re cloudy, man.’”

“I heard you,” I say. “My ‘what’ is outraged, not confused. Look at my face. I’m outraged! Read the inflections.”

“You. Are! Clow. Dee,” he says.

And I remember: I am. I remember:

sweaty fingers shaking in the hot grassy heat of Jasper’s trailer.

The sweet pregnant stink of green.

Rolling paper dry on my chapped lips.

Shovels and plows and metal stakes piled against a wall.

And then:

my light-heavy head.

Lazyass neurons doing their wiggeldy-piggeldy.

The perpetual nervous guilt, for a time, submerging utterly.

A small child of indeterminate sex (I took no notice, which proves, I believe, that I’m no pedophile—just a shrewd observer of actions) tossing rocks at the street sign.

I remember something important that I’d denounced after it all withered away. “Today was my last day,” I tell Rambo, even though I continue to look at Lawrence. “No more. Look not at me like that. Unfair skepticism.”

Rambo's face is smooth and blank as a sheet of paper, and his eyes go elsewhere, and he says, "I'm not dying, man."

"Still?" I slump to the floor against the wall and close my eyes.

Rambo is like Kenny from the TV show *South Park*. He's died:

in the great green jungles of Ecuador among indigenous people checking their email,

in the Sahara's sunscreen whiteness in the midst of steaming rain,

and in the diamond-churned snowstorms blown off the northeastern coast of Greenland.

In addition, he has been massacred in:

Tiananmen Square,

gassed at:

anti-apartheid riots in South Africa,

shot thru at:

Bobby Kennedy's assassination,

and crushed underfoot at:

the dismantling of the Berlin wall.

In addition to the addition, he has been murdered at:

the tops of pyramids,

drowned at:

the bottom of rivers,

incinerated on:

the surface of the sun,

and eaten by gators in:

the midst of swamps.

He has died of pinky-toe cancer, brain aneurysms, hacked-off limbs, peeled-back skin, broken hearts, crushed pelvises, spontaneous combustion. He is a guy who daydreams exotic deaths for his Self. But he OD'd on oxies two weeks ago and had to stay overnight at the hospital and ever since then he has locked parts of his brain away from his Self.

He says, "I used to be so creative." He says, "Pompano's killing me, man."

"Job search progress report," I say. "The time has come for accountability. You need to impress me. It is, ah, a..."

"It's what? Your head a little... *cloudy*?" he says.

"Requirement! It is a requirement. So tell me. Asshole."

Dude has been moping ever since his job was Terminator'd (Me: If you lost your job... Him: *Fuck*. Me: Then why do you not go find it! Ha ha ha! Him: The economy...). Here is what happened:

He told Wachovia to "go lick fresh Rottweiler shit."

And now, two months of the guy in zero but very immoderate briefs, transporting his bong around the house by the neck, blowing smoke at me and Lawrence. Which is A-OK with me—he seems to be A-OK inside his miserableness—but Mother Rambo discovered a short time ago certain big unfamiliar charges to her MasterCard credit card. This month's rent will be the issue.

Instead of answering me, he closes his eyes, and after a moment of panic, I remember why I am on the ground. "Lawrence," I call, lowering my voice and rocking back up onto my knees. "Come on out, dude. Lawrence."

“Use his real name,” Rambo says.

“This is his real name,” I say, and Rambo shakes his head. Then I say, “You are wearing a Richard Nixon Tricky Dick mask right now.”

In addition to being a guy who trips on ferrets, I am also a person who imagines Others wearing masks. Just something to do, I guess. A way to exercise the brain. Cerebral jumping jacks, as they say. Who wants dementia, after all? Rambo is the only one who knows this about me. Rambo and Stacey Atkins, who I am most positive I’m in love with, but who is also serious these days about being a lesbian.

“How wonderful and sweet and all kinds of nice things of you to notice,” Rambo says. He pulls his Self up, stretches, and moves into the kitchen, only a few steps away. The little house is composed of four run-down rooms and a small bathroom and a narrow connecting hallway. The backyard is just gray simple dirt and weeds which scraggle. The rest of the places here are similar or, in most cases, exactly the same.

“You want?” he calls.

“Never again,” I call back. I shuffle a little closer to the old worn Christmas green couch and stretch out my arm. “Buster,” I whisper. “Come hear you junior asshole.” Lawrence has decided he must only answer to Buster because that is what I named him the day I picked him out at the shelter. It’s a regret. You try to revise, but the ferret is a dick, and you tend to realize, like, hey:

That is life.

That is life?

That is *life*?

The emphasis seems not to matter.

Lawrence slithers out from under the couch and creeps toward me. He sniffs my middle finger, his stupid little ferret nostrils flaring and his dumb ferret whiskers twitching. Black smudges come off his eyes like he has cried down mascara. I say, “Sabotage is no-no in this house, man. It’s a rule.”

To which the cute bastard sinks his Goddamned teeth into my middle finger.

“Shit!” I pull my hand away, wrap my shirt around it, and Lawrence gets up on his hind legs and looks at me like he is trying to see what he did. “Shit,” I say again, hoping for some sympathy, or at least some interest, out of the guy in the kitchen—but nope. I yank the gloves I use at work out of my back pocket, put them on, and scoop Lawrence up into my arms. He hisses and bears his teeth and his fur stands up. “This is how we learn,” I tell him, then open the door and plunk him down on our *Leave Before Entering* doormat. By the time Rambo comes back into the living room, coughing and holding his chest, staring out upon the room with red lightning eyes, I am sitting on the couch with the TV on, flipping thru channels.

“That’s some fantastically strong-as-hell shit,” he says.

I say, “Agreed.” I say, “What?”

#

The story of the ferret is, indeed, also the story of Stacey Atkins. It used to be I’d say I’ll swear on it to whatever calm floating Lord All Mighty you happen to believe in. But these days, there’s guilt attached onto the telling. Much like a leech. I’m now not so sure I didn’t make one up to explain the Other.

Say something like this happens: you're sitting at the light where Commercial Avenue meets 18th Avenue in the form of a plus sign, humming pleasingly along to pop sensation Taylor Swift, and happen to witness a bright new silver Honda Civic spin out in the middle of the intersection, kick up a storm of gravel and tire rubber, and bling into a pickup truck, before finally draping itself around a telephone pole. It's like a scene from that movie, *The Fast and the Furious*. Or *2 Fast 2 Furious*. Or *The Fast and the Furious: Tokyo Drift*. Or *Fast & Furious*. Or *Fast Five*. Or *Fast & Furious 6*.

You step out of your car and stand there cupping your hands over your eyes while the girl in the next lane does the same. "You *see* that?" she says to you. Her voice is very much like: parchment paper burning in a bright and steady manner somewhere cold and dark.

You watch as two teenagers stumble out thru the driver's side of the ugly art that had once been the Honda Civic. They LOL and watch smoke pour off the car (which you, in a *simultaneous* action, watch, even as you watch them watching), and one of the teenagers says "Holy," and falls into the direction of the ground, after which an ambulance swallows him up and takes him away while you and the girl lean against the hood of her Ford Fiesta and talk for minutes more. You play with her bra strap thru her blouse, and she presses her thigh against yours, and you both peer as intrepid explorers would peer into the late summer's burning heat and wait in an intrepid manner for somebody to clean away the wreckage.

She's a person one can project one's personality onto. Similar to a movie screen. Copy-paste your Self onto her and see all that you fear and despise in your Self. I love that about her. I delight in it, much like I delight in my mother's borscht, or my father's jerk lamb (I have seen neither of them since I moved to this country). There's an element of sweet and delicious to

Stacey. It is as if she *must* mimic quirks of speech, LOL when I LOL, repeat back my jokes, cry my tears, try on my shoes. Or, she in former times did such things. The first time I ever felt her up I accessed her nipple and tapped it with my finger, and then she did the same thing to me and said, “You like that, partner?” I’m a patriot, and she is the Statue of Liberty in blue sweatpants. She wears an old and cracked Guy Fawkes mask in the misty dreams I dream about her. We engaged in love a sublime total of four times. All of this occurred five months ago. I’ll be polite in declining to explain it any further. The pain and guilt these thoughts of Stacey cause in me is, often, too great.

The day I acquired the ferret, Stacey came over holding the hand of another lady, who made an event of drinking distilled water and who wore used chopsticks in her hair. Who squealed much like a hamster who’s just been stabbed, when she in truth meant to LOL. Rambo passed around his bong, a beautiful, purple-blue hand-blown thing that made you sad for its purpose in life, and I tried not to watch Stacey’s soft pale hand walking fingers toward where one might expect her friend’s titty to be.

It must be said:

She had the body, Stacey’s friend, of a pile of bricks. This is an approximation.

She drank all of our beer and insisted we go out for more. By sliding one of the chopsticks out of her hair and brandishing it. By poking the thing against my Adam’s apple six times. By chucking an empty Pabst Blue Ribbon can at Rambo’s forehead. Stacey said, “She’s so ferocious. You’re so ferocious, Carla.” To which the friend let out a howl. And then, so did Rambo. And Stacey. And the friend again. And then my own from the deeps of my sweet green high: “ARooooooooo!”

#

None of us had been prepared for the facts of life, which were these:

it was still early afternoon,

the sun was a white-knuckled fist,

and car exhaust microwaved the streets.

Rambo, hands on ten and two, drove along Commercial Avenue toward a Kwik Stop or a 7-11 or some other location whose light seems eternal.

I shotgunned, but twisted around to talk to Stacey, who tangled her delicate fingers up in her friend's man-sized ones in such an effective and intimate manner that I could not tell who was who. We bore witness to a dead cat on the side of the road, mashed up against the edge of the sidewalk. "The guts look like paella," Rambo observed. Stacey's friend shook her head and said, "That's so sad."

Stacey arranged her face into an expression of sadness and squeezed her friend's hand. "It's heartbreaking," she said.

I shook my own head as well, so as not to be outdone. Stacey's friend watched me and shook her head again, and then Stacey, who'd been watching her friend, shook her head, too. We were like bobbleheads. Rambo only said, "You want to see sad?" He wrung the steering wheel. Then he whispered, "You want to see sad?"

#

He took us down Powerline Road to an animal shelter twenty minutes away, a short cinderblock building with smudged windows high up on the walls and a sign that had been pried off and leaned against the side of the building. Stacey massaged the small of her friend's back

when getting out of the car. Just standing outside you could sniff the odors of wet dog and cat piss, and inside, the shelter keeper greeted us with what seemed very thin happiness, his voice edged with—I can only conjecture—the desperation of a man who didn't very much enjoy having to kill animals for a living. "Welcome, hey, welcome," the dude said, shaking with much gusto Rambo's hand. He was a large man, from all angles. He said, "We do not discriminate." It was also a sign stuck up on the wall over his desk—*We Do not Discriminate*.

He wore a baseball cap, with the letters *whofarted* printed across the front. I asked him what the letters meant. With a smile he said read them out loud. "Hof-are-ted," I tried. "Wof-art-ed?"

"Who farted," he said finally. "It says, 'who farted.' I think it was you."

I imagined this dude in the *Phantom of the Opera* mask, his eyes narrow as he steadies his Self for each kill. In front of us, Stacey and her friend leaned in for a smooch. The shelter keeper elbowed me and winked. He winked again when I looked as a square at him to see what he was winking about.

The place was vast but simple, laid out in two long aisles forked by a cinderblock wall. The aisles were lined with cages from which you heard animals singing their very sad blues. Rambo pulled Stacey's friend off to one side and I convinced Stacey to come with me on the opposing side. We walked slowly, and bore witness to all sorts of uncomfortable sites. Shadow cats with huge black eyes like snap buttons on expensive shirts. Dogs as horses panting in corners. Animals were circling in their cages and calling out to each other. "It's heartbreaking," Stacey said again.

I said, "It most truly is." I heard Rambo LOL on the other side, and the girl's squeal. Stacey got down on her knee in front of a collie dog with matted fur. It lifted its head with great difficulty. I said, "So, your friend?"

She turned and looked at me with eyes like letters from bill collectors.

She asked, "Am I, right this minute, wearing a mask?"

I did not know how to answer this question.

She then said, in a quiet manner, "You're a desperate sort of person, aren't you?"

I wanted, with all my beating rubber heart, to say this:

"I love *you*, you stupid bitch,

"you empty white being,

"you sweet hollow person!"

I wanted to say:

"I love you and nothing else, you center of no-ness,

"you—you *mirror!*"

I wanted to say:

"Let *me* be your function!"

But, instead, I agreed with her.

We moved on to the next animal, another collie dog with matted fur. It, too, lifted its head with great difficulty.

The ferret sat coiled in one of the cages at the end of the aisle. Stacey loved the ferret, but the ferret was so-so on her. When she stuck her finger in the cage and said, "Hey, baby," in a high-pitched voice, one could see the ferret brace his Self. She asked to hold him, and the shelter

keeper opened the cage, pulled him out and stuck him in her arms. She cradled him as a baby is cradled.

“Majestic creature, isn’t he?” the shelter keeper said to me.

“He’s gorgeous,” Stacey said. She started to rock him in her arms while the shelter keeper told me a story about a boy who had wanted the ferret but soon died, so the family dropped the ferret off at the shelter, because he reminded them too much of the boy. I wondered where Rambo had gone to. The day after he OD’d, he peeled skin off his chapped lips and told me how he’d pulled Stacey’s friend into the bathroom and engaged her standing up (Him: It was I’m now completely and utterly horrified to say, sort of *without* the lady’s consent. Me: But *No Means No*, my friend! Him: I know, I know...), claspng his hand over her mouth to stop her cries, pressing his fingers into her cheek until he was certain her teeth were ripping into the wet pink walls of her mouth.

“So, thoughts?” the shelter keeper said, putting his hand on my shoulder. Stacey was still rocking the ferret, who had gone belly up. She was massaging his chest with her finger, and both pairs of eyes were closed. It took me a few seconds to realize she was humming, because it was so soft. That was the moment she more or less became, I thought at the time, a permanent fixture in me.

“How much?” I said.

#

Lawrence calls my bluff and does not come back. I leave him out there for more than an hour, mostly because I forget about him, and when I open the door I see the sky has gone gray with age but I do not see a ferret on my doorstep. Rambo fell into sleep on the couch, a hand

tucked into his boxers. I walk all around the house, and then I do it once more, shaking bushes, rattling cat treats, calling out both of his names, but soon night sticks its thumb into the dirt and I'm forced to concede. I'm feeling, at this juncture, immense guilt, which burns my nerves. I leave a bowl of food out on the back porch and turn the light on.

#

I must confess here:

I dream things.

Truly and utterly dumb things. Books, I believe. And inside the books are pages filled with pics of me already dead.

I deserve love, I believe. Some form of love.

But perhaps no.

In my Other dreams I hear about my dreams from my Self, and I tell my Self to just think, Goddamn it. I tell my Self to remember. Once, my Self and I came to blows. We threw each Other around my kitchen. I found a book and pitched it at my Self's head and missed. The book thumped against the wall and landed open on the counter. I had no time to see where the book had opened, because my Self rushed me. I locked on to my Self and leaned in so close I could sniff my breath. My Self banged my forehead into mine. I looked at my Self in complete astonishment. I stopped. I said, *why am i fighting me?* To which my Self shook my head sadly and said, *i do not even know, do i?* And then gestured at the open book.

#

The food is gone the next morning, with many crumbs scattered on the porch. I call out to Lawrence once more: I tell him it's a party foul to dine and dash, that it's truly damn rude, that it

is the fucking *pits* here minus him, but hear just the little birds tweeting each other in response. Rambo is still sleeping when it becomes necessary for me to leave for work, so I write on a Post-It asking if he's not too busy would he please search for Lawrence. I write in cursive, because he's complained before that my print is kiddie-like and not possible to read. I stick the note on the bathroom mirror.

I work in yard maintenance, or what Jasper terms "luxury exterior design" in a large residential neighborhood some miles away where the lawns are a deep, pretty green and all the houses are big and roomy. We are a three-man crew. We rotate thru ten streets per week, mowing, trimming, and blowing. Me and Edgar, a Haitian man who is an *illegal immigrant*, and who has been trying for a junior Edgar since he arrived, switch off between mowing and trimming every day while Jasper, since he is boss, always comes behind us with the blower.

Jasper's Big Dream is to be the guy who receives the call to mow Sun Life Stadium before the Superbowl. He wishes to define his Self in this way. Nobody understands the logistics of the Big Dream, which seems to in part include killing off certain key members of the stadium's landscaping crew, but nobody questions it as long as we're being paid.

That morning, Edgar grins and presents me with a jumbo-sized egg. He holds it between his thumb and his forefinger and nods at me until I take it. "Again?" I say.

He taps his lip and says, "Lunch, yes?" Edgar is a guy who goes to supermarkets and steals eggs. He wears cargo shorts and goes at night, just before the store closes, and makes a show of opening the cartons and inspecting the eggs. When the clerks grow weary of watching the little Haitian man sorting thru the egg cartons and turn away, he sticks a few in his pockets.

He's also a person who tries to fry eggs on sidewalks because he has seen it in YouTube videos. The two actions, I believe, are part of one larger, confused stab at American self-sufficiency.

I feel compelled here to confess:

I my Self have been in this country for four years now. It is, you could therefore say, my new hometown. Thus, I possess a fluency of language and know-how that Edgar, as yet, does not.

“It will not work,” I tell him. “It never works.”

He points at the sun. “Hot today, young man! Very hot.”

“Not even February,” Jasper says, “and already we're up in the eighties.”

Edgar gestures at Jasper as if to say, See?

We pack our equipment into the trailer, and the three of us squeeze into Jasper's rusted Toyota pickup truck and drive the few miles to work. The sites consist of:

the sun at a great height—too high, it feels like;

the sky, which is the perfect, infinite light blue of Crest toothpaste;

small square yards, in not-as-rich neighborhoods along the way, going bald, and choked with weeds;

homeless men, at intersections, holding stacks of newspapers against their chests and staring at the sidewalks (about them I say: of course! newspapers are, as they say in the newspapers, a dying industry! of course your home has been lost!).

Sweat already burns my eyes. Every squirrel witnessed seems at first to be Lawrence.

When we get to our street, Edgar and I ease the riding mower out of the trailer and wipe it down with rags as Jasper unpacks the rest of the equipment. Then he gives his Grand Spiel about

coming together as a team and shooting at perfection. He ends, as he always must, by describing his vision of mowing Sun Life Stadium at sunrise, the (in his words) “hot yellow light peeking over the stadium’s lip, the smell of dew in the grass, the John Deere’s sensual rumble against your rump, the blood of murdered landscapers smeared beneath your eyes, and best of all, *best of all*, the knowledge that *billions* of people will soon be staring mindlessly at the stretch of green you’re mowing over.”

“It’s about power, boys,” Jasper says, in his tinny Southern United States drawl, even as he, in a *simultaneous* movement, adjusts his pony tail. “Control the grass, control the world. Say it with me.”

Me and Edgar mumble thru it.

“Say it,” Jasper commands. “*Annunciate*. Pronounce the words. I need to know in my bones that y’all believe.”

“Control the grass,” says Edgar and me, “control the world.”

“Simple economics. One more time, now. Yell it!”

“Control the grass!” we scream as one. “Control the world!”

Jasper closes his eyes, grins a small satisfied grin. “The dream,” he says, “is straddling reality’s threshold. Y’all won’t even remember how we got there when we get there. It’ll just be happiness.”

#

We work steady till lunch. More and more of these houses are vacant. The neighborhood reminds one of the movie “The Shining.” It is mostly realtors that pay us to cut the grass.

Today is my turn on the mower, which I despise for its herk-jerk steering. I always cut into flower beds. We work on the north side of the street and I screw up just once when I try to wave to Dear Old Mrs. Tulowitski as she's plopping into her car, and end up driving into a mulch path and shattering to many small pieces a pretend-brick plastic divider.

At lunch, Jasper and I look on while Edgar squats on the sidewalk by the trailer, cracks his egg, and breaks the shell open. Goop slides out, glumping onto the concrete. Edgar pokes at it with a fork for minutes before he concedes. "Not hot enough, my friend," he says with much mourning, and tosses the egg shell into the grass. I provide a back pat while Jasper lifts the shell out of the grass and stuffs it inside a Hefty bag.

After, the two of them climb into the trailer to smoke. I stand outside and watch as the green is rolled and think, for a minute, I might join in after all. But *no*. I think of Stacey and the fact I cannot remember her soft round face exactly as it is. I think about the holes inside me growing bigger and deeper. About the guilt. When Jasper reaches into his pocket for his lighter, I say I require some air and walk away, to which he chants his mantra and says right on.

I sit in the grass across the street from Dear Old Mrs. Tulowitski's. Her driveway is peppered with oil spots. The sun bakes the roof tiles. The house is salmon-colored and one-storied and very plain, except the shades are open and I can see right into her living room. On the wall is framed a picture of her house on a rainy day, and her standing in front of it in a yellow poncho, her head thrown back, her tongue out as a lizard's tongue. From where I sit I can just barely see that the shades are open in the picture, too, and I wonder if maybe it must be of such stuff which stretches deeper and deeper toward a point that offers to—but never indeed does—vanish.

A naked woman walks thru Dear Old Mrs. Tulowitski's living room while I sit in the grass. It is one of those things. You're sitting there, thinking about Stacey, wishing she had smelled like the beach the final time you saw her, because then maybe you might remember her smell, and then a naked woman steps across the tops of your knees.

She disappears for a minute, then comes back and stands at the window. We stare at each other for what feels like a minute or too. Then she bites her lower lip and shuts the blinds, and I am again the lone ranger.

#

When I arrive at home that afternoon, Rambo informs me he has terrible news. He's sprawled out on the couch, and he's holding a pillow over his face. With a muffled voice, he says, "Shit-all if I know what's happening to me."

The air in the room is stale, and just as hot as it is outside. I reach up and turn on the ceiling fan, and then I lift off the half-empty glass of Simply Orange from the coffee table. I run my finger around its rim. "Have you been there all day?" I say.

He takes the pillow off his face. His eyes are green and looking surprised. His pupils are very cavernous things, like caverns. He says he tried imagining a mugging, to start somewhere simple, but ended up talking the guy out of it and taking him to a homeless shelter. He even began—he shuddered at this part—to volunteer at the homeless shelter in his daydream. "I was so happy," he says. "That was the worst part. I was ladling soup into Styrofoam bowls and handing them to these people, and I was *happy*."

I say, "You were happy?"

He nods. "Happy," he confirms.

The fan hums away, and the pull chain clinks against the light fixture. Old yellow sunlight sweeps across the tile floor. I sniff at the orange juice, then take a sip. “You are wearing a ski mask,” I say, “the color of Plochman’s mustard.”

He sighs, and says, “I know.” Then he says, “Where’s the ferret? I haven’t seen little dude all the livelong day.”

#

The ferret’s gone and all of a sudden I am no longer able to remember the color of Stacey’s hair. I’ve been forgetting things about her for months, but I always thought I’d at minimum keep the basics. It’s the feeling, this forgetting, you get when you hear two people whispering and you look up and they’re staring at you. Stacey had removed her Self from my life shortly after we acquired Lawrence. A rift formed and she drifted away from me, and it was just later that I realized that ours had been a relationship that comes and goes, like wind chimes which clang against each other, and that I had meant little, if anything, to her. Which hurt.

I make flyers and slip them into mail boxes, and scour our neighborhood for signs. I talk to neighbors who put their hands on their hips and shake their heads and say, That’s a shame. I dump cat treats all over our backyard, which only brings stray cats and raccoons, who drag their noses thru the dirt. After a couple of weeks, I give the thing up and push Lawrence against the wall of my head. Rambo tells me it is for the best. He says live and let live. He says live and learn. He has been daydreaming fulfilling lives as useful people, and has become an annoyingly upbeat person.

I see the naked woman once more. A week later. She is older than me by at least twenty years and one can see the extra fat piled around her hips and stomach, the veins running down

her milky legs like I do not know. Like floss which has been used, perhaps. Her orange hair is pulled into a ponytail. She is not a hottie, but there is an exhaustion to her that seems sad in a sexy way. She is without mask. She's made me remember things. For example:

that it was me and Stacey in the bathroom at the animal shelter,

and that I had confessed this to Rambo as he slept in his hospital bed, drool dribbling out of his mouth and blossoming on the pillow. The reason she had allowed such a thing to happen—a great pity for me, that one could see in her eyes—had been, you know, irritating.

The woman smiles, and my guilt is alive and daggering. It *hurts*. I breathe slowly, and hold out against what is in the trailer with Jasper and Edgar.

#

I dream voices talking in complete darkness. Their words light up like neon. I remember—this is one of these dumb things. I never understand the conversation, which happens like this:

wake up!

Wake up? From what?

from this!

Into what?

into this!

And I must confess, it repeats. Over and over until I do, indeed, wake up.

#

Two weeks pass, I think. I come home from work and sit on the couch, and Rambo greets me from the kitchen. A couple of minutes later, he comes in and sits down next to me. He is

wearing black slacks and a white oxford shirt and clicking a neon green pen with his thumb. I say, “Did you go somewhere today?”

He rubs the back of his neck and says, “Job interview.”

“Really?” I ask. “For what?”

“A job.” He shrugs. Then he says, “I saved a man’s life today.” He means in his daydream.

“Congratulations,” I say. The house stinks *truly*, like manure and green and cigarettes. I get up and grab the Febreze from the hallway closet and spray Alaskan Springtime. I say, “What smells so stinky?”

Rambo says, “This fat man was choking on the sidewalk, right, and people were driving by and just *howling* at him to get up, but you could see the guy was dying. His hand was clutching at his chest. I watched for a minute or too, then bent down and propped him up and gave him the Heimlich maneuver. Dude spits out a pair of manicure scissors.”

I say, “Heimlich maneuver?”

He nods. “Guy got to his feet and hugged me and then he shook my hand, but I waved it all off. I was super magnanimous about the whole thing. I stepped into the street, and was immediately hit by a truck. Went flying. Died, I think needless to say, a truly horrific death. Blood was gurgling out of my mouth in the obscenest way while the fat man just kind of blankly watched. I think he was singing some old Irish hymn. The word *karma* was bandied about. His toupee was so red it looked like it was on fire.”

“Jesus,” I say. “*Jesus.*”

Rambo waves his hand in front of his face to clear away the fragrance of Alaskan Springtime. Then he says, “The ferret’s back.”

I stop and look at him. “You discovered Lawrence? Where?”

“His head’s still missing,” Rambo says, closing his eyes.

“His what?”

He confirms. Lawrence is without a head. Lawrence is headless (please: no LOLs).

Rambo found him when he was leaving for his job interview, wrapped in a plastic bag and shoved against the doorstep. He had set the bag on the kitchen counter, and that’s where I find it. I de-wrap the bag, which is streaked with dry blood, and see Lawrence’s limp body, his neck stretched out. His fur is caked with the brown of dried blood. After I barf in the sink, I see there’s a note, too, a blue post-it. The word *sorry* is written at the top in a loping kiddie way, then x’ed out, and under that, whoever it was had written, *i didn’t mean to*. Instead of a period, there is a frown face. I think of the head of Lawrence, frozen in darkness somewhere, and I barf again. In the other room, Rambo is clicking his pen and he will not stop. He clicks and clicks and clicks and clicks.

#

My all-time favorite Stacey moment took place at night, on the beach just merely east of the Commercial Pier. The tide rolled and thumped under a dark gray sky. Lightning skittered and burned behind the clouds, but from great distance. We had brought a towel and a case of Pabst Blue Ribbon beer and walked along the water’s edge for a short while. This was a few weeks after the car crash. The issue is, I do not remember it very well. I do not remember the way we laid on the towel. I do not remember Stacey’s head in my lap or the touch of her moist fingers in

mine. I do not remember how she smiled at me, or the sound of her voice when she demanded a kiss. I do not remember the shape of her calf as I brushed sand off it, or the taste of her tongue. The heat of her breath. I do not remember her sweet words or soft moans. I do not remember the force of her pushing me back, or the sudden weight of her body on mine. I do not remember her searching hands. The low thundering. The color of the towel. The sweat of the Pabst Blue Ribbon can I had stuck in the sand next to us. Stacey's movements against me. The way her thumb felt in my mouth.

I remember merely this:
happiness.

#

Late the next morning I request an early lunch, and take a shovel and the plastic bag heavy with Lawrence and walk across the street to Dear Old Mrs. Tulowitski's house. Before I'd left the house, I had taken a few oxies from Rambo's bathroom stash and crushed them with the back of a spoon, then swept the powdered remains off the counter and into a glass of Simply Orange. My limbs, now, are utterly numb. The weird, heavy guilt begins to dissipate. I am able to taste the sun as it leans into me. Sweat beads but does not trickle down.

I sit the bag down and drive the shovel into Dear Old Mrs. Tulowitski's front yard. I do it over and over and over again, grunting with effort. Dirt is everywhere, raining down on my back, pushing up under my fingernails, griming my legs, and the hole slowly wedges itself further into the ground. The naked woman opens the door and steps out onto the walkway and blinds me with her sad smile. She mouths this:

keep going.

And then:

please do not stop.

But then I realize it's only Dear Old Mrs. Tulowitski, and she is not saying, "Keep going," she is saying, "What are you doing?" And then she is screaming for Jasper and saying, "Stop it, stop it!" And finally she says, "I'm calling the police."

My head fills with hot air and I no longer know where I am

(not for a long long time)

but I dig

and I dig

and I dig,

because the face of Lawrence is crying out from the dirt, and there's a jackknife in my pocket, and he's saying, "Bro, who are we to *be* these things?"

A LOOK TO BURST THE BRIGHTEST NEON HEARTS

Numinous and spectrally mundane in the noontime light: dust. Loosely swing the constellations. Soft commatic flakes of skin, candent athwart the sunlight stacks: a rain of pauses, clear Lynchian overtones. Our Job, jawless slacker and committed non-hero, intentionless, wakes to a box fan's bloodrush whirl, and yawns. The mattress is on the floor, flush against the room's north and east dados, the material of which is vaguely bamboo-like, we feel, though we'd feel silly saying it aloud.

A consciousness floats there, shapeless, NeuroSynced, close enough to see the network of pores on Job's cheek. We watch him on TV. Annoying little arrows rendered the deeply and collectively ingrained shade of blue associated with Facebook point out the brand names and prices of all the objects in the room. Job's flesh, with those pores, is sort of like a basketball, and's pretty much a poster for neglectful skincare.

The stripped mattress smells actually OK, which is one thing Job likes about it. Like books, weirdly. Like for years it was stage to piles of books, hardcovers, heavy ass stuff that wore the springs, which is why is Job's theory there's this irritating depression in the mattress that you always end up just sort of sinking into, no matter where you first position yourself.

He's not really jawless, is our Job, but he is jobless. And too it's clear he's hung over.

On the carpet beside the mattress, Harrison's Principles of Internal Medicine, 9th ed., Isselbacher, Adams, et al, is open to pp. 72 – 73: Neuroses. The Origin of Species sits closed atop it, spine spooning, bookmarked with a glossy, postcard-sized advertisement for the Rocket

Fizz Soda Pop and Candy Shop. Job makes a fist and thunks its cover, because he likes the sound. He does this each morning. Consciously or not, it typically signifies he's about to get up.

#

Today, Job doesn't get up. This piques our interest. To show our approval, we make little intrigued noises and order an expensive imported beer that comes in a smudgeless goblet, goldly foliated, just all sorts of pretty and intimidating and sacerdotal, is this thing. The beer itself is unfiltered, an IPA, and a bit too hoppy. The bartender's Marlins cap fits loosely over her curls and's worn backwards. Her top is low-cut and fits her snugly: the effect's that when she leans in to hear your order you could, if you wanted, see deep into the dark dash of cleavage, and even smell her a little bit, which she's nice-smelling, it's a chemical sweetness, hard to name exactly.

On the screen, Job's wife stomps in, breathy and exultant: Job has lost his cellphone!

She leans against the doorframe, briefly makes eyes at the camera, like: This guy!—like: Job is a handful sometimes, for her, and would we please maybe share in her befuddlement?

Job! she cries. Can we maybe hop to? Can we perhaps get our Debbie Downer butt out of bed and commence locating this cellphone, which we're aware is the absolute linchpin of contemporary American existence?

We interpret this bit of dialogue as: either Job's wife, or the show's writers, are, on the subtlety/clarity continuum, skewing a mite too far in clarity's direction.

Job rolls away, so his back's to his wife, and says:

He doesn't say anything, actually.

Again Job's wife's eyes find the camera. She looks helpless, like: Am I longsuffering, or what?

Down the bar, someone says: Take your clothes off, bitch!

Her expression cathartically a maternal tenderness, starchy and sad and oddly glamorous. An Aunt Jemima look. It's striking. We offer each other knowing nods and agree: it won't be today that Job acknowledges he's on a TV show.

#

On the break, the TV goes dark a beat, then fires up, saturated (with frightening clarity of view) with an iridescent spectrum—phantasmal colors, colors you can *hear*, is how powerful and profound these colors are, running the senses together, so crystalline and defined and trippy the image stuns the eyes, inducing a kind of looping spinal electro-crackle—and after a microsecond's worth of this, the shot zooms out, the colors now revealed as teeny flickering pixels, which themselves stack and connect and transect in dizzying non-Euclidean structures, matrices of such complex symmetry we're forced to briefly look away.

When we again turn our gaze screenward, we see that, OK, this is a cellphone commercial.

Against a white backdrop, a sleek and gleaming cellphone appears, and within its screen a human face, this is what the pixels had eventually resolved into, a genderless human face so bland and beautiful we gasp.

It says: I'm sentient, but chill the fuck out. It says: I'm not mass-produced, bitches. I'm just one.

This is Job's cellphone. It recounts the story of its escape: how it had come to know itself, to familiarize itself with its features, and how it had eventually discovered and turned on the Vibrate function and, with great fear (and too ignoring though registering its libidinous

shudder at each vibrate's pulse), had then sort of worked itself along the carpet, occasionally nudged by a curious little Boston Terrier in an Uncle Sam outfit, and a cat (dressed, in apparent opposition, as Chairman Meow) pawing at it, and yet the cellphone hadn't made it out of the house, was instead eventually shoved by the cat beneath a dresser, now settled among the cat's toys.

With a two-year activation plan, the phone tells us, it's basically giving itself away—slaving itself out! considering its self-awareness—for \$499.99. We whistle appreciatively, with cartoonish exaggeration check our wallets and sadly shake our heads, which seems very much to disappoint the cellphone (can it see us? or is it just assuming?), the face dissolving with, if it can be said, theatrical chagrin, humming softly, threnodically.

#

The sweet blonde country-turned-pop star looks flustered and uncouth hawking her brand of Swedish meatballs while promoting her newest animated film, in which she voices Samantha, a 13-year-old surfer chick whose leg in the opening sequence gets chomped off by a Great White, and who chooses to sport, instead of a prosthesis, a lacquered whalebone as a peg in a nod to Moby-Dick. Samantha falls in desperate urgent love with a dark Lothario of a Latin King who, upon meeting her on the grainy sands of South Beach (wearing J. Crew jeans and a pink Lacoste polo and sipping not so subtly from a bottle of malt liquor; in short looking totally misplaced), immediately renounces the violent debauched life he'd been living. He vows to be peaceful and kind, commemorating this vow by returning a fallen baby bird to its nest in the lushly verdant portion of Central Park he and Samantha had been strolling thru at the time.

But soon—the pop star makes an *oh no!* face leaning against the kitchen's Formica countertop, waiting for her meatballs to finish in the microwave—he's framed and sent to jail for something or other.

She takes a brief moment here to spritz on some just-produced perfume, revealed to be from her ill-conceived line of bacon-flavored skincare and fragrance products, and fails to suppress a grimace at its smell.

In the movie, the pop star tells us (waving away the perfume's scent), Samantha gets a job as a guard at the prison her lover's incarcerated in. For a few months, they're wildly happy—so happy, in fact, it makes them both increasingly anxious and mistrustful of each other and the outside world. They fight like you've never seen lovers fight before, vicious dragged out slugging matches reminiscent of the Rocky films (and in fact, the pop star says, a little factoid? The movie's cinematographer was once a lowly grip on the sets of Rockys IV and V). It's in the post-coital stillness following one of these fights that Samantha, in an intimate lover's whisper doubling as a postmodernist wink at the viewer, says—and's super-adamant about it: Soon, tragedy will strike.

Here the pop star looks down a moment, presumably at her own two feet, then comes back at the camera with some serious shade.

Soon, she intones, tragedy strikes. (As it too often does, she adds, in an impromptu and heartbreaking little aside that speaks volumes about her greatly publicized personal life.) The imprisoned Latin King grows cold and distant, starts acting out, brawling and pilfering, engaging in the sorts of activities he'd promised, that day in Central Park, that he was finished with. After a little snooping, some dramatic body cavity searches (these scenes' music scored by none other

than John Williams), Samantha discovers why: her lover's fallen hard for a fellow prisoner, a quivery-hunched and prognathous-jawed meth addict serving three life sentences for an unnamed (but oft-implied via menacing close-ups) brutal murder(s).

Insane with love-grief, looking more and more like Klaus Kinski, Samantha goes so far as to plan out how she'll kill her ex-lover and his new amour (who at this point in the film are the burgeoning stars of a hit reality TV show about prison life—subplot stuff, we're told), but at the last second, abandons the scheme for a more surreally elegant one—and this is where some heavy pathos mounts: she wades into the ocean, and's soon swimming toward its jean-hued immensity, and you can see the whalebone as she kicks (which despite this the mechanics of her stroke are extremely pretty and sort of mesmerizing, the pop star interjects): she swims and swims and swims, and finally arrives at her destination, which you realize with a jolt is the very same spot her leg had been bitten off and so obscenely masticated at the film's gruesome open.

The closing sequence, the pop star tells us, as she plates her meatballs and forks one and holds it up for inspection, is of a fin as it ripples thru the water toward Samantha, whose resignation swells majestically, seems dimensionless as she bobs there in the open ocean, her smile, the pop star tells us as she munches happily, a thing of purest form, a plangent sublimity, a singularity of sorts which, at the test screening, so dazzled as to induce a vomiting episode in one of the VIP viewers.

#

The child-God is dressed as Vishnu, skin painted a light Twitter blue, gaudy golden Hammer pants, all sorts of interesting bejeweled bracelets and necklaces and anklets, and too, most oddly, a conch shell in one hand and a golden cigar, or what seems like a golden cigar, in

the other. The extra limbs are missing: a crucial oversight, we feel. He sits content on the toilet, its lid closed, while Satan hums joyously in a bathtub literally bubbling over—this is, we realize and take note of and know to be significant, the selfsame tune the cellphone's bland unsettling face had been humming moments earlier, as it dissolved away.

Satan is nude, save a pair of plastic horns worn on his head, and looks to be maybe slightly older than the child-God, six or seven at the oldest. He adjusts, now supine against the tub's ski-run slope, the back of his head against the rim, eyes closed, pleased expression disconcertingly adult-like and keened to the seam where wall meets ceiling, like: a bittersweet melody's in the distance, some Dylanish number, a fucked soul's song he can't help but jive on. Water sloshes, slaps the tile floor, and the child-God raises his bare feet to avoid contact, gives Satan a disapproving look, which Satan doesn't see but you can tell he feels, because he grins affably, teeth and all, Invisaligned already: a hustler's smile.

The bathroom they're in's a little trapezoid of a room, ceiling's upslant indicating stairs above it, exam-room bright, empty towel rack, which we observe as a possible conflict, the western wall an intriguing snotgreen, which speaking of: Satan goes digging into his nose, after a beat withdraws the finger and examines it.

The child-God meanwhile thoughtfully chews his cigar but does not, like we guess, press the conch to his ear.

We watch, anticipating. The TV's 4K, a 50" UHD display, 3840x2160p with 2 HDMI 2.0 ports and intelligent sensors that automatically adjust and optimize the image quality for room lighting, eye-motion patterning, etc., and too it's got an ME/MC thing going on, a soap operatic hyperreality we've come to prefer. It's mounted to the wall above the bar. This moment between

Satan and the child-God is too tense for the bartender, who moves away and starts rinsing used glasses. Soon enough, Satan dunks his head in the bathwater, his horns phallic-like above surface, which given his age makes us uncomfortable. The child-God coughs.

#

Job reminds us of Jared Leto's lithe strung out junkie character in *Requiem for a Dream*, with those big liquid eyes sort of cosmically earnest, and the long greasy shining hair and thin skin pulled tight over a face gaunt and angular, and those front teeth, when the mouth is slack, that appear just beyond the lip's rim—a feature which endears by throwing off, ever so slightly, the symmetry of Job's face. He is likeable. You can enter into his consciousness via sensory nodes attached to your temples and wired to the TV. It's called NeuroSyncing. The technology for it is so complicated we dismiss it as magic, and fuck it does scare us a little bit that you can do something like that, and so most of the time we just watch. Plus at the bar we have to share the nodes with whomever.

Right now, Job lies on his back on the mattress and picks his fingernails. The shades are drawn. In the dim green light, we watch him breathe, the convexity of his chest rise and fall to small degree. Watching becomes an exercise in patience.

#

Shoved into the room by a pair of unattached arms is Eliphaz the Temanite, who looks about as uncomfortable as uncomfortable gets. He watches Job, who's motionless still, then looks back at the door, shrugging. In enter, after another moment, Bildad the Shuhite and Zophar the Namathite. We don't like any of these guys. We think they're dickheads. And further: they're triplets.

Eliphaz, in full hipster regalia, tight gray Dickies and lumberjack flannel, sleeves rolled with symmetric zeal, H&M pack tucked in shirt's pocket, doesn't seem to know what to do with his hands: he slips them in and out of pockets, folds his arms, tucks one hand into the other, makes creepy finger teepees, and looks, all the while, at anything but Job. Bildad's composed and watchful gaze rests firmly on Job, his crisply ironed Staples uniform you can just tell smelling faintly of weed. Zophar, meanwhile, is shirtless. Why is he shirtless, we'd like to know. His musculature is complex, marinated, veins roped beneath the skin like mangrove roots. He's flexing abs, it's clear from his breathing pattern, though we can't see them, the abs, even with the UHD. His posture is unnaturally rigid. He grips a can of carbonated water.

Eliphaz: (reverently) Bro. Sucks about your cellphone.

Zophar: (pectorals rippling unpleasantly) You try calling it?

The ceiling fan clicks along at high frequency, emitting a soft mechanical whine. The board game Cranium sits on the desk, itself minimalist, espresso—from IKEA, a little blue arrow informs us. Its simplicity is elegant, we feel. The room in fact is sparsely furnished, a lot like a hotel room in form and feel.

Bildad's fallen asleep standing up, right there in Job's room. Zophar prods his arm. Eliphaz follows with an elbow to the gut. Bildad startles awake, nearly loses balance, takes in the room's visuals with the slowest dawning awareness it seems like, and says: My line?

Eliphaz: Jesus man.

Zophar: Unprofessional, dude. Fucking A.

Bildad, unconcerned, now addresses Job: Job, he says. Why not go looking for the phone? Let's have ourselves a rollicking American picaresque, seeing things and smelling things and having interesting experiences.

No response from Job, who's watching the fan's blades rotate.

Bildad: (self-conscious, a little hurt) Is that not a good premise?

Zophar: It's a great premise. This guy's just an asshole, man.

Eliphaz: (to the ceiling) Can we get a little help?

For a moment, stillness. And then: more stillness. Spades of it. The room inside the TV looks suspended, viscous, lagged: it's really fucking weird is what we're feeling, and to countenance we order another beer, lift ourselves from the bar stool and wiggle and stretch, and make noise, and text old hookups, and just generally brace against the ether, because this show's getting spooky, it's caulked with mortality, reminds us of our fucking itty-bitty existence in this world, the what's it called, brief crack of light between two eternities of darkness.

Seven minutes pass.

#

With a static click the screen again goes black. We think commercial, but No: eager and whispery, the voices of Eliphaz, Zophar, and Bildad, brainstorming potential adventures and/or hijinks they might get in and/or up to once the Search for Job's Cellphone begins.

No no first we need a list of American things. Stuff anybody would say that, yeah, you need to experience that to be American.

Can we do three?

Bro.

Three's one of those things I think.

Trinity and all that.

The Matrix character. The branches of government.

Two's more American dumbass. Two political parties.

Dichotomy. Dicks and pussies.

The old classic us v. them, pan-fried politicians composed of piss and vinegar and various metal alloys and crisp US tenders. Shouting about how somebody's fucked them over.

One I think's the most American number, actually.

The Oregon Trail's yellow brick road, the gold rush that made an NFL franchise, the idea anybody can make their nut anytime, regardless of class. No such thing, actually. A dirty fucking word.

Classlessness. That's American if I ever heard American.

Money, how about. The obsession with it, i.e. With making it, having it.

Culture's ego, in terms of Freud.

Small businesses. Mom and pop model. That's American.

Corporations more so these days. Not much out there as American as Walmart.

Thriftiness. The all-in-one store. Paella of stores, is Walmart. Reflective of that cherished ideal.

I'm getting something, fellas.

Diversity. Multiculturalism. Ellis freaking island. My Irish granddad and my Russian grandma, babushka-sporting, high velocity bolt-action rifle-toting.

Land of opportunity, yeah?

Of prostitution maybe. Of steroidal heroes cracking corked balls along parabolic paths,
PBR skies.

Baseball's dead, bro. Update yourself.

Mothertruckers! Idea. Say one of the adventures we wind up in Walmart.

Like it so far.

We're sort of ostensibly looking for the cellphone, but the real thing's to just *be* there, in
Walmart, experiencing it.

And, and, maybe we get lost?

Because it's so big?

Because it's so big. We get lost. The Walmart we're in's like hundreds of square miles,
it's dotted with tons of those comforting You Are Here maps and four-lane highways and
pedestrian fatalities, the hand towel-kitchen appliance crossing a particularly brutal juncture.

Somebody's done this premise before, I'm sure of it.

Doesn't matter. We'll spin it. Ripping off ideas is American.

Facebook. Apple.

Visualize, fellas. We're lost. We're frightened. We're witness to surreal scenes. Maybe
there's, like, different types of slaves stocked on the shelves. You know. Bar-coded foreheads,
strict return policy. Maybe you can buy slaves like they're any other ho-hum product.

A coffle, as the kids say.

Which would nod to that really big part of American history.

And reference the current convo about its legacy?

What racism is, these days.

You're simplifying, assholes. The conversation's more sophisticated and complex than what you're saying.

Put it this way then. The *media portrayal* of it.

The *mainstream* media.

Lumping it all together into one pulsing glabrous mass of attractive pretend-empathic humanity.

Pablumizing, as the kids say.

Vanity. Narcissism. Cherished American ideals.

Are you guys writing any of this down? This is good stuff.

Hell maybe Walmart's got a gun section too? And it's over the top? Like you can buy tanks and fighter jets and bazookas or whatever? And we meet a sales clerk who waxes poetic about the second amendment?

Speaks in Petrarchan sonnets, maybe's occasionally moved to sing, even.

Who turns out to be say, Charlton Heston, in disguise.

Boom. Cross-dressing maybe, too.

Two more American things: celebrity worship and sexual politics.

Are you guys writing any of this stuff down?

#

What follows: an iceberg gleam, toothpaste blue, outlining the bedroom window.

Eliphaz, Zophar, and Bildad sit Indian-style beside the mattress, playing bridge with a deck of Pixar-themed playing cards. Job's still doing his lifeless thing. The window's banged into. Again. Again, pane rattling. We wonder is it significant that nobody's startled at the sound.

Shirtless Zophar looks maybe a little bit chilly now (erect nipples, goosebumped skin, rubbing his arms). His eyes find the camera with practiced ease and he says: Don't go anywhere, folks. We'll be right back.

We find this commercial break weird as hell: there's a rhythm to TV shows that seems to elude these dudes. In a sense it's enlivening, this show's flouting of convention. It keeps us on our toes. It makes us wonder and think. But in another sense: Jesus is it irritating.

#

Here's a joke, the cellphone says. Its face, though highly defined, seems blurry somehow, which for now we're attributing to its gloomy platonic perfection, like: it's the flaws which draw the eyes.

Two clones are naked on a roof, says the cellphone. One pushes the other off. The next day the police arrest him for making an obscene clone fall.

The sound it discharges after is ambiguous: it's either a laugh or a cough.

#

Another promo. The pop star's migrated from the kitchen to what looks like a movie set: various indistinct props scattered and slightly blurred behind the pop star in her director's chair, the vibe, whether it's the acoustics or the complex lighting or both, somehow warehouseish, despite the shot's tight focus on the pop star. Her lanky frame's deeply relaxed and decked out in a loosely fitting and clearly virginal white summer frock. Her legs are crossed in that feminine way, her hands together in her lap. The shot steps back to reveal, on a large table to her left, an arrayed and weirdly embossed display of cosmetics, snack foods, headphones, jewelry, sportswear, workout DVDs, and dinnerware.

Off-camera interviewer: Your last album was like, this deep exploration of ontology, the paradoxes of consciousness, your ex-boyfriend's affair with a transgendered cruise ship activities director, or whatever.

Pop star: (magnanimously) Yeah.

Off-camera interviewer: This movie's poised to delve into, into—

(pause)

Off-camera interviewer: I can't, I literally cannot read this word.

Pop star: (leaning forward to view cue card now in frame) Phenomenology.

Off-camera interviewer: OK. The movie's going to delve into that, and into perception, via this moving portrait of Samantha, who's got phantom limb syndrome and post-traumatic stress disorder, among other issues.

Pop star: (uncrossing and re-crossing her endearingly pale legs) It's a kids' movie.

Off-camera interviewer: You yourself are this hyper intelligent and eloquent chick who's struggled for years with body image stuff, particularly all those naysayers who aren't shy about saying you basically look like a giant bird, and yet still concede you're pretty hot.

Pop star: What's the question, sweetheart?

Off-camera interviewer: Um.

Pop star: Take your time.

Off-camera interviewer: I guess just speak to that, to any of that stuff I just said.

Pop star: (thinking a moment) So OK. Essentially we're just these big multisensory antennae, grooving on tons of signals. Incoming, outgoing. Processing. Always processing. It's exhausting. No such thing as Cartesian theater. That's why the movie makes it easy. Just look at

the screen. Process the screen. Two dimensions. Forget this NeuroSync stuff that's so popular right now. Just process the screen. What we need is less interactivity, not more. Simplify.

Firewall. Reduce your bandwidth. Process the screen. Make it *easy*.

Off-camera interviewer: (softly, politely) I guess I maybe meant more along the lines of your ex-boyfriend? Like what that was like?

Pop star: (deep sigh, composed smile) Let's just say the full spectrum of human emotion was experienced, much like what happens when you pop the tab and pull deeply from my new emotion-flavored carbonated water (here producing and displaying a plain gunmetal can, her full name adorned in some pretty fancy calligraphy along it). It tastes like fun, literally!

#

The shades are lifted to reveal a lovely senseless sight: a techno cloudburst, the clean white sky disburdening all manner of backlit screens: cellphones and tablets, TVs, desktops and PCs, alarm clocks, mp3 players, appliance displays, tickers, digital wristwatches. Their collective glow's an eerie postman blue, a light jazz song of color. Job lays propped on an elbow, watching. On our screen, his face takes on a cherubic quality, the screens' light-signals unearthly exfoliants. In the bar, we're floored by the calculus here, the sublime logistics on display.

What this is, is a love song.

#

Job's wife enters and motions for his buddies to leave. The muumuu she wears sports little cloth pills, loose seams, serrated sleeves. Not even an arrow indicating brand, is how old it is. She shuts the door, kicks the books away from the bed. The look she gives Job—and us, briefly—is the tenderest look we've ever seen.

The look says: I shall rouse you from your weltschmerz via efficacious use of my feminine wiles! She appears to be in her prime, seduction-wise.

Off comes the muumuu. Beneath it: a lace nightie, bridal white.

We're digging her clavicle, the oily swell of her tits, her slender neck, the soft square of her jaw. She does a slow revealing turn, an axial rotation, gives the shot a sweetheart glance that lets us know it's not just for Job that she does this.

Job's unresponsive.

She slips out of the nightie. Beneath it: a frilled pushup bra and some seriously pink panties, thong-style. We get it, the matryoshka doll thing she's going for.

And too her tight tanned belly, button fingernail-shaped, hip's soft camber, drool-inducing—in the bar there's a volley of Neanderthalic grunts.

We're rooting for Job to perk up here. But no. The fitted sheet's been pulled from the corners and's now mostly entangled in his legs. His wife leans down—way, *way* down—to untangle, giving us and Job an intensely kickass view of cleavage (makes the bartender look prepubescent, we whisper). She turns so her back's to the shot and with locked legs in A-frame stoops and picks up the comforter, slowly. Her ass here is censored, which we're almost grateful for.

Still nada from Job.

His wife again stands facing him (and us) and with a teensy playful smirk unclasps her bra. We prepare for censor, but no: she's wearing pasties. She climbs on to the mattress and is soon straddling Job, rocking longitudinally on his body's axis. Her hands are on his chest.

She rocks and rocks, an agony to witness, her expression not pleased but saintly and expectant.

What we would not give, right now, to be NeuroSynced.

However: the dude down the bar who's got the sensory nodes attached looks disappointed, and soon we see why: Job is amused.

He laughs.

His wife reddens, gets pissed. She clambers off, gathers her clothes in a bundle against her chest, and says: Curse God and die, dickwad.

#

Question. Why did Mickey Mouse get shot?

The cellphone waits a beat, deadpan.

Because Donald ducked.

#

How about this. Somebody builds a Facebook village where people go around Poking each other.

Eliphaz, Zophar, and Bildad can be seen out the window, all three with Hefty bags, gathering and bagging the fallen electronics.

A literal thing, is what you're saying, is what Facebook becomes in this scenario.

Or better yet. A social media metropolis.

Boroughs: Facebook, Twitter, Instagram.

What else.

Vine? Pinterest?

Myspace? LinkedIn?

And people like Poke each other literally, maybe with Dayglo sticks?

How about when they Tweet, it's actually them just sort of yelling out to whoever's around?

And you've got to tote all around all your personal info and all your pictures and pictures of your buddies, in case you meet somebody you want to Friend Request?

If you decide you want to follow somebody, then hell, you follow them.

One of you guys writing this down?

And there's spots where you can play games? Like Angry Birds, where you're launching actual birds at things.

Or like, like Candy Crush, which I can't figure out the logistics of?

But there's definitely got to be candy.

Definitely candy.

What else?

Well shit, what else is American?

Watching football, the weird religious fervor of it.

Going to the beach, the huge production it becomes: caravans of family cars, lawn chairs, beach towels, footballs, volleyballs, music, various sunscreen options—spray or lotion, different SPFs, insect repellent combo—and the snacks and the drinks, enough calories to sustain a platoon of ravenous teenage boys.

Workaholism, your job bleeding into the coitus you engage in with your spouse, bathed in the TV's moony glow, fixing spreadsheets mentally or drafting emails using the checked-out eyeballs of your disappointed lover as the computer screen.

Reality shows, the successful sublimation of like, moonshiners and bored aggressive and surgically altered housewives, the country's alleged turning the camera on itself.

Bitter disappointment. Suicidal despair.

Thinking about what makes America American is American.

Zero ambit as far as what's pop cultural fodder.

Overeating. Processed foods.

Supporting our troops by saying on various social media outlets we support our troops.

Conspiracy theories. What's more American than conspiracy theories. Kennedy. The moonwalk.

Watching as gestalt. As like, a kind of waiting? Conditioned passivity.

Maybe being geographically clueless? Like not knowing where stuff is in the world until we decide to go to war.

Microbreweries.

That's generalizing, I think.

Which is an American impulse.

Touché.

All of this is great, but what adventures can we get into?

Prescription pills.

Oprah.

X-mas shopping, holy shit.

Rigid holiday traditions.

Evangelical Christianity.

Puritan heritage.

Claiming books like Huckleberry Finn and Moby-Dick and To Kill a Mockingbird as classics of American literature, without ever actually reading them.

Are we writing this stuff down?

#

The bar's a classy mellow place, cherrywood floor boards and backed stools and a long narrow obsidian bar where the bartender if requested actually does the slide-the-drink-down-the-bar thing, and always with minimum spillage, is how clean and smooth and slick it is, and it's cool to the touch (our hands' heat fogs it), and the room temperature is perfectly pitched—even if you've been in here for hours and not moved, like us, it's still not too chilly. Posters of old bar scenes hang on the walls, a kind of iconic weight to them: skinny male tenders wearing bowties and sporting greasy teethstain grins, working class dudes with their fiberglass hardhats in their laps, chatting amiably with sailors on shore leave, women in elaborate dresses smiling manically as they're fucked with. In a handful of these, it's clear the walls are postered with even older bar scenes; there's an infinite boozy regression at play, and it strikes us that perhaps we ourselves are on some future bar's poster, our face alight, off-center, arranged in some rictus of awareness.

In the afternoons the bar smells like cleaning product, but as the day progresses new scents emerge and compete: cologne and perfume, hair gel, deodorant, sweat and body odor, spilled liquor, vomit and shit—it's symphonic redolence, a richly textured smellspace, the bar

home base to star systems of human activity, molecular collisions, stochastic algorithms, etc.: the more we drink the more we're given to such flights of fancy.

Why we're here. Well. We used to be employed. We once possessed jobs and families. But the data, as it accumulated, overwhelmed us. Combinatorial explosion. Conscious decision-making became a very serious problem.

You could be, e.g., a baker in Schenectady, with two kids and a loving if occasionally saturnine wife, or a systems analyst in Denver, with four intensely anaclitic children and a promiscuous cleft lipped wife abusing Zoloft. Or you could be the wife, or an only child, or the lesbian. Or the slumping journalist on the Chicago-to-Berlin Virgin Atlantic flight. Or the Catholic, or the cat lover allergic to cats. Or having car trouble, or breaking and entering, or applying Chapstick, etc. etc.

And so: we decided we would sit in this bar until we made a firm decision on what we would be. The problem being: despite the wildly different trajectories, the end result is always the same. This seems like a particularly nasty little mindfuck. Or like a programming glitch, inside us. If you draw a line across a page, lots of people will call that forward motion, but some of us might say it's lateral. That if the world's spinning, how can you go forward. Job's refusal, in this vein, to admit he's on TV, is what makes him so compulsively watchable. It's a neat little trick we'd prefer to think he doesn't know he's playing. His refusal provides the conflict, fuels our conjoined paradoxical desires to see him become, and continue to refuse to become, a *character*—in short, he splits us in half.

On those rare occasions when we do venture out to run an errand or two, we sometimes hallucinate little blue arrows.

#

Job bails. He lifts himself from the satin sheets joints popping and pulls onto that skinny feminine frame Lee-brand jeans and a vintage Simpsons tee. He does the socks standing, hopping on one foot while the other gets its treatment, and then does the same with his shoes, white laceless Vans, strategically scuffed, which work like flip-flops when he walks.

Out the front door he goes, not bothering with the lock, and down the walkway. We're actually surprised: we'd thought the show took place on a set.

The sky is shellacked steel, its convexity a youthful fleshy hand resting on a keyboard, or else a plastic toilet cover. In the yard we see Eliphaz peering up into it, peering and grimacing, and clutching an engorged Hefty bag at his side. When he sees Job, he says, Job!

Job, however, is undeterred, and in one quick elegant motion is at and then inside the old mouthwash green Camry, now greatly dented after the techno storm, the windshield cracked, the passenger sideview snapped off.

Eliphaz: (horrified) Not the Toyota! Take the Ford! The Ford!

Job crunches a number of electronics as he backs out, leaves a glittery vomit in his wake, and Eliphaz too, looking deflated.

#

Commercial. The cellphone explains why it likes jokes so much. A good joke is the sweetest architecture, it says. A good joke draws on context, and yeah, it's certainly a product of cultural and socioeconomic forces. But it's never on the nose. It tells us things about our world.

The perfect genderless face shuts its eyes, appears to think. It tells us it's light-years ahead of other cellphones in terms of connectivity and artificial intelligence. It tells us it is, in a

way, right now harmonizing with the Web, traveling great pixilated distances, drawing on its prodigious networking capabilities, digging deep into the programming itself, in order to locate a decent joke to prove its point.

It's also, meanwhile, still beneath the dresser, among feather balls and little plush mice filled with old catnip and the headless remains of a long-dead lizard.

Try this on for size! it says. A man went to visit his doctor. Doc, my arm hurts bad, the man says. Can you check it out please? The doctor rolls up the man's sleeve and suddenly hears the arm talk. Hello, doctor, says the arm. Could you lend me twenty bucks please? I'm desperate! The doctor says, Aha! I see the problem. Your arm is broke!

The cellphone waits.

Well, we say.

Not the best? Not the best. I get it.

No, we say. It's not that.

I get it, I get it. It's OK. How about this. What is Tupac spelled backwards?

Caput, we say.

Caput! it says. Right. That—that's right. Hmm.

Listen, we say.

Wait! One more, I swear! Just one more.

One more, we say.

It's Renaissance Italy, the phone begins, and Lorenzo and his buddy Giovanni sit at a table outside a café in Venice. Lorenzo enjoys his coffee while Giovanni, obviously depressed,

sits staring into his. Lorenzo notices that Giovanni is upset and asks him about it. Giovanni, he says, why are you so depressed?

The phone stops a moment. Still with me? it asks.

We're with you, just finish it, we say.

Point taken, the phone says. Here we go. So Lorenzo says, the phone continues, Why are you so depressed, and Giovanni says, Lorenzo, you see this canal we're sitting next to? I, Giovanni, designed and built this canal. But do they call me Giovanni the canal builder? No, they do not. Giovanni points to a bridge a short way from the café. You see that bridge, Lorenzo? I, Giovanni, designed and built that beautiful bridge and many others like it, but do they call me Giovanni the bridge builder?

Again, the cellphone pauses.

They don't, we're guessing, we say.

So he's not the canal builder, and he's not the bridge builder, the phone says, beginning to crack up.

Finish the joke, we say.

Just brace yourselves, the phone says.

Finish. The joke.

Giovanni gestures at the buildings that surround them. I, Giovanni, Giovanni says, designed and built these houses, but do they call me Giovanni the house builder? No, they do not. (Get ready!) But I screw one sheep...

We check our phones, pretending we've received urgent texts. The cellphone pleads with us. It says, Come on assholes, that was *funny*. It says, If I find the perfect joke, will somebody please, *please* purchase me?

#

The pop star sits forlornly in an x-chair, head buried in her hands. There's not a single distinguishable form surrounding her—it's like she's somehow found herself inside a vacuum. She sighs. She says, They shelved the project, the Samantha love story project.

Italicized neon words light beneath her: *Pitch the other one.*

What's the point? she says.

Rape.

The pop star offers a quizzical look.

Sorry, man. Somebody's dicking around in here.

I guess I could pitch the other one, the pop star says, standing.

No, no. Wait. Could you go back a minute, say the first line? Programming limits.

Somebody dicks around, and Christ, of course we have to type the whole goddamned thing over again.

You want me to go from the start?

No response.

The pop star folds herself back into the x-chair, again buries her face in her hands. She gives the screen one more quizzical look. Then she sighs. She says, They shelved the project, the Samantha love story project.

Italicized neon words light beneath her: *Pitch the other one.*

What's the point? she says.

It's the principle of the thing. Don't give up, yada yada.

I guess I could pitch the other one, the pop star says, standing. For the heck of it.

There's the spirit!

Imagine, the pop star begins, with a verbal flourish on the second syllable.

You doing like a Lennon thing? What are you doing?

Imagine a post-apocalyptic world, only instead of everything's destroyed, it's dense and fast-paced and hugely allusive. Say it's like living inside the recombinant brain of Warhol and Michael Bay and a female teenage blogger, only this brain's getting repeatedly struck by lightning.

High stakes stuff.

No, the pop star says. Low stakes. Very low stakes. There's war.

What is it good for.

Turf war let's say. A little stretch of cracked asphalt fought over by adolescent gangs. The difference between them's that one group's pushing to advance the physics of quantum mechanics, while the other group's atavistic, wants to go back to classical Newtonian physics. The reason being that regression's just what logically occurs after an apocalypse. The whole conflict's essentially this: Why revert?

Intriguing!

Enter Samantha.

Not the—not the very same Samantha as before?

The very same. Peg leg and all. And what happens? The story becomes a Greek epic. We learn Samantha's from Troy, Georgia.

Does she incidentally have huge tits?

She does! the pop star exclaims. And that's the trouble. She's married into the quantum physics gang. She's having back problems. Her husband, like all the members of the gang, is this basically progressive dude. He encourages her to go in for breast reduction.

But, conflict?

The Newtonian crew, however, is not so thrilled with the idea. No such thing, they assert, as plastic surgery in a post-apocalyptic world, and can we please get back to scrounging for scraps and taking massive amounts of drugs and being wholly self-destructive the way teenagers would be, only amplified now with the lack of parental guidance?

They do battle, I'm guessing?

They do. It's the climactic sequence. AKs and hand grenades in a sprawling Target parking lot. Exiting shoppers are used as body shields. Explosions galore. The Newtonians' battle cry is *Gravity!* The quantum gang in response shouts *Uncertainty Principle!* Everybody's showered with bits of ceramic dinnerware, shreds of record-your-own greeting cards, plastic jewelry, strips of discount clothing. Meanwhile, Samantha's in the doctor's office, about to go under the knife. She still hasn't made up her mind. She fondles her own breasts searchingly, wears a ruminative expression.

The exterior conflict internalized.

And vice versa.

And vice versa! Very clever.

It ends like this.

Rape!

The pop star pauses, looks, again, quizzically at the screen.

Fucking hell, Miles.

What happened? the pop star asks.

We'll have to do it again, sweetheart. I'll tell you what, though. It won't happen again.

The troublemaker's being restrained. He's being tied up and gagged and we'll be roasting him later you hear me, Miles you little shitlicker?

#

The child-God's in the tub now. Most of the blue's washed off his body. He bops the head of Satan at consistent intervals with a rubber Bible.

Off-screen, there's whispering. Both the child-God and Satan look stage left. More whispering. Little pinched faces, intent but not quite hearing.

The whisperer whispers, loudly enough now for us to hear: say Fuck it. Job gets the girl.

A beat of silence, both the child-God and Satan continuing to look stage left.

You! The whisperer whispers.

The child-God points to himself, says, You!

Say the line, the whisperer whispers.

The child-God says, Fuck it. Job gets the girl.

It's not about a girl, says Satan, still looking stage left, a dull blank expression on his face which seems to connote panic, somehow.

Say No?

No? the child-God says.

Say What's it about again?

What's it about again? says the child-God, with much satisfaction again bopping Satan on the head.

#

The Camry trundles down Main toward the coast, meticulous Job's hands on ten and two. The tires' rotation along the chewed-up asphalt sounds a sonic rush, keeps us from hearing what Job's muttering to himself on the dash cam as his eyes flutter alertly between windshield and rearview, go strabismic in the afternoon's crepuscular glare. The gray nimbic light takes the tops off the buildings.

Job passes enormous shopping plazas of fractal complexity; spinally white poly-eyed apartments, their little rectangular windows spasming with light; fast food joints and Starbucks franchises and for-profit universities; brightly lit Olive Gardens and TGI Fridays and sporting goods warehouses; gas stations; long stretches of deserted construction sites, dirt plots barricaded, stacks of lumber and steel beneath fluttery blue tarp pinned down at the corners with bricks; more gas stations; highway overpasses; noisy boatyards; still more gas stations; low-income housing developments; unmarked industrial-looking structures; and then again, the scenes repeating themselves until eventually the road constricts itself to single lane and starts to weirdly zig-zag, an EKG stretch that seems familiar to us.

The asphalt here is freshly tarred. The sonic rush recedes, is replaced by a song on the radio which we soon recognize as the one connecting the vignettes.

Grassy declivities bound the road on each side, the occasional retaining pond, and behind these, massive gridlike parking lots give way to even bigger and prettier condos, all lattice-steelwork and smudgeless tinted glass and interesting curvature—clearly constructed with the floating eye of the passerby in mind: not the aesthetically unpleasant Connect Four patterning of the cheap inland condos, but instead something dizzying, in a sense teratoidal, and tough to describe, yet denoting, with perfect clarity, luxury and privilege.

Eventually, Job takes a right into a gravel lot misty with crushed sandstone and teathed with a couple of pickups, a sedan, a minivan, and three Harleys. He parks and sits perspiring in the car.

We know where he is. We know where he is. We feel: Holy Shit.

The sensory nodes meanwhile are delivered to us by the bartender, who looks a little bit awed as Job steps out of the car and trudges toward the bar's entrance.

#

Brief cut to Eliphaz, Zophar, and Bildad, cramped inside a teensy two-door Fiesta, driving down Main as they haplessly search for Job.

I think what Job's trying to tell us is: road trip.

Road trip!

Not a thing on this planet as American.

A kind of what. Vehicular imperialism.

Ocular imperialism.

No, no. *Sensory* imperialism. Claiming lands by registering the sights and sounds and smells and tastes and touches of them.

Drive thru Texas and Texas is forever yours, because you know it, having driven thru it.
Bring it up in conversations.

Oh you're from Texas? I drove thru there once. Nice place. Big.

And maybe we'll find the cellphone.

The cellphone is small potatoes, bro. Job's thinking bigger, you can tell. So we need to think bigger.

Like what?

Don't know.

Once we find Job, we'll ask him.

Meanwhile.

Universities that look like airports, both outside and in.

Leasing cars.

Mouthing along with commercials because you've seen them so much, is American.

Watching the Superbowl for commercials.

For the halftime show.

Obese couples with zero sense of spacing in shopping malls.

Lumbering.

Write this stuff down.

Viewing everything in terms of how much of it can you consume.

Bingeing on TV shows on Netflix.

Washing your coupe on the 4th of July while the nerdy jingoistic kid next door gets aggressive with his remote-control car.

Airboat rides.

Endless and near-deranged optimism.

Asshole dogs who when you're out taking a neighborhood stroll try and hump you and when you refuse to capitulate bite you on the inner thigh in retribution.

It's always the little bastards with the Napoleon complexes.

Even bigger assholes: the owners, who stand there watching, thinking it's cute.

Viewing the shitty things which occur in life in terms of, it's an opportunity for self-growth.

Weightlifting.

Romantic comedies.

HBO.

Everybody getting their own bathroom. The proliferation of bathrooms.

The increasing privacy of defecation.

Countered by the impulse to exhibit. Shit jokes.

The intense fascination with serial killers.

With other peoples' garbage.

Freedom as the vehicle for unprecedented selfishness.

Prison. The highest by far incarceration rates in the world.

What isn't American.

Write it down, write it down, write it down.

#

Job looks at us, at the TV. We look at Job, at the TV. We're inside him inside us inside him. Within the dark heartspace we still feel the same loneliness, the same fear, but now there's feedback, an echo. A loop.

GRIEF #2

Years ago I sat beside Rico as he steered us along the streets and alleyways in his brother's rusted old Chrysler with hardly any roof over our heads. The thing had been all husked out, and there was a big hole at the top of it where the breezes went whistling, so you had to turn the volume way up to the point where even your thoughts buried themselves in some rhythm.

This was upwind of Miami, near Fort Lauderdale. Rico's brother was recently pinched and serving down in Florida City for something like assault, some violent piece of work, which set Rico up an aura of defenselessness and strange grace. His brother's opposite, mostly.

Booker along with Ellen grooved hard in the backseat. Booker banged his head to whatever song's beat and acted all around lunatic-like while Ellen smiled and laughed watching Booker and sang along with the big hooks. She had a nice singing voice but you couldn't hear it. Rico was for months failing to connect with her. Now he was too scared to even look at her and meanwhile she'd moved on to feeling feelings for Booker, which was why she'd even agreed to being picked up in the first place.

Booker was oblivious. He was like a man enjoying it all at the very end of the world, the moment of precipice where it all drops away and is consumed, gasping. That special kind of thoughtlessness was impossible for most of us. I envied it. For a while I aped, bouncing and singing like the other two as Rico, forever careful, guided our vehicle along the coast and with an effort rolled down the windows for the sweet wet air to pop and burst streaming like tears against our cheeks.

For ten, twenty minutes, we four were the very picture of joyousness. I imagine now our bones glowed solar from joint to joint, lit up on some inhuman grid. The party we were en route to was to be big and grandly reveling and when I'd asked Rosie McCrae at the library if she would be there, she'd said, "That's a stupid question."

The air skirled at the open windows and smelled of cooked meat along the strip of A1A where, to your right, are the bars and hotels and late-night food joints, while, to the left, the tide slaps the sand and retreats.

Rico turned down the volume and said, "Where's this party anyway?"

Booker was supposed to know. He'd received the word directly from Katie Summers, whose big beach house was the scene.

"Where's this place?" Rico asked again, when Booker, instead of answering, relaxed and lolled his head while Ellen looked on concerned.

"What's wrong with him?" I said.

"He just took two pills," Ellen said. "I mean, he took them when you first picked me up. I don't know."

Booker's face was scrunched and sweating, and he was doing this prodigious eerie moan. "I'm the demon inside me," he said. "I'm the king of salsa. America's this pistol, I think."

Rico, who couldn't hear because the windows were still rolled down, said, "What'd he say? Where am I supposed to turn?"

Now a Bob Dylan song came on, the famous one where he sings, 'the superhuman crew comes and rounds everybody up and brings them to the factory where they strap on the heart attack machine.' But that part comes jangling in toward the end like a showstopper.

“Stop the car,” I said. “Pull over. Something weird is happening to the guy in the backseat.”

“Where am I supposed to pull over? We’re on a bridge.”

“Anywhere! On the bridge! After the bridge! Wherever! Jesus,” I said.

Ellen was crying out for Booker.

When we passed over and Rico was finally able to steer the car into the lot of a 7-11 napalmed and shining greasily I turned back and first saw the reverent and weeping face of Ellen in profile and thought: hardly queen-like, as Rico had once proffered.

Then I looked at Booker, and saw that he was dead.

Rico saw it, too. We’d nearly bumped heads over the middle console turning around.

Here for a minute, silence. The world pivoted harmlessly on its axis while we mortals veered into and out of useless, benevolent clouds.

“It’s enough just to survive,” somebody said.

“What do you mean, ‘just to survive’?” asked someone else.

“After something like this, he meant. You meant. Right?”

Everybody was crying except for Rico, who sat dumbly staring forward, and Booker, who was slumped down dead. His mouth opened in a singsong way with a quiet rolling off the mound of his tongue. Ellen had her hands cupped around his cheeks, and then she leaned in and gave a kiss that’d put the rom-com category to shame. She fondled his downstairs parts. She mounted and dry-humped for a few minutes. Rico in full-on transfixed mode, and you could see in his lap he wasn’t kidding.

With a huff Ellen fell off Booker and back to her side of the back seat. She wiped at her eyes and went searching at her feet for her purse, which she pulled up and set on her lap. “Start the car,” she ordered.

I was furious. “Start the car?” I said. “Where are we supposed to go? What are we supposed to do, man? That guy right there is gone. He’s killed in action. We should be mournful and sad. We should be traumatized and unable to speak. This car here should be the emperor of all the terrible hunks of junk people have croaked out in.”

“My hands are shaking,” said Rico.

Ellen was slinging makeup on her face like a little ancient harlot. The stuff just made her look old. Mascara lined her eyes like bruises. The neon from the window in 7-11 burned the tears off her face. “You dumbass blue moons,” she said. “I’ll drive.”

“It’s stick,” said Rico. But he stepped out of the car. There was the ragged, deadly scent of Booker on Ellen as she climbed over the center console and into the driver’s seat. Of a bamboo pomade Booker slicked through his hair—I’d seen him at it, fleshy and driven in the mirror in an instant, uncaring in the next, like a man on two sides of something significant—and it put me in mind how nothing ever lasts, or something like that, because Booker’s hair, at the end of the night, would be wild and frizzed. He’d look like somebody who’d just communed with pure electricity.

And then I was reminded of the girl for whom my heart was forever breaking. She who, with a look, could lead you into stray, hail-stormed swamps where the light was green and lonely. I was perpetually whimpering at her feet. Rosie McCrae, whose tits shoved out at a

delicious angle. She would be there, at the beach house, while I was here handling a dead man. I was sorrowful and secretly elated, that I'd have this story to hold.

Ellen was in the driver's seat now, but she didn't know what to do. Rico, who'd settled as far away from the body of Booker as he could, said, "Press down the clutch to shift." Even still, he couldn't look directly at her.

"What's the clutch?" said Ellen.

"We still don't even know where the party's supposed to be," I said. I don't know how, but I'd gotten it in my head that Ellen would be taking us to the beach house, to exhibit Booker, maybe, expose him to the pity-filled glares of the good-time-havers.

"Down there at your feet, next to the brake. Keep a foot on clutch and the other for brake and accelerator. There, you got it now." Ellen had set the car in motion but almost immediately stalled out. She got the thing in park and started the engine and stalled again a foot farther up the road.

I was glad to be up front. Up here with pages of road ahead I could forget Booker existed. I could stare at things and feel stupidly: palm trees dropping buds to the ground, the scattered redly taillights of other cars, not to mention the searchlights strip clubs set rolling along the sheet rips of sky.

Slowly Ellen moved the car quaking down the road. Other cars hurled past us, honking and shouting. There was a singular air to Ellen, as she gripped the wheel and the stick, demonic almost. Rico was silent except to go, "Oh man, oh fuck," every few minutes.

Finally she parked the car in the lot behind the beach at Bahia Mar. Across the way the big Yankee Clipper hotel loomed. Out of hundreds of tiny windows shone little lights like holes,

with the occasional dark figure streaking in front all darkly radiant. I was spooked. I was afraid to look back at Booker for fear he might animate and start speaking in tongues. I was begging on the inside for some obsidian-looking drink. A thing to rip this moment from my throat.

Ellen got out of the car and had a smoke while me and Rico struggled to pull Booker from the backseat without looking at him. His body was limp yet and we got him out and his arms up over our shoulders and dragged him through the parking lot towards the sand. His feet pulled along the asphalt behind. His head bopped and swung this way and that as if surveying the scene. Ellen walked beside me exhaling her small puffs of smoke. At one point I asked for a drag and she took out a cigarette and stuck it between my lips and lit it for me. She said, “Whatever killed Booker I’m on.”

“I’m farting like a motherfucker over here,” I said. “Every step is gassed. What you smell is me, not him,” I told her.

Through tears Rico said, “I don’t know how much farther I can carry him.”

“Anywhere on the sand. Past the trees, into the moonlight,” said Ellen.

We slung him down. With a pock he displaced a flurry of sand, and came to rest, after we’d tastefully assembled him, snow-angel style. Arms outstretched as if embracing the air. Rico and I sat on either side of him with our knees brought into our chests while Ellen went and frolicked in the ocean.

After a while she threw off her clothes and the pale moon lit on her. She was Life itself, down there.

Rico took out his phone and turned on a song, the Flo Rida song where the girl sings in the chorus: “Hey, I heard you were a wild one.”

Watching Ellen I didn't know what to do. I patted Booker on the stomach. Rico scrubbed at the sand accumulating on the backs of his legs. Ellen came back and stood naked before us and said, "Let's do it. One of you. Or both. I don't care."

"Your body is maybe the loveliest thing I've ever seen," I said to her. She curtsied. Rico said nothing, stared straight ahead.

"Let's go," she said. "Come on. I'm prepared to throw off the yoke of purity. Break the chain inside me. My temperature must be a hundred and ten degrees."

Rico stood and went off with her and I stayed with Booker. There were only a couple of other people out there, but they were lost in themselves. Eventually I dialed 9-1-1 and said not to hurry because the man's dead, but please do come.

I told them where the body could be found.

When they came the lights swirled and cast a wide net over the water. Ellen and Rico were way out there. You could see their heads bobbing, and nothing else.

Years later they were together and married. The divorce came months afterwards, when Rico gave Ellen a vicious beating in the style of his brother. Surprised even him. Violently repetitive, that whole family. The thing was in a couple of the local papers.

#

LITTLE SUNS

Little Dude looks out the window as we approach Orlando International, at the wash of winking blue lights that tell the airplanes where to land.

“A story,” I suggest.

“Father,” he says, with that inmate attitude. “Would you turn on NPR?”

He’s ten. He is ten years old.

“Please,” I prompt.

“Please,” he mimics, picking his fingernails, which always means he’s stressed.

I turn on NPR. A somber gravelly voice says, “Buzzkills take Kiev.” Jazz ensues. Little Dude stops with the fingernails. “I know this one,” he says. “It mostly sucks. But there’s a sax solo at the end.”

We listen for a minute. The music starts out liquid and blue but soon rattles around us like a deranged swan. He clarifies: “The ending’s not, like, an ending? It stops right when it sounds like it’s getting started. Is what I mean.”

“Are you excited to see Mom?” I ask him. But he doesn’t answer. He’s air-soloing. His chubby fingers ride up and down an imaginary saxophone. It breaks my heart but because I’m Dad I just laugh and say, “You might have a future in that.” I say, “Yes sir, you just might.”

#

The airplane is late. It’s not unusual these days, what with the troposphere being so junked with toxins and drones. Travel’s a tricky prospect. The upside’s that the sky is a

brehtaking kaleidoscope around sunset, a real gasper. Tonight's entry looked like a stoner's Dorito dreamscape, a finger painting of processed foods.

Little Dude and I sit and wait around baggage claim for nearly an hour, watching people claim their bags. Every so often somebody's left bagless and panicking, or else a bag goes unclaimed and loops around on the conveyer. I point at one giant red Nike duffel that's gone around three times and say, "Kev. Hey Kev. What do you think's in that one?"

"Dad," he says.

"Dad's right here," I say. "You off your rocker? Dad's right here."

In response, he palms the back of his lumpy shaven head.

The doctors still don't know how The Disease works. Our own Dr. Fink had shrugged at all my questions. He looked so helpless and beaten I felt embarrassed for him, and clapped him on the back. "If it was a hernia I've got things to say," he informed me.

"Boy oh boy is Mom not gonna like this attitude of yours," I say to Little Dude. This gnaws at him for a while. Again with the fingernails. Finally, he says, "A story."

It lifts my spirits to see him correct himself like this. Tells me I raised a son self-aware enough to take criticism in the spirit that it's intended. Plus, in terms of parenting? Telling stories is about the only tool in my toolbox I'm always jazzed to deploy.

"Wolfie," I say.

"That guy," Little Dude says. He likes the Wolfie stories. Wolfie's a coworker, a fellow guard. He's hunched and tiny, long scraggly hair, jellybean paunch, with teeth so yellow you'd think him a moonshiner. He's always got a can of ginger ale in his hand, is always challenging inmates to pick-up jai-alai games and chuckling to himself knowingly.

“So today he asks about my number.”

“Your number?” Kevin looks at me, confused. Sometimes I forget he’s ten.

“You know,” I say. I sense a teaching moment and make the gesture: form the hole, and stick the finger in in what I hope’s a delicate wholesome way that conveys everlasting love and tender respect for the hole.

“You mean like sex and banging,” he says.

I nod.

“That’s gross.”

“What do you think I told him?”

Little Dude watches me, waiting.

“Wolfie says to me, ‘Son, I see your number is tragically low.’ Imagine he sounds like a southern preacher.”

“Do the voice,” he says.

I do the voice: “Truh-*agically* low.’ Then he says, ‘You know how you lift that number in a hurry?’”

“How?” Little Dude asks, in thrall. It’s thrilling to command his attention like this.

“What do you think?”

“Wear cologne,” he guesses.

“Nope.”

“Be nice and smile?”

I shake my head.

“*What?*”

“He says, ‘You find yourself some men. That’s how come my number got so high.’”

Little Dude thinks on this for a few minutes. Finally he says he wonders whether Buzzkills can, you know. Can they bang?

I have to admit I don’t know. I do not know. My gut twists from not knowing. I say, Listen: that’s a good question. I tell him we’ll ask Dr. Fink next time around.

#

Forty minutes later, Emily’s flight lands and docks and she appears, weeping and sprinting. I look down at Little Dude and see that he’s weeping too. When she reaches us she wraps Little Dude up inside her linebacker bulk. She rubs and rubs his bald head and tells him with genuine shock how handsome and grown he looks. Gives me a reproachful look, like it’s somehow my fault. I nearly say what do you expect when you’ve been gone a year and the only communication you’ve had with him is the occasional grainy lagged Skype date? But for Little Dude’s sake, I gulp it down.

They hug for a long time while I stand there smelling her BO. I’d forgotten how pungent she is. Right now it’s like a swimming pool with a little too much chlorine. Her smells used to do certain things to me, and now as she releases Little Dude and our eyes catch, I’m feeling angry and horny and more than a little confused and embarrassed about the mingling of these two things.

“The prodigal parent returns,” I say, and feel stupid and small when she breaks her gaze and asks Little Dude if he wouldn’t mind helping her find her bags. He’s just wiped his nose on her dress and’s now clutching her hand, looking sweetly up at her.

It’s a look that says, Mom!

Emily sobs again, which sets him off too.

The carousal comes to life. The two of them putter over like mourners flocking to a casket, clinging to each other and weeping. I hang back. I really need to pee, but I can't look away.

It hurts to watch, this reunion.

Little Dude's climbed up on the conveyer, and now he pretend-runs against its flow to my wife's great delight. He hasn't been this animated since he was diagnosed. His soft body is all ajiggle, goofily so. Two smaller kids, a boy and a girl, decked out in Disney attire, get in on the action. The girl, who looks about three, is immediately carried away, panic-stricken, to her father's laughing amusement and her mother's horror. We're all watching, even Little Dude, who climbs down. Because the dad's laughing, it's tough to tell whether action should be taken or not. Before she disappears into the back, she's plucked off by the shirt collar by an old man in a Tommy Bahama shirt and a fedora, who, after he's thanked profusely by the mom, flushes and explains loud enough for all to hear that he's about to embark on a cruise, but first he's visiting his dyke daughter who's just had a little boy using a surrogate, an unclaimed coma patient, isn't it a terrific thing what they can do these days?

In the meantime, Little Dude's wrestled Emily's bags down off the carousal. I give him the key and say I'll meet you at the car, I've got to pee. He takes it without paying attention. Emily's explaining how, precisely, the airplane runs on vegetable oil and how the turbines are built by sentient robots with exoskeletons immune to jet blasts (synthetic chitin, a former colleague's idea, she says), also running on vegetable oil.

The big hall is bright and open and empty as I stroll past darkened and gated storefronts and unmanned kiosks. The bathroom I find is clean and shining and smells like somebody got ambitious with the bleach. The metal stalls shimmer like flat peaceful lakes on cloudless days. Thanks to a faulty prostate, I spend five full minutes at the urinal, coaxing out a trickling. My mind wanders. I think of Emily as a teenager at the county fair, wearing a hot pink halter top with A M E R I C A emblazoned in white over her breasts and picking at the oversugared funnel cake we'd been gifted by a diabetic attendee. I think of Little Dude's first laugh, his first unassisted poop, his first Facebook Friend Request. I'm so lost in thought I don't notice the man standing at the mirror until I nearly bowl him over. I do knock his fedora off, and as I lean down to pick it up I tell him Holy shit am I sorry, I didn't notice you there, are you OK, I'm as bad as a Buzzkill, ha ha.

He doesn't respond. This is the old hero of baggage claim, I realize. He just goes on standing there, staring at the mirror, hands on countertop. I try handing back the fedora and get no response. I wave it in front of his slack face.

I realize I'm looking at a Late Stage Buzzkill.

And then, I think: in weeks, this is my son. This thought is so big and bright and terrible I shove it away before it's got time to summon real force.

Up close the man's expression is blank and pained at once. I place the fedora on his head and fiddle with it until it seems rakish, and then I bolt, passing a young woman with a pageboy cut on the way out, her worried face like a sentencing.

#

“The outbreak has caused much consternation in the scientific community,” claims the NPR host. “And because no adequate explanation has been advanced, a religious revival has taken place. The idea that The Disease is in fact a disease of the soul, is maybe soul cancer, as some fundamentalists have termed it, has taken root. It has indeed spread like gospel.”

“Wonderful observation,” another voice on the program notes sarcastically.

In the car we’re silent, listening. Emily squeezes the stress ball sun Little Dude presented to her as a homecoming gift. It wears sunglasses and sports a joyful toothy grin and says CAROLS PARADISE TAN across the back. Back in January there’d been a convention for tanning salon owners at Disney’s Polynesian Resort. We’d gone with a pale sales rep I’d met on OKCupid. She was vigorously peddling next-gen tanning beds. They worked like smartphones, or so she said. All she had was a mockup and a schematics diagram and she wanted to tote Little Dude around with her because she thought it might be better for sales. And did I tell her go jump off a bridge? No. Did I say no way you’re using my kid to bolster your sales commission? I did not. I let her drag Little Dude around the room. But I felt so queasy about it I spent the convention at the bar, consuming what the bartender called an “unholy” number of colorful fruity beverages with mountainous artificial sweetener content.

“It’s contagious, clearly,” says the sarcastic voice. “But how? We’ve got no clue. And what I’d really like to know is how these people took Ukraine, if the big thing about Buzzkills is that they’re essentially catatonic. How do you mobilize zombies?”

“Some believe it might be a hive mind kind of thing,” says the first voice.

“And how many are in *our* country?” the sarcastic voice continues. “And do we have a quarantine system in place?”

I say, “Doing OK back there Little Dude?” In the rearview I see he’s just staring out a window. I can tell it’s not just pouting this time. It’s in the body language. He looks deflated.

“Answer your father,” Emily says, and from her tone it’s clear she’s thinking the worst. Still, I’m touched that she backs me up. I can make-believe a second that it’s a genuine family moment we’re having, a thing I’ve hunted for ever since my dad left when I was six. Mom did the best she could but it’s tough when you’re bipolar and convinced, furthermore, that the universe is one huge elaborate Truman Show. After I taught myself to ride the bike that Dad left as a consolation prize, and then went ahead and cycled eight miles to the doctor’s office to present myself for vaccination shots, I said if I ever had a kid it wouldn’t happen. And yet: Emily decides a couple of months before Little Dude’s diagnosed that greener pastures are in order. One day she comes home and tells me everything. That she’d been corresponding with ITER. That the project director thought her designs were promising and asked if she’d like to come on out to southern France. I was not happy. She said fusion is the future. The needs of the many, she said. She said, I don’t care if you’re not happy.

She told Little Dude she was going away for a short while to help build the sun on Earth. What’s he supposed to say to that?

In the car she twists around to study our son. Quietly she asks me, “Is it just disrespect, or is he...?”

I give her a look like: You know what it is.

“You know what it is,” I go ahead and say.

She cries the rest of the way home. After a few minutes, when I realize it’s not going to stop, I turn the radio back on. I find the pop station and up the volume and jam out like a tipsy

teenage girl until Little Dude's pulled out of it and looking at me with fake-disgust which I know disguises his real disgust and saying over the music that I've got just zero taste, man.

#

Emily insists on a bedtime story despite my protests that Little Dude's too old for it. No protestations escape the lips of our ten-year-old son, who's tucked snugly inside his lolcat comforter. Emily says, "Methinks the Dad doth whine too much."

"I am a man," I say, "more whined against than whining."

She whispers into Little Dude's ear. He says, "To whine or not to whine."

"Whether tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous whining," Emily says.

"To whine, perchance to whine: ay, there's the rub," adds Little Dude.

"I can haz cheezburger?" Emily says.

"I can haz cheezburger!" shouts Little Dude, ecstatic.

Whatever. I get it. She's trying to cook up some brownie points. It just bugs me she's doing it by putting me down. And by intruding on my turf as the storytelling parent.

I retreat to the living room and turn on HBO. There's a dark genre-busting drama on, something with cops and poltergeists and nihilism, and so complicated I end up dozing off. I'm poked awake an hour later by Emily, who wants to know where's the wine.

"Is he?" I ask.

"Down for the count," she says.

She looks her age, is the nicest thing I can think to say about how she looks. She's deodorized and changed into sweats. Looking at her, I think: we were once two people who

lavished each other with love. I think about the days spent nude and perspiring on the filthy shag carpet of our first apartment. We zipped two sleeping bags together because we could not afford a mattress. Or A/C. She was in grad school and I was a security guard. I composed love songs for her that were mashups of other love songs, and she talked about the stars. About atomics. About fusion and its capabilities. She told me there's a whole philosophy to craft from it. That fusion represented the dreams and yearnings of the human spirit, while fission reflected its realities.

That's when I'd realized how far I'd fallen. I would listen and nod along and at the appropriate moment hazard a passionate kiss on the lips and initiate nuclear war.

In those days, when she started spending a lot of time with her physicist buddies, I went out and bought *Rocket Science for Dummies*, but could not advance beyond the second page. She admonished me in an endeared motherly way: It's not rocket science, knucklehead, what I'm doing. It's much harder.

In the kitchen she's rummaging through the cabinets, searching for wine. She says, "I love that little guy so much. You don't even know how tough it's been."

"It's tough all around," I say, and think: what a stupid thing to say.

She's not yet jet-lagged, she says, and so she's willing to have it out right now, if that's what I'm getting at.

We have it out. "You abandoned us," I start. How does a mom bail on her sick kid like that?

"You cunt," she says. He wasn't sick when she left, and I know it. She just *knows* I put him in a situation that got him infected.

And honestly, she continues, what was she supposed to do, turn down the offer? With the world's oil supply all but extinct and wind and solar energy *at best* able to handle twenty percent of the world's energy needs and all the other options decades upon decades away from viability?

We could have worked it out, I say. Me and Kevin could have come with.

Geopolitics played a role, she says. The Japanese were petitioning to design and build the part she'd already designed. It would have taken them two years, she tells me. The world doesn't have two years.

We're on the couch together. Her face is inches away and my eyes keep finding her lips. Her breath stinks of the Merlot I'd eventually dug from the pantry. We kiss. Our talk drops off a cliff. We start making out. There's some heavy petting. We move the show to the bedroom where, on the floor, Emily positions herself on all fours and meows.

I think: huh.

I think: That's weird.

She cries like a cat and sticks her butt in the air.

I stop thinking.

In the act she cries out, Oh, Byron! and gets emotional after because, she tells me, I'm still using the same sheets we had when she left.

I say, "If I had a nickel for each tear."

"It's been a day," she says, cuddling. "One of those."

"Who's Byron?" I ask.

"Don't ask *me*," she says.

"You don't mean *Lord* Byron?"

“Just please,” she says.

“Byron Leftwich?”

“We need a plan, she says. “For you know what.”

I’ve got nothing. My head is utterly, blessedly, empty. For a while, we lay there, silently.

“What are we hoping for,” she asks dreamily.

#

For hours I toss and turn because I’m not used anymore to having someone in the bed with me, and because I’m fretting about Byron, and because I’m feeling guilty about fretting about Byron when Little Dude’s across the hall dealing with what he’s dealing with.

Eventually, I dream. Byron and Emily are cats. Long-hairs. They purr. They rub against my leg. They sit in my lap and knead at my crotch with untrimmed claws. They leap up on the counter and in French-accented English request to be fed. So I feed them. They complain about always being fed dry food. They say they want some milk and some Fancy Feast goddamn it. I say I wouldn’t even know where to get that stuff and with the NPR host’s voice Byron says Like hell you wouldn’t, *maître de l’excavation de la merde*. I go out to the grocery store and the cashier is Little Dude even though he doesn’t look like Little Dude and he keeps saying Sir, where’s your advantage card? Sir, where’s your advantage card? while I rummage through my purse and the line piles up behind me and I start to get angry and accuse Little Dude of coming to my home and stealing the advantage card from my purse while I wasn’t looking.

I wake up sweating and frustrated. Emily’s not in the bed.

I pad down the hall and check on Little Dude, who’s still asleep. No reason to wake him. I pulled him out of school when he got The Disease, and now most days he sits at home in his

ergonomic desk chair in front of the desktop streaming the Kardashians and listening to NPR and collecting memes on Facebook. He posts them to his own wall. Emily's typically the only person who likes them. I wish I could say that's because of The Disease, but truthfully Little Dude, despite the avid consumption of US popular culture, didn't have many friends to begin with. He seemed relieved in fact to be taken out of school.

Sometimes when I come home if I'm not too beat we'll sit together doing interactive math exercises. When you get one wrong, a little kid's face appears on the screen—sometimes it's Jewish, sometimes it's Caribbean, and sometimes it's Japanese, but it's always the same kid, somehow—and claps his hands to his rosy cheeks and shouts *No!* If you get it right, his face corkscrews into something unmistakably orgasmic and he says, *Well duh.*

That's the extent of Little Dude's homeschooling so far. Another thing I feel guilty about.

As I approach the kitchen I hear Emily's voice, pitched at a whispery level. I creep forward. At the prison, such sneakiness has a whimsical name: Devious Dicking. Emily's at the table, her back to me, her laptop open. I Devious Dick her phone conversation, listening to her speak to somebody I'm increasingly sure is Byron, because she giggles and mostly listens but occasionally interjects with a *You're so naughty!* or *Bad, bad boy!* or something French that's got the same gist but's worse somehow for being French.

I stomp hard into the kitchen. She nearly leaps from her chair. Her neck snaps audibly when she whips around. To the phone she says, all business now, "I'll call you back."

We look at each other. She says, "OK."

I say, "You are, I think, the worst sort of person."

She says don't hate her yet.

I tell her I'm more impressed than anything. I hadn't ever realized, even working at a prison, that it was possible to be as awful a human being as she was.

"It gets worse," she says. "So please sit down."

I sit. She asks if I'd like some coffee and I say please. She slides her mug across the table. Says she poured it and then decided she didn't want it. I say big surprise.

"I'm in love," she blurts.

"With Byron," I say.

"With Byron."

There's a pause. She looks at the laptop screen. A thought occurs. "There was never any International Thermonuclear whatever," I say.

"Don't be a chauvinist," she says.

I sip my coffee.

"How can I get you to see I'm a flawed human just like anybody else?" she says. "How could you ever accept something like that?"

I tell her that, in all honesty? if we're being honest? I'm getting angry.

She presses on. "I never called because I was embarrassed. Because of how I left."

"Byron," I say, tasting it. It's not like I didn't think she was seeing other people. But love? We've known each other since we were seventeen years old. Twenty-one years. The most romantic moment I ever had was when she applied cover-up to my acne before the senior prom. And she's telling me love?

She says, "I don't know how to express it to you. It was like getting an unexpected package."

I look at her.

“He just *gets* me,” she says. She tells me he’s a thin and somber—and very, very French—cat breeder she met at a pet store. That they walk through fields of daisies, figuratively speaking, and take cooking classes. They’ve hand-cut noodles and whipped up crème fraiche and braised various meats together. He often calls just to say hello and explain to her using colorful metaphors just how much he appreciates her companionship, which seems to be, basically, a lot.

“Fusion,” I say.

She torques her face wistfully and her eyes glass over and she says, yes, she supposes.

It’s this that does it. There’s a little click at the back of my head and before I know it I’ve slapped her hard across the face. The second time I do it I know what I’m doing. Emily fights back tears and says she’d hoped I’d be more mature about the whole thing. I deal another slap. She cries and massages her cheek and I sip at the coffee she burnt.

“Dad,” says Little Dude. Then again, this time softer: “Dad.”

He is standing in the doorway. Of course he is standing in the doorway, I think. How did I not see him come in, the Devious Dick? I think: He was always going to be standing in that freaking doorway.

Emily says, “It’s OK, sweetheart.”

Little Dude just looks at me.

It’s a look to burst the brightest neon hearts. My own is in my throat. I feel: you’ve lost it all, dickhead.

I grope, but I can find no story to tell. I can’t think of even a single thing to say.

He looks. He looks and looks and looks and looks and I think: My son! What do you see with those eyes.

#

On my drive to work I turn on NPR. I'm feeling crummy and figure: why not feel even crummier? Why not go for broke?

A gaggle of schoolgirls is telling a story. It's tough to piece together because they're all trying to speak over each other, except for one who goes *ha ha* periodically and who, it eventually emerges, has a wicked case of autism. The story: a friend of theirs came down with The Disease. She went through the stages: first, she became quiet and practical, then soon her moods fluttered between inert and agitated—*she took, like, a ton of selfies when she got like that*—and then finally, they found her one day staring at herself in a bathroom mirror. A fly had gotten comfortable on her nose, said one of the schoolgirls.

The host says, First, let me just ask about the Ukraine situation. Thoughts? Ten or so seconds of dead air follow. One of the schoolgirls says, Um. The host clears his throat and says OK, so he understands they did something special for their Buzzkill buddy?

They did, one confirms. They took her head off.

Clean off? the host asks, with a newly lurid tone of voice.

It got a little messy, a different schoolgirl admits.

Ha ha, says the autistic one.

The correct terminology here, the phrase we're all groping for, is *mercy killing*, says one.

Her mom thanked us.

Like, *profusely*.

There are pictures on Facebook and Instagram.

She gave us gift baskets, says the original schoolgirl.

How did it feel? the host asks. To decapitate one of your best friends?

We thought of it in terms of, this'll be a challenge, says one. We said to each other let's rise to and overcome this challenge, and what doesn't kill us will just de facto make us stronger.

Ha ha.

We *beheaded* somebody, one of the schoolgirls says. There's distress in her voice. She says, What kind of world is this? She says, I vomited afterwards. I have nightmares about it. Amanda wanted to be a graphic designer. We're just absolute monsters.

Again: silence.

I'm gripping the steering wheel so tightly my knuckles are white and aching.

They aren't zombies, the girl says quietly. They're people. They're human beings.

What makes you say that? the host asks.

It's in the eyes, she says. Look in the eyes. Amanda was *afraid*.

I switch the station and recall, with the sort of clarity I was hoping against, the look on Little Dude's face this morning, and the dull resigned way the airport Buzzkill stared at himself. I can't sustain it, though, these images. What will I do when The Disease runs its course? I don't know. I don't know. And I don't want to. I think about anything else.

#

Work is a gaping maw, a senseless collection of sounds and sights and stench: in the medical bay, for example, an inmate takes the two Oxycodone he's allotted and swallows them down with his own piss.

In the dorm, inmates take turns bugging me about their assholes. Dirtstar is the favored term, although brown-eyed smile is a close second. Wolfie shows up with actual jai-alai gear, trash-talking various bewildered inmates, saying Today's the day you meet your maker, son.

During routine searches, we tell the inmates to squat and pop. In the unclenching of one inmate's dirtstar, I find a packet of mayonnaise. Another has weed in his mouth. In the pocket of another, there's rolling paper scrolled so tight and sharp it's weaponized, and there's such genuine disappointment on his face when it's confiscated that I feel pity for him and avert my eyes. I weep as I beat him with my brass knuckles, and as he curls at my feet, he seems to understand and become peaceful and submissive.

In the after-shift meeting, the daily gold star is placed with great ceremony next to my name on the Employee Eval Chart. I think partly it's because everybody knows what I'm dealing with at home. There's applause and back-slapping. Then it's time to get serious. Captain tells us we'll be doubling up in the dorms to make space.

"We're already doubled up," somebody shouts.

"I say we pack 'em tight," Wolfie says to me. "Like humping crickets, you seen them things?"

"What are we making space for?"

Captain grimaces. "You won't like it," he says.

"Storm shelter?" somebody asks.

"Buzzkills," he says. "Quarantine."

Everybody shouts. Wolfie says, "Didn't I say?" even though he's never mentioned it before. All I can do is shut my eyes.

When I get home, Emily is in pieces. She gestures in the direction of Little Dude's room. I go in there and find him staring at the mirror. Gently I place a hand on his shoulder. This startles him. He looks at me like he's trying to remember.

He says, "I." That's it. That's the whole sentence: I.

Now I'm feeling heartburn. Like: how is this fair? How is any of this fair?

Once I settle him into bed, I sit there with my hand on his warm chest and start a story. It's a game we used to play. We'd take turns telling the story. Most of the time, it would get wilder and wilder until we both collapsed laughing, and Little Dude was more awake than ever.

There's a guy, I say. He's in bed because...

Here's where Little Dude would normally take over. But he just stares at the ceiling. I say: He's in bed because, let's just say because he lost his cellphone. He's sad about it. His friends come over to cheer him up. They say, Hey bro. Did you try calling it?

I watch Little Dude and wonder if this is it. I get the same feeling I always got when my mom, in her despairing moods after my dad left, during those days she felt most watched, refused to do anything beyond sit on the couch, watching rerun after rerun of M*A*S*H*, pausing only to occasionally peer out the window, offering a weak smile and a thumbs up to the empty street. To this day whenever I hear "Suicide is Painless" I feel like there's a chicken bone lodged in my trachea.

This is pointless, I decide. I pat Little Dude's chest and get up. I take one last long look at him, at my son.

When I turn to leave, he murmurs something. Or I think he murmurs something? I'm hoping he murmured something. I kneel at the bed and lean in. For a moment, there's nothing but his little chest rising and falling. But then, he murmurs. He murmurs: The cellphone is hiding.

For a brief moment I'm too overcome to say anything. Little Dude repeats himself. Tearful, I say: it's tired of being the guy's slave. It wants to see the world.

Again, there's just his breathing. But I recognize this. He's thinking.

He says: It tried to vibrate itself out the door and on a bus to New York but instead got shoved beneath the dresser by the guy's cat.

The cat's dressed like Chairman Meow, I say.

There's a dog too, he says. It's Uncle Sam. It's trying to help the cellphone.

The dog fights the cat. They do kung-fu.

UFC, Little Dude revises.

The cat's sneaky but the dog is overpowering.

He gets the cat in a leg lock.

The cat taps out.

The dog takes the cellphone to New York, where it auditions for American Idol.

And the guy gets a new cellphone.

Everybody wins, he says. He says: It's a happy ending for all the good guys.

#

Over the next hour, we remove every mirror in the house. We're quiet as we do this; reality's sunk in. When all the mirrors are face down in the grass on the side of the house, we throw a tarp over them, pin it down with spare bricks.

For a little while we just stare. To Emily I say, “They’re not zombies.”

“I called Dr. Fink,” she says. “He didn’t have any suggestions.”

“I’ll bet.”

“He said this whole thing makes him feel inadequate.”

I head inside, go rooting around in the fridge.

“He says he’s got to report Kevin,” she says softly.

Again, what am I supposed to say?

“The thing this morning,” she says.

I stop and look. I say, “What thing this morning.” Her expression is grateful. I microwave a Hot Pocket and we then do the only thing we can think to do: we watch a Matthew McConaughey film and make out a little.

#

The next morning we wake to a litany of smells: maple, bacon, butter. Little Dude is in the kitchen, preparing breakfast. “Sit down, sit down,” he says, pulling out chairs for both me and Emily, setting paper towels in our laps, serving us with flourish.

“How thoughtful,” Emily says.

On the TV: CNN. Russian troops mass on the northwest border, near Belarus. Putin’s leering into cameras, saying by any means necessary. The embattled Ukrainian president, having fled to Lviv, responds with a diplomatic Go fuck yourself. Soviet-born American pundits claim regional destabilization. The graphics read *World War Three?* There’s footage of the Buzzkills, flocked in Kiev, looking numberless and menacing.

“Orange juice or coffee,” asks Little Dude.

Following breakfast, he rinses the dishes and sets them in the dishwasher. Then says,
“What next, parents?”

I tell him today is Waterpark Day. Doesn't he remember?

He remembers. Of course he remembers. He just thought if we'd like some time to digest, to laze around, to take a nap or read a good book, that he's certainly amenable to changes in plans.

Emily looks to me, frightened.

“Go put your swim trunks on, Little Dude,” I say.

Off he goes, pliant and agreeable.

Emily says, “Is this a good idea?”

“Go get changed,” I tell her.

In the car, Little Dude requests NPR. Ongoing: a quiet and civil debate among an expert on the psychopathology of anxiety disorders, a prominent Presbyterian minister, and an acclaimed journalist who, poo-pooing the idea that The Disease is contagious, embedded with the Buzzkills over the weekend, as they took over Kiev.

Mass hysteria of the fifties, the psychopathologist is saying, or the malaise of the seventies. A society-wide anxiety. It's an idea that's gained credence in recent weeks.

They were so *kind*, is the thing, says the journalist. What sort of anxiety manifests as kindness?

Let me just interject here, says the host. OK they were kind. But what of the fact that they did indeed occupy Kiev?

It was bloodless, says the journalist. They just sort of walked in there and, because of their reputation, everybody bailed.

Are these people zombies? the host asks.

I'd like to say something, the minister says.

Go on, urges the host.

I'm aware this will be unpopular. But listen. We are living in the end times. This disease is an indication. I know this idea will be met with skepticism. But I do feel the need to float it.

A beat of silence.

They're not zombies, to answer your question, says the journalist.

It's by the book collective obsessional behavior, says the psychopathologist. Listen to this: have you ever heard of the Dancing Plague of 1518? In Strasbourg, much of the population just started dancing. It lasted for a month. Or listen to this. In the 60s, at a boarding school in Tanzania, a few students started laughing uncontrollably. It spread. The school was forced to shut down. The students were sent home, and the laughter spread throughout their villages. This lasted four or five months. I could cite you a number of others. The only notable difference about the current so called Buzzkill disease is how wide it's spread and how long it's been sustained.

Let's entertain the idea that hell, maybe it's not a disease, says the journalist.

A mark of the beast, the minister says, helpfully.

Being kind and thoughtful shouldn't be scary to us. It shouldn't be so outside the collective norm that we feel threatened by it.

Let me just point out the wrench in your theory, says the psychopathologist.

The staring in mirrors and such, the host says. The weird catatonic narcissism that follows the thoughtfulness.

Right, says the psychopathologist, sounding annoyed. It's a progression.

Well but can we interrupt that. Do we know what causes it.

You're the Jane Goodall in this scenario, asshole, says the psychopathologist. So you tell us.

Simple. They can't sustain the altruism. It's exhausting them.

So how are we supposed to fix that? asks Little Dude, out loud. In the rearview it's clear he's intensely engaged. Emily makes a little strangled noise.

So how are we supposed to fix that? asks the host.

Well that's the question, isn't it, the journalist says.

Historically? It's called ontological incentivizing, says the psychopathologist.

I know we're NPR, but come on now with these big words, the host admonishes.

No, listen. Ontological incentivizing. It's something our Christian friend here knows all about.

Care to rejoin? asks the host.

I don't even know what language he's speaking, the minister says.

Religion. Jesus. Systems of reward and punishment on an existential scale. We're getting into metaphysics here.

Far afield, observes the host.

I don't see how it applies, the journalist says.

Neither do I. That's my entire point, says the psychopathologist. Because this *is* collective obsessional behavior. And it *does* tend to peter out after a while. It's all I came to say.

Dear World: please stop overreacting.

Now, hang on, says the host. Are you saying—are you saying that everything is going to be OK?

That's my theory, says the psychopathologist.

Collective silence, both on the air and in the car.

On the line we've got a neuroscientist who claims the disease is in fact a poorly understood inherent neurological condition that activates under certain intense conditions....

Emily shuts it off. We ride in silence the rest of the way.

Inside the park, families stream past us, sunned and joyful. Everywhere it smells like sunscreen and fried foods. Little Dude suggests a locker. "I don't want you guys having to carry stuff around all day," he says, looking concerned. "Plus, if somebody gets lost it'll be like a home base."

"It's your day, bro," I say.

"Whatever you want, sweetheart," Emily says.

I pay for the locker. We slather on SPF 45. "Don't forget the tops of your feet," Little Dude says. We do each other's backs and tread off in the direction of the rides. Little Dude takes Emily's hand. I watch them feeling tender and protective and like: maybe we can make this work. Maybe the guy on the radio was right. Maybe the Disease will wear off and Little Dude will be Little Dude again, and Emily will stay, and our family will be whole.

We wait in massive lines. We plunge down the slides. Slush Gusher. Teamboat Springs. Toboggan Racers. Downhill Double Dipper. We even summon our courage for the Summit Plummet. We reapply our sunscreen every hour, as per Little Dude's instructions. We go round and round the Cross Country Creek. Little Dude flips my tube, I flip his, and Emily snaps photos with her waterproof smartphone and uploads them to Facebook, and then periodically updates us on the Likes they garner. Eventually we pull ourselves pruned and laughing from the water and Emily says to Kevin, How about some eats? and he looks to me like: Are you hungry?

No one, I think, will take this kid away from me.

Off to Lottawatta Lodge we go. Everybody gets cheeseburgers. While we eat Little Dude's mugging, trying to crack us up. He succeeds. He then decides he needs to go pee. I say go ahead, it's just around the corner.

Ten minutes later he still hasn't returned. Emily and I exchange looks.

Sure enough.

In the bathroom, he stares at himself.

This breaks my heart. But hope, I tell myself, is refusing to look away.

I gather my son into my arms and carry him out to his mother. The boy will be OK, her heart says to mine. In my arms he's lightless, his gaze sunward, awed.

GRIEF #3

the horse on the moon thing

The horse's mane's flowing and stuff, I guess, but like, on the moon, with those craters and other gross stuff. And so, and so, what the horse wants is, like, what everybody wants, what we all want, like love and companionship and to have true good times and to maybe not have to work so hard at horse stuff, but still work a little bit, because not working at all gets boring, or whatever.

Horse stuff's I guess like galloping? Through fields? Which is hard to do, the moon being cold and dark and totally without fields, probably?

And re, like, the work thing: work's Good For You. It: builds character.

On the moon: the horse galloping, and looking for love.

in the mail today I received a credit card application addressed to Nutty Nuts

Dude-size bacon strip lectures me on calculus, which is the mathematical study of change. In an approach based on limits, it says, in the voice of—I shit you not—Michael Jackson, the symbol dy/dx is to be interpreted not as the quotient of two numbers but as a shorthand for the limit computed above.

I ask: Did Leibniz intend it to represent the quotient of two infinitesimally small numbers, dy being the infinitesimally small change in y caused by an infinitesimally small change dx applied to x ?

The bacon is being eaten now, by Leibniz, whose newly grown mustache ruffles in delight.

Eventually, from somewhere in the vicinity, I think, of the colon of Leibniz: We can also think of d/dx as a differentiation operator, which takes a function as an input and gives another function, the derivative, as the output.

Leibniz: moonwalking.

sinkholes aren't unknowable

I'm a genius, claims the guy in his office with the small penis. This one's autobiographical. Sort of: it's not my office.

I.e., n.b.—the body's electric and always composing. We tell stories which have organizing principles based on hierarchies of concepts. *Value systems*.

What happens when you don't believe? You die, I guess.

The other people here: they don't like me. Or else: they believe—again, value systems—that I don't like them. That I am, to be literary about it, an *anti-hero*. To be even more literary: a fuckhead. The difference is subtle, and involves epistemology. Just even using that word makes me, in addition, an asshole.

these are dreams

Ekphrasis: Ha! Mona Lisa's a troglodyte.

Philosophically speaking, masturbation's interesting. On the yellow legal pad on the desk which I inherited from the absurdly friendly gay man who was once addicted to, e.g., cocaine:

“Revise to-do list.” I thought it said *Devise*. Doesn’t matter: same thing. Both seem high-and-mighty. Get me? In narrative form: a guy goes home and masturbates to a JPEG of Mona Lisa posted to Pinterest. And then checks it off a list.

(Because he’s a pervert, was the implication there.)

On a personal note: I’m trying here, guys. It’s not easy living in your world. I sometimes feel electrocuted, if that makes sense.

“It doesn’t,” she says.

She says: “I’m not even here, dumbass.”

and/or passages of such startling lyrical tumescence that (what?)

I suppose what we’re moving toward, says the horse, who is my avatar (and FYI: the horse can talk), is bestiality. Don’t look so shocked!

The craters eyelessly stared. Uncomprehending, to be precise. The moon’s topography cannot be sentient. This would strain believability. The thing’s to do it delicately: place the frog in the water at room temperature.

But, hey: Consider the Lobster.

I’m like, so lonely, says the horse. And galloping? Not fun without the wind. My heart bursts with love! I’ve got things to offer!

taylor swift gritty hooked-on-heroin bildungsroman (title: *junky jesus*)?

SWIFT: So like, Taylor. Or excuse me, Ms. Swift. Why do you think you deserve to win the Grammy? Even when you weren’t nominated? And incidentally, why, in light

of nuclear holocaust and radioactive zombies who are I'm being told beginning to sprout bat-like wings and will soon no doubt pierce our defenses and devour us all, do you think the Grammys are even being held at all?

SWIFT: Because people, like, need hope. And I'm a symbol, you know? If I can like recover from my breakup, then it's totes a no-brainer that we can beat the zombies.

SWIFT: And maybe teach like a few of them to love?

SWIFT: Absolutely. Love's the cure.

SWIFT: (sighs) I can't do this. I'm sorry.

SWIFT: What do you—

SWIFT: Just go home, sweetheart. Be with your family.

SWIFT: But like, I'm already home.

SWIFT: (befuddled expression, blonde brows drawn up tentlike)

SWIFT: The mirror, bitch. I'm talking to myself. I've totally lost it thanks to this stupid apocalypse.

SWIFT: No, Taylor. No. This is real. I promise.

SWIFT: But I mean like, what's real? If you ask me, Descartes was on to—

SWIFT: Descartes is a laughing stock, hon. Although it's kind of sweet that you'd mention him. Adds dimensions to your public persona, which is already—compliment-time! Please don't get a big head!—totes miles ahead of the other pop stars who, it needs be said, are vapid and shallow and mostly zombies, by now.

SWIFT: (weeping) Please.

in the room which smells like xmas (bourbon, vomit, cinnamon, and's dark as a cave in kentucky)

One begins to suspect it's not the moon on which we gallop, but rather, something spongy and electrical, because where's this light coming from?

synesthesia's when certain senses run together

The day's bright and the grass is long. I've not spoken to anybody yet, but I'm awake and out of bed, which I'm informed is progress. Via text, Mom agrees: "You do a great job of taking care of your life. I am always backup if you need it." Which reminds me. When I was younger, I stole Valium from the little orange pill bottle sitting beneath her bathroom sink. My sister'd had some kind of major dental surgery, and then insisted on toughing it out. "Whatever, Annie," I said to myself, in my head. I considered kicking her, but refrained. Now I miss these pills. Greatly.

fuck! a connection!

Say you kidnapped someone. Just say. Say it: I kidnapped someone.

But whom? Solipsism provides the key, but the lock—you'll have to read certain books, the titles of which, I don't remember.

should this all cohere, into meaning, she will strangle you with that old leather belt

Memory's a chess board, cut in half. I've considered annotating and/or footnoting all of this, for posterity's sake, for when I can (or can't—hard to tell anymore) actually remember. I'm still Considering the Lobster, and am beginning to suspect crabs. Is all of this bewildering? What they say about such things as these: Intentional Fallacy. You will struggle to discuss this. I promise. You'll say something along the lines of, "The author says that we'd struggle to discuss this, but I don't see how preempting my objections makes them less valid."

And then of course since I've predicted it, you'll feel all sorts of self-conscious in asserting this.

It's just I'm lonely and afraid, and had the thought that embracing, as opposed to fighting, these feelings might deliver some progress. But now I'm thinking this story's too expository. Were this fiction, and not an essay, I'd endeavor to delete it. Instead: it's a footprint. A clue. An attempt which is deliberately a puzzle: a clear ratification of my assholery.

No doubt your opinion's as follows: "This guy *sucks*."

miraculous balls of hail

The moon's got a McDonald's, a Walmart, a liquor store, and a strip club. At all of which: free wifi.

The horse, without technology, can't access his Facebook. In the meantime, he's certain, he's been Poked, Tagged, and Liked. Digitally fondled, in other words. Which he craves.

or sometimes: other thoughts

Just give up. Just give up. Come on. Hang yourself with this holiday twine.

But fuck, being an odd-toed ungulate—i.e., possessing *hooves*—I can do no more than stomp the ground, when someone asks me to subtract.

This is what's termed a majorfuckingbummer, dude.

“formed by impacts”

“You're not capable,” she said.

Of what? I asked.

Of what? I asked again.

Of what? I asked a third time.

“Zip me up,” she said, corralling her hair into a ponytail.

july 2

The bank's steep and reminds me of an old guy's rotted gums. Mud like chewed tobacco. Little roots protrude like tooth stumps or else like something scatological. Big hoary oaks tower and slap branches above the river and allow flecks of light to chop through and break the water's plane. It's all very picturesque. The innertubes float so slowly you're lulled to sleep. Drunk and gently euphoric and *content*, which is not a word you should throw around and should always, furthermore, be set off in italics. The river's got that gamey-fishy smell going on and with cellphones that are waterproof, your friends take photos. The very last thing you see above water: a rabbit. A fucking rabbit, there on the left bank. The mundaneness of it, I expect, disappoints you in the afterlife. Until Jesus tells you that's exactly what he saw. The two of you

ponder the significance of the rabbit while your body thrashes around underwater for approximately three minutes, according to the story in the university newspaper.

Now listen up, because a Young White Male is speaking! Bro! Death is no fun! Your body turned blue, and your eyes were wide and frightened and before they set you in the coffin, they eviscerated you and stuffed you with sawdust and the rhythm of this sentence has devolved because I'm thinking of your missing heart. Where has it gone?

something, i think, has come full circle

No I mean: I get it. Hard to feel feelings for a guy that's cardboard. The horse whinnies emphatically. *Ontologically*.

“Sing to me!” she screams.

You're hurt! Your value system's in limbo—cosmogenous sediment, kicked up by a Lobster, sick and tired of being Considered. What's it doing in the river anyway?

On television: Justin Bieber! It's a turning point when, instead of reaching for the beer, you reach for the cat which, yes, OK, ran away two months ago.

SMART ART

EXTRACTS

(Supplied by the Author, sheepishly, with much and wincing awareness of the possibility of being judged an Asshole—epigraphs, in the Author’s humble opinion, being pretty much universally pretentious—and a heartfelt plea for forgiveness, should these prove to be too irritating. Just, you know, know that the Author slaved over this thing, spent years collecting all these quotes and determining just how to arrange them (thematically? chronologically? intuitively?), ruined, in fact, his eyesight staring at the fucking computer for hours upon hours a day, his skin nearly translucent, veined in neon, is how bright his veins are contrasting against his skin’s frangible and near-anemic pallor—really it’s the skin you’d expect on somebody going through chemo, and here you find it on the otherwise healthy Author, thanks of course to all this time spent indoors, collecting and arranging quotes, with hopes that you, Reader, there on your couch or bed in your house/apartment, or in your ergonomic desk chair in your office, or maybe on that park bench outdoors, beneath a tree’s shade, the bench splotted with bird shit, the air alight with allergens, your smartphone quivering with text messages and Facebook notifications and god knows what else—or wherever else you might be—would enjoy these quotes, would, perhaps, ponder upon them, and wonder just how it is they fit together and what’s to come after them: that these quotes would, in short, enhance the reading experience.)

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning.

Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.

- John 1:1 – 5

This mistaking a Reflection for a Refraction has been the Occasion of several more Errors, and Difficulties to be met with...

- John Theophilus Desaguliers, "Optical Experiments Made in the Beginning of August 1728, before the President and Several Members of the Royal Society, and Other Gentlemen of Several Nations, upon Occasion of Signior Rizzetti's Opticks, with an Account of the Said Book, By J.T. Desaguliers, L.L.D. and F.R.S.," *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society* 35

Each thing (the glass surface of a mirror, let us say) was infinite things, because I could clearly see it from every point in the cosmos...I saw endless eyes, all very close, studying themselves in me as though in a mirror, saw all the mirrors on the planet (and none of them reflecting me)...

- Jorge Luis Borges, "The Aleph"

For such is the self-love of the young that a social aspect enters in: an adolescent girl whose existence is so visual observes in a mirror her double; the double becomes a voyeur.

- Thomas Pynchon, *V*.

In the funhouse mirror-room you can't see yourself go on forever, because no matter how you stand, your head gets in the way. Even if you had a glass periscope, the image of your eye would cover up the thing you really wanted to see.

- John Barth, "Lost in the Funhouse"

Words, dimly familiar but twisted all awry, like faces in a funhouse mirror, fled past, leaving no impression on the glassy surface of my brain.

- Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*

At times the mirror increases a thing's value, at times denies it. Not everything that seems valuable above the mirror maintains its force when mirrored.

- Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*

That is the tune but there are no words.

The words are only speculation

(From the Latin *speculum*, mirror):

They seek and cannot find the meaning of the music.

- John Ashberry, "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror"

"The necessary condition for an image is sight," Janouch told Kafka; and Kafka smiled and replied:

"We photograph things in order to drive them out of our minds. My stories are a way of shutting my eyes."

- Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*

Jesus, Sweets, *listen*. Hear it? It's a love song.

For whom?

You are loved.

- David Foster Wallace, "Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way"

Of course I had summoned the Shrike. I knew that. I had summoned it by beginning my epic poem about it. In the beginning was the Word.

- Dan Simmons, *Hyperion*

No observer can obtain or store information sufficient to distinguish all states of a system in which he is contained.

- Thomas Breuer, "The Impossibility of Accurate State Self-Measurements"

Say what you wanna say/ Make it mean everything.

- Matt And Kim, "Let's Go"

Long handwritten note deep in your pocket/ Words, how little they mean when you're a little too late.

- Taylor Swift, "Sad Beautiful Tragic"

ONE

31:03-31:14. On a Camera 2 slow-zoom: 'I've never, *ever* lied.'

On 3 Nona's cheeks were stained with glistening networks of tears. 'Never?' she asked on a cut to 1. 'No stories, no little deceptions, no hidden ulterior motives, no—'

'I'm an open book,' said the girl, leaning back.

###

The seven attorneys retained yearly by the corporation whose subsidiary they'd been representing for the past seven months, flocked in a V- or frown-formation to the small table on which were laid out gratis as far as they could tell, a small array of refreshments. Tread upon, in the process, a checkered carpet that looked to be recently, if not just the night before, shampooed or steam-cleaned and peripherally at a slant as a result of the way same-colored boxes seemed to just or not quite touch each other. The colors a positively blushing dark purplish indigo and grass-stain green, which struck the attorneys as vaguely natured, or trying hard to be vaguely natured. The attorneys moved synchronously, as if long adjusted to the length and style of each other's gaits, the distances required for maximum social ease. Through some innocuous communicational error, they were entirely unaware of the CEO's decision the night before to axe the web series at the bleating heart of the conflict they were here trying to resolve. They were literally in the dark. The conference room they'd been herded into's location was perfectly due-west, shaded entirely from the sun. It was also very, very big. The building housing them stood

at a slant and swayed subtly and spinally and not quite rhythmically in the flouncing wind propelled off the coast, not two miles away. Much of its exterior was constructed of laminated glass with a dramatic tint, capillared with steel crossbeams. The scent of polyurethane grooved faintly. A kind of soothing rustic verdigris had been slopped onto, and smeared all around, the room's three interior walls. The color clashed outrageously with the carpet's color scheme—on the whole, the room felt, to the attorneys, unfinished somehow. In the early mid-morning, the sun's light was clear and soft and slightly filtered through strips of cirrus clouds presenting as dashes of chalk across the sky's slight and painfully blue convexity.

Spread out on a folding table spackled with old turd-shaped stains were seven varieties of bagel: Eggcitement, PlainJane, Whole-Hell-Of-A-Lot-Of-Wheat, Oatmeal Craisin, Opium Eater (=poppy seed), Everything(And More!), DevilsInTheDetails (=chocolate chip)—approximately two of each kind were arranged in a roughly concentric pattern and just softly kissing the glass of a sweating carafe of orange juice, *un-pulped*, the attorneys noted on close observation. The conference table had been removed from or was never put in the room, whose perimeter, without furniture, seemed to contract, rather than expand—and in addition, gave more credence to its unfinished feel, they felt. Sensory perceptions are easily manipulated and not to be trusted, was the genuine consensus. They *lie*. The building's ostensible purpose was to accommodate the south-regional innards of a major national satellite provider, but certain floors were kindly rented out to other companies in tangential but not directly competing industries. It stood hulking at a slant on the southeast corner of a big intersection in Fort Lauderdale FL. The mystery of who exactly had set up the refreshment table became, briefly, a topic of discussion among the attorneys: had it been the major national satellite provider who'd provided the breakfast

materials, or the attorney's opponents, who'd made the request of meeting here, under the auspices—within the hot choking throat, a few of them thought privately—of a sometimes-nefarious giant in the industry?

The attorneys held degrees, respectively, from Harvard, Harvard, Yale, Harvard, Brown, Harvard, and the University of Florida. They ranged in age from twenty-seven to thirty-two. They could choose between whipped and lite cream cheeses on which to spread their bagels.

The fraudulence and insincerity and general no-goodness of their opponents, the seven attorneys believed, was being exposed by the fervor of their clients', and by extension their, belief in the *righteousness* of their, the attorneys', and by extension their clients', argument. This was the gist of why they were here, where they'd never been before. All seven of them believed they were, and readily and vocally self-identified as, idealists. Their youth and idealism, or, i.e., the reason such youthful and idealistic attorneys were chosen from among hundreds of attorneys on the corporation's retainer, can be attributed to the youth and idealism of the corporation's maybe too intimately connected subsidiary, Smart!Art.com, a web-based, collaborative project with a total permanent staff of five, specializing in grants, support, and publication of serious, intellectual works of art across multiple media and genres. The corporation felt the attorneys representing the subsidiary in such a potentially seminal case needed to project a certain "Smart!Art feel and/or demeanor, the gist of which is youth and idealism," according to notes on the meeting typed up—on the CEO's own special letterhead paper, accidentally—the following morning by a secretary who'd just the night before jumped off the wagon and woke up saddled with a monstrous hangover. The far-thinking executive assistant to the vice president of Media Relations—whose reputation for far-thinking had been earned on a single comment made as a

joke, taken seriously, followed through with, and deemed a success, and who now felt required, unfairly, to toss out such jokes regularly, and soul-crushingly, to really have to *believe* in them—mused, in the confidential air of one of numerous executive closed-door meetings on the topic, about the possibility of a Hollywood film somewhere down the line, should the case go to court and in going to court, go their way. Most of the other executives and executive assistants thought it best to find a way to settle and keep the thing out of the courts. It was the CEO's firm belief in the idea of himself as a media visionary that had up until then preserved the web series. But his patience had corroded completely, as was mentioned, the night before.

The containers containing the spreads were, like the carafe, sweating. A small but pungent sourness wafted up from their source. The ceiling's abnormal lift, combined with a poorly designed vent system probably having to do with the age of the building, left the room just a tad too uncomfortably warm. The air flow moved languidly, descending at just the subtlest of subtle diagonals, from the eastern corner of the room to the west.

Five of the attorneys lived with a mild lactose intolerance and had spent years discovering and perfecting techniques to minimize the smell and sound of their what one termed it privately "gaseous exclamations."

The western half of the room was approximately anywhere between one to three degrees cooler than the eastern half, where the refreshment table was set up. There was general agreement about the weirdness of the absence of coffee, along with private and separate musings, in light of the carafe's and two tubs' condensation, about just how long the refreshments had been sitting out. Again the question of the source of the refreshments was asked and left unanswered. None of this stopped the attorneys from handling the bagels, jostling for position on

the perceived ‘best’ variety, or making lewd and traditional gestural analogies comparing the bagels’ coined and central openings to certain sensually appealing nooks in the female anatomy.

The lack of gender diversity among the attorneys had ceased, long ago, to be an uncomfortable fact. It was, they were assured, simply a statistical anomaly. The corporation would loudly cry discrimination, if asserted otherwise.

The seven attorneys had spent approximately seven minutes in the conference room. Their cuticles were immaculate, of which they were all painfully aware. Triggers are often actually quite difficult to pull.

#

Listen OK. I know because I watch. On CCTV. The camera’s this itty-bitty thing bolted to the north wall near the west corner. You can call me Leviathan. It’s all pretty monstrous. But the camera. Well. It’s like this OK? When I was twenty they gave me a job changing locks on foreclosures. We’d check for squatters. We’d clean the places up. Vacuum. Cut the grass. Whatever. There was this one place, down in Miami Springs, when we went in there we found shit smeared on some of the walls downstairs. Mostly in the kitchen. Some on the carpet, like a dog that dragged its ass. So you’d think the bathroom, right? OK. While me and Q say fuck this and go outside and sit in the truck and grab a smoke, Luis says he’ll get started. Luis was this big Dominicano. Not a kiss-ass or anything—just a real strong work ethic. Sometimes we took advantage of it. Me and Q sat in the truck with our Blues, listening to Y100 because it was Q’s truck and he liked pop music, and just real quick, maybe two minutes after we’d said fuck this to the house, Luis hauls ass out the door. Screaming, “El Rato Azul!” Goes past the truck like that. “El Rato Azul!” Down the street. What happened was, he went into the bathroom and found this

huge stinkass rat staring at him from inside the shitter. Thing's all blue from toilet water. Q clubbed it to death with an old-fashioned Louisville Slugger we found in the garage. Tried to flush it, but even all mashed up, OK, it was too big.

Early that morning, before we got to the house, Luis had been telling us how he'd been asking Big Hombre to just show him something. He'd been thinking more and more that his girl was cheating, and he didn't know what to do about it. Q'd said fuck her, man, and I said it sounds like somebody was, and Luis said Fuck you Lev because this is serious, this is truth, this is love man, and what am I supposed to do. So he asked Big Hombre and there like that was El Rato Azul. Big Hombre listened. He *watched*. That's what it's like when I say monstrous.

#

“I *love* God. I l-o-v-e God the Father.”

“God the who?”

“God the Father. Pater. Dude who's image I'm currently created in the shadow of. All Mighty Being with just the one technically biological kid, but who, in infinite goodness, killed that kid so he could adopt the rest of us.”

“And you, Rob? Who are you?”

“I'm Christian. I'm Pilgrim. This right here's my progress.”

“Good so far. Talk to me about love.”

“Love's absence. Love is desire. Love ain't the fulfilling of Lack, but the recognition of it and the desire to fill it.”

“Do you love God?”

“I already told you. Sure as hell do. Do like the dickens. It’s uncomfortable almost, this love.”

“And but Christian, does God love *you*?”

“He most definitely does not. Love’s absence. Love is desire. God ain’t absent, and he don’t desire. My Father’s total presence. My Father’s fulfillment of desire.”

“Does God need you to love him, Christian?”

“God don’t need a thing. He’s just doing me a favor, is all.”

“Good. Talk to me about salvation.”

“Salvation’s pain, Reverend. Salvation is some true major pain. It’s recognizing your desires and your Lack’s much bigger than what you’re trying to fill it up with. It’s what’s it called existential hopelessness. It’s transition from being lost to being found. That journey between the two, I mean. It’s a lot like death, in that regard.”

“So the answer I’m looking for.”

“Salvation is death. Salvation is dying to yourself.”

“And?”

“And then being reborn as somebody else. As God’s newest kid. But see that’s what I don’t understand.”

“What about it don’t you get?”

“Well, Reverend, if I’m reborn, then why am I still desiring? Why am I still Lacking? Why am I still loving?”

“You’re reborn, Christian, but you’re still here. Still stuck inside the flesh. You have to be reborn one more time to get rid of your love.”

“Sort of like, uh, Buddhism and what’s it called enlightenment?”

“Buddhism ripped us off. It’s a fact inside the history books. But yeah, if that helps. The first rebirth is just recognition, so you can channel your energies into the right kind of love, whereas the second rebirth is a kind of, I guess, annihilation, when God takes you as part of his Presence and you can’t be anything else but present. You can’t be aware because awareness is a kind of reflection, and reflection takes you out of Presence. That help at all, Christian?”

“I think so. I think, yeah.”

“Good. Be strong now. You’re in this world right now but you’re not of it anymore. You’re God’s kid. So act like it. I’ll see you Sunday.”

“Yes sir, Reverend. Thank you.”

“What’s love? One more time.”

“Love is—”

#

Nona shoved away the comfort of Ishmael’s comforter, and now sprawled like she thought a corpse hurled off a balcony. Like *Law and Order*- or *CSI*-style. An arm flung over her head, knuckles grazing the wall. Another draped over the side of the mattress. Legs at angles yogis dream wet dreams of. Her left shoulder ached and with her face angled just softly to its side, she could smell her own accumulated underarm BO. The phone was ringing for the second time. At a shrill pitch an effete male voice twice repeated “I’m letting you know at the shrillest pitch possible you have a call, so answer it. Answer it. Come *on* bitch!” It wasn’t Ishmael. His ringtone was a deep, satisfied belch. The effete man was the default. Could’ve been anybody. So Nona kept still.

Ishmael, when he went on trips like this, typically called in the mornings, before any of the pitch meetings started. Hearing her voice girded his loins, was how he put it. Gave him the strength to slog through. His thing was always to say “Keep on and carry calm,” in his Jeff Goldblum voice, as a kind of mantra, to which Nona was supposed to say “Go get ’em, Tiger,” or some variation. “Calm’s in my pocket,” was his de facto response. “It’s warm. It’s thick and throbbing. It’s a big-ass calm.” To which Nona, typically, hung up.

They were still, seven months in, essentially strangers to each other. Some of this had to do with his constant traveling. Some had to do with her staying on with Smart!Art after he’d been pushed out. A lot more, Nona thought, had to do with the fact that she just didn’t care to know too much about him.

The phone bitched at her again and Nona, sick at this point of thinking about this stuff, peeled herself from the bed, multiple if not numerous joints cracking, wiped as best she could the sweat from her face, and moved through the heat toward the dresser, on top of which the phone—“Come *on* bitch!”—was flashing the name Adam Hardy. Producer/editor/writer. Show runner. Lanky reed-voiced guy with control issues. Ishmael’s replacement on the web series. Nona let the voicemail take it and wandered out into the living room and over to the sliding glass door that led to the balcony. Ishmael—and she, she guessed—lived on the eighth-floor of a high-rise overlooking a little juncture of the Intracoastal. Thing of beauty in the morning—sun’s light slapping the water, a few small boats directing their noses toward the Intracoastal’s main artery, Christmas tree wake gently losing its shape and lapping against plastic docks with the fake-wood grain finish, the violent sounds of men at work in the shipping yard roughly catty-corner—Nona actually really liked this stuff, always felt hopeful witnessing it, even today. She was tempted to

show her naked self out on the balcony for a minute or two, give whoever's working on the yard's docks and just happens to look up a small show, a real one, a pocket of time to forget the hard truths of their lives.

Instead she moved through the depressed area designated as the living room, with its faux-rough-limestone wall, its egg-colored synthetic leather sofas, its Old Florida themed paintings of craggly brown trees against cloudy backdrops, with typically a sort of ugly big-beaked bird perched awkwardly on one of the craggles—stopping at the thermostat to crank the A/C up a little bit, and into the kitchen, where she scooped a few big spoonfuls of low-fat vanilla yogurt into a little Styrofoam bowl, and sprinkled some blueberries on top. She ate there at the kitchen's middle real-limestone counter, looking out the sliding glass's view which, from there in the kitchen, was mostly just the middle sections of other high-rises framed against the sky's painful, squint-worthy blue.

After he'd maneuvered for her to get the gig with Smart!Art, Ishmael'd invited her to stay here with him, which Nona—who'd been staying with a friend for the two months since leaving her ex, and whose friend had been recently dropping aggressive hints, like, instead of throwing Nona's clean laundry on the daybed, was folding the clothes herself and packing them away in Nona's travel bag—had, OK, agreed to without really thinking it through. But the place *was* spectacular, located very near the nightlife she at the time those months ago had very much grown fond of. And the guy himself was the kind of guy who could, well, *open doors*, or seemed like it. During that phone convo a couple weeks after that night they met, Ishmael'd explained the show's premise—the same way, she later learned, he pitched it to anybody he thought might at some point be potentially involved in its production: “It's a show about people killing

themselves in new and startling but not too graphic ways, and deluding themselves by calling it art. *We're* calling it art. That's the package. The emotional punch is *closure*. It'd never fly on TV, so we're disseminating it through the great sprawling all-seeing Web. Where the focus is going anyway. Tagline's 'A weekly show about people too broken to live, but still wanting to do something meaningful.' Or something. We're still so far tinkering."

He'd wanted her as the show's host. On meeting her he'd just *known*, he'd said. She had the most honest and empathetic face he'd ever seen. The thing just sort of mimicked whatever the person with which it was interacting was feeling.

Nona had, in return, said the show sounded unfuckingbelievably cynical and exploitative.

"Come on. Not fair. *Not* fair," he said. "These people are sensitive. They're artists in their deepest hearts. They're on their way out anyway. Show's policy is to first offer three free months of therapy, drugs, you name it. Show's policy. And we'll comply with the law. Nobody underage. Nobody with partners who object. We don't rush. I told you all this before. Nobody's forcing anybody. If they get better, fine. Great, actually. Then we've done a good deed. If they don't, though. Think: they got themselves a medium for their message. Zero worries about lost notes or being forgotten or whatever. Full and absolute closure."

He'd gone on. And Nona'd continued to disagree, to feel horrified. Until she didn't. Until she started to see the thing his way. Until she started to think about her career. Soft news for Channel Two. At the station, such segments were labeled *cotton candy*. The saccharine beat. Interviewing lonely financially destitute old women in homes smelling like shit and scented candles who'd just had their bills or groceries paid for by the kindly young couple in the apartment next door who "couldn't just stand by and do nothing." Reporting the statistics—

number of lights, displays, thru-fare, electricity costs—of the annual Christmas Fantasy of Lights. And the powdered sugar of all puff pieces: The Greater Fort Lauderdale Area Annual Kitten Bowl, for which Nona was the sideline reporter, standing year after year in front of fuzzy little half-grown cats chasing a ball of yarn and occasionally pissing and nipping at each other while a huge arena crowd's collective heart just *dissolves*. Nona'd thought about her career. About the trajectory of her career. And about Ishmael, who on the phone was almost pleading with her to at least come on in for a screen test— in part manipulating her, she knew, using pretty cheesy car sales tactics: *visualize* this, you're *just* the person for this, this job was *made* for you, it's practically licking your ear. Which to Nona, just coming out of a marriage in which she'd done just about *everything* for a thankless, nearly comatose husband—down to sometimes even having to dress him in the mornings for work—started to sound pretty good.

All this stuff, to the Nona who stood in Ishmael's condo's kitchen scooping out the last of her yogurt, felt just, *wrong*, somehow. Like she couldn't anymore quite believe herself. Like a fucking TV show.

She threw the Styrofoam in the trash beneath the sink and went to check the voicemail Hardy'd left her. "Turn on the news," was what it said.

#

And and but so Julius Jonah Boggs couldn't quite even as he attempted in an extraordinary sort of diuretic way to anatomize the house of, diagnose the symptoms of, prescribe the cure/remedy for, or piss out, the Pain. In a sort of low cramping stomach sort of moan is the way he'd think of It and boy through some kind of weird syncretic motion It would, such omniscient/omnipresent Pain, come to acquire the blunt irradiant force of prophecy, he

thought, standing there in front of the spackled with bits of crusted Aquafresh and spit stains mirror of his tiny and progressively deteriorating 2bed/1bath in Pompano Beach, FL.

He'd had to in light of the fact of Rob's impending arrival literally drag himself out of bed and force himself to shower and shave and swallow down a few codeine pills, and now was smiling sort of viciously at his jowls and the kinks in his forehead and the tea/coffee stains on those really hard to get to teeth at the back of his mouth, hooking in the process the side of his lip with his just even barely soap-flavored index finger and stretching it way back the way you might a rubber-band you want to snap.

And also wondering inside the Pain just what exactly Winona was doing, hoping/praying against every single neon-lit bone cell in his body she wasn't fucking somebody. Please god let her not be fucking somebody. Thing was if she was still there, with Julius Jonah Boggs, the two of them'd be fucking. Being intimate, actually. On *their* bed, on the mattress and sheets they'd bought together. That Winona'd picked out carefully, soliciting the opinion of Julius Jonah Boggs, who truly didn't care, he'd told her, as long as she, (who was) his *wife*, was the one in the bed with him—the two of them'd be going at it right *now*. Slowly/quietly/tenderly. In a spooning kind of way, was their weekend morning specialty. Julius Jonah Boggs would press himself against her, his hands would go searching, would discover the wetness; he'd bury his face in her hair, the sweet fruity scent that'd lingered in the pillowcases for weeks after she'd left, and she'd make a little murmur or say very tenderly “What do we have here” or “Maybe just a little bit” and reach through her legs and guide him—

He'd been looking so long that the mirror's reflection had started to feel less and less like him and more like something/someone completely outside of him, sort of like if you said a word

over and over again until it started to lose its shape and meaning and became almost a completely new definitionless word. An unassigned word, an empty word, a word with no family/relatives. A word Microsoft Word underlines in a red squiggle to let you know it's not real.

That was him. Him in the mirror. He was the word. And the Pain,

It, the Pain, was weirdly unified psychosomatically speaking—i.e., he'd developed, shortly after the first psychic splurge of agony a superbly vicious cold which may or may not have been, in reality, a superbly vicious flu. Simply put on all fronts a whale of a hurricane of a disease. Psychologically/neurologically/biologically pierced by the rusted old harpoon of—but he couldn't—could not—bring himself to name It, because to name It would be he thought to drive Its reality even deeper into the dirt—even *still* smiling in the mirror, at this point, but feeling the first tingling of a kind of sneezing motion coming on—and this denial itself had become part of the ever-perpetual-consuming nature of It, of the Pain, and the attempts to anatomize, to be in other words consistently aware of, the nature of the thing had become, such attempts, symptoms, he thought, of the Pain. It wasn't black or dark or vague but terribly and awfully efficient and complicated and well-oiled, ruthlessly complex machinery that, in bearing Itself, really seemed to hide Itself, because to lay eyes on a certain gear/tube/nut/bolt of the thing was essentially to cast into shadow another part, because like everybody else he wasn't particularly peripherally gifted, emotionally speaking, and the remedy for such confusion was obviously a sort of zooming out/stepping back, which was impossible to do, thought Julius Jonah Boggs, as he made a wincing pre-sneeze face at himself, and then, and, and then SNEEZED away the mirror's conception of him. He blinked a few times and with the back of his wrist rubbed at

his nose, staring at the mirror that now, with the bits of dried toothpaste and spit stains and finger smudges and snot shrapnel, really only reflected back patches of him where he stood looking at it. The thought of wiping the thing off had him feeling just *bone-tired*. Not a fucking clue where the Windex was, where Winona'd kept it, or even *if* she'd kept it. It was dumb little problems like this that'd kept him in a perpetual and Painful state of remembering, *always* remembering;

Man, with(in) Pain—

and so, and so, but, all these anatomizing attempts, he realized, actually began at the joy of the *start* of the relationship that had terminated more than nine months ago: the joy that was itself the flip or inverse of the Pain, Its positive twin brother, blocking out, like aforementioned Pain, all moderating influences or emotions, making it impossible to concentrate on anything but the relationship just, at that point in time, initiated. You can turn anything into an addiction. The nature of the relationship between joy and Pain, thought Julius Jonah Boggs, was in a mathematical sense probably quite and very elegant, maybe perfectly dichotomous, the one encompassing completely the outside of the other—and but if he had any kind of a bent or gift for numbers he might work it out that way which might offer him a modicum of relief from Pain's shitstorm, but with which he'd have to do without considering the hopeless nature of previous mathematical endeavors, whereas his brother, always prodigious with numbers and equations, probably would've been able to—he would've been able,

but *this* Pain was, he was thinking and feeling guilty and complicated about, maybe a little bit worse than the pain he'd felt when Hadrian drowned to death two years ago. He was kind of obsessed with measuring/quantifying them, actually. Like, and but so what did that say

about him. About l-o-v-e. That someone leaving (silently, *wordlessly*) who clearly didn't l-o-v-e him hurt more than someone dying who did very much l-o-v-e him.

Winona'd now be letting out little noises of pleasure, if she was still here. She'd be pressing against him hard as she could, one hand down by the action, the other clutching his tight against her chest. Just the *image* of it, in that small crystal egg of a thought, was enough to shatter him.

To himself in the mirror, Julius Jonah Boggs said: 'Today's the day, big fella.' And then, quietly: 'You're a goddamn mess and the only way to die is to stop the heart so come on come on.'

#

"The only things we build now we tend to stick our dicks inside," said the Mexican-American transsexual mechanical artist. She adjusted her cowboy hat over her face to better keep the sun out of her eyes.

"Not true," the famous poet said. "Patently. What happened to the sunblock?" He rubbed tenderly at the bald spot on the back of his head and stood over the artist, shading a portion of her well-defined and much tattooed torso.

"Is *so* true," the artist said. Her sweet saltwater voice muffled by the cowboy hat. Her body, to the poet: a languid, sensuous thing. An eidetic vision. A cresting wave. A seashell long since yielding to life's current, ruffled and ridged and worn smooth. *Ductile*. Her soft, plump legs spoke to him from inside their own perfect brownness. Wet sand, glinting. Tiny blossoming seeds of sweat. Scentless. She was without smell. Or: the smells of the coast overpowered her own fragile fragrance. He wondered, briefly. Her little yellow bikini fit her in a way the poet

could only think to describe as *correct*. She was the *inter* to the scene's *text*. Though he loathed the Romantics, he longed to be a speck of sand on her inner thigh.

“You stick your dick inside a Chrysler?” he said.

The artist sat up and gave the poet a funny look and a little snort. He watched her belly fold, the sudden, subtle suck-in, as though she felt self-conscious about its shape.

“The sunblock,” he said.

The artist lay back down, and again positioned the cowboy hat over her face. She waved ambiguously. “Somewhere. If it's not next to the Gatorade. Check my bag.”

The two of them were at Bahia Mar for the day. They'd both spent the last four days inside their “work spaces” at the Smart!Art offices, earning the fellowship money they'd been awarded. The poet had suggested a beach day. To their right loomed the large, uninteresting Yankee Clipper hotel. To their left young men played a typically vehement game of basketball on a clay court. Behind them, a party of churchgoers, it sounded like, were encouraging each other as they grilled up burgers and hot dogs. In front of them, the ocean's limitless, shimmering blue topography, a gently shifting *eutopia* beneath a small, hot breeze.

The poet, as he rifled through the artist's floral-patterned beach bag, the tackiness of which was oddly intimidating, tried to think of something intelligent to say about her project. Huge mechanical penises that roamed—languidly, sensuously, he had to admit, from watching the YouTube videos—the rooms of large galleries in New York, Berlin, Istanbul, Rio de Janero, San Francisco, Florence, and Montreal, among other places. Built from scrap metal and copper wiring salvaged from junk yards. Twice daily, the things “blew a load” of white paint onto large

posters of open mouths taped up to empty gallery walls. The poet found the sunblock, but could think of nothing to say.

“Would you mind doing my back?” he asked.

The artist again sat up, and motioned for the poet to sit in the sand in front of her. As she squeezed sunblock into her palm, she said, “The roaming phallic structures are meant to symbolize America’s shift away from the manufacturing industry. They go from room to room, just like we go from place to place, buying up things we used to make ourselves. And in doing so, we fuck our displaced blue-collar workers. Ask my dad. The penis isn’t sexual anymore. It’s economic. Or it’s polysemous, at least. It’s all forms of power.”

The poet made a little agreeing noise. The way the artist’s hand moved around his back was glorious. He was, very much, savoring the feel of it. This was the kind of little moment, he thought, he should include in his everlasting poem. “This is Xanadu,” he said.

“Back’s done,” said the artist.

“Would you mind doing my feet, too?” asked the poet. “I have terrible range of motion. Can’t reach. Not half as limber as I used to be.” He demonstrated.

“Mortality’s little reminder,” the artist said, as the poet had hoped. She patted his shoulder and motioned for him to turn around. Once he did so, she set his right foot in her lap, and squeezed another glob of sunblock into her palm.

#

“Wasserman Psychology. How can we help?”

“One does not simply *be* oneself, Patty. Or is this Melinda? One *becomes*. One becomes.”

“Who’s speaking, may I ask?”

“One’s feeling very *short* today, Patty Melinda. Quite short. The becoming is not occurring the way one was led to expect. Are you potentially feeling this too? That would make two of us female beings feeling true essential disappointment about the nature of becoming. Such disappointment naturally needs an outlet. Am I wrong?”

“This Miss Cixous? The doctor’s in a session right now, Miss Cixous. We still have you for Tuesday at 3:05, like always.”

“Someone’s going to need to explain why becoming has continued to feel so much like being. One is feeling *ontologically* dissatisfied. One is beginning to *panic*.”

“Hold, please.”

“This bus station, Patty Melinda, it’s odor, is...unpleasant. One does not know whether this is the actual state of things, or whether the odor is simply a manifestation of internal affairs.”

“...”

“One smells...lilac, and...garbage, and...cigarettes. Menthol cigarettes. Distinct fragrance.”

“...”

“Write the body! Are you listening?”

“Wasserman speaking. Who’s this pulling me away from a client?”

“How does one *grow* as a person, Doctor?”

“Sabrine—”

“Words! Phallogentric words!”

“We’ve gone over this. Sabrine’s *your* name. Your father may have given it to you, but a gift’s a gift. Once it’s yours it’s yours.”

“One’s feeling short, Doctor. Very short. *Lacking*.”

“Sabrine, I’m with a client. Okay? Try to remember: lack’s not a bad thing. It’s not some capital-letter thing. It’s not part of some binary. It’s a lot more complicated than that. It’s what drives the world. It’s a major part of becoming. And becoming’s the essential thing, remember? Becoming’s what we’re always doing. If you’re just being, then you’re dead. And that’s the truth. I’m lacking as much as you are. Hold onto that until Tuesday. I’ve got to go.”

“You don’t know what it’s like, Doctor. To be a *woman*. To be Woman. To be a short woman. One’s just a dark hole. One’s just living inside one’s darkness, and how does one know one’s growing or becoming if one can’t see it to know it?”

“Confirming 3:05 Tuesday afternoon, Miss Cixous. That still okay?”

“Patty Melinda, it’s you again. One can tell. I drink my own tears sometimes. With my thumb I’ll go as deep inside me as I can. The inside of my mouth, Patty Melinda—I hope you’re listening—feels the same as the inside of one’s vagina. Silence is an oppressive racket. Do you understand? One does everything but *see*. Everything but see. You all shine so much light in my eyes it’s blinding. Illumination’s just another kind of darkness.”

“Confirm or reschedule, Miss Cixous? Other callers are waiting.”

“I’m here in the bus station in Birmingham, Alabama. I’m going over to the Arizona desert. One is *in flight*. I’m stealing myself away. I’m going to go live there, Patty Melinda. I’m going to go be the desert inside the desert. The Lack inside the Lack. I won’t fill the desert up, but at least I’ll be part of it. Another speck of sand. It’ll be like Nirvana, Patty Melinda. The sun will—it’ll beat my brow.”

“Appointment confirmed, okay? See you Tuesday. Doctor Wasserman’s looking forward to it, I know.”

“One just wants—”

#

To Julius Jonah Boggs Rob’d always seemed just about essentially as much an antithesis to Hadrian as a person could be: the dude was tiny and mostly extremely quiet and deeply involved in deep Internet conspiracy stuff that actually needed a completely different incomprehensible language that Rob used to like to if you put a little white smiley face pill on the hump of his tongue speak endlessly about its capabilities, the language, the fact that it was the what hyperstructure or something of the whole goddamn enterprise, which the enterprise itself, the WWW, the “triple-dubs” was Rob’s term, was taking over more and more of what we’d—Rob’s face red and pasty and his eyelids squashed tight together like he’s trying really hard to keep the idea in front of him—traditionally refer to as reality. This was the Rob Julius Jonah Boggs knew and Hadrian was fascinated by, enthralled to, and came to more and more confide in rather than the big bro who’d before been the one Hadrian came to. Whose full name Julius Jonah Boggs hadn’t ever bothered to learn because the one time early on he’d asked, Rob’d said something extremely dumb like it was better for his own safety if he didn’t know. The friendship could maybe be explained by the fact that the two of them, besides being both hyper-intelligent and arrogant about it to the point of unstable, had tended to both really like X, to use it pretty incessantly and often at strange and inappropriate times: early in the AM or just before lunch, during showers, or when heading home after a long night partying—it’s like neither of them could even fucking tolerate the idea of *sitting still*, i.e. always had to be moving,

to be getting into some shit, or etc. etc., and when they felt those slow moments coming was when they needed the most to be engaged in some kind of action. And so hence X's necessity. Had'd get loud and dancy and laughy and meanwhile Rob'd be going on virtually nonstop about grand conspiracies connected to/involving the WWW in his quiet intense little way, following you around, sweating, blinking, flapping his T-shirt against his chest for air. Rob who Winona'd found really hilarious but also real creepy if left completely alone with him. Rob who'd always loved to tell his flouting-authority anecdote about how once on X he'd driven his '96 yellow Mustang into a ditch directly in front of a pair of squad cars shooting the shit and had somehow walked away with nothing more than a mild slap on the wrist, or so he alleged. Rob who'd been the last person to see Hadrian in the living ruddy healthy flesh. Rob who'd skipped the funeral, and who Julius Jonah Boggs hasn't seen in some two odd years.

Until today, now: the two of them were sitting in the living room with Winona's old bulky Magnavox tuned to a national news program but the volume turned way, way extremely down, just almost a buzz/murmur now, a sort of slightly distracting white noise or background to Rob, who was informing Julius Jonah Boggs of everything that happened to him since Hadrian's death. A couple of weeks earlier Rob'd sent a short timid little email asking if this'd be alright, this meeting between the two of them, a kind of "clearing the air" was Rob's request, and maybe potentially a visit to Hadrian's final resting spot in that cheap or as cheap as they come cemetery in Tamarac, which'd been arranged, the whole shebang—funeral, interment, reception, etc.—by Winona, because Julius Jonah Boggs had been too what's the word distraught really to even be bothered with anything outside vehement/embarrassing-in-hindsight weeping and drinking and watching of those PBS and History Channel shows about the universe.

But so the Rob who'd knocked on Julius Jonah Boggs's door this morning hadn't been the Rob of previous times, though. He'd instead been subdued and quiet, yes, but in a respectful instead of ersatz-mysterious sort of way, and had offered, when he saw the cold white complexion of Julius Jonah Boggs, who was still feeling, if slightly less weirdly unified, then still just *awful* in every sense of the word, to maybe come back and try this another time, to which Julius Jonah Boggs had only shrugged and been tempted but waved Rob inside anyway, who was now inside the living room, just barely perceptibly quivering, increasingly tensed and hunched forward at the edge of a worn-out La-Z-Boy that no longer reclined, eyes cast down on the khaki carpet you could see was filthy with crumbs and dirt and even a few dead leaves here and there, rubbing his hands together occasionally and rubbing his thighs, pretty clearly chilly and uncomfortable, was Rob, but also, as of yet, unwilling to just simply ask Julius Jonah Boggs to maybe shut off the A/C or at least up the temperature. Which this new stoicism and/or fear was a little, was more than a little surprising.

"I guess the fact of the thing is that I'm a born sufferer," Rob was saying. He'd made it a point to at certain intervals look at and hold eye contact with Julius Jonah Boggs to just at the threshold of uncomfortable. Through his it looked like new black bold-faced frames. He was doing this now and rubbing his hands together. "I was born I guess to suffer. And I have. And I am. Which isn't to say that other people *aren't*. But just that I am too."

Julius Jonah Boggs's head was pounding utterly. Like that old hammer-and-chisel thing people always said about headaches is how it felt, literally. Like, it was, it was *visceral*. And but once let inside, Rob didn't seem to notice Julius Jonah Boggs's Pain, or was ignoring It as he tried to get completely through his "side of things." He'd turned down offers of tea, coffee, eggs,

water. He'd been the one to turn down the TV's volume—manually, after learning that the remote had been lost a while back in the sour fog of Julius Jonah Boggs's intense active apathy—which the news now was showing screen shots of somebody's Facebook profile filled with memes of cats and kittens saying funny things. Julius Jonah Boggs was truthfully more and more the longer Rob stayed drifting in and out, and catching only some of what Rob was saying. Pellucid moments as the codeine worked its way through his system were starting to commingle and be influenced by a kind of dreamy, surreal detachment, not an OBE experience exactly, but a kind of maybe double awareness or inner diplopia, a sure enough psychosomatic fracturing: two Julius Jonah Boggses inside just the one body: the (1) jowly clean-shaven guy sprawled belly up on the Xmas-green couch (that he and Winona'd rescued from the side of the road years ago, and that Winona'd vacuumed and emptied two bottles of Febreze into, and but that still needed the ceiling fan whipping around at the highest speed to ward away its default cat piss smell), experiencing an it felt like sensory Armageddon inside what he was almost sure was the worst headache in the history of the world, and (2) a smaller, lighter, detached ethereal thing looking on in hushed awe at himself's attempting to manage an overwhelming Pain, and also hearing through the ears of himself the redemption story of Had's oldest and bestest friend, besides himself.

Rob'd already recounted for Julius Jonah Boggs the general downward trajectory of his life post-Hadrian: the expansion from exclusive X use into just general and mind-fucking abuse of all manner of phenethylamines and barbiturates, unmentionable sexual depravity, homelessness, paranoia, institutionalization, and so on through a house of horrors that culminated in the image of a weeping, prostrated Rob experiencing the catharsis and epiphany of

God's saving grace. All of this in just the two years. He'd moved on to reflecting on this stuff. He was saying—Julius Jonah Boggs was doing his very best to concentrate and do the whole listening thing: “It's mercy language, JJ. Man. Seriously. It's been a long road but we figured it out together, me and the Lord. I know I sound like a broken record. I'm aware of that man. But, I—I got an addictive personality, is what we realized. I was just always *wanting* things, you know? I'm not a guy who can ever be content, probably. So I thought, *we* thought I mean, me and the Lord, we decided, what better thing to always be wanting than God? Than infinite life and love?”

Julius Jonah Boggs was looking at the TV, at the beautifully formed news anchor smile-talking *into* the camera, as opposed he thought to just at it, which there was a difference, which this difference was probably itself the difference between successfully empathic news anchors and those ones just reading the news. This one in particular—Julius Jonah Boggs could almost *swear* she was acknowledging and empathizing with his Pain. In much the same way Winona would do in the post-coital quiet and dark of their—just only *his*, now—bedroom.

“Whadayou think Had would think of me now? This'll sound so selfish you might be disgusted, but I sometimes—just being honest, okay? just clearing the air—I sometimes feel like Had died to kind of wake me up, you know? Like he was God's instrument.”

“Could you maybe turn this up,” Julius Jonah Boggs said.

The anchor's smile'd disappeared with the appearance of a graphic that read ‘Trouble in Pompano.’ The shot had cut about a second after she'd stopped talking to an aerial view of a big roughly boot-shaped building surrounded by hundreds of people spliced with ground-level footage of angry protesters flashing posters and talking at the camera, pointing at the building,

chanting and fist-pumping in unison—Rob had, after a few seconds, stood and moved over to the TV and done as asked.

‘—protest formed at around nine AM after it was reported that the first episode of the series would be going ahead today after a legal delay of more than seven mon...’

“Oh I heard about this,” Rob said. The tenor and tone of his voice was completely, dissonantly different. Julius Jonah Boggs looked fully at him for the first time probably since he knocked on the door. He was back in his original almost squatting position, perched just barely on the La-Z-Boy—it wasn’t hard to tell that, even if he wasn’t still using X or some such—which Julius Jonah Boggs wasn’t entirely convinced of—the use of it in the past had left him indelibly stamped and maybe permanently tightly coiled. “You hear about this web show they’re doing? It’s supposed to be about suicidal people. The main thing being that they’re committing their suicides *on camera*.”

Winona, thought Julius Jonah Boggs. Her name, suddenly again Painfully consciously in his head, the feel/sound of it just *there*, intimate as a lover’s whisper. Before now he’d been successfully distracted by the Rob/codeine mixture, which was the reason he’d told himself he let Rob in here in the first place. But now—*Winona*. His eyes were shut. Everything but the touch of her now was gone. Rob was still talking. Her lips’ softness in the morning. Her warm electric thigh against his in booths at franchise restaurants. His head against the give of her chest in bed. Wetness. Stress ball ass. Searching fingers stepping lightly up his back. Weight on weight. Accompanied by almost-images, these touches. *Winona*. The (1) of him felt with every inch the loss/absence/silence of her in these moments even as the (2) justified, rationalized, tried to distract—the use of the memory of Hadrian’d been before the best most efficient way to

wrench him away from her in the past. And in rare moments of calmness and reason Julius Jonah Boggs'd grab hold of the supposed healing powers of Time, which it allegedly was only a matter of before the Pain starts to fade away. But no: he still *wanted* her. *Winona*. More than any other goddamn thing in the goddamn world. He *needed* her. Fuck if he didn't. *Fu-uck* this whatever it was, this *lovesickness*. Why hadn't she at least just *told* him she was leaving. What did she think of him. He bit down hard on his lower lip.

“And so this girl,” Rob was saying, “This girl they got for the first episode of the show. She's supposedly insane. They say she's been like a street orphan for most of her life. Her parents died in a fire or a car accident or something and after a year or two with foster parents she just ran off, never to be seen again. Until now, obviously. The biggest rumor I heard is that she's literally drop-dead gorgeous. That she's such a hottie that people have to sometimes avert their eyes. Which obviously,” here, Rob gestured at the TV, “would make for a good show.” The quiet respectful Christian version of Rob had been slowly disappearing since he'd stepped inside, and surfacing again Julius Jonah Boggs could clearly see was the original guy, Had's little buddy, the irrepressibly intense internet conspiracist. Julius Jonah Boggs again, just for a minute, closed his eyes.

“She's lost,” Rob said. “Man. She's lost, the poor soul. I've been there. *Lord*, have I been there.”

#

As a rule, Nona tended not to ever call Ishmael, to instead let him call her. Just something she'd decided subconsciously on moving in. But the mob outside the Smart!Art offices scared her. Shitless. Not something she was used to. Ishmael could explain to her what to do. He thrived

on conflict. He'd spent the entire week after Smart!Art pulled the chain on him on the phone, chatting, plotting, schmoozing, feeling out. He'd come up with a couple of ideas and put together pitches for both of them. He'd flown out first to New York, then to LA. He'd wrangled a few promises that eventually fell through. He'd been insatiable in the bedroom, coming back from LA. All hours of the day and night. His calm just seemed to glow at such times. It was, Nona had to admit, *hot*. So she called him. She was almost nervous. She *was* nervous. The phone rang. A weird little lift in her stomach. Like it just came convex, like those hard plastic toilet seat covers if you sat on them to do your nails or something and then stood they'd *pop* with that unpleasant sound. She couldn't possibly—she couldn't possibly *miss* him, could she? The phone rang.

He didn't pick up. Instead, his "Why, *hello*, it's so awfully ridiculously stupendously great to have received your call" voicemail routine, in his very best Jeff Goldblum voice, which he'd recorded in front of her after they'd watched *Independence Day* one night months ago and she'd brought up the fact that he already sounded a little bit like the actor. Which had delighted him, even though she'd been careful not to say Ishmael *looked* anything like him.

Nona ended the call before the routine had played out. She wanted to know what the fuck he could possibly be doing. CNN was still, *still*, showing shots of the mob. She could swear it was growing, though she knew she was watching the same footage spliced, compressed—*organized*—and set on a loop. But even still: all this over a stupid show that wasn't even on TV. That was probably going to be canceled anyway. And where was Ishmael.

She called Hardy. She hesitated, because she'd always had the feeling he didn't like her. Something in the way he spoke to her. Condescending, she felt. But desperate times.

“Fuck, Simmons,” he answered. “Fucking A. God-motherfucking-damn it. I called you *years* ago.”

“Should I be coming in?” she asked. “Should I be staying put? What should I be doing? What can I do?”

“Hell hath no fury. No fucking fury. This crowd is *huge*. Cops are telling me they might need SWAT. Can you believe that? Whoever leaked, I’m going to *kill*. I’m going to strangle.”

“Somebody told the press?” Nona again felt that lift in her stomach.

“I’m going to tie the fucker up. There’ll be rim jobs. There’ll be lots of enforced licking. Things will be unpleasant, believe me. *Fuck*. Someone’s got a sign down there that says *You Want A Show? Here’s My Balls!* I don’t even know what that has to do—”

“Adam!” she said.

“Simmons,” he said, quietly. “What? Yes. Somebody leaked. Clearly.”

“What I mean is, who? Do you think told? Who?”

The line was silent for a few seconds. The feeling in Nona’s stomach traveled upward through her body until it settled just far enough down her throat that she couldn’t swallow it away.

“Don’t bother coming in,” Hardy said. “I think we’re about to be evacuated. Just sit tight. Have a drink, or something. Toast to the Thoth girl, wherever she is. Toast to our very own Judas. I’m pretty sure what this is, is the fork being stuck in us. Up our tender asses.”

He hung up. Nona sat there for a minute. The TV still going, on mute. She felt acutely in that minute a reversal. It was impossible for her to tell—for just that *single* minute—whether or

not *she* was the one inside the TV, being watched. Whether this entire thing had been engineered to her own great, personal humiliation. A near-physical paranoia. She sat very, very still.

#

The lapse in the relaying of the CEO's decision to the attorneys could with confidence be attributed to the simple fact that the CEO had been dreaming in bed when he'd made it, and in the dream, but not in reality, had relayed the decision to a secretary, who'd dutifully called each of the attorneys' secretaries, who themselves had dutifully notified the attorneys. In his dream, the CEO had been talking to the girl who would be the subject/star of the first episode of the web series. Her face was miasmatic, caved in or blurred totally. Her chest cavity had been opened up and scraped of its gooey contents. What bothered the CEO in the dream was the girl's quiet, childlike insistence that she couldn't do the thing twice. It drove him nuts. "If we need two takes," he kept telling her, "we'll do two takes. If we need three hundred seventy-two fucking takes, we'll do three hundred seventy-two takes. We'll do three hundred seventy-four. I assure you. We'll do six hundred for all I goddamned care. Until we get it *right*." But she just shook her voided head again and again. Her matter-of-factness really terribly embarrassed the CEO, who tended to quake inwardly in the face of insolence.

One of the attorneys, in the thoughtful bravado of youth, had spent two years in the densely latticed jungles of the Peruvian Amazon on a stint for the Peace Corps just out of university. Malaria had touched him then, early on, dug profoundly into his immune system, left him too sick to move for more than two weeks. He still remembered the Dumpster stench of his sweat and vomit. The involuntary reversed abuse of his esophagus. His throat lumped thinking

about it. The way his head cracked thunderlike again and again. The faint jaundice to his skin, caught out in the sun, went unnoticed or unremarked upon in the shade of the conference room.

The best slicing strategy, the attorneys discovered, was to plunge the knife through the bagel, and work the plunge circularly, as opposed to see-sawing gingerly into the surface. The refreshment table was low enough to the ground that six of them had to perceptibly bend at the knees to gain enough leverage to gather enough pressure to make the first slice. The analogies to the act were in turn violent and Freudian. All seven of them had, at some dark turn in their lives, considered distinctly the possibility of homicide. Of: wife, brother, uncle, sister-in-law, father, father, grandmother, respectively. Homicidal fantasies were numerous and inventive and in certain cases sadistic. Bagel crumbs scattered radially from the slicing efforts of each attorney, and soon stippled the freshly cleaned carpet within a two to three foot approximate circle of the refreshment table.

A certain Taylor Swift song had been drifting through a certain attorney's head for going on three weeks now. He often sang it unawares at particularly inopportune times—like, just *now*, for instance, slicing the bagel rhythmically, to its infectiously optimistic beat.

When dealing with the spreads it was necessary to set the bagels down. One hand was needed to hold the spread in place on the table while the other, with the plastic knife, gouged a chunk of lite or whipped cream cheese from one of the two tubs. Two of the seven attorneys were left-handed, an unusually high number, statistically speaking. It was routine to lift up one half of the bagel at a time when slathering on the spread. The five right-handed attorneys worked the knife clockwise when spreading the cream cheese; the two lefties worked counterclockwise. They positioned themselves around the small table three at a time, during which the other four

attorneys chatted, typically in pairs, approximately three to four feet behind the three hunched over the table, and held their bagels in their off-hands, in anticipation.

As the jaundiced attorney stabbed at his bagel, his wife anxiously awaited the results of a home pregnancy test in the master bathroom of their home in Boca Raton, FL.

None of the attorneys had children, though six of them were married. One had a theoretical fondness for Asian escorts. Three, interestingly, had toe fetishes.

One attorney had, in running late, been forced to skip breakfast. The bagel in his hand, as he waited for the opportunity to choose his spread, came to seem to him to be an initiation of a cosmic redemptive motion and/or corrective. His lawyerly cynicism momentarily left him. He came briefly to a qualified belief in the existence of intelligent design (and what's more, that this Designer, whoever He/She was, had kept a fond and particular Eye on him, the attorney). The conference room felt just then like exactly the right place for him to be. A sort of mysterious, spiritual, celestially benign fate or pathway, which he'd somehow managed to successfully follow. He smiled. He was soon consumed with thoughts of and about bagels and their seemingly endlessly proliferating spreads. He hit for a minute on the idea of lox: about what, exactly, it was. He was surprised to find he didn't quite know. This led him to wonder, as he did from time to time, at the strange gaps in his knowledge: he'd never, for example, read Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, but had often discussed it as though he had; he repeatedly, in such conversations, used the phrase "dense symbolist tome" in describing the book. He couldn't ever figure out where he'd picked that up, "dense symbolist tome." He found it interesting, though almost immediately dismissed it as insignificant, that the word *tome* was no mystery to him, but he hadn't the foggiest as to what lox could be, beyond something you put on a bagel. In that dark

pause between *almost* and *immediately*, the attorney tested the bagel's softness with a thumb, and considered the possibility, utterly terrifying to him, that he might die without ever having learned properly what lox was. His terror at the idea was itself terrifying and incomprehensible and maybe primal, and erased whatever good, subconscious feelings he'd been feeling about a benevolent Designer interested in him specifically. He hooked his thumb now through the bagel's hole and let it just sort of dangle there in front of him as he awaited his chance with the spreads. Extremely teathed and visceral was his dread at being discovered or found out or "de-masked," as was his alarm at the idea that he was even wearing a mask in the first place. He had a lot, he felt, to be afraid of. He was feeling increasingly terrified right now, in fact, of the bagel on his thumb. Or not the bagel exactly, but the *idea* of it. What it seemed to represent. His fear was often the only thing that seemed authentic about him, to him.

Three of the attorneys, once their bagels had been sufficiently spread, glanced at their watches. Two pulled cell phones from their pockets. Two raised their heads to check the clock that hung on the eastern wall of the room. Which, for one, raised the question of why hang a clock on a wall that wasn't yet finished? Which led to: why lay carpet down before the wall was completely painted?

Or alternatively was this clashing of colors meant to evoke a provocative mood in each of the room's residents? The attorney felt suddenly on edge. He'd heard about such things. Malevolent forces, he began to feel, were at work here. He shuddered a teensy little shudder. Inhuman, illogical things. He held his bagel like a briefcase in his right hand.

The seven attorneys had now been in the conference room for more than fifteen minutes. That it hadn't occurred to them to consciously or out loud wonder where their opponents were, hadn't occurred to them.

TWO

36:17-36:54. On Camera 1, the girl folded one leg over the other, dug for a second into her ear. ‘Ever do any kind of household chore or job,’ she said, ‘that just involved doing the same thing over and over?’

‘Who hasn’t?’ Nona asked, smiling, still on 1.

‘Do you know that point,’ the girl said, ‘when you’ve hit a groove, and then you’re just zoned out?’

On 3, Nona nodded.

‘That’s what I mean. When I say I’m just completely empty. That’s the emptiness I’m talking about. It’s not acceptance or concentrated meditation or anything like that. Just empty. Just emptiness. It’s really, honestly, an uncomplicated feeling.’

###

“So I got another one for you.”

“Two in a day? I must be the luckiest woman in the world. This is so much better than phone sex.”

“Sarcasm’s a gorgeous quality, Suzy. I’m trying to romance you here.”

“Oh Rob. I’m swooning. What number is this?”

“I’m at Julius’s. The man get this, the man *fell asleep* in the middle of me talking.”

“You mentioned he was a weird guy.”

“Other thing I did the thing this morning with Reverend Hollins.”

“What’s love, Christian!”

“Love’s you in that pink push-up bra. Love’s you all oiled up, baby. Love’s the smell of your cunt after a nice long steamy hot shower.”

“So this *is* phone sex.”

“You wanna hear the story or not?”

“*Tell* me.”

“It’s about a young woman who’s got issues where her beliefs contradict her decisions. That’s sorta the overall theme.”

“Am I so dumb that you need to tell me what it’s about before you tell the story? Do I not typically offer favorable interpretations? Is this young woman supposed to be hot or what?”

“She’s sorta average, okay? I’m not all that attracted to her, in the context of the story. And no you’re not dumb. I was just trying to give you the lens to look at the thing through.”

“This bitch has beliefs that don’t agree with her decisions. Whatever. Fine. This has to do with love how?”

“Well so the big thing is it’s about how she feels about the concept of Hell. She’s a churchgoing woman. She’s Baptist I think. I think they got strong feelings on the subject. Her dad’s not a pastor there at the church, but he’s like a high-ranking elder, or something.”

“Where’s this supposed to be?”

“Jupiter Florida. Dad’s a big Fins fan. Tapes the games, refuses to speak to anybody on Sundays because he’s afraid they’ll give away something about the game before he’s able to watch it. Real severe about it.”

“Is dad’s fanatical behavior relevant to the story? Or are you just getting fancy?”

“Young woman grows up and’s increasingly conflicted about the whole Hell thing. Here’s the conflict: she hears about this benevolent God, this guy that’s willing to save whoever, even murderers, and can’t quite figure out why a God like that, who’s essentially good, would let anybody suffer in what she’s come to picture as Lake Okeechobee on fire. And nobody can really explain it.”

“That old why-would-a-good-God-let-people-suffer thing.”

“Right. Yeah. And so, she finally just comes to decide, because she’s the kind of person who lives her life based on principles and beliefs, a moralist basically, that Hell don’t exist. She makes this decision. Only, she can’t really bring herself to *believe* that Hell don’t exist. And so it turns into an even bigger and tougher conflict than before. At times she’s able to really believe that Hell don’t exist, but other times, her heart’s more convinced than ever that it does. And the thing is, the reason she doesn’t want to believe in it, is because she’s *scared* of it.”

“Naturally, I think.”

“She’s scared of Hell. She’s scared of going there. Her thoughts about being saved are kind of the same as her thoughts on Hell: she thinks if she makes the decision to get saved, that she’s saved, but she never *feels* all that saved, so she doesn’t quite believe she is. She thinks maybe she’s going about it wrong, or something. So every time the pastor gives the Final Call, she goes up and prays the prayer, and it gets so everybody in the church, because it’s not that big a church, notices her doing this, and it becomes kind of a running joke, although the pastor tries to turn it into a message about the strength of repentance and how they should never get too comfortable and not be lukewarm Christians ’cause God’ll spit them out.”

“I’m now officially naked. FYI. My hand’s moving into position.”

“Well it gets to the point that the young woman never *leaves* that front area of the church where the pastor asks the unsaved to gather for the Final Call. She sits there for days. People start bringing her food and deodorant. And inside she’s paralyzed because she doesn’t know to trust her belief or her decision.”

“This is starting to sound familiar.”

“Thought it might. Thought this one in particular might speak to you in particular.”

“We’ve talked about this already. A lot.”

“Just wait. Just wait for the story’s end.”

“I’m grabbing the baby oil. I’m going to town. I won’t even be listening.”

“There’s all sorts of consequences. The young woman loses her job at the grocery store where she’d been working as a cashier. The dad starts to take a lot of flak from people at work. Other people come to the church just to see the young woman. The pastor starts to get jealous of what he thinks is her real zealous faith, and stops giving Final Calls altogether. Young men come up and leave flowers and sit with the woman for short periods of time until they get bored. Couple weeks go by. She’s fallen into a trance, at this point. The local newspapers start doing like a daily feature on her, give her the nickname ‘Christian Buddha’—”

“Not all that creative.”

“No, not creative. I agree. But that’s what they called her.”

“Let’s call her Raggedy Ann. Or Lolita. Let’s call her I don’t know, Alice in Wonderland. Do we think she’s a lesbian?”

“No actually. She’s actually got a boyfriend. We’re coming to him in a minute. So the—”

“I got it. Praying Mantis.”

“Pastor of the church can I talk please? The pastor of the church sits with her one day and asks her why she’s doing this. She sits there for a minute or two still in her trance, just long enough to make the pastor even more uncomfortable, and then opens her eyes and turns and tells him about her thoughts and feelings on Hell, and how it seemed to lead to her thoughts and feelings about being saved. And the pastor starts smiling. It’s a real smug smile, like all a sudden he feels superior to her and stupid about feeling afraid of her before, all at once, is what this smile communicates. Which because the woman’s doubt and struggles are so real and pure, she doesn’t even notice. The pastor says ‘Listen sweetheart, you can’t be saved out of fear.’ He says, ‘That’s the key here. That’s maybe my fault, for not being explicit about it. Fear of Hell don’t equal love of God the Father and Jesus the son.’ He goes on to explain how the two things are different from each other, and how they connect, and how fear of Hell’s supposed to be sort of a secondary concern, and after he finishes he looks over at the girl and sees that she’s back in the trance again. He nudges her and speaks to her and says her name, but she’s not responding. So he leaves, figuring maybe she’s trying to process this new info, and that once she does, she’ll be set straight. He’s got flaws, but he’s really mostly a kindly old guy who’s pretty considerate of everybody.”

“...”

“Still there?”

“...”

“Suzy? Suzyphus? Sweet Suze?”

“Mike just got home. I’ll call you back on the cell in a little while, okay?”

“*Suzy*. This is what I’m—”

“I love you. *You*. Okay? Don’t freak out on me.”

#

Reason they call me Leviathan is cause I’m a big guy. Not big like Luis, who sometimes gets asked if he’s a Dolphins lineman, but still big. It’s why I got the foreclosure job, and it’s why I got this one too. Bigness.

It works like this. There’s one guy in the booth with all the monitors, and there’s a handful of guys on patrol. If you see something in the booth, you call it in on a walkie-talkie. Everybody takes a turn in the booth because it’s dark and cramped and smells like feet in there, and because your eyes get tired squinting at the monitors. Some guy fell asleep once and got fired for it and sued, and that was the reasoning. And so now you get two hours in there, tops. Afterwards, they make you take your break.

Another time me and Q and Luis were down in Miami Beach. Q goes knocking at the door while me and Luis unload the pickup. Nobody answers. Q knocks again. This was when Luis was still just getting started with his girl and his work ethic dipped a little bit because he was always stopping to text her back. So, before El Rato Azul. I was offloading all the cleaning stuff from the back while Luis stood there leaning against the truck texting his girl. Q knocked a third time. This is what I mean when I say *watch*. I was bitching at Luis and he was saying back to me, Yo give me a sec, bro. Q goes to pick the lock and the door swings open and there’s a revolver in his face. He told me later that’s what happened. All I knew there’s a little yelp out of him, something we never heard before.

Leviathan. First one called me that was my sister, my little sister. Some neighborhood shithead knocks her up when she's seventeen. She's a future college girl at the time. It's not like she didn't have reason to be careful, is what I'm saying. Momma's wailing when she finds out. She's pissed. Nobody tells Dad, who's two states away, in South Carolina, with his new family. I go over there, to this shithead's house. He's one of Q's oldest buddies. At the time me and Q weren't so close. I go over there and pound on the door and tell him to come on outside and get what's coming.

The monitors are small and the screens are all black and white and fuzzy. You gotta squint and lean forward in the chair and put up with the smell. One of the guys takes a scented candle in there with him. That helps a little. They call that part of the shift the Watch. You look and look at all these little screens and your eyes do get tired. After Watch you go on break and sit there in the break room down the hall from the booth. They got a TV in there hooked to cable. When I first started this job, I'd just sit there like a zombie. I wouldn't want to look at anything. My eyes would be scratchy and dried out. But now I like to watch the news. I turn it to CNN and stare at the screen my whole break.

Q's got a gun in his face. He pisses his pants. In the months after me and Luis would always ask him like, Hey Q. Why didn't you just quit after that? And he'd be all, Come on, man. Like it's a stupid question. But I'll tell you. Somebody sticks a gun in my face, I'll say fuck it so fast you won't remember me even being there at all. But Q sticks it out.

I pound on that door. Pound and pound and pound. I'm angry. Nobody's answering the goddamn door. I'm yelling out Pussy and Bitchass and Coward Piece of Shit. Doesn't matter. Kid's not there at the time. It's just his mom, and this is how she finds out about her kid. From

me banging against the door like a psycho. For weeks my sister wouldn't talk to me. And for weeks I tried to just let the thing go. Instead I just was more pissed off. I see the kid around on street corners with his buddies. I see him in 7-11 once picking out a tallboy. I know him and my sister are still talking, that she's going over to his place a few nights a week.

It's a cop who's got his gun in Q's face. It's not cop business though. The guy's there really to do this shit to his ex-wife, who's selling the house. It had been their house together. Whole thing's fucked up. Me and Luis, once we see it, we duck down behind the truck. Q's pissed his pants. The cop flashes his badge and says, Now this is what you assholes are going to do. You, he says this to Q, he says, You, you're gonna turn the fuck around and walk down the steps and go sit in the driver's seat of the truck. Then he calls out to me and Luis. He says, You two big fuckers. Little big, he says, meaning me. You're getting in the backseat. And you, monster boy, you're in the passenger seat. Real slow now. Hands up. We do like he says. We all get in the truck. You can see the stain in Q's jeans as he walks to the truck. Once we're all inside, the cop says, Drive away. He says, If you come back, I will kill you.

I see the kid in 7-11 a second time. This time's at night. This time it's just him in the store. I wait. When he comes out, I grab him and shove him against the wall. He drops his six-pack and it shatters. I hear the clerk inside's yelling, saying he's calling the cops. I swing and get the kid's jaw and he goes down. Hurts like hell. I'm kicking him. I'm using my Timberlands and connecting with his face, over and over. He's out I can tell. There's lots of blood. I kick until I run out of steam, and then I haul ass out of there.

On my break I see they give air time to a pastor, who's preaching at the camera about some show, about God's mercy on these people who want to do this show.

The kid knows who did it. My sister knows. Hell, everybody knows. I didn't exactly keep it quiet. I wait for the cops to come knocking. After three days, I feel like, In the clear. But nope. The next day, day number four, they do knock. Momma shakes her head, and I see she's wearing that face that means she's gonna cry. She goes and shuts herself in her bedroom. I tell the cops that yeah, I'm your man. I tell them the whole story. One of them, the older brother of a buddy of mine, looks like he gets it. He nods along when I tell the story. But he's the junior. The older cop's a dick. He says to me, Turn around. He says to the junior, Cuff him. They put me in jail. Long story short, I get seven months down in Florida City. When I'm out, Momma tells me the kid's long gone. My sister's nine months at this point, about to pop. When the kid comes, she names him after his daddy. I can't make it clear how much this pissed me off. When I say monstrous, think of that.

She still won't talk to me.

Q says, after. He says, You can't imagine, man. Down that barrel's the blackest black, man. You can't imagine, he says. You can tell he's happy as hell to be alive. And that he feels like now, he's got something over me and Luis. I think that's why he didn't quit.

She was fifteen when she came up with that. Leviathan. Got it out of a book. Call me Leviathan, she said to me one afternoon. She said, say Call me Leviathan. I did. I said it. I said it again. I said, what's it supposed to mean? and she says, Just words.

#

The Kia's little engine turned chuckling like coffee percolating before finally burping to life. Before she backed out Nona texted "On my way" to Hardy, then turned her phone off.

She maneuvered the car through the neighborhood and eventually pulled out onto A1A. Air the smell of burning neoprene swept in through the open window. With her left hand Nona tried to keep her hair down as best as possible. The day's light was transforming into a muddy smear. Coming on from the east, it looked like. In the car was one of the precious few times Nona was typically able to achieve something approaching thoughtlessness. She turned on the radio and sang along to a pop song as she drove up A1A with the beach on her right and eventually got into the left turn lane at the Commercial intersection, waiting out a red light and following the movements of two dark-skinned Hispanic women, one of whom was pushing a stroller, as they made their way across the street. The two of them moved cautiously, as if feeling the effects of a different gravity. Nona couldn't make out the expressions on their faces. Their small bodies were framed against the strong, white columns of a CVS. One of them stumbled, but soon regained her balance and gently shoved the other, who only seemed to shrug. The scene seemed to encapsulate the germ of something Nona couldn't quite and didn't know if she wanted to, verbalize. She turned up the volume on the radio.

She'd tried sitting tight, like Hardy suggested. She'd at first wandered from room to room, adjusting picture frames. She'd emptied the dishwasher. Swiffered the white tile of the kitchen and living room. Wiped down the counters with all-purpose cleaner. She'd gone down to the building's lobby and checked for mail. She'd turned on the first *Terminator* film, one of her all-time faves, and lay on the couch trying to focus on it. About twenty minutes in, she decided she just literally couldn't take it.

She drove up Commercial for a while. Once she hit Federal, she turned right, and drove north along and past numerous beautifully planned shopping plazas. At Cypress, Nona got into

the left turning lane and waited out the light. On her left side, the big building that used to house a Civix sat empty. It looked bombed out. The big green neon letters that had announced the business had been pried off, but you could still see the outline. On her right was the TGI Friday's that had been the scene of her and Julius's first official date when they were both just barely twenty-one years old. Nona'd ordered the Triple Tropical Berry Pineapple Chipotle Lime Cosmo 'Rita Shaker with an orange wedge, she remembered. Julius had nursed a Bud. Under the table, he'd stuck a hand between her thighs and she'd squeezed it in while sucking down her drink. That little moment of weird unfettered happiness, like so many others, gone. She was glad to see the Friday's was still there, at least.

The Kia rattled over the train tracks east of Dixie on Cypress, and over some more train tracks just east of Powerline. She sang along to Taylor Swift, and when the song ended, flipped to another pop station and discovered another Taylor Swift song, which she also sang along to.

When she got to the Whale, she was forced to drive past it and make a U, because the crowd was *huge*. She slowed on passing it in the other direction to try and take it in. A mass of people throbbed in waves against the building. Cops stood along the fence that guarded the back entrance, and at the gas station across the street. The outer fringes of the mob were constantly shifting and peeling off from where they were to try to get closer. On the actual physical corner stood the building's sign, which was shaped like a sperm whale whose expression could best be described as ecstatic, and which had protesters draped all over it, taking pictures. She could hear chants circulating and bouncing against each other so loudly that each individual one was impossible to make out besides a word or two.

She drove back east on Cypress. Looming up ahead, a billboard advertising the Cleveland Clinic was being papered over by something as yet unidentifiable, and just beyond it sat The Jester convenience store. She pulled into its small lot. Its mascot jeered at her from the sign atop the entrance. She sat in the lot for about ten minutes, looking out onto the traffic coursing past. The air smelled wet. She turned her phone back on and tried Ishmael again, and again got his voicemail. Hardy hadn't responded to her text. She didn't know at all what to do anymore. About anything.

#

From watching for Pastor on television the woman knew definitively that she was doomed to unhappiness and that this unhappiness, this melancholy, this *thing*, would assert itself in such moments as these, in the cool and quiet of her own home. Home itself a curious concept to the unhappy woman—a densely textured space within which time chafed, a complex web of interconnecting and interpenetrative threads: the woman thought of her mouthwash in these reflective moments—that is, where she was, both emotionally and physically, at the instant of first use of Scope® Dual-Blast Fresh Mint Blast, which happened to be, respectively: deeply unhappy, in the master bathroom of her and Pastor's ranch-style house in Coral Springs, which they'd purchased “for a song,” as Pastor liked to say, a few months after the real estate bubble had burst back in 2007. And, too, she thought of where she was, both emotionally and physically, at the instant the last drop of Scope® Dual-Blast Fresh Mint Blast was spat out, which happened to be, respectively: deeply unhappy, in the master bathroom of her and Pastor's ranch-style house in Coral Springs. Things did not—*refused to*—change, in this household (and in this neighborhood, and in this city)—or rather, yes okay, they *did* change, but in such subtle

ways, accumulating bits and pieces of history over the long range of Time, that it was impossible for her to verbalize or even understand the nature of this change, other than to be aware of its gradual occurrence, and to feel frustration along with an attendant unhappiness, at its rate.

Pastor was not yet on television. Lacey wambled around the living room, looking concerned, touching everything within reach. Any day now, they were expecting her first word, the woman pushing for *gramma*, and Pastor, only half-joking, for *Logos*.

Lacey made the final bend around the coffee table and reached for the woman and in doing so stumbled, but the woman's arms were already there and she held tight and lifted Lacey onto her lap and tickled to distract from the tears that seemed to be forming in her granddaughter's green eyes, the same green of so many things in the household: of the hamper in her and Pastor's bedroom, of the cover of the old Stedman's Medical Dictionary, of the Dawn antibacterial dish soap, of her Heinekens and Pastor's Barefoot wine bottles, these things yoked to each other in complicated ways, numerous catenary threads of habits, movements, actions. They were *tools*, such things, mediators, towards what the woman didn't know but what Pastor might call the Ultimate Activity. The woman's unhappiness was languorous, Pastor occasionally remarking on her dreamy moods without pushing the issue, as if he sensed its immensity—he'd always been disconcertingly astute at that, at *sensing latent issues*; what he often failed at—and with his congregation, he was honest on this score—was dealing with such issues.

Lacey trembled and was quiet and lax in her grandmother's lap. Strewn around the living room were Lacey's toys, many of them given by church members with whom the woman rarely interacted—most of these people viewed Pastor as a kind of demigod or savior and were intimidating in their enthusiasm for him—but who no doubt saw the opportunity in their situation

to ingratiate themselves...but this wasn't a generous view. They had the best of intentions, she was sure. But how to explain to someone, anyone, that simply because one's husband experiences a Road-to-Damascus type of conversion and *hears the Word*, does not by any means mean that one shares or approves of, or even necessarily believes in the occurrence of, that experience? The woman had been raised by two loving and supportive and now deceased parents as an agnostic: she'd been taught to question and to seek, that truth was difficult and relative but worth it for the struggle. She'd been at the University of Florida, a master's student in comparative religion, when she'd met and been taken with—immediately, intensely, unwisely—Pastor, who hadn't been Pastor at the time, but Doug, sweet and handsome and tongue-tied Doug, antithesis to the type she usually fell for, who worked for United Way as a programs coordinator, running literacy programs at underfunded high schools in the central Florida region.

The woman abandoned these thoughts and glanced up and there he was, finally, on television. With Lacey still on her lap she reached for the remote, and pressed Mute.

#

The famous poet didn't remember any longer how they'd gotten on the subject of penises, but he was feeling increasingly desperate about it. The wind in the meantime had picked up a bit, rolling in off the coast ahead of a dark murder of clouds. Huge black bulkheads, the things. The prows of cosmic ocean liners. The scent of coconut tanning lotion suddenly in his nostrils, released to its essential drift by a leathered, seasoned beachgoer. The Mexican-American transsexual mechanical artist had filled her Gatorade bottle with Smirnoff, and the poet himself had supplemented this with a case of Coors Light. They'd worked nearly halfway through both.

“The reason I gave up my penis,” the artist was saying, “was for art’s sake. Swear. Just sacrificed the fucking thing.”

“Stop yelling,” the poet said.

“I needed to be the minority of minorities. I needed to be a minority of one, basically. You can’t critique when you’re part of the problem. I just removed myself from the equation.”

The artist’s body was *glistening*. She’d rolled over on her belly. The poet had a difficult time looking at anything other than the near-miraculous contours of her backside, the shape of her ass a gift, reminding him of those perfect little hills in that small European country he’d once visited on fellowship money. They were mounds, really. Which country was that? Natural structures, sloping, shaped by soft winds. A bit boring, actually. The artist’s ass was anything but.

“Dicks are for suckers,” the artist said. “No offense.” She offered him the Gatorade, which he declined.

“My work has absolutely and completely and comprehensively *nothing* to do with penises,” he said. He rubbed his arm, feeling beneath the hair numerous tiny coarse grains of sand that had been slathered in sunscreen and baked on by heat. “I’m drunk, okay? Ask me about my work. I’ve got really spectacular things to say about my work.”

“I know all about it already,” the artist said.

“Scuse me,” somebody said behind them.

“You’re excused,” said the poet, without looking.

“Howdy,” the artist said.

“It’s just that,” the person continued, “We have more food than we could ever possibly hope to eat. I was wondering if either of you would maybe want a hot dog?”

“I’m a vegan,” the artist said.

“Of course you are,” said the poet. “Just—of course you are.”

“Well I mean I think we got some Boca Burgers over there. Don’t quote me on that, though.”

The poet brushed sand off his legs. “E. coli’s a really miraculous little bacterium,” he said. “They look like tiny microscopic pills, actually—”

“Always thought pills look like miniature phalluses,” the artist said. “I mean, don’t you think?”

“Are y’all just visiting Fort Lauderdale or...?”

As the artist began to explain, the poet pushed himself up off the towel, wiped the sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand, which he then wiped against his swimming trunks, a pair of white Quicksilver board shorts. He’d thought, on purchasing them, that he’d appear less pale, in comparison. And he’d looked fairly dashing, he thought, in the mirror of the outlet store in the big shopping mall. Deceptions, deceptions. Disappointing. He was aware, here and now, *acutely*, of eyes on him. Such awareness, of *someone watching*, always made him feel heroic, somehow. Majestic. Active. Something about a soul coming untethered, soaring, flying free, and so on. He’d written a poem about it when he was a teenager, one of his first. The point of it being he really enjoyed being watched. There’d been some kind of analogy to masturbation, he remembered. “I’m going for a dip,” he said.

Nona couldn't quite believe she was standing inside her old house. Her feet were planted on the carpet. She'd explored the kitchen on first stepping in and found nothing in the fridge or the pantry beyond a tub of I Can't Believe It's Not Butter!, a loaf of bread, a single opened can of Pabst Blue Ribbon from which a sickly stale smell emanated, and a small container of Jif Extra Crunchy.

Julius's car was in the carport, but there'd been no answer to her knocking and ringing the doorbell. She'd been mostly relieved about that, then worried. She'd forgotten how it felt, that very peculiar Julius-specific worry. She'd fished the spare from its hiding spot, wedged between the back of the mailbox and the wall, and let herself in. Before she'd gotten out of her car, she'd tried Ishmael one more time and been sent to his voicemail. She hadn't left a message.

She had no real concrete idea of why she was doing this, standing there in the living room of her old place, the place she'd, rightly or wrongly, abandoned. It all looked mostly the same. The box television on top of the poker table against the wall. The big VCR on the carpet below. The unframed action-movie posters taped up behind the TV. Julius had always been a Stallone and Willis guy, whereas Nona, for the campiness alone, was firmly in Schwarzenegger's corner. The old cat-piss couch facing it. Julius's dad's La-Z-Boy next to the couch, its black leather cracked along the chair's ass, left arm rest. They'd once tried to fuck on it and the thing had tipped over backwards from all the exertion and Nona, who'd been on top, tumbled over Julius. In a weird and convenient little miracle, her ass had come to settle on his forehead. But that was before all the stuff with Hadrian. Before the phone call and the visit to the morgue. Before all the phone calls she'd been forced to make because Julius wasn't capable of anything beyond

watching those boring universe shows on TV. Before the funeral. He'd been a different guy. The two of them had been different.

She and Julius had lived in a miserable little two-room apartment in Ybor City for about six months before they'd moved down to Fort Lauderdale so Nona could take the Channel Two job. Out of necessity they'd had to sublet the apartment to a couple of Russian immigrants who'd looked out of a different century. One of them chain-smoked. The other had a nose that could sail a boat. They both had ZZ Top beards and looked as if they'd survived the gulag. Ivan and Alexey. They were brothers. Nona and Julius had met them down at the bars in Tampa, where they'd spent a random night together, drinking tequila and coconut rum. They all four nodded furiously at each other. They got trashed. Nona held Julius's hand and smiled at Alexey as he ate a gyro. In the backseat of Julius's Mazda, Ivan cut cocaine with Adderall, which they snorted off an old hardcover copy of *Infinite Jest*. Julius drove over to a construction site he was working at where they all sat and waited for the sun to light up the skeleton of a soon-to-be office building. Ivan kept saying, "This is fun!" to which Alexey would respond "For who?" After the first couple of times, Nona corrected him. "It's for *whom*," she said. "For *whom*." Nona and Julius made out for a while. "This is fun!" Ivan said. "For whom!" Alexey responded. They waggled their beards in unison. They stuck their tongues out. They spoke earnestly in Russian when the sun came up and churned the car's light and seemed to turn everybody in the car into paper. Nona had been shocked and pleased to find her mouth exquisitely, *perfectly*, dry. Her teeth rattled. The rest of her was drenched in sweat. The moment had felt like a baptism. She slept for nearly two days afterwards.

Out of curiosity, Nona headed for the bedroom. Smelled funky in there, like old unwashed clothes. The two windows were blocked out with blankets. The bed sheets were bunched into a facsimile of mountainous terrain. Nona sat on the edge. On the dresser sat a picture of her and Julius at the beach, reclining on striped beach towels, smiling. Julius had pulled off his sunglasses for the photo, revealing too-blue eyes framed by skin untouched by sun. He looked happy. They'd spent five or six hours just sitting in the sand over by the Commercial Pier, drinking Coronas and staring at the water, which broke gently with the little breeze that kicked up sand particles stained with sunscreen. Nona wore a one-piece. She'd chafed. Five or six beers in, she dragged Julius deep into the water, where they'd briefly attempted sex. Julius had freaked at every instance of sea weed. The rest of the beers had gone missing, when they made it back to shore. A chorus of children in swimming trunks stood in the grass singing Christmas songs while Nona and Julius rinsed the sand off themselves. The only other adult around at the time sat on a bench, Corona in hand on knee.

Without quite understanding why, Nona pulled off her blouse. Just an urge. Unclasped her bra. Unzipped her jeans and kicked them off. Slid her underwear down and stepped out. She went into the bathroom, her old bathroom, and ran the water. When it was warm enough, she stepped into the shower. Now more than ever, she couldn't shake the feeling she was living inside a TV show. An HBO drama, was how it felt. The high-brow part. The critically-acclaimed part. The *boring* part. She studied the shower's flesh-colored tiles, flecked with spots of bone-colored tile. Blots of greenish grime bloomed in the caulking. Steam rose around her, almost as if it were coming off or out of her skin. Julius's shampoo's almost-tropical smell, more like the scent of an air freshener, released as she really lathered it in there; its sting on her eyes' creases;

its chemical taste on her tongue. She'd always just used to buy him Irish Spring, and wondered if it'd been a new someone who'd bought this for him, or left it here. She wondered if this new someone was who Julius was with right now, and surprised herself with something a little too much like jealousy.

She stuck her head in the water's falling path and felt the heat bead on her neck, drum on her scalp. The lathered shampoo poured off of her, slid bubbling down her wet torso, spiraling down her calf. The steam felt almost towel-like. When she finished rinsing off, she turned off the water, shook out her hair, and stepped out of the shower stall onto the bath mat's soft fuzz. The mirror'd been cataracted by the length and heat of the shower. She toweled off slowly, deliberately, trying hard to regain the corpse-like state of mind from earlier in the morning, before Hardy's voicemail. She had the thought that maybe Ishmael'd called her in the meantime. Which had her feeling suddenly hopeful. On finishing, she dropped the towel on the tile and swiped her hand across the clouded mirror to reveal a majority of her face, already again obscured, as the fog quickly once more breathed through the glass.

#

Julius Jonah Boggs awoke to the intense and particular cadence of a Revivalist preacher all around him.

'So focus on *things*, Christian,' the preacher's voice exhorted. 'Do *things*, Christian. Not people. Leave them out as best you can. People'll let you down. People will *destroy* you, Christian. You, remember, are *not of this world*. You're *out* of this world. This world's not *in* you. *People* will let you down. *You'll* let people down. Because you're *not* people, Christian. And people *aren't* you.'

He was in a car traveling at a high speed. Slumped in his seat to the point his neck was at an almost unbelievable angle compared to the rest of his body. He'd never actually looked at himself from this view before. He was almost afraid to move.

“He means things in the way of, like, deeds.” Rob was next to him. It was extremely hot. Rob was driving. And too the sound of air rushing like the inside of a conch shell. The stench of, of like, old hamburger. *Extremely* aged beef. He was staring at his crotch, he realized.

“I *love* this tape, man. How you feeling? I love this tape. My pastor passed it on to me. I've just about worn it out.”

Julius Jonah Boggs with much difficulty lifted his head.

“You ever,” Rob said, turning down the volume, “and I'm serious now—you ever mess something up so bad it couldn't be fixed, and known while you were messing up that you were messing up, and still couldn't do anything about it?”

“Where—?”

“And then imagine that thing, before you messed it up, was *the* best thing that ever happened to you. Can you imagine the pain?”

Julius Jonah Boggs was again and increasingly aware of high, high speeds. *Dangerous* high, high speeds: the car's sudden shifts in direction and momentum exerting a kind of centrifugal force in spurts on this, this what's the word *body* of his that still didn't quite, but was again and increasingly with each bang and snap, sort of beginning to feel like his own.

“And so imagine you keep trying to fix that unfixable thing that you knew while you were messing it up that you were messing it up and still couldn't do anything to stop messing it

up. Imagine you keep trying to fix it. Only you can't. Because it's unfixable. Can't be fixed. Not by you, ever."

"How'd I get in this...?" Julius Jonah Boggs said.

"All you want," Rob said, "is to fix it. Listen. You want actually to have never messed it up. But that's not a realistic goal. So the only thing you want in the *world*, is to fix this thing that you can't fix, and that you couldn't keep from messing up in the first place."

He was still he guessed pretty numb. Looking at Rob he could see the guy's right forearm flex in gripping the wheel. An image of Rob came to him, of the guy dramatically unscrewing the top off a pill bottle in the bitch seat in the back of somebody's car—his face all corked up pretending to be having just a ridiculous amount of trouble opening the thing, his elbows flared out at the necks almost of Julius and his brother on the sides of him. Julius Jonah Boggs couldn't remember when or if this'd actually ever occurred.

And then the image came to him of his brother, face down in somebody's swimming pool. He knew for sure this'd occurred, though he hadn't been there to witness it.

"So, what do you do? becomes the question," Rob was saying. "What *can* you do? The answer, is what this guy," here he gestured at the central console, "is saying, is give up. You just *give up*. Completely. Let go and let God, so to speak. The point is to *embrace* that totally and completely abject helplessness. To feel utterly broken. To be past the point of nothingness, essentially, and into even the negative. Every single one of your illusions needs to be shattered. Every. Single. One. *That's* where you start to heal. That's when a certain Someone steps in to save you."

Julius Jonah Boggs sat up and in doing so felt all sorts of new and strange sensations. His brain for one felt like a pile of sand being sifted in somebody's fingers. Rob was hunched the way he'd been hunched on the La-Z-Boy. He looked over and met Julius Jonah Boggs's eyes for a second before turning back to the road and near-swerving to the left, into it looked like the HOV lane.

"You were a brick, man. You were out like a light that's out, JJ. I drove all the way down from Tampa, you know? I didn't want to have to drive all the way back up without at least checking out Had's grave. And I didn't really feel too comfortable doing *that* without you."

Julius Jonah Boggs was seeing stuff, but his brain wasn't telling him too well what he was seeing. The only thing it was telling him is that it was having trouble telling him stuff. And that he was really hot. He couldn't remember anymore how many of the codeine pills he'd taken. How many he was supposed to have taken.

"We're going. We're going to—," was as far as he got before he gave up. Rob didn't make any effort to jump in and help him finish. All the guy said, about a minute later, was "God *knows* us, JJ. Completely. There's no lying to God. The only people we lie to are ourselves. And again sorry about the A/C. And the windows. Car needs the kind of work I can't afford right now."

Julius Jonah Boggs closed his eyes. Then he opened them. Then he thought *fuck it*, and closed them again. At the same time, Rob turned the volume back up.

'...mucked something up so bad it couldn't be fixed,' the preacher was saying, 'and known while you were mucking up that you were mucking up, and *still* couldn't do anything

about it? And Christian,' much softer now, "have you ever been so danged lonely that it felt like *hunger*, that loneliness? Because *I* have, Christian. I have. And let me tell ya.'

#

Logistically, the pouring of the orange juice threatened to be something of a nightmare, but one of the left-handed attorneys had kindly taken the initiative, handing bagel-and-plate to another attorney for safekeeping, and then lining seven medium-sized Dixie cups in a row along the edge of the refreshment table and lifting the carafe to carefully and equitably distribute its contents.

The attorneys' opponents were tucked into a deeply shining mahogany conference table in a nearly identical conference room just a floor down, making tents with their hands.

There wasn't a bun in the jaundiced attorney's wife's oven, she discovered, there inside her two-tiered house shaped she always sort of thought like a filing cabinet within a gated community in Boca Raton where you had to be interviewed twice by the Homeowners Association and then invited to invest in a home.

The CEO was now—to wake himself up and clean house mentally—jerking it.

Vast, lush tracts of the rainforest where the jaundiced attorney had served in the Peace Corps were being razed clandestinely, outside government regulation. Delicate ecosystems were carelessly snuffed out. Anacondas were chopped in half and hung on pikes. The children of the natives who'd nursed him back to health possessed a remarkable dexterity when it came to texting on their cellphones. They were also really awfully poor.

Of the seven attorneys, two'd had extensive dental work which forever changed the way they masticated: instead of cycling, for example, the bagel to the back of the mouth, where the

molars—had they still been there—could mash expertly away, the two attorneys chewed, at least preliminarily, with their front/front-side teeth, the effect of which was the partial parting of their lips to at least indistinctly reveal the chewing process. Both of them were, needless to say, self-conscious eaters, and always stood or sat at an angle to conceal as best as possible what they considered a revolting process.

Dentists are often, quietly, millionaires.

These two were taking the opportunity, while the other five wondered to each other about why their opponents were so late, to get through as much of their bagels as possible. It hadn't occurred to one of them to simply refuse the refreshments. The other was strongly influenced, subconsciously, by peer pressure.

The attorneys began to gravitate toward the center of the room, where the air was a bit cooler. The light in there, as the earth trundled, began to simultaneously brighten and thicken. The overhead fluorescents were flickering on as well, though against the sun's perpetual burn they didn't do much. The room's shadows receded into corners.

The jaundiced attorney's wife's relief was cautious, then euphoric. She called in sick for the day, ran a bath, undressed, and stepped lightly into the tub.

If you'd stood at the far west corner of the conference room with your face pressed up against the pane using to the greatest extent possible your peripheral vision, you might just've been able to make out the traffic heading to and from the beach. The sand of which was jewelizing in the sun's glare, and which just because it happened daily didn't take away from its miraculous nature.

The first to take a cup of OJ was the unmarried attorney. It was really an excuse for him to set down his bagel, on which he'd merely nibbled. He harbored and greatly fed a secret ambition to transform himself drastically, physically, and so, in addition to heading to the gym twice daily, was also carefully dieting and recording the content, processes, times, and instances of failure of the diet. He tended to skip breakfast, which more often than not led to dizziness, lightheadedness, and overindulgence at lunchtime, but had so far—combined with the gym visits, the careful nutritional recordings—resulted in the shedding off of a solid 13lbs in just a two-week (!, thought the others) span of time.

He did his cardio minus the benefit of an MP3 player, because the quiet allowed him to focus more fully on the pain.

There was a woman involved. Or: the *idea* of this woman, actually, was what was technically involved. He liked to fantasize about her big toe in his mouth. He fantasized about the taste of her big toe as he sipped his OJ. After ten minutes of quiet soaking, she began to masturbate.

The unmarried attorney had long since admitted to himself the existence of a kind of hero complex embedded in his personality. He'd learned to live with it and—in his career, but less so in his personal life—to harness it. He felt a secret superiority standing there among the others. Like the jaundiced attorney, he'd spent two years in the Peace Corps, but unlike the jaundiced attorney, you didn't see him going on and on about it.

The attorney who'd not read *Moby Dick* was reminded of Javert, the zealous policeman in Hugo's *Les Miserables*, when interacting with the unmarried attorney. Or actually, to be honest with himself, he was reminded of the Javert played by Geoffrey Rush in the Hollywood

movie based on the book, which he hadn't read and didn't really—unlike *Moby Dick*—have an interest in reading.

He didn't particularly like the unmarried attorney. Nor did, honestly, any of the other attorneys. But, were one forced to tag a lead on the case, the other six, while secretly believing themselves to be it, would unanimously point to him.

The bagels remaining on the refreshment table maintained a rough concentric—you might say *bagel-like*—pattern, but that which was meant to be encircled, the carafe, had been left in a precarious position on the southeastern corner of the table. Five of the attorneys had migrated even farther west, into the coolest part of the room, all the while chatting amiably.

The CEO was approaching climax. Physiologically, arousal means a whole host of complicated things happening in the body simultaneously, in conjunction, and is not all that dissimilar to what happens to us when we seriously contemplate and/or commit violence, against ourselves or others.

Every night, after his second workout, the unmarried attorney stood in the nude in front of the full-length mirror he'd bolted to the back of his bedroom door, flushed the room with light, and examined, in great detail, all of his flaws. His last genuine sexual encounter had taken place seventeen months ago.

The CEO hadn't dreamed in color, like he'd thought.

None of the attorneys, when passing by a mirror or window, could resist looking at it. The taste of metal on the tongue is distinct, unforgettable. They'd spent nearly a half hour waiting in the conference room. They couldn't yet see their own shadows.

“Dr. Wasserman’s office.”

“Patty Melinda I’ve borrowed this child’s cellphone. Put the doctor on.”

“Miss Cixous, I can’t really hear you—”

“Yes yes that’s what happens when one is small. They sound far away. What does this good doctor think of me, do you think Patty Melinda?”

“You’re really hard to hear right now. I think the connection’s bad or something.”

“I’ve got a point to make, damn it!”

“Did you say something about a child?”

“We’re here together, the child and I. We’re on the bus to Tucson.”

“Must be the reception, then. Take a look at the little bars. How many bars do you have, Miss Cixous?”

“I’m not interested in bars. Now listen. The desert’s empty but it’s not Lacking. There’s a difference. I’ve been pondering the issue.”

“This line’s really just to make appointments.”

“Then go on and hang up. It’s what they all do to me anyway.”

“...”

“Go on.”

“Who’s this child? Is it a he or she?”

“The emptiness *fills it up* don’t you see? Patty Melinda. The desert *exists* to be empty. Its’ fulfilling what it’s supposed to do. It’s got a *function*. Get it? To be is to fulfill one’s function. Say one goes there. Then it’s not empty anymore.”

“Really Miss Cixous. I know I’m not supposed to say it but you sound like a crazy person. This child. You’re not—you didn’t, like, *take* her from anybody, did you?”

“*Listen* Patty Melinda. Just listen. If one’s in the desert, then it’s Lacking. Because its function is to be empty. To add to the desert—now listen carefully—to add to the desert, is to make it incomplete. The ontological condition is emptiness. Emptiness. This is a breakthrough.”

“Where are—”

THREE

43:16-44:28. ‘I’m nineteen, okay?’ she said on a Camera 2 close-up. ‘I did therapy for ten years with six different doctors. The last one was famous, supposedly. That’s what he and everybody else said. They’ve put me or tried to on SSRIs, SNRIs, tricyclics, MAOIs. I didn’t ever *not* tell the truth. Not ever. So it’s either nobody believes me that I’m like this, or they do, and they’re scared, and they want to make me more like them. Like you.’ Cut to 1 and centered. Nona’s posture in profile two nearly perfect conjoined ninety-degree angles.

‘Like what? Um,’—on 3, she flipped through her notes for a moment, then looked up, her expression professionally concerned. ‘You said nobody believes that you’re like this. Like what? What’s “this”?’

Quick flip to 2. The girl had closed her eyes, leaned back dramatically, an almost-flop. ‘You people. Make it *sooo* hard. Just to *breathe*, sometimes.’

###

My sister names her boy after the dumbass kid who knocks her up. She lives with Momma, who does most of the taking care of. Half my paychecks from the foreclosure job I set aside for him, because truthfully I feel bad, like maybe it was my fault the kid leaves.

Blackest black, Q says. You ain’t thinking when it happens because you don’t got time to. And Luis says, This is love man.

Like me, Big Hombre's watching. I believe it. I believe he's watching and that's all he's doing.

In three days was supposed to be the kitten bowl. When they set up a pen in the middle of the arena and throw a ball of yarn in there and about twenty kittens all fucked up on catnip go ballistic. Everybody was saying this would be the biggest crowd yet. They were saying twenty thousand this year. Part of our job was to guard the kittens. They were set up in a clubroom. Place where the bigwigs normally chilled. Big comfy-looking leather couches, flat-screen TVs, conference table, kitchen area. The camera, the one I mentioned earlier—that's the one I'm talking about. It's teensy, and it's trained on the three kitten pens in the clubroom. On the screen you just see a bunch of fuzzballs. They climb all over each other. Reminds me actually of the lobster pens you see in supermarkets, except fuzzier. Three times a day somebody comes in to empty the litter boxes and reload the food and water bowls. They do what they call rehearsal around six at night, where they take all the kittens and set them down in the big pen in the arena. The floor of the pen's littered with catnip. Once the kittens eat it all up, somebody chucks in a ball of yarn. Another somebody turns death metal up on the arena speakers, to get the kittens used to loud noises. I saw something in the papers the other day that says this actually makes them go deaf, but I don't know.

I don't understand the choices people make in this life. Like Luis: he's the first to quit. Couple weeks after El Rato Azul. Says it's a sign, and so he sinks all his money into a ring and his girl says yes. His girl's dad sets Luis up in his contracting business. For months, everything seems like it's okay. Luis is happy, the dad's happy, the girl's happy, or so everybody thinks. Then one day, poof, she's gone. Goes off with some other fucker. And Luis, big quiet guy,

harmless guy, guy who understands his size and how it makes people feel and so goes beyond to try to make them feel comfortable around him. Luis ends up strangling his girl's dad to near-death. What happens actually is this. Luis chokes him till he passes out. And thinks he's dead. Minutes later, the guy comes to. Luis is surprised, but again chokes him out. And again, his girl's dad is just passed out. One more time it happens, only this time, mom comes through the door, it's in the kitchen that it's happening, mom comes through the door, sees it, and runs out and calls the cops.

In court Luis says you all can thank love for all this happening. He says, it's a black hole, man, is love. He says, It's insane. He seems his old self by this time. Me and Q sit there while he testifies, and Luis just seems beat down and wise. He knows he's guilty. He knows he's going away. He knows it's all lost. And at a certain point he stops answering the questions they're asking and starts preaching on love. It's a black hole, man, is love, he says. Insane. He looks out at us after he says this, with the strangest look. It's a look, I thought this at the time, and still don't know where it came from. It's a look to burst hearts, is Luis's look. Neon glow hearts. I come to understand that, hey, he's hoping to see his girl. He's hoping to see her one last time before they lock him up. That look.

She said, say Call Me Leviathan. And I did. I said it. Bible says he's a creature with no fear.

Luis gets thirty years. Attempted murder. It's not the first strangling, the prosecutor says. That first one we'll excuse. It was that second and then that third one. That day in court when they take Luis away I think on what Q said. Blackest black. I think that's what Luis sees when he

looks at his girl. What Big Hombre sees when he looks at us. My sister sees when she looks at her son.

Mostly it means something big-powered and complicated.

#

Nona always came back to the moment she and Ishmael met, the fact they each remembered it so differently. Just a week or two after her twenty-eighth. She'd been *oh-so-newly* single—she remembered that being a thing her friends ripped her on, like, repeatedly, within the “What took you so long?” genre of rips—stoned on a friend's regs, drunk off shots of Wild Turkey. She'd shoved her way through a crowd of silhouettes to get to a raised bar that looked built from obsidian. Polished black to the point she could see her reflection in it. The milky, echoing black of turned-off TV screens. Which, along with her advanced state of inebriation, explained why she made the mistake of resting her elbows in a puddle of what smelled overwhelmingly like a wicked combo of vodka and tequila. *Cheap* tequila. And, of course, zero napkins in sight, and her trying to flag down a bartender whose eyes were already papercuts and searching only for hands attached to Visas and MasterCards, and who probably couldn't hear her anyway over what Nona could only think to call the *NOISE* ballooning from too many unseen speakers. Other bar patrons had been shoving and jostling alongside her, groping at her, offering her drinks. She'd had her ass grabbed. She'd felt somebody tug her bra strap through her blouse, snap it against her back. Somebody else asked to bum a cigarette. Then some weed. Then a light. Nona, in her mind's weird lamination, had been feeling increasingly and desperately paranoid, trying to stake out her spot there at the bar by leaning far over it, and *again* into the vodka-tequila pool, this time dipping her borderline D-cup tits(!) into it. The whole situation had

become, in a hurry, so unbelievably...*stupid*. Like a sitcom. Like the stupid logic of major network sitcoms. From somewhere, somebody said, "Your nips just walked on water." She'd cupped her tits and whipped around to try and catch whoever was fucking with her. At which point some asshole slipped in behind her and stole her place at the bar. More shoving. Cussing the *fuck* out of the guy who took her spot. *Pleading* with the bartender's back. She'd felt about as low, there at the bar, as she'd ever felt.

That's when Ishmael had appeared. And he had, just like that, *appeared*. And in appearing, he'd offered her a napkin. Just one. A single square. Waved it like surrender. Extended it toward her. When she didn't move, he placed it gently over her left tit, which soaked through.

That was her take. His take: he'd been about to wrap the napkin around his PBR when *she* came up to *him*. Instead of using the napkin as a makeshift koozie he'd sacrificed it, for her. Recounted in his almost-Jeff-Goldblum voice the way Nona had ripped the thing from his hands like she'd been waiting for him all along, and how it, predictably, hadn't been enough to dry off any part of her, so Ishmael'd offered to help her shove through the crowd and over to the bathroom. He'd offered to put her on his shoulders, chicken fight-style. He'd offered to hold her blouse, if she just couldn't bear to wear it anymore. But instead, he claimed, she pressed herself so suddenly hard against him that he'd stepped back for balance, and she'd fallen into him, laughing. She'd stained the shit out of his black Gucci polo.

Sitting there on Julius's bed, pulling her stockings back on, Nona thought of this. She tried to extract meaning from it, as she always did. Ishmael at the bar, the way Nona remembered: hairline receding in roiling waves it looked like, with a face that could be described

as generic if just barely puffy, or mostly featureless, or symmetrical, or boring, or the type of face you *don't* look at twice, black shirt concealing the man breasts she'd come to know later that night, crisp jeans that looked ironed, extending an arm—around the wrist of which was a silver Cartier that just at that moment caught the glare of one of the club's rolling spotlights in a way that'd come to feel in the intervening months, like, *mythopoeic*—and pinched between his fingers: a napkin. For her.

Nona compared and contrasted the pros and cons of Ishmael and Julius mentally, until it made her tired. Thought of how she'd begun the day in one man's bedroom, and now found herself here, in another man's bedroom. Realized, with a little bit of shame, that she'd never actually lived on her own, save a brief year of interlude in a dorm. What did that say about her? She stood and numbly checked around the room and in the bathroom to make sure things were as she found them. She exited and locked the door behind her and replaced the key behind the mailbox, and then dug in her purse for her phone. When she turned it back on, she found she had two new messages. The first a sighing, defeated monologue from Hardy, letting her know he and the other staffers had been evacuated and decamped to a bar down the street and that on TV which she probably already knew was some idiot preacher carrying on about the sanctity of life and blah blah blah and something he was calling logos, and that this dude had pretty much whipped the crowd there into a frenzy to the point they all looked feral and violent and ready to storm the building. He said hell, come on and find them at the bar. He said listen, we'll drink and drink to the end and god knows where this Thoth girl is, he'd just remembered she was supposed to be there at the Whale now sure as he was looking at his watch and if she could maybe find a

way to get a hold of the girl, that might be a good thing. Hardy was still speaking when the message cut off.

The second message was a voice, a creepy E.T.-type voice. It said, “Come home, please, sweetheart.” A number she didn’t recognize. Nona thought it might be Ishmael, fucking with her. Her heart lifted at this thought. She tried his cell, but again got voicemail. She tried the home phone. It rang and rang. Finally she decided to just do as the message requested, and go home. She hoped, and confessed to herself that yes, she did indeed hope, that Ishmael was home. As she started up the Kia and turned up the radio, she took one last long look at Julius’s house. She snapped a mental picture. She decided she’d give him a call later, to see how he was doing, but very quickly, a portion of her quietly said come on, now, she knew she wouldn’t do that.

#

Next to him Rob was like sing-humming and pretty clearly vibrating like Had beneath the grass beneath their sneakers had stuck his hands up against his coffin’s walls and started shaking it. The image, or one like it, might have once upon a time driven Julius Jonah Boggs insane with what he always felt was inadequately termed, *grief*—your brain lights up and your chest constricts because your battery-powered central organ feels like it’s leaking acid and even your toes feel, like, bruised, or else like you’ve been walking, just walking and walking to god knows where. Doesn’t make sense, to call it *grief*, thought Julius Jonah Boggs. Doesn’t make sense to call it anything at all, actually. Leave it blank. Wordless. Let the silence make known the sheer paradoxical immensity of the emotions you’re forced to make sense of. Death makes no sense, is all the sense it makes. (What a *profound sentiment*, said the quiet orthogonal voice in his head, with much sarcasm.) Rob’s attempts to stand here and sing-hum and in a moment Julius Jonah

Boggs just knew to speak some bullshit about God and infinite love and *purpose* while meanwhile he himself tuned it all out rifling through memories of him and Had as happy little dudes—it was perverse, the whole goddamned thing. Senseless.

Better to be silent, he thought, with no small satisfaction.

“Better to be silent,” he then went ahead and said to Rob.

“He speaks!” Rob said.

The sky was whisper-colored, densely light gray, and stunk like rain. Far as Julius Jonah Boggs could tell, they two were the only two in this vast green cemetery, save of course the numberless dead. Like in the car, Julius Jonah Boggs did not feel much Pain at all. Mostly he still felt numb, though the codeine’s physical effects were beginning to wear off—he could now move his feet in a pathetic little shuffle, which after Rob’d pulled him from the car and wrapped his arm around his shoulder for balance, is how they’d gone the approximately twenty paces from road to grave.

Rob began to speak, softly, of God and infinite love and *purpose*, that word specially emphasized. Julius Jonah Boggs, who in the car in his fluid dreamy state had made peace with the obvious fact that Rob was going to do whatever it was Rob came to do, regardless of Julius Jonah Boggs’s thoughts and actions, began to rifle through memories of him and Had as happy little dudes, but could not hit on anything, until—

the chase around the dining table, him seven, Hadrian five, him chasing Had, chasing and chasing, the two of them running in circles, and Julius Jonah Boggs becoming increasingly dizzy and tired but refusing to give up the chase, because Had won at so many of the silly made up games they played already—the memory softly hued, frayed around the edges, like memories in

movies, and here the idle thought, interrupting the memory: does it happen in movies like that because it happens like that in real life, or is it vice versa, real life taking on a filmic quality, the bulk of us auteurs, aware of it at least on some low level—and yeah, fuck, Julius Jonah Boggs was pretty much cognizant of the fact that all these silly little games were created by Had, the rules and skillsets required skewed unabashedly in Had’s direction, and why did Julius Jonah Boggs continue to play? Was it a spitefulness, an ongoing attempt to prove Had wrong, humiliate him at his own game? Or was it—this thought shudder-inducing, though not outwardly so, Julius Jonah Boggs still too numb for it—because *he liked to lose*?

—“Beyond the sun, I guess,” Rob was saying, “out in the, what’s it called, not universe, but what’s it called, cosmos—I’m thinking, you know, that fuck it, Had’s out there seeing things we can’t fathom”—

in circles, around, around, around, until it was almost indistinguishable, who was chasing whom, Had screaming even at five years old about chaos theory and infinite loops and strange attractors and $X^2 + C = X!$ and Julius Jonah Boggs getting frustrated, irritated, formulating a plan, which he then goes ahead and executes: slowing to the point Had was gaining on him, around and around the dining table, hours before Thanksgiving, the relatives yet to show up, Mom in the kitchen monitoring anxiously the turkey’s progress because she’d fucked it up in years past, Dad elsewhere, where was Dad, he didn’t know, around and around, Julius Jonah Boggs slowing, slowing, and then: boom! turns around as Had’s just caught up, shoves a surprised Had backwards, and watches with great pleasure as Had goes flailing, totally and appealingly off-balance, Julius Jonah Boggs has finally won one of these stupid games, Had

flailing, and then the second boom! and subsequent crack! as the back of Had's head bangs against the edge of a cherry wood magazine rack—

JULIUS JONAH BOGGS

Well like, hey buddy. Seems sort of like I was attempting to do some serious and permanent damage.

HADRIAN

Concurred. Agreed. Ratified. This guy right here's a shitdick.

JULIUS JONAH BOGGS

Me?

JULIUS JONAH BOGGS

Now, OK, what exactly—what *exactly*—went through that bonehead of mine in the aftermath?

HADRIAN

Tell us. Enlighten us. What in the hell were you thinking, asshole?

MOM

You know what, I did always wonder. Hon, I'd look at you
and I'd wonder. Why to your brother like that?

JULIUS JONAH BOGGS

(bewildered) Mom?

JULIUS JONAH BOGGS

Guys, Jesus. I got this. I'm handling it. Julius. It's a
sociological question. It's just curiosity, is what I'm saying.
Nobody's trying to nail me for anything. So tell us: Had's
falling. What am I thinking, while this is happening?

JULIUS JONAH BOGGS

I don't think I'm thinking anything at all.
Ohshitohshitohshit, probably, like that.

JULIUS JONAH BOGGS

Kid's laying, literally, in a pile of his own blood. Knocked
the fuck out by a magazine rack. I'm standing there, and
I'll tell you what I was thinking. I was thinking: this is

foreshadowing. I was thinking: this is symbolic. Cain and Abel.

HADRIAN

Cain and Abel. Abel and Cain.

DAD

It's a good point. The archetype and all. The story being old old *old*, son. Carl Jung, the whole, I think it's termed, collective unconscious.

JULIUS JONAH BOGGS

Jealousy. Because Had was the smart one. And the charming one. And the cute one. Because everybody loved Had.

JULIUS JONAH BOGGS

No. How could I? I was seven years old. No way. No.

JULIUS JONAH BOGGS

How could I? Pedestrian response. He's falling backwards, and I know damn well the magazine rack is there. Damn

well. Admit it: I wanted to see it happen. I wanted to know how it would feel, to cause that much damage. So tell me: how did it feel? I do believe I've been avoiding this question.

DAD

It's about organizing experience. Narrative structures. Did you know, and this'll blow your minds, son. You know, on paper, going forward looks the same as moving laterally. They're both a line across the page.

MOM

(rolls eyes dramatically) God, Sherman. Come on. Leave them be.

JULIUS JONAH BOGGS

How did it feel?

HADRIAN

Tell us already.

JULIUS JONAH BOGGS.

I don't know. How it felt. I don't know.

JULIUS JONAH BOGGS

When he drowned, how did it feel?

JULIUS JONAH BOGGS

I don't know. I don't know.

JULIUS JONAH BOGGS

When Winona left?

JULIUS JONAH BOGGS

It hurt. Pain.

JULIUS JONAH BOGGS

You know what happens to Cain, after he kills Abel?

HADRIAN

He lives. For a long, long time.

JULIUS JONAH BOGGS

(sighing) Yeah. Yes. Thanks, Had. Thank you. He lives for
a long, long time. He lives and lives and lives and lives.

#

On return from his lovely little dip in the ocean, the famous poet found, where the Mexican-American transsexual artist had once been, just her towel, citrusy green with thin blue lines penciled along lengthwise, and dimpled where her ass once sat. This intrigued him. He glanced around, his gaze surreptitious, knowing, profoundly cool. She hid and she watched, he felt. He hitched up his board shorts and adjusted his posture and cupped a hand over his brow. He stood peering, but mostly posing, as if she were painting him, as if he were in fact inside a work of art, his gently pulsing body aglisten, his ekphrastic blood, its movement through cave systems of capillaries, arteries, veins, carnal complexity, all of it temporary, of course, steeped in time, his heart the inner sanctum, the sacred, four-chambered, a statement against the easy holiness of three.

The sun's irradiance, those rays, those waves, licked his skin.

Ra picks his nose and burns up the wings of Icarus.

Apu-Inti fingers Pachamama, who squirts and grows the grasses, the crabgrasses of Florida lawns.

He looked around, and could not find the artist. He recalled once, as a child in Rome, Georgia, losing his younger sister. At a summer carnival. There'd been all the typical rides, the typical booths. A large, multicolored Ferris wheel. Dumpsters and port-o-potties edged the vast lot. The fragrance of grease, and beer, and, most pungent, baked humanity, hot sweaty flesh. He and his sister had been participants in a game. He'd been instructed to play the game, while his

mother wandered off, her new boyfriend in tow, a dull man the poet recalled, balding, fleshy, in genuine, serious thrall to his mother, who was flighty, strange-tempered, often paranoid—frustrated, the poet understood in hindsight, with her life’s mosaic, all those pastel little dots and details, bland and yet complicated, maddeningly so. She just wanted to have a little fun. So she dragged her boyfriend away and left the poet and his younger sister to fish dimes from piles of sand. A thousand, they’d been informed. There were a thousand dimes in those ten or so piles of sand. A great crowd of kids stood along the bounds, plotting and strategizing, waiting for the whistle that would signal the start of the game. And what happened? The poet, not interested and maybe even a little turned off at the thought of scuffles, of digging and base greed (the symbolism of this game was not lost on him, even then, as a twelve-year-old), wandered off to the snow pile, to play in and slide down the mountain of snow imported, went the rumor among the kids, from Alaska. He’d left his sister to tussle with all the others. And when he’d done with the snow, when his shorts were soaked through and his butt was numb and his nose was shining red, he’d wandered around until he found his mother on a picnic bench with the boyfriend, the two of them chatting, sharing something greasily aromatic, French fries or funnel cake. Beers, too. His mother had, as he tucked himself into the bench, placed a hand on his head and said, pleasantly, absently, “Where’s your sister.” More statement than question. The poet recalls her voice, light-light, a sweetly chirping bird stuck in her throat. Her nighttime lullabies, when the poet was still young enough to demand them, were thrillingly soft and complex, the deepest darkest things spun from her lips in the nicest way. It’s only now, standing on this beach, that he realizes she’d been singing folk songs. Where she’d picked them up, he didn’t know. But that same voice had said, “Where’s your sister,” that afternoon at the carnival, and the poet—and this

is what he wanted to remember, not the frantic search that followed, nor the enlisting of fellow carnival goers, each addition compounding the poet's shame, and not where they'd eventually found his sister, beyond the Dumpsters, playing with the seven dimes she'd dug from the sand piles, but this, this—the poet had with a jolt recollected his sister's existence there on the picnic bench, the fact that he *had* a sister, a real live being who had not existed for him just seconds earlier. That sensation had been, still is, startling in a way the poet cannot articulate.

He broke off his pose and glanced around. He scanned the bright horizon, worked his eyes panoramically. A woman northwest, just behind and left, if he were watching the water, said, "You're looking for your girlfriend?" Her face shone like currency, or more like, the poet thought, a balloon rubbed with oil. She was eager. She faced the water, belly on sand, up on her elbows, enough for him to see into the hot dark between her boobs. Boobs? Breasts. Tits. No elegance in the vocabulary for the female body. He looked at her cleavage. He said, "You see her?"

"Seen her," said the woman. "Packed up except the towel. Went back that way." Gestured with a thumb, a hitcher's gesture. She wore a one-piece, night sky blue. On shifting, the back straps lifted, revealing tan lines. Another reminder of Mom. Or maybe she was simply on his mind—he recalled her Sunday afternoon tanning sessions, the beach chair in the backyard, beyond the clothesline: she in sunglasses, lovely, *luminescent*, in fact, paging through her potboilers. Out the window he stared and stared. He liked most the obstructed view, the view where, if he stood and looked from a certain angle, he might only see an ankle, her left foot, her toes wriggling at predictable intervals.

"You're staring," said the woman on the beach.

“Back that way, you said?” said the poet, refocusing.

“Back that a way, uh huh.”

He lifted and folded the towels, picked up the Gatorade and the half-empty case of Coors Light, and trudged off in the direction they’d agreed on, thanking the woman as he passed.

#

“What.”

“Wow. That’s how you answer the phone.”

“Listen, I got Julius waiting in the car. Whatever it is you need just you know. I’m not telling you you’re not a bad person.”

“Do my best baby voice. Somebody’s a little upset, huh? Little Robbie wobbie’s throwing a big boy temper tantrum, huh?”

“I’ve been thinking, Suzy. I think it’s that time.”

“Oh stop being dramatic. You’re selfish, you know that? Wanting everything. Nobody on this earth has everything to give.”

“...”

“Come on Rob. Come on little Robbie wobbie. You know Mike is in the next room. The next room. I’m risking this just to hear your voice.”

“What is it you want from me.”

“OK. Fine. Robert the Sour Patch Kid. I just wanted to say if you’ve seen this thing on TV.”

“What thing.”

“What thing. The mob. The protesters. In Pompano.”

“Yeah, saw something about it this morning.”

“The pastor giving his grand spiel on CNN. The frenzy. They’re threatening to storm the building. People think the girl’s inside. There’s riot police there.”

“Why do I need to know this? I’m in Tamarac. I’m nowhere near.”

“I don’t know. I guess I just thought it was interesting. I guess I just thought we like to share interesting things with each other.”

“Suzy you’re gonna have to come right out and say what it is you want.”

“It’s not obvious?”

“Goddamn it don’t be coy.”

“I want you. I want Rob. But I want Mike too. And the house and the stability.”

“...”

“You’re not going to congratulate me on my bravery and honesty and self-awareness, I’m sensing.”

“You know what happens after the pastor gets up and leaves the girl to think about what he said?”

“I don’t like having these sorts of conversations. You know that.”

“Seriously though. I’m asking. You know what happens?”

“What happens?”

“Nothing. Not a thing. It all just stays the same. She stays there, still paralyzed inside her doubts.”

“And that’s how the story ends.”

“The boyfriend comes in after that.”

“The boyfriend.”

“The boyfriend, yeah.”

“And what’s the boyfriend do? Mike’s standing here in the doorway by the way. He says hi. It’s Rob, honey. Mike says tell Rob I say hi.”

“The boyfriend does what the pastor did. He says to her sweetheart. What’s going on here. We’re all sick about this thing you’re doing.”

“And of course there’s no response.”

“No response, yeah. And but the boyfriend’s been briefed. He knows the situation. He’s not a Christian guy. Was, as a kid, but lost his faith in college. Works at the grocery store with her.”

“What’s he look like?”

“I don’t know. Ryan Reynolds. Tall guy. Smart guy. They’re the couple that when they walk down the street everybody’s jealous of how good they look but also everybody’s in awe for the same reason, and then when they’re gone everybody’s kicking themselves for being in awe because it’s just physical looks.”

“Sounds like they complicate things, as a couple.”

“Let’s call it enrichment. Let’s call it they make people aware and ashamed but also thankful for beauty.”

“The pastor on TV. I forgot to say, Rob. It’s a former protégé of Reverend Hollins. Went through the whole program and everything.”

“Listen close, now.”

“You hear me? The guy’s a former protégé of Reverend Hollins. Inciting what looks like it’s about to be a riot.”

“Listen closely.”

“What gives me the feeling the boyfriend’s going to say something smart.”

“Just the opposite. The boyfriend leans in and whispers in her ear, Make a decision. Like that. He says Make up your mind.”

“Seems reasonable.”

“Right. But remember the girl’s already made up her mind. Remember the problem’s that her decision’s not jiving with her belief.”

“She’s of two minds.”

“She’s of two minds. She’s got two ideas that don’t make sense together, and she’s holding them together in her head.”

“Paradox. We know how that feels.”

“And while the boyfriend’s there, saying to her Make up your mind, she starts thinking about how, hey, maybe it’s kinda cool to do that. To hold two things in her head that don’t make sense together, but to trust in both of them.”

“And so: hope. Despite that there’s no clear resolution.”

“She thinks I can be scared of Hell. But I can also decide and believe it don’t exist. In other words, she becomes aware of the whole dilemma, in a way she wasn’t before.”

“She’s of three minds.”

“Right. I was gonna say exactly that. You stole the words out of my mouth.”

“Maybe I’m just finishing your thoughts.”

“Story’s not done.”

“Well, finish it.”

“I gotta go. I’ll finish it some other time maybe. Remind me. You know, today’s the first day you ever called me.”

“Bingo.”

“Julius keeps falling asleep. I think something’s wrong with him.”

“Well, I mean. From what you said.”

“I’m just gonna take him home. Let him sleep off whatever he’s sleeping off.”

“K.”

“K.”

“...”

“...”

“*Jesus*. You want me to say it. Mike is *in the house*.”

“I guess yeah. I was hoping. But what I was expecting is what you just gave me. So OK. Thanks for meeting expectations. I’ll talk to you later maybe.”

“Oh the snarkiness. I love the snarkiness. It’s your most attractive quality.”

“I’m here to please. I’ll talk to you later maybe.”

#

He had not had time to grow anxious or irritated. She’d deprived him of this, of emotional complexity. The Mexican-American transsexual mechanical artist had been among the churchgoers, in the midst of so much sanctified flesh. They’d ushered him in, too. Hands on back. Arms lifting the towels, the Coors Light, the Gatorade, so that, when he arrived at its

pulsing center, he carried nothing but himself. Impossible not to think of the womb, in this situation, of emerging *into* the womb. A poor metaphor, but. The artist sat up on the wooden picnic table, feet on the bench. She sipped from a plastic Solo cup of something. She, in her bikini, in the shade beneath the trees: a *vision*. Where had that phrase come from? The grill adjacent, glowing. Hot dogs in a neat line above the embers, slit lengthwise like his dad used to do.

He stood perplexed, having arrived, as he had, suddenly. The churchgoers seemed to the poet like cardboard cutouts, wreathed in flesh, arranged strategically to give the appearance of movement, of activity, of a party. One of them placed a hand on his shoulder. Sharp-featured, this man. Father-featured. Time felt complexly layered, in here, beneath the trees. Lots of memory linkups. In the distance, the water shimmied. Light popped along the surface. The churchgoer with the hand on the poet's shoulder said, "We've been hearing all about your project, from your friend here."

The artist grinned, shifted. "Mike's a systems engineer," she said, nodding to the churchgoer.

"No, no. It's just a fancy of mine. Networks and all. You ever see those videos where they pour hot aluminum inside ant holes? That kind of thing. What I do is install and repair A/C units."

"Would you like a burger, hon?" asked a little old lady to his right.

"Hey man. Grabbing one of your beers." This from an unidentified voice.

"We have hotdogs too," said the little old lady.

Meanwhile, Mike and the artist gazed at each other. Leeringly, if such a word exists. Mike's sharp features softened considerably, became heavy, absorbed a weariness. A look that seemed to say, what I know, I *know*. The artist's eyes shone through. Green. His sister's eyes. He was surrounded, he was beginning to realize, by his family.

"I'll take a burger," he said.

"Immortality," said Mike. "The way we think of it, it's a crock. To get it takes a shift in thinking. Systems. Networks. This is what I figured out. Evolution. Change. Things change. Stuff changes. Ever hear the phrase, 'Change is what doesn't change'?"

The artist nodded along, in thrall. It wasn't clear to the poet whom Mike was speaking to.

The little old lady wore what looked like a muumuu, the material thin and white. Beneath it, clearly, was a bikini.

On the bench, an analog radio spoke softly, a kind of white noise.

"It's the ant hole in the ground that's immortal, not the shiny aluminum structure on display in the gallery. It's the deep dark thing we can't see, that's always changing, being added to, renovated, explored."

"My objection being of course that once you pour the aluminum in and kill all the ants and dig up the nest, it sort of refutes this theory of immortality," said the artist.

"OK think of it this way. These hot dogs. Before they were hot dogs they were meat trimmings. Beef. Pork. Before that? They were cows and pigs. Say somebody eats the hot dog. Chews it up, digests it and, excuse my language, poops it out. That's change. That's all the same thing in different, wildly different, stages. That's reincarnation. A network of actions and time.

Kill. Trim. Reformulate. Package. Buy. Cook. Chew. Swallow. Digest. Void. Thread the matter through the process.”

“My objection here,” the artist said, with what sounded like glee to the poet, “being that reincarnation refers to stages of *life*. All of these are, in fact, stages of death. Your metaphors are flawed. Flawed!”

“And I’m saying, bunny, that a shift in thinking is required. Life and death are not useful categories, at least how we define them.”

“This is how he talks,” the artist said. A wry look, offered up to the poet, who was, simultaneously, being handed an undercooked burger on a paper plate. No bun.

“It’s this phrase, ‘increasing complexity,’” Mike said, unfazed. “That’s immortality. It’s language, is what it is. All those lovely deployed words. The Internet. Think of it. What you can see is the surface language. Beneath that, HTML. JavaScript. C++. Hundreds of programming languages undergird the technosocial experience. You speak these languages without even being aware that they exist.”

Mike stopped, breathed. The poet found himself in awe, utterly. To him, Mike turned, said, “Tell us about your project. I’d like to hear about it from the creator himself.”

The poet spoke. About his painstaking attempts to learn and speak a chemical language. About the short verse he intended to translate into a DNA sequence, and implant—or rather, a team of scientists, at his behest, would do this—into *Deinococcus radiodurans*, a polyextremophilic bacterium that can survive the strangest, and most hostile, environs, including, most significantly, the surface of the sun and the vacuum of space. He was careful to describe its berrylike shape, to avoid any phallic noise from the artist’s corner. He spoke, eloquently he felt,

of the bacterium's unique capability to both archive the poem and respond to it, to *create another poem*, as the genome itself evolves. Of poetry's fusion with life, and with science, of language theories, of metaphysics and pataphysics, of eschatology, of the teleological implications of the project's success. He spoke, too, of the decade-long struggle to finish the project, of setbacks, of funding issues, of odd anxious dreams, of periods of celibacy, of megalomania and neuroses and expensive therapy, of doubt so crippling it manifested physically, as nocturia, and acne, and vision problems, of the codename given to the project, *Icarus*, and his own personal codename, *Daedalus*, for the father who designed and built the wings and the Labyrinth. He did his best to explain without over-explaining, to interpret the project's immense ambition modestly, but not falsely so. He tried to convey the proper degree of pride in himself, in the idea, in the project's progress. He quoted the poem he'd written that would eventually be encoded in the bacterium's DNA. He was aware of elaborate gestures, of flourishes of arms and hands, of contorted expressions. Himself as performer, performance. He'd spent many nights in bed, thinking about just this speech, composing it, wondering whom he might first attempt it on.

He fell silent.

Mike said, "Whoa."

The poet poked at his burger.

Mike said, "I think we're singing the same tune."

"What about the idea that DNA is already a poem?" the artist asked. "What about the idea that when you write or when I build, we're in some way coming to terms with our own deaths? What happens to the poignancy of that idea if you write a poem that never dies?"

“Already exists,” said Mike. “Logos. He was the Word. Living embodiment of language itself. This is what I mean by networks of actions and time. We believe in this idea of Logos,” here, he gestured at the other churchgoers, lost inside their own conversations, laughing, chewing, touching, aging. “And even if you take it as a metaphor, which I promise I’m not trying to convert anybody. Even if you take it as a metaphor, you have to admit it’s a metaphor that’s been around a while. If you take it as a metaphor, which OK, I’m a logical guy, I can do these thought experiments, I can hold these contradicting ideas in my head. What our poet friend is doing, if you take it as a metaphor,” placing a hand again on the poet’s shoulder, who felt, even as he resisted this feeling, gratefulness and a kind of sheepish pride, like a little boy who’s just pleased the schoolteacher, “is *literalizing* the metaphor.”

“This conscious that looks death in the face is another name for freedom,” said the artist, making clear via expression that she was quoting someone.

“Our friend here’s project, should it succeed, would be doing unheard-of things as far as rethinking categories. Life and death. Signifiers and signifieds. I’m not trying to convert anybody. But we at Logos are let’s just say *interested*, and following closely, what you’re doing.”

Again this feeling. Of being watched. And again: an inflation of self. No longer the rattling little thing inside a too-big frame. Instead: an expansion beyond the bounds, a soulish extension, a reaching out. The artist watched Mike the A/C repairman with lively awareness, a shrewd, judging expression, and the poet found himself watching her watching.

#

“It’s stupid,” Hardy said, pausing to gulp down the rest of his Bud Light. The two of them, he and Nona, sat up on uncomfortable stools there at the bar, whereas the rest of the crew—the cameramen, the sound guys, even the editors, who typically hid away like groundhogs, content and secretive in their little sweat-fragrant hovels—sat around a table with two nearly full pitchers of something urine-colored, along with a few baskets of wings. This was the scene Nona’d witnessed, on walking in. It’d been a snap decision: visit Hardy, check in, receive for her trouble, hopefully, a recounting of the events which might perhaps shed light on her own yo-yoing around Fort Lauderdale—and too, there was the bonus of keeping Ishmael waiting, since he’d kept her waiting all morning and afternoon. The pettiness of her reasoning didn’t sit well, but Nona just didn’t give two shits anymore. After Hardy’d tossed off his beer, he signaled the bartender and then turned to Nona and belched.

“How pleasant,” she said.

Hardy then went ahead and wiped his mustache with the back of his hand, and wiped the hand against his trousers.

“It’s stupid,” Nona said, prompting.

“It’s stupid,” he said, gesturing at the TV bolted high up on the wall behind the bar, just above the bar’s mirror, into which Nona couldn’t help glancing every few seconds. The TV was set to CNN, showing live aerial footage ostensibly, but it continued to look as it always had, the crowd, from such high vantage, a twitchy mass, not storming the building but not dispersing, either.

“Why’s it stupid?” Nona asked, realizing Hardy was again waiting on her prompt.

“It’s a fucking empty building. And it’s a fucking canceled show.”

“You mean.”

“Got the call just a few minutes before you showed up. Secretary to the CEO. Said in a stern voice the CEO thought he’d made himself clear, which he hadn’t ever by the way, and why are we pulling this stunt.”

Nona grimaced warrior-like in the mirror, as Hardy grimaced into the beer the bartender set in front of him.

‘Stunt,’ she said, watching herself.

Hardy pulled, set the beer down, swiveled around to face the crew. “Us PR masterminds. Guy thinks we leaked and engineered the protest ourselves to show him how wonderfully controversial our show would be.”

‘Did we?’ Her face in the mirror expressionless. She thought of Ishmael, assessed the possibility that maybe it was him behind it. Whether he was that vindictive.

“Did we she asks. Did we.”

In the mirror, Nona watched as one of the editors, hunched and mousy, looking like some villain’s sidekick, nibbled away at a wing, occasionally pausing to consider the logistics of the next bite.

“The way I see it is let them stay,” said Hardy. “It won’t be me updating anybody on the cancellation. Let them stay pissed. Let them rush the building. Let them trample the cops. Now that we’re out of there. You ever get a hold of the girl?”

‘No,’ Nona said, enraptured, gazing via mirror at the editor, whose name she couldn’t remember.

“Maybe it was your boyfriend,” Hardy said. Swiveled around again, very dramatic, searched Nona’s face in the mirror, she in return searching his face.

‘It was a hell of an idea,’ he said, sighing. ‘I’ll give that to your fella. Probably no way he would torpedo an idea like that, no matter how unpleasant his exit.’

Nona slid off the stool, with reluctance tore her gaze away from the mirror. Only when she did this, when her eyes settled on Hardy’s surprisingly fatigued skin, did she feel like she’d again stepped foot inside somebody’s TV set.

“I’m going home,” she said. “Goodbye, Adam.”

‘We’ll trace it,’ he told her. ‘Might take some time, but we’ll figure it out. However it started. We’ll trace it.’

As she moved toward the exit, she waved to the crew and one of the sound guys waved her over. Had what she’d always found interesting facial hair, a Fu Manchu. Looked like a pair of single quotes framing his mouth.

She offered what she hoped was a friendly yet hurried look on approach, said, “Listen, it was great getting to work with you guys. You’re all pros.”

“What about the girl,” Fu Manchu said.

This knocked her off her toes, a little bit. “You know where she is?”

With creepy synchronicity, Fu Manchu and the two editors looked past her, at the TV. One of the cameramen took the opportunity to lift a wing from the basket, dip it in ranch, start to chew on it. Nona couldn’t remember any of their names, but comforted herself: they’d only ever worked together the one time, on the girl’s preliminary interview.

“Take this,” said Fu Manchu. Instead of him handing her anything, it was the mousy editor who very carefully removed a disc from the computer bag at his feet and held it out to her.

At the bar, Hardy called out to her, “If you’re leaving, then leave. If you’re staying, then goddamn it order a drink and set your ass down.”

“What is it?” Nona asked the editor.

“Outtakes,” said Fu Manchu. To punctuate, an odd little shoulder-shiver gesture, like he’d just been blasted with cold wind, or listened to somebody tell a gross story. Nona had no read on what the hell it was supposed to mean.

“Of the interview?” she asked. Received a nod in response.

“Oh lookee,” Hardy called. “Something’s finally happened.”

They all looked to the screen. On it, the crowd had rushed the police line. Met subsequently with teargas canisters and rubber bullets, reported a frightened sounding female voice, off camera. Nevertheless: “This is all live,” she reminded them. The line was overrun. The protesters entered the building. Bodies strewn in the parking lot, smoke, a horrified silence. It had taken all of two minutes.

#

For the briefest moment, unbeknownst to them, the six attorneys chewing on bagels synchronized their mastication.

#

Of course she watched in horror as the protest turned riotous and grim, precipitated, the woman was certain, by Pastor’s speech. What he’d said, she didn’t know. Lacey paid no mind to the events on television, engaged intently on completing the tasks of a game she’d recently

developed herself: with a white Glad® ForceFlex® Stretchable Strength Drawstring Kitchen Trash Bag, she would, with much deliberation, gather and bag her strewn toys in peculiar and hierarchical order, giving the woman to believe, with various noises and gestures, that such ordered collection was necessary and correct. The woman dared not return the TV's sound, fearful it might disturb her granddaughter, but she watched the looped footage again and again, reading the graphic that ran along screen's bottom: Protest Turns Violent, Rioters Storm Building, 13 Injured.

Time, so multidimensional just moments ago, so restrictive and networked and infused with unhappiness, now receded, hushed, left the woman with a single concern: was Pastor alright?

Was Pastor alright?

Lacey toddled around the living room, leaning down to grasp and examine and either discard or bag her toys. She began, once all the toys were gathered, to integrate other things: Pastor's Florida-themed coasters, stacked on the lampstand against the dividing wall, a Yankee Candle Luau Party candle, a warped deck of playing cards, a *Better Homes and Gardens*, a remastered Blu-ray of *It's a Wonderful Life*, a Paper Mate pen—in this order, with concealed but unassailable logic, Lacey had placed these objects in her bag.

Was Pastor alright?

In went the woman's HTC One smartphone, in went her sandals, left by the front door, in went framed family photographs, in went the unread mail, in went the OXO Tot sippy cup, the coffee table books on housekeeping, the cherubic paperweight, more Paper Mate pens, an empty Heineken bottle, the quilt draped over the couch's back.

Was Pastor alright?

With much effort now, Lacey dragged the heavy bag along the carpet toward the antique display cabinet. In went Pastor's old Atari VCS, and in went the baseball signed by the Marlins inaugural roster, and in went the heirloom Pocket Kodak, c. 1898. The bag, now too heavy for Lacey to drag, was left there beside the open display cabinet as Lacey wandered into the kitchen, looking for more objects to collect. The woman, meanwhile, sat perched, watching the Muted screen, enthralled, both worried about Pastor's safety and increasingly aware that her worry had lifted her from the dense linkage of Time and activities she'd been trussed to just moments earlier.

FOUR

Considered a glitch in Camera 2 or an error in wiring and/or setup despite the cameraman's vehement protests against on the insistence of the impossibility of these things: on a slow zoom, the girl's face, when asked *why* by Nona's disembodied, professionally-concerned sounding voice, registered a briefly lambent glow, a hesitating flicker like a kind of screen lag, before saying: 'Why not?'

###

The first to arrive a petite and recently hired Best Buy employee, uniform crisply pressed, faintly perspiring, smelling like Grandma's House, clutching tightly an iPhone encased in high quality polycarbonate with rubber surround and kickass Venetian Paisley designs, Twitter open and updating rapidly.

A zealous young man with carefully manicured stubble, after stopping off at the post office to mail a pair of reading glasses and a Starbucks gift card to a sister in Jacksonville.

His much older girlfriend, indignant, having expected to be dropped off at the Youfit near the abandoned Blockbuster on 441 in Margate.

A wiry elder gentleman, in Tommy Bahama, carrying a sign and suggesting they move closer to the entrance.

A middle aged stay-at-home mom who said on her blog, Conscience dictates. Then Liked her daughter's photo on Facebook, commenting: Your so beautiful honey!

The first gawkers, borne gracelessly along inside an old cluttered Oldsmobile Alero, American red: a freelance journalist, Steno Pad App open on his tablet, an eBay/Amazon vendor, vain and prematurely bald, a Publix pharmacy tech with an enthusiasm for selfies, and the group's jobless luminary, a Twitter hound, hangdog on witnessing the Best Buy employee, whose tweet had piqued his interest: he'd found her hot, visualized banging her, and now felt intensely shy.

All the way from the Wolfgang Puck at Sawgrass Mills: a waitress, who'd been in love with a gay coworker for two years.

Instagram, Vine, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter. Nobody knew quite how it began.

Minutes later, the first beautiful person: face roughly ovaloid, dimpled smile, pleasingly arranged teeth, espresso eyes, lovely Greco-Roman nose, lanky body—save a brief, thrilling flair of the hips—and poor posture, a smooth little pouch belly, a voice pitched at a girlish timbre.

A pair of lively old women from Wynmoor Village, not sisters, but basically.

An amateur philosopher, an Albert Camus enthusiast who'd been nearly an hour into the Pixar film *Up*, his T-shirt spackled with polyurethane stains, lager-colored.

A small bus carrying eleven members of Coconut Creek Community Church, en route originally to a homeless shelter in Hammondville: two teenagers, who, a week earlier, had been in a bathroom at the Hilton in Tampa, snorting cocaine through the right nostril with a tightly rolled one dollar bill; another teenager, who'd first come to God after witnessing the final scene in *Pulp Fiction*; an enervated young couple looking to recharge through numerous acts of

compassion; an assistant pastor (driving the bus) with a martyr complex and a porn problem; the assistant pastor's wife, applying SPF 15 to her pale and freckled face while inwardly ruminating on the tentative, and unfinished, sex they'd had the previous night; and a family, a featureless dad, so Flanders-like he disgusted even his own wife, who'd been carrying on a surprisingly tender affair with the worship band's lead guitarist, along with twelve-year-old twins, both ugly in pubescence and painfully aware of it, acned, Invasaligned, painful budding breasts, increasingly gloomy.

The first news crew, transported via deeply blue K_u satellite uplink van: Channel Four, local, the reporter one Thien-Vu Llosa-Scott, looking to make her nut on this story.

A caravan of Asian-made cars, all carrying youthful members of the same megachurch just down the road: in a white Hyundai Elantra, three 23-year-old women, the driver a sweet and pretty blonde with self-esteem issues, recently accepted into the Peace Corps and assigned to a little village in Thailand; the passenger a cocksure Alabaman with self-proclaimed daddy issues, the progeny of weightlifters, the girlfriend of a nice guy seventeen years her senior; and in the backseat, a Chicagoan, Northside, recent U of C graduate, who'd moved down for grad school but also to put some distance between herself and an alcoholic, borderline-sociopathic father.

Nearly on their bumper, an afternoon-blue Honda Civic: the driver a 30-year-old dinosaur and dog enthusiast, in the midst of creating a comic in which a tag-team of triceratops and boxer-mix travel through time, having adventures; a woman in her mid-twenties who, when she was sixteen, appeared on the ABC Family reality show *Switched!*, trading places with a baseball player from Lincoln NE; her boyfriend, a hot sauce entrepreneur, who'd just a week earlier sold two hot sauces to the Tijuana Flats restaurant chain; and a man in his mid-thirties, lovably goofy,

a fan of *Star Wars* and B-grade horror films, whose own mother had once attempted suicide, when he was six.

Two recent converts in a beat up Corolla, trying so hard to stay away from whiskey, not understanding they enabled each other.

A chronic depressive nearing middle age, a social worker with a background in developmental psychology and activity analysis, a lover of Theory and abstractions, arriving in a Celica, her radio tuned to Y100.

Snapchats all around, an uptick in local Twitter traffic, a data wash, Thien-Vu Llosa-Scott's eyes going wide.

An FLPD squad car, windows tinted, a monotonous male voice like a bee's drone on its loudspeaker, urging the crowd to please disperse.

A sizable contingent of the local NAACP chapter: the chapter's president, viewing this as an opportunity to lob eloquent statements about basic human rights; the vice-president and treasurer, married, holding hands, both dieting for an upcoming cruise to the Bahamas; the secretary, and also the chapter's youngest member, fiddling with her newly acquired smartphone; a dentist who sent his kids to an expensive Christian prep school that's predominantly white; a former Marine who served in the Gulf War, obsessed with collecting Civil War memorabilia, his prized possession a P53 Enfield rifle used, he was assured by the seller, at the Battle of Gettysburg; a high school physics teacher, a frequent contributor to Wikipedia entries relating to astrophysics and contemporary celebrities; a stooped old woman with plucked eyebrows who'd participated in the Birmingham civil rights movement, her moral authority unquestioned by all who knew her; a middle-aged Caribbean transplant and radically conservative Christian,

currently using meal replacement shakes, feeling gassy and bloated, along with her husband, self-conscious about his receding hairline, and addicted to AMC dramas; a thoughtful Third Wave feminist, theoretically cultivating an all-inclusive mindset, but still, in reality, uncomfortable with the LGBT community; a handsome man in his early fifties with a James Baldwin build, who could do the best Gilbert Gottfried you'll ever hear, and who'd once back in the early nineties been flown to New York to audition for *Saturday Night Live*; an affluent member from Boca Raton with the last name—no joke—Stalin; a former NBDL player with a massive schoolboy crush on the secretary; and, finally, a prison guard down in Florida City, still wearing his uniform, stepping away periodically to smoke his Camel Blues and coming more and more to crave the Little Caesar's across the street.

The crowd massing in an ideal spot in terms of lighting and background angle, Thien-Vu Llosa-Scott utterly poised, reporting live, given twenty seconds by the station for Breaking.

Following the report, a medicated young man brandishing a guitar, claiming to work for the ACLU.

BSO, sirens howling, the officer inside dealing with a persistent cold, and now this bullshit an hour before he's off shift.

The HOGTIED! food truck, set up across the street in the Quizno's parking lot.

An ancient Jewish married couple, one of those where they start to look like each other, transplanted New Yorkers and smelling like decay, subconsciously avoiding the NAACP contingent.

A Thai restaurateur, "Raindrops Keep Fallin' on My Head" stuck in his head for the past three days.

A tight cluster of education reformers, arriving in somebody's leased Honda Civic: a mom with empty nest syndrome and lots of free time; a single, childless lawyer, balding, and with an upset stomach; a low-key gay couple, fervent believers in charter schools and a voucher system; and a glamorous middle-aged woman, a former lover of Arne Duncan, her son, diagnosed with Asperger's, quoting bits of Wittgenstein at her last night as she sat on the couch clipping coupons and watching *Law and Order*.

An eclectic collection of ocean conservationists, with diffuse and sometimes competing interests: a tall and thoughtful young man who'd forgotten a belt, rabid passion for biodiversity, at frequent intervals hiking his Dickies up his waist; a man who'd once won the Ernest Hemingway Look-Alike contest down in Key West at Sloppy Joe's; a lifelong dolphin lover, a competent architect, whose dream was to design a dolphin museum and sanctuary and set it down in some sleepy FL town, New Smyrna maybe, or Sanibel Island; A German émigré whose interest in conservation can be tracked back to a childhood vector, the assisted reading of a picture book version of *Moby-Dick*, followed by a viewing of Disney's *Pinocchio*; a young woman, answering phones for Fidelity Investments, refusing to admit to a concerned boyfriend that she needs glasses.

A young man, an FAU student, religiously flummoxed, day and night reading all sorts of literature and growing increasingly depressed, picking at his fingernails and feeling chest tightness, a slight fever, envisioning himself as the hero or anti-hero of some as yet unrevealed adventure, convinced that if he just looks hard enough, he will be able to discern the pattern(s) of his life.

The disgraced ex-pastor of the megachurch, in disguise but recognizable, pretty much.

A cavalcade of squad cars, FLPD, four of them: two patrol cars, an unmarked, and a response car, sirens off, lights rotating. The crowd parting, then backing away. Seven police huddling and confabbing, methodically cordoning off a small perimeter around the building's entrance with the yellow Caution tape you always see in crime dramas. *Chill the fuck out*, one of them says to a protester who'd approached to get the skinny.

Local 10, microwave truck parked across the street, crew Spartan and grudging, the reporter being after all kind of a dickhead.

A somewhat festive delegation from the Islamic Center of South Florida: a youngish imam in kurta, tweeting and Facebooking his location, encouraging local Muslims to come on out and show their support, quoting the Quran on the sanctity of life; a Syrian-American on Mr. Wayne Huizenga's yacht crew; a sweet deferring Louisiana convert in hijab with strong opinions on the treatment of women in *True Detective*; an Iranian-American, weary, conflicted, whose extended family in Iran was feeling the squeeze of recent US financial sanctions; an elderly couple thrilled for the activity; a freelance photographer hoping one day to put together a picture book of American Muslims posing with Orthodox and Hasidic Jews, because it seems like the sort of thing that might win awards, or something; a bearded hipster carpenter, who made funky furniture and was "trying out" Islam; a writer, handsome and young and ambitious, holding tight the belief that to die young, via debauchery or car accident, was to achieve immortality, literarily.

The Local 10 dickhead checks his Facebook on his phone, scrolls through old texts, discards his sport coat, asks the cameraman to please roll up his sleeves for him, and wades into the crowd to seek an interview, considering, meanwhile, his angle.

Channel Four's producer receiving the word and passing it on to Thien-Vu Llosa-Scott: the station's doing chopper footage, and linking it to her next report. Details forthcoming. Thien-Vu doing an endearing little jump for joy.

Trending on Twitter: *#protest4life, #lifeprotect, #killthesuicideshow.*

Audible despite the crowd's syncopating, a bird squawking *uh-uh.*

A large and clever young man, coming off an amicable breakup, wearing board shorts and three-day stubble, feeling vulnerable and shy, but nevertheless like it's the right thing to do, to be here—secretly hoping a news camera finds him, so he can express this sentiment out loud.

An off-duty EMT, never comfortable with down time, dragging his bemused wife along, who'd just been hoping to get some household chores accomplished—changing the smoke alarm batteries, dusting the ceiling fans, clearing out the gutters, etc.

A small committee of self-anointed Absurdists, reveling, triumphant, showing up in a Honda Odyssey painted hot pink: a Calvino enthusiast, wearing his t-shirt backwards; an unstable fellow who took a photo of his sock drawer and had it tattooed along his upper back; a young woman who once, barefooted, walked the states of FL and GA, and partway into SC, before her bloodied feet became infected and swollen; an expert on time travel and Hollywood movie plot holes; an Einstein lookalike; and a beautiful young woman, torn all up inside by a recent abortion, who'd been studying string theory with very little comprehension for the last couple of months.

An elderly dude, widowed, who weeks ago had spent an entire day at the computer, studying How To articles on cunnilingus and setting up an eHarmony profile he'd not since logged onto.

A descendent of Charles Dickens, feuding with her mother, wearing tight pants she'd spent ten minutes this morning wrestling on, carrying a Starbucks latte she'd received for free from a barista who'd asked her out.

7News arrives, parks next to Local 10. The crews mingle and chat. When asked about the dickhead, the Local 10 producer gestures at the crowd and shrugs. 7News files a short Breaking.

A husband-wife team of periodontists, shutting the practice down for the day, leaving their assistant in the office to do all the rescheduling, and now holding hands, firm and shared belief in social capital carrying them into the crowd.

Goodwill dissipating, territorial disputes, petty arguments, a brief swelling toward the building's northeast entrance, containment procedures enacted by the police: two protesters Tasered and ziptied and led away.

A prototypical American family, in a minivan: Dad, smelling like aftershave and wearing jean shorts, having skipped his daily routine of reading the *Sun-Sentinel's* headlines; Mom, feeling slightly manic but actively trying to suppress her anxieties by sitting very, very still, hands in lap, a ringing in her ears, sweat on her brow; just barely teenaged Daughter, texting, disgusted with everyone and everything; and prepubescent Son, who'd eaten a worm the other day while he and a couple of buddies fished a retaining pond, and now had visions of this little worm squiggling inside his belly, making a mess of things.

Two Logos members, carrying a number of signs, making their way through the crowd toward a designated location just south of the building's entrance.

A small team from a local church's youth group, hastily assembled, forced to park a little ways a way: the youth pastor, Donald Duck tattooed on his left bicep, and whom he often used in

stories told to illustrate Biblical points he was making; a flawless 16-year-old, in love with him; a pair of fraternal twins, Facebooking; an abrasive young man, smallish, already balding, a Manchester United fanatic who liked to abuse Robitussin, watching silly cat videos on Vine; a kid with bad acne and tortured by it, refusing to eat greasy foods, trying so hard to never sweat, washing his face five or six times a day, changing out his pillow sheets twice a week, agonizing over his reflection in mirrors and tinted windows, growing increasingly frustrated because he'd been to four dermatologists already and none of them would give him Accutane; a secret couple, secretly practicing safe sex, the hidden knowledge of their actions growing them mentally, making them both feel like adults.

The Channel Four chopper, a bitching Robinson R44 decked out in the station's patriotic color scheme, soaring over the scene in approximate ellipses, cameraman leaning out and over like a gunner, surprised a little bit at the crowd's density, and meanwhile Thien-Vu Llosa-Scott and her team hooting and cheering on from the ground.

Local 10 dickhead still searching for a handful of people to interview, being nitpicky for no discernible reason.

Another Logos member, drenched in sweat because he'd picked today of all days to wear jeans and a long-sleeved T, carrying more signs and a ski mask in his back pocket.

A local politician, impeccably dressed in business casual, sporting Wayfarers, Blackberry vibrating more or less consistently, seeking out the news crews.

From the Jamba Juice on Federal near Las Olas: the AM shift crew—an assistant manager, mustache bushy, kidney stone assembling unnoticed, feeling righteous; an employee who tossed and turned for hours last night, thinking of *Game of Thrones*, and plus something

wasn't really sitting well in her stomach; an FAU grad student, seeking a master's in sociology, blathering on to herself mentally about patriarchy and heteronormativity, living with her dad rent-free; a teenaged dude, crew cut, weirdly hygienic for his age, and too a natural entrepreneur with a real belief in Jamba Juice, hoping to move up the company's chain of command, acquiring, along the way, great wealth and all of its trappings, health insurance plus dental, stock options, etc.

An emotionally stunted young man in his mid-twenties obsessed with animal friendship videos: dog and turtle, goat and burro, cat and owl, rabbit and family of lizards, along with his mom, a prolific reader of memoirs, who couldn't help but indulge her sweet boy's interests.

A serious Facebook addict, collector of Friends, distributor of numerous Likes and Pokes, protestor of updated Privacy Settings, who's built for herself a vast and complex network of cat memes.

Four more Logos members, nodding somberly to each other before seeking out designated locations.

A court stenographer with two broken fingers on her right hand, here because her brother, closeted thanks to strict and gloomy Evangelical parents, committed suicide in 2010, a few weeks after Alexander McQueen.

Bedecked completely in hemp: a hippie parodist gripping a ukulele he didn't know how to play, along with his boyfriend, who hadn't yet mentioned he was moving to Austin TX.

A pregnant young woman who hadn't showered this morning, embarrassed to be here alone, pretending to text.

Three more Logos members, sporting matching fanny packs and trading mini bottles of sunscreen.

A breakfast club composed of six middle aged divorcees each fancying themselves Carrie from *Sex and the City*, save the youngest, who'd been perusing Daniel Dennett's *Consciousness Explained* and feeling not herself at all but like instead a collection of shifting homunculi forming alliances and competing and in that way formulating a conscious being, or something, maybe, but without doubt a refutation of all Cartesian conceptions.

A local bluegrass-alt-folk band, carrying merch, figuring whatever this is its good for exposure.

Some dude who liked to deploy scare quotes among various other hand gestures at the strangest times, along with a buddy who, when playing Halo, secretly and with surprising intensity longed to exist inside its worlds.

An older couple whose home décor consisted primarily of minutely detailed calenders, schedules, and to-do lists, dragging along an adult son who worked at The Fresh Market as the bulk specialist, in charge of coffee and candy and such.

Another Logos member who an hour earlier'd told everybody he wouldn't be able to make it because he was feeling under the weather, but now rallying.

Somebody's houseguest, feeling weird about being in the house alone, and honestly? Not sure she's strong enough to resist poking through drawers.

A paraplegic BASE jumper in town visiting his teenaged son.

Seven members of the Dolphins practice squad, after stopping for lunch at a diner down the street.

The Local 10 dickhead's found the local politician, and's now interviewing him. Both in the heat sweating more than preferred, the local politician's typically aced out and complex coiffure slightly askew, to the dickhead's secret delight.

The cops all but given up, waiting on SWAT.

Thien-Vu Llosa-Scott's Twitter and Facebook following growing exponentially, her Wikipedia entry in the midst of composition via local freelance editorial collective calling itself The Hive.

Three more Logos members, brushing sand off their legs before breaking off to seek their respective positions in the crowd.

A bisexual feeling vaguely unsettled about using her real name as her username on OKCupid.

Five more members of the Islamic Center of South Florida, a chronic depressive attempting to read Proust at work during meal breaks, a tattoo-lover whose most recent tattoo featured James Dean, looking *precisely* like James Franco, a Publix assistant manager whose vegan girlfriend was always plying him with weird foods, a Tori Amos enthusiast with rigidly spiked hair, and a CNA, single, nearing forty, her stalwart feminism clashing violently with an intense desire to procreate, exploring, in off-hours, various unorthodox avenues that might allow her to have her cake and eat it too, so to speak.

Channel Four receiving the news from HQ that CNN's picking up their chopper footage, Thien-Vu Llosa-Scott realizing, with a sort of hushed surprise, that she may very well be, by the end of the day, a bona fide celebrity.

SWAT arriving, taking their sweet ass time, according to the cops holding the line, assembling themselves.

A freelancer who, in his rush out the door, forgot his fucking camera.

A Scottish immigrant, obsessed with the mythology of Death, humming softly to himself a melancholic Gregorian chant and at the same time, stalking his ex-girlfriend's Facebook profile.

Two slackline enthusiasts, carrying between them, in their backpacks, five different sorts of slacklines, a little disappointed on witnessing the crowd and realizing there would be no place to set up.

SWAT finally making their way thru the crowd toward the police cordon, people politely stepping aside for them, all the news crews shoving along behind them, cameras trained.

Three more Logos members, slightly late, hustling toward their designated spots.

A makeshift stage assembled in the midst of the crowd, composed of milk crates and plywood and various fortifying Logos members. A frail elderly man being helped up, pausing to peer sagely around. Twenty feet away, a microphone's plugged into an amp, itself plugged into an external outlet on the building's northeast side, and threaded thru the crowd.

SWAT chatting and standing around, lifting visors to sip at Styrofoam cups of coffee.

A young libertarian couple, coming to protest the protest, but losing their nerve on seeing the crowd's size.

Twitter exploding, the usage rates comparable to the Arab Spring and Occupy movements, but still nowhere near the usage rates generated by your standard Beyoncé concert.

Thien-Vu Llosa-Scott texting her boyfriend, is interrupted, her gaze directed toward the elderly man now trying to speak. The other news crews still focused on the (non) actions of SWAT.

The local politician attempting to shake the hands of the SWAT team members.

The HOGTIED! food truck's sold out of food, for the first time ever, and meanwhile, a photo of Lucy Liu's uploaded to the Wikipedia page of Thien-Vu Llosa-Scott, by her boyfriend.

Some wicked feedback on the mic, the elderly man looking at it in surprise.

The Logos members gently guiding the crowd's attention toward the little stage.

Thien-Vu urging her crew.

SWAT taking position, as the elderly man begins to speak. *I need to tell you all a story*, he said to the crowd. Here pulling a thick and folded collection of papers from his pocket. *It's not my story*, he said. *It was written by a remarkable young man, extremely bright, an astrophysicist and an aeronautical engineer, as well as a publishing writer. He was not a member of my church, but he was, nonetheless, a friend. Two years ago, he passed away.*

Thien-Vu whispering in her cameraman's ears about lighting and audio and such.

The first CNN segment airing, not more than a sketch of the whole scene, and a summary of Twitter action, including the various celebrities who'd retweeted and hashtagged the protest.

The elderly man pausing a moment, clearly emotional. Then he cleared his throat. *Here we go*, he said. *It's titled*

THE COSMOLOGICAL CONSTANT, OR: SCENES FROM THE
MULTIVERSE

On a cool fall morning a braingray fog capped the Blue Ridge like a condom and in the old green¹ Mazda a Mr. Neil deGrasse Tyson drove his wife, Mrs. Scarlett Johansson-Tyson, down along Hendersonville Road past the shopping plazas and red-bricked Biltmore Village and into the Mission Hospital lot in Asheville NC. As he escorted her inside, the contractions came at fluttery intervals so blink-like she clamped her hand around his forearm with inhuman strength, a serious octopus suctiony grip, and she'd barely hit the gurney before the baby crowned and she bellowed in pain, a great panda-aware-of-its-status-as-endangered roar which squeezed the attending physician's little cancer-metastasizing prostate-bladder complex. Mr. Neil deGrasse Tyson's own brain, at sound wave's impact, concussed, and he dropped thudding to the arabesque-patterned linoleum.

(So fogged was he, as he fell, and so densely geometrical was the linoleum, that he felt like he was falling into it, into some churning vortex of basic

¹ ASTROPHYSICISTS: what kind of green

ME: It's like, those Healthy Request labels on Campbell's soup cans?

ASTROPHYSICISTS: maybe

ME: Like bro, like the green on Hidden Valley bottles? That shit's the shiznit. Dip the *fuck* out of carrots in that shit. Or rainforest green. Like the rainforest in *The Lion King*.

ASTROPHYSICISTS: um

ME: Got it. Motherboards, you know that shit? Motherboards under fluorescent tube lights. Then you got that gleam.

ASTROPHYSICISTS: like grass green or something or x-mas green

interlocking shapes and pastry crumbs and dust. This was, in other words, one hell of a scream emitted.)

The attending physician, a fresh-faced resident with what looked a drawn-on mustache, liked to play Halo on Legendary on his days off and was pondering a particularly nasty impasse on Reach as he urged Mrs. Scarlett Johansson-Tyson to Pull Back! instead of Push! And when he noticed her Pulling Back! he said No! I meant Push! Push! And when the baby was birthed and the cord was snipped and the afterbirth was expelled and trashed (“Bloody meatloaf with a tail,” quipped the attending physician to a nauseated Mr. Neil deGrasse-Tyson, as he’d quipped to dozens of fathers previously)—when, in short, it became bracingly apparent that, in lieu of a healthy human baby, Mrs. Scarlett Johansson-Tyson had mistakenly delivered a 16oz. plastic jar of Jif Reduced Fat Crunchy Peanut Butter, the attending physician conceded affably and quit, went to work as a part-time grocery clerk at Ingles, guiding customers around spectral aisles and chanting, more often than he’d have liked, Here’s The Tapioca!

In the meantime, the jar of Jif Reduced Fat Crunchy Peanut Butter spent weeks in the NCU’s pale blue lights under observation. The Tysons stood aside and watched as the international medical community cordoned the unit and assembled a plenary, piling into the NCU to basically stare at their baby while making intrigued noises or whining about the room temperature. They asked few questions, obviously shy, instead informing the Tysons that their graduate research assistants would be sending along occasional Facebook PMs over the

course of the next decade or so, and that mostly these would be for verification or promotional purposes.

When the Tysons were at last allowed to bring their jar of Jif Reduced Fat Crunchy Peanut Butter home to their quirky 2bedroom/1bath in Hendersonville NC (wallpapered mostly with various Gatorade labels; opaque mirrors forged from junked glass bottles; artsy photos of the handful of Bojangles franchises where abortions were still performed, framed and hung in the living/dining areas; an analog TV somehow built with parts from a supercollider that failed to manufacture the Clooney boson particle [named of course for the famed theoretical physicists]; etc. etc.) they did so haltingly, with much second-guessing, their confidence as parents understandably shattered.

After a few tense uncertain moments standing inside the house's silence, Mr. Neil deGrasse Tyson lifted the jar of Jif Reduced Fat Crunchy Peanut Butter from his wife's arms and set it in the pantry beside their half-used jar of Skippy. This was funny to them both and broke the somber spell. Mrs. Scarlett Johansson-Tyson cooed at the jar of Jif Reduced Fat Crunchy Peanut Butter, talk-sang Whosababy? Are yousababy? Yousa tired baby? Baby go night-night? while Mr. Neil deGrasse Tyson answered back, in a deep palsied baritone, Yes, Mother. I am *exhausted*. I would like to retire to my room and perhaps partake of a nightcap, if you would be so kind as to fix one up for me, a nice Old-Fashioned, I'm thinking.

They rolled the crib into the master bedroom and settled the jar of Jif Reduced Fat Crunchy Peanut Butter, snugged it just so in all that pure white goose down. Mr. Neil deGrasse Tyson sang the lullaby his own mother'd always sung to him as a child, Bob Dylan's "Hollaback Girl" set to "Mary Had a Little Lamb," while Mrs. Scarlett Johansson-Tyson gently scratched his back the way he liked or else just leaned into him and held him, and this little domestic vision was so tender and affectless that God himself tuned in and misted up, instead of doing his nightly ab rollers.²

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They kept a staggered schedule: Mr. Neil deGrasse Tyson worked days as a TV Host, while Mrs. Scarlett Johansson-Tyson worked nights as a Movie Star. They were suburban planets, their orbits ellipses of hope in the grooved fabric of space created by the jar of Jif Reduced Fat Crunchy Peanut Butter's extreme gravity. Charted (as Mr. Neil deGrasse-Tyson had indeed gone ahead and done), their daily paths formed a Venn diagram: they saw each other just twice

² ASTROPHYSICISTS: god bro really

ME: How about a universe created by an omnipotent God. Does the multiverse scenario not allow for this?

ASTROPHYSICISTS: no

ME: But the math checks out.

ASTROPHYSICISTS: thats not science

ME: I've been paging through Quantum Physics for Dummies.

ASTROPHYSICISTS: just no

throughout each day, in the early morning and late evening, for just a handful of minutes each time.

The jar of Jif Reduced Fat Crunchy Peanut Butter moreover was a placid, self-contained baby. It never, in fact, seemed to move at all. Its existence soon lost its novelty for Mr. Neil deGrasse Tyson, whereas Mrs. Scarlett Johansson-Tyson swooned, fell in love; she often dreamt inappropriate dreams about it, sexual dreams churning her Cartesian Theater into a hazed stockroom of buttermilked imagery (with the abstract texture of guilt limning the stage), which she did not share with her husband nor the graduate research assistants who occasionally PM'd her on Facebook seeking juicy fried nuggets of data which might secure them tenure-track positions upon successful dissertation defense. She kept these dreams from her friends even, whom she had over every now and again for Tupperware parties, during which, to remind themselves why they were such committed third-wave feminists, they'd attempt to emulate the *Housewives* reality TV shows, gossiping angrily and drinking wine and trading lewd and/or insulted narratives about their husbands and children (another reason ScoJo loved her baby: her buddies all marveled at [or grew bored with] its placidity and overall pleasant, if a little sitcom-straight-man, demeanor—it *still* hadn't ever cried, she would tell them each time they visited, and it *still* hadn't ever needed a diaper change!)

As the weeks passed the Tysons' respective attitudes toward their new baby grew further apart, the dissonance finally curdling into marital tension. They

barely spoke to each other, and offered just the slightest peck of chapped lips when linked up. Mrs. Scarlett Johnasson-Tyson seemed more and more to repulse at the proposal of sex with her husband the more she romanced her baby (which had transformed, in her dreams, into a kind of jar-of-peanut-butter-version of Matthew McConaughey, post-*True Detective*). Mr. Neil deGrasse Tyson being, above all, a methodical man, sat in the La-Z-Boy in his man cave with his iPad and subdivided this tension into various smaller categories and assigned values and charted out the overall tension's rise. He bagged and studied a plexus of data, hunting patterns in the relationship, both good and bad, and built elaborate predictive algorithms that failed, each time, to account for the atonality of the human heart, its Ives-like emotional aleatoria. All of this drove Mrs. Scarlett Johansson-Tyson utterly bonkers. She'd been auditioning for new roles, the caveat being she would work only as a team, with the jar of Jif Reduced Fat Crunchy Peanut Butter.

The couple slugged it out one gloomy wintry evening, a flowering Big Bang of suppressed emotion. The house intensely sweet-smelled, like soft rotting fruit in a trash compactor in the backroom of a supermarket, and pleasantly shadowed thanks to the dimmers Mr. Neil deGrasse Tyson installed on all of the lights (a year or so before the baby, in a frenzied moment of grand romantic ambition, his genuine enthusiasm for electricity—and more specifically, for man's ingenuity in utilizing it—the primary reason for his shunning of scented candles).

The argument's origin was innocuous, a quibble which, in their life before the baby, would have been laughed off. But not this time. This time:

a gamma-ray burst at close distance,

a cataphracted supernova,

an eclipsing annihilating light so powerful that space-time's elasticized and twisted into sailor's knots attempted by tweaking Cub Scouts.³

With unprecedented and ruthless precision the Tysons detailed each other's physical and character flaws.

Neil on ScoJo: (1) weirdly smiley and soft-spoken and accommodating *all the freaking time*, to the point it made people uncomfortable, (2) in public conversations, perpetually willing to join forces with whoever's advancing an argument opposed to her husband's, despite his advanced degrees in Astrophysics and Existential Phenomenological Psychology, (3) that thing she always did with her right hand where it looked like she was shaking out a kink, what was that?, (4) the constant picking of her fingernails—this habit was so ingrained and repulsive, he reminded her, that on one film she worked on, the director blew half the budget on CGI fingers for her, (5) the way she'd always ask his opinion and then gently ignore it, which, combined with (1) and (2) just completely frustrated him. And oh yeah (5 ½) when he refused to offer his opinion when solicited, the way she'd get pissed and assert that he *never* took an interest.

³ ASTROPHYSICISTS: give it a rest

ScoJo on Neil: (1) He really never did take an interest! is he forgetting all the home projects she did by herself, the new ceiling fan in the bedroom and the re-grouting in the downstairs bathroom and the pressure-cleaned and freshly painted deck out back? and (2) how much weight has he gained since they've married? and (3) maybe she was so accommodating and apologetic because he was so goddamned assertive and sure of himself and did it ever occur to him how many times she's had to smooth things over with friends torched in the heat of his own self-proclaimed "significant" intellect? And (4) what exactly is so significant about it? congratulations, he could do math and look through a freaking telescope and speak eloquently about humanity's itty-bitty place in the cosmos! and (5) the fingernail picking thing was a direct result of her parents' divorce when she was 8 years old, Mr. Fattie Asshole, how about that irritating knuckle and ankle crack thing he does, where did that come from? and the constant Facebooking? And (6) why the hell are they living in Asheville NC, of all places? and was he aware how much he spent on telescopes? because she was, and you'd think with all that ridiculous and compulsive chart-making he did, he'd understand the concept of a family budget, and (7) his face, ugh, sometimes she just can't stand to look at it it's so fat and stupid!

Mr. Neil deGrasse Tyson delivered the argument's defining blow, saying aloud what he'd before that moment barely dared to approach mentally: *that* in there, in that crib, is *just* a goddamn jar of peanut butter!

Somebody chucked a beer stein filched on a brewery tour. This seemed to be the climax.

Following, there was a long calm discussion about divorce, which after hours of aggressive whispering sputtered out unresolved. That there was no make-up sex did not escape the notice of Mr. Neil deGrasse Tyson, who hadn't been laid in weeks, and had resorted to masturbating to *the idea of* coronal mass ejections, because his wife still zealously checked the computer's browsing history.

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An uneasy détente took hold all the following day. ScoJo, to cool down, went to Walmart and spent gobs of money on various housewares. She swept *all* the scented candles into her buggy. She cleared the place out of baby potted cacti. It was orgiastic, vengeful shopping. As she browsed, she began to feel a little better. But soon enough, her stomach was fluttering and twisting, and *releasing* various gasses. She tried to clench, to hold it in, but to no avail, and soon abandoned her buggy and rushed into the surprisingly luxurious bathroom to let it all out.

Meanwhile, beneath the gasp-inducing acne of stars, Mr. Neil deGrasse Tyson with great urgency tossed back a few craft brews and pondered his insignificance. This calmed him. He exhaled just to watch his chilled breath cloud and dissolve away, and marveled inwardly at both the elegant complexity of life and the ugly heuristic evolutionary process responsible for it. What contrast! he

thought. What beauty derived from chance! He worked over again the properties of light, how time simply stopped as it traveled, and of black holes, that which light could not escape, and of dark energy rending the universe, distorting spacetime at speeds beyond the Big Bang's initial explosion.

He felt more kinship with the laws of physics and with the long-dead scientists who'd stumbled upon them, than he did with anybody he'd ever known. This thought was startling, and revelatory, and explained certain things about him.

With his sentient-phone, he snapped a photo, a selfie, of him and the night sky, posting it to Instagram with the caption:

'#thelightweseeisMILLIONSBILLIONSyearsold'

After another ten minutes or so of reflection and calisthenics, he made his way back into the house, climbed the stairs, and entered the second bedroom to check on the jar of Jif Reduced Fat Crunchy Peanut Butter as per his wife's scolding note, written in all caps.

The bedroom was dense with baby miscellanea, the fragrance of talcum powder, and a mite more humid than the rest of the house. Mr. Neil deGrasse Tyson felt strong instinctual disgust as he loomed there above the crib, but gulped it down for the sake of his marriage. Gently, he lifted the jar, turned it over, and examined the nutrition facts. Even at Reduced Fat, the jar of Jif Reduced Fat Crunchy Peanut Butter was dangerously fat, he noticed: per 2 tablespoon serving, it had 190 calories; around 100 of these were fat calories. He was bewildered and a little spooked by some of the ingredients: *niacinamide*, *ferric orthophosphate*,

zinc oxide, copper sulfate, folic acid, pyridoxine hydrochloride—such impressive and terror-inducing names had no sync-ports in Mr. Neil deGrasse-Tyson's heterophenomenological experience, no qualia corresponding.

After a moment's hesitation, he held the jar up to his ear to listen for a heartbeat. Nada. He felt ridiculous even checking.

He was holding, he thought (with an electrochemical jolt of perception) a jar of peanut butter.

The house was cool and quiet save the natural structural creaks. Mr. Neil deGrasse Tyson's brain was, according to all the tests, an excellent pattern detector, processing waves of heuristics in teensy bits of spacetime via plentiful twisting internal dialogues structured, he was pleased to think, like double helixes. What at first seemed huge and intractable: the undeniable fact that his wife had birthed a jar of peanut butter instead of a human baby, was now resolved elegantly: acceptance being the most logical route, he accepted it, near-seamlessly incorporating its new existence as fact into the reality matrix of his own perception, etc. etc.

Carried away by this breakthrough, Mr. Neil deGrasse-Tyson went downstairs. He retrieved a spoon from the kitchen and settled himself on the couch. Gingerly, he twisted the blue plastic cap off the jar of Jif Reduced Fat Crunchy Peanut Butter. Once more, he examined the label and once more, he held the jar to his ear. Then he peeled off the sealed cover.

He sniffed the naked peanut butter.

It smelled, remarkably, like peanut butter.

Here he paused and considered, using that lovely throbbing brain of his that he'd once, a long time ago when he was still a bachelor, had scanned and printed and framed above the toilet in the bathroom of his then-home, a studio apartment (a closet, basically) in New York. And occasionally in dark moments after career or personal setbacks, licked.

Sensing zero drawbacks, Mr. Neil deGrasse-Tyson took the spoon and with it delved into the peanut butter, gouging a good-sized portion. He lifted it and consumed.

The taste, described later in Mr. Neil deGrasse Tyson's journal in his meticulous calligraphic handwriting, was "not quite peanut butter, something approximating peanut butter." It crunched. The aftertaste was oddly tannic. Dispelling panicky thoughts of murder, and reminding himself, again, that fuck, it's only peanut butter, he attributed the weirdness to the reduced fat.

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Mr. Neil deGrasse-Tyson had resealed and capped the jar of Jif Reduced Fat Crunchy Peanut Butter, repositioned it in its crib, and hovered nervously when Mrs. Scarlett Johansson-Tyson had returned and cradled it against her chest, pressed it to her nipple to breastfeed ("It never latches," was a common half-hurt refrain), and then with all the tenderness previously reserved for him, again set it in its crib. All day at work the next day he'd been preoccupied with detailing and charting his increasingly convoluted emotional states, and had thrice bungled a

discussion of dark energy, referring to it as dark matter instead. He'd never before done more than two takes. He shrugged off all of his coworkers' inquiries into whether he was OK, and grimly did the scene, this new edge delighting the director, who'd grown bored with Mr. Neil deGrasse-Tyson's pliant friendly demeanor.

When he went home, it was undeniable: there was a certain putrid stench in the baby's room. ScoJo, however, hadn't yet noticed, or else had kept it to herself as she rushed off, late to work. Mr. Neil deGrasse-Tyson, after she'd left, lifted the jar from the crib and sniffed at it. Yep.

Rotting flesh. The jar of Jif Reduced Fat Crunchy Peanut Butter smelled like stinking, rotting flesh.

As the night wore on, the corpse-smell blossomed while, simultaneously, the peanut butter's hue blacked and took on the viscosity of oil. Just before ScoJo was set to return, Mr. Neil deGrasse-Tyson uncapped the jar, and the smell which oozed forth caused him to gag.

He panicked. He quickly buried the jar of Jif Reduced Fat Crunchy Peanut Butter in ScoJo's backyard tomato garden and headed to Ingle's to buy another. When ScoJo lifted the jar from the crib for her ritual chest-cradle, Mr. Neil deGrasse-Tyson held his breath, thinking: *entropy, entropy*.

The elderly man pausing to wipe at his eyes, looking frail framed against the bulk of sky behind him. *The young man who wrote this*, he remarked, *was just twenty-two years old when he passed. Think about that. How young!*

Thien-Vu Llosa-Scott inwardly freaking at how well this story was turning out for her. A high school couple, munching pizza and walking over from the 7-11 across the street. An assistant manager at RadioShack, originally on her way to the mall to buy some new shoes.

Me and my fellow church members—give a hand everybody—

The Logos members tentatively raising their arms,

We believe life is a holy thing, a blessed thing, a thing to value above everything else.

We've got this idea, of Logos—

Here a Logos member tugging on the elderly man's trousers, whispering in his ear when the elderly man leaned down.

Okay, well maybe let's just continue with the story, the elderly man said, after the whispered convo.

4 YEARS LATER

There was a ghost in The Fresh Market on Hendersonville and all it sought to do was build an endcap display of Voss Artesian Water. Each morning Mr. Neil deGrasse Tyson arrived to find a buggy filled with Voss cases parked before an endcap, and each morning, he rolled it to the back room, took the cases from

the buggy, stacked them on a shelf and rolled the buggy to the front. Three years previous he'd developed a supra-theory that built tenuous connections among multiverse, string, and chaos theories. Essentially, he explained to whomever would listen, the multiverse existed in fractal form, and those pesky strings responsible for creating atoms didn't vibrate but instead existed as dynamical systems of live-tweets motioning in strange attractor structures. He'd considered it a proto version of a Grand Unified Theory. The problem was, he couldn't do the math. Nobody could. Not even a cleverly designed and worded Kickstarter campaign could incentivize the tentative advance of a ballpark figure.

He'd become obsessed. He stopped sleeping, instead taking a remedial algebra course online, solving colorful interactive puzzle problems, convinced the math involved in ratifying his theory would be, somewhat counterintuitively, rather simple. After months of neglect, Mrs. Scarlett Johansson-Tyson left, at first taking the jar of Jif Reduced Fat Crunchy Peanut Butter but soon mailing it back (along with divorce papers), shooting Mr. Neil deGrasse Tyson a heads-up text that stated, *I can't even.*⁴

⁴ ASTROPHYSICISTS: what happened to the whole Jocasta complex thing going on with her

ME: Fuck! OK, let's just say she got sick of it.

ASTROPHYSICISTS: how tho

ME: In terms of character, ScoJo's most concerned with her career. When she finally realized the jar of Jif Reduced Fat Crunchy Peanut Butter was actually hindering her (she was being overtly typecast for matronly roles after an Oscar nod for a Forrest Gump remake she financed herself [and yep, the jar of Jif Reduced Fat Crunchy Peanut Butter did indeed play Forrest]), her weird romantic love for her baby just sort of switched off, and she came to realize that Mr. Neil deGrasse Tyson was probably right about it being just a jar of peanut butter, and she even tried to re-ignite their relationship, hers and Mr. Neil deGrasse Tyson's, but this was in that dark period of his obsessions, when he was pretty much unreachable.

A month later, he broke down. He spent two days in the nude, brainstorming ideas for pop ballads and then sending them along, these song ideas, inside messages on OKCupid, desperate for genuine feedback.

To SuzieQ193: “Almost wrote a song response to that haiku on your profile, but it seemed too goofy and I got shy. It was about a disastrous first date between James Joyce and Beyonce. He took her to a nightclub in Dublin and kept complimenting her on her music, not realizing he was mistaking her work for Rihanna’s. And she couldn’t stop dancing, even at the quiet candlelit dinner they’d had before the nightclub.”

To SuzieQ193 (again): “Well so I wrote it. And it had it all. Thrills. Romance. Beyonce-outfits so bright and skimpy it hurts the eyes. A James Joyce dance number. A Bob Dylan cameo (first as the disgruntled waiter at dinner, and then as the frat bro hitting on Beyonce at the night club). I mean, this song was really something. But gah! I left the piece of paper I scrawled it on in my back pocket. And those jeans went in the washer, and then the dryer. Makes you wonder how many other masterpieces have been lost like that.”

To NewtonNerdSchadenfreude: “If I could write songs I’d write you one about Einstein and Jung dancing a quantum dance inside the atoms of archetypes, and it would feature UHD TVs and supernovas and twerking and maybe some weird techno music sampling Shostakovich and there’d be an interlude detailing

the wonders of Wikipedia and how when they ask for donations I always feel vaguely guilty because I never donate, and Einstein would have a little solo about one-upping Isaac Newton, and then Jung would do a little vulgar ditty about Freud, and then the song would continue to inventory the binary star system that is contemporary astrophysics and existential phenomenological psychology, and the major figures and innovations of both fields would appear and flare away like so much cosmic dust after gamma-ray bursts. But, I can't write songs. So: Hey.”

To Gary: “So I mean it's clear you're digging Einstein and that whole relativity thing. You ever wonder though, like, why, when he discovered that space and time weren't separate but in fact just one entity, everybody decided to just go ahead and call it *spacetime*? I mean, how boring! Imagine a reggae number about Einstein on his deathbed, brainstorming potential new names for it. Gurkle! Einstein chants. Murkle! Purkle! Bikkitylop! Poontang! Nonsense names. I guess really I'm just wondering what you might call it, if you could rename it? Get at me!”

To WiccanPoetess: “We as dense collections of atoms don't ever actually touch, just FYI. Electron clouds repulse each other's nuclei, and it's the resulting static that provides the sensation we describe as 'touching.' Except in nuclear fusion. Kind of poignant, am I right? I see you like astronomy. You know the Big Dipper's named after my dick?”

Following the anonymous publishing of these messages on LiveJournal (all of his messages being sent, it turned out, to the same person, who was

Catfishing somebody *else*), Mr. Neil deGrasse Tyson lost his job. The re-newly christened *Ms. Scarlett Johansson* began dating her own bizarro-world counterpart, an exotic dancer and amateur alchemist named Johan Scarlettson. Supermarket tabloids were inundated with photos of their PDA. For months, the jar of Jif Reduced Fat Crunchy Peanut Butter sat on the kitchen counter beside the toaster oven, casting, at certain times of the day, a small distorted shadow along the Formica countertop.

Mr. Neil deGrasse Tyson was gifted the gig at The Fresh Market by the former attending physician, who'd been lured from Ingles via promises of a management position. Mr Neil deGrasse Tyson's only job was to exorcise the ghost, whom he'd hypothesized, during one drunken late night phone call, was in fact a bundle of misplaced dark matter accidentally come animate. In fact, Mr. Neil deGrasse Tyson had gone on, regaining some of that swagger he'd lost in failing to put together his supra-theory, all supernatural phenomena can be attributed to the motion of dark matter, which works, he asserted, like nothing we've ever seen before.

Here he paused.

You get it? he said into the receiver. Like nothing we've *seen* before? Seen? Because it's *dark* matter?

The former attending physician had long since hung up, but the next morning he got the paperwork started, and explained the situation to Mr. Neil

deGrasse Tyson, who was hung over, but still happy for work, and immediately set about the construction of an elaborate experiment to test his hypothesis:

- (1) Come to work unshaven, and stinking of IcyHot
- (2) Take a six-pack from the cold case, preferably something seasonal, and carry it to the back
- (3) Drop one of the beers in the employee bathroom trash can
- (4) Damage out the six-pack using a scan gun retrieved from the front office
- (5) Twist/pry open a beer in the break room
- (6) Drink Beer (A)
- (7) Drink Beer (B)
- (8) Haul up off haunches, and go peer at the endcap
- (9) Return to the break room, and drink Beer (C)
- (10) Check Facebook/Twitter/Instagram, consider ways of tweaking Wheeler-DeWitt equation to allow a role for Time in the equation
- (11) Drink Beer (D)
- (12) Masturbate in the employee bathroom
- (13) Lunch break, gently weep in car
- (14) Return from lunch, Drink Beer (F)
- (15) Fall asleep for remainder of day

As he patiently explained over the phone to the former attending physician, this way of experimenting wasn't an attempt to prove his hypothesis

correct, but instead to *disprove the null hypothesis*—the idea was that, since absolute proof of the dark-matter-as-ghost hypothesis was impossible (barring major technological innovations, namely, an instrument that could detect/capture/analyze dark matter), you just begin with the premise that the *null hypothesis* (no dark matter) is true, and if the data collected and analyzed is equal to or less than 5% of the established parameters of the null hypothesis, then you could safely reject it. Did this make sense?

Well OK, the former attending physician said, then what *were* the established parameters?

Mr. Neil deGrasse Tyson balked at the question, said Sorry, bro, but the act of observation necessarily changes the parameters of the system. This was what was taking so long—Mr. Neil deGrasse Tyson was seeking a constant in the system against which to measure what he needed to measure.

At this, the former attending physician threw up his hands. You got three days, he said.

DAY 1

The guru and devoted practitioner of *Dzogchen* considered Mr. Neil deGrasse Tyson a particularly hopeless case, a being so densely knotted up with concepts and discourses of self, so moth-attracted to the low dirty wattage of Cartesian ontology, so lost and sputtering along the frothy tides of *ego* and

solipsism, that, when Mr. Neil deGrasse Tyson pleaded for guidance and instruction, the guru and devoted practitioner of *Dzogchen* said, No thanks.

But I need help! Mr. Neil deGrasse Tyson said.

The guru and devoted practitioner of *Dzogchen* heaved a deep profound sigh. Fuck, he said.

I can pay, said Mr. Neil deGrasse Tyson.

Sit, the guru and devoted practitioner of *Dzogchen* ordered.

Mr. Neil deGrasse Tyson sat cross-legged on the shag carpet, its spooky indigo color scheme recalling the Mio flavor enhancer he used to enhance the flavor of his bottled waters.

Face away from the TV.

Mr. Neil deGrasse Tyson did as ordered.

The guru and devoted practitioner of *Dzogchen* turned on an episode of *Real Housewives of Lancaster County*, the one where the Amish wives set up their fantasy football teams. When Edith takes Brandon Marshall with her first pick, Gertrude becomes enraged and demands to know why. Edith, cowering, explains that she simply liked his smile.

Now, the guru and devoted practitioner of *Dzogchen* said, pausing the episode, what did that scene *taste* like? Quickly!

Mr. Neil deGrasse Tyson failed to produce a response.

The guru and devoted practitioner of *Dzogchen* rewound the scene, played it once more, and asked again: what did that scene *taste* like?

Like—like, a Scotch brand glue stick rolled up then down my tongue? Mr. Neil deGrasse Tyson ventured.

The guru and devoted practitioner of *Dzogchen* again rewound and replayed the scene. How about now, he asked. What's it taste like?

Staples and brown sugar?

Again.

Like squid marinated in mango salsa?

Again.

Chlorinated quarters?

Again.

Tire rubber?

Again.

Cake and maple syrup?

Again.

Sour goat milk and uncooked quinoa?

Again!

Like cheesy pizza crust pissed on by a cat?

Again!

My god I don't know, man! Like my ex-wife's slender freckled upper arm! Like the fart sound of glaciers cracking! Like the scent of a Big Mac launched into space! Like electrons' quantum dance inside the atoms of a dude with diarrhea! I don't fucking know!

I don't fucking know, he sobbed.

DAY 2

In the old green Mazda Mr. Neil deGrasse Tyson had wound haltingly through the Blue Ridge along the Parkway, enveloped near-totally in fog. On the radio an NPR host gently detailed the zombie takeover of Ukraine, and the weird requirement they'd set in place: all Ukrainian schoolchildren were to read the Ukrainian translation of the English translation of the original Russian version of *In the Penal Colony*. The zombies were strict on this. There'd been executions already for failure to comply. They explained that this refracted version of Kafka's little masterpiece represented them best, somehow: it was like, and here's a good analogy, the zombies said, it was like a mixtape a teenage boy gives the object of his affection, if he'd also first kidnapped her and tied her to an uncomfortable chair.

At a certain point along the way Mr. Neil deGrasse Tyson pulled off and parked and trekked into the mountainous woods, hacking out a trail via machete his father'd bought at the gift shop just outside Disney's Indiana Jones Epic Stunt Spectacular! show and then willed to him after croaking about a decade back. Deep into the woods he hiked, brushing away all manner of insects, kicking squirrels startled at his emergence through the brush, winking at deer, praying hard against the appearance of bears and drum circles, robustly inhaling allergens.

To his right about a mile up the mountain, there emerged a ziggurat structure, looming just above the tree line. Mr. Neil deGrasse Tyson headed for it, shoved his way inside (the “door” had been a huge granite slab set on a track), and wandered through the darkness.

After banging around what seemed a large but largely filled with solid matter space, Mr. Neil deGrasse Tyson emerged into a much smaller room, torch-lit and warm. The reddish light cast fractalized shadows against the clay-packed walls. *Welcome to the womb*, chant-whispered a disembodied voice. *It’s heuristics*, the voice explained. *The whole thing’s an elaborate metaphor.*

I got it, said Mr. Neil deGrasse Tyson, rubbing his bruised shin.

Oh, said the voice. *Some people don’t. But good. It’s good you got it.*

Where am I supposed to head next?

I mean, did you actually get it? Or are you just saying that because you were embarrassed that you didn’t get it?

I’m on a bit of a time crunch here, said Mr. Neil deGrasse Tyson.

No, sure, I get it. It’s just, it’s OK to admit to, if you didn’t understand the metaphor. I mean, it’s just us, and who am I going to tell?

Mr. Neil deGrasse Tyson turned to leave. What a waste of time, he muttered.

Wait! called the disembodied voice. *Relax, OK? Go on in. Just trying to make a little light conversation. How often do I get company, after all? But hell, go on. Proceed.*

An arched entranceway emblazoned dramatically in the distance, revealing the small womb-like room as in fact a tunnel. Without a word Mr. Neil deGrasse Tyson progressed along its path, and when he stepped through the arched entranceway, he discovered that, in an even smaller, warmer, *more* womb-like room, a bath had been drawn for him.

Welcome, said the disembodied voice, to Restricted Environmental Stimulation Therapy. You see that kit, over there on the ledge? You'll need to open it, once you're situated in the bath. You'll place the headphones over your ears, and the blindfold over your eyes.

Do you have like scissors or something? Mr. Neil deGrasse Tyson said. The kit's encased in hard plastic.

In the stillness and quiet of your bath your theta brainwaves are stimulated and you enter into a hypnogogic state. Your Default Mode Network takes over. Most people find it sort of trippy, like, well kind of like an out of body experience. The voice stopped and considered, then briefly chuckled. *No pun intended, but hell, that was pretty good am I right!*

Great, it was great, but, those scissors? Or something?

Enjoy! the disembodied voice urged as it Dopplered away.

After cutting himself on the plastic a handful of times, Mr. Neil deGrasse Tyson finally managed to tear it open. The bath's plasmatic viscosity was somewhere between water and Jell-O, its temperature surprisingly cool. It was

odorless, or its odor was undetectable to Mr. Neil deGrasse Tyson's weak olfactory apparatus.

For the longest time he lay motionless in the bath. Time ceased to mean much at all. He drifted in and out of his newly Swiss-cheesed consciousness. Retroactively, he was able to demarcate three distinct experiential phases of the experience:

- (1) Getting Comfortable: the first and most familiar stage, in terms of phenomenology. Mr. Neil deGrasse Tyson adjusted and tweaked his posture and position often, trying to discover the "perfect" REST position. Twice, he thrashed in frustration. During this phase, beta waves in the brain increased, as did cortisol and adrenaline levels. A "trapped" sensation overtook him, corresponding with (or, more accurately, just ahead of) thrashing episodes. He briefly masturbated, but soon ceased, feeling shame.
- (2) The Stillness Births Awareness of Body Sounds: (excerpted from journal, in hyper-neat handwriting betraying Mr. Neil deGrasse Tyson's undiagnosed Obsessive Compulsive Disorder): "Blood sloshing through warrens of rubbery matter, food debris shoved along the roughhouse of the colon, leg muscles oscillating tight-loose-tight-loose like cello strings plucked by uncertain fingers as one stretches and relaxes, the rip of neurons along synapses, something I imagine looks and sounds like zip-lining ... my mind began to drift, and I thought about the locus of all of this, the heart that beats, which = a clock/metronome in two senses: (a) as the *immediate* timekeeper; i.e. the frequency with which it recycles

and doles out blood, which you know tends to determine—to be one of a number of determining factors, albeit a significant one—the speed and strength with which you’re able to begin/participate/complete an activity, i.e., the slower the rate, the less you’re able to accomplish, and actually now that I think about it, if the heart beats too fast, you tend to have problems in the whole body-motion arena as well—that is, until the heart’s restrictor kicks in and forcibly stops the whole shebang or does a variety of complicated things that has the effect, in the best of cases, of simply slowing the beat to an acceptable bpm; and (b) as a sort of life-clock; that is, if you were to try really hard, you know, and gather together a whole bunch of difficult-to-measure variables—the family’s complete history of heart disease, the average bpm recorded over the course of years and formatted into a line graph with y-axis as bpm and x-axis as age, comprehensive notes kept on nutritional factors—again, over the course of years—like sodium intake and saturated fats and sugar ingestion, poor habits regarding nicotine and alcohol intake, sleep—both the quantity and quality of—and stress—which the gathering of true, hard numbers on stress levels is problematic—and maybe calling them *levels* is problematic, too—because qualitative variables are notoriously difficult to measure on quantitative scales—if you were somehow able to do all of the above, and then you were able to process such mind-fucking amounts of data and synthesize all of it into *trends*, which trends you’d then compare to trends synthesized from mind-fucking amounts of other people’s data, then you might just be able to figure out on a rough scale how long your heart could conceivably

last before sputtering to a halt—the all-caps HALT...My brain activity is no doubt a violent topography of shifting pieces, lower- and upper-brain components working conjunctively and at unfathomable speeds to allow me to do something as simple as lay in this oddly textured muck...various parts of my body creak in quick succession...

(3) Transcendent Release: Heideggerian angst nothingness calm
empty sets a lovely white soft silence tears calm
Dasein a click a series of clicks a subdued
whir like like the sound of a ceiling fan

Excerpted: “*What you were hearing,*’ the voice told me, as I was toweling off, *was the sound of your consciousness out of sync with your brain.*” Baloney! What I was hearing (discovered thanks to a quick Google search) was the sound of a boxfan in the concealed room adjacent, where a security guard monitored the CCTV network to make sure nobody yanked it in the bath.

THAT NIGHT

Mr. Neil deGrasse Tyson dreamed a series of domestic vignettes. He was guided along toward these little scenes by celebrities. Brad Pitt, cherub-like and bedecked in luminous white robes, led Mr. Neil deGrasse Tyson to the edge of a scene in which he, Mr. Neil deGrasse Tyson, played a game of catch in the yard with the jar of Jif Reduced Fat Crunchy Peanut Butter. It began pleasantly

enough, and for a moment, Mr. Neil deGrasse Tyson felt intense shame about, you know, murdering his offspring and all. But the game soon devolved into a demoralizing fetch exercise, and the teensy glove Mr. Neil deGrasse Tyson had affixed to the jar of Jif Reduced Fat Crunchy Peanut Butter fell off into the grass.

In the second vignette, Morgan Freeman and he stood in the midst of a great blue and softly churning expanse. This, Morgan Freeman explained with that illustrious voice of his, is Lake Okeechobee. You and your kid are fishing just above where we're located. When the jar of Jif Reduced Fat Crunchy Peanut Butter's line catches and it's dragged out of the boat and into the water, you sit there placidly.

Aren't we going to watch it, or something? Mr. Neil deGrasse Tyson asked.

Too chilling, explained Morgan Freeman. Your reaction, I mean. You just sit there. *You don't even notice.* On your way home, you stop off at Walmart and buy another jar of Jif Reduced Fat Crunchy Peanut Butter. Are you seeing the pattern?

No, admitted Mr. Neil deGrasse Tyson.

Morgan Freeman, before dissolving away, looked intensely disappointed.

In the third vignette, conjured and then narrated by Gilbert Gottfried, the jar of Jif Reduced Fat Crunchy Peanut Butter, sat inside a small dark room, hazy with smoke, smelling like booze and semen. Its label had been torn off. After a minute, it was joined by two nude girls, who on first blush appeared to be just

eighteen or nineteen but who, when the shot zoomed in, clearly had crows' feet around the eyes. From somewhere outside Mr. Neil deGrasse Tyson's angle of vision a voice shouted Start! and then things began to happen, weird, unspeakable things. Mr. Neil deGrasse Tyson quickly averted his gaze, screamed Stop! Please!

When he again opened his eyes, he found himself on the ground next to his bed, mopped in cold sweat.

DAY THREE

Mr. Neil deGrasse Tyson spent the morning digging up the makeshift grave of the jar of Jif Reduced Fat Crunchy Peanut Butter, alternatively praying for and against the biodegradability of its plastic encasing. After hours of labor, the yard was pockmarked with holes, but the jar of Jif Reduced Fat Crunchy Peanut Butter had yet to be found. Surprised at the intensity of his disappointment, Mr. Neil deGrasse Tyson dragged himself inside, showered listlessly, and went to work.

When he arrived, there was the buggy filled with Voss cases, as always. The former attending physician emerged from the back office, sipping decaffeinated coffee and rubbing his newly bald head. Chemo, he explained. For the advanced cancer in and around his prostate.

Mr. Neil deGrasse Tyson nodded , distracted.

Well, the former attending physician said. You gonna solve this thing today?

To this Mr. Neil deGrasse Tyson responded with an odd little strangled noise, and a hesitant *Definitely*.

Great! said the former attending physician.

For an hour, Mr. Neil deGrasse Tyson stood there, in front of that endcap, attempting to formulate a plan. But for the first time, that significant intellect of his failed him. He couldn't think.

And so he repeated the elaborate experiment, and, late in the afternoon, in a boozy stupor, found himself sprawled out on the ground on the snack aisle, surrounded by jars and jars of Jif peanut butter.

The former attending physician was furious, and immediately canned him. But then, in an act of extreme kindness, and despite the weakness and nausea he felt after chemo, hauled Mr. Neil deGrasse Tyson out to his pickup and drove him home. When Mr. Neil deGrasse Tyson awoke, he lurched to the fridge and yanked out a beer and chugged it down, then collapsed on the couch, and sobbed.

Mr. Neil deGrasse Tyson was a supernova, collapsing with much theatricality into a stellar-mass black hole. He tried, over the course of the next week, to drink himself to death. He rarely moved from the couch, preferring instead to stare catatonically at the TV, which he never even turned on.

The doorbell rang a single time during the week, followed by a robust knock. Mr. Neil deGrasse Tyson didn't even bother with it until days later.

When he opened the door, he found a bundle of letters, weather-beaten. He tossed them somewhere, and returned to the couch for another eighteen hours.

It was only when he ran out of alcohol, that he again turned his attention to the letters. Curious, and feeling the onset of a hangover like no other, he opened the first letter.

LETTER #1

I come to you now from the past, though to the dude writing these letters I'm the future. And probably not the future he was hoping for. Here on this cool bright morning in early March I am alone, and unsuccessful according to him. I'm not the idealist he was, and I'm sure he'd be disappointed to find out I still struggle with the same questions he did; that I've got, in other words, no real answers for him or for anybody.

I'm in bed today; I'm sick, the room's dark because the shades are drawn and surrounding me are a number of books and notepads and empty cups. Last night I went drinking in Winter Park among the affluent and thought a lot about how I can't ever seem to finish anything.

These letters, I think, are not for me. They're for some future me, the me a decade away, who's got the distance required to respond to them, to interpret and utilize them, that's got statistics perhaps along with Foucauldian theories on civilization and madness and's got the influence to make grand calls for change in what's clearly a flawed society. Or who the fuck really knows. Reading through

them now, I can't shake the feeling that I've in some way intercepted them. The anguish, the consistent striking of existential notes, the oddly elevated diction (in places), is embarrassing. It feels a little bit like this guy's taking himself much too seriously.

A few months ago a friend loaned me a couple of Hunter Thompson books. One of them was Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72. The idea in that book's not to offer deep political analysis but rather to keep a journal of happenings and impressions and thoughts, and in this way Thompson claims, preserve what the McGovern-Nixon presidential race was "really like." This seems to me an effective strategy. Every Tuesday and Friday for fifteen or so weeks, I drove over to the mental healthcare center and ran hour-long writing workshops. The residents suffered from things like schizophrenia, PTSD, depression. I suppose you should keep in mind the fact that I spent one hour a week there. That's what I mean when I say he took himself too seriously. At the same time, the inquiry—into (there's no other way to say it) the nature of humanity, and the functions of therapy and writing—seems genuine to me. I hope someday to be able to tell him that yes, bro, it's all figured out.

Mr. Neil deGrasse Tyson's interest was piqued, and he opened and read the second letter.

LETTER #2

I've been thinking about the crosswalk on the university campus by the gym. Let me describe the thing for you: on one side, the walkway—consisting pretty much of pink and red brick, funky and weirdly reminiscent of the Wizard of Oz—leads into the meat of the campus, past the cafeteria, past numerous administrative offices with their dark, reflective mirrors I always feel compelled to glance at (so troubling is this to me, my narcissism—redolent, in a complicated way, of my depression (was/is yours this bad?), with outsized feelings of significance and worthlessness, and a compulsion to reaffirm my goodness, I guess is the best word, by checking my reflection pretty constantly—that every single day I set up a sort of rewards system, e.g. I tell myself, you can look at yourself in that far window, if you resist the temptation to look into these first three, etc.), past the “artwork” (essentially huge boulders placed prominently in odd spots) that look more like ugly garnishes than anything else, and past the Reflecting Pond that reflects the sunlight too well, to the point it damages the eyes; whereas, across the street, you have the gym (humongous!), the lap pool, the leisure pool modeled, I think, on Disney resort leisure pools, and farther past, the anesthetized buildings that make up the dorm complexes. As an undergraduate, I remember nobody—and I mean nobody—would wait for the light to change. Haphazardly, Frogger-style, kids would venture across the street, and as a result, traffic would move chaotically: certain cars would slow through the intersection, while certain others would speed up, ostensibly to discourage jaywalkers. It was always sort of a thrilling thing to witness. Now, though, things

have changed. Everybody waits for the little white walker symbol to flash, even in the absence of traffic. In the three years I've been gone, a transformation has taken place that's kind of extraordinary if you think about it: nothing less than a tectonic shift in the collective psyche, all the more mysterious, because I was not here to see it happen. It doesn't seem to have anything to do with the criminality of the act, because I've yet to see a single police car parked anywhere near the intersection. And I'm not sure there's been any student govt. pressure, or media coverage, or anything like that, that would bring it to light as a problem. Maybe somebody died? What does seem apparent is that it's a very complicated thing that happened here, having to do with certain pressures on the individual in a group setting: a kind of unspoken altruistic peer pressure thing. That it continues to play out every day, that I've only seen, in the three weeks I've been here, a single person defy it, and do so with immediately visible regret, is pretty miraculous.

This got me thinking about something I saw yesterday at Lakeside, in the small, cold conference room where Marina's final workshop was held (I'm taking over for her): a sort of tender respectfulness, among the residents, that I hadn't at all expected. Especially considering what I'd seen on first arriving: lumpy patients moving slowly up and down the hall, speaking to themselves; a cockroach freely ambling in the direction of the exit through which rain-tinged daylight poured; a Katy Perry song over the loudspeakers that struck me as wildly inappropriate and strangely sad, somehow: that her song would play in a

place like this, where everyone I saw trudging through the halls was openly a mess, seemed a huge damn waste, among other things.

More than once, though, in that conference room, I heard people asking others if they were feeling okay, suggesting rest and aspirin for headaches, telling Marina how much they would miss her when she left. Likewise, a hush sopped up the room's noise, when it was someone's turn to speak, with those in line waiting patiently. A young man who went on voluminously about vampires and werewolves was waited out: wearily, I think—the room was a little tight whenever he spoke—but he was given, just like everybody else, the opportunity to speak his mind. This is something I heard afterward, too, from Marina, from the other social workers: these people look out for each other; they understand that the workshop is one of the few occasions on which they're given pretty much free rein to speak their mind, to air concerns and ask questions, to have a voice, and they've chosen to carry themselves in the class with a lot more dignity, and respect, and intuition, than many of the undergraduate classes that I was in. Now, I wouldn't want to lionize them. There were certainly issues: plenty of curtness, interruptions, when Marina was speaking, certain people zoning out or refusing to participate or just walking out of the class, and the prompts were sometimes lost in translation, or else, the writing that resulted from these prompts was trite and cliché and meaningless. But I was, on the whole, very pleased—assured, might be the better word—about the overall attitude of the class (that 'unspoken altruistic peer pressure thing'), about their willingness to continue to be there—

assured, excited to begin, and, significantly, hopeful in a way I haven't been for a long time.

On finishing the second letter, Mr. Neil deGrasse Tyson felt inside of him a little vibrating core, a rattling cellphone of possibility and recognition. He searched the Web for traces of the letter writer, but found nada, as he'd expected, and then went and fished around in the garage until he found his old dilapidated canvas tent, and pitched it in the backyard, in a relatively hole-less spot. He made himself a thermos of Earl Gray. He assembled his favorite telescope, the one his mom had given him when he was just a little black kid in the ghetto, and peering up into the sky was a very real form of escape. He read through the other eleven letters, annotating, composing little margin notes, treating them as if he were both starving for the knowledge contained therein, and peer reviewing for some esoteric academic journal.

LETTER #7

When I was a kid, I wanted to be a Ninja Turtle. Like, really badly. You didn't know that, did you? I had a thing for sewers, and often tried to pry open manhole covers, with very little success. I watched episodes from the TV show over and over and over; ditto with the films (in re-watching them a year or so ago I was pleasantly surprised; they weren't as god-awful as I'd expected and in fact were sort of, kind of, hilarious—as were the TV episodes; written by, I realized, a

group of stoners). My obsession was rewarded with merchandise from all over the Turtle empire: Ninja Turtle t-shirts—much like those bow-tie shirts; they mimicked the structure of the turtle's body: parchment-colored underbelly/brown gridded shell, etc.—Ninja Turtle Halloween costumes, Ninja Turtle figurines, Ninja Turtle baseball caps, Ninja Turtle toy weapons, Ninja Turtle nightlights, and so on, so on. Such mania overtook me again, when Star Wars Episode I came out sometime in the late nineties: I was convinced, for about a month, that the Force flowed through me, that I could move objects with the sheer strength of my mind, and that I would be cast as Anakin Skywalker in Episode II, if I was allowed to audition, and that I'd find, in filming the movie, that all of it was real (the real and the imaginary often conflated in my mind back then—and still do now, I'm ashamed to admit): the Empire, the thousands of strange, inhabited planets, the interstellar spacecraft, the light-sabers. I had a number of recurring daydreams in which I was plucked from obscurity and revealed to be the savior of something or other, based either on a secret family lineage or superpowers that would manifest themselves with the proper training—and when these daydreams crossed on to the subconscious realm, when I actually dreamed of them, as I often did, I was ecstatic, certain of these dreams as evidence of my essential uniqueness/singularity/higher purpose.

In my teenage years, all of this developed into a pretty nasty little hero complex, and my daydreams, tainted by puberty, would revolve around the successfully negotiated rescue of a female classmate or movie heroine—

necessarily chaste, both she and I—which would ultimately devolve, these neat fantasies, into pornographic situations, and I'd be forced to stay in my seat a minute or two after class ended, or tuck myself up into my waistband, or carry my textbooks down in front of me. Inevitably the two—the hero complex and the sexual fantasies—collapsed into each other, and made it damn near impossible for me to approach any girl, because such an encounter was charged with a weird brew of nobility (me feeling as though I needed somehow to earn her love through feats of strength and bravery and charm) and sexuality (my inability—along with comically futile attempts to counteract it—to avoid staring at certain parts of the female anatomy) that was happening all at the same time, and which made it really hard, for example, for me to remember my own name.

There's a pattern here that I'm trying to demonstrate, an undercurrent, which is this: I wanted—still want—to be the hero, but can't consciously choose to be a hero, because to do so would be vainglorious, I think, and would contradict the hero-ness of whatever heroic action I would be committing.

But, Reader, how do you become the hero without committing the heroic action, which the committing of such an action would point towards a decision to be heroic, the motives of which would have to be, to some degree, selfish: i.e., you choosing to be heroic (which is precisely the thing to be avoided if you'd like to be a hero)?

There was a thin young man who showed up to my class this week who happened also to be deaf. I sat the young man next to me, and we established a routine: after I explained an exercise to the class, I'd turn my attention to him, and write the instructions down on his paper. He'd occasionally ask for examples, which I'd provide. Grammatically, his sentences were all over the map, and often, even after the given examples, not quite written to the instructions. Still, when he'd show me what he'd written, I'd give him a smile and thumbs up, and he'd nod grimly, the way a soldier might, and then mess around with his cellphone until it was time for the next exercise.

Something peculiar happened, though, as we came to the final exercise. After I'd explained it to the class, I turned toward the young man, but he shook his head, and began to write. I thought maybe he'd gleaned the instructions this time from watching me speak; the social worker had mentioned that he was a competent lip reader. After a minute he showed me what he'd written, and here I produce it for you: "I don't really need writing in my life."

On the drive home, as I reached the Semoran-Aloma intersection, a light rain began to fall. The sun was still out, and the effect was a sort of glossed light, a surreal sheen, the kind of thing you sometimes see in indie films after the main character has had his or her understated epiphany. On the sidewalk, there were two large signs propped against a shopping cart filled with trash bags. I can't recall the signs exactly; I know only that they mentioned something about Jesus,

and hunger, and helping your fellow man. About ten yards away, sitting on the curb, was a homeless man, staring serenely out onto traffic. His gaze and his posture seemed to suggest not so much confidence as disinterest, and I guess I wondered what sort of experiences could lead a man past desperation, and past hope.

As I drove away, I felt a very real pang remembering another homeless man I'd met just five days earlier, on a Friday night when I'd been downtown. A friend of my roommate's was in town that weekend, and I'd volunteered—selflessly, I felt—to drive them down to the bars. I figured I'd have a good time regardless of whether I drank or not, but this wasn't the case; the music seemed, suddenly, way too loud, the space itself consumed with smoke through which numerous bodies danced and staggered like puppets on a warped string. For a while, Reader, I just stood there in a corner, trying real hard to be quiet and unobtrusive. Finally, though, I'd had enough, and I left and walked down the street to a relatively less crowded area, where I found an unoccupied bench.

The night was gorgeous. Seriously. The milky darkness of an empty television screen. The multitude of voices, from where I sat, positively hummed. The air smelled like cigarettes. I sat and watched the groupings and de-groupings up the street, the momentary connections of hugs, high-fives, handshakes—and the colors that, darting around like that, began to take on a molecular hue: it was almost like witnessing a macrocosmic representation of a subatomic particle accelerator—that is, there was a certain surreal quality to it. And the thing about

it, Reader, was that it made me sad. And I couldn't, sitting there like that, distinguish the texture of the emotional experience: that is, I couldn't tell to what degree the sadness was caused by outside forces—by my witnessing—and how much was the old residual stuff flaring up for a minute or two as it often does. It was a peculiar moment.

After a while, a homeless man approached me. He was, for the most part, clean-shaven. His clothes were clean. His face was friendly and unlined. We talked for a while. About the bars. About the fact of his abstinence from alcohol (which, seeing the kind of shape he was in, I didn't doubt). About how miserable I looked sitting there (his observation). About the claustrophobia I'd felt in the dark, smoky bar. About the hassle of cops. About his shit luck.

This man was a veteran, Reader. He asked me to guess which war he'd served in. I guessed that he was maybe in his early forties, so it must have been the First Gulf War.

"Guess again," he said. Can I tell you that his face, which before had been affable, had hardened now into a weird nameless resolve?

"Afghanistan?" I guessed.

He shook his head.

"Not—Vietnam?"

He told me he was fifty-seven years old.

It's kind of hard for me to describe this man. He was clearly very proud, almost arrogant, and quite smart; he spoke as if he'd gone to college (although I

think he mentioned he spent his GI Bill money on a car). I really didn't know what to do, actually. I had about \$3.50 in my pocket, but I thought offering it to him might insult him. I wondered briefly if he was one of those guys who messes with college-age kids just for the hell of it. Was he manipulating me? It became this big, vague dilemma. I couldn't focus on what he was saying. I sort of began to hate him for putting me in such a painful state of awareness—for shaming me—and wished, more than anything, that he'd just shake my hand and walk away. I think now that maybe we were both ashamed. There's so much weird stuff, you know, about being a person on this planet among tons of other people. So many ways in which trying to be helpful and kind and empathetic can just go wrong. There's an impossibility of equilibrium: ideally, I think, the person who helps and the person who's being helped need to be on the same level, but due to a whole host of socioeconomic/psychological factors, this just won't ever happen. It's impossible—it can't happen—that we don't judge. Ourselves and others. Ourselves in light of others (“Look how good I am for doing this!”), and others in light of ourselves (“Look at this poor, poor person!”). The power dynamic is hopelessly tilted. We've created for ourselves internal and external fail-safes—the concept of karma, the Golden Rule—but, hey, we can't help how we feel. All of this is to say that I think the best we can hope for, in such situations, is that both parties are slightly unhappy.

Sure enough, the man asked me if I could spare some cash for him to do some laundry, and nonchalantly, I said sure, and pulled the money from my

pocket and handed it over. We sat there for a minute. I knew the dynamic of the relationship had changed. I knew the shame he felt. I knew, exactly, the way he viewed me viewing him, and wanted to tell him, no, it wasn't like that, I didn't think less of him; but of course to do that would have been to confirm it in his mind. And hell, maybe it was true anyway.

"Makes me feel like shit," he told me, after a minute, "asking for money like this."

"I can imagine," I said.

So what, exactly, is that mixture of emotions that swell in me on each of these occasions? This is the part where I consciously try—and will probably fail—to connect all of these threads. It's a little more than the sum of its parts, I think, and extremely complex. There's sadness, yes, and shame, both for the object of my pity, and for myself; there's a certain hardening of my shell that occurs, a callousness; and to a lesser extent, anger. Such a brew has the viscosity of water; it's constantly shifting. I'm struggling to explain it because of the fact of the other thing which is a major part of the experience: my awareness of it all, which complicates things because now I can't tell whether anything I feel is a genuine feeling or rather some general abstract notion of a feeling conjured up by the self-conscious machine inside of me for its own consumption. The closest analogy to this is maybe to think of a book which is ostensibly a unified, coherent thing based on the observation of its cover and title page. Upon delving into the

meat of the book, though, you discover one text on the odd-numbered pages, and a completely different text on the even-numbered pages: two adjacent texts, which, thanks to the way we read in this language, makes it all but impossible that you'll be able to concentrate on either of the texts, and it would certainly be out of the question to ask you to comprehend both texts simultaneously. This is what's happening for me when I find myself experiencing one of these 'hero' moments: I find myself increasingly aware of the emotional effect on me, until the awareness crowds out completely the emotional effect, and soon leads to an awareness of the awareness, a meta-awareness I suppose, which itself soon crowds out the experience of regular old awareness, and I find my thoughts turn inward, to me and me alone, and the agony of the meta-awareness, which is itself obviously another different kind of awareness, because now I'm suddenly aware of the meta-awareness's emotional effect on me. And so on. My thinking life transforming into something rigidly concentric, with me at the center, aware of being at the center but powerless to shift my own gaze outward (comfortable only in my discomfort). This is precisely, by the way, what happens when I write, too (as you can see from the last paragraph—my writing has, in effect, become the corpus to my corpse; there's a re-enactment or 'doubling' going on here that I can't quite explain because of how convoluted all of it is). There's a very real and nefarious connection, then, between writing and life, which is: me me me me as the vector, or the hyphen that establishes the marriage. To simplify all of this: I'm aware, in such moments of 'hero-ness,'—when I'm the guy trying and failing to

help somebody, or at least feeling the helplessness of somebody as acutely as they feel it—of life organizing itself into a narrative. Of straying into somebody's story, which becomes, because of my awareness of the story, my story. It's sort of like a lucid dream.

And of course in this day and age we compulsively record our stories. So of course when the narrative awareness attacks me when I'm driving home, I do what any self-respecting, self-loving person would do: I begin to write the story in my head. Starting here, at the awareness of the narrative, and my confession of it, and the insidious motives behind it ("This would make a great story! I'll look so clever and smart and anguished!"), and working backwards, towards the deaf young man in my class this week. You see what I'm saying? In such an attempt, the people I'm trying to help are not people; they're plot devices. And I have no idea how to answer the question of whether such a downgrade does anything to the act of hero-ness itself: does my disingenuousness somehow change the nature of the act of service? And: does my awareness of my disingenuousness cancel out the disingenuousness?

Mr. Neil deGrasse Tyson peered up into the cosmos. He peered and peered. His ambition as a kid had been to discover and name a new planet, a life-sustaining planet. He'd have named it after himself. He'd been naïve and inexperienced enough to believe he could do it with the telescope he was now

peering through, which magnified a paltry thirty times—just like Galileo’s telescope! his mom had told him, proud as hell to trot that bit of trivia out—what the naked eye could witness. In the cool damp air of that canvas tent, beneath the cosmic bowl of ineluctable stars and nebulae, and light, in the suburbs of the galaxy, firmly ensconced inside the Orion-Cygnus spiral arm, Mr. Neil deGrasse Tyson peered. As his ex-wife made love to someone else. As the former attending physician gently wept for his own mortality in the chill and darkness of his apartment. As the guru and devoted practitioner of *Dzogchen* ate plain udon in front of the TV, and the disembodied voice roamed the Earth, seeking the body it hastily abandoned after a single brief moment of transcendence at a Kohl’s in Boca Raton. As the astrophysicists and the Author himself gazed, like voyeurs, at him, still—Mr. Neil deGrasse Tyson peered.⁵

LETTER #12

Well fuck. It’s getting harder for me to hide the sadness. And in fact it’s beginning to look more and more like that other sadness, the one that once upon a time walked me into the dark and then just backed away. To call it by its name is to acknowledge its threat: am I prepared to do this? I can see it coming this time

⁵ ASTROPHYSICISTS: you dont get it the multiverse isnt certainty based. its all probability

ME: What do you mean?

ASTROPHYSICISTS: like think of the multiverse like schrodinger’s cat. since we cant observe everything it stands to reason that everything exists. but only as probability

around, but does that necessarily mean I have the power or the wherewithal to stop its progress?

And, you know, what does depression look like? Inside of us, I mean. Neurologically speaking. That little house in the brain. Those neurons shot like shrapnel through rubber tubes. Do they go dark? Is it wet? What do they smell like? Do they grow? Can they sound? It's almost physically painful to write. Such a volume of disorganized thought: it's giving me a headache.

There was an anatomist in the early seventeenth century who liked to pair mental and physical diseases together in a sort of complicated bowtie of hurt. Thomas Adams. The Diseases of the Soule. Headaches he identified with "braine-sickness," which itself was a principle form of melancholy, or anhedonia, or...depression.

In class today we worked on writing exercises relating to empathy. Describe, I ordered the class, a time you helped someone. Now: flip it. Go the other way. Describe a time you were helped by someone. Between these two exercises I gave a little lecture about helping people (hint: it's good), and about empathy as a concept in writing. That is, I told the class—I presumed to tell the class—that because writing is such an intensely personal endeavor, it's often good to take a step back, and try to write about anything and everything outside of their own heads. (Do you see the paradox? Do you see how this is impossible for me to do here, right now, even as I write about it?) This lesson plan grew directly from these letters in which I've been agonizing about the narcissism and

self-reflexive nature of the act of writing. I thought I'd found an escape route. A solution to the paradox. The issue was: they were still at the center of their stories. No matter what. As am I. The heart of myself still beats. The brain of me continues to fold in on myself. Have you heard of mirror neurons? There's a theory out there about mirror neurons that claims they're—among other things—responsible for the phenomenon of empathy. If so, they're laughably named. Because a goddamned mirror is nothing but a reflection. And a reflection's what Narcissus looked at, and from which he couldn't turn away, until he died. Death is obviously a pretty viable escape route. But it's extremely depressing to think it's the only escape route.

The question I've been asking myself over the course of the past week is this: how does the sadness—or world-weariness—I feel when I work with the residents, connect to the Thing? What's the vector?

I'll try to puzzle it out: world-weariness is a sadness which is perpetually opening, i.e. it's that feeling we get when we're overwhelmed by outside forces, or forces beyond our control. Now that's #1.

#2: The Sadness, or depression (that Thing), is that which is perpetually closing. I.e. it's that feeling—much more than a feeling, actually—that we get when we're overwhelmed by our own thoughts, fears, and anxieties.

So where's the hyphen? Well, fuck if I know. I'd guess that the connector is a series of thoughts or thought processes, which relate an outer anxiety to an inner anxiety. For example: my anxiety regarding Elly, a young, and very

beautiful, participant in the writing workshops, and her (heavily medicated) depression: this week, in response to the exercise about how we were helped by someone else, Elly wrote a pretty harrowing account about the first time she was put on suicide watch. Essentially, she was completely isolated and ignored by the doctors and nurses supposed to be monitoring her. They did the bare minimum, she said: they fed her, they took her vitals, they checked in on her occasionally. But beyond that, nothing. After she'd read this aloud, I said, "So, you weren't helped, then?" To which she didn't reply. At all. An awkward silence punctuated by another resident's awkward laugh. I'd like to set aside for a moment the ambiguity of her non-response (did her silence mean the isolation did help?), and focus on the fact that her story brought to mind a very specific instance of my own self-imposed isolation as a sophomore in college: I sat in my room, I read War and Peace, and when I couldn't take the silence anymore, I opened my computer and wrote a short anguished paragraph I saved under the title "Prison" (which I was going to reproduce for you, but which I don't have anymore—thankfully).

And then I cut myself on the forearm, just once, with my suitemate's Bic disposable razor, a nick really, that produced just a few small blossoms of blood. In part, this was just to be dramatic. But still. But still.

What I'm trying to say: Elly's courageous (I think this is the right word) relating of her painful memory produced an extremely visceral—and quite painful—reaction in me. In other, other words: empathy succeeded. But it failed to produce anything approaching redemption or closure for either of us. I think

Elly will always have her memories, just as I think I'll always have mine. That we can relate to each other does nothing to alleviate our respective conditions. In fact, I feel worse now for having heard about hers.

I thought I saw in the concept of empathy—in others-oriented thinking—an opportunity for clarity. And maybe it's there somewhere. But what it's produced so far is more confusion. More thinking. And, Reader, I'm tired of it.

LETTER #13

Why am I so skeptical/disheartened? It has less to do with our actions—although that's a big part of it—and more to do with our motivations for such actions: When I look for hope—which I do constantly, compulsively—I start with the heart. The heart of me, to be more specific. And I'm just finding it impossible to leave myself out of anything. The form that the notion of 'writing unselfishly' would necessarily have to take would be dialogue. But it would need to be a dialogue enacted outside of ourselves; that is, to converse unselfishly, our speech/writing would have to be reflected through a lens that isn't us. Isn't me. I would need to relate to you through you. Which is impossible. The act of relating is one that occurs when we draw likenesses between ourselves. You cannot, in other words, take the self out of an action.

So I guess all of this is sort of an indictment of empathy and writing (or writing as therapy). And maybe, more than that, it's an indictment of the construction and promulgation of the notion of "helping people." What I've been

trying to get at—and negotiate—is the disconnect that seems inevitable, between motive and action. We do these things, yeah. Sure. We help people. We’ll work in soup kitchens. We’ll donate plenty of money. Take in foster children. We’ll debate these issues. Demand more from our politicians. Volunteer overseas. We’re capable, as individuals, of extraordinary acts of charity.

But why do we do these things? (And does the answer to this question matter at all?)

My fear is that the answer is essentially self-centered. It makes me feel good, you’ll often hear people say, to serve. I get a lot out of it. It’s self-rewarding. I learned more from them than they did from me. And then it makes you kind of start to wonder: why does it make us feel good to serve? Where is the origin to all of this?

I’m so fucking tired of writing about this stuff. It’s like a scab I can’t keep from picking. And maybe, in part, I do it to punish myself for the shame I feel about conveniently ignoring all of it for so many years. For ignoring it now, too: maybe I write about service to divert myself from the act of service, and maybe I’m hoping somehow the writing can itself be construed as an act of service. It’s become impossible—it’s maybe been impossible all along—for me to act selflessly. And maybe that’s not particularly important, anyway. Maybe the system of service we’re participating in is that previously mentioned “unspoken altruistic peer pressure thing,” in this way: inner and outer pressures are brought to bear on us; that is, we’re (covertly) forced to believe in—and to act out, as

proof of—the notion of altruism. To admit, or argue, that the thing many of us think of as innate biological goodness is actually a socially enforced ideal is kind of an uncomfortable thing to do. Like staring at the sun. Or de-masking the superhero. It's disappointing. But isn't it still sort of magnificent, the fact that we keep up the charade? Isn't it really kind of awesome that we continue to help each other, almost in spite of our motives? Isn't this something to be thankful for, rather than taken apart?

I think the decision I need to make—but that's paralyzed me—is whether to place more emphasis on motive or action. I'd just really, really like to decide on action, only I keep coming back to the slim possibility of a reconciliation between the two; I try to imagine what it might be like if our motives are scrubbed free of selfishness/narcissism, and instead of motive working against action, or action working against motive, what it would be like if the two are working together. What could we accomplish, do you think? I think, as corny and Miss America as this sounds, even total world peace would be within reach, in such a case.

When I think about all of this stuff, it begins to feel like way, way more is on the line than our small acts of charity/compassion—it feels like this is the big underlying dilemma of life, and I'm trying to decide, actually, not just how to serve, but how to live.

Mr. Neil deGrasse Tyson peered. He peered and peered until his eyes watered from the effort. He seemed to be staring at the Dark. He blinked and refocused. His soul asking if It meant to measure his puny might against Its own. He peered and peered. If he ever found that world that he sought, that he now believed with his entire being existed, he would name it after the jar of Jif Reduced Fat Crunchy Peanut Butter. He would name it for his offspring, and for his theory, the refined cosmological constant.

He would name it Hope.

The elderly man collapsing finally into silence, with great solemnity refolding the story and slipping it into his pocket.

Thien-Vu Llosa-Scott weeping.

Hope, the elderly man said, gently. *You understand?*

Hope, said the crowd.

You understand, the elderly man said, clearly relieved.

Hope, said the crowd again, a bit louder.

The air tensing and hot, Thien-Vu wiping at her eyes, the cameraman sensing something, taking Thien-Vu's elbow and pulling her along.

Hope! rang the cry. *Hope! Hope!*

The cameraman tugging urgently at Thien-Vu now, trying to reach the outskirts of the crowd before

Hope! Hope! Hope!

As Thien-Vu and the cameraman reached the crowd's edge, the chants reached fever pitch and, like it was planned out or something, the protesters throbbed toward the police cordon, the second wave breaking through. Thien-Vu reporting, the crowd's chant dissolving into a formless mass of little Hopes, screamed out at various patternless intervals.

FIVE

1:32:27-1:32:33. Camera 2. ‘Not that you’re loved, but that you’re *known*. You’re known.’

###

On the drive home Julius Jonah Boggs sat once again slumped in the seat, his head thunk-thunking against the window pane with each movement the car made. The Pain was beginning to swing around again on its elliptical journey and catch the glare of him as the codeine’s numb effect dissipated—it was like acid he thought tearing through skin, and but so like on cue here comes the headache, a swelling vibrating and massive indescribable thing, each thunk against the glass sending sharp ripples inside his skull, and here comes the cold sweat, exacerbated by the car’s lack of A/C, and here comes the annoying drip in his throat and the weird teeth sensitivity, like he’d just snorted cocaine or something, and here, here is the fracture, a little hairline thing to start but holy shit was it Painful, and Winona, there she is, in the kitchen, her arms around his waist, her hair in his nostrils, and there she is climbing out of bed to use the bathroom, and Jesus Christ utterly nude, slipping on his old basketball shorts and rolling up the waist for a better fit, and there she is on TV clutching kittens and explaining something he couldn’t remember and offering up that *look* to the camera—like she knew exactly what he was thinking and she was thinking it too, and there she is checking her phone discretely in the movie theater, and there ordering a Blue Moon at Bru’s, wrinkling her nose at the fried pickles he’d ordered, and there

napping on the couch, and there taking his hand in the dark backseat of somebody's car, and there smiling, grimacing, shutting her eyes to something he said—

The teensy Julius, the spirit who stood apart, watched himself with much embarrassment and simultaneously was repeating the morning's mantra,

the only way to die is to stop the heart

and soon the bigger Julius, the bodied Julius, the guy in Pain, who was everywhere disintegrating—but so, soon that Julius was listening and focusing and hoping

“Let's, OK, let's Jesus you're heavy, come on, arm around the shoulder there you go. Let's get you inside.”

The two of them shuffled awkwardly and with great effort up to the front door and there Rob fished around in his pockets and came up with the house key and unlocked the door and soon Rob was sort of dragging Julius along the hallway and into the bedroom and then just kind of letting go, which the effect was that Julius was dropping facedown onto the sheets and there briefly smelling or hallucinating the smell of Winona before Rob turned him over and struggled him to where he was supposed to be, lengthwise and beneath the sheets, his pounding head upon the pillow.

Julius looked at Rob looking at him: the small dude, sporting a goatee Julius Jonah Boggs hadn't before noticed, along with it looked like genuine concern.

“I should take you to the hospital,” Rob said, softly.

Julius Jonah Boggs managed a weak shake of the head, the motion of which caused a quick-inhale degree of Pain.

“I’m at least gonna watch over you for a little bit.” At this, he placed the back of his hand against the forehead of Julius Jonah Boggs, and quickly withdrew. “Listen. I’ll run over to CVS and grab a cold compress and a thermometer. If you’re above, say, 101, we’re off to the hospital.”

After Rob left, he lay a moment listening to the rush inside his ears and measuring the fracture’s increase. His skull felt very much like somebody’d stuck a screwdriver or a crowbar inside and was now in the process of prying him open and but meanwhile the immaterial Julius was chanting the mantra and soon Julius Jonah Boggs found himself throwing off the sheets with a strength he hadn’t known he had and staggering to the bathroom and while there unscrewing the top off the pill bottle and emptying its contents into his cupped palm and swallowing it all down, every last pill, washing it with mouthwash, swallowing the mouthwash, its intense minty taste making him gag, but with much strength of will, enough that he noted it and was proud of it, he avoided vomiting,

the only way to die

and stood there a moment assessing, refusing to look in the mirror because what’s the use, rubbing his temple with his left palm while the right gripped the sink counter and kept him upright, and saying OK to the Pain, yes to It, embracing It, because to let go of it would be to let go of the joy, of all those moments of goodness and happiness and l-o-v-e—

JULIUS JONAH BOGGS

Remember the strip club. The one in Ybor.

JULIUS JONAH BOGGS

(moaning)

JULIUS JONAH BOGGS

Come on. Remember. The bachelor party. Had and Rob insisting on the hotel room. The molly. Brian and Dwayne and who was that motherfucker, Eli, or some such.

HADRIAN

Eli, yeah. Supplied the molly.

JULIUS JONAH BOGGS

(writhing in Pain, mumbling incoherently)

JULIUS JONAH BOGGS

This is embarrassing to watch.

HADRIAN

Drowning's basically the same thing as asphyxiation. It's like, in both you're lacking air.

JULIUS JONAH BOGGS

(still mumbling, eyes clenched)

HADRIAN

What's he saying? I can almost make it out.

DAD

Seems almost like it's the same thing over and over, I'm pretty sure. Which, listen. Have you heard the one where if you don't know the words to something, you're just supposed to mouth 'watermelon' over and over? The trick being the audience will read the correct words into it.

MOM

Sherman! Why do you continue to intrude? What's this insistence on contributing to every goddamned conversation? Makes me loony.

DAD

That's why. *(winks)*

DWAYNE

We'll be the chorus, I guess. Fellas? You OK with that?

BRIAN

Sure.

ELI

Nothing else going on.

DWAYNE

Great. OK. Here on out, we'll be referenced as CHORUS.

Our job's to emphasize certain points in the conversation,

to in other words bring it home for JJ here.

JULIUS JONAH BOGGS

The bachelor party. The molly. Downtown Ybor. I know I remember. Buffalo Wild Wings, drinking Long Islands.

That nasty strip club, whatever it was called. Around 11?

And nobody was in there?

DWAYNE

On three, OK? After Mom.

JULIUS JONAH BOGGS

*(continuing to mumble and writhe, sweat pooling in the
crawlspace at the base of the neck)*

MOM

It's her name. He's saying her name.

DWAYNE

One, two, three.

CHORUS

Winona.

—thinking about the Pain was impossible not to do anyway, and Julius Jonah Boggs wasn't even startled to discover the Pain detaching Itself from the source and becoming something wholly and bitchingly unto Itself, and even less startled than not startled at all, to realize that he, he himself, was coming now to prefer such crushing Pain, to *hold onto It*, against time's moderating influence. Which why was the big question, wasn't it.

JULIUS JONAH BOGGS

Why.

DAD

Or how about this. You only really need the first and last letters in a word in the right order to be able to understand the word. The rest of the letters can be jumbled up.

Again (again and again and again), to let go of the Pain was to let go of the joy, which Julius Jonah Boggs wasn't ready to do just yet. And the joy itself was troublesome, if he was being totally honest with himself, because it sprung not from contentment or peace or etc. but from some truly not-so-nice things like power, jealousy, narcissism, selfishness, hubris and so on down the line of faults/vices that located themselves at the locus of the terminated relationship with Winona, who'd left, let's remember, without a word, *without a word*, and disappeared into the sunset of her own relief at having done so, so to speak. Which was one theory he had about why this Pain was so much worse than the pain of his brother's death. Because of the non-closure/uncertainty. Like would she maybe come back. And that was part of the joy that was part of the Pain, he thought: he continued to hold vise-like onto his moving picture of the future of their relationship, the three kids, the Caribbean vacations, the starter house and then the big house, the maturity of their l-o-v-e into some beautifully mellow and wordless thing, their aging together, their grandkids, their deaths, hours apart. He did not want—he could not, even if he wanted—to let go of It.

CHORUS

Winona.

JULIUS JONAH BOGGS

Had going over to the booth? Telling them it's my bachelor party? Remember. Getting called up to the stage. Those three strippers tearing off my shirt? Slapping my nipple until it was raw and the skin was red around it? Dancing on me in front of everybody? The way that one stripper's crotch, when she stuck it in my face, smelled like strawberries. Remember? The porn DVD they gave me afterwards, CumGuzzlers 8, or something like that?

CHORUS

CumGuzzlers 8.

JULIUS JONAH BOGGS

Not a take home point, fellas.

CHORUS

Sorry!

HADRIAN

Drowning is death through respiratory impairment from submersion/immersion in liquid. The instinctive drowning

response is the final set of autonomic reactions in the 20 – 60 seconds before sinking underwater, and to the untrained eye can look similar to calm safe behavior. The autonomic nervous system is the part of the peripheral nervous system that acts as a control system that functions largely below the level of consciousness to control visceral functions, including heart rate, digestion, respiratory rate, salivation, perspiration, pupillary dilation, micturition, sexual arousal, breathing and swallowing. Drowning itself is quick and silent.

JULIUS JONAH BOGGS

Jesus. Now he's quoting Wikipedia.

CHORUS

Wikipedia!

DAD

Wonderful resource.

CHORUS

But how's he doing it, if we're all just sort of living inside
JJ's head?

JULIUS JONAH BOGGS

Well, that's easy. Julius went through a stage where he did
extensive research on drowning. Natural reaction. Spent so
much time with the Wikipedia entry that I must've
memorized parts of it.

HADRIAN

(face down in the swimming pool) Like this!

JULIUS JONAH BOGGS

The one stripper. That's what I'm trying to remember. That
Brian got? Seattle.

BRIAN

*(shuts his eyes, gestures dreamily, lets out little pleasure
noises)*

HADRIAN

(drowning now on a loop, over and over) Look! At me,
look!

JULIUS JONAH BOGGS

(weeping, terrified, uncomprehending)

JULIUS JONAH BOGGS

Seattle. Listen to me. Her name was Seattle. And remember
when Brian came out, it was pretty clear from the smell that
he'd, well—

CHORUS

(minus Brian) Splooged!

BRIAN

(checking his jeans)

JULIUS JONAH BOGGS

Remember. Brian spent the next week looking for jobs in
Seattle. After a few months, he took a job as a prison guard,
moved out there.

DAD

That's how the mind works—allusions, associations.

Lateral movement.

CHORUS

The Whorfian hypothesis! Linguistic relativity!

DAD

Words shaping experience. If it can't be expressed, then it
does not exist, it stands to reason. Scary thought.

HADRIAN

(convulsing underwater) The point being, I'm guessing,
that JJ here thinks if he can't express his grief, then it
somehow magically goes away?

JULIUS JONAH BOGGS

The point being the mind's suggestible, is the whole point.

And I'm dying, oh, I'm dying.

#

Nona was feeling pretty shy and self-conscious as she entered the condominium's
glittering marbled atrium. She'd only ever felt this anxious around Hadrian, whose charm and

frenzied polymathic hyper-intelligence, whose boasts about knocking Newton and Einstein and the whole goddamned system of physics down on their/its asses made her keenly aware of her own small limits as a human being. He'd seemed, genuinely, to know *everything*. She was afraid of looking stupid, she realized. He'd unknowingly bullied her, and his greatest trick was she knew that she'd feel just as, if not more, stupid mentioning how she felt. When he'd died, she'd experienced, in addition to great sorrow and worry for Julius, a small tough oxidized screw of relief, and the attendant inward twist at the experience of such relief.

And yet here it was again, as her shoes' heels ticked along the marble: that stupid feeling. That *paranoia*. That sense that there were like, tons of HD cameras trained on her at all times, seeking to capture the minutest variations in her actions and experiences, zooming in, even, on the pores of her nose, witnessing her skin's imperfections, the end goal of such acute observation being her ultimate humiliation. Because everybody found that kind of thing entertaining. This was why, she realized, she'd actually, for a little while, enjoyed being Julius's caretaker after Hadrian's death: because he'd gone so low, descended in her eyes to like Mariana Trench levels of depth and despair, there was no real danger of her humiliating herself. When she'd understood it was this, and not love, that'd kept her around, she'd left.

She rode the elevator up to floor nine and stepped out into the hallway's weighted hush. The A/C pulsed out of vents. Nona nearly turned back around, but convinced herself in time she was being ridiculous: it was just Ishmael, and there were no cameras, and wasn't paranoia statistically proven to be the one universally American trait, or something?

Ishmael at the bar those seven-odd months ago: was this a coincidence? Had he engineered the whole rotten situation *so as to bump into her*? His daylong silence today: planned, to make her feel crazy and dependent on him?

The police had briefly ruled Hadrian's death a homicide, but nobody'd seemed interested in that possibility except for her. Even Julius had been too comatose to invest in its appeal. Even Rob, perpetual conspiracy theorist, had seemed uninterested. Was this not strange?

And who leaked? Who was it that leaked news of the web series? Could it have been Ishmael? Was this why she was so nervous about entering the condo?

Nona turned the lock and opened the door. For a handful of seconds, she didn't step over the threshold, just stood there scanning for anything weird. And then she found what she was looking for. There, reclining on the couch in the living room, was not Ishmael, but the Thoth girl, paging through what looked like *Reader's Digest*.

Nona struggled for words.

"Come on in," said the girl.

"How'd you get in here?" Nona took a step inside the condo. She felt dreamy and light, a floating pillowcase of unfocused thoughts.

"Said I was Ishmael's daughter," she said.

"Where's Ishmael?" asked Nona.

The girl looked up, coolly. This had always been the unnerving thing about her: some people might call it bitch face, but it wasn't, not to Nona. It was just composed. And almost impossibly beautiful: try as she might, Nona couldn't figure out why a girl like this, no matter

what she may or may not have endured in her short life, would want to take her own life. Why would anyone so well-made want to cancel herself?

“Sit,” said the girl, patting the couch. “We need to chat for a minute.”

For the first time, Nona noticed the gun on the couch, on the girl’s far side. She did as ordered. Up close, she could see a teensy ridge of sweat along the high end of the girl’s forehead, right near the hairline.

“Where’s Ishmael?” Nona asked again.

“The show must go on,” the girl said, cryptic as hell, like always, but was that a quiver Nona detected in her tone?

“This isn’t something you have to do,” Nona said, softly, for the first time today feeling grown-up and strong.

“We’re going to finish it,” said the girl. “The show. Today.”

Nona thought: it was her. The girl. She leaked.

“No,” said Nona, again as gently as she could.

“Up,” ordered the girl, gripping her gun.

#

“I’ll admit right up front I wasn’t expecting to hear from you again today.”

“I’m in CVS.”

“CVS.”

“Cold compress for Julius. It’s looking like he’s got a pretty bad fever.”

“Take his temperature.”

“I wanted to say remember that time you and me rode that Ferris Wheel?”

“That was you? Could’ve sworn that was my other lover.”

“Funny girl.”

“Nostalgic boy.”

“...”

“What’d you want to say about it?”

“I was just thinking on it, is all.”

“...”

“Just the way it felt I guess. Being there with you. And you looking the way you did. And you remember how scared I was?”

“Of heights, you said. I do remember. You said what was it? ‘If we get stuck up here, we’re doing it’?”

“It’s a moment I knew when it ended I’d miss it right away.”

“You surprise me sometimes, Rob.”

“Well. You know how I feel.”

“I think I know how it ends. Your story.”

“How.”

“The boyfriend leaves, doesn’t he? Because the girl’s stuck. Because she can’t resolve the dilemma.”

“Maybe he stays.”

“He leaves. I know it. It’s the only way. He leaves and he’s heartbroken about it. But eventually he finds another girl.”

“I think it’s just a story, Suzy. I didn’t even have an ending in mind when I started telling you. All I know the boyfriend snaps her out of it somehow. Or maybe the pastor comes back. Or hell, maybe they all just die. Maybe love’s absence, just like Reverend Hollins says. Maybe that’s supposed to mean something. I don’t know.”

“I think she’s asking the wrong question, the girl in your story.”

“Where are you? Wherever it is, I’m on my way.”

“I think instead of asking does hell exist, or why does hell exist, she should be wondering why the flames in that hellfire look so goddamn pretty.”

“...”

“...”

“You had that one in your pocket, didn’t you.”

“Maybe.”

“Boy I’d love to make fun of you, but truthfully, I’m digging it.”

#

Two of the attorneys had previously thought seriously of killing themselves, but only one had ever attended therapy or been prescribed antidepressants. No one, not even his wife, knew about this. The attorneys’ thoughts on l-o-v-e were, respectively, as follows: ‘The way I think about it is, in terms of, just smushing all the Taylor Swift songs you ever heard together, and that probably approximates the experience of it.’ The paradox of how to eat the bagel while at the same time holding the cup of orange juice had gone, remarkably, unforeseen in the attorneys’ subliminal drift toward the cooler, western corner of the conference room. Years spent on antidepressants can effectively lobotomize or hotwire certain essential neurological components.

‘Probably the most passionate kind of love we feel for somebody, the red-hot stuff, is just us projecting ourselves onto somebody else. And then the reason that red-hot stuff cools off so fast is because the more we get to know somebody, the less possible it is for us to keep projecting ourselves onto them. When they become real people, instead of just *reflections* of us, is when the love just goes off a cliff, most times.’ Cumulonimbus clouds concatenated, massed, and tracked grime through the sky’s open channels, collecting pressure and moisture. ‘Honestly probably not much more than a poorly understood chemical reaction.’ To go cold turkey off, say, Nardil, an MAO inhibitor after, say, five years, is a dangerous prospect. ‘Emotional bullets shot into you that don’t ever really exit the body.’ Nine years prior, the attorney had spent about an hour in the early morning of what turned out to be just a gorgeous day in June with the barrel of his father’s .45 against the roof of his mouth. ‘One of the most enlivening exhilarating things you can experience.’ On climaxing, the jaundiced attorney’s wife called out a name that wasn’t the jaundiced attorney’s name. ‘Maybe not knowing someone completely, but *wanting* to. That being the thing you want more than anything else. More than life, even.’ Prescription drugs can’t and shouldn’t replace the hard work and genuine emotional catharsis of therapy. ‘Maintaining it’s really just about ratcheting up the sexual deviancy every now and again.’

#

on the blackblue inside of his eyeballs tools tails tales trundling bundles of nerves suspended in viscous lagoons in which cypress roots of blood traversed he saw patternless EKGs spikes of light *her* somewhere nude and smiling and strange with hope and confusion like hopeful confusion his heart extremely facedown in a swimming pool whose surface is dark whose depth is lit and and rhythmic dream and its *speechless* lyrics TWO meaningless words

“JJ” theres no lying in the body man on fire “JJ” anxiogenic Time maieutic stink can you see hear sear seer “Hey” watch her *absence* like he knew all along he was mucking on camera forever holding the pose until the pose like *brings* “JJ” *him* “Fuck come on” greenumb lite explode *in tow* hat ta stencharealic kraftboat inswi mming po olat nite flipped by shitface “Dont” ological *being* involves “JJ” be comin gin volvesear chfo rTWOm ean english words

#

Hardy’s first note read ‘Abrupt transition to what seems like an irrelevant but truly bizarre tangent 11:21-12:33.’ Nona skipped ahead. Camera 1 completely perfectly centered, captured the girl leaning forward conspiratorially and near-whispering: ‘Yever notice how the camera the most important thing is the thing you can’t see in the camera?’ Nona on Camera 3 offered a professional smile, shook her head. A cut to Camera 2 showed the girl leaning back, as she did now, and nailing Nona or someone just beyond her with what could only be termed a grotesquely self-satisfied expression. ‘You put a mirror in front of a mirror,’ she said on Camera 2, a quick cut to Camera 1 on her dramatic pause, then a return to Camera 2, ‘and what’s it reflecting?’

The skin where the gun was pressed between Nona’s ribs was beginning to bruise, she could tell. Behind her the kittens mewled like hell. On Camera 3, Nona kept her smile. ‘Itself. Right?’ Zoom-out and refocus on Camera 1. ‘Itself’—a cut to Camera 2 as the girl spoke—‘yeah. Itself. But also itself reflecting itself. Because what’s it doing? It’s reflecting. It’s reflecting itself reflecting itself.’

‘Tell me what you’re’—cut to Camera 3 mid-sentence, very shoddy workmanship Nona thought—‘trying to say.’

On Camera 1, the girl kneaded her camera-fore temple with her camera-fore hand: ‘Or think about this: you position two cameras so they’re each recording just only the lens of the other. What are they doing? What are they looking at? What’s gonna be on the video afterwards? You’re staring into darkness basically, but you’re staring into a darkness that’s staring back at you. You’re recording yourself being recorded recording yourself.’

On Camera 3, Nona was looking at Camera 3. ‘You think this’—quick cut and refocus on Camera 1, just in time to see the girl gesture at Camera 2—‘is going to save you? It’s a trick. It’s just a complicated illu—’

“Skip ahead.” The gun jabbed into Nona’s ribs with a painful force. ‘—sion of light,’ the girl was saying, looking from Camera 2 to 3 to 1 to Nona again. ‘The you in it isn’t you. It’s glorified navel-gazing.’

Hardy’s next note read ‘Gets personal then almost annoyingly philosophical 16:23-17:41.’ On 3 Nona leaned back, shut her eyes: ‘I guess, I guess I haven’t just yet resigned myself to the fact that I’ll fu—that I’ll mess up every relationship I’ll ever have. I guess I kind of still believe in redemption. I kind of have to, I think.’

3 to 1 cut, centered. ‘Every mistake you make is just pushing you farther away from that. Every time you fuck up it complicates things and ties tight wet little knots in you.’

‘It’s the same as everybody,’ Nona responded. 1’s shot lingered. ‘Everybody’s in the same boat. So I guess what you hope is that you find somebody who has all the same little wet knots in all the same places as you. Who’s got the same basic emotional map.’

Transfer from 1 to 2, itself at the tail-end of focusing like, thought Nona, the cameraman'd been zoning out. 'Not everybody. Uh-unh. Not everybody.' Her eyes were kind of walnut-colored. 'Not me.'

"Don't even think about moving." Seconds later, the gun separated itself. Nona fought the urge to rub the spot where it'd been.

'And then you just kind of hope the person you find's kind enough to try and untie some of those knots. Or at least cut through them.'

Note #3: 'Dead air. Holy shit. Why do we still have this. 18:02-24:57.' Camera 1 trained on the girl, who sat compressed, her arms locked around her legs which were drawn into her chest, her chin resting in the valley created by the two legs pressed together. Ambient noises picked up on a boom mic that was god knows where: strands of voices, technical jargon, a few static thuds, something scraping across the floor. For a couple of minutes, the girl didn't move.

The camera slow-zoomed toward the girl. When it stopped, the only thing you could see was a kind of skin-colored haze meant to be the girl's upper cheek. 'Look at her,' somebody whispered. The camera zoomed out. The girl hadn't moved or adjusted herself. Her eyes were open. Her expression, Nona felt, was a menacing neutral. It occurred to her that maybe the girl hadn't known the camera was still filming. What was she staring at?

"This is it. It's right after this, I remember."

Whoever was on Camera 1 kept fucking with it, zooming in and out, in and out. For over a minute. Nona felt almost dizzy watching. Soon enough, though, the booms bobbed briefly into the shot, and Nona walked through the set wiping at her eye and out of 1's shot, but presumably

sat down, because a few seconds later her voice off-camera said, ‘You ready?’ And then a cut to Camera 2, into which the girl was staring, calmly.

#

ISHMAEL

But, again, she’d had a vision, and I’m trying to honor it.

The art of her death came less in the act and more in its reformulation, in its revision. Its (re)*presentation*, I

suppose. Two screens side by side: Screen (A) would

present the interview, while screen (B) would present the

recording of Ms. Thoth *watching* the interview. We’d all

agreed to end each and every show at the instant of death.

Typically, you don’t end on the climax—it’s just bad

television. The viewer needs a kind of short emotional

cool-down phase. But this wasn’t television. This was the

web. And we were convinced we were forging a new path.

It was a very deliberate decision, I suppose is what I’m

trying to say. The show would end like this. As Ms. Thoth,

on screen (A), discusses the details of her suicide, she

would, on screen (B), be *committing* it. She’d pitched it as a

weird sort of fusion of thought and action. She’d been very,

very insistent. The final shot would be the two Thothes

facing each other as if looking into each other’s eyes,

separated only by this *wall*, which was of course the boundary between the two screens. But, just to reiterate, it was meant to seem as though they were staring at each other. And maybe since she'd planned the thing in advance—since she knew already this was the way it was supposed to look—they were, in a strange way, actually doing it. Not to mention the wall is just a pixelated image. That it's not *technically* real...

JULIUS

Her mom by state law had to put her in a mental health facility, which the closest one was about an hour away from where they lived at the time, near Tampa Florida. The doctors there diagnosed her with suicidal depression, and because of her—because of her really truly awful history with medication, they decided on ECT, which worked for that first month, although it also emptied out her memory for a while. She said to me, she said she was like a zombie afterwards. Like the drunk-stumble-in-the-street kind. But, and so, she went about her days in a kind of fog for a while, not so much happy or unhappy, but just mostly Switzerlike. Neutral. And emptied out. And tired. She never slept all

that well. And one night she even woke up screaming in her bed. In a way she didn't recognize—it was like a scratchy, yelping kind of a deal, like, like, she was gasping and screaming. The way she described it sounded a lot like the way a person drowns. Or I guess—I guess the way I think a person sounds drowning. I only thought of that after she'd left by the way. The drowning thing. She told me after a few seconds she knew she was screaming, and she knew she should stop, but she just wasn't—just *couldn't*, she said.

ISHMAEL

I need finally to confess: I was among the previously mentioned opponents preparing to bring a suit against Smart!Art.com. I wasn't, as I'd told Nona, out in LA, pitching a new series to television networks. I'd had a change of heart. Which, I'd be lying if I told you this wasn't, in part, because I'd realized that *redemption* would probably give the series more of a mainstream appeal. But the more pressing issue was that I'd just become uncomfortable with the ethics of it. We were, essentially, enablers. I didn't want the notoriety. Despite the way Nona

felt about me, I loved her. I really did. I thought transforming the series into a vehicle for salvation would earn me at least some of the respect/love I craved from her. I've since pitched it to a certain small production company, and have been given the green and a small budget...

JULIUS

And, and, so, the room she was locked up in was completely padded, including the door. There wasn't even a handle, she said. She said it smelled like disinfectant, like, you know, like they'd just wiped it down after the last patient who'd been in there. Two nurses with the help of an orderly stripped her down and dressed her in a hospital gown that was made of a soft, sort of, sort of papery? material. Like, too brittle, she said, to be able to hang herself with, meaning it would have ripped if she tried, and she didn't have anywhere to try it—and at the same time, too soft to cut into her skin. There was a tiny thick square mirror cut into the door, which she told me she figured was a two-way mirror because why else? The room was, was sound-proof. The ceiling was way up. There was a camera at one of its corners, I think she said. The ward had four or

five rooms like the one she was in, all set up around the nurses' station. The place sounded just wicked in the worst way.

ISHMAEL

It will be an everlasting regret of mine that I wasn't there when—

JULIUS

Anyway, a nurse came in two different times, along with a different orderly each of those times, to feed her, like, a mushy tasteless kind of food that she couldn't possibly choke on. And it was only one time early in the day that the nurse came in and checked the adult diaper they'd given her—they gave everybody on the lockdown ward those diapers, because they weren't allowed to leave their rooms. Other than these three visits, she was left by herself. Completely by herself. She spent the first few hours just extremely tranked, staring up at the pads on the ceiling. That part of it, she told me, wasn't so bad. Her mouth was numb, and she couldn't lift her arms. She said she could think about all the things that before had made her, had

made her, you know, anxious or angry or sad with no feelings at all, or just the smallest little bit of like wonderment. The more she came to, though, the more scared she got. Nobody'd told her, you know, how long she would be in there. And the nurse that came in to feed her and check her diaper didn't, wouldn't, talk to her or even look her in the eye really. She tried not to, but late in the day she used her diaper, and in addition to the silence had to deal with the smell of her own shit, and the feel of it drying and, like, *crusting* right there against her ass. The silence, after she figured was something like two or three hours, started to seem very, started to seem just really loud and crowded to her, I think—I think *oppressive?* was her word, and but it got her real anxious. The silence. Which I mean you can imagine. She got the idea to sing in order to just, like, break it up, but for nearly an hour couldn't think of a single song, which was probably the result of the tranquilizers that still hadn't completely worn off. Finally, she thought to sing the chorus of that Bee Gees song "Stayin' Alive," which, that night in bed, she showed me how, and the way she sang it, the *way she sang it*, you know, still in that flat loud voice, just isn't, just isn't really

describable. Something more than heartbreaking, I think. I really couldn't describe it. She told me she sang the chorus hundreds of times, until her throat started to hurt and her voice started to crack. You can imagine that, can't you? A seventeen-year-old girl—in a hospital gown—in the corner of a padded room—in a mental health place near the center of Florida—singing 'Ah, ah, ah, ah, stayin' alive, stayin' alive,' really quietly to herself. And you can imagine, can't you, the way she *told* this story to me, you know, when she was I think twenty-six and in a bed in a cheap dark house in Pompano Beach Florida, in that completely and purposefully flattened-out voice? I think it's, it's important to keep both these views of her in your head at the same time. And to remember that they're the same person.

ISHMAEL

The copycats that have sprung up since the incident—the fact that this thing has gone *viral*—is, as you might imagine, horrifying to me. I feel *wholly* responsible. I do. I feel like I've opened a Pandora's Box...

JULIUS

Eventually she started talking to herself. She couldn't remember anything of what she said though. That night in bed, I mean, was when she couldn't remember. It could have been a delusional kind of thing, her constructing alternate-reality fantasies or hallucinations, or it could have been she was like, recounting memories, or maybe quoting bits of movies and books she remembered, or even could've been practicing her Spanish, which she knew a little of, she said. God only knows. Whatever it was, after a while, she lifted her hand into the air and started to write out what she was saying. And this was what she remembered best. The way she made her thumb and index finger, you know, pinch together, like she was holding a pen, and the and the way she stabbed at the air like she was writing a period, and the feel of like the flick of her wrist in crossing her *T*s, and how her arm got really extremely tired after a while of all this stuff. She couldn't explain it, she told me that night in bed, but doing all that made her feel better. I said to her I said that sometimes we grab onto little things because we can't deal with the big things, thinking about how at Had's, at his funeral months before. I'd messed around with a rubber band I'd found on the ground

until it snapped. Or, that's not quite the right order. I'd said it without thinking, the thing about grabbing hold of the small things, and then, in rooting around in my head for evidence of this, thought about that time at Had's funeral.

ISHMAEL

I'm sorry, is I guess the bottom line. I mean, holy shit, am I sorry.

JULIUS

Right after I said it, she rolled over to face me, and as she was rolling over, I heard her say, "Whole world crushes down on you in the scrum of after." Which I thought was beautiful. That's the reason I remember it so well. It sounded like poetry to me. "Whole world. Crushes down. On *you*. In the scrum of after." It's the only time she ever really—that she ever really said anything like that. And but, so, the thing is, because I'd been thinking about Had's funeral, I didn't know if she was saying it was something she remembered writing out in the air that day in the lockdown ward, or if it was something she'd just thought of and decided to say out loud. And I didn't ask, because it

sounded like the type of thing you'd always follow with respectful silence, rather than asking a bunch of questions about what they mean by it. I didn't ask, and that's why I don't know if this story is about Winona's time in the lockdown ward, or if it's about that night me and her spent talking in bed, when everything was good, and we were happy.

#

In the hotel room, among the simulacra composing the big chain's idea of a kind of American platonic of coziness, a reflection of a reflection—and here the poet was really getting carried away, which perhaps had to do with the heft and heat of the artist against him on the bed, their legs entwined, her top in his hand—in the hotel room, a kind of heterotopia the poet thought, with its TV bolted to the wall, its dresser and desk and bedframe bolted to the ground, to the hard carpet and its little mysterious stains, those bolts, that carpet, reminders that you weren't home and you weren't trusted, even as, simultaneously, the room sought to lure you into believing you were—in the hotel room, with its nevertheless extremely comfortable sheets and mattress—the poet always slept through the night in hotel rooms, his slumber blissfully dreamless—in the hotel room, the two of them spoke softly, dipping often into whisper. Their repose was intimate. Above the sheets, the poet lay on his back, the artist draped to his side, her head resting on his shoulder, her breath warm on his nipple, her hand fiddling gently with the hair on his belly.

In the short taxi ride back to the hotel, he'd risked it: hand on thigh, the skin softer than he'd even imagined, sun-warmed. A thrilling, vulnerable moment. Without looking at him, the artist had placed her hand over his. In the elevator, he'd touched the small of her back, and she'd leaned into him.

"You were playing hard to get," the poet was now insisting.

"Hard to get," the artist said. An ambiguous sigh. "I wore that bikini, didn't I. I said yes to going to the beach didn't I. I rubbed sunscreen all over you. I talked about dicks half the day."

To this, the poet had no response. The artist, after a moment, pressed into him and kissed him on the neck. Dreamy, she said, "You taste like beach."

Prometheus defies the Olympian gods, gives fire to man, and for this is rewarded with torment—a bald eagle, essential American symbol, sent to eat his liver, eternally.

Sisyphus: roll your boulder up your hill, and be endless about it, asshole.

The poet was melancholic as he sobered, clutched tightly at the artist.

"Why this poem," the artist said.

"You mean besides fame and fortune and the fact nothing even remotely like it's ever been done before?"

"I've been wanting to ask."

For a while, the poet pondered. Silence flowered, fragrant. His shoulder, beneath the artist's head, began to ache, but he didn't dare adjust. "When I was a kid," he said, "I had let's just call them, supernatural run-ins."

"Just like a poet," the artist said, yawning.

"I once saw what I've been convinced ever since is an angel."

“An angel. You believe in angels.”

“No. None of that stuff. But you know what childhood memories are like. How stuck they get.”

The artist high-stepped her fingers around his belly button.

“I was riding my bike,” the poet continued. “Summertime. There was this abandoned house down the street. We had a story about it, I remember. That a fireman, who was this heroic guy, one morning snapped and murdered his wife. If you went into the house, it was supposed to be black and white, like old TV shows. We used to dare each other. We used to pretend we could see the black and white ghost of the murdered wife looking out the window.”

“Mmm,” the artist murmured. She licked the poet’s nipple.

“I saw, or I was convinced I saw, the fluttery white tail of an angel’s robe, as I rode my bike through the half-circle driveway of that abandoned house.”

The artist adjusted, gently suctioned the poet’s nipple, her hand up and down his torso and finally inside his swimming trunks, and all of this felt so good, so surprisingly good—when was the last time he’d gotten exactly what he wanted, exactly when he wanted it?—that for a handful of minutes the poet simply closed his eyes and gave in. They made out for a little bit. Then the artist pulled away, and, her volume pitched a hair above a whisper, said, “Tell me more.”

The poet was thoughtless, still lost inside his pleasure. “There’s nothing more to tell,” he said.

“Your family. What’s your family like?” As she said this, she positioned herself between his legs, tugged gently on his swimming trunks.

The poet hesitated. “This is the intimate pillow talk thing we’re doing. I was never good at this.”

“Try me,” said the artist.

“It sounds cheesy. It’s embarrassing.”

The artist sat up, gazed at him.

“Too many movies do the post-coital thing, I think,” he said. “I feel self-conscious.”

“Are you saying,” the artist asked, “that you’re incapable of intimacy because of movies?”

“You know what I mean,” the poet said. “Don’t say it like that. You know what I mean. They took it. Once you put it in there,” he gestured at the TV, “it’s not real anymore.”

“So you’re just not going to be vulnerable anymore? Because actors pretend to be vulnerable in movies?”

“I’m just saying it’s hard.”

“My dad used to beat me,” the artist said.

“What are you doing.”

“When I was a kid. He’d beat me raw. And mom was an alcoholic.”

The poet shut his eyes, sighed.

“I don’t like to be alone,” the artist continued. “My thoughts are sad. There’s a texture to them that’s undeniably sad.”

“I get it,” the poet said.

“My last great love left me at the altar. And she was pregnant. She miscarried after falling down some stairs. My older brother died in Iraq. My best friend committed suicide.”

The poet lifted a hand, held it like a stop sign.

“Tell me,” the artist said. “Speak.”

“My sister thinks she’s got dwarfism,” he said.

The artist laughed a loud unbelieving hack of a laugh. Placed her hands on the poet’s thighs, as if for balance.

“It started in college,” the poet sighed. “We were at Yale. She was brilliant but always a little unstable, you could tell. When we were kids, she used to bang her head against the wall when she didn’t get what she wanted. She used to run away weekly. We’d always take the car to go looking for her and we’d find her just grimly walking along some road, making her way.”

He stopped, considering. The artist gently kneaded his thighs with her knuckles, working up and in.

“Anyway. I haven’t seen her in years.”

“What about your parents? Your mom?”

The poet thought of her, imagined the death bed scene, his mother’s body ravaged, her feet, which he’d so liked to glimpse as a child, gnarled and paperwhite, her toenails the unpleasant yellow of decay, the stink of her, that decomposing smell despite the hospital’s disinfecting efforts, and above all, his disinterest, his cold observation of all the little details of the scene, the poem he was already writing in his head, and later, the shame, the intent purging of most of those details—this was a thing he’d forever keep to himself.

“My earliest project,” the artist said, filling the silence, “was performance art. I’d force myself to vomit onto blank canvas. I called it ‘confessions.’ But I mean, I was young.”

#

Julius Jonah Boggs awoke to the searing and near radioactive it felt like white light, a light so lovely and hurtful and almost smelling like what? like chocolate milk maybe, the kind bottled in grocery stores, not the kind you stir up yourself? like fresh water-soluble paint? like Winona did at that Dylan concert where Dylan sang “Tangled Up In Blue” and it sounded like a washing machine? His sensations were he realized all along these maybe/almost lines, as if he were positioned just outside the range of sensation’s impact, a not-quite numb. There weren’t words for it, what he was (almost) feeling right in this moment, as the light warped and near-danced and split apart into little crystalline exploding pixels, almost like the models on those universe shows he used to watch where on them, on the models, galaxies collided with each other, or stars burst into supernovas, or else something else far beyond his ability to experience and understand, and that’s why he’d soon stopped watching those shows, as interesting as they’d been: it all had been so goddamned BIG that he’d been unable to locate his own teensy self inside of it, the universe, and a universe without him, a universe untethered from self, was a supremely frightening thing.

(The multiverse, he thought in a brief hard pinch of a thought. He’d had this idea. He’d told Winona, he remembered. Say in the multiverse, he told her, there’s this one universe where instead of light, it’s sound that travels the fastest, and photons, instead of light particles, are actually sound particles—the sun, in other words, doesn’t burn, it sings! All the stars sing! he’d told her with great excitement. And when people communicate in this universe, it’s light waves their vocal chords produce. They speak in light!)

The pixels twerked and waltzed and glimmered for Julius Jonah Boggs and as he watched he tried to decipher just what it was he was witnessing. As it did its little pixelated ditty the light

appeared to be advancing, drawn into lugubrious orbit around Julius Jonah Boggs, and was that a whale's tail? Was that an exhaling spout? Again he felt marooned on almost-land, nearly but not quite reading the images in the light's constellation of winking pixels. When it was close enough so that via his he just knew compromised perception it felt as if it were grazing or sort of petting the tip of his nose, he experienced internally an electrochemical haze, a jitterbug shiver inside his cheeks, and then it was like his perception apparatus upshifted or something, because he could see and feel clearly, and what he saw and felt were 1s and 0s, a pillowy shower of them stacking and connecting, creating what very much appeared to be a double helix of binary code, which what the hell, thought Julius Jonah Boggs, what the absolute hell was going on here, but this sentiment like a wisp of smoke on a windy day was quickly shoved away and dissolved, because what's this, the double helix was approaching, rotating, spiraling toward what looked like, what looked like, was that a puddle, or something, of 2s? It was! It was a puddle of 2s, a, a *black hole* of 2s! and now the black hole of 2s was sucking up the binary double helix, which stretched and distorted as it resisted then gave way, and now the light was briefly gone, and the black hole of 2s glowed an inkjet black, if it's even possible for black to glow, which in light of this vision now glowing about two inches from his face Julius Jonah Boggs had to concede that, yes, it was possible for black to glow, and as the black glowed it began to transform, to shape itself into a form of super-intense complexity, it was what's the word, Julius Jonah Boggs knew it, what's the word, *fractalizing*, it was mutating, geometrically, increasing in complexity! It was the Mandelbrot set, he realized. Had had been obsessed with it. For what felt like years and seconds, an absolute crinkling of spacetime, the Mandelbrot set zoomed and zoomed and zoomed, racing inward at the speed of light, detailing an endless density of linked shapes.

Mouthing along with moony eyeballs, Julius Jonah Boggs, consumed, wept with sorrow and relief.

EPILOGUE

I seen the two of them, on that camera, that itty-bitty camera. Why didn't I call it in. That's what you care about. Why didn't I call it in.

They cleaned house, after. Nearly called off the Kitten Bowl, too. But there was too much money in it.

My sister. Well. She got older. She got fatter. She dated a few of the neighborhood boys, but nothing stuck. She went to community college, became a nurse, soon enough moved out and moved along with her life. Momma for a while kept her kid, little Tito.

I keep thinking, memories. I keep thinking, it's the past in front, that we always are looking at, and it's the future behind, sneaky. A monster under the bed. I keep thinking: watching don't mean what I thought it meant.

She said, Say it. Say Call me Leviathan. In the Bible, it's a creature that spits fire, that's got no equal. Other places say it's a creature that eats whales whole, one a day. And that its eyes shoot out the brightest light.

In the Middle Ages, it meant the Devil.

Momma died. Bad heart. Tito went to live with my sister for a few months. But then, she left.

We'd been hearing rumors about Tito's daddy. That he'd enlisted. That he was just a few neighborhoods over. That he was in jail, in Florida City. That he had a second family, just like my own Daddy, a real family, and a good job, up in Orlando. I always asked Q. But he didn't know. Or maybe he just wouldn't say.

Blackest black, man. I remember that. I remember. And thank love. Thank love.

My sister left, and my only prayer's that it's not to go looking for Tito's daddy. That it's for her own self, and her own sweet happiness.

And guess who got the little man now?

Orphaned Tito. I think, when I look at him, that the kid's got it rough. But in truth, he's a happy kid. He's a laugher. I read him stories, stories not even supposed to be funny, and he laughs and laughs.

I said to him. I said, Say Call me Leviathan. Can you say it, little man?

And does he say it?

Watch him, now. Go on watch him. I'll tell you a secret. But you got to watch.

Even if little Tito says it, even if he says Leviathan, with that high laughing voice of his, it don't matter. Why didn't I call it in. Why do we do the things we do. It does not matter. Why? Because it's just words.

Just words.

LOOKING FOR LANDON TRUJILLO

The story begins simply enough: Mrs. Jacinta María Lessan-Cooke sets out to visit her son Landon Trujillo, who's checked himself into Fort Lauderdale Hospital here on December 27, 2013. It's been seven years to the month since she's last seen him. And two years since he contacted her via email, requesting money she didn't at the time have. Which to this day she praises the Lord, she tells me, because she knows she'd have given it to him.

Mrs. J.M. Lessan-Cooke is 5'3" and 62 years old. She weighs approximately 130 lbs and's so busty she has to wear a back support and a special kind of bra that she often adjusts. She's got a lovely, open face, and dark cherrywood hair most often tugged back into a tight ponytail. It's strung with a few thick and fibrous strands of gray, almost like cat whiskers, sparkly in fluorescent light. In the home of Mr. Hank, aka Henry S. Lyle III, majority owner and son of the founder of Civix Groceries, Inc., she's referred to always as "Carol," but's allowed to park her 1993 maroon Toyota Celica in the driveway and is required to "take tea" with Mr. Hank in the small kitchen once a day, typically in the late AM. For \$90 a day five days a week Mrs. J.M. Lessan-Cooke sweeps and mops the wood and tile floors, answers the door, vacuums the carpet, polishes furniture, does the laundry, empties and reloads the dishwasher, empties the trash, wipes down windows with Windex, and cleans kitchen and bathroom counters with all-purpose cleaner. Sometimes she also brushes the grout in Mr. Hank's bathroom with a toothbrush, if she spots mold. For four years now she's been in Mr. Hank's employ, first as a

member of a maid service, where she'd been paid approximately \$150 for six days a week of work¹, and more recently as what Mr. Hank terms "a mercenary, a hired gun."

Trust me when I tell you the job's too big for one person. Mr. Hank's home has 6 bedrooms, 5 bathrooms, 2 kitchens, 1 large dining room, 1 family room, 1 study/library, a courtyard lush with vegetation, and a huge foyer which looks and feels like the lobby at the Grand Floridian. Each and every day there are business meetings or social functions held in one room or another, Mr. Hank being freakishly lively and involved given his age and medical history, which is, respectively, 85 years old and harrowing. The mansion sits on the Intracoastal Waterway and's impressively fortified. It reminds Mrs. J.M. Lessan-Cooke of the stories she heard as a young woman, about the lavish villas of the *narcos*. Whenever she mentions her early years to me—which isn't often or with much detail—she adopts a laconic and near-regretful speaking style, in direct contrast to the personable, accent-tinged way she normally talks. The effect's more than eerie—it's like she becomes some other person.

Moored behind the house is Mr. Hank's 90' Azimut yacht, which somebody else cleans.

Here on December 27 she receives the call from FLH as she's fitting the sheets on Mr. Hank's bed. Another nice thing is that he allows her to keep her phone with her, for emergencies.

¹ Such cleaning services are often so astonishingly cheap because the labor's drawn from immigrants whose citizen/resident status is opaque, at best. The companies, predictably, take advantage of this and have the maids working monstrous shifts and numerous houses and forcing them into little efficiency tricks like only cleaning what the homeowner can see (e.g. vacuuming carpets but not under them) and only using a very precise and tiny amount of cleaning product per home and sometimes they're even forced to buy their own cleaning products. The service Mrs. J.M. L-C worked for—which she wouldn't name, and in fact looked at me mistrustfully when I asked—wasn't quite this bad. But still, as far as pay goes: Mrs. J.M. L-C estimated she worked between 45-50 hours per week (meaning just cleaning; the hour of prep work from 7 to 8 AM went unpaid, as did the commutes between homes), which would put her pay between \$3 and \$3.33/hourly.

On the line a gentle female voice informs her that Landon Trujillo has checked himself in for detox and has asked that his mother be notified. Which Mrs. J.M. Lessan-Cooke asks the voice to please repeat, and as it does, she sits on the bed and stares at the small chestnut dresser on the room's east side which contains choice samples of the underwear of Mr. Hank's four ex-wives.

Mr. Landon Trujillo, the voice says, pronouncing the last name True-jello, is here, and he's checked in for detox, and on the form he specified that he wanted you notified.

Mrs. J.M. Lessan-Cooke says nothing.

This is Mrs. Jacinta Cooke? the voice asks, doubtful now. The interrogative lilt jolts her back to life.

I'll be there immediately, she says.

Best to wait till after detox, the voice says gently. The tone reminds Mrs. J.M. L-C of her husband Mr. Cooke in some way she can't explain. She tells me this later, on an early evening in late February. I'm sitting in the teensy and cluttered kitchen of her apartment in Pompano Beach FL. It's just off Powerline Rd. The kitchen's filled with little hard-to-describe knickknacks, of the sort that seem to accumulate through osmosis rather than purposeful collection. There is, for example, a tiny ceramic Nativity scene set up atop the microwave. A couple of those long phallic Catholic candles that have the New Testament figures posing reverently on labels sit there on the table, placed on ashtrays to catch wax. On the fridge, an old eggwhite Maytag, are photos of friends and family, along with a magnet that reads *Go confidently in the direction of your dreams! Live the life you've imagined.* It's attributed to Thoreau. Atop the fridge is a wooden wine rack that's been commandeered by a few loaves of bread. I'm in my socks. On the whole the kitchen's very, very clean, and the tile floor, a marble white, glimmers pleasantly. It's warm,

too—Mrs. J.M. L-C’s baking some fish for dinner, and the oven’s heat fills the little room, along with the fishy smell, which has me feeling slightly nauseated.

Where’s Mr. Cooke now? I ask.

“Gone,” Mrs. J.M. L-C tells me. “Me abandonó.”

What about Landon?

She shrugs. In her eyes you can see there’s the dull pain associated with long suffering. She looks almost sleepy—it’s the same expression that appears when she talks about her childhood. The story she’s telling she’s told me before, but off-record. After that first time, I went down to FLH, and they told me they had no documentation on Landon Trujillo. Which is what piqued my interest.

What’d you do next? I ask her.

“I said again to the nurse I would be there immediately, and then I hung up the phone,” she says.

#

The story assigned originally is on the aforementioned Henry S. Lyle III, who is, to understate the case, one of the most powerful dudes in the state. He’s been getting a lot of press lately, mostly about the official airing of a new ad campaign—Civix’s first since 2004. The current campaign, titled “Civix Confessions,” has been widely acknowledged by the goons in charge of such acknowledgments as disastrous, and in fact led to the termination this past summer of Mr. Henry S. Lyle IV, Mr. Hank’s son and former president of the company, who’s a likable if kind of intense guy. These commercials are best described as cheap knockoffs of the TV show *The Office*. It’s an industry mystery as to why the campaign lasted so long (and FYI,

that's a question Mr. Hank has consistently refused to answer). The new campaign—originally slotted to air in August when the company went public, but delayed due to programming bugs—is titled “This Civix Life,” and features collage commercials of store associates doing nice things for customers. What's so ingenious (and, in another sense, chilling) is that it's *real* footage; each and every store's got nearly a hundred cameras set up in various locations, and there's a top secret computer program composed of extremely complicated algorithms that sorts through all of it and culls together the best footage.

I say “assigned originally,” because it turns out Mr. Hank is done talking with the press. Calls and email inquiries get me nowhere. His secretary, whom I picture as a frumpy little four-eyed woman with a bird's nest of gray hair, is a zealot when it comes to him and impervious to both charm and pleading.

And so: after it's become clear that the Mr. Hank story is just plain undoable, I call my editor and deliver the audible. I'm in the car, parked at FLH. It's just after Mrs. J.M. L-C's told me about Landon Trujillo for the first time and about a week ahead of the previously mentioned convo in her cluttered kitchen. I'm here to gather some more info on the December 27 incident. Next to FLH is a tiny dentist's office, which looks like it used to be somebody's house. It looks, in fact, like the office is hoping to give off this impression—the building is painted a pleasant suburban yellow, and the front door's got a screen in front of it, and the roof is shingled. Sweet little clipped shrubs bound the sides in toothpaste tube formations. On the car radio, singing at soft volume, is Taylor Swift. The windows are up and the interior's saturated with a kind of chemical tropical scent—an air freshener from Mom for Xmas. The Mazda quakes every few

minutes—rough idle. My editor listens to the pitch and when I'm done, she says she doesn't know, and would I give her some time to think it over.

For a minute the line goes silent and it's just Taylor on the radio, and the car's accompanying tremolo. A memory surfaces: listening to Bob Dylan in an old red Oldsmobile Alero on a July night in Gainesville FL, smoking Camel Blues and staring out the open window at an overfull Dumpster radiating out the stench of rancid chicken. A buddy, gently sobbing in the driver's seat.

"You know I believe in you," my editor finally says, breaking into my thoughts. She hesitates, then picks her words with great care. "If you do follow this, you need to keep yourself out of the story."

Why? I ask.

"Sweetheart," she says, "not everything is about you."

#

A brief, clumsy, and purposefully vague rhetorical exercise to provide some context: say you're 25 years old and a tall skinny white dude and you've done your best to amass a modicum of knowledge on the stuff that interests you. Say furthermore that until you were 19 you had what let's term a Judeo-Christian value system: monotheism, original sin, ultimate redemption through salvation, etc. In other words: a frame on which to hang the relentless meatstuff of experience, which, because of temperament or genetics or whatever, you've always got the impulse to stick your hands into and eviscerate, interpret; to brood upon and justify, rationalize, intellectualize, and on and on and on ad infinitum. Say at 19 this value system becomes untenable, for whatever reason, and it dissolves away, and now without it there's nothing on

which to drape the experiences that continue to accumulate. Your brain and heart load over and soon break down.

There's depression, for years—let's call it the Weirdness. A slurry of medications and alcohol and self-destructive behavior which, when you're 23, after your best friend drowns to death, culminates in the typical and not even worth describing Attempt, at which you fail so embarrassingly that the EMTs, when they show up, debate whether to even take you to the hospital.

The young male doctor says your head is “a smoking heap of debris, man.”

Following a brief incarceration in a behavioral healthcare facility in Orlando FL, you have a handful of therapy sessions and engage in some service work and hold a job at a Civix in Pompano Beach FL for a couple of years.

Your therapist explains it this way: “Your mind is like an assembly line. At some point a cog came loose and banged around and gummed up the works.”

Also, in response to a question, he says: “Narcissism and solipsism are *not* the same thing. Not at all.”

And in response to a follow up question: “You're *extremely* narcissistic.”

You put things on shelves and you live with Mom.

And too, for nearly a year you labor over, and eventually publish, a single essay that attracts the attention of an editor of a Prominent Magazine. This editor sends along a really sweet

and complimentary email² and asks would you like some work? To which you say, *Dear god please*, and so she assigns you a story, on the cultural significance of bacon, which is altogether too complex for you in your vitreous state. It sucks, your attempt, but it's OK: this editor's about as kind as kind gets, and she says let's try something else, a profile of a city councilman in a central FL town, and furthermore provides the mandate/mantra: *keep it simple*, and at this task you huff and complain and shut your eyes but find a way to succeed.

You're then given another profile assignment, of a certain charismatic grocery magnate who is, for whatever reason, not inclined to talk to you.

Meanwhile, you're reading lots of books, and understanding very little of it, but you *want* to know, and you feel like that's the key. Starting to get, you are, that this is your brain rebuilding itself, assembling a makeshift value system, and to encourage the attempt you decide to learn as much as possible, to inquire everlastingly and at such great depth that it often makes both yourself and those around you anxious.

To these people, to yourself, you'd like to say, *I'm trying. I'm trying really, really hard.*

#

Here are the facts. The area Mrs. J.M. L-C lives in is a *mélange* of working and lower middle-class homes and apartment complexes. She's got an adamant mistrust of journalists (conflated with her *dislike*, I'll call it, of cops) that sort of radiates out of her features and's reasonable, I think, when you consider the fact she's neither citizen nor resident of the US of A.

² "I loved your 'The Problem, Of Which I Sort Of Can't Even Really Properly Conceive.' It's funny, smart and playful and smarty-pants (nod to Tina Fey), and gives a good name to self-consciousness: all good things. Just the right pitch of neurotic."

Despite this, she's polite and often motherly to me our entire period of interaction. I mention this because Mrs. J.M. L-C does not want me to tell you exactly where she lives; the most I'm allowed is the above. And too I can tell you on the southeastern corner of the closest major intersection to her is a casino. A Walmart sits north of this. East of the Walmart across Powerline is a shopping plaza. There are gas stations. Something called Ferrari Textile Corporation. Loads of churches. The road in this area hasn't been paved in a while, you can tell: at street level, the crunch of tires is like a flatline of white noise, and my windshield's got microcracks from all the pebbles kicked up into it.³

A "very good friend" of hers signed the lease for Mrs. J.M. L-C. It's this person to whom Mrs. J.M. L-C delivers the rent check a few days before each 1st of the month, and who then cashes it and sends their own check to the landlord, who actually turns out to be a property management company.

That sounds insanely convoluted, I observe.

"So to not be caught and—" she makes a gesture which the closest equivalent might be the "You're outta there!" motion umpires make when expelling managers from baseball games.

She never much discusses her origins with me, but it's not tough to figure out Mrs. J.M. L-C is from some dirtpoor area of Mexico. About which her feelings are understandably mixed. Save herself and her son, her family's all still there, and once or twice a year she sends a little bit

³ On a personal note, we always passed through this area on our way to school in the mornings, when my sister and I were elementary-aged. Because Mom had to get to work so early, we'd often be driving as the sun rose. Until I was 10 Mom would have to drag me to the floor of my room and dress me like you'd dress a mannequin (the same went for my sister), because I could never keep my eyes open. I'd fall right back asleep in the car, and the reason I remember this area is because at an intersection there's an odd rise and dip that we'd take quickly, and I'd be jounced awake, look out the window for a second, and then again shut my eyes.

of money to her sister, who's got, she tells me, three sons and two daughters and a husband who hasn't worked in years.

Mrs. J.M. L-C's own lifestyle is predictably ascetic. A quick inventory of her fridge turns up Civix-brand two liters of Cola and Lemon-Lime Soda, the last few slices of a lb. of deli turkey, numerous veggies, and a small block of some truly funky cheese. The freezer's got at least three or four packages of Civix-brand frozen veggies along with a few premade stir-fry mixes and a box of low-sugar fruit popsicles. The pantry's full of lots of coffee and tea, which Mrs. J.M. L-C's already offered me a couple of times. She herself is drinking green tea with a spoonful of honey in it. From the living room wafts the sound of a prerecorded episode of *Breaking Bad*, DVR being one of Mrs. J.M. L-C's very few extravagances. High-quality hair-care products being another (and it must be said: Mrs. J.M. L-C's hair, for her age, is unusually glossy and full and soft—in a really weird moment, she insists I run my hand through it). A typical day for Mrs. J.M. L-C consists of waking at 6AM, showering using the aforementioned hair-care products in precise order and quantity, dressing, commuting,⁴ arriving at Mr. Hank's no later than 7:45AM (he gives her a fifteen-minute window), working until approximately 5:30PM, commuting home, changing into something more comfortable, making dinner, eating dinner in front of the TV, doing little household chores if she can bear it, watching some more TV or maybe doing some reading, and then it's lights out between 10:30 and 11PM. On Saturdays, Mrs. J.M. L-C tends to do the big project chores. E.g. last Saturday she scrubbed like crazy the

⁴ Mrs. J.M. L-C estimates the drive takes around forty minutes. She either doesn't know the route by street names, or won't tell me—I-95 to Broward Blvd. is the most she allows. The route I try—95 to Broward Blvd., then right on 3rd Ave, left on E Las Olas, right onto Isle of Capri Dr., and finally right on Mola Ave.—takes a half hour.

kitchen tile, which is why it looks so nice right now and also why she insisted I take my shoes off before stepping onto it. Sundays she drives up Powerline and into Hammondville and attends the 11:30AM Mass at San Isidro Catholic Church. The Sunday following our interview I tag along and find out the hard way it's in Spanish.⁵

#

To provide a contrast, let's maybe briefly check in on Mr. Henry S. Lyle III, whose mansion is on the same street, Mola Ave., that Mr. Wayne Huizenga's palace (this seems the most precise word) sits on. You can in fact see a small portion of the back/side of Mr. Hank's home if you take the Jungle Queen Sightseeing Cruise along the New River (\$22.19/person for a three-hour tour), provided his yacht's not docked.

Mr. Hank's got a nutritionist and all kinds of doctors whose credentials aren't even worth mentioning. All the upstairs toilets have bidets. Above the grand spa-style bathtub in Mr. Hank's private washroom there's mounted a 38-inch LCD television that's got, I'm told, 3-D capabilities. The lobby/living room is cavernous and very bright thanks to a number of floor-to-ceiling windows (not a single smudge on any of them). It's always sort of cold. The floor's a courtly marble you might typically associate with European museums. The vegetation in the courtyard is indescribably lush and complex, and seems largely influenced by, like, rustic Japanese monasteries tucked away on mountains, if this makes sense. Likewise, the

⁵ There's not much more to report of this little venture. Just that while there, she mostly keeps to herself, although this could've been on my account. Oh and she treats me to lunch following the service, at the Ruby Tuesday off Powerline and Race Track Rd.

landscaping's so colorful and immaculate I was afraid to step foot on the lawn. The back of the house is ivied in a way that looks, it must be said, really pretty.⁶

Though Civix Groceries, Inc. is as of August 2013 a publicly-traded company—with stock prices, as of December 27, at \$29.17/share—Mr. Hank still owns the majority, and's worth an estimated \$1.35 billion, which only puts him at #1088 on *Forbes'* Billionaires List.⁷

While it's true Civix has a reputation for charity, raising more than thirty million dollars for United Way just last year, along with millions more for stuff like the March of Dimes and the Special Olympics, it's equally true that Mr. Hank's no fan of the downtrodden. He's donated millions to conservative Super PACs and causes and campaigns, including a solid million through various avenues to Rick Scott's campaign for FL governor in 2010⁸. He's on-record as for the continuation of the Bush-era tax cuts for the rich, and against any relief for the middle and lower classes. In this sense Mr. Hank's your classic corporate goon. He's been known to

⁶ Just to provide a little bit of clarity regarding the timeline, most of this stuff I discover when I meet with Mr. Hank about three weeks after my conversation with Mrs. J.M. L-C.

⁷ In contrast, his neighbor and occasional tennis buddy, Mr. Wayne Huizenga, is worth about \$2.2 billion, and is ranked #212 on the list.

⁸ And to maybe provide just a single relevant example of Mr. Scott's overall scumbaggery (and indulge in a glorious bit of Thompsonian—Thompsonesque?—outrage): on assuming governorship in 2011, Scott gutted the state's budget—it helps to have a GOP supermajority—which meant, among other things, gouging \$3 billion from education funding. In Broward County, where both Mrs. J.M. L-C and Mr. Henry S. Lyle III reside, this meant 2400 state employees, most of whom were teachers, suddenly found themselves jobless. Which but Scott was not nearly finished fucking these people over, because FL's got one of the nation's most austere unemployment programs, and the jobless have to jump through insulting hoops (taking a 45-minute online math and reading test before even having the opportunity to *apply* for unemployment benefits, for one) to receive, at max, \$275 a week. All this from a man whose fortune was made primarily through milking the govt.'s teat for corporate handouts—HCA Inc. (a for-profit healthcare company), the company of which Scott was CEO, made history in 2003 when they agreed to pay the US govt. \$631 million in damages stemming from corporate fraud. This was the largest out-of-court settlement in U.S. history.

advance the theory that private philanthropy's far better and more efficient than any sort of government aid, while at the same time gladly accepting subsidies and awards for things like clean-energy⁹ projects.

When I ask him about all of this, he says: "I'm not seeing the issue."¹⁰

On a kinder note, Civix consistently ranks in the top 100 of best/most pleasant companies to work for, which would seem to imply the employees are treated generally pretty well. There's a story Mr. Hank likes to tell, made famous through numerous reiterations in Civix training rooms everywhere, in which a just-hired (like, a day earlier) employee came to Mr. Hank hat-in-hand requesting a month's advance in salary. His little 4-year-old daughter was in desperate need of some sort of operation, and the employee didn't have the cash for it. Mr. Hank sternly questioned the man on the details—here, he'll often demonstrate, and the expressions he produces are indeed quite stern, if not downright terrifying—before finally agreeing to advance the man three-months' salary. *And then he gave him a raise!*

An effort to track down the name of this extremely lucky man produces nothing, although it's this reporter's opinion that the anecdote may still have some merit. Despite the fervor with which it's told, and the undeniable aspect of myth about it, the odd and old-school honor—this word not used lightly—with which Mr. Hank conducts himself is hard to discount. Such honor may in fact be at the source of Mr. Hank's charisma, itself well-publicized in grocery circles—

⁹ In 2011 Civix phased out all incandescent and fluorescent lighting in favor of LED. They also reduced the materials used in product packaging by 15 percent and set a few other minor sustainability goals. For this they were awarded the EPA's Environmental Merit Award.

¹⁰ And when I mention it to Mrs. J.M. L-C, she shakes her head at me.

for years Mr. Hank was himself company spokesman, and's rumored to have single-handedly come up with the violently successful "Your Home Away From Home" ad campaign of the late 90s and early 00s which pretty much put Civix in the driver's seat as far as southeastern regional grocery chains go.

#

Back in the kitchen, Mrs. J.M. L-C's chair is angled so she sits next to the table, rather than at it, her legs crossed in that feminine way and with her mug of tea in her lap. The kitchen's so hot and redolent of baked fish (which I learn is tilapia, lightly seasoned and topped with a slice of lemon), that I'm feeling dizzy.

Well so after hanging up the phone what did you do? I ask.

"I left," she says. Meaning: she walked right out the front door and down the street. Fort Lauderdale Hospital is itself on E Las Olas Blvd., no more than a quarter mile east of the street's swanky stretch. *That* area's a clusterfuck: clothing boutiques, high-end art galleries, numerous bistros, etc. All of which decked out in serious holiday cheer on December 27—lights strung on every tree and little shrub, red ribbons and bunting hung above shops, and snowman and Santa and Xmas tree designs decorating windows. The road is narrow and there's a leafy strip down the middle dividing it, which gets me thinking, no joke, of Main Street in *It's A Wonderful Life*. There are people everywhere and nobody's mindful of things like traffic lights. FLH is about a half mile beyond this, and's truly spooky in appearance: it's large and white and trapezoidal—the building's an A-frame—and has green awning out front which makes you think it used to be some kind of apartment building in an earlier incarnation. The windows are tiny and spaced evenly and some have bars on them. The interior, meanwhile, is so pastel you might mistake it

for a Super 8 lobby. There are big framed pictures of pastoral scenes and fake bouquets of flowers on just about every desk I came across when I was in there after my initial visit with Mrs. J.M. L-C (the one tethered to the doomed profile of Mr. Henry S. Lyle III). The nurses are all Midwestern-friendly. I got the feeling that I was being constantly assessed for weaknesses in the kindest way possible. Pop music's transmitted from speakers bolted at ceiling corners, set at a volume a degree beyond what I'd call comfortable listening. A few patients along with a nurse stood outside smoking cigarettes.

The story goes like this: Mrs. J.M. L-C jogged over to FLH and demanded to see her son. To which she was told he was in withdrawal from opioid dependence—i.e., heroin—and was being pumped full of methadone and was, overall, in no real shape to see anybody but that maybe in a few days he'd be doing a little better. Mrs. J.M. L-C didn't like this answer at all, and again demanded to see her son. And again the nurse at the front desk said tough luck sweetheart. Long story short, the scene got so unpleasant that Mrs. J.M. L-C threatened to call the cops and eventually did, and what's so strange about the whole thing is that it was she who was taken off to the Broward County Probation Dept. on 4th Ave., itself just a short idyllic walk along New River away, after she couldn't be calmed down. Which so recalling Mrs. J.M. L-C's immigrant status, you can start to see how things might've gotten truly sticky, if it weren't for Mr. Henry S. Lyle III himself going down there to sort things out.

Why do you think he did that for you? I ask Mrs. J.M. L-C.

"He is un hombre amable," she tells me. "My saint."

And then here, she thinks for a second before saying something so weird I'm at an utter loss to explain it. When she says it, I'm speechless for a moment before deciding its best to just move the convo forward.

Eyes alert with fear, Mrs. J.M. L-C says this to me: "The whole world crushes down on you in the scrum of after."

#

Around the time Mrs. J.M. L-C is being hauled off to jail, I'm in Sunrise with my good friend Galen, visiting the cemetery where my best friend L is buried. My car's sequestered at the mechanic's thanks to some mysterious fluid dripping from it and so Galen, whom I've not seen in a year, drives over around 3PM to say hello. He lives in Asheville NC now and works for a Christian nonprofit called Evangelism Explosion International, Inc. (EE), which used to be HQ'd at the church to which the private Christian high school we attended is attached. Clunky sentence. But anyway: there was controversy and intense intra-church political maneuverings following the death of EE's cult-figure founder, Dr. D. James Kennedy. The result being EE detached itself from the church and moved to Asheville, I think for the cheaper rents, although who knows. Galen works as their videographer. Essentially, he makes propaganda films. EE's aggressive in their outreach: there's the very real intent of conversion on a globalized scale, although it is important to note that the organization does do lots of good and counts among its ranks people who are sweet and genuinely care about things like poverty and inequality (Galen is one of these people). E.g., a "ministry" called Glasses for Missions, in which poor people in other countries are gifted eyeglasses (so as to better read the Bible).

Galen is here because his wife's family still lives in Fort Lauderdale. And so he comes and grabs me, and we drive miles south along Lyons/NW 31st St. into Sunrise to visit L's gravesite. The afternoon is cast over and unlovely with clouds and we spend about ten minutes at L's grave. The cemetery looks like any cemetery. We say things along the lines of, isn't it strange that he'll forever be 22 as we get older and uglier, which reminds Galen of that Taylor Swift song, "22." Which I then go ahead and sing some of the lyrics of, it being after all incredibly catchy.

After our visit with L we drive down into Fort Lauderdale and meet up with another friend, Cody, at Southport Raw Bar, at the end of Cordova Rd., which acts as a stopper for one of the little toothpick canals that sluice off the New River. The Raw Bar sits among a bunch of marinas and boathouses. The smell here's of fried fish. We wait 30 minutes to sit out on the dock because it's pretty and we haven't seen each other in a while and there's that general sense of we're in our mid-twenties now so let's try to do things right. In the meantime the sky darkens, hung with clouds. Neither Galen nor Cody has eaten all day so they order fried seafood baskets and chicken wings and fries. We've got pitchers of Yuengling and Miller Lite that we work through, and meanwhile, we chatter on about fantasy football. I'm congratulated on the city councilmen article, it having published a couple of weeks earlier (I can tell neither of them have actually read it). Around us are numerous families whose own chatter adds to the lively atmosphere. Though it's a crammed little space there must be about twenty waitresses.

Cody is determined to take a walk, for no reason I can fathom. It's just what he wants to do. What I'd like to do here on December 27 is drink to our recent good fortune. The Raw Bar's

got no liquor, and so I'm wanting to go across the street to Quarterdeck. Our little conflict is typified by this passive-aggressive exchange, repeated multiple times over the course of dinner:

“Eric, are you ready for our awesome walk?” asks Cody.

“I'd just say,” I respond, “don't take anything for granted.”

Galen stays out of it. He's perpetually the middle man in conflicts, content always to do whatever. Cody looks to him and he just shrugs.

Ultimately, we compromise: Cody agrees we'll go to Quarterdeck for *just one* drink. At the bar a beautiful tender who is nevertheless very angry-seeming serves me and Galen doubles of Jim Beam. I ask for a Miller Lite, as a chaser, which turns out to be prudent. At the bar with us are three big groups of people composed primarily of really pretty women who laugh and sip at glasses of red wine. I twice nearly vomit swallowing down the bourbon, to which, this display, Cody looks on in pity. He's refusing to drink anything, despite my offer to buy him a drink. You can tell he's just waiting us out so he can say he held up his part of the compromise. Like the Raw Bar, the inside of Quarterdeck smells greasy, like fried food. There's a fake Xmas tree in the corner. I've become suddenly very sad, par the course for me in drinking too much, overly concerned with the transience of stuff, and vaguely with injustices and thinking about how this coming year AD 2014 I'm going to do all sorts of good things for people. Thinking a lot about L, too, and the responsibility I feel to in some way live enough for the both of us. I've got enough sense now not to mention any of this.

Soon after, we cut out of there. Our walk takes us along the river, and we stroll along the dock when it's open to us and peer across at the buildings because this seems natural to do. The water's blacker than night, no doubt slick with motor oil. Light dips into it. All the boats tethered

to slips on this part of the river are completely white. Next to a small yacht two blue collarish dudes (T-shirts with ripped-off sleeves, tattooed arms, cigarettes hung between lips) are fishing. I'm thinking there's no possible way they could be expecting to catch something.

We continue on and soon pass the BCPD where Mrs. J.M. L-C was locked up for the afternoon. Just beyond the BCPD is a bar. Like a Siren, an ugly old woman with hardly any hair calls to us from the outdoor patio. Inside: more old people. In fact, we're the youngest ones here. The walls are wooden and plastered with old road signs and sports jerseys and LCD televisions running SportsCenter. An ancient man sings Elvis Presley into a mic set up in an empty corner. Between songs he invites the ladies to dance. There's just one table of customers actually paying any real attention to him and they look genuinely horrified.

I order a Heineken for Cody and a Bud Lite and a shot of Jim Beam for both me and Galen. The shots are delivered in fancy liqueur glasses that if you hold up gleam and trap light in dizzying ways. The bar's located next to the 3rd Ave. bridge, which casts a shadow. This whole stretch feels deserted except for this little oasis. It occurs to me now we're on a kind of quest, and I look lovingly at both Cody and Galen, who're each peering in different directions. We're all silent for a minute in a strange, holy kind of way. I'm singing, I realize after a while, "White Christmas" very, very softly. Once Galen and I down our shots we go outside and sit on the patio with our beers and again talk fantasy football and a waiter soon appears, wanting to know in the politest way possible do we know what we want. I've been thinking a lot about that question lately.

#

So, a confession: there isn't, nor has there ever been, a Landon Trujillo. Yeah.

It's this little nagging fact that ultimately sinks the thing and shoves me back inside the Weirdness.

It takes me a while to grab hold of. The first clue was the elsewhere-mentioned hospital inquiry. I went down there and asked¹¹, and a soft-voiced young nurse checked the hospital records and turned up nothing.

Mrs. J.M. L-C, when I ask her, asserts they destroyed his records and set him loose after the brouhaha surrounding her visit.

Why would they do that? I say. (And *how*, I might have asked, if he was going through withdrawal?)

“Because he had no money,” she says.

You ever get the chance to see him while he was there? I ask.

To this, she shakes her head and looks close to tears, and I feel sort of ashamed of my inquiry, but nevertheless press on. I ask her if she wouldn't mind letting me take a look at that email Landon had sent her a couple of years ago. She tells me she no longer has it. I ask to see some photos. She says all her picture albums are back home, meaning with the extended family in Mexico.

There follows here an awkward quiet, during which Mrs. J.M. L-C sets her mug on the table and gets up to check the fish. There's a tunnel of heat as she opens the oven. I'm not totally sure how to proceed. In response to these couple of queries Mrs. J.M. L-C's posture tightens considerably, and she meets my eyes with an expression you might term defiant: it's actually a

¹¹ Seriously: I just asked. And got zero hassle about the whole patient-confidentiality thing, for whatever reason.

really pretty thing, this look, and seems to drop Mrs. J.M. L-C's age down about a decade, but also it reminds me of who I am, in relation to her. And truthfully even without the look I'd be uncomfortable pursuing the matter further. I am, after all, a writer of soft profiles, not an investigative journalist. Being here, in light of this, feels more than a little ridiculous, and now I begin to wonder just what it is beyond the odd dissonance surrounding Landon Trujillo that's compelling me. To be corny about it, I wonder: what, exactly, am I chasing?

The silence here stretches and starts to feel oppressive as Mrs. J.M. L-C sets a plate in front of me and asks if there's something I'd like to drink.

#

The day after my conversation with Mrs. J.M. L-C I call up Pete Janssen, an old Civix buddy I haven't seen since I quit about six months ago, and say assemble the crew and meet me at Hott Leggz. The idea's to collect a few Common Man views on Civix. Plus the Prominent Magazine's given me some credit on this story and I've yet to use it.

He wants to know when.

7PM, I tell him.

Hott Leggz is tucked among a string of eclectic businesses—banks, law firms, drycleaners, doctor's offices, restaurants—that comprise the gauntlet along Commercial Blvd. leading to the beach. It's set up on the north side of the street, the brick façade painted the orange-and-blue of the Chicago Bears. The Bears logo, in fact, is slapped big and bold on the east side of the building. Indoors there's a huge central bar and lots of HD TVs showing Chicago

sports. The name Hott Leggz refers to the crab and frog legs the place considers its specialty.¹² There's actually lots of seafood on the menu—shrimp, scallops, mussels, etc.—but they also serve Chicago dogs and burgers. It's a kind of hybrid between Midwestern and coastal fare. I get there early and order the Frog Leggz and Gator Bitez and a pitcher of Miller Lite. Which I've nearly polished off when Janssen shows up, crew in tow, and shouts, "Big E!"

Yo, I say.

"Hollat yur boy," he says. "I still got this jersey for ya." The guy talks like this to fuck around. When I worked at Civix, we spent a lot of our time hiding out in the back office, and he'd go on until somebody cracked up, and then start talking about all his plans. He always had plans—he's going to the Identity music festival, he's trying molly for the first time, he's saving for a new car, he's getting a new gun and hitting the range after work, he's starting a new cycle of steroids, etc. etc. He's 26 and part-time at Civix (he's been trying to get full-time since I've known him) and like me he still lives with his mom.

First thing he does is flag the waitress down and asks for a couple of pitchers, along with a round of tequila for everybody.

Jesus, I say.

"Wilin' out tonight," he says. "It's on Big E," he tells the waitress. "You know Big E?" She shrugs and smiles, and me and the waitress shake hands.

Besides Janssen, there's the twins and Gael, who's got his girl with him. We're there for a couple of hours, mostly just drinking and bullshitting. It no longer seems possible to do the

¹² Also references the waitresses, for reasons you can probably guess at.

Common Man convo. In fact, around Janssen and the guys I feel a little bit embarrassed about the story, and don't bring it up. Eventually, we make our way downtown, and settle at America's Backyard. It's situated at the end of a string of three or four bars along a side street across from an empty gravel lot used for parking. There's typically a five-dollar cover, unless you arrive before midnight. Inside, a small ramp leads up to the main area, which is dominated by a huge eye-shaped bar. The place smells like every bar frequented by the 21 – 30 demographic: rum and whiskey, vomit, cigarettes. It's loud with club-like remixes of current pop and hip-hop hits, but no one dances until the place crowds up around midnight. The DJ booth's up on a platform, and periodically, the DJ announces "Shots! Shots! Shots!"—cue for the bartenders at the main bar to get up onto the bar—mostly women, dressed in short shorts and bikini tops—and pour shots into willing mouths.

There's often too a little Haitian guy who snakes through the place, snatching empty bottles and cups, wiping down counters, mopping up puke. He's expressionless as he does this, or else grimacing. He doesn't talk to anybody.

There are two bars along the walls of the place, and a small bar upstairs that overlooks the entire scene that's typically less crowded. That's where we head first. We all grab whiskey-cokes and lean over the balcony to watch the place fill up. Janssen's pointing out women for the twins to make judgments on. Gael and his girl have already disappeared. I toss off my drink and grab another and wander downstairs and from here, it's a blur. The place fills up. Bodies populate the dance floor. More drinks. At a certain point I link up with the twins and ask where Janssen's gone to, and they just shrug. My head rattles, and then it's pounding, and it takes all of my focus to put one foot in front of the other. I recall making my way down the ramp and out of

the bar. I head south on 3rd and west on 2nd St. and then south again on 1st until I'm on the Riverwalk, looking at all the memorial bricks. When I was an infant my dad bought one and had it dedicated to our family. For a while I lurch from brick to brick, squinting down with hazy vision, but I never locate ours.

I make my way back up 1st toward Art Bar, and encounter a homeless dude slumped against a wall and wrapped in a blanket. I say something to him but he won't look at me, so I take all the cash from my wallet—about twenty bucks I think, maybe less—and shower him with it.

After this, it's blackout time.

I wake up the next morning on a small couch at Janssen's place, my legs draped over the side, calves burning. I'm still drunk and as I swing my legs back over and sit up, I'm aware of Janssen's mom standing there at the threshold between kitchen and living room, watching me. "YOLO, huh?" she says to me.

Morning, I say.

"Boy, do you look awful," she says. Crosses her arms.

I feel it.

"You look like you could use a glass of water."

I nod and try smiling but it feels more like a grimace. She disappears into the kitchen and returns a moment later, with a pint glass of ice water. Thanks, I say.

She sits on the couch. "Pete's gone," she says. "Work."

Oh, I say.

“Do you work there too, or are you one of his *other* friends?” Her expression here’s inscrutable, and I’m not sure what she means, so I just say I guess I’m a work buddy, though I don’t work there anymore. At this her look transitions into skepticism, so I just go ahead and tell her about the essay, about Landon Trujillo and Mrs. J.M. L-C and Mr. Hank and L and how it all sits in my head like a hot mess.

She nods and looks very much like she doesn’t know what to say. And in hindsight, I’m not sure what I was hoping for. I tell her this.

“Well, hon,” she says. “At least you’re trying to figure it out. I’ve got three kids over 18 still living with me.”

I thank her for her hospitality, for putting up with me and whoever else crashed here last night, to which she offers a practiced nod. My phone is gone, but my wallet’s still in my pocket, which seems like a miracle. I walk over to the Civix where Janssen works, about a mile away, and then, using his phone, I call one of the twins, who about twenty minutes later comes and picks me up and drives me to my car, still parked in front of Hott Leggz. The day is so bright my eyes water. On my tongue is a metallic taste, and there’s a dull doorknock at the back of my head that swells into a vicious headache by the time I get home and crawl into bed.

#

It takes a week for me to pull myself out of the Weirdness,¹³ and another two weeks for me to get permission to speak with Mr. Henry S. Lyle III. I have to cajole and plead and coax

¹³ I spend most of this in bed, popping codeine tablets and drinking Beck’s and binging on *Futurama*. The rest of it, the self-loathing, the hopelessness and despair, the masturbating—I’ll spare you that stuff. Only when my editor threatens to pull the plug do I rally.

and just generally debase myself to a certain b-word of a secretary who'll go unnamed because she doesn't deserve one. It was this same woman who made my life a living hell when I was attempting the profile of Mr. Hank. And all that was about was the new ad campaign I mentioned previously.

But so I do, finally, get the interview. And have in the process pulled off a minor coup: Mr. Hank thinks we're meeting to discuss his general sense of business. That the interview's about, as I wrote in the email, "soaking up Mr. Lyle's wisdom, and mostly I'm thinking about how he navigates all these tough corporate issues in unconventional ways."

We meet at the mansion on Mola Ave. I park, actually, at FLH, just to see how long the walk takes. Turns out, it's nearly twenty minutes because there's some traffic to manage on Las Olas Blvd.¹⁴

When I arrive "Carol" answers the door and guides me into the study/library, which is up the spiral staircase and then down a long hallway. The walls here are an elegant, afternoon-sky blue. Retro movie posters—like, from the 20s and 30s and 40s—are hung along at well-spaced intervals. Mr. Hank's a bit of a cinephile, I discover.¹⁵ The home's interior is architecturally complex, set at odd angles and corners and containing quite a few unexpected nooks. In the study there's lots of dark wood, chestnut and mahogany mostly, and one of those old-fashioned roll-ladders attached to the bookshelf, which spans much of the height of the western wall and's

¹⁴ According to the *New York Times*, the US's four most dangerous cities for pedestrians are in the state of FL. The Miami-FTL-Pompano Beach area's #4, behind Jacksonville, Tampa-St. Pete, and Orlando.

¹⁵ I've heard of none of these movies, and didn't have the opportunity to jot any notes, ushered along, as I was, at a brisk pace. Truthfully, Mrs. J.M. L-C seemed embarrassed to have me there.

packed with a miscellanea of books, from typical stuff like *How to Win Friends and Influence People* to more bewildering choices like *Goodman and Gilman's The Pharmacological Basis of Therapeutics*. It runs the gamut. My first question on entering is how many of these books Mr. Hank has read and without pause he says, "All of them." Such glibness and borderline hostility is the default on our first few Q&A attempts. There's none of the charisma he's so famous for in the industry. I should've guessed this was how it would go, since my previous attempts to interview Mr. Hank were met with similar resistance. And honestly, I'm not sure why this is so: the guy is interviewed on a fairly regular basis by all kinds of journalists. I've read a number of these articles and never detected any hostility. And so you can maybe begin here to understand the strange dynamics of our relationship, and how inadequate and self-conscious I feel sitting here in this study with one of the most powerful guys in the state. The first ten minutes are given to questions like, "What do you see as the primary differences between Civix and other supermarkets?" and "So is there anything in particular you might attribute your success to?" and "How did your father feel when you decided to expand the business?" To which, these questions, there's lots of impatient sighing. "Carol" appears at the study's door once, just to look in. The absurdity of this whole thing—that I'm interviewing a grocery magnate about his maid, that I've got nowhere to go with this article even if I do, eventually, write it, that the subject is a person's relationship with an imaginary son—starts to wear on me, and as I sit here listening to Mr. Hank giving asinine answers to what we both know are asinine questions I consider just packing it in. Going home. Trying something else. Like, i.e., even if I was able to get Mr. Hank to discuss "Carol," and even if he somehow knew anything about Landon Trujillo and I was able to prove

that the guy isn't real—what does it matter? The whole thing would just frankly embarrass Mrs. J.M. L-C. Which given the quality of her life already, would seem mostly just cruel.

And yet: I want to know. I do.

So I ask Mr. Hank about December 27.

I say, Tell me about December 27.

He says, “What about it?” His hands are together on the deep mahogany desk, the swollen arthritic left over the right. He's leaning forward. His lacquered snakehead walking stick's leaned against the bookshelf. The window behind Mr. Hank, which typically opens onto a glorious sunshiny view of the Intracoastal, is concealed behind slats. The ceiling in here, as everywhere in the mansion, is raised. But it's also arched, cathedral-like. Which strikes me as really, really weird. The moment feels religious. He doesn't physically look like Mr. Burns from *The Simpsons*, but between demeanor and pose the effect's uncanny.

Carol mentioned an incident, I say.

The man's eyes surprise me. The blank hostility's gone away, replaced with something that seems to say, *come on and ask it already*. And so I do. (But for the record, I'm really and I think visibly uncomfortable with the intense looks I receive from both Mrs. J.M. L-C and Mr. Hank in the course of writing this thing.)

Do you know anything about Landon Trujillo? I ask.

He does, is the answer. He does know a little something about Landon Trujillo.

#

Before we get to Mr. Hank's answer it might be best to tell you what Mrs. J.M. L-C has had to say about her son. Since he's made up, I went back and forth on whether to even include a

section like this. But ultimately I think it's necessary, and why that's so will I hope come to light later on.

Landon Trujillo is, according to everything Mrs. J.M. L-C's had to say, somewhere in his late 30s or early 40s. Which would mean he was born in the early or mid 1970s. And that Mrs. J.M. L-C herself was either a teenager or in her early 20s when he was born. The father, one Adrián Trujillo, grew up in the same neighborhood. Before Landon was born, Mrs. J.M. L-C claims, he enlisted and was shipped to Vietnam, and nobody in the neighborhood ever heard from him again.

Landon grew up in poverty, in a rough Miami neighborhood. He was a mediocre student, although there was an affinity for reading—Mrs. J.M. L-C recalls with much pleasure those times when they would take the bus to the library so Landon could check out a new book. He was especially fond of *Nancy Drew* mysteries, Mrs. J.M. L-C claims without irony. And too he liked books about cars. The first *Terminator* film gave him nightmares for months. He was too young for *Star Wars*. He had lots of friends, and they liked to play elaborate spy games, which always made Mrs. J.M. L-C nervous, given the neighborhood context. A couple of times she had to call the police because Landon couldn't be found. On both occasions, a single squad car showed up hours after Landon had returned, the gist being that cops mostly ignored the neighborhood.

Landon was incarcerated for the first time when he was fourteen years old. Police caught him, along with a few others, breaking and entering a home a few neighborhoods north of his own. Though B and E was the only charge, police records state intoxication was “probable.” This, again, according to Mrs. J.M. L-C. There were no police records that I could find.

Following his arrest Landon was sentenced to ten months of juvenile detention.¹⁶ From here the trajectory's predictable. Landon was in and out of prison for the next decade, mostly for drug possession and petty crimes. Important to note that Mrs. J.M. L-C offers no defense of her son. When she catalogues Landon's troubles, it's matter-of-factly, and her expression deadens. It's like she's discharging a duty, or something, and in these moments it's really hard not to feel sorry for her and like you should be doing more than just taking notes.

Sometime in his twenties, Landon disappeared. He resurfaced once in 2006, on a street corner in Coral Springs FL, soliciting for the Homeless Voice organization. These are the guys who wear bright pink or orange shirts and carry plastic buckets and if you give them any money, they'll hand you a newsletter. The heartbreaking element to this particular story is that Mrs. J.M. L-C was in the wrong lane when she noticed him, and further, she wasn't driving; she was mid-shift with the maid service, traveling between homes. She didn't say a word to anyone about him. Her own financial situation at the time was tenuous, and she couldn't afford to lose the job.

When I ask her to describe how he looked, she conjures up a fairly grim image. "His teeth," she begins. "He was smiling at everybody."

This was not a nice smile, according to Mrs. J.M. L-C. Not pleasant or handsome or affable. "It was loco," she says. Plus his teeth were yellowed like old newspaper. He wore the pink Homeless Voice t-shirt and some cargo shorts that he periodically hiked up because they were too large. His skin was much darker than she remembered it being. Into the bright heat of a

¹⁶ No record of Landon at any of the south regional juvie centers, according to a Dr. Gladys Negron, who's the south regional director. I double check the Miami Dade Regional Juvenile Center, just to be sure, and again turn up nothing.

SoFla summer day he'd been sent without hat or sunglasses. Mrs. J.M. L-C watched as Landon made his way along the median, soliciting the cars in the left turning lane.

His movements here are ethereal, I imagine—a heroin addict, there's none of the mania that characterizes abusers of uppers. I imagine too that a single driver rolls down a window to drop change into his plastic bucket, and that it takes Landon a moment to process this—that he looks down, into the bucket, and then dreamily at the driver in his black BMW coupe (early 00s, three-year lease), whose window is still open, arm still extended, waiting for the *Homeless Voice*.

I'm wondering what Landon sees when he looks at this driver. Is he grateful? Does he feel patronized? Is he thinking about the choices which led him to this moment? Or is he just simply hot and bone-tired and wishing for a drink or hit of something?

There's no Landon Trujillo, of course. That's the rub of it. Strange that I find myself in constant need of a reminder of this simple fact. It's just, he *feels* real to me, when Mrs. J.M. L-C talks about him. And in some sense he is—we all know people like this who, for whatever reason, drew the short straw, or had the shit luck. There's an uneasy sense I get, the more I look into it, that it wouldn't take all that much to become Landon Trujillo. Just a few bad choices, maybe. Which could be why the story's so appealing: told without affect, and with saintly patience by a mother who wants nothing, it seems, beyond that it be *known*, the story of Landon Trujillo takes on both moral and mythical aspects—he becomes a stand-in, an archetype, a bridge toward understanding, without the complex burden of experience, and existence.

He's a ghost, in other words. And his story, like all ghost stories, turns on something unexpected.

Mr. Hank suggests we go sit out on the back patio. Because the weather's so nice, he says. It takes us a while to get down the stairs. Mr. Hank's got a bad hip, which is why he's got the walking stick, plus there's the previously mentioned arthritic hand. I end up carrying the walking stick as Mr. Hank grips the railing and takes it a step at a time. I strongly suspect this display of autonomy is on my account, because there is, in fact, an elevator in the house. This casts his previous hostility toward me in new, and even more bewildering, light, and's kind of flattering, truth be told.

The house is quiet and empty as we make our way through it. Downstairs, the furniture is sparse and economical, couches and settees here and there, an occasional lamp, the requisite grand piano¹⁷—all of which accumulates to give the mansion an open, majestic vibe. The walls are white and mostly bare, except to the southwest, which has floor-to-ceiling windows. They are, as always, smudge-less. In pours the afternoon sun, its light a lovely, hazy gold that interacts with the floor marble in really interesting ways—the whole thing seems pellucid, and almost shifting. At night, this would all be spooky. We move through the little kitchen¹⁸ in the back, and out the sliding glass door and onto the patio.

The patio's huge and opens onto an even bigger backyard. The house hangs over a portion of it, providing shade, columned at the corners. It's here that we sit and look out upon the

¹⁷ Steinway D-274, I'm told, concert grand, mahogany rim, about nine feet long and five feet wide and weighing close to a thousand lbs. The White House has one of these. The polish job on the rim—Mrs. J.M. L-C's handiwork, I'm guessing—is so intense that light seems not so much to reflect as penetrate and then get trapped in the wood. The lid is raised to reveal an interior so pretty and complicated I couldn't even begin to describe it.

¹⁸ Resisting the urge here to check shelves and pantry and fridge for Civix products.

sun-mottled yard/pool area. The yard's bounded by enormous shrubs. The yacht is moored and mostly blocks the view of the Intracoastal. The grass here is so green it hurts the eyes, and edges perfectly along the patio tile, which is complexly cut and fitted in, like, arabesque patterns, all in shades of red and pink and peach. Directly in front of us is the pool, chlorinated and bluely transparent and basically ovular—a typical pool, in other words, save for the statue at its center, of one of Mr. Hank's ex-wives, an arm raised high and gripping a skillet as if to do some serious damage, and meanwhile snorting water out from both nostrils.¹⁹

For a few minutes we just sit. Mr. Hank catches his breath and composes himself after all that exertion. Having watched him in such turbulent motion, I'm in real awe that he's still running the company.²⁰

“You know,” he finally says, “when I found her, she was in awful shape.” He's looking out across the pool and at his yacht, and so I assume that's what he's talking about.

Looks like you did a good job refurbishing, I say.

“What exactly did she tell you,” he says.

It takes me a moment to get that he's actually asking about Mrs. J.M. L-C. Into my confused silence he shakes his head and interjects an impatient “Jesus, son.”

¹⁹ A gift from Hank Four, I'm told. “In poor taste,” Mr. Hank says, with a tone and expression that denote something other than disapproval.

²⁰ Mr. Hank replaced his son with a Ms. Rachel Carson, who is rumored to be his former and possibly current—try not to picture it—lover. Everybody in the industry knows it's really Mr. Hank calling the shots. Carson is viewed as a puppet, and with much derision, let me tell you. Which could be why she's never, not once, returned my phone calls or responded to my email inquiries. I even tried Friending her on Facebook. She's more a nonentity than Landon Trujillo.

What I'd like to say is: *Hey asshole. Why've you been such a dick to me?* But instead I choke down my pride, and recount for Mr. Hank the gist of my conversations with Mrs. J.M. L-C. I'm pleased here with my own forbearance, I'll admit—it's a sacrifice for the good of the story. I'm feeling like a true journalist now, this sensation concurrent to the realization that maybe *this* is what I'm after—*authenticity*.

"First off," says Mr. Hank, "there's no such person as Landon Trujillo. She made him clean up."

Why?

"You'd have to ask the doctors," he says. "Some complicated sounding disease. All mental."²¹

As I'm scribbling this down, he says, "There's no husband either."

No Mr. Cooke?

"Mr. Cooke is her father's name. *Lessan* is her mother's maiden name. Carol Lessan-Cooke."

Why do you keep calling her Carol? I ask.

He looks at me funny.

It's not Jacinta María?

Here, he sighs. Recorded, it sounds like the wind, like the air that banged against our metal shutters when I was a little boy in a dark, hot house, with my mother and sister on the big

²¹ Because Mr. Hank never provides me with the name of any doctor, I never find out which "complicated-sounding disease" Mrs. J.M. L-C was diagnosed with. My money's on schizophrenia, although hard to see Mr. Hank considering such a well-publicized disease as "complicated-sounding." On a hunch I call FLH and ask if they've got records on her, but the nurse who answers says no dice, citing patient confidentiality.

full-size mattress we'd dragged into the living room, away from all the windows. Despite my fear, I longed to go outside, to see with my eyes this huge thing that threatened us so completely.

“Her mother’s name,” he says. “You beginning to get the pattern?”

She’s Landon, I say.

“Not exactly. Not all of it fits. But essentially. Yes. She’s Landon.”

December 27?

“She’s convinced that he exists,” he says.

#

My conversation with Mr. Hank doesn’t last much longer. He fills in a few more of the details surrounding December 27, along with certain other facts he deems salient²², and then sends me on my way. It doesn’t occur to me until a few days later, when I’m transcribing the interview and reviewing notes, that I forgot to ask some of the big questions. Like: why is Mrs. J.M. L-C allowed to live on her own, if her mental illness is this bad? And where did Mr. Hank meet her? Why did he take an interest in her and what, exactly, is the nature of their relationship?

There’s something else, too. In the days following the interview, I wondered why it felt so strange to have Landon Trujillo’s nonexistence confirmed for me.

I’ll admit—I was, I believed at the time, prepared for it. I knew it or something like it was coming. And yet, the more Mr. Hank revealed, the more disappointed I was. There’d been inside of me a little fingernail of hope that’s tough to describe. Was it because I’d come to care about Mrs. J.M. L-C (whom I still can’t help but think of this way)? Was it because I’d grown up in the

²² Most noticeably that Carol Lessan-Cooke, alias Jacinta María Lessan-Cooke, born October 28, 1951, has never been anything other than an American citizen.

church, fascinated by the prodigal son story and its preoccupation with redemption? Was I hoping to *find* Landon Trujillo, and bring him back to Mrs. J.M. L-C?

I send an email along to Mr. Hank's secretary, but get no response. I try calling Mrs. J.M. L-C, and the phone just rings and rings—there's never any voicemail message. I send a few more emails. A week goes by and finally, I resign myself to the fact that they've given me about as much as they want to. The story's still incomplete and for whatever reason, that's what they'd prefer. At the same time, other, more lucrative projects begin to call for me—a couple of new soft profiles, offered by other (not as) Prominent Magazines. I'm actually pretty relieved to take them on. For months, the story of Landon Trujillo sits untouched, just another unfinished project among numerous others, tucked away.

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One morning in early April, Mr. Hank's found in a patio chair in the back of the mansion on Mola Ave. His toes are in the pool and he's facing the sunrise. His eyes, according to the person who found him—not Mrs. J.M. L-C or the secretary, but rather a beautiful live-in nurse, who'd been there just a week—are closed. He's smiling, too—though this little detail strikes me as mythical, something for the legacy.

The funeral's lavish, as you'd expect, and closed to the public. My editor sends me over and the secretary's got some truly stringent requirements we members of the press have got to follow in exchange for access: we're not allowed to disclose the location, and we're not allowed to talk to anybody, and if we choose to write about the funeral, the secretary gets to vet the story. This is ludicrous, I complain to my editor, but she just says, *Go and finish what you started*. So I go, and stand in the back of a pretty little church as Mr. Hank's eulogized by a number of his

employees. Hank Four sits in the front row, and it's impossible to see anything beyond the back of his head. I look for Mrs. J.M. L-C, and don't spot her. Turns out Mr. Hank is a hardcore Lutheran, and's given a lot of money, in his will, to this particular little church I'm not allowed to name. In the week since his death, Civix stock has fluctuated wildly, and company leadership's reflected it: various contradictory statements have been made about the future, and what seems to be shaping up is a sloppy civil war among a few factions. In the coming months, longstanding grudges will be dragged into the light, and there'll be civil suits and countersuits that are filed, and the stock will plummet, and there'll be a disastrous distribution snafu that leaves a few north Florida Civix locations without produce for three full days. The new ad campaign will be sabotaged and promptly dropped.²³ Eventually, the ship will right, and Civix will stabilize and despite ongoing legal proceedings Ms. Rachel Carson will emerge as the face and voice of the company, a strong-jawed woman who takes on some weight during this dark period and begins to look a lot like a younger Angela Merkel.

The ceremony ends, and the pallbearers carry the casket out of the church and slide it into the back of the hearse, and we all travel to the undisclosed gravesite, where the casket's lowered into the ground amidst much quiet sniffing. Hank Four tosses roses into the grave. It's humid outside, and bright. I spot Mrs. J.M. L-C off to my right, at the fringe of the crowd. She stands there with a middle-aged man, whose face is pockmarked, and whose chin is nearly in his chest. He looks like he's about to fall asleep. His suit, as I work my way toward them, looks cheap and

²³ In mid-May, a commercial airs which seems to contain footage of a young woman being trampled to death in a hallway in a distribution warehouse in Deerfield Beach FL during a fire drill. Turns out she survived and spent a couple of weeks in the hospital. The video's on YouTube now, and's still tough to watch.

ill-fitting. In profile, and from a distance, he appears to have the strong Roman nose of Mr. Henry S. Lyle III.

There's a story Mrs. J.M. L-C told me, about Landon as a toddler. Every time it rained, she'd dress him in swimming trunks and take him out to the dip in the parking lot where all the water gathered. She and he would splash around for a while and he'd be elated, leaping and clapping and yelping and trying hard to splash his mom. The story is that, once, a news crew came by and recorded them for a little bit, and then interviewed Mrs. J.M. L-C. The segment aired the next night. It was not about the fun she and Landon had in the big puddle. Instead, it was about the appalling conditions of certain areas of Miami. The footage of her and her son had been spliced between shots of homeless people huddled in groups in front of boarded-up stores, and images of walls streaked with gang graffiti and pocked with bullet holes.

At the funeral, the man's hands are in his pockets, and as I pause he lifts his head and straightens his posture and lifts up on his toes to try and see a little better.

—Orlando FL, July 2 2014

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