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*The Voice Behind the Curtain:
Hollywood, The Metamodern
and the Sense of Loss*

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for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

This thesis will reflect upon specific narrative structures, and the application of narrative devices, explored in the creation of my novel *Dinosaurs*. The object of this research is to examine the effects/affects of these creative choices within a critical framework using comparative texts and films that employ similar techniques or share, to my eye, similar aesthetic and thematic concerns that could be said to interrupt a habituated reading of the novel form. The central focus of this thesis will be to examine how effective I have been in creating empathy towards a misogynistic, solipsistic protagonist who has little regard for the people in his life, or society at large. As with Meursault, Walter exhibits signs of anomie that prevent him from engaging with the world in a meaningful way, and thus excuse his behaviour by a process of sophisticated self-rationalisation.

As the novel progresses, there are questions surrounding Walter's perception of reality: of who is narrating the novel and from what point of view are we experiencing the narrative. This raises questions of male identity and selfhood predominant in contextual works from the 80s and 90s within this thesis, while also examining the schizophrenic nature of certain texts. I intend to explore the effectiveness of distancing my subject as a means of creating empathy. This technique of a narrator perceived at a distance from subject to create a sense of danger can be seen in several of my comparative texts and bears exploration in terms of its application to a single individual. By examining contemporary novels and films that have experimented with various postmodern and metamodern techniques, I hope to understand how specific characteristics of such fiction negotiate the space between signifier and signified, and thus afford an opportunity for a discourse between reader and text that occupies

a space outside of the narrative. I am also aware that much of my contextual fiction is based in the 90s and focuses, it seems, on the fragility of the male ego. I have therefore experimented with certain references and technologies within my novel that deliberately blur time in order to reflect similar themes that might serve to critique the male ego and highlight a lack of emotional progression within my own protagonist.

INTRODUCTION

I was cleaning a room and, meandering about, approached the divan and couldn't remember whether or not I had dusted it. Since these movements are habitual and unconscious, I could not remember and felt that it was impossible to remember - so that if I had dusted it and forgot - that is, had acted unconsciously, then it was the same as if I had not. If some conscious person had been watching, then the fact could be established. If, however, no one was looking, or looking on unconsciously, then such lives are as if they had never been.

(Lemon, 2012).

This extract from Tolstoy's diary seems to suggest that if one does not consciously observe the everydayness of life, then such habitualisation might cause all things familiar to disappear, and for a life to be as if it 'had never been.' Using the same extract in his essay *Art as Technique*, Victor Shklovsky seems to support the assertion that 'Habitualisation devours works, clothes, furniture, one's wife, and [even] the fear of war.' And so '...art exists that one may recover the sensation of life.'

(Newton, 2022)

Shklovsky's thinking surrounding what he terms defamiliarization, or 'ostraneniye' (literally translated as 'making strange'), seems to me to be an excellent starting point for this thesis in which I will reflect upon the narrative choices, and the application of certain narrative devices, I have explored in the creation of my novel *Dinosaurs*, and thus examine the effects of these creative choices within a critical framework using comparative texts and films that employ similar techniques or share, to my eye, similar aesthetic and thematic

concerns that could be said to interrupt a habituated reading of the novel form. The central focus of this thesis will be to examine how effective I have been in creating empathy towards my protagonist Walter Stopps who is a problematic lead character due to his attitudes towards women and society in general – the former of which he experiences only as objects of desire or a thing to be possessed, or, in the case of the character Agatha Lightley, as a means of furthering his own career.

To begin to achieve a desired, and arguably necessary, empathy towards my protagonist, I decided my novel would benefit from the application of certain metamodern devices which I will explore throughout this thesis. As the novel progresses, there are questions surrounding Walter's perception of reality, of who is narrating the novel, from what point of view are we experiencing the narrative, and the application of metafiction throughout – such as script format to reflect a difficult memory and a dystopian narrative written by Walter in an attempt to explain his life to himself. It was my aim to use this intertextual link between various genres to raise questions surrounding the very nature of story, the fluidity of narrative structure and thus, the potential of people to be fluid: to highlight or suggest our ability to change and reinvent ourselves.

Walter is a sexual predator, an ambitious movie producer in an industry synonymous with misogyny and sexual harassment. In the wake of the Harvey Weinstein court case, and the continued growth of the #metoo movement exposing systemic sexual violence and harassment in the Hollywood film industry and beyond, it seems especially problematic to have created as one's protagonist an insecure, misogynistic sex addict, to place that character in the heart of the Hollywood film industry, thus exposing his unforgivable attitude towards women, even his fiancée, and expect a reader to sympathise or relate to that character.

I did indeed have reservations about the novel after details surrounding the Weinstein

court case were made public, alongside countless horrific stories concerning sexual harassment within the industry, but it was important for me to realise as part of my writing process that narratives which have examined extreme misogyny and violence towards women are by no means a modern cultural production. In fact, most of my contextual work was published in the mid-nineties and writers such as Chandler and Mosley began way before that. And so my starting point when thinking about the problems I had created for myself as a writer began by examining novels such as *In a Lonely Place* (Hughes, 1947), and *American Psycho*. (Ellis, 1991) The latter was directed by Mary Harron, who also co-wrote the screenplay with Guinevere Turner. Reading interviews with the director and writer helped me realise I was, to some extent, attempting to frame parts of my novel in terms of a feminist perspective in a similar fashion to Harron's adaptation. Although, now that it is complete, I would not consider *Dinosaurs* to be a feminist text, not least of all because of considerations surrounding a right to speak. I do feel, however, that I have created a novel which at times explores male insecurities and shortcomings rather than celebrates men as dominant. And I was consoled to learn, at the time of its release, many critics and cinema goers considered *American Psycho* to be unnecessarily violent (Bernstein, 1990), while Lila Shapiro observed in a more recent article: 'Twenty years on, the culture has finally caught up to Harron and to her complicated form of feminism, which refuses to fit into a tidy ideological framework.' (Shapiro, 2020)

When thinking about *Dinosaurs*, the process of questioning whether a reader (male or female) might feel any sympathy towards Walter, or weather, for want of a better word, he deserves it, was, in part, a process of self-exploration. I was required to question my own attitudes towards women and ask myself why I wanted to create the character of Walter in the first place. Why not create a modern-day Bilbo Baggins (Tolkien, 1950), or Atticus Finch

(Lee, 1960) and have them negotiate Hollywood and modern-day Los Angeles? To create Walter, to position him within the film industry, and to have him work as a movie producer seems, in retrospect, somewhat naive in terms of not realising potential difficulties in creating empathy. I must confess, a great deal of the initial character development and plot construction was naive, or largely unconscious. When I first began writing the novel, Weinstein's atrocities had not yet come to light, and I have always been fascinated by the idea (the construct) of Hollywood, and the city of Los Angeles in general. Throughout the writing of my novel, I was constantly reminded of Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* (1996) which served to reassure me that unlikable characters, seemingly lacking in morals and empathy, can be highly engaging and entertaining, and, at times, even relatable. Even Marla who one might expect to be a more sympathetic character, feeds off the pain and misery of those attending cancer survivor group meetings. And so it is more likely I was unconsciously reimagining and reinventing characters and plot elements created by writers who had fascinated me throughout my teens and early twenties, from Raymond Chandler and Jack Kerouac to Daniel Petrie, who wrote *Beverly Hills Cop* (Brest, 1984), and A.M. Homes, whose novel *This Book Will Save Your Life* (2007) I found especially useful in terms of examining alienation and the creation of empathy towards a difficult protagonist, and which I explore more deeply later in this thesis.

In retrospect, I realise Walter was born from a desire to investigate what a relatively young, disillusioned man might get up to in Tinseltown. But as I continued to write, and to study various aspects of creative writing throughout my PhD, *Dinosaurs* developed into a novel about the dangers of anomie, of a disconnectedness with society and with the planet we inhabit. It is a narrative that I hope explores the dangers of blind ambition over moral judgment, much like James Ellroy's Character Ed Exley in *L.A Confidential* (1990) It also became a novel about the importance of forgiving oneself and allowing the possibility of a

second chance rather than repressing guilt. A theme that can be seen played out quite brutally in much of Ellroy's novels. But here again, Exley is also relatable in many ways so that traits such as his insecurity make him vulnerable and fascinating to read.

As the writing of *Dinosaurs* progressed, and the plot revealed itself to me in more detail, the process of self-exploration I described earlier led to a growing awareness of what I can only describe as cognitive dissonance: on the one hand I enjoyed Walter immensely and often found myself placing him in harm's way to see how he would react and what he would think and feel. I love his acerbic inner voice and the sense of alienation he feels, even the lack of value he places on the thoughts and feelings of others. Writing Walter was, at times, very liberating and fun, as if he were *my* Mr Hyde. On the other hand, I find his attitude and behaviour towards friends, family, and colleagues to be disappointing, and his attitude and actions towards women to be despicable. In the process of examining this internal dissonance, and exploring many comparative texts that would inform my novel as well as this thesis, and help develop my critical self-reflection skills, I was afforded an insight into the various possible devices and narrative choices I might employ in order to help create a sense of empathy between Walter and my imagined readership.

In many ways, it must be said, I was also striving to make myself more sympathetic towards Walter so I might continue to explore his actions throughout the novel and eventually reach the stage of the narrative that would usher in the beginning of his rehabilitation in a clinic which serves within the novel as a kind of purgatory. The advantage of closely reading other contemporary texts means I was able to gauge how effective I found certain devices and narrative structures employed by other writers with far more experience and skill than myself. For instance, it might be a despicable past time to infiltrate cancer meetings and pretend to have the disease, but as we continue to read the narrator in *Fight Club* we might understand a

need for catharsis, or a need to feel something authentic. This process of close reading was invaluable, and is, after all, at the centre of creative writing as a growing discipline.

And so, this thesis attempts to examine the application of several key narrative devices that serve a central theme. I will explore what I mean by metamodern devices, limiting this exploration to what is relevant in the creation of my own novel rather than a broad examination of a term that might be more appropriate than postmodern because it is applied ‘as a means of articulating developments in contemporary culture, which, it is argued (and our generation appears to intuitively recognise) has seen a move beyond the postmodern mode of the late 20th century. [and] witnessed the emergence of a palpable collective desire for change, for something beyond the prematurely proclaimed “End of History.”’ (Turner, L. 2015)

I will examine various devices and narrative structures that I feel create a sense of isolation, aloneness, and anomie, and attempt to explain why I find such applications effective in creating empathy. And I will explore my choice of Los Angeles as the setting for my novel and how this location informed my writing.

Although I created Walter to be fallible and somewhat relatable, he is, nevertheless unlikable in so many ways, and his attitude towards women was, at times, difficult for me to articulate and dramatise. Coupled with this issue was my decision to write a bulk of the novel in close third person, meaning I had created an unlikable character from whom we are afforded little objectivity, or distance. The key to making the narrative work was to attempt to create a perceived necessary distance despite my choice of narrative voice, and to create the sense that Walter’s actions were born from a position of aloneness and isolation rather than simply greed and belligerence. It is a difficult balance to strike, but it is a balance I have observed other writers achieve to great effect. This thesis will explore how effective, or not, I

was in creating that balance within my own work

CHAPTER 1. THE VOICE BEHIND THE CURTAIN

Despite the title of this this thesis, I am not overly concerned with attempting an original critical exploration of metamodernism, or even postmodernism, or of defining in any great detail what is meant by metamodern writing. It is enough, in my mind, to acknowledge that my novel, is a self-conscious narrative, but a narrative less concerned with irony and parody, but rather of examining the nature of story and ‘truth’ in modern society. Metamodern writing is, as Turner asserts, more concerned ‘...with the resurgence of sincerity, hope, romanticism, affect, and the potential for grand narratives and universal truths.’

I am, however, also concerned with observing certain narrative devices that I attribute to the postmodern novel - devices I have explored within my own writing and have observed, to great effect, in contextual novels and films that share similar thematic concerns to my own.

For the sake of concision, and in relation to my central concerns within this thesis, we might agree that the postmodern novel has at its core ‘obsessions with its own tactics of structure and design.’ It places ‘... the means and modes of art at the centre of the work,’ and thus, ‘demand[s] the reader’s involvement in its significant order.’ (Bradbury and McFarlane, 1991, p.394-96) To apply this definition to my own work, I am interested in exploring how certain narrative devices, and ‘tactics of structure and design’, might serve to create a sense of loss and isolation surrounding my protagonist, and thus encourage a discourse outside of the plot of the novel. In creating *Dinosaurs*, I wanted to explore how ‘modern literature both reveals conceptual and discursive limits, and “leaps” towards an entirely new mode of thought.’ (Johnston, 1990, p.802), while addressing what Bradbury and Fletcher observe as ‘a problem both artistic and historical – of apprehending and making authoritative the traditional

stuff of fiction.’

In terms of my writing, the success of any negotiation taking place outside of the plot relies on the success of creating a sympathetic anti-hero. And perhaps it is not so much that the anti-hero must be sympathetic, but rather I believe I have identified the idea my reader might be required to reflect upon their own behaviours and actions in a candid manner, and in doing so might form a degree of empathy towards Walter. To this end, I might argue that we are all, to some extent, anti-heroes, and so in engaging with narratives that contain anti-heroes, we might be asked to engage with that part of ourselves. ‘Examples of anti-heroes avoiding comeuppance are still few and far,’ but the question remains, ‘Is film [and modern-day narrative] moving further towards this acceptance of people winning, despite gaining their place through foul means?’ (Bloom, 2015)

To begin answering this question, we might look to films such as *Wolf of Wall Street* (Scorsese, 2013), *Night Crawler* (Gilroy, 2014), and the success of television dramas such as *The Sopranos* (1999), *The Wire* (2002), *Breaking Bad* (2008), and *House of Cards* (2013), all of which have, at their core, anti-heroes: men and women with questionable morals, voracious sexual appetites, and violent tendencies. Elmore Leonard’s protagonist Chili Palmer in *Get Shorty* (1990) is the perfect example of a greedy and violent, yet highly entertaining and at times even relatable protagonist played to great effect by John Travolta in the 1995 film adaptation directed by Barry Sonnenfeld. I would argue that we seem to enjoy watching characters who employ ‘foul means,’ to get what they want. In fact, each of the protagonists from the list above also committed murder, or multiple murders, and yet this did not alienate their audience or break the creation of empathy. And, in terms of Leonard’s novel, it also seems to me that by placing the action in Hollywood and Los Angeles, the violence seems less real, less brutal. Chili is simply a regular guy learning the system of Hollywood in order

to achieve his goals. In this town of stories and storytellers, it seems that even violence has no 'real' consequences, but, in fact, only rewards.

Closely observing the films and television shows I have listed above, alongside films and comparative texts I will reference throughout this essay, enabled me to better form an understanding of two key points in the creation of empathy towards a problematic central character. Firstly, I do not require my reader to forgive all of Walter's thoughts and actions throughout the novel. Instead, I need the reader to understand him. To do this, I needed to narrativise his feelings. 'Spontaneous empathy for a fictional character's feelings sometimes opens the way for character identification,' and, even more compelling, if one is to agree with Keen, '...empathetic responses to fictional characters and situations occur more readily for negative emotions.' (2006, p.214-15) Secondly, my reader might find themselves empathising with Walter because they see themselves in him, just as they see aspects of themselves in Tony Soprano or Frank Underwood. Web continues to critique *Night Crawler*, and the character of Louis Bloom from a post 9/11 point of view, and argues, 'Our greatest fear is no longer the opponent stood across the battlefield from us, but is us. We are terrified of what we have become and where we are going.' (2015)

i. Metamodernism Working for Dinosaurs

When writing *Dinosaurs*, my intention was not to create a metamodern, or postmodern text, it was a process that happened to me rather than my being the architect. In fact, while contemplating the duality of both creating and experiencing a plot as it developed, I also experienced what Bradbury and McFarlane refer to as '... a sense of joy in the elegance of a fiction and a sense of crisis about the relations between a novel and God's fiction, the real universe.' (p395) To put it in more prosaic terms, while enjoying the creation of my story, I

became more and more aware of so many elements that one might associate with metamodern and, to a lesser extent, postmodern writing: elements that call attention to themselves, making the story feel unreal and overly conscious of its own telling. Yet almost overtly struggling for sincerity and the idea of redemption. This tension between fiction and ‘God’s universe’ might be articulated as a struggle between my desired suspension of disbelief on the readers part somewhat at odds with the introduction of self-conscious, self-reflective narrative devices which might be said to interrupt an innocent (or naïve) reading experience. I wanted my reader to be fully immersed in an authoritative, yet fabricated universe based on an assumed shared cultural experience, yet I seemed to be consistently signposting my story as artifice and the novel as artifact. At the very least, my novel feels to me as if it is deliberately following a movie structure, as if the novel has already been adapted for the screen – especially in terms of the overly used bookend device that reveals what we assume is the moment of the protagonist’s death or revelation. But rather than this be an ironic device, I am playing on a movie structure prevalent in biopics and fiction alike and applied to great effect in creating empathy towards problematic characters from *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962) to *The English Patient* (1996) and more recently *I, Tonya* (2017)

By Applying this cinematic device, I am drawing attention to the structure of film within a narrative about a film producer, but rather than parody, I am attempting to keep Shklovsky close to my heart throughout the writing process in the hope I might articulate through certain narrative devices my desire that Walter ‘recover the sensation of life.’ If I consider some of the authors whose work has had the greatest effect on me over the years - Don DeLillo, Paul Auster, Douglas Coupland, Margaret Atwood and Michel Houellebecq – all of whom are noted in this thesis, I recognise a similar artistic aesthetic at work, a manipulation of God’s world so that I might be encouraged to see that world more consciously. My fear for Walter,

is similar to that of Tolstoy: A life not consciously observed is as if it 'had never been.'

As I write this, it occurs to me for the first time the extent to which the authors who had affected me so much over the years then had such a dramatic effect on the writing of my first novel. I was entering into a genre which seemed overly interested in revealing the voice behind the curtain, the author behind the words and, as I will observe throughout this thesis, the seemingly inescapable idea of 'book as cultural artifact.' (Ezell and O'Brien O'Keeffe, 1994) It might seem an obvious thing to happen but I was unaware, and this lack of understanding in the initial stages of the novel which led, quite by accident, to certain narrative choices that created a tension within the novel I am still not sure I have reconciled. Just one example of this was my decision to use a close third-person narrator for much of the novel. This enforced closeness with Walter can, at times, be claustrophobic while also making it difficult to create the distance that might make empathising with him easier. Rather than affording myself the opportunity to use other characters to articulate and observe doubts or fears that Walter might have, we are, instead, required to occupy his mind at all times, living the narrative through his world view. The result of this realisation was that I focused more closely on the thematic concerns of my novel. The question to myself then became: what am I attempting to share as a writer? And if one accepts Ortega y Gasset's assertion that 'the novel today [is] an art of figures rather than an art of adventures.' (Cox and Dyson, 1972) , then I was required to examine more closely the figures within my novel and what they might represent. And should I accept the novel I was creating might be described as metamodern, another realisation I experienced might simply be articulated as a fear of producing a 'Literature of exhaustion.' (Barth, 1984) That is to say, I was afraid I was creating a novel that was concerned with style and postmodern aesthetics, rather than meaning. A novel that was not sincere.

I have always found novels that exhibit a degree of self-consciousness, or narrative introversion, compelling as I feel they require the reader, or, to avoid any sense of over generalisation, require *me* to engage more deeply with the text: to enter into a discourse or negotiation with established semiotics that might lead to new meaning. This process is one of ‘...communicative interaction between various and often protean sides,’ in which, ‘...the subject and object (the moderator/author of the conventional art and the individual/reader are immersed in this reality).’ Both are ‘...in the pursuit of understanding each other.’ (Hakobyan and Šuler-Galos, 2015)

In terms of a discourse with postmodern texts, Suler-Galos references Bakhtin’s theory ‘of literature as a continuous dialogue between the author and the reader, as well as with all current and previous culture.’ This idea resonates with me and has informed my writing, especially as I entered the final chapters of my novel, but Suler-Galos takes this theory a step further by referring to this discourse in terms of a ‘system forming category of a game principle.’ Isaev also seems to share this idea: ‘meta-semantics is characteristic of postmodern works and can be achieved through a variety of connotative means. However, these tools can be described with just one word - a game.’ leading to a ‘situation of an unlimited number of meanings.’ Isaev then argues that such a game results in ‘...meaning [not] connected with pre-existing reality.’ (1992, p.7-8) This seems to me a pessimistic view of the postmodern novel, not to mention somewhat reductive. It also seems to suggest that if an author enters into a discourse with their own writing, or experiments in creating a narrative that is concerned with its own tactics, he or she is consciously choosing to abandon all meaning they might have been striving to achieve through the creation of an original story. I would rather think of postmodern aesthetics as a negotiation between reader and writer, a relationship that might lead to new ways of experiencing the text. And, in order to focus less on games and

more on meaning and exploration, the term metamodern, and a struggle to articulate the modern world is now a more useful term than postmodern.

I do, however, disagree with the idea that all postmodern writing might be viewed as a 'game' resulting in an 'unlimited number of meanings' because I feel such a novel would be in danger of failing to communicate its ideas effectively. And I would argue this is certainly not the case with the novels written by the authors I have mentioned so far within this thesis. I would go a step further and assert that a novel full of disparate or dichotomic themes and ideas, one containing unlimited meaning, or without relation to any agreed sign system, might be said to break the reader writer contract. 'Writers [after all] cannot put what they like into the text, not if they wish the interpretation that a reader will bring to the text to bear some relevance to their own intentions.' (Smith, 1994, p.87-88) The reason I was interested in reading more closely around this idea of postmodern writing as game playing, is that it encouraged me to focus on my fears concerning the creation of *Dinosaurs* and (hopefully) avoid many of the pitfalls I was able to identify. As I observed a growing self-consciousness within my writing, I was subsequently encouraged to focus more closely on meaning and emotion – to keep in mind that I must strive to find a balance between experimentation and style alongside an effective narrative construction and cohesive sign system that would help me express my ideas. After all, it was not, and is not, my intention to play games with my reader, but rather to experiment with words to explore new ways of conveying meaning, to open a dialogue and explore new sensations. As a further example of what I mean, I first read *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (Pirsig, 1974) when I was perhaps sixteen years of age. At that time, I was too young and too inexperienced a reader to fully appreciate the aesthetic technique and multiple devices within the novel's construction. In fact, in reading it as part of my research, I find I am still unpicking it to this day. But Pirsig was able to make a

sixteen-year-old boy understand and feel the unbearable pain of losing a child. He created the ‘spontaneous empathy’ that lead me to believe and experience, to understand the meaning of loss and the heavy toll it takes on mind and soul.

What Smith examines is the idea of an agreement, a ‘contract’ between reader and writer. Not a game without meaning, but a promise, it seems to me, to strive for meaning. This contract does not work unless a writer is honest in his or her attempt to share ‘real’ meaning, and an understanding that the text will - despite a greater or lesser degree of experimentalism - strive to stay within a recognisable sign system so that ideas and feelings might be conveyed effectively. For me, one of the central attributes of postmodern writing is the exploration of a middle ground between truth and knowledge, a playful space of experimentation and self-reflection in which the reader is invited to meditate not only on plot and theme, but on the very nature of the act of writing, and on the phenomenon of story from *The Epic of Gilgamesh* * to Christopher Nolan’s recent cinematic reimagining of the *Batman* franchise (2005; 2008; 2012)

ii. Devices That Create Loss

An exploration between the concepts of truth and knowledge is explored in the short film *Surviving Desire* (Hartley, 1994) in which a literature professor falls in love with one of his students only to later witness the relationship deteriorate for reasons, although complex at times, might be easily negotiated in order for the relationship to continue to grow. Despite this, we are forced to watch the man and woman drift apart until they both end up alone. In the final scene, the professor writes on the blackboard, to himself and (I assume) to us the

* The Epic of Gilgamesh from Ancient Sumeria, written on 12 clay tablets in cuneiform script between 2750 and 25 BCE

audience, *Sometimes Knowing is Not Enough*. Much of Hartley's work explores big, philosophical questions, and here he plays with the idea that, although both professor and student *know* they love one another, and it is certainly *true* they could try to make the relationship work, but knowledge and truth are subjective concepts. The sad truth is, they do not feel the love. Hartley is experimenting with the notion that knowledge and truth are nothing compared to feelings, there are no semiotics of the heart.

This idea might be applied to my theories concerning the technique of self-conscious prose. As an author, I do not wish to narrate the things I know. Or rather, I do not wish to outright narrate the things I believe to be true. I am convinced that simply asserting one's truth or knowledge is not enough to affect a reader, even if there were such a thing as objective truth in the first place. Instead, in writing *Dinosaurs*, I began to experiment with various narrative devices which might manipulate my reader into experiencing emotions rather than being told about them. The phenomenon of the novel as experiential is achieved, in my mind, by a combination of the story itself and the technique by which the story is delivered.

As a scriptwriter, I often used to speak about the need to manipulate an audience. Not to play games with or take advantage of, but nevertheless to manipulate. Now that my novel is complete, I realise how my ideas surrounding manipulation have changed. Previously, I would have referred to a great deal of postmodern writing as manipulative, and to some extent I believe that manipulation is a part of the success of narratives. But more and more I find myself understanding metamodern and postmodern devices as philosophical and aesthetic techniques that encourage feeling. For my novel, I employed a form of self-conscious prose because I, Like Hartley, feel that knowledge alone is not enough. I agree with Dietrich when he states how '*It is undeniable that feeling the truth - the conscious experience of knowing the*

truth - is a big part of how we know we are in touch with truth. (2016)

If I consider the contextual novels I have chosen to examine within this thesis, and the authors who have affected me the most over the years, then I might observe ideas of truth becoming intertwined with ideas surrounding aesthetics, requiring one to view the artist as a conduit, ‘giving expression to something he [she] truly feels, that is, with sincerity. Artistic truth in this sense bears no relation to linguistic truth as can be seen if we reflect that it is one thing to ask whether a statement is true and another to ask whether the speaker made it sincerely.’ (Sheppard, 1987, p.117) For me, the truth that preoccupies so much of my writing, my attempt to express myself sincerely in the medium of story, is the truth and consequence of loss.

In Paul Auster’s *New York Trilogy* (2011), I see one of the most compelling examples of a self-conscious novel exploring a sense of loss and, to some extent, a sense of nostalgia. Auster does not assert that it might be true we all feel loss or might experience loss at some point in our lives, neither does he reveal himself as the author to the point where he directly addresses the reader in regard to these ideas. What he does do, especially in *City of Glass* (the first of three stories within the novel) is apply certain narrative devices surrounding his protagonist to create a strong sense of loss, of isolation and aloneness, and what might be described as anomie: a sense of being outside of the moral framework of society or of having difficulty with negotiating multiple moral standards within certain sections of society. ‘The condition of anomie is not a true condition of normalness, but, rather, one of multiple, contradictory normative standards with which the actor must contend.’ Anomie can also be described as a sense of isolation, or being separate to, or outside of, society, a state in which ‘...an individual is confronted with a number of moral and ethical systems which may be contradictory to each other.’ (Dudley, 1978, p.97-109)

It is important to acknowledge that countless classic novels, *Wuthering Heights* (Brontë, 1847) for example, accomplish this feat successfully, but I would argue that Auster is able to begin this process of experiential isolation and aloneness far quicker than Brontë because he employs certain narrative devices from the opening page and it is the application of such devices I observe to be important when writing my own novel.

City of Glass is the story of Quinn, a thirty-five-year-old writer of mystery novels who answers a telephone call late one night. The call is a wrong number, the person on the other end is looking for a private detective named Paul Auster. Quinn informs the person that he has dialled a wrong number, but when Quinn receives the third call, he decides to play the part of private detective, assuming Auster's identity and taking on the case which will involve tracking the movements of his client's father who is due to be released from prison after serving time for abusing his son. The novel opens by informing the reader how 'It was a wrong number that started it, the telephone ringing in the dead of night, and the voice on the other end asking for someone he was not.' (p.1). It is a detached, clinical voice, more nostalgic reportage than contemporary novel, asexual and occupying a space between first or third person. The narrator goes on to inform us:

'In the beginning, there was simply the event and its consequences. Whether it was all predetermined with the first word that came from the stranger's mouth, is not the question. The question is the story itself, and whether or not it means something is not for the story to tell.' (And in the very next paragraph) 'As for Quinn, there is little that need detain us. Who he was, where he came from, and what he did are of no great importance. We know, for example, that he was thirty-five years old. We know that he had once been married, had once been a father, and that both his wife and son were

now dead. We also know that he wrote books. To be precise, we know that he wrote mystery novels.’ (p.1)

In terms of creating empathy with the hero of the piece, there is something rather wonderful at work here. A cardinal rule explained to all budding writers in creative writing classes all over the world is, *show don't tell*. Yet Auster opens his novel by telling not showing. So why do I consider the opening passage to be so affecting? We know that Quinn has lost his wife and son, but we do not know how. We might begin to imagine how devastating such an event would be, and how angry and alone it would make any person feel. But we are not told to *feel* this. We are simply presented with the facts in a rather antiquated and detached tone. What makes this information so affecting is the clinical fashion in which it is delivered. How could it be that such terrible facts surrounding one man's life can be of so little consequence to the narrator they 'need not detain us.'? This lack of empathy, what I perceive as a juxtaposition between information and tone, creates for me a sense of empathy towards the protagonist. And it is not simply this seed of empathy that is planted, there is also the question of who is telling me such information need not 'detain us.' Who is asserting that *they* do not particularly sympathise with Quinn's situation? And on top of this, a third phenomenon (or device) is at play. We are informed that the question is the story, but any meaning to be inferred, or question answered, is 'not for the story to tell.' And so, I might ask myself, what does it mean that Quinn is a writer of stories, and not only stories, but mystery stories. Our hero is a writer of mysteries, and the story we are reading is a mystery story, and this mystery story opens with the line, 'It was a wrong number that started it, the telephone ringing three times in the dead of night, and [then] the voice on the other end asking for someone he was not.' (p.1) Auster is, to my mind, ensnaring the reader into the narrative in the dead of night, suspending our disbelief while simultaneously raising questions that are of a literary nature. There is even

a sense that something unnameable is at stake, the idea that, 'Literature and metaphors, like maps and diagrams, show rather than state, but what they show, if describable at all, is better described in terms of possibility than in terms of fact.' (Sheppard, 1987 p.127) When I read the first page of *City of Glass*, the possibility that struck me was the possibility that Quinn's sense of loss, already unbearable, might eventually consume him. And, of course, we learn by the end of the novel that he has literally disappeared, leaving nothing but the red notebook from which his story has been pieced together. And so, my initial assertion that Auster is telling not showing is not entirely correct. In this case, the revealing of the narrative is performed by an absence of what is being told.

We might agree that stories are, for the most part, all about people who are not. Certainly, this is the case with all fiction. We are presented with people who are not real, they are imagined people, figments of an author's imagination or a composite or amalgamation of people who do exist in 'real' life. Quinn is a fictional character who is mistaken for somebody he is not. This now becomes something of a philosophical question of identity and ideas of self, also the nature of story and of truth. Auster is experimenting with layers of narrative, a mystery inside a mystery. Quinn even takes on the name Auster - a device that seems to be in danger of constantly reminding the reader of the 'real' novelist Paul Auster at work in the 'real' world. This is what Shklovsky might have been referring to when he says that 'Art exists that one may recover the sensation of life.' As for knowledge... At this stage, as with so many good mystery novels, we are not to believe anybody who claims to know anything, especially an unreliable, seemingly omniscient first-person narrator. This idea might be the reason such thoughts 'need not detain us.' Alex Callinicos refers to Fredric Jameson's theories surrounding postmodernism when he posits the idea that 'Art produced under its reign is characterized by a peculiar depthlessness, a draining away of any emotional content.'

Leading to ‘...an instance of the “hysterical sublime”. (Callinicos, 1991, p.128) This is not the same as saying postmodernism, or postmodern writing is lacking in meaning, but the detached, somewhat nostalgic tone in Auster’s opening paragraphs might indeed be described as lacking in emotional content. This deliberate lack of emotion, however, seems to me to invite a discourse surrounding the idea of loss.

There are two more significant devices at play in Auster’s novel that help create a sense of, not only loss and nostalgia, but also of unease, or, perhaps more particularly, a raising of questions that create unease. The first, as I have mentioned previously, is that we very quickly begin to wonder if the story is being narrated in first or third person. Yes, there is a direct address early on when we are told that little need detain us regarding the particulars of Quinn’s life, and the style is arguably that of reportage, but there are also personal facts and internal feelings that could not be known if this were a simple reporting of the facts. For instance, how Quinn would walk around New York’s inexhaustible space, an exercise that, ‘...always left him with the feeling of being lost.’ Observing how ‘The world was outside of him, around him, before him, and the speed with which it kept changing made it impossible for him to dwell on any one thing for very long.’ (p4) Early on in the plot, once Quinn has decided to assume the role of the private detective Paul Auster, and undertake his first case, particularly during his meetings with his client’s wife, Virginia Stillman, the style of the novel seems to effortlessly transition into a pastiche of the opening of Raymond Chandler’s *The Big Sleep* (1939) and *The Lady in the Lake* (1943) creating an added layer of nostalgia, both depicting classic scenes of the gumshoe detective meeting the strong, flirtatious, yet somewhat sexually repressed female client. Perhaps this latter device is less to do with what is going on in the plot of the novel but creates instead a discourse outside of the novel by reminding us of the lonely private detective – a singular individual, resilient and tough, but

nonetheless almost always, as with Marlowe, a lone figure in search of truth and, it could be argued, in search of meaning. Auster the detective, in this instance, is in search of a meaning to his continued existence.

This layering of devices serves to create a sense of isolation and aloneness surrounding the hero. It is sad because we know this is a story of a man who has lost everything, but also, we might assume, even at this early stage in the novel, a man who is no longer with us. Auster has created a mystery novel about a lonely man whom we know is already dead. A story about a ghost. Not so much a who done it, but a how did the detective die... It could be said that the central question within the plot, one that reveals itself in the opening pages, is what happened to Quinn. Yet Auster's narrator assures us that 'the question is the story itself, and whether or not it means something is not for the story to tell.' I believe this statement is the paradox that sits at the centre of a great deal of postmodern writing. This is articulated by Foucault's theory: 'this strange intimacy between madness and literature to which one should not lend the meaning of a finally revealed psychological relation. Uncovered like the language silencing itself and superimposing itself on itself.' (Johnston, 1990, p.803) Another way of looking at this multi-layered storytelling, of writer hiding behind writer and hero assuming Paul Auster's name, is the point of view of schizophrenia (often attributed to postmodern writing), not as diagnostic but descriptive: 'The schizophrenic then does not know personal identity in our sense, since our feeling of identity depends on our sense of the persistence of the "I" and the "me" over time.' (Jameson, 1985, p.119) Quinn seems lacking in a single sense of self, so too does the novel, insofar as it is a pastiche of the classic American crime novel, a work of literary fiction, and a novel that shares so much in common with the European philosophical tradition.

A passage that seems to summarise the above observations regarding a sense of

aloneness, and the condition of schizophrenia – within protagonist and within in the style of the novel itself - comes early on in Quinn's case when he intends to locate the abusive father of Peter Stillman: 'As he wondered through the station he reminded himself of who he was supposed to be. The effect of being Paul Auster, he had begun to learn, was not altogether unpleasant. Although he still had the same body, the same mind, the same thoughts, he felt as though he had somehow been taken out of himself, as if he no longer had to walk around with the burden of his own consciousness.' (p50) And on the following page, Auster then references *Moby Dick*, as Quinn finds his thoughts drifting to 'Melville's last years - the taciturn old man working in the New York customs house, with no readers, forgotten by everyone.' (p51)

These devices combine to create the sense of a hero struggling with unbearable sadness at the loss of his wife and son, a loss so great that he yearns to be free of the burden of his own consciousness. Without saying so out loud, Quinn is nostalgic for his past life, just as Auster's writing seems nostalgic for novels of the past. There is also the sense that Quinn might have taken on the case, and the identity of Paul Auster, in order to give the young Peter Stillman a better future: a future he was unable to give his own son. This layering of ideas surrounding loss and isolation is presented to us in the style of a mystery novel - Chandler in particular, but also reminiscent of Dashiell Hammett and modern crime writers such as James Elroy.

New York Trilogy, and *City of Glass* in particular, is permeated with past narratives, past lives, and an intertextual relationship with other contemporary and classic novels, all of which combine to explore, not only the nature of loss but the nature of personal narrativised history and the novel as cultural artifact. If we required further proof of this theory, it is worth noting that Quinn is reading Rustichello de Pisa's *Marco Polo* on the night the telephone rings for

the first time. The combined effect of this layering of devices is that I not only sympathise with Quinn but am encouraged to think of the process of the creation of the novel and the role of writer in society. In fact, it often feels to me as if Auster is writing to and for other writers. I experienced a similar sensation when reading *Moon Palace* (1989) and *The Book of Illusions* (2002) in particular. And in doing so, I, like Quinn, found myself imagining Melville in his 'New York customs house, with no readers, forgotten by everyone.' One might even posit the idea that Auster is observing how lonely the process of writing can be, and this sense of aloneness can then be projected onto Quinn an observed within ourselves, creating that all important moment of empathy.

CHAPTER 2. A GHOST IN THE MACHINE

My novel opens in the style of the bookend I described earlier, one of foreshadowing: a scene of an unknown man rushing across a busy freeway while people look on waiting for the inevitable consequence. The established history of such a device leads me to believe the reader will know the man on the busy freeway is the protagonist, and so might assume this man will be dead before the novel's end. A device used by Alan Ball in his screenplay *American Beauty*, directed by Sam Mendes (1999) Here we see protagonist Lester Burnham narrating over the opening scenes of American suburbia: 'My name is Lester Burnham. This is my neighbourhood. This is my street. This is my life. I'm forty-two years old. In less than a year I'll be dead.'

Lester is, in all the ways that count, a selfish, self-centred, essentially misogynistic character experiencing a rather sad mid-life crisis, yet the knowledge he will die before the movie ends makes him more sympathetic. We look for his good attributes rather than focus on the bad, and at the end of the movie, as he lays dying on the floor, we remember only his love for his daughter and wife. His thoughts, finally, are not about himself but about those he loves. I might argue this is a characteristic we the audience were looking closely to recognise throughout the film. I would also argue this device highlights the fact one is not only experiencing a narrative, but one might recognise the history of such a narrative - story throughout a person's lifetime and therefore reflection of that lifetime. This device might also be argued to interrupt a habitualised reading process while simultaneously signposting the potential for a discourse between novel and reader, a discourse that begins by recognising the novel as cultural artifact. That is to say, I believe such a device might encourage self-

reflection, and on this basis create the potential for empathy towards a seemingly unlikable protagonist. 'We read through lenses of intervening cultures and ideologies and from glimpses construct narratives to understand texts and ourselves.' This process of engaging with cultural production, '...presses us to acts of self- knowledge.' (Ezell and O'Brien O'Keeffe, 1994, p.3)

My novel opens with the sentence, 'A woman screams from the sidewalk, she knows what is about to happen, knows it will not be stopped. The man is moving too fast, climbing out of the cab with his head down. He looks upset The cab driver is calling after the man, waving his arms frantically, but the man keeps moving.'

Unlike the detached voice of Auster's unnamed narrator, this voice feels more sympathetic towards Walter. Together we are observing the hero from a distance. And so, if we consider the theory of binary opposition, the hero takes on the role of lab rat, unawares of its own situation, unawares it is being observed and discussed from a distance, unable to join the conversation and therefore separate in some sense. And, most importantly, unawares of his fate. If we consider aspects of anomie, Walter, as with Quinn, is positioned outside of the ideological structure of the narrative. A hierarchy has been established, and for all of Walter's bluster and ego and despicable behaviour throughout the novel, he is rarely in a position of total power.

Douglas Coupland uses this same device in *Girlfriend in a Coma* (2004), placing the central characters simultaneously under the microscope but also at a great distance, observed by a ghost from some strange otherworld. This distancing affords Coupland the opportunity to comment on society in a way that feels objective. It also allows him to observe and comment on the future of the planet which our society inhabits. The novel opens with, 'I'm Jared, a ghost.' Unlike *Dinosaurs*, this first person narrator comes to us from a distance created by

time and place. 'Earth was kind to me,' he informs us, 'and my bout with cancer was my great experience.' (p.1) The opening passage raises the question (as with ghost characters in so many literary works) where is he now? Jared goes on to casually inform us, 'Yes, the world is over. It's still *here* but it's... *over*. I'm at the end of the World. Dust in the wind. The end of the world as we know it. Just another brick in the wall. It sounds glamorous but it's not. It's dreary and quiet and the air always smells like there's a tire fire half a mile up wind.' (p4) It is easy to see just how powerful an influence Coupland's novel had on the opening of my own. Initially the similarities were unconscious, but once I realised the effectiveness of the device, I was not afraid to play with the idea of intertextuality and push that influence to pastiche, perhaps even outright imitation.

As with *Trainer*, there is a strange dichotomy between the seriousness of what Jared is telling us and the fact he is making pop references with Lyrics from R.E.M's *End of the World as We Know It* (1987) and Pink Floyd's *Another Brick in the Wall* (1979) - released on the year, according to Jared, that he died.

As with Auster's unnamed narrator, and *Trainer*, Jared is also omniscient, shifting in time and space: 'To visit earth now you would see thousands of years of grandeur and machinery all falling asleep. Cathedrals fall as easily as readily as banks; car assembly lines as readily as supermarkets.' (p5) The final paragraph of Jared's opening narration then hands over the role of narrator to another character because, 'Richard is the best talker of the group' (p5) This happens once distance has been established and rather large and scary questions have been posited in the mind of the reader. What Coupland achieves in the opening of *Girlfriend in a Coma* is the sensation of planet earth as isolated and fragile, existing in a space between life and death where its very existence is at stake. Unlike Auster and I, Jared ends his opening gambit on a positive note: 'So here follows the story of friends of mine who finally learned

their lesson: Karen, Richard, Pam, Hamilton, Wendy and Linus.’ And although we have been told by Jared that he has seen the end of the world, he also assures us, ‘The future doesn’t exist yet. Fate is for losers.’ (p5) This statement seems to assure the reader that no matter how bad things might become, no matter how myopic the central characters might seem at the opening of the novel, their fate is not yet sealed. In other words, their behaviour is likely to change as the novel progresses in order that the world not come to an end.

Although I have stated I believe such a device creates distance, especially with the detached voice employed by Auster, this distancing also creates empathy. In the case of Quinn, we feel for a protagonist who has lost everything because he is observed by a voice that seems incapable of empathy. It feels to me that Auster is manipulating the reader into compensating for the narrator’s lack of, for want of a better word, feelings. In the opening to Coupland’s novel, before we know anything about the six central characters, we know the world is over. And so, we might be encouraged to empathise with the struggle that must lay ahead of these young heroes in order that they, and the world, survive. There is an added effect to this device in that we are, I might assume, all somewhat invested in the future of the world. Jared obviously cares about his friends - the heroes of the story – and so the reader is encouraged to care. Where Auster opted for an eloquent but clinical tone, Coupland employs a friendly voice with elements of humour. Both stylistic choices achieve the same effect of isolation, aloneness, and subsequent empathy.

My hope in observing Walter’s assumed death in the opening of the novel is not only that the reader might be inclined to be more sympathetic towards his more unsavoury behaviour as the story unfolds, but this device of distancing might create a sense very early on in the novel that he is alone and also that he will not get away with his bad behaviour. The character of Trainer, introduced early on in the novel, also serves to represent another side of

Walter's character, revealing glimpses of Walter's inner world, his doubts about his own thoughts and actions. In this sense, Walter is not simply a guide but a device which attempts to persuade the reader that no one person can be viewed in black and white, or in simple binary terms, just as Dr Jekyll's character in *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (Stevenson, 2008) 'is not pure good, and Hyde (Jekyll's statement to the contrary) is not pure evil, for just as parts of unacceptable Hyde dwell within acceptable Jekyll, so over Hyde hovers a halo of Jekyll, horrified at his worse half's iniquity.' (Bowers et al, 1982) When thinking about Walter, the character of Hyde has been a useful psychological template, and although Hyde often articulates his internal struggles and Walter's inner doubts surrounding his actions remain largely repressed, the resulting unease is similar and the avoidance of simple binaries similar also. Hyde is not without vulnerabilities, predominantly physical in nature, just as Jekyll is given to moments of pride and anger. Another reason Stevenson's novel informs my own is the exploration of ideas surrounding repression, first articulated by Mr Utterson when he wonders if Jekyll's malaise might be due to his wilder years when he was young, '...punishment coming, *pede claudo*, years after memory has forgotten and self-love condoned the fault.' (p.17) In terms of ideas surrounding repression, my novel attempts to raise the question: what if a person cannot forgive their own actions? What happens if we cannot move forward and resolve or make peace with our sins? We are informed at the start of my novel that Walter is dying, and so perhaps the seed is planted that we must forgive ourselves or else we cannot live successfully. Coupland's narrator might be suggesting that unless we consider a fundamental shift in the way we live on the planet, the world as we know it will end.

Coupland Once again applies the technique of direct address in *Player One* (2011), but in this later novel opts for a detached, clinical voice similar to Auster's narrator. For the majority

of the first chapter, the novel is presented in third person, each character afforded a chapter to themselves so that we might learn how they came to be in the rundown, somewhat timeless cocktail lounge of the Toronto Airport Camelot Hotel – a setting that arguably serves as the concept of purgatory. The apparent third person narration holds until the mini chapter headed *Player One* begins, at which point we are informed that, ‘Humans have souls and machines have ghosts. Me - Player One - I’m actually more of a ghost than a soul, but it remains to be seen when I got here and how it happened.’ The narrator goes on. ‘At the moment what matters most is that we learn what happens next in this story.’ (p42) The effect of this statement is that we are required to shift our assumption of third person to first while being reminded of the construct of story, and even of book as artifact. Certainly, this was the sensation I experienced upon first reading the novel. Despite the shift from third person to first, and the use of direct address, the narrator retains an omniscient quality throughout the remainder of the novel. The effect is that perspective is shifted as certain key questions arise, the most prominent of which might be: who is Player One and how did he or she get *here*. And, unavoidably, where exactly is the *here* the narrator is referring to?

We might not be able to answer these questions immediately as we continue with the process of reading and interpreting the narrative, but Coupland has planted the idea that our heroes are somewhat isolated. We begin to realise that the rundown bar with its glass doors and windows, sitting on edge of a sea of tarmac, is being observed from some unworldly plain, a distance that creates a sense of claustrophobia and impending doom. Soon after the introduction of the ghost device an explosion happens in the distance, the television informs our heroes that the price of oil is rocketing, and black clouds begin to roll towards the glass façade of the Chamelot Hotel Bar. And so, once again, the device of ghost (*unheimlich*) narrator not only signifies the possibility of loss and death, but creates the sense of story being

told from some other place that affects the way in which the narrative is interpreted. The ghost also, ‘becomes a metaphor for memory; it is also a metaphor for things hidden and buried.’ (Kunz, 2016) This device then works effectively in creating both a sense of things hidden from the reader, but also things hidden from the protagonist, and of memory being fluid rather than fixed. We might frame this latter assumption as one of a negotiation between signifier and signified that encourages an exploration of meaning.

i. A Postmodern Paradox

What I observe in the comparative texts examined in this thesis, and note within my own work, is a fascinating technique of duality. In experimenting with certain postmodern devices such as framing the narrative, the unheimlich narrator or direct address, I have come to appreciate the extent to which such techniques might serve to create distance from one’s subject. The application of a ghost narrator seems to me to increase the stakes, becoming, ‘a metaphor for things hidden and buried,’ and thus increases a sense of danger. This danger might be physical in nature, but for the purposes of this thesis, and the comparative texts I have chosen, I primarily note a danger to psyche and mental wellbeing. To my mind, the idea of psyche as fragile, unfixated, and subject to outside influence, makes the use of such devices so affecting. Whether or not we fear solely for the psyche of our heroes, or whether it is a fear we also realise in ourselves that bestows the power I accredit to such devices is not a concern we have time to investigate. What is fascinating to me, however, is the ability of these devices to create distance from, while simultaneously bringing us closer to, the protagonist.

Michel Houellebecq’s novel, *The Possibility of an Island*, (Houellebecq, 2006) seems to me to embody all of the devices I have observed within comparative texts thus far. It is only upon the completion of *my* novel, and in the critical self-reflection process and research required to

complete this thesis, that I now fully appreciate the extent to which Houellebecq has influenced my aesthetic technique and informed my thematic concerns. As with Coupland's novels, Houellebecq has created a narrative in which he presents us with a clear and present physical danger to the planet. And like Auster, chooses to investigate these dangers by focusing on a single protagonist to imply a symbiotic relationship between individual and society, and the dangers inherent in a lack of meaningful connection between the two.

The device of ghost narrator creating both distance from and empathy towards protagonist is present. Once again, the narrator's tone is clinical and detached. 'My current incarnation is deteriorating; I do not think it will last much longer. I know that in my next incarnation I will be reunited with my companion, the little dog Fox.' (p3) This asexual voice comes to us somewhere between life and death: 'deteriorating.' We are reminded that books are artifacts, cultural production. Stories are written in pages, a transference or sharing of meaning is, to some degree, at stake. 'This book is intended for the edification of the Future Ones. Men, they will tell themselves, were able to produce this. It is not nothing; it is not everything; we are dealing with an intermediary production.' (p7)

What is unique about Houellebecq's novel is that the narrator is a 'neohuman'. A copy of a copy, version 24 to be precise. We are presented, once again, with a ghost, a replica of the original Daniel, a version that is reading the life story of the original version of himself, added to by each copy of Daniel, memory passed on in narrative – a book of life. I view this version of Daniel as a ghost because I believe Houellebecq intends the narrative to be interpreted in this manner. By making Daniel 24 a ghost-like figure, looking back on the self-involved consumeristic life of the original Daniel, we are thus persuaded to reflect on the history of the planet which this copy of Daniel now occupies. Therefore, it seems to me, the ghost as narrator is the ideal device to create objectivity and distance, not only from the characters

within the novel but also from their surroundings. This is one of the reasons why I created Trainer as a ghost in my novel, so that I might observe and critique issues surrounding environmental change. Although I do this to a lesser extent than I observe within Houellebecq and Coupland's writing, or in contemporary, postmodern novels such as *White Noise* (DeLillo, 1985) or *Oryx and Crake* (Atwood, 2003), I nevertheless find the device affecting in creating empathy towards my protagonist. It feels to me that hinting at the destruction of the earth, or in Coupland's case, presenting the reader with an apocalyptic version of the future, we thus view the central characters within any narrative as vulnerable. Perhaps we then view ourselves as vulnerable, creating that moment of empathy.

Observing these combined techniques enabled me to constantly strive to create empathy towards Walter while also exploring his depravity. I want to have created a novel that offers the reader a despicable man and have them sympathise with that man and follow him on his journey. They have to want Walter to be a better person. They must reserve judgment until the end of the novel when all of the 'facts' of the story are in.

The Original Daniel in Houellebecq's novel, the one we experience in the present day, is similar to Walter, although more artistic in nature. He is not entirely unlikable because he is obviously intelligent. He is world weary and whimsical at times. And one cannot help agreeing with many of his observations regarding society – perhaps because we all suffer a little anomie, a sense of being outside of ideological apparatus, or the sense that it works against us rather than for us. But Daniel is also egotistical, lazy, unemphatic, solipsistic and extremely sexist. I wonder how a female reader would respond to this text given the distaste I felt at times. This, of course, is the central reader response question surrounding my own work. I do not want to have created a narrative that only men can relate. This is why the empathy must be born of universal concerns, not concerns based on gender or age.

Daniel's early observations concerning women are reductive and based on sexual politics and aesthetics. He informs us in a matter-of-fact tone how, 'Women in general lack a sense of humour, which is why they consider humour to be one of the virile qualities; throughout my career, opportunities for placing my organ in one of the appropriate orifices were never lacking.' (p.15) The device Houellebecq employs in order that we might empathise with this ridiculous man is to make him long dead and have his ghost reflect upon his past life. Daniel 24 also lacks empathy, just as the unnamed narrator in *City of Glass* was cold and distant regarding the 'facts' of Quinn's life. But this harshness softens as the telling of Daniel's past life progresses. Perhaps Houellebecq is hinting at the power of story to change lives, and the opportunity at redemption no matter how long past the fact. Both themes occupy the centre of my own work.

From the safety of his compound, surrounded by electric fencing, Daniel observes what is left of humankind. 'Look at the little creatures moving in the distance; look. They are humans. In the fading light, I witness without regret the disappearance of the species. A last ray of sunlight skims over the plain, passes over mountain range barring the horizon to the east, and colours the landscape with a red halo.' (p.17) This is an affecting observation because it is a copy of a man looking out over mankind, a dying species. And it is a poetic voice, sentimental despite the claim of no regret. We soon learn how this human trait of sentimentalism creeps in with each neohuman the longer they are alive, or the more versions produced after the original. Daniel 24 claims a clinical distance from his ancestors, but by reading Daniel 1's *life story* and keeping a record of his own thoughts (by the act of writing a memoir of sorts), Daniel 24 becomes more and more human. I would go as far as to say Houellebecq's is alluding to the importance of the novel in society, but we might certainly agree it serves to create empathy despite the distance of narrator from subject. The

neohumans call the original text of their predecessors a, 'life story, initially conceived as a simple complement, a provisional solution, [to passing on information] but which was, following the work by Pierce, to become considerably more important. Thus, curiously, this major logical advance resulted in the rehabilitation of an ancient form that was basically quite close to what was once called *auto biography*.' (p.18)

It feels to me as if there is a link between protagonist and planet that aids the development of a sense of empathy. I too suggest a link between Walter's life and the continued life of the planet - the transience of both, the need for cooperation and empathy so that both might flourish. I am suggesting that it is in the readers best interests to empathise with Walter. Just as Coupland opens with visions of the earth full of, 'Endless cars and trucks and minivans sit[ting] on the road shoulders harbouring cargoes of rotten skeletons behind the wheel,' (p4) juxtaposing this vision with the idea of youth on the verge of adulthood, Houellebecq opens with an apocalyptic vision of the future coupled with the idea that, 'Life wears you out, above all – there doubtless remains in some people an undebased core, a kernel of being; but what weight does this residue carry, in the face of the general decay of the body.' (p.44)

My central theme of the importance of empathy towards all people, even despicable men like Walter, is summed up in the novel when Daniel 24 writes about love and forgiveness in his journal, a passage that relates to the title of the novel itself. 'I am only a neohuman, and my nature includes no possibility of this order. Humans, or at least the most advanced among them, already knew that unconditional love is the condition for the possibility of happiness.' (p.62)

As I have stated, my central concern within this thesis is examine the various techniques I have applied throughout my novel that might create empathy towards my protagonist. Or, to

put it another way: Can I manipulate or persuade a reader into empathising with Walter until such a time this investment bears fruit and Walter turns over a new leaf. If I have failed in achieving this sense of empathy, and sympathy, I would argue the novel is in danger of failing; that is, if we agree that almost all narratives are constructed in such a way as to encourage a reader to invest, not only in the success of the hero, but also their emotional development.

I believe the application of the ghost narrator, placing Walter outside of the dominant ideological apparatus due to his subordinate position in the company and his lack of family money, as well as applying pressure from other more dominant characters such as his father-in-law and Agatha's dying husband, goes some way towards creating this empathy. Not only do I hope to have created a sense of the stakes being high, but this constant pressure is one I hope a reader might relate to. However, I do not believe this culmination of techniques and narrative choices is enough.

Auster created a character who suffered unbearable loss, living alone in his apartment without his son or wife, totally detached from the outside world and losing himself inside the detective genre narratives he creates. Coupland's opening gambit is to threaten his young protagonists with the apocalypse unless they change their ways. Houellebecq presents us with a ghost machine living in a burning landscape, his 'current incarnation deteriorating.' my protagonist, however, seems to have led a somewhat charmed life. Unlike Quinn, Walter is not physically isolated from the world. On the contrary, he is very much involved in the world - a Hollywood movie producer living in Los Angeles with a beautiful fiancée, a career, and, seemingly, his whole life ahead of him. Walter's problem is that he does not appreciate his life, his fiancée, or the people around him. In fact, he seems to engage with people only from

the point of view of what they can do for him. His sense of isolation is born of a perceived lack of social standing and repressed guilt over his attitude and behaviour towards the people in his life: the way he treats them, and, particularly, the way he has treated close friends and family in the past. His regret and guilt, and subsequent rationalising of his bad behaviour, is especially significant when it comes to his best friend Trainer and his fiancée Angel. He is distracting himself, indulging his desires, both physical and psychological. Walter pursues instant gratification with seemingly blind greed, without thought of the repercussions to his own life, or how his actions might affect those around him. He is also unwilling to empathise with others because, on some level, he knows that to empathise would mean he would have to examine his actions more closely. Walter is not willing to be distracted from his self-gratification. He suffers from a powerful drive demand that supersedes the needs and wants of others. He is used to satisfying the drives of his ego, primarily sexual in nature, despite the fact these drives threaten his relationship with his fiancée and, in terms of his career, his relationship with Angel's father who owns the production company where Walter is employed as a producer. He lives in constant danger of being found out which would ruin his upcoming marriage, his career and income, and his social standing in a town where reputation is everything. Walter struggles with a form of hysterical blindness, constantly denying the facts of any given situation while he pursues the American dream. Paradoxically, in the pursuit of this dream, Walter is rendered inert by the, 'attempt to alleviate anxiety by using methods that deny, falsify, or distort reality and that impede the development of personality.' (Hall, 1957) The result is that his behaviour worsens and his attitude towards those around him becomes more and more cynical.

During the early stages of writing *Dinosaurs*, I was unaware of the full weight of Walter's crimes, and I had not yet imagined the moment when Angel would discover the

extent to which she had been deceived. I was, however, aware that I had already created several problems for myself that caused a tension between exploring my protagonist to the full extent while having him remain sympathetic. That is why I chose to place my hero in a unique setting, one that would work for me on several levels and help to create that all important empathy.

CHAPTER 3. GOOD MOURNING HOLLYWOOD

Early in the novel, fresh from surrendering his body to Agatha Lightley in the hope of securing her husband's latest screenplay, Walter is visited by his old friend Trainer whom we quickly discover, had walked out on Walter seven years previously and, 'disappeared into the vast, shadowy landscape of Los Angeles.' (p.7) Trainer's unannounced arrival into Walter's carefully constructed house cards acts as a catalyst for change: often referred to in literary criticism as the *inciting moment*. This experience interrupts the habitual processes of Walter's ego, now unsustainable, and begins the hero's journey towards self-discovery. Here, also, is our first glimpse into Walter's fragile psyche because, in my mind, Walter might be talking to a ghost, a figment of his imagination summoned by repressed guilt and remorse. This idea is only alluded to at first when Walter's secretary, Rhona, says, 'I didn't let anybody into your office, Mister Stopps.' (p.14)

In retrospect, I need look no further than Palahniuk's *Fight Club* (1996) to discover the novel that planted in my young mind the seed of this device. Indeed, another of Palahniuk's novels (*Choke*) also employs the same direct address I found compelling in *American Beauty*. When it opens with a direct address, an acerbic voice challenging the reader to stop reading the artifact they hold in their hands: 'After a couple of pages, you won't want to be here. So forget it. Go away. Get out while you're still in one piece. Save yourself.' (2001, p.1)

Where Auster employs the staccato voice of Peter Stillman, my inciting moment is the arrival of a ghost: a framing narrator borrowed from Coupland, but also a familiar plot device used to great effect in *A Christmas Carol* (Dickens, 1843). And I choose for this moment to take place in Los Angeles, within a construct named Hollywood, the biggest floating signifier

I can think of.

To test the effectiveness of my choice of setting in supporting and informing the themes within *Dinosaurs*, it was useful to examine A.M Homes' novel, *This Book Will Save Your Life* (2007). Richard Novack is a fifty-five-year-old, successful securities trader living an isolated life in his luxurious home in the Hollywood Hills. He is divorced. His ex-wife and estranged son live on the east coast in New York. Richard is somewhat asexual, his only human contact comes in the form of his cleaner, his nutritionist, and his personal trainer, all of whom visit the house rather than Richard leaving his hermetically sealed enclave overlooking the city. He is a benign hero, not unlikable in any sense, but without the qualities one might assume necessary to create empathy. In informing my writing, Home's protagonist straddles the psychological and physical gap between Quinn and Walter.

Richard Novack has suffered no great loss or committed no great crime. Yet the problem of creating sympathy and empathy, it seems to me, is still relevant. The question surrounding Homes' novel, as it relates to my own, might be framed as: how has the author made me (the reader) care about an affluent white male with a myopic world view who has deliberately cut himself off from society? How does this novel serve as a useful counterpoint to my own writing?

Richard begins each day by checking the stock market while on his running machine, observing his beautiful neighbour whom he admires from a distance as she swims laps in her pool below. 'He takes comfort in her swimming, in her determination, rhythm, routine, in the fact that she is awake when he is awake.' (p.1) He watches the women from his glass window while wearing a noise cancelling headset. Homes presents us with a quiet, introspective protagonist, literally shutting out the world in every way possible, observing from a distance, 'Above and below, a chain of houses [which] climes the canyon wall: a social chain, an

economic chain, a food chain. The goal is to be on top, king of the hill - to win. Each person looks down on the next, thinking they somehow have it better, but there is always someone else either pressing up from below or looking down from above. There is no way to win.' (p2)

What does Richard mean by, 'win'? I sense in this opening a man aware of other peoples' perception of him, of social standing and the hierarchy imposed by wealth. He is surrounded by expensive art and technology and good food. He places importance on the accumulation of wealth and excellent physical health. But we sense in his observations the futility of these pursuits.

Early in the novel, Richard suffers a pain in his chest that causes him to call for an ambulance. As he waits for the paramedics to arrive, he dresses in clean clothes to preserve his dignity, and perhaps to exert some notion of control over the attack to his person. This inciting moment reveals a sense of pride, but also intense vulnerability. The pain Richard experiences in his chest marks the start of a redemptive journey back into society which will also see him reconnect with his estranged family.

Although I consider Richard to be a less problematic character compared to Walter, there nevertheless remains the question, why would a reader invest in his journey towards self-discovery. Unlike Walter, he does not cheat on his wife, or abuse or manipulate women. He does not take drugs or even drink alcohol, and his work is honest. In fact, his only crime seems to be that of self-imposed isolation. We learn that his relationship with his son is turbulent because he has been an absent father, and his marriage ended (according to his wife) because he did not fight for it. But these are not exactly crimes. On the other hand, I would argue that Richard is not an especially likable character. His observations relate mostly to *his* relationship with the world, *his* place outside of society, and how he feels about *his* future. He is a solipsistic character, singularly lacking a sympathetic world view. He is also a wealthy

person in a city that has a huge disparity between rich and poor. This is highlighted by the government man who comes to check on the inexplicable sink hole forming outside of Richard's million-dollar property. 'Nice up here,' he says. 'Not like down there – nothing to be afraid of up here.' Just as the man is about to enter the hole, he asks Richard: 'Any animals or street people who could be living in a cave?' Richard is curious about this question but does not appear shocked. 'Cave people, [the man continues] they come in and set up house. We've got people living everywhere.' (p65) This socioeconomic disparity underlies the entire novel in subtle ways, but the most overarching clue might be that all of Richard's problems, and those of his fellow actants are, 'First world problems.' The characters in Homes' novel seem to drift around the sun-drenched city, sandwiched between the Pacific Ocean and the San Gabriel Mountains. They lead a life occupied by coffee shops, hotels, day spas, yoga retreats and supermarkets. These, '...modern luxuries of individual choice and religious freedom have created a new reality, one in which life can have multiple meanings.' (Froese, 2016) I agree with this theory to some extent but suggest that such an abundance of choice might also lead to life having no meaning. This is what I feel Homes investigates throughout the novel. Even the notion that destitution and hunger are without meaning if one feels no connection with the society in which they are supposed to be emotionally invested.

After the inciting moment of intense chest pains, Richard experiences an awakening of sorts and makes a concerted effort to connect with his family and the people around him. In the wake of his hospital visit, and continued visits to Doctor Lusardi, he tells himself, 'He couldn't cover everything up anymore, he needed to feel everything as it was.' (p.35). I would suggest his feelings are not based on the reality of 'everything as it was,' but remain, instead, highly mediated because he lives in a town that specialises in media and the mediation of information. Nic, the recluse writer who lives next door to Richard when he moves to the

beach, sums this idea up perfectly when he explains: ‘We live in a time when no one wants to remember. We pretend we are where it starts. Look at the way we live – we build houses on fault lines, in the path of things, and when something happens, we don’t learn history, we build it again, right in the same spot’ (Homes, 2007 p281). Homes posits the idea, rather ironically, that *this book* will, in fact, not save your life, not unless *you* (the reader) are prepared to remember and to learn from history.

Novack is not evil, or even callous. Despite all his wealth and privilege, he might be viewed as a victim. He is, if anything, a blank canvas: free of distinguishing emotional features which serve to highlight his estranged, disconnected position within (and outside of) society - much like Meursault in Camus’ classic novella *L’étranger* (1942). We might be encouraged to sympathise with Richard as he remembers what it was like to be married, or when he recounts the period in his life when he drifted apart from his wife and moved away from his young son. However, these choices were his to make and it is not until the latter part of the novel that we get a sense of regret concerning his actions. Where Walter has obvious unlikable traits that pose a problem in terms of creating empathy, Homes tackles the issue of empathising with a privileged man who is part invisible and without a concrete history. She explores this by combining ideas of environmental unrest in a city lacking a sense of its own history and identity. A city without an agreed sign system, one that deals heavily in the production of media: ‘It’s the one thing this town understands – the movie business.’ (p.264)

This Book will Save Your Life might easily be interpreted as a cautionary tale, one that concludes with Richard floating on a dining table in the Pacific Ocean (a literal floating signifier) while the cover of the book, in all editions I have seen, features pictures of doughnuts that look suspiciously like lifebuoys. Much like my own novel, it is a story about the inherent dangers of placing too much importance on wealth and perceived social standing.

The pursuit of ideas imbedded in the phrase, “the American Dream” [which] was introduced into contemporary social analysis in 1931 by historian James Truslow Adams.’ Supported by the idea that, ‘Cultural histories of the general “success” theme in literature testify to the remarkable durability of the American Dream over the course of the past century.’ (Messner and Rosenfeld, 2012, p.7)

To my mind, Homes’ choice of Los Angeles as the setting for her novel complemented her thematic concerns perfectly. She was afforded the opportunity to explore sign and signifier throughout, and thus highlight the impossibility of agreed meaning. Reminders of rampant consumerism and the environmental impact of overurbanisation were constantly flagged from the beginning: birds flying into plate glass windows, forest fires, sink holes, floods, and a sabre-toothed cat. This depiction of nature in crisis reflects the internal landscape of Richard Novack, and so many others within the novel. References to film production and to story serve to remind us of the amorphous nature of ‘truth’ and, as with *Get Shorty*, once again highlight the problematic nature of the pursuit of a meaningful existence. On top of this, Homes’ plays with perceptions of Hollywood and the idea of things not being what they seem. Apart from horses that should not find themselves in sink holes in the Hollywood Hills, and sabre-toothed cats which are supposed to be long extinct, several of the key characters in the story also have dual personalities. The famous Hollywood actor, Tad Ford, pilots the helicopter that winches the horse to safety, and later in the novel works alongside the construction crew fixing Richard’s house. He also undertakes the role of spiritual guru, father and chef. The homeless bum to whom Richard donates his denim jacket turns out to be a famous novelist in hiding, and we discover that Doctor Lusardi, whom Richard confided in on several occasions, and whose advice he took to heart, was actually masquerading as a doctor before skipping town. Curiously, Richard seems to resonate more

with the fake doctor than the real one he meets later in the novel.

Throughout the narrative, people appear to be screens upon which various personalities can be projected, just as the troubled landscape plays host to both concrete and jungle. And in such a setting, constantly subject to a complex and sophisticated media output that places importance on material wealth, we might all be capable of empathising with the difficulty in leading an authentic existence.

i. City of Angeles

On the face of it, Damien Chazelle's *LaLa Land* (2016) might be interpreted as a simple pastiche, a homage to Hollywood musical predecessors such as *A star is Born*, *Singing in the Rain*, or *Meet me in St. Louis* - all produced in the mid-forties to mid-fifties. Certainly the appearance of the lurid GLORIOUS TECHNICOLOR logo painted across the screen during the opening scene is not only self-referential and nostalgic, but serves as a reminder of the song 'Glorious Technicolor, Breathtaking Cinemascope and Stereophonic Sound' sung by Fred Astaire and Janis Page in the film *Silk Stockings* (1957). The opening dance number, played out amid oppressive Los Angeles commuter traffic, is also a pastiche of the nineteen-eighties film *Fame* when hundreds of performing arts students take to the streets amid New York traffic thus exploring a juxtaposition between artistic expression and the seemingly all-powerful industrial and mechanistic forces of the day. And so, only minutes into Chazelle's modern-day take on a great Hollywood tradition, we are transported into the past. But, more interestingly, we are not simply transported into a single, recognisable past, but into various versions of Hollywood history, a history, one might argue, that only ever exists on the big screen. This is an example of Los Angeles as a setting on which ideas can be projected, just as with Home's novel: Hollywood is a construct, and Chazelle's film seems unafraid to indulge

in pure nostalgia. However, unlike *Top Hat* (Sandrich, 1935), starring Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, the star-crossed lovers of *LaLa Land* do not dance off into the Venetian sunset, but instead end up going their separate ways due to seemingly irreconcilable differences. This anti-ending is much like Hartley's short film because it is obvious our heroes are still in love. What we witness here might be another example of the transient nature of Hollywood, where nothing is fixed or permanent. This anti-ending is the most obvious difference between *LaLa Land* and so many of its predecessors because the failure of our heroes to remain together at the end of the film is in no part due to a Shakspearian warring of houses, but simply the pursuit of career and, I assume, the *American Dream*.

LaLa Land is not simply a romantic comedy paying homage to musicals of the past, it is, in my opinion, a self-conscious Hollywood fictive, a dream played out in a town where dreams - according to a long history of Hollywood cinema from *Cinderella* (Nichols, 1911) to *Pretty Woman* (Marshall, 1990)- are said to come true. 'Welcome to Hollywood,' the homeless man chimes over the opening credits, 'What's your dream? Everybody comes here, this is Hollywood, land of dreams. Some dreams come true, some don't. But keep on dreaming. This is Hollywood, always time to dream.' Even, it would appear, the destitute believe in the *dream*, so how could the rest of us resist? The trouble is, dreams are not real, and the homeless man will, most likely, die of alcohol consumption and poor diet. And the protagonist in *Lala Land* could easily be accused of cultural appropriation as he mansplains the history and nature of jazz to his romantic counterpart

The question is, how do characters like Richard Novack and Walter Stopps, privileged white males, carve out for themselves a place in which authenticity rather than dream is the conceptual ideology. Chazelle might be signposting this tension by denying our star-crossed lovers a happy ending, just as we are denied the ability to truly suspend our disbelief

throughout the film. The tension between suspension of disbelief opposing self-conscious narrative is explored throughout the film to the extent that a sense of nostalgia and loss emerges within every scene. When Mia, a struggling actress, and Sebastian, a struggling jazz musician (this is essentially the plot of the film) are finally alone together, in the street outside a party in the hills overlooking an unrealistic, smog-free Los Angeles backdrop, they dance together for the first time. We sense a connection between the two, an on-screen chemistry that is undeniable - especially if one has already seen Gosling and Stone together in Dan Fogelman's *Crazy, Stupid, Love*. (Ficarra and Requa, 2011) But just as the opening dance number on the crowded freeway comes to an abrupt end with the honking of car horns and the revving of engines, this intimate moment, a subdued courtship dance reminiscent of Astaire and Rogers in the *The Gay Divorcee* (Sandrich, 1934), comes to a sudden end with the bleeping of an electric car remote alarm: an abrasive, modern sound that pulls us out of the dream and into reality. And, as mentioned, we are already invited to think of Hollywood as entertainment industry that produces fictional introjects because we have seen these two characters in another romance narrative in which they do get together in the end.

This interrupting of the most recognisable pastiche moments, or a breaking of narrative structure, continues throughout the film, replacing fantasy with objectivity. In the case of the Prius' remote alarm, we are reminded of how modern the film is, how it is set in the present day and, as such, is consciously mimicking films of the past. In doing so, it places itself somewhat in opposition to films of the past. We might also be prompted to ask how Mia is able to afford a Prius on a coffee barista's salary and, consequently, be reminded of Hollywood's constant unrealistic representations of lifestyle when it comes to the cars, clothes and apartments our heroes are able to afford. Such unrealistic representation is a Hollywood aesthetic tradition from *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (Edwards, 1961) to television

sitcoms such as *Friends* (1994) in which we are proffered an unreal world of beautiful people exploring supposedly ‘real’ problems in unrealistic settings.

This tension between real and unreal is explored more fully when Mia and Sebastian go on their first proper date to the cinema. While they are watching *Rebel Without a Cause* (Ray, 1955), the bulb on the projector burns the celluloid causing the reel to melt just as we see the iconic Griffith Observatory appear on screen. The sensation caused by this interruption of narrative is one of a dream ending, reality replacing fantasy. This device was also used in *Persona* (Bergman, 1966), and *Cinema Paradiso* (Tornatore, 1988) to explore ideas of transitions of mental and physical state. In the context of *LaLa Land* (Chazelle, 2016) this device is interesting because as far back as 1999 many cinemas were already using digital projectors. By 2013, ninety-two percent of cinemas in America were digital and so a print like *Rebel Without a Cause* (Ray, 1955) would be very rare and very expensive, and therefore unlikely to be played except at special screenings. This scene is self-reflexive because *LaLa Land* is a deliberately nostalgic film, just as the process of watching celluloid at the cinema is nostalgic: both the musical as genre and celluloid itself are things belonging to the past. Just as Homes’ novel (2007) posits the idea of America existing in ‘a time with no past,’ Chazelle’s film hints at the idea of history being burnt in favour of the present, while also retaining a sense of nostalgia: the phenomenon described by Jameson in postmodern writing as schizophrenia, and of, ‘not know[ing] personal identity,’ (1985). Once again, I observe how Los Angeles as setting informs and serves thematic themes within my novel and the contextual works that make up this thesis.

Once the melted celluloid fills the screen and the house lights come up, our heroes abandon the auditorium and drive to the ‘real’ Griffith Observatory that appears in Ray’s iconic movie. What we witness is not so much life imitating art as art imitating art from the

past. The couple are able to enter the planetarium in the dead of night and dance among the projected (another illusion) stars in a surreal scene reminiscent of a Busby Berkeley film, and which sits in stark contrast to the violent *chicken-run* or knife fight scenes at the Observatory which appear in *Rebel Without a Cause*. The dance scene is a fantasy within a fantasy, but rather than promoting a suspension of disbelief, what occurs is a series of questions caused by juxtaposition: ruminations on past films and the nature of story or, in this case, the nature of story through the medium of cinema: the act of Hollywood examining its own mechanisms and constructs.

My thinking surrounding Los Angeles as setting, and the constructs of Hollywood and the *American Dream*, can be summed up by, ‘William Mulholland’s Laconic dedication speech at the opening of the Los Angeles Aqueduct in 1913 – “There it is! Take it!” (Soja, 2011, p.194) After decades of restructuring and *spatialization* the sprawling city, ‘has become the paradigmatic window through which to see the last half of the twentieth century. A place ‘where it all comes together.’ (p.220)

ii. *Hollywood Tales*

There is a scene earlier in the film when Mia is preparing to go to the party where she will have her first conversation with Sebastian. It is a dance number set in an impossibly colourful, stylised apartment with three beautiful friends that might be compared to the scene *The Wizard of Oz*. (Fleming, 1939) There is a parallel here not simply because there are four of them, just as with Dorothy and her companions, but in the sense of anticipation, an adventure that might bring about the fulfilment of a dream - to meet the wizard and be granted the wish that will make life perfect – a brain, a heart, courage, or, in this case, discovered by a famous movie producer. And just as there is no grand wizard, there is no movie producer, only a

struggling jazz musician in the form of Gosling.

I would argue, *LaLa Land* is narrative that examines the nature of the stories we love to experience. It also examines what those stories look like in a post 911 America. We are presented with a classic boy meets girl narrative in a highly recognisable genre, but that genre is subverted by the boy and girl not ending up together. It is as if this simple idea of love concurring all cannot be sustained even in the most nostalgic and naive of genres. And yet, at the film's end, Chazelle cannot resist offering the audience a montage of what might have been, an alternative ending played out during a chance encounter when Mia and her new husband accidentally enter Sebastian's jazz club. Our heroes are picked out of the darkness by two spotlights as Sebastian plays the now all-too-familiar piano theme song and we experience images of the young lovers ending up together with a beautiful baby girl. Although this might be viewed as a consolation to the audience, this juxtaposition only serves to highlight a sense of loss because there is no reason why it could not have been - or, rather, not the recognisable, familiar reasons we are used to seeing in genres such as tragedy or drama. Los Angeles, and Hollywood again work in service to the themes explored within the movie, just as they serve Homes' and myself. In a landscape that constantly strives for reinvention and, arguably, wealth and success, concepts like true love might struggle to find a foothold. The montage at the closing *LaLa Land* is what the endings to musicals used to look like. This is how Hollywood cultural production used to look and feel when it was willing to believe in simple ideas such as love. Taking this hypothesis a step further, one might suggest this is what life used to look like when we believed in happy endings. But in a post 911, fake news world, perhaps that time has passed, and those ideas belong to the past. Just as with Dorothy, we now live in a world where the magic of story, the construction of narrative, has been exposed: A post postmodern world. A metamodern world. If we agree that we also live

in a post-truth world, the idea of happy endings, of Hollywood endings, is now an impossibility. This is the interesting and often complex idea behind *LaLa Land* that in many ways relates to my own writing and the discourse I want to enter with my readership. Where *LaLa Land* fails, my mind, is that it is too concerned with pastiche and irony and not concerned enough with 'truth'. One might argue, as I have in places, that pastiche serves to highlight meaning, but the script is already out of touch with its audience and at times, as I observed with the scene where Gosling, a privileged white male, explains to Stone the origins and meaning and depth of jazz.

Where it succeeds, is to explore the idea, to some extent, that story is now a process of negotiation because we have all seen behind the curtain, and as such are now denied simple ideas, simple 'truths' presented in all narratives. At the end of *The Wizard of Oz*, Dorothy wakes to find the whole story was a dream. In this sense, *LaLa Land* does the same but in reverse.

CHAPTER 4. THE ANTICIPATION OF TRUTH

I have always found science fiction and speculative writing particularly affecting in addressing societal concerns and attitudes because I feel that by positioning a narrative within an imagined setting - that is to say, within a time and place not of this earth - a writer is better able to experiment with issues surrounding ideology, psychology and philosophy. A writer can project onto the imagined canvas a world that will best serve the themes they wish to address within the novel or film. Of course, I acknowledge not all science fiction, and especially speculative fiction, takes place on faraway planets or in strange dimensions. The same affect can be achieved with islands, farms and jungles. What I am investigating here is the idea that certain settings can effectively imply boundaries and barriers - a means by which to keep your heroes in one place, or, if one considers ideological apparatus, in a singular state of mind that best serves that apparatus. In this sense, I feel I have unitised both the physical and psychological characteristics of Los Angeles just as Conrad made use of his dark and humid Congo, and Golding his uninhabited island. It is my opinion such settings enable a writer to better examine the nature of society from an implied objective position.

In terms of boundaries - implied, psychological and physical - I am reminded of the infamous tagline on the original posters for *Alien*: '*In Space No One Can Hear You Scream*' (Scott, 1979) The statement creates a mood based on simple, scientific fact. There is a sense of claustrophobia before one even enters the theatre, the sense that space is harsh, unliveable and remote. Should *you* find yourself in danger, from an alien species for example, your fellow man will not be there to help you.

Writers such as Isaac Asimov, Ursula K. Le Guin, and Philip K. Dick, use the science

fiction genre to great effect/affect to critique themes such as ideological apparatus, religion, colonialism, selfhood, and feminism. If I consider Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (Atwood, 1985), for example, I think of Frantz Fanon's ideas of the possibility for literature to be a form, '...of combat because it assumes responsibility, and because it is the will to liberty expressed in terms of time and space.' (Bond, 1968, p.63) Atwood herself asserts that science fiction, and speculative fiction is not about the future, 'I'm not a prophet,' she says. 'Let's get rid of that idea right now. Prophecies are really about now. In science fiction it's always about now.' (Allardice, 2018)

When considering Los Angeles as the choice of setting for my novel, the most obvious reasons for doing so are similar to why many science fiction writers choose distant planets, or an earth of the future. Just as it was not hard for Atwood to imagine a dystopian Gilead where women are property and the will of the affluent forms the basis of all ideological apparatus, it is not hard for me (and, I hope my readership) to imagine a Hollywood where aesthetics, money and power rule, and the ideological apparatus is formed and governed by the affluent. It does not matter that Atwood's readers have not seen the future, or that my readers have not actually visited Los Angeles, both works are based on an assumption of shared opinion, or of shared, previously experienced texts, films, and television programmes. I cannot speak for Atwood in this regard, but for myself, I also assume a degree of engagement with politics and certainly with the business of the film industry in terms of cultural production. Once I assume a certain degree of shared opinion and shared media, there is a sign system that can be utilised, but also a gap between signifier and signified that can be explored. I too am investigating the possibility of *liberty expressed in terms of time and space*. And if, with my protagonist Walter Stopps, I am not always exploring liberty, I am certainly exploring a negotiation of self-realisation. Whether my Hollywood is 'real' or not, is not so important,

what is important is placing my protagonist in a world that I feel best serves ideas surrounding the struggle for individuation: what Jung observes as ‘the centre of the personality, a person’s inner core with ‘it’s individual and social destiny.’ (Jacoby, 2017)

i. The Center of Nothing

Another film that influenced my writing, one that has haunted me for many years, and which I found difficult to watch due to its representation of self-centred, misogynistic male characters, was *Hurly Burly* (Drazan, 1998), written by David Rabe and later adapted for the big screen in 1998 - directed by Anthony Drazden.

One of the reasons I was compelled to revisit this film is because it relies heavily on preconceptions surrounding Hollywood, film production in Hollywood, and life in Los Angeles. At the time, the stage play reflected an America coming out of more than a decade of deep recession. The country experienced a dramatic economic upturn and entered a time (especially for those who benefitted most from Reagan’s huge tax cuts) of economic prosperity which resulted in the rise of materialism. It is my assumption that there were enough preconceived ideas surrounding the Hollywood elite that Rabe was able to focus less on setting and more on dialogue. In this respect, I was able to observe a narrative that relied heavily on shared preconception to effectively explore many of its central themes. Similar works that I regard as relying on a degree of preconceived ideas around time and place might include the novel *American Psycho* (Ellis, 1991) and the film *Wall Street* (Stone, 1987) - both of which are concerned with (among other things) consumerism, consumption, sexism, drug use, and a subsequent loss of self. It is interesting to note, that *Wall Street II* – basically a remake masquerading as a sequel, and thematically the same in every regard, was released in 2010. I am also reminded, when I think of these particular contextual works, and of my own

work, of the poem *The Second Coming* which I feel acts as a framing device for this genre of cultural production, yet one that arrived ninety-nine years before my debut novel. Perhaps I am a bit behind the curve...

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity. (Yeats, 1921)

Taking its title from Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, *Hurly Burly* focuses on the life of two Hollywood producers who seem, at first, entirely lacking any moral grounding. Eddy is playing host to his acerbic friend Mickey, who seems to be taking a hiatus from his wife and child. They reside in the Hollywood hills, looking out, as with Richard Novack, on the crowded city below.

From the very first scene, we realise Eddy is high on drugs despite it being early in the morning on a workday. What we witness is a man on an almost Jungian quest of ego death, one who yearns to lose himself through consumption and self-annihilation. Or perhaps, as was argued by several film critics at the time, to gain enlightenment through drug use in line with William James' theories (Moon, Kuza and Desai, 2018). What I perceive in Eddy's character is total lack of empathy rather than enlightenment, and total solipsism rather than the death of the ego. The lack of empathy in two distinct but closely linked moments within the opening scene of the film. In the first, a drunk aging actor friend (Phil) arrives complaining about how

he argued with his wife again that morning, exclaiming, ‘...and that’s when it happened, I whacked her,’ revering to his wife as, ‘a deceitful bitch.’ Phil is a heavysset man and when he says ‘whacked’ one cannot help noting the size of his arms and hands. No sooner have we experienced this tirade of abuse about a wife who is seemingly unwilling to support her out of work actor husband, and noting the lack of concern the confession of physical violence arouses in Eddy and Mickey, then a fourth friend (Artie) walks in with a beautiful young drifter in tow who he, ‘found in the elevator of his apartment building,’ after she had been hit by her boyfriend. He presents the girl as a gift: ‘[I] figured I don’t need her. And Maybe you guys need her... Because I figured, you know, hey, you’re desperate guys.’

Throughout a protracted conversation (because all conversations in the film are protracted due to drug and alcohol consumption) the young lady remains silent, acquiescing to the exchange, a commodity in need of a roof over her head. There is a scene later in the film when Phil throws a woman out of a moving car because he thinks she is laughing at him. This is done in such a matter-of-fact way that it is almost comic, and thus uncomfortable to watch. What the scene does is illustrate the extent to which women have become objects to these men. This idea is repeated so often throughout the film in renders the experience of watching uncomfortable and claustrophobic. These scenes are brutal in just about every regard but speak to my own novel on many levels. Eddy’s character asks a lot of philosophical questions in his drug induced state, many of which seem logical, some even sympathetic, but they lack any real emotion or concern because he is too preoccupied with his own turmoil – the hurly burly of his life. He has fallen apart. His centre cannot hold. It is as if, by living in a world with no agreed sign system, Eddy’s thoughts and feelings are lacking meaning, and he has no moral compass to navigate his life of unbridled consumption. The only agreed meaning throughout the movie seems to be the signifier *woman* to mean *object*.

Much like Walter, Eddy's character has the capacity for empathy but is lacking a moral centre which might act as a bridge between observing and empathising. He asks about the wife who Phil 'whacked.' He asks about the young homeless girl who is being proffered as a gift. But he is not concerned with the violence either woman has been subjected to. In terms of narrative device, I observe within all my contextual works, it is what is not said that has the greatest affect. It is Eddy's lack of empathy that raises the questions: why does he not feel and how is it he seems incapable of caring about others. What path leads a man, apparently successful, educated and affluent, to take drugs in the morning or to be able to treat women as objects? Like Walter, Eddy is not satisfied with his life. He has big, philosophical questions he wants to explore. He is a middle-aged male with a deep fear of death, but what does he do about these fears, how does he reconcile his vacuous lifestyle with a need to be more enlightened. The truth might be that there is a binary opposition at work here that makes reconciliation impossible. This internal struggle leads to repression which leads to a return of the repressed that takes on many ugly forms.

Although I have created a similar character in Walter, there is a tension at play here that paradoxically interests and concerns me. Rabe's character and mine live in the same environment, are governed by the same ideologies, and both suffer a process of repression that leads to a sense of alienation and otherness. The difference I observe in my novel compared to Rabe's play, is that I hope to explore similar levels of dysfunction while allowing for the possibility of redemption – the possibility that my readers will be sympathetic towards Walter by the end of the novel. Perhaps the fact that Eddy is difficult to sympathise with is a reflection of the ideologies surrounding Hollywood in the eighties. In other words, both Rabe and myself rely on preconception of place, but Rabe's Hollywood, and so his characters, are much harsher and more lacking in moral grounding. The play seems

to want to critique the era and the male psyche, rather than explore any possibility for redemption. It is, to my mind, a cautionary tale that is brave insofar as it does not attempt to offer any solutions to the aberrant narcissism it so eloquently portrays.

Eddy lives in a nice house in the hills in Los Angeles, and we know he is a movie producer. But the only time we see the outside world is when Eddy and Mickey race their respective executive cars to work, whilst continuing their conversation on mobile phones about how Mickey has stolen Eddy's girlfriend - a brilliant example of waste and consumerism. When they arrive at work, they walk past an array of beautiful female hopefuls waiting outside their shared office, then flick absently through an array of headshots of beautiful female hopefuls before calling it a day. The reason, as I have mentioned previously, I chose this play/film as a comparative text, is to illustrate just how much legwork preconception does in terms of time and place, and how Hollywood as a construct in a valuable tool in terms of my novel.

I believe Rabe relied on the shared idea of rich sleazy Hollywood producers as instantly recognisable, and, to some extent, the kinds of debauched lifestyles they might lead and the sexist attitudes they might possess. It is a sad truth that the Hollywood film industry is no different today that in the eighties. This makes my novel relevant, but also raises the stakes in terms of Walter being a sympathetic character, especially in terms of a female readership.

For me, the highlight of the script/film is when Phil returns to Eddy's house in the hills having kidnapped his baby girl from his estranged wife in the dead of night. When he attempts to hand the baby to Eddy, Eddy cannot accept, simply saying, 'I am all dirty.' Phil then asks, 'You think if we kept her and raised her, she'd grow up to be a decent human being?' The question hangs in the air unanswered until, quite suddenly, the conversation continues in a similar vein to the opening of the film. Eddy's sense of being dirty, and the

question of whether these men could raise a baby girl, create a brilliant scene full of both spoken and unspoken questions and leave, for me at least, a very lasting impression.

As with *Wall Street*, *Hurly Burly* was written in the mid-eighties but was not made into a film until 1998, and it is worth noting the film was set in the present day at the time of its release. What I take from this, and in observing my own novel, is that it is not simply the time-period that informs the themes within *Hurly Burly*, but the ideologies and assumptions surrounding Los Angeles and Hollywood.

ii. *It's Not True That It's Funny, but It Is Funny*

Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho*, is a novel which gives '...the impression that we have created a world devoid of compassion and empathy, a fertile breeding ground for monsters to thrive while hiding in plain sight.' It is a disturbing account of a psychotic, violent, and insecure man in an environment based solely on perception. But Ellis creates a balance by, 'Furnish[ing] us with that most impenetrable of shields: dark humour and irony.' (Welsh, 2015).

The device of juxtaposing humour with the acts of violence and psychotic behaviour, does not exactly create empathy, but it does create a necessary distance from the violence, making it bearable by reminding us it is not real. The application of dichotomic themes such as comedy and violence allow the reader to perceive both in new ways and thus invent new ways of experiencing both - it creates, as Shklovsky observes, a prolonged experience, important 'because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged.' (p3)

This prolonged process of perception is a form of discourse between the novel and the

reader which relies, in part, on the assumption that ‘...our experience of literature, and indeed of everything else, depends not only on the intrinsic features of the text,’ but also, and perhaps more importantly, ‘...on the culture we have internalized; and that the culture we have internalized comes from the discourses (in a rather broad, metaphysical sense) in which we have engaged.’ (Jackson; Leonard, 1991p260-61). My ambition is to create a narrative that raises questions outside of the text, questions that draw from previous external discourses in terms of past shared experience, but also from other forms of cultural production. This discourse is necessary when engaging in all texts, but the challenge, in terms of my novel, is not only to interrupt what I might refer to as habitualised engagement, but to create empathy with a protagonist who is, on many levels, unlikable.

It is pertinent to note that this thesis or, at least this section of the thesis, is not necessarily about whether or not my assertions surrounding Los Angeles and Hollywood are true - or a true representation of place, or of the ideological apparatus and beliefs surrounding that place. They could, in fact, be entirely untrue. This thesis serves as a critical component to an original creative work and so, what is important is to demonstrate why I have made certain assertions and choices in the creation of that work, and why my choice of comparative texts not only share similar assertions and aesthetics or thematic concerns, but how and why they have influenced my creative choices as a writer. I do not wish to assert, for instance, that Hollywood is this way or that way, but it is necessary to demonstrate why my make-believe Hollywood serves my thematic concerns just as it has served many writers before me.

CONCLUSION

As stated in the opening chapter of this thesis, I am not overly concerned with defining Metamodern literature as a genre, but rather my interests lie in observing certain narrative devices that are attributed to such writing, or what I refer to as *the voice behind the curtain*. However, it is exciting to me that Los Angeles (and Hollywood as a concept) feels like a metamodern setting in which I have been able to experiment with various devices that have, I hope, helped me to create a sense of empathy towards my protagonist, Walter Stopps. I have not taken up much space in this relatively short thesis to quote my own novel as my preoccupation has been to attempt to articulate the concerns and fascinations I have surrounding any problematic characters in works of fiction. It is also important to note at the closing of this thesis that I am aware I have chosen as my contextual texts some problematic novels that can be accused of misogyny, as with Houellebecq's writing, or distasteful and violent, as with Ellis. I do not use these novels as a way of demonstrating that any and all opinions can be made tasteful or palatable if the right devices are applied, or that any protagonist can be made to be sympathetic, but rather I use them as extreme examples of what can be achieved with certain devices. Many of the novels remain problematic, some might be said to be outdated, including the *LaLa Land* script. I would agree they are, for the most part, an acquired taste, just as I suspect my own novel is an acquired taste. It is for this reason, I suspect my own writing, in this instance, is out of step with current thinking, but I believe it was a necessary first novel, one that I was required to write in order to explore my initial ideas surrounding narrative structure and, to some extent, exercise my previous literary influences before moving on. It is a novel I have learned a great deal from, not least of all its

shortcomings which will serve me well in the future.

As I approached the end of this critical, reflexive work, other theories began to form, ideas and observations that would require further research to effectively articulate. In the process of closely reading so many comparative texts, and researching and appreciating literary theory, I discovered what might be the most affecting device that runs throughout all of the novels I site as contextual works. There is a sense within these works that a deeper level of empathy is achieved by the omniscient first-person narrator being denied an authentic life experience due to an overly developed sense of objectivity – what I have observed as distance. It is my assertion that an authentic life cannot be experienced and observed simultaneously. This sense of overt objectivity feels, to me, very sad, because I have the sense of a person living a half-life. This sensation ignited in me a deep sense of empathy and is a device I will explore as my writing progresses.

It is thanks to the commitment and knowledge of my supervisor, Celia Brayfield, that I was encouraged to observe my own writing in a new light and this enabled me to take risks in expressing myself, not only in my creative piece but within this thesis.

So much of what concerns me regarding Hollywood as setting can be argued to be only preconceived ideas - and thus can be accepted or rejected in terms of being true. And isn't that a theory that sits at the centre of postmodernism - the rejection of a single truth And if there is no single truth, what opens up is a negotiation between sign and signified, what Homi Bhabha refers to as a 'liminal space' (Bhabha, 1994 p.134) in which preconceptions can be challenged, negotiation can take place and, certainly in terms of Bhabha's critical theory surrounding the 'othered', a celebration of uniqueness might be allowed to blossom.

Instead of a wizard's curtain, Hollywood provides me with a screen. Instead of a history I need to engage with in terms of true or not true, Hollywood gives me a contemporary culture

that is constantly redefining itself, that seems, in fact, to consciously reject its past in favour of the next new thing. Perhaps, due to its long history of reconstruction and constantly redefining itself, Hollywood (in terms of cultural production) seems now to be languishing in a phase of nostalgia. My novel uses Walter Stopps as a symbol and a device with which I might observe and investigate themes of loss, of lostness, and of being alone.

‘People act in relation, not to brute reality, but to culture specific modes of perceiving and organising the world.’ (Rosaldo, 1988, p78) On this basis, *Dinosaurs* is an attempt to comment on a world that I perceive to be in the grips of unbridled consumption. It is also an era of mediated experience in which we experience life through technology, and so the ‘facts’ of life are dictated by this intuitive, personalised media output. My novel posits the idea that Walter desperately wants to become a sort of phenotype and thus undergo a process of what Rosaldo describes as ‘acculturation and assimilation’ or letting go of ‘...one’s past-autobiography, history, heritage, language, and all the rest of the so-called cultural baggage.’ (p82) I want to explore the dangers inherent in having no history

While writing *Dinosaurs*, and working out my own relationship with Walter, I so often found myself thinking of Gatsby standing on the end of his pier staring out over the lake towards the green light, a man without history longing to be a part of something unobtainable. And just as all the wealth in the world does not help Gatsby to be accepted, no amount of money and good looks will help Walter convince himself or others that he belongs. A repressed fear of not being good enough or rich enough causes Walter to act out in ways that are basically self-sabotage and will, ultimately, lead to his death. Walter’s survival depended on forming meaningful connections with others and a sense of self formed by history and accountability.

Hollywood as culture and ideology is the worm that feeds upon my protagonist’s

insecurities and forces him to act out in so many ways that are damaging to himself those around him. Los Angeles is the setting that affords me the opportunity to highlight themes such as isolation, repression and overconsumption. I am reminded of Steve Martin's character in *L.A. Story* (Jackson, 1991) when he observes that 'nobody walks anywhere anymore.' There is a wonderful scene where Martin gets in his car to drive less than a hundred yards demonstrating, all be it comically, that it is impossible to walk from one place to the next in Los Angeles. The serious message articulated perfectly in this scene, a theme explored throughout the film, is that there is no 'natural' linking of place to place in Los Angeles, and that any travel is done by car, hermetically sealed, isolated, just as separate communities are isolated. I attempt to observe the emotional effects of such physical and psychological separation. This comedic but rather accurate representation speaks to Shklovsky's ideas surrounding defamiliarization. I am fascinated by this concept because one of my primary concerns as a writer is the idea that the application of unfamiliar technique within the novel form is not only aligned with Shklovsky's idea of 'remove[ing] objects from the automatism of perception.' (p3) but also, might encourage the necessary discourse (or negotiation) between reader and novel that I require in order that my novel succeed.

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Dinosaurs

A Novel

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Chapter Headings

(for the purpose of novel as partial thesis submission)

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Dinosaurs

Then you will know the truth, and the truth shall set you free:

John 8:32

Endurance is more important than truth:

Charles Bukowski

E=MC²:

Albert Einstein

White Cadillac

A woman screams from the sidewalk, she knows what is about to happen, knows it will not be stopped. The man is moving too fast, climbing out of the cab with his head down. He looks upset. The cab driver is calling after the man, waving his arms frantically, but the man keeps moving.

The first car swerves across the central line. It beeps its horn and the driver shouts through his window for the guy to wake up and get out of the road. Other people stop on the sidewalk and look at the man. A small boy holds his breath and closes his eyes because he does not want to see it happen. Another woman screams and points as a white Cadillac slams on its breaks and screeches in the road. Everybody on the sidewalk knows the car will not stop in time. The man and the car are the only things moving in the world.

* * * *

Chapter I.
The Narrative

He cannot resist the idea it all began the day Trainer showed up in his office, clutching the pristine white wedding invitation like an immigrant with a new passport. He knows in his heart he was already on the road long before then. Maybe when he quit his studies at USC to work for Breaks. Maybe the first time he cheated on Angel, that first line of cocaine, the prostitute with the long nails who told him right to his face he was a sinner, a snake god who deserved the blood of virgins. But he requires a simple narrative, something he can explain to himself without difficulty, and the day he walked into his office at Goodtimes to find Trainer sitting with his legs up on the desk as if he owned the place, that is the day he chooses to believe it all began.

Walter had just come from his weekly rendezvous with Agatha lightly where they would discuss how she was going to get Walter her husband's latest script. Larry was the industry's golden ticket when it came to dreaming up asinine but successful teen movies. The recipe was simple: a love triangle, a power struggle, some element of the supernatural, and a divine gift of some kind or another that involved the female co-stars removing their clothes and walking through waterfalls or rainstorms in slow motion. Larry had realised all men fantasise about having a threesome with two teenage girls. That was the formula Walter needed, so he would reserve the same room at the hotel every week. The room with the view she liked that faced away from the ocean. After lunch he would escort her silently to the room where he would peel off her silk underwear and whisper into her skin and kiss her aging perfumed body until he could feel her muscles trembling and her breath shorten.

Agatha had thick black hair, dyed and curled, worn loose around her face to hide the surgical scars near her ears. Her smoky grey eyes were always framed with thick black

mascara, cheeks rouged to match her tight, flaming lips. She was Walter's ticket to the big-time. And so he kneeled before the one who would give him what he needed and listened to the speeches and preaching and sly comments aimed at undermining his masculinity. And he begged and smiled and charmed and tried always to reassure himself that he was in charge, that he knew what he was doing. He was winning. He was a winner.

He turned up late that afternoon, already behind the game, knowing she would be annoyed at being deprived of her big entrance. He was worn out from too much cocaine and too little sleep. When he approached the table, Agatha peered over the top of her impossible sunglasses as she lit a pale pink cigarette.

'If you don't want me to walk out of here, darling, you must first apologise for your unforgivable tardiness, then you must absolutely promise you will take care of me in the restroom between courses.'

Before he could answer, an out of work actor in white shirt and black tie appeared with Walter's customary double bourbon on the rocks and topped up Agatha's wine glass after she gave her consent with an almost imperceptible nod. The actor coughed politely and proffered an ashtray from his apron pocket. Agatha dropped her cigarette in the ashtray with a tutting sound. She ordered for them both without looking at the menu, then dismissed the actor and his smoking ashtray with a wave of her hand. The actor smiled and bowed and melted effortlessly into the background lunch crowd, but not before Walter noticed something in the boy's smile, just for a second, before he disappeared, something that hinted at violence and insurrection.

'You look tired, darling. Don't tell me that fiancé of yours is keeping you up at night.'

Walter reached for his bourbon and told himself not to drink the whole thing down. 'Why don't we leave Angel out of this,' he said, trying his best to keep his voice level. 'These afternoons are about you.'

‘But of course, darling. Me and my poor husband’s next million-dollar travesty to be added to an already cancerous and decaying medium.’

Agatha sucked down a half mouthful of wine and smiled to herself in a self-congratulatory way that made Walter want to scream in her face that she was an old, dried-up hag with disgusting habits. Instead, he smiled and waved for another drink. When Agatha placed her wine glass on the white tablecloth, he noticed blood red lipstick crowding the rim of the glass. He thought of vampires and butterfly wings and wished he could take a line of coke.

‘Travesty or not, my love, I do need that script,’ he said, keeping it relaxed, dressing it with another half-smile.

‘And I am going to get it for you, darling. You don’t think I want you to abandon me, do you? I want you to use me all up first until there is nothing, absolutely nothing left of me. That’s what you do, isn’t it, you young sexy executive types, you bastions of power...’

Agatha tilted her head forwards and lowered her sunglasses as if peering out from behind a limousine window. ‘He’s not at all well,’ she purred. ‘He seems to be taking all kinds of silly pills. He wakes up nights screaming at the top of his voice. I can hear him all the way from my room. It’s ghastly.’

Walter remembered a time when Agatha made him get down on his hands and knees and push his tongue inside her while she caressed her breasts in front of the full-length mirror and sucked on one of her pale pink cigarettes. She recited lines from *Inferno* and pushed herself hard into his face until his neck hurt, until her taste and smell filled his throat, and he was hard and breathless and sick of himself and everybody else in the world.

‘But he is going to finish, right, Agatha?’

She raised the limousine windows with a manicured nail. ‘He always finishes, darling. It’s just taking a little longer than usual. But he’s typing away in that little study of his, as dedicated as ever. Like a little beaver.’

There was an electric pause, then Agatha alighted from her chair with a preternatural speed that belied her age. She came to rest at Walter's shoulder, gold talons digging into his velvet chair back, wings shielding them from prying eyes. The Mother Dragon, dangerous and hungry. She leaned in close to his ear so that Walter was convinced he could taste her sweet, rotten breath in his mouth.

'I want you inside me,' she whispered. 'I don't want to wait. I want to eat my raw steak with the satisfied feeling an empowered woman gets after she has been fucked in anger and desperation. You don't want to disappoint me, do you. You want to be a man. You do want to be a man for me, don't you, Walter?'

The Mother Dragon placed an oily kiss on the back of Walter's neck and swooped silently across the restaurant floor towards the restrooms, leaving in her wake a terrible shadow that permeated Walter's skin and wrapped itself tightly around his heart. He could feel the butterfly wings on his neck, pulling him to his feet. He slowed his breathing and downed the last of his bourbon. It was time to earn his way, time to work. There was no love, only commerce.

After lunch, after the room with the drawn curtains and expensive wine, after the promises and servitude and skin, when the inevitable quiet settled and clothes returned to bodies, Walter escaped the velvet opulence of La Pequod and headed back to Goodtimes amid the rush of afternoon traffic.

He rode the lift to the seventh floor and assured himself he was going to hide away for the rest of the day and ignore his calls. The brushed chrome doors swished open, and he crossed the floor at speed keeping his head down, refusing to make eye contact with the industrious men and women in their padded grey cubicles, plugged into phones and computer screens like incubating clone babies.

He needed a day off, stillness and predictability, maybe a line and a strong coffee So he

kept his head down and his shoulders high. He kept moving. And that's when he saw Trainer through the open door to the office with his feet up on the desk, that strange expression on his face as he played pretend movie producer with Walter's phone.

They had not spoken in almost seven years, not since Trainer walked out that night and disappeared into the vast, shadowy landscape of Los Angeles. And from there who knows where. No phone call. Just the letter that one time, if you can call it a letter. He was barely able to decipher the inky scrawl, a desperate cry for help scratched into a stained napkin straight from the mind of a crazy man.

For the first few months he would see his friend all over town. He was the homeless man cleaning windscreens at the traffic lights on the corner of Mortuoria and Williams. The broken old man packing groceries at the store, singing Nina Simone and asking after peoples' kids like he meant it, like he cared. He was just up ahead, the back of his head tilted in that awkward way, shoulders raised against the evening chill. He was the man leaving the bar at last orders, a streetlight shadow stretched out across a wet sidewalk.

He left Walter without a best friend, without a writer or a follow-up to their smash hit debut. He had done so without explanation or warning. And now he was back, a strange, comic figure with his legs up on the desk pretending to make a call to another imaginary movie producer, perhaps in another town, an imaginary town across the ocean, on the other side of the bridge where there was no disease.

Walter's first instinct was to turn and run, but where would he go? He watched his old friend from the doorway and could not help pulling at the hem of his suit jacket, rubbing the expensive fabric between sweaty thumb and forefinger. He knew Trainer had to leave the way he did, knew his best friend and enemy had done him that one last favour, not blaming Walter for ruining them both, for dragging them down and making everything cheap and disposable. Trainer had wanted to be a real writer, but Walter had talked him out of it, persuaded him into

the sordid dream of money and flesh and all the terrible bullshit.

What had happened to his friend in those seven unknowable years? How had Angel tracked him down? He had no hair, none. His scalp was red raw. He used to have a beard but that was also gone. His face was the colour of overcooked hotdog meat and one of his eyebrows was missing. Walter could see his friend had pencilled in a substitute with black mascara or felt pen. He was wearing a cheap nylon suite in electric blue over a white t-shirt and white leather boots with thick Cuban heels. Walter thought of Gene Hackman playing Lex Luthor in the original Superman movies, except his friend had a sadness in his eyes that Walter did not recognise. All of this made him want to turn and run, but he was paralysed, frozen by ancient regret and the unfamiliar eros of memory. All he could do was stand there and pull at the hem of his suit jacket, trying desperately to silence the Superman theme music going round and round in his head.

Trainer jumped up from behind the desk as soon as he noticed Walter standing dumb in the doorway. He said goodbye to the imaginary movie producer on the end of the line and opened his arms wide like a game show host.

‘Walter, goddamn! Come here, buddy! Look at you!’

Walter didn’t move but Trainer was on him in seconds, crossing the office at speed and wrapping his skinny arms tight around his shoulders like they were long lost lovers, which, in a sense, they were.

When Trainer finally let go, Walter noticed the eyebrow had smudged at the height of its already elaborate arc giving his friend an attitude of mild surprise.

Walter untangled himself and tried to create some distance. ‘You look well, T. A little psychotic, but well... healthy. What happened to the hair and beard?’

Trainer shrugged and ran a tentative hand over his skull. ‘Suicide,’ he said, matter of fact, like talking about a bad day at the office. ‘No big deal, buddy. What about you, marrying

Angel-goddamn-Breaks no less!’

Walter tried to work out what was happening, why he felt so out of control, but his brain could not get a handle on the situation. He felt his lunch shifting in his stomach, Agatha’s scent clinging all over, making him uncertain. The absence had returned, a friend once more - no longer a lone figure in an Edward Hopper Diner, but real and skinny and beaten down, smiling through impossibly white teeth as if this is what people did all the time, appear out of the past in Gene Hackman attire without a word of warning.

Walter calmed himself. ‘What do you mean, suicide?’

‘You know how it goes.’

Trainer ran another hand over his skull and smeared the eyebrow further up his forehead so that all of a sudden Walter was sure he was going to burst out laughing, or wake up in bed and realise it was all a terrible dream..

‘I fucked up, Walt. I slept with this chic, my supervisor at Happy Burger. Audrey caught me. She took the kid.’ Trainer examined the black mascara stain on his palm before wiping it absently on the breast of his suite. ‘All gone,’ he said, trailing off into a near whisper.

‘Jesus, T, you’re married, and you’re a father. When the hell did this happen?’

‘Was and had, buddy. Was and had.’

‘And what the hell are you doing working at a Happy Burger... You’re a writer!’

Trainer turned his back on Walter and fixed them both a drink from the chrome trolley in the corner of the office. The two of them stood there as Trainer explained how he had gotten mixed up with his supervisor, how they had gotten naked and ended up fucking on the foul-smelling green plastic lawn in the play area at the back of the Happy Burger.

‘Right under that stupid clown’s face, you know. Man, I hate that fucking clown.’

Audrey had arranged to pick him up that night, but Trainer had forgotten their plans as usual. He told Walter how he didn’t even know he was busted until he got home and found

her packing a suitcase. She explained to Trainer, between deep drags of her slim menthol cigarette, how she had seen him humping away like a dog, caught for the briefest moment in the one good headlamp of their beaten Volvo.

‘She recognised me straight off without seeing my face, something about rhythm or tempo or some shit. She told me I was predictable in every way and how she wasn’t ever going to eat meat again. Can you believe that! Who says that? None of us knows the future, man. Then... well, she left.’

Trainer downed the last of his drink and went to fix himself another. His hands worked quickly over the ice and the screw-top. He took a deep swig straight from the bottle before pouring out a couple of generous shots while mumbling something about drinks trollies only being in movies.

‘I set up this camp bed in the kitchen,’ he said, calmer now, as if easing into it. ‘I opened the stove and turned on all the burners and everything. I had some beer, figured I was going to sink a few and just kind of drift off, you know. I got drowsy I guess, or I wasn’t thinking straight. It was sad, sitting on that camp bed with that gas smell everywhere. I had this pillow of Dylan’s with a picture of a dog and a cat on the front...’ Trainer suddenly seemed lost for a moment then shook himself free. ‘Anyway, I got this urge for a cigarette. Then boom! You remember the letter, of course.’

Walter tried to erase the memory as Trainer stared deeply into his second empty glass as if he could see the exact moment all over again. He looked with those new eyes, with the sadness Walter did not recognise. Then he occupied himself with the ice and the screw top as if to say that’s it, that’s all you need to know.

Walter could not handle seeing Trainer like this. Looking at his old friend caused feelings of guilt to rise from the pit of his stomach. He had not forgotten the cry for help, the scrawled letters like the handwriting of a child, the desperation, screwing up the napkin into a tight ball

and throwing it in the trash, not telling Angel. But that whole scene was behind him, he'd moved on. Fuck Trainer and his sob story, his sad faraway eyes that made him some new, indecipherable creature. He hadn't asked for this; the past was the past. He placed a shaking hand on his ex-best-friend's shoulder and guided him towards the door without looking him in the face.

'Why don't you go see Angel, T. I bet she would love to know you're in town. I'm guessing she was the one who sent you the invitation, right, so you should let her know you're here. She's at the gallery, same place. We'll get together later, dinner or something. It's a busy time right now. You know how it goes. It's good to see you, really...'

'Walter, are you giving me what we here in the movie game call the bum's rush?'

'No way, no... I just... Angel will want to know you made it, that's all. I'll catch up with you, okay. It's just a crazy time right now, you know...'

Walter ushered his old friend out of the office, snatching the glass tumbler from his hand at the last second as he waved a lame goodbye. He kept his eyes fixed on the floor and counted to ten. He leaned his head against the closed door. In the air-conditioned silence he felt inside his breast pocket for the little glass vial of white powder. He gathered himself as he sat behind his desk, moving various useless objects as if they were chess pieces, creating order from chaos. He took a deep breath and stabbed at the intercom.

'Rhona, do you want to tell me what you're doing letting strangers into my office when I'm not here?'

There was silence from the other end, a gentle electronic hissing sound, but nothing else.

'Rhona?'

A hesitant voice came through the tiny speaker: 'I didn't let anybody into your office, Mister Stopps.'

'Then what the... Never mind, just get me some coffee and hold all my calls for the next

few hours.'

Walter released the button on the intercom and collapsed back into the soft leather chair. A second later he lunged forward and stabbed at the little chrome box again. 'Make up something good,' he said, 'but make sure it seems like I wished I could have taken the call. Make sure it seems like I'm busy but not so busy I won't get back to them. Make sure they feel important, but make it seem like I'm more important. Strike a balance.'

Another pregnant pause from the tiny speaker on the desk, then: 'Sir, there is a Julie Sheridan from accounts to see you. She doesn't have an appointment.'

Everything was moving too fast; the usual calm Walter would feel when sitting in his big leather chair had abandoned him. He often imagined himself as Captain Kirk steering the enterprise towards nubile aliens with platinum blonde hair, but now he felt more like Hoffman in Marathon Man. He used his free hand to smooth down his hair then breathed into his cupped palm. He was convinced he could still smell Agatha but was grateful he had washed in the restroom sink after they were done.

He realised he had not let go of the button on the intercom, so he coughed what he hoped was a professional sounding cough and steadied himself. 'That's okay, Rhona, send her in. And forget about the coffee.'

Julie Sheridan stood five feet ten with long platinum hair which she wore straight down her back with a sharp fringe that brooded over her eyebrows. She had a strong Nordic jaw in opposition with the delicate feline curves of her neck and shoulders. Her whole body reminded Walter of polar icecaps with their sweeping curves ending in sharp, glassy edges where they had surrendered whole parts of themselves to the ocean. She radiated coldness from her pale skin and frosty blue eyes. She was magnificent and terrifying, but despite her majesty Walter always thought of her as lacking something important - a photocopy or a tracing, an idea of beauty without the originality. This is how he justified his actions. He was

not a great or good man, but he would not sin against originality, he was, in his own way, an artist, and artists held originality above all things. It was a principle of his, especially important in this town.

Julie perched on the edge of his desk and examined the points of her brown leather heels, a sibilant whisper of nylon as she crossed her legs, a tapping of manicured nails on the deep veneered mahogany.

‘You didn’t call,’ she said, her voice flat and hostile.

‘You look fantastic, Jules. Did you get your nose done or is that a new dress?’

She picked up the brass nameplate from the desk and traced the letters with the long red nail of her index finger. A sardonic smile appeared briefly then melted into frosty nothingness. She weighed his name in her hands, turned it over several times then dropped it to the floor.

‘It was Doctor Kaufman,’ she said, then calmly swept her arm across the desk sending the telephone and intercom to the floor where they lay trailing their thin grey umbilical cords in the creamy wool rug.

‘Why didn’t you call?’

Walter could not take his eyes from the stranded intercom. He wanted to pull on the cord, to place the shiny chrome box back into context. He wanted his life to make sense, and the sight of the little chrome box on its side at his feet was telling him that nothing made sense, nothing was permanent or predictable; all it takes is a little shove and everything becomes stupid and broken and obsolete.

He smoothed down his hair but stopped himself from sniffing his palm. He tried to re-establish the smile but his lips were not ready. He remembered seeing packets of ready chopped onions in the refrigerated section of the supermarket. The packets were emblazoned with bright red letters that read *No More Tears*.

‘Come on, Jules, you know how it goes.’

She straightened her back and stretched like a cat about to pounce. Her eyes scanned the ceiling for prey.

‘No, Walter, I don’t know how it goes. You think I like that cheap room? You think I like that crap you make me wear? You do don’t you, that collar, those fucking boots.’

‘Come on, Jules, we have a good time, don’t we?’

She looked him directly in the face then and he could feel her daring him to believe the words coming out of this mouth. In his mind’s eye he could see the boots, the collar - patent black leather with little silver studs running all the way around to an elegant buckle. He remembered the last time they met, Julie on all fours slugging on a bottle of cheap Empire Vodka bought with cash from the corner store near the motel. They snorted thick lines of cocaine. She arched her back and stuck her ass up in the air and peeled the tight black shorts from her white skin. For the briefest moment, an accident of chemistry, Walter thought he was in love.

Julie shattered the image with a hand landing hard on the desk. ‘You use me, Walter, and I let you use me because you promised me a job in your department. Now I hear your father-in-law hired some bitch fresh out of business school! She’s from Idaho for Christ’s sake!’

Walter rolled his shoulders and felt the little glass vial press against his chest from inside his breast pocket. ‘Don’t call him that.’

The smile returned to Julie’s lips. ‘What, you don’t like me saying *father-in-law*?’

She pulled the words from each end, stretched them out over the desk, enjoying Walter’s discomfort. ‘But Breaks is going to be your new daddy, isn’t he? You are marrying the boss’ daughter. Your precious little Angel’

‘Let’s leave her out of this, Jules.’

‘You promised me that job!’

Walter was losing his patience. He wanted to be back in the motel room, in the half light and sweet bubble gum smell of the place. He wanted the collar and the boots and the light, dizzy feeling that took him away from the world. He didn’t see why he should be put on the spot. It was about power, and if you had power, you were never the one on the spot. He noticed the distant roar of a 747 out over the ocean, inbound for LAX. He imagined the giant engines sucking at the sky, pulling a hundred tons of gleaming steel towards the ground. He could see six-inch heels catching the muted light of a table lamp next to a single bed, the sheets stained with sweat and vodka and semen. He could see discarded foil packets scattered on a dirty threadbare rug curled at the edges like a giant rose petal rotting into the damp carpet.

He pushed his chair from the desk so Julie could see he was hard. He said nothing. He allowed them both to enter a silence in which hundreds of years of history was played out. He fixed his eyes on hers, but she held his gaze, not blinking. Hundreds of years behind those icy blue eyes, from the invention of fire to the OJ Simpson case. He told himself he was just another hurdle to her, an obstacle to be overcome so that one day she might be the one in the chair, passing it down, passing it on. Hundreds of years of servitude and regret. No big deal.

Walter thought he saw the exact second something inside of the woman vacillated, something to do with the glossy adverts in expensive magazines, greed and commerce, something modern and ancient, from the garden and the serpent to the silver screen. That is what he told himself, but even then, he knew it was not true.

‘I want that job,’ she whispered. ‘You promised me that job.’

‘And I am the one who is going to get it for you, darling. But I want you to use me all up first. That is what you do isn’t it, you beautiful, resourceful types.’

Her eyes glazed over, then the inevitable, obeisant melting onto hands and knees in feigned

supplication. She undid his belt buckle in one cold, fluid motion, willing to surrender more of herself and reveal to the world the jagged edges that would be left behind.

He cannot picture her face amid the ocean of creamy carpet. The eyes and jaw and lips, yes, but not the woman. He never knew Julie because the disease did not allow it. He cannot recall her face as he sits on the edge of his small wooden bed in his little room with the stone floor and stone walls. He cannot see her in the smoke rising from the cigarette in his shaking hand. He cannot see her in the soft, grey dawn on the other side of the single arched window. She is far away. All of that is far away. Now there is only him and the book and the story he has explained to himself so he might cross the bridge out over the ocean towards whatever comes next.

* * * *

Chapter II

In the Beginning There Was Eggs

The book is heavy, leather bound, a deep ox blood red. His name is embossed in gold leaf across its face and down the length of its spine. It was laid on the stone floor at the foot of his bed. He noticed it as soon as he woke that first morning. The edges of the pages are also gold. At first, he thought it was a bible, but then he saw his name. The recognition had caused a wave of panic. He bolted upright, lifting his knees to his chest, making himself as small as possible, like a child stranded on a life raft, hunted by a red shark adorned with golden tattoo in Times New Roman.

His thinking was fuzzy. He had been sleeping for days, waking only occasionally when the pain in his chest became too much. There were people sometimes, floating above him, applying new bandages, maybe feeding him, words spoken through layers of cotton wool, from far away. The room grew dark and later grew light, a cyclic passing of time during which his life played out in distorted vignettes and vicious nightmares.

Now the book is resting in his lap. By the time the young woman came to his room he was on his third cigarette and he and the book had formed a truce of sorts. He unfurled himself and allowed his bare feet to find the sandals beside the bed. He would relieve himself in the toilet in the corner, but always he kept his head turned over his shoulder so as to watch the book the whole time, just in case it vanished, or attacked – he wasn't sure which he was more afraid of.

When the door unlocked for the first time and the woman waved for him to follow her, he picked up the book without noticing. Perhaps he didn't like the idea of it sitting alone on the floor while he wasn't there, a part of him already. It was his name on the face after all, and names are powerful signifiers.

He is sitting in a room full of books with other peoples' names clinging to their stretched skins. Hundreds of them, from floor to ceiling. He touches the face of his book, still unopened.

His mouth is dry. He wants a cigarette but there is nobody to ask. The woman who led him to this room is gone. She'd nodded silently at the chair, allowing her hand to rest lightly on his shoulder for the briefest moment before leaving. Now it is just him and the books and the cold wooden desk with nothing on it except a black fountain pen with a gold lid.

There are three small, barred windows along one wall that allow skinny arms of sunlight to reach inside, but the books absorb the light, and the space exists in a sticky orange darkness, an ecclesiastic gloom into which secrets are whispered. It smells of dust and time slowed down, the smell a room adopts when there is not enough life, not enough words or laughter to keep the air moving and the clocks ticking. Walter cannot help imagining Father Armstrong, sitting in his vestry in the church back home in Oxford, on the edge of the council estate where there were a few more trees and slightly less crime, the surly man with wide shoulders listening to devout Irish Catholics confessing to beating their wives. He imagined the priest handing out penance in the form of lazy prayers that would never see the light of day. There was a social club, a sort of makeshift pub at the back of the church and even as a kid Walter felt that alcohol and religion did not belong together, even though he always looked forward to the packet of crisps and the fizzy drink once all the mumbling and sitting and standing was over. He wondered if his father ever admitted to the beatings. Did he believe that once recited the prayers would absolve the man from his sins?

Walter tries to work out how long he has been in this place, locked away in his little stone room. Four, maybe five days. It is hard to tell because he doesn't know how long he was unconscious for.

Some sort of high-end rehab clinic up north, he thinks. Maybe Angel checked him in, or

the motel night manager. A passing stranger who dared to peek through the half open door to find him collapsed on the floor or slumped over the TV set. They found him in that room, all broken and bloodied and full of goddamn drugs. That's what happened. He mumbles this last thought out loud. Enough already! somebody had shouted. It's time this crazy ride ended.

He takes his hand from the face of the book and gingerly runs his fingers down the ladder of his ribcage. He winces at the thought of the white Cadillac. The terror in the driver's face, making the man dumb and ugly. They were in it together, the two of them, dumb animals in a storm of fear and cruel physics. He remembers the force of it, the inevitability, a searing pain in his body that caused flashes of unbearable light to silence the world, a crushing pressure on his chest. He fixed his eyes on the sky and repeated his own name over and over as if it would save him, somehow transport him back to the motel room with the bare light bulb hanging limp from a flex in the centre of the ceiling, the peeling nicotine paint and warm, damp smell of sex.

Is that what happened? How did he make it back to the room? He cannot see the journey, only a rose tattoo, a gentle voice, the edges of everything soft with heat and cigarette smoke. He remembers a woman running towards him from the sidewalk. She looks tired and scared, a black woman wearing white clothes under a blue coat.

He wants to laugh at himself but something inside him is afraid to let go. He does not like the linen trousers with no belt, the clean white shirt and soft leather sandals. They speak of suicide risk, of frailty. He has been in places like this before, but always on the other side. He does not belong here, he thinks. This is not me, this whole scene.

He looks down at the book and runs a tentative finger along the spine, aware of his awkwardness, his need to keep moving in small ways, to create time within the room. He can feel the indentations of the letters, the difference in texture of the pressed gold leaf against fine leather. Maybe a week. Maybe even more. He thinks about opening the book but knows

he cannot do it. He is afraid.

Suddenly the door opens, and a heavysset man walks in, all soft with frayed edges, a watercolour on the move. The man has a half smile on his full moist lips and bright blue eyes that sparkle behind gold rimmed spectacles. His beard is grey in places. He has wispy grey hair that catches the sunlight as if smouldering, as if it might burst into flames should he move too fast into the room. He waves a silent hello and places a plain packet of cigarettes on the desk in front of Walter as he takes his seat. He opens a drawer and pulls out a large glass ashtray and places this next to the cigarettes. From his inside pocket he pulls out a book of matches, and from his side pocket retrieves a pipe which he examines for a moment as if surprised to find it there. He places the pipe in the corner of his mouth. ‘How did you sleep, Walter?’

His voice is soft, avuncular. ‘You look a little tired still.’

Walter reaches for the cigarettes. He pulls a match from the book and lights up, enjoying the burning sensation in his mouth and chest. The smell of the smoke and the easy, familiar way he shakes the match dead and tosses it into the ashtray make him feel calmer. The spell is broken. He is his own man once more, as if all he needed this whole time was a few simple props with which to ground himself in this new space.

‘I’m okay,’ he replies, realising the sound of his own voice is alien to him, as if coming from an old gramophone record player – the one with the dog sitting next to it. He takes another long drag of his cigarette and watches the smoke drift up into the skinny arms of light above his head.

‘I’m a little confused, I guess.’

The old man nods a sympathetic nod and places the pipe back in his pocket with a smile. ‘I understand, Walter. It is a confusing time. My name is Doctor Bennedict, but you can call me Eggs. Everybody here calls me Eggs. You’ll find, after a while...’

Walter clears his throat, ignoring the old man. ‘Who checked me in, doc? And where are we exactly? I feel like I’ve been out of it for a while. He shrugs and his eyebrows do a brief dance. ‘I feel a little, you know... odd.’

Benedict rests his elbows on the desk. He takes up the pen and absently rolls it between his thumb and forefinger. The soft smile plays across the man’s face again, but this time Walter feels as if he is being excluded from some private joke. He gets the sense he is being watched and scans the corners of the room for hidden cameras.

Benedict places the pen on the desk. ‘Let’s just say, for now, this is a place in which we hope you will find answers.’

‘What kind of answers?’

‘That depends.’

‘On what?’

‘On you.’

Walter shrugs again and flicks some ash into the ashtray. ‘Where did they find me? It’s kind of blurry, the whole thing. That car really did a number on me. I guess I did a number on myself, right?’ He slaps his belly and tries not to wince. ‘But you fixed me up pretty good it seems.’ He forces a smile through the pain. ‘It was a real scare, the whole thing. I honestly think I’m cured. I do. And now it’s time I get home.’

‘It’s not that simple, Walter. You are here to find answers. That’s how this works. That is how we move on.’

Walter stabs the cigarette out in the ashtray and lights another before tossing the dead match onto the desk. He sets the old man in his sights. ‘I get the picture, doc, the dramatic scare tactic thing. Aversion therapy, right? That old life is over. That part of me is dead now and it’s time to move on before it’s all too late...’

He suddenly notices the book in his lap and tosses it up onto the desk where it lands with a

thud next to the dead match. Time is really moving now, like waking up after a long sleep.

‘So how does it work, doc, you put me on medication, something to ease the transition? I make a few baskets and you show me Rorschachs that look like vaginas, and I tell you how my mother never loved me? Or how I loved her but in all the wrong ways. The Freudian ways. I just can’t see that happening. My mother was a good woman. I have a good life.’

The old man looks absently around the room to give Walter a little space. ‘Perhaps you are asking the wrong questions,’ he says eventually. ‘Anyway, you are here now so why don’t we make the best of it.’

Walter watches the shifting sunlight form stiff columns across the top of the desk and is sure, just for a second, he can feel the earth spinning, the same feeling he always gets on boats, that feeling of being pushed and pulled, helpless in the face of the unknowable, the vastness and deepness and the coldness. He never learned to swim, even when he moved out to Los Angeles from England, even though he had an apartment close to the beach in a city on edge of the ocean.

The old man adjusts his glasses on the bridge of his nose. ‘We all find ourselves here for a reason,’ he continues, pulling his heavy shoulders up to his ears then letting them drop back down again in a slow rolling motion. ‘What is important now is to think on that, to examine it. That is how we find answers, son. That is how we move on.’

Walter feels a cold sweat forming on the back of his neck. He wants to get up and move around. He wants to shake it off, the feeling of being small, of being pushed into his chair.

‘What’s the deal with the book?’

‘Ah, the book. If you are going to write a story, then you are going to need a book in which to write it, no? Everybody here has a story, Walter, something inside of them they need to share. Story is the means by which all writers explain the world to themselves and to others. We all of us exist inside one big narrative. Everything is story, after all.’

Benedict slides the pen across the desk. 'You'll need this too.'

Walter wants to retaliate in old ways, but something stops him, a lump in his throat, something caught there that he has not noticed up until now. He takes a long pull of his cigarette in the hope the lump will evaporate in the hot smoke. He tries to swallow it down into his lungs, but it will not budge. His hands begin to shake. He wants to put the cigarette out but is afraid the shaking will make him look weak in front of the doctor.

Benedict silently retrieves the pen and the book and places them both in the drawer in the centre of the desk. 'I'll keep these for you,' he says. 'Why don't you get some rest, son. We can talk again soon. We have plenty of time.'

Walter reaches for the ashtray but doesn't make it. The shakes have him. He can feel the cold sweat forming on his brow and in his armpits, a sick feeling in his stomach. The sun through the window is burning his neck. The old man says something, but he is far away now. Everything is oily colour, blood rushing in his ears like crashing waves. He tastes sick in his mouth and wants to scream because he feels as if he is falling and there is nothing to grab hold of.

Then he is gone, lost in that dark.

* * * *

Chapter III.
Lilly Tamara Thompson

In the beginning he spends all his time in his room. He sleeps but often has nightmares. He sees the Cadillac rushing towards him. He sees a gleaming steel bridge reaching out over an ocean into nothingness. He wakes in darkness to ghost images of an old friend and the echoes of his own screaming, a small child in a strange place, made smaller still by the unfamiliar smells and shapes of night.

He feels his body mending, but the mending makes him weak. He refuses to join the others for daily meals which are served in a large, communal dining room on the ground floor. From his window he watches them tending to the vegetable gardens or working in the fields further out near the river. He is often forced to remind himself who he is. One day he traces his name into the dust on the stone windowsill in his room and watches the letters vanish in a gentle breeze.

When they bring him food he does not thank them. He demands to use the telephone, but they simply smile and silently retreat. Eventually they leave the food on the floor outside of his room. He waits until he is sure they are gone before opening the door and sliding the tray inside like a death row inmate in solitary confinement, unable to look people in the eye for fear they will know his sins.

There is always a fresh packet of cigarettes and a book of matches. The cigarettes have no branding, no pictures of bleeding lungs or dead eyes clouded over with cataracts. They come in crisp white packaging with sharp edges. The matches are the same. There is sometimes a message written in elaborate script, black ink on cream paper, requesting he visit Doctor Benedict. He ignores these requests and makes paper airplanes that are forming an angular mountain in the corner of the room next to the toilet.

He cannot understand how this happened, how he ended up on the other side of the wall, in the linen trousers and soft leather sandals. How did he lose his grip so spectacularly.

He often sits on the edge of his bed and contemplates his pale feet in the dawn light. They look pathetic, the dark hairs trailing from his skinny ankles down to his toes, the bones and nails and ridges. How was it that women ever found him attractive? It was as if he were seeing his body for the first time, a frail thing not built to be exposed to daylight.

He smokes and paces and marvels at the gap between his old life and this new half-life of sleep and dream and hiding. He is losing weight. His beard and hair are growing.

At the end of the corridor there is a communal bathroom for the male inmates which he uses only once he is sure the others are asleep. The room also has a stone floor and stone walls which smell of disinfectant. There are three separate shower cubicles, also built from stone, with frosted plastic curtains to the front. Also, a single rolltop bath with rusted iron legs that sits beneath the one barred window set high up in the wall. There is a small, wooden framed mirror above each of the three sinks that rest on a long mahogany shelf on the far wall. The room is lit by three naked lightbulbs that hang from old flex that looks like rope. They run in a line across the centre of the ceiling which is covered in peeling white, grey paint full of damp patches and ominous yellow spots. The bulbs are always dim, as if they are about to die.

Walter uses the middle sink. He never looks in the mirror. When he brushes his teeth he keeps his eyes closed, or fixed on the plughole, watching the bloodstained water move in whirling circles before disappearing into the blackness. He often sits in the bathtub, half full of lukewarm water, and stares up at the night sky through the barred window. The taps drip and Walter imagines dark caves hidden deep inside of snow-capped mountains. Everything is stone.

The clinic echoes and creaks and exhales musky sadness.

His hair grows. His beard grows. His feet drum out a soft tattoo on the stone floor as he idles from his room to the bathroom in the safety of otherwise silent nights. This is how he measures time. He does not think, not in the old ways. He stares out of his arched window with no curtains. He lets the sun touch his face. One day he takes his shirt off so he can feel the heat on his pale skin. He stands at the window with eyes closed. His chest grows warm and he falls inside the orange light against his eyelids, like honey on the backs of silver spoons, he thinks.

He is often convinced he must have pushed himself too far, that there is another him, a real him, out there in the world not mad after too many drugs and too much deceit. While this him, the one who mumbles to himself in the dead of night, haunted and broken, is left to rot in this beautiful stone prison on the coast up north someplace.

Nights come and go, the clinic echoes and hums and plays out its daily routines despite his presence. He moves in and out of shadowy past, adrift in the flickering black and white frames of brittle celluloid. He hides beneath his covers, curled up in a ball in the darkness listening to the melodic rolling of wax covered film, the click clicking of the perforations over the sprockets, the creaking wheel feeding moment after moment through some internal lens deep within his soul. Time stretches, it melts and pauses and jumps without any point of reference. He mends but he is lacking something important, something necessary to survival. Then, one day, a pale blue day that smells of damp English grass, he experiences a kind of synaesthesia, a strange awakening somewhere deep inside triggered by a fear of disappearing, of being wiped out and forgotten. His body twitches into life, from eyes to toes it unfurls itself between the warm sheets until he knows with absolute certainty that he must leave the room, get up and out and breathe and be a part of something before it is too late.

Somebody, he never saw them or thanked them for this simple act of kindness, had taken to leaving paperback books on the tray along with the cigarettes and the food. He always

ignored these books, but the previous evening he'd decided on impulse to keep one. It is a tattered copy of Moby Dick, the cover depicting a faded black chalk image of Ahab leaning into the storm, chasing down the whale. When Walter looked at the picture, he could feel the man's obsession, his greed for the prize, for domination over another.

He rolls out of bed and snatches the book from the wooden table and tucks it under his arm. He slips his feet into the soft leather sandals and heads out of his room towards the central staircase that he knows will lead him down several floors to the hallway below that will then take him out into the gardens at the rear of the clinic.

There is a bench a couple of hundred yards out from the gardens on a gentle rise just passed the olive groves overlooking the river. The hallways are quiet and he realises most of his fellow inmates must be in the dining hall for lunch. He is grateful for this piece of luck, still unable to make eye contact, still raw all over, or ashamed, the new bird who doesn't know the ropes and might get shanked if he eyes the wrong guy.

The first thing he notices as he walks out into the garden is the cool jasmine breeze against his skin, it washes over his cheeks and the backs of his hands and makes the hairs on his neck stand on end. He squints against the afternoon sun as he heads straight for the bench, head bowed, shoulders up, counting out his steps across the soft grass. When he reaches the bench, he cannot help breathing a sigh of relief which causes an unfamiliar smile to play on his lips. I am Tim Robbins, he thinks, just trying to find a space to call my own, get my head around being wrongly accused and wait for Morgan's soft voice to soothe my soul. Except prison guards don't need script notes or feedback and I am terrible with numbers. Fuck.

Beyond the wide river the land rises steeply, cloaked in a gently, undulating blanket of tall grass, pot marked here and there with obstinate cedar trees. On the opposite bank there is a beautiful weeping willow. He can hear the trailing leaves sighing in the breeze. He closes his eyes and lets the sound wash over him. He listens to invisible birds in the blue distance, the

rippling of the winding river heading towards the ocean, perhaps the ocean itself, on the other side of the clinic, out of reach.

He turns and looks back towards the clinic, a grand sandstone affair wrapped here and there in creeping ivy, a sagging terracotta roof that is in desperate need of repair. There are four floors with countless windows staring blankly over the undulating countryside. He wonders which one is his window. On the ground floor there are three huge doors that open out onto a raised patio from the dining hall inside. There are smaller windows which he thinks might be treatment rooms. He imagines his fellow inmates weaving baskets and watching television screens, crying about it all in their own private ways. It strikes Walter as a place of regret and promise, of past and future. Inmates who are sorry over this or that but promise themselves and others that once out and reformed everything will be different. If he had the money he would turn the place into a vineyard, or level it and build a parking lot for somebody else's vineyard.

There are high walls that stretch out left and right, away from the clinic as far as he can see. He thinks about prisons with golden bars, a Bukowski quote, maybe from the movie with Micky Rourke. He wonders how much the place is costing and who is footing the bill. Angel?

He turns his back on the clinic and takes a seat on the bench. He opens the book and enjoys the musty smell of damp paper mixed with jasmine. He takes a breath and allows himself to slip inside without another thought.

He reads for some time before he realises she is sitting on the bench beside him - silent, contemplating him with serious eyes, perhaps attempting to assess his crimes. The eyes are green, flecked with gold in the centre. Her face is delicate with pale freckled skin wrapped tightly over high cheekbones. She has fine, mousy brown hair and a high forehead with elegant eyebrows. Her lips are full and pouting, not in a sensual way but not wholly innocent either. She is graceful, sitting elf-like with long fingers which she uses to tuck a stray hair

behind her ear. Walter cannot help thinking she is beautiful. She looks him directly in the eyes and does not turn away even when he adjusts himself on the bench and tries to bury his head back inside the tattered pages of the book.

‘How do you like my bench?’ she asks eventually, her voice soft and slow with a slight southern drawl.

Walter ignores the question. His fellow inmates often spoke to themselves as they roamed the corridors or worked the gardens. Staccato sentences, like muffled rifle fire, would break out in the olive groves or outside of the door to his room as they made their way down to the dining hall in the mornings. He chooses to give her this opportunity to walk away, no hard feelings, just another burned-out junkie mumbling to herself. But she does not leave. She holds him there with her emerald gaze until his cheeks burn and the words on the page no longer make any sense to him.

‘I was wondering how you liked my bench?’ she asks again, catching another stray hair and tucking it behind her ear.

‘It’s a nice bench,’ he concedes, keeping his eyes down. ‘I like the view.’

His voice is hoarse and cracked. It comes from an unused place that gives it a hesitant, childlike quality which makes him even more uncomfortable.

‘What about Ermintrude?’

It is only then he notices the girl is holding a piece of rope loosely in one hand. Attached to the other end of the rope is a white goat with a white beard and deep ruby red eyes. The goat stares at Walter, a wad of grass hanging limp from the corner of its mouth. The goat looks stoned and Walter experiences his first drugs pang since arriving at the clinic.

‘She’s fine, I guess. She likes grass?’

‘Goats like grass,’ Lilly says, reaching out and patting the creature on its head and rubbing behind its ears.

Walter is confused. He had been watching. Occasionally somebody would share a nervous laugh with the others, or maybe ask something to do with the clinic - prosaic mumblings to fill the space - but he rarely saw them talking to one another. He imagined they just wanted to get clean and get on with their lives, or they didn't like to look each other in the face for fear they would see their own reflection, or worst still they might see somebody they knew from the outside. He doesn't understand why this girl is disrespecting the rules. As far as he was concerned, the clinic was a prison, and prisoners had a certain etiquette which Walter had learned from countless prison movies. In the yard you kept to yourself, you kept your head down and you did your time. Unless you were Morgan. If the girl was Morgan, Walter would have buried his head in her lap and wrapped his arms around her waist and started crying.

She takes a deep breath and exhales slowly which causes the tendons in his arms to pull tight. 'It's beautiful here, isn't it?'

She is sitting too close. She is too personal. He is raw and small and resents both, so he snaps the book shut and turns on the girl, something old catching fire in his belly, something from his recent past.

'This is a nice place,' he snarls, 'wasted on us goddamn junkies. All this peace and quiet is just beautiful. Would you like to chat for a while, maybe tell me your crimes, all your dirty little secrets? What landed you in here by the way, heroin, sex, dysmorphia, did you fuck all the wrong people, or not enough of the right people? Maybe good old fashion booze. Self-harming, self-loathing, prescription pills, abortion. What's your poison?'

Her smile barely falters, but a shadow passes across her face that makes Walter instantly regret his outburst. He knows in that instant he has ruined his one chance at speech after all the silence of his room.

The girl pulls a wad of grass from the ground and opens her palm towards the goat. Body of Christ. Amen. She looks off into the distance for a moment until her eyes close and she

releases a gentle breath.

‘It was a bad time,’ she says ‘For my mom, I mean. I was an inpatient child, and I wasn’t going to wait around. The doctors said how things might have gone smoother had she given up smoking and drinking during the pregnancy, but you could never tell her anything. I guess she kind of held me responsible, you know, for the damage.’

Lilly looks up at the sky and shifts her weight on the bench. She takes slow, deliberate breaths and it feels to Walter as if she is trying to shake some heavy, invisible thing that is pulling at her shoulders. He holds his own breath somewhere deep inside his lungs for fear it might poison the girl, infect her somehow with his sense of regret. He grips the book hard in his hands, not wanting to move now for fear she will see or smell him for what he really is and get up and walk away. She closes her eyes again.

‘Mom headed for the local bar as soon as she was back on her feet. She left dad to raise me as best he could, but he didn’t really know much about little girls. He talked about crop rotation and beef prices and read from the paper, stuff like that.’

She opens her eyes and smiles a watery, ephemeral smile. She waves a hand at nothing in particular then contemplates her toes, wiggling first the right set then the left. Her feet are small and delicate, a golden colour, Walter assumes from working outdoors in the garden or the olive groves. There is a long, drawn-out silence between them, not uncomfortable but unfamiliar to Walter.

‘It wasn’t so bad,’ she says eventually, ‘I didn’t really know much about little girls either. Mom didn’t like the farm. She hated being a nobody. That’s what she called us, like it was the worst thing you could be.’

Her gaze drifts upwards over the river towards the vast rolling countryside stretched out before them, way out to where the powder blue sky is being pushed hard against the green curve of the earth. She is spellbound, caught up in the weight of things that cannot be undone,

recounting her story like some broken jailbird, sharing with the new guy because he isn't really there. He notices goose bumps on the backs of her pale forearms, the fingers of her left hand worrying at the weave of her linen pants. He knows without looking there are tears in her eyes, can feel the somnolent, melancholy beast draped across her shoulders, whispering from the wide open planes of airless Midwestern memory. He also feels that familiar need growing inside of him. He wants to touch her, caress her. A part of him wants to push his way in and force her into the present with his need. He wants to take her even though she is frail and small, made sheer from pain, perhaps because of it. She looks at him then and wipes the tears from her eyes with the backs of both hands.

'Have you ever held a dead man in your arms?' she asks, her voice level, controlled. 'I have. The sun was setting behind the farm and it looked just like a postcard of how people imagine farms to be if you never had to live or work on one yourself. He was driving us in from the fields when Matilda just jumps right off the path and heads into the scrub. I thought he was making a joke. He kind of slumped forward and I thought he was making a joke so I laughed and put my arms tight around him so I wouldn't fall out of my seat.'

Walter feels a stabbing in his belly. He crosses his legs and looks down at the shadowy figure of Marlowe in his hands. They sit in another cold puddle of silence while Lilly reaches all around with invisible hands and pulls herself together, gathers herself up and makes herself whole again.

'The farm was sold at auction which raised enough money for mom to put a deposit on a wood panelled two floor in town. I don't remember much about the place that first few weeks. Silly stuff, you know, like how the carpet made my legs itch whenever I sat on the floor and my dress rode up. Or how the windows were dirty with bird shit and the grease that came up from the vent from the diner next door. Time kind of stood still and the days just got dark and then light again. It didn't make any sense to me, how a person could just disappear like that.'

She reaches down and tares another handful of grass out of the ground and holds it in her open palm for the goat to feast on.

‘It was mom’s idea to enter me into the Teen Beauty Pageant. She read in the paper how the prize money was almost five hundred dollars. She told me I owed her for what I’d done, so we piled into her rusty piece of shit Studebaker and headed for Des Moines, just like that. We won, too. Mom got the prize money, and I got a rose coloured sash that let everybody know I was the prettiest. There was a crown, too, but you only got to wear it that one day.’ She reaches up towards a space above her head but stops herself just in time. ‘Girls love crowns,’ she says, letting her hands float back down into her lap like broken wings.

‘Mom never paid me much attention before, but there she was all weekend fussing over me, making sure everything was just perfect, like I was a china doll. We even shared breakfast and dinner both nights. We travelled all over after that, took prizes in Ohio, Indiana, South Dakota, even Wisconsin. When I got a little older, mom took me with her to the bars. I didn’t like that so much.’

Lilly confesses quickly and quietly, the jailbird, how mother and daughter could milk a man of a week’s wage and leave the fella broke and alone come closing. ‘Not always,’ she says, her face taking on a blank, matter of fact attitude. ‘Mom took some to bed with her and she told me one night how I had better grow up fast if I was gonna make it in the world. I didn’t like the sex so much. It hurt. But I liked the attention, the looks they would get in their eyes like they were hungry.’

‘I had a good chance at Miss America. Mom said if we took the big one, we could make up to a thousand bucks a time just cutting ribbons, opening stores all over the state or singing a tune at the travelling rodeo. She liked the idea just fine. For me it was too late anyway. I was lost, you know? I was addicted to that look in their eyes, the look men get when they’re hungry, when they want you. It was better than when they came at me with their dumb hard

dicks trying to push inside. All I needed was the looks. How else is a girl supposed to react? What are we supposed to do with all that attention, all that greed?’

Her delicate fingers absently caress the line of her jaw, trace the veins down her neck and then crawl slowly inside her shirt to touch the pale skin wrapped over her collarbone. Her chest rises and falls, and Walter is sure he can smell something yeasty and sweet on her breath. He imagines her alone in a motel room, standing before a mirror, fingers caressing her stomach, teasing the buttons on her jeans: a young beauty on fire, swaying to the night music of a strange neon city, the air humid thick with alcohol and sweat. She is on the edge of desire, not lost but close, a red scarf thrown over a table lamp, a cigarette hanging loose from the corner of her swollen lips.

Lilly buttons up her shirt all the way to the top and reaches down and pulls another wad of grass which she holds in her open palm same as before so the goat can scoop it up with its funny pink lips and start in with the chewing. She tells how they checked into a cheap place close enough to the Grand Hotel where the big contest was gonna take place.

‘At the liquor store, that first day after registration, mom got carried away in all the excitement and set us up with two quarts of bourbon and two cowboys. We got pretty wasted. By the time we woke up we were late for the second day preliminaries. The judges weren’t too impressed with the hicky on my neck which mom missed because she was still half drunk. She was sick next to a dumpster right outside the hotel. They don’t take kindly to all that, the pageant folks. They are a pure bunch, don’t you know, the ones who peddle flesh. There was this whole scene, real ugly, mom calling out names and rushing at the judges. I was disqualified and banned from taking part in any more pageants. It was weird, like all of a sudden they couldn’t see I was beautiful. Mom ran out on me that night. She gave me this look; this look like it was all my fault and nothing was ever going to be the same again. I don’t think I ever felt so alone. Not till that moment. She didn’t slam the door behind her. She

left it open so that I could see the empty parking lot out front. I wondered what everybody else was doing that night.'

She raises her palms up in supplication, voice cracked at the edges like brittle china. 'She looked at me that night like I was a nobody. That's how I knew it was really over. All gone. It was just after five. I know that because there was this wall clock above the TV made of glass with gold numbers stuck on it, kind of floating like magic. I liked that clock. I pulled the light flex around my neck, and I remember thinking that I hope this cheap ceiling holds my weight and I tried to think if I had any breakfast that morning. I looked down at my feet on the little wooden table and they looked far away, small and separate from the rest of me. That's funny, hey?'

She trails off then, the jailbird, her voice a whisper and the beast heavy on her shoulders like the sky heavy on the earth. Walter is there, in the motel room, his feet balancing on the edge of the dark wood table with the coffee cup stain like a sliver of pale moon.

Lilly shrugs her shoulders. 'That was it,' she says. 'I just kicked at that table because there was nothing else left to do.'

Lilly gets to her feet and brushes herself down even though she has nothing on her clothes. Walter just sits there, mute, invisible. He wants to say something, but what would he say. He wants to apologise on behalf of all men, on behalf of history and witch hunting and gold sashes with states and countries emblazoned on them.

Lilly turns and walks away.

He looks out over the rolling countryside beyond the river, up at the pale blue sky now edging towards evening, taking on hues of purple and green. He tries to imagine the sun falling into the ocean on the other side of the clinic.

That night he dreams about flesh being torn from bones by a hungry wolf, a dark beast with

matted hair and silver claws. The wolf does not eat the flesh, it discards the bloody chunks so it can continue to tear and slash and draw blood. He knows the flesh is a woman because he can hear screaming. Then he is in a small room, hot and damp. There is a scarf thrown over a lamp. Everything is bathed red. His feet slip on blood running into the carpet. He catches his reflection in a tall mirror standing in the corner of the room. He reaches out and plunges his hands into the mouth of the wolf in the mirror because he cannot stand the screaming anymore. Then he is standing on a beach north of the city where they are building a bridge right on the edge of the water. The massive structure glints in the failing sunlight as men in hardhats work the growling machinery, pumping a thick red liquid into the concrete base set directly into the sand. When he looks closer, he notices there are cracks in the concrete and the red liquid is oozing out and congealing in the heat. One of the workers notices Walter standing there and shouts for him to come help plug up the cracks to stop the bleeding. He is given a bucket and a trowel. He is pushed up against the wall and told to work fast before the whole thing comes down around their ears. There are too many cracks and Walter is no good with the trowel. The blood gets over his hands and drips down his arms. It gets into his eyes. The sound of the machinery working on the surface above is deafening, and the man behind him keeps shouting and pushing him and telling him to work faster.

He wakes to the sound of his own screaming. He is shaking all over, covered in sweat so that the blankets stick to his skin. He realises he has urinated on himself and the smell of the piss and sweat and fear drive him out from the bed and onto his unsteady feet where he reaches for the windowsill and tries to slow his breathing. It is a terrible feeling, being so weak and disgusted and afraid. He takes deep breaths and fixes his eyes on the stars. He feels his skin drying in the cool air but he does not want to look at his pale body which is getting thinner because he does not eat. He lights a cigarette and pulls the hot smoke deep inside his lungs. When his hands stop shaking, he pulls the wet sheets from the bed and rolls them up

into a tight ball. He doesn't know what to do with them after that so he leaves the bundle at the foot of the bed until he can figure something out. He would rather sleep without sheets than ask an orderly or the doc what to do about it. He hasn't wet the bed since he was a kid, and even back then he could barely look his mom in the eye the next morning. She would reassure him it was okay to have an accident every now and again. 'Life is a series of little accidents,' she confided, when she found him trying to wash the sheets in the kitchen sink. 'No use in pretending otherwise.'

One time when she found him in the kitchen, she smiled and ruffled his hair and let him miss school if he promised to read one of the books from the bookshelf. His dad had gone by then and now there was a bookshelf in the living room made of planks and bricks that went all the way along one wall and all the way up to the ceiling. Walter cannot remember where the books came from. He does not remember the shelves going up one by one over time as the books slowly arrived from charity shops or friends. The shelves simply appeared already full of books, as if they were waiting the whole time, replacing the father with his loud voice and raised hands.

His mother tidied the house around him and made lunch for them both while they listened to a play on the Radio, most of which Walter did not understand because the adults were talking about politics and laughing about the leader of the Conservative party and making something his mum called analogies with fat cats. Later, when she was washing the dishes, Walter stood in the doorway and watched. She had a cigarette hanging from the corner of her mouth. She never used to smoke. Later she would cut her long hair, and for a short while she would smoke a pipe - small acts of defiance the boy was too young to understand. She was staring out of the window above the sink, blowing the grey smoke against the glass while her hands moved absently back and forth in the murky water. She dropped the half-smoked cigarette into a dirty teacup on the draining board and brushed a stray hair from her face with

the back of her hand and told herself not to be so silly. That's when he realised she was looking at her own reflection in the glass.

They are both gone now. He is, he supposes, an orphan. His father passed away in a hospice in Blackpool that smelled of warm piss and baked goods. He was moved to the hospice after they found him in his little council flat with newspapers covering all the windows. That's all he knows about it, although he often imagined life inside the flat, the torment and the inky tabloid darkness. Vascular dementia, the doctor told him when he finally found out about his father's new semi-life through his aunt who still lived in Cork City in Ireland. He does not know what was going on in his father's head as he taped the newspapers to the windows, but he hears voices sometimes, the voices he imagines were in his father's head, accusing and suspicious, both perpetrator and victim, a lifetime of suppressed guilt, violent acts, but acts of kindness also, because we are none of us all bad, or any one defining thing for that matter. He would never pass a homeless person without giving them change, never underestimate the plight of the working man, even though he chose not to work himself because he had other ways of getting money, shadowy ways.

The Irish Catholic priest who sat at the back of the small chapel next to the crematorium told Walter after the brief service that his father was a kind man who always gave money to those who needed it, The Irish Priest was one of three people in the small chapel in Blackpool that day. The other man was the priest who performed the few words necessary to make sure his father's soul would ascend to heaven and not be left languishing in some purgatory waiting room. The third person was a Philippino woman from the hospice who cried throughout the service and left immediately afterwards. Walter wondered how many times she had attended the funerals of those whose asses she had wiped and mouths she had fed as they shouted abuse, or incoherent nonsense in her face. He wondered if it was common to have so few people attending such services. We all die alone, his father used to say. But the

big man knows me and knows who I am and he'll see me alright come the end.

Body of Christ. Self- delusion.

They have both been gone almost five years now. His mother only lasted a few months after the mechanical wheels propelled his father's coffin into the oven on the other side of red velvet curtains to the instrumental version of the theme from Ghost, the theme that plays as Swayze's ghost reaches around Demi Moore's waist from behind so that four hands, two living, two dead, form a giant clay penis on the spinning wheel. His father would not have known the tune because he was so utterly out of step with popular culture and so preoccupied with money. Walter appreciated the joke because it reminded him how religion was so out of sync with popular culture. The music saved him from crying in front of strangers.

It didn't seem right, the proximity of their deaths. He felt his mother deserved some time on earth without his father being around. The two of them never spoke after the messy divorce but Walter sensed his mother would have appreciated having the planet to herself without Brian Stopps taking up all the oxygen.

He didn't go to his mother's funeral. Didn't take the eleven-hour flight and stand by the grave of the woman who had raised him and loved him and tried her best to shield him from the violent world of men. His mother's sister telephoned in the middle of the night, her voice was distant, as if coming from the past. Before she spoke, there was a sound like a needle on a record once the music is over. Her voice was a whisper, almost mechanical. She informed him there was not much time. If he wanted to say goodbye, he should come home now. His mother was asking after him.

What would she think of him now? What would she say?

He buried his head in the business of movies and tried not to think about the house he grew up in. His old life before Los Angeles. The smile his mother would give him as if they were in on a joke together, letting him know that teachers or neighbours or policemen could be silly

sometimes. The smile that made him feel like they were in it together, like he was a grownup and together they were going to be just fine, even though he did skip school, did trash the neighbour's garden, did steal that car stereo. That was true love, an unquestioning, infinitely forgiving, come what may kind of love that deserves, at the very least, a plane journey. But the disease does not like that kind of love, and so the disease discredits and cheapens the love, undermines it and focuses on obtainable things, things that can be purchased and owned and used for self-gratification. Things that come in expensive gift wrapping or cheap store bought dresses, things that are trying to make their way in a man's world, that just want to be taken seriously, that do not want to be subject to the male gaze.

The sun is rising out beyond the distant hills. Walter half smiles to himself because he knows the sun is not rising at all, it is he who is spinning. The sky takes on a milky white blue hue and he imagines a bird stretching its wings and yawning and preparing to find a wiggly breakfast. Do birds stretch. Do they yawn?

He puts on a clean pair of the linen trousers and sits on the edge of the bed and lights another cigarette. He does not know how long he is sitting there before there is a knock at the door. He waits for the person to put the tray on the floor and walk away before he gets to his feet to retrieve the breakfast he will not eat. There is a fresh packet of cigarettes and a book of matches next to the plate of food. And there is another note written in elaborate script inviting him to meet the doctor. He knows it is time.

He knocks loudly on the door. He's overcompensating, trying to bury his nerves deep down. Now he's here he doesn't want to go inside. He is afraid of the books, the old man with his knowing smile like an infomercial television evangelist. He has not forgotten his own book is in there somewhere, waiting for him. Benedict issues an invitation from the other side of the door and Walter gathers all the fragmented parts of himself together as best he can.

He walks in without saying hello and sits right down in the chair in front of the desk.

‘I’m losing my mind, doc. I would appreciate it if you would give me something to calm the waters.’

The old man slides a fresh packet of cigarettes across the desk. Walter pulls one out, lights up, and nods his thanks.

‘I was thinking you might have something in one of those drawers of yours, something prescribed.’

Benedict retrieves the pipe from his pocket and uses a match to pack down the tobacco before lighting up. The two sit in silence for a moment, the old man contemplating the grey blue smoke filling up the room. He wafts some of the smoke up over his face and Walter remembers old westerns on daytime TV with Red Indians played by middle aged white men in red makeup. We live in a world where pretend things are always replacing genuine things and nobody says anything about it, he thinks.

‘Why do you think you’re losing your mind, Walter?’

‘I don’t know. I have these feelings, or I’m suffocating with too much information. And it’s not all mine, this information.’ He pauses for a second and imagines his book sitting in the drawer between the two men, waiting. ‘I had a nightmare last night and this horrible sad feeling, or regret... I don’t know. And the other day an inmate...’

‘A what?’

‘A girl, okay, a patient, comes up to me with all this stuff and it’s been choking me ever since. I need something to make it go away.’

‘So you are afraid,’ Benedict asks with a hint of a smile. ‘of these feelings, I mean?’

Walter suddenly remembers why he didn’t ever turn up for his appointments. He flicks ash on the floor. ‘I didn’t say I was afraid, doc. I said I think I’m going crazy.’

‘Do you know what omnipotence is, Walter?’

‘It’s not my fault I pissed the bed, doc. That’s just what I’m talking about!’

‘Omnipotence.’

Water takes a drag of his cigarette and wills time forward. ‘God, yes. The whole being everywhere seeing everything. I don’t believe in god but I get the concept, sure.’

Walter ashes his cigarette in the ashtray this time and pretends to read some of the names along the spines of the books behind the old man’s desk.

‘Does it feel like that?’

‘No, it’s not a god complex. It’s just a simple case of the crazies.’

‘Well then, perhaps we are talking about something less grandiose. Empathy for instance. Do you know what that means?’

‘Yeah, doc, empathy, sure. I don’t exist in some solipsistic bubble with me at the centre. I...’ He stops then, grinds to an abrupt halt despite himself.

The old man waits, puffing contentedly on his pipe now that he’s got the air flowing just right. ‘That’s good,’ he says, exhaling a plume of smoke, wafting it back over his face so that for a moment he disappears in the cloud then reappears slowly from the chin like an upside-down mountain out of the morning mist, smiling that smile.

Something had happened. Walter had realised something. But how was it the old man seemed to know what it was when Walter didn’t?

‘What about that medication, doc?’

‘I’m afraid not, son. That’s not how we do things around here.’ Benedict opens the drawer in the centre of his desk and pulls out the leather book with Walter’s name in gold leaf across the face and down the spine. His book. ‘You’ll need this,’ he says. ‘Everybody has at least one story inside them. Even you.’

Walter backs up in his seat and crosses his legs. A high-pitched laugh escapes from his mouth. He doesn’t know why and he feels embarrassed about it straight away. The old man

chuckles to himself as he slides the book and pen across the desk.

‘Anything I write in there isn’t going to be nice, doc, that’s for damn sure.’

Benedict looks sombre for a moment. He reaches into another drawer and pulls out several white packets of cigarettes and places them on top of the book. ‘That’s okay, Walter. You just do what every good writer does. You attempt to explain something to yourself as best you can. You write a story and then you find somebody here, a fellow inmate if you will, willing to read it. When you do that you will be able to move on to whatever comes next.’

Walter leans in, excited. ‘You’re telling me you will let me check out of here if I write a story?’

‘Something true. Explain something to yourself. That’s what it’s all about, son. And you find somebody here willing to read it. That part is important, the sharing of the world you have explained to yourself.’

Walter’s mind goes blank. He gets up out of his chair and pockets the cigarettes. He takes a breath and picks up the book and the pen. He’d forgotten how heavy it was, his book. It seems strange to him how it can be so heavy without any words inside. Just as he is about to head out of the door, he stops and turns back to the old man sitting behind the desk, working at his pipe with the match, making it just so. ‘Hey, doc, where do you get your cigarettes? I really like the packaging.’

The old man doesn’t look up. He stops fussing over the pipe for a moment and stares absently out of the window. ‘Same place we get everything else,’ he says with a smile.

Walter has to admit that he’s warming to the guy, all the crazy shaman talk and his new age clinic with the books and the gardens and the sandals. He figures you had to have a little something special to keep a place like this running. He waves towards the back of the old man’s head. ‘I’ll catch ya later, doc.’

* * * *

Chapter IV.
My Life as an Eggplant

Walter sailed his BMW onto Beverly Drive with that same feeling of fear and foreboding that had been haunting him all week, ever since Trainer arrived back in town from god knows where, ever since the elephant had settled on the sofa and bed between Angel and him, making the air at home thick with silence.

That first day he found Trainer in his office, Walter was determined to ask Angel how she had tracked him down, why she felt the need after so long. Was it just because they were getting married, or was it more than that, a need for continuity, a deep nostalgic yearning for a past they once shared together, the three of them at college with nothing but time and future and cheap weed.

This town had no history, no connectedness. It was disparate, spread out so that no one place seemed joined to the next, so that you had to get into your car and drive yourself to another suburb to buy groceries or take a walk. There were whole blocks without sidewalks so that you couldn't get out of your car even if you wanted to. It wasn't like back in England when Walter was growing up, on the council estate of his childhood where everybody knew everybody, the local park where you could hang around after school and smoke a stolen Benson and Hedges on the edge of the play area where the trees made a kind of camp in which you could hide out with John and Danny and talk about movies and girls, or even take a girl there yourself one time: a girl called Lucy Reagan who smelled of mint chewing gum and flowery deodorant. Lucy with the bleached jeans and baggy white T-shirt with a picture of the Goss brothers on the front.

The estate was a rough place and Walter and his mother never really fit in, but it was home. The neighbours looked out for one another even if they didn't really like each other, or

didn't like Walter and his mum who they thought were up themselves. And the Irish families never approved of the divorce and would call Emily Stopps a lesbian behind her back. The lesbian and her gay son. But it was a community nonetheless, united in semi-poverty, making the best of things. Mowing small lawns and cleaning broken-down cars and going to church on Sundays. Maybe Angel missed her own midwestern past in the same way and bringing Trainer back was a consolation of sorts in an everchanging present. They both grew up in Grand Rapids before moving out west for college and back when the three of them would get drunk in dorms at UCLA Angel and Trainer would talk about their old neighbourhood for hours, making Walter feel excluded at times because it sounded like a John Hughes movie when Walter's past felt more like a Dickens novel but with cheap drugs and setting cars on fire after ripping out the stereo and searching the glove compartment for loose change.

Maybe Trainer was the link to a past she needed right now. But Walter hadn't asked her that first day why or how she had tracked him down, even though he wanted to, even though he was desperate to know all about Trainer's life. They didn't mention his arrival the next day either, or the next, and now it seemed too late somehow. Their friend was an unspoken presence in their lives and Walter dreaded going home to everything that was unsaid.

He stayed out in the city till late, hitting bars along the strip, hiding in the corners of strip joints with shots of vodka and beer chasers. He buried himself in flesh or stayed at work long into the night taking hits of coke and reading scripts he knew he would never option. That had been his routine all week, ever since his best friend and enemy arrived in the electric blue suit with that sad smile that Walter did not recognise. And he had not asked Angel why she wanted to find him, so that the elephant also arrived, uninvited, and made itself comfortable on the dining table and the sofa and the bed, even when Walter reached out for her and pulled her close, found her lips in the dark and used the tips of his fingers to trace the curve of her spine so that her breath quickened. Even then the elephant sat patiently at the foot of the bed

and sucked at the air until Walter felt like he had to move slowly to conserve energy, to save what muddy oxygen was left in the room until he could escape into the bright, anonymous morning.

A silver Bentley piloted by an MTV starlet with platinum hair came up on the inside lane and just missed his wing mirror. The starlet was screaming into her mobile phone, steering with her knees, her free hand rummaging for something utterly necessary which must have been hiding at the bottom of her handbag on the passenger seat beside her. They both stopped at the lights and the starlet flicked Walter the finger when she saw him looking over. Her light turned green, and she took a left, leaving him in a cloud of exhaust fumes and the feeling that he was passed his prime. He tried to think of the starlet's name because he was sure he had seen her video playing on the giant plasma screens that lined the walls of his gym. In the video she was dressed in a school uniform, surrounded by nubile clones. They danced up and down the corridors of an unnamed high school until they were covered in sweat, reproached the whole time by a teacher in sensible clothes and thick glasses who eventually relented and joined in with the dancing, intoxicated, he supposed, by youth and bubblegum and the promise of sex.

Walter could not hear the song in his head, but he could see the girl's pelvis thrusting back and forth, her tongue licking her lips between clipped verses. He thought maybe he might get a hold of her agent and hint at a chance of a movie role; then it would play differently. The starlet would rock up with her best smile and her tightest jeans and she would give him that look so that he would know she was willing to do anything, anything at all to break into the movie game. It made him angry that he was getting older and more and more reliant on his job or his money to get what he wanted from women. He had begun telling himself he was going to put it all behind him after the wedding. He was going to make a change that would mean he felt clean inside. He wanted that old feeling of love being enough, of being present in

the love. He was going to feel lucky again. That's what he wanted, that feeling of being lucky and that luck being enough. But there was also a creeping suspicion in the back of his mind, a voice that was growing louder by the day. The voice whispered that it was too late. The voice did not admonish him but reassured him it was too late. The voice told him, do more, take more, we only have one life, and you don't want to waste it. The voice made him a cipher; a puppet being pulled around by a need for more. And all the time he buried deep inside himself the knowledge he missed his old life where what he had at any one time was not only enough but more than enough.

A black limousine beeped its horn to let him know the light was green. He shifted into drive and tried to loosen his grip on the wheel a little so that the blood could flow back into his knuckles. The car glided forwards and Walter watched the glowing needle of the rev counter jump from 0 to 3000. He imagined the next evolutionary step, full circle to a place where gender would become a thing of the past, triggered by a universal desire towards self-satisfaction, a desire to literally fuck ourselves: millions upon millions of androgynous beings, automatons with blank exhausted eyes and dead smiles, alive in a future where nothing would be required to last, nothing shock or sicken. No moral code. No ethics or conscience, only choice. His foot pushed down on the gas and he felt himself propelled into this otiose future, evolving exogenously from the hollow promises of neon billboards and the sickly glow from a million television screens. He pushed on the gas, silenced his brain, and watched the road disappear beneath the grill of his BMW.

He pulled into the drive around eleven thirty and pressed the clicker that raised the garage door. He piloted the car inside and tried to figure out how it was he could not remember driving the last fifteen miles or so home. He walked in through the side door to the kitchen and dropped his keys next to the answer machine. James Willis' voice, bright and lurid, leaked from the speaker when he pressed the button.

‘Walter, baby, how ya doing? Still shaking it in all the wrong places I hope. Look, buddy, I’ll be in town next week and I was wondering if you could hook me up again. I had a blast last time, and this time I’m coming prepared, baby. How’re we looking for a shooting schedule by the way? You’re the man, Walter! You are the man! I’m in on the four-thirty on Tuesday. I’ll call you then. Ciao, baby.’

Walter’s body performed a tight, involuntary shudder. The last time James was in town they didn’t make daylight for three days. They got themselves locked up in a small apartment in Ventura and almost drowned in a sea of bronzed skin that smelled of suntan oil and deep yearning. When he eventually crawled out of there, he had a nine thousand dollar hole in his pocket and an apocalyptic coke hangover that left him nervous and jittery for a week. He also had a bite mark on the inside of his upper thigh that blossomed like a flower of purple and claret. It unfurled itself up across the skin of his pelvis and around his balls so that he had to keep his underwear on for two weeks. He told Angel that he was self-conscious about his weight, so she gave him a little space to work off a few pounds in the gym. She teased him each night as he got into bed beside her, reassured him that he was still a beautiful specimen of a man despite his thirty-eight years and the first signs of grey beginning to appear in his dark hair just behind his right ear and a little at the roots of his fringe. But this acceptance, the way in which she consented so easily, made him feel sick, and it always seemed as if her teasing put him in a bad mood. She would apologise and he would just nod and roll over in bed and squeeze his eyes shut.

He looked at the machine accusingly as if it might delete the message so that he could pretend he had never heard it.

Angel was curled up on a lounge on the balcony listening to The Band play *The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down*. That’s how he knew she was in a funny mood, maybe even a bad mood. It was always The Band when things were bad. Nina Simone if they were good.

The choice seemed counter intuitive to Walter, but he didn't have that kind of a relationship with music.

He fixed them both a drink and handed her a glass as he walked out onto the balcony. He kissed her lightly on the forehead before lifting her slender legs and sitting on the end of the lounge. He tried to seem calm as he stroked her calves, sensing in the tight muscles beneath her skin the tension she was holding in check. He thought about the deep shifting currents of oceans that could drag a man out into the abyss, beyond all saving. He thought about mermaids and shipwrecks and lies.

'Late again,' she said, her voice belying the tightness within her body.

She took a sip of her drink. The ice cubes clinked and tinkled in the thick cut glass and Walter had a flash of Agatha and remembered he had to book the room. Angel looked off into the distance, into the warm night, out towards the curtain of silver draped between the mountains, out towards the invisible ocean beyond. He knew instantly she had already listened to the message and that she hated Willis. She once accused him of treating objects like women which she said she found uncomfortable and creepy. Willis had laughed at her and told her it was 'woman like objects', not the other way around. Later, when most of the guests had drifted from the table and were making small talk over brandy, Walter caught James licking the rim of his wine glass when he thought nobody was looking. He felt so close to Angel in that moment that he had to excuse himself and go and hide in the bathroom until his heart slowed and his breathing evened out. He pushed his hands into the wall on either side of the mirror above the sink and was sure he was falling away from himself, toppling down a whitecap into the swirling waters below. He thought of something his mother used to quote from Jonah whenever she was about to cry: *You hurled me into the deep, into the very heart of the seas, and the currents swirled about me; all your waves and breakers swept over me.*

That was the night he proposed to her, in the car on the way home, regretting it the instant the words left his mouth, as if he had succumbed to a weakness that he instantly sensed would someday result in the destruction of everything, as if he were willing himself into the very heart of the seas. And at the same time, because of history and skin and a thousand intimate conversations in the dark, he regretted the callous way he had asked, like talking about the best route home to avoid traffic, or foot medication - mundane and forgettable. He wished he had waited so that he could have gotten down on one knee with a ring all picked out, made a moment for Angel to remember, something smug and intimate and knowing, even though he was sure she didn't really care about stuff like that. Even though he did not know exactly why he was proposing in the first place. But she had been waiting, in her own way, he knew, so he blurted it out like a teenager and she said yes, not even taking her eyes off the road, a hint of a smile that might have been intended to mask relief or shock, he never knew which.

'Why not,' she had said. 'Why not.'

Walter followed Angel's gaze into the warm night, out across the silver light towards the ocean. He tried to ignore the clinking sound of the ice in her glass which she held with the tips of her fingers and thumb and twirled slowly round and round, occasionally taking a small sip of the gold liquid inside. He said:

'I'll take a few days off, okay? We'll do something. I'll talk to your father tomorrow, I promise.'

He felt her relax a little beneath his fingertips so that he could take a hit of his own drink. She told him about her day and how Antoine - the owner of the gallery she managed - had cancelled her exhibition again. She had been trying to get her own work up on the walls for two years now and each time a space opened up, Antoine agreed to let her exhibit. But there was always a reason to pull out at the last minute, sometimes just so he could close the place and go back to France for a week or two and save on bills. This time was different though, he

went for the throat, no excuses; he explained to Angel how her work was out of touch, something about unfashionable impressionism, an abstract rebellion among Hollywood's critical elite. Still life was the new brown, fruit bowls on little wooden chairs were settling in for the season, broad strokes with bold intentions were out on the street. That's how she explained it and that is how Walter knew she was hurting so badly. He never understood the esoteric language of the art world, could never follow Angel for too long when she talked about tension or depth, or the bold architectural style of this painter or that sculptor. But he understood rejection on the intuitive, visceral level of a child. Being hurt by rejection is something none of us outgrow.

He lowered his head and planted a single kiss on her delicate ankle. 'Fuck Antoine,' he said. 'I hate that guy. What does he really know about art anyway, he's just a shopkeeper?'

She raised her glass and tried a smile. 'To fucking Antoine.'

There was silence between them then, and even this far off Walter was sure he could hear the waves crashing against the distant shoreline, threatening his town with terrible violence.

'I really wanted that exhibition.'

'I know you did, baby.'

More silence. Then Angel looked up at him and asked, 'What did he mean by hooking him up?'

'Who?'

'When he said, "hook me up?" It sounded... seedy. I hate that guy, always looking at my tits when I'm talking, always smiling and winking like a dumb ape.'

Walter ejected himself from the lounge to create a little space in which to move around. He always thought better on his feet, and he did not want their skin to be touching as he spoke.

'Who knows what he's talking about? Half the time he's high, the other half he spends

wishing he was high. Maybe he's just happy we're rolling with the Biker Sluts sequel.'

Angel locked onto him with her wide eyes and again he was absolutely sure he could hear gentle mermaid song on the air, mixing with the sickly-sweet smell from the White Evening Primrose growing wild below the balcony, making him dizzy.

'Look, baby, I'm sorry I have to deal with a lot of assholes in the job, but that's just the way it goes. You know this town. You know what it's like.'

'Are you some kind of drug dealer, Walter?'

Angel asked this with her head cocked, eyes wide like a child. There was genuine concern in her voice, as if she didn't really want to know the answer. Walter fixed his eyes on the large canvas Angel had placed on a wooden easel on the other side of the glass doors. He imagined a thousand faceless bodies covered in sweat, and in that moment watched the oils melt from the canvas and splash onto the white marbled floor creating a beautiful mess of colour. He let go of his breath and smiled.

'No baby, I'm not any kind of drug dealer. I hook the guy up now and then. You know the game.'

'But you're not still doing it, are you?'

'We gave up, remember?'

'You never wanted to. Not really. I know that.'

Walter returned to the lounge and held Angel in his arms, close so that their eyes would not meet, but not so close that she would feel the glass vial inside of his jacket pocket.

'We both gave up,' he said, stroking her hair, holding her close, 'because it felt right, because it still feels right.'

He controlled his breathing. Her muscles relaxed inside his embrace. Her chin nestled close to his neck, warm and safe and ignorant.

'We're okay aren't we, Walt?' Her head fell into his lap and he could feel Julie's hands all

over his skin. The wet nervous kiss from the new girl he had cornered in the stairwell that afternoon.

‘We’re getting married, baby. Doesn’t that sound okay?’

‘So, I’m being silly?’

He continued to stroke her hair, skin burning all over as he sang the lullaby of trespassing lovers. He reminded innocence of hands held and secrets shared, of bare feet and empty bottles. He wooed his deceived with rose tinted memories, with soft caresses and pet names. And like so many deceived, she accepted the memories and the song without question, because she wanted and needed and was human and flawed and holding on too tightly. Nothing is more effective, he thought, than whatever it is we need to hear from another. We choose to believe in that which appeals to our higher consciousness, to our hearts: life after death, empathy, man on the moon. Love.

Angel turned in his lap. ‘I love you.’

‘I love you too, baby.’

He passed the he-said-she-said crowd on the fourth floor, locked in frantic cubical conversations, their lives squandered on the myopic perception of who did what and who went where with whom. The currency of the mediocre changing hands and ears across the soft partitioned walls of the accounts department like a low-grade virus always made him nervous whenever he came down here.

Julie was at the photocopy bank on the far side of the office floor, absently leaning against the wall, flicking through the latest copy of Pure Vanity while the machines spat out black and white memorandums about nothing in particular. She was chewing on the corner of her bright red bottom lip. She stopped flicking the pages and leaned in close to sniff the

magazine. Walter watched her turn the edge of the page and rub it against her neck and the inside of her wrist. When she noticed him approaching, she tossed the magazine in the trash.

It was Friday and he had promised to take her to lunch somewhere fancy, but he was going to have to cancel for the second time because Trainer had called at dawn and left a garbled message on his mobile phone about meeting that afternoon. He had been back for just over a week but Walter had not seen him since that first time in his office, even though he knew his old friend must have been spending time with Angel, maybe trying to talk her out of the wedding, maybe telling tales about what the two of them used to get up to before Trainer disappeared.

He told Julie about the unscheduled appointment, how he was sorry and wished he could move things around. She smiled, waved it off with a handful of memorandums and dug her heel slow and hard into the soft leather of his handmade brogues until he was sure his toes were bleeding into his socks.

‘That’s okay,’ she purred, ‘I’m used to it.’ She touched his cheek ever so briefly then licked her fingers as if they were coated in sugar. ‘You go do whatever it is you have to do, baby. Why don’t you see me Monday and tell me all about how you’re going to get me the fuck off this floor, or I’ll tell you how I’m going to ruin your life.’

The copy machine beeped and belched out a final meaningless memorandum. They arranged to meet at an invisible bar between Destino and Liberty Blvd. He could see that she meant it, the ruining of his life, and he wondered how it was that he had accidentally given her so much power.

He rode the elevator up to the seventh floor and ran into the executive washroom in order to gather his thoughts before facing Rhona. His assistant always made him nervous. It was only ten fifteen and already he was on the lamb. Life seemed to be picking up speed, closing in on him so that it was hard to catch a breath and think straight. He tried to get a handle on

the day as he relieved himself into the porcelain hand and ignored the stinging sensation in his cock. He had to keep it together if he didn't want Trainer smelling blood. He heard the door open behind him and tried to relax his shoulders. There were snatches of telephone and computer song then Breaks sidled up to the porcelain hand right next door to Walter and reached inside his zipper with both hands. At sixty-two the old guy still carried his college football build with broad shoulders and the thick upper thighs that pushed hard against the fabric of his tailored trousers. He was tall with cropped silver hair and tanned skin. He had bright blue eyes and a chiselled jaw that reeked of family money and prairie land. He was self-assured. Walter often noticed how his father-in-law could suck all the air out of a room and leave nothing for anybody else, like he had the right, like he owned you.

'Walter, my boy, how are you?'

'Fine, Mister Breaks, how are you?'

The old man hunched his shoulders and pulled out the biggest cock Walter had ever seen.

'We're going to be family soon, Walter. You're marrying my only daughter for Christ's sake. God I love that girl. You know what I mean?'

He slapped Walter on the back and the leather shoes suffered their second attack of the day as the porcelain hand failed to catch what was left of his recycled coffee.

'Look who I'm talking to, of course you know what I mean. You're marrying her, right? My point is, Walter, you don't have to call me Mister Breaks any more. You just go right ahead and call me sir.'

Breaks let rip from his python cock and Walter was forced to imagine just how many coffees the old fart had squeezed in already. Then he came out with it. Walter knew it had been on his mind, had often sensed the guy counting the days like so many before him. They had been no use since little girl turned fifteen and they wanted back in the game. They had lost hero status, usurped by younger, more virile versions of themselves: daddies who would

suck nipples, who would smoke pot; daddies who would push dirty hands inside clean knickers, who owned pickup trucks and had tattoos of eagles clutching rifles; daddies who were always hungry, relentless, dangerous; daddies who were, paradoxically, everything and nothing like the original. But Walter knew the son-in-law was an opportunity to exert a little power, regain meaning in little girl's life. And there he was, standing too close, holding Walter captive in the executive porcelain prison with the sound of the monster cock relieving itself and the smell of aftershave and bleach thick in the air.

'I like to meet all my boys in here,' Breaks continued in his friendly tone. 'This is where I come when I need a little chat. You know why?'

Walter had no choice but to play along. He said:

'No, sir, why do you do that?'

'My cock, Walter. I have an enormous cock. I know you've noticed already. I mean how could you miss the thing, am I right?'

Walter nodded his agreement at the tiled wall, unable to squeeze another drop from his retreating soldier, outgunned by the old man's python and his unbearable proximity.

'An employee of mine needs dressing down, I just come in here and pull out my cock and they know I'm the boss. They know that if they fuck with me or my company or my only daughter... Well, they know I've got the biggest cock is all. Don't get we wrong son, we're men, men do things because we need to, Jesus, because we almost have to. I'm no saint, for sure. I'm a man, but marriage is different, Marriage is where we pull it together and put our heads down, you know what I mean. We have needs, sure, but there are rules. Don't think for a moment I don't see you, Walter. I see you just fine. It's only natural for a while, a God-given right if you will. I mean, they practically beg for it some of them, al I right. But marriage is different and I see you just fine. And I have the biggest cock of them all. Don't forget that.'

Breaks zipped up his pants, made sure to slap Walter on the back with his unwashed hand, then headed out of the door wearing his most expensive smile. ‘You keep making me money, Walter.’

The computers crowded, the phones and faxes jeered, then silence. Walter felt a searing rage course through his blood like a subway fire. He stomped up and down the washroom. He punched at the air and cursed the old man over and over. He pictured his fist smashing into his father-in-law’s face until it was a bloody mess. He kicked at the unformed tiles and grabbed a hold of the hot air dryer and tried to wrench it from the wall. But Walter wasn’t cut out for physical destruction. He didn’t have the weight or singlemindedness for it. He worried that he might damage his suit which had only just arrived from his tailor in London. Instead, he reached for the vial inside of his jacket pocket and took a hit of the metallic white powder. He calmed himself and threw a half smile at the mirror like it was no big deal. He stroked his fragile knuckles with the milky white liquid soap. He moisturised, told himself that he would win the war, that he would show the old bastard who was boss, take his company from him, his only daughter. He would watch the man crumble to dry ash and dance on his grave one pleasant summer’s evening when the rest of the mourners had all gone home.

Trainer flashed his game show host smile from the opposite end of the restaurant. He was sitting at the table near the window which Walter had booked. The staff all seemed to be doing their very best to ignore him. He still had on the blue nylon suit and the white boots with the Cuban heels, but this time he was wearing a pair of silver aviator shades held together with silver tape across the bridge. Walter noticed the beginnings of a handlebar moustache which made him very nervous. Trainer half stood and proffered Walter the seat opposite.

‘I hate these places, Walt. You couldn’t pick someplace normal we could eat?’

‘What do you mean. This is normal.’

‘Like I could get a burger here.’

‘I’m sure they do burgers. What are you drinking?’

Another impossibly beautiful, unemployed actor approached the table, pad and smile at the ready. Walter ordered two double scotches no ice, one burger and fries, one egg white omelette and green salad without olive oil, and a shot of wheat grass.

The unemployed actor raised a soap opera eyebrow. ‘Burger, sir?’

‘Take a steak and put it between two pieces of bread with a little ketchup.’

‘I take it sir is hungry and thirsty today.’

Walter looked the unemployed actor right in the eyes and asked if there was perhaps a manager that the kid was anxious for him to talk to.

The actor performed the half bow of so many thousands in town, hating those who had made it, dreaming of the day they would shove it to the customer, the boss, the whole goddamn world. But the kid would have to wait. He would have to do his time just like Walter.

‘Coming right up, sir.’

Minutes later Trainer was draining his glass and waving for a refill. He was high from all the beautiful people and seedy joints the town had to offer, even talked about the idea of a big return. But Walter knew better and assured himself it was all just empty threats to put him on edge.

‘I tell you, Walt, I’d forgotten about all the entertainment, all the babes. I spent last night with these freaky dudes from the Porn Emporium up in Breton. Have you tried crystal meth? What a fucking rush.’ Trainer smiled, his eyes still dilated from the night’s heavy indulgence.

‘My head’s a little fucked and my dick’s sore, but that stuff is fun... Why doesn’t that kid notice me waving do you think?’

Walter waved down the actor and ordered another couple of drinks. This time the kid looked genuinely concerned but quickly nodded and headed for the service bar without comment.

‘You trying to make me jealous, T?’

‘Come on, Walt, you’re serious, you’re not a player? Walter Stopps, loyal fiancé, dedicated employee. The son-in-law all fathers dream of. Why don’t you come check this place out?’ Trainer handed over a shiny black business card with a smile. ‘The joint is wild, honestly. Come check it out this afternoon.’

Walter mimed a lame protest and gulped down his drink in one go. He ate his omelette while Trainer eyed his steak with suspicion and searched for cracks in Walter’s narrative. He told him he respected Angel too much to see her marry like this. Told Walter right to his face he knew he was still a player, told how they both had a disease for which there was no cure.

‘At least I’m being honest with myself, Walt. Look at you. Angel is too good for you. She deserves better. It’s not like I’ve forgotten all the shit we used to get up to, man.’

He went on to tell how he had a chance with Angel himself the summer Walter disappeared in Mexico that time after graduation. Walter stayed cool, told himself this, after all, was why Trainer had turned up. He wanted to ruin Walter’s life, tear it all down and expose everything: show the world the real Walter Stopps and save Angel before it was too late. But it was him that was using the word save, wasn’t it. So did he also know she needed saving?

‘Seriously, Walt, I still have these crazy hot dreams about some of the shit we got up to, but I didn’t know any better. I was lost in the whole scene. And you weren’t about to marry Angel. I loved it when you guys got together, baby, loved it, but it’s not right anymore, Walt. It’s not fair on her. Marriage... Jesus, come on.’

The gloves were off. Walter hid his face in one glass after another and tried to dodge the

punches. Trainer kept at him, persuading him to let go and come clean. It was exhausting, listening to his crimes like this, having his life in his face by a man on a crystal meth comedown, a reformed saint taking the moral high ground. In the end, Walter distracted his friend by agreeing to skip work and go check out the club in Breton. Trainer opened his arms and smiled.

‘Now you’re talking sense, baby. Now let’s get the fuck out of here before we turn into one of these stick up the ass fucking zombies with the stretched skin.’

They arrived late in the afternoon, a little drunk already after hitting a few bars on the way. It was a discrete affair on the outside, no neon or garish sign above the small wooden door. Trainer knocked. A large black face appeared at the barred window in the door’s centre.

‘What’s up?’

Trainer looked at Walter. ‘Tell the man you are Mister Blades and you are here for a good time.’

Walter did as he was told. The face was unimpressed.

‘Who the fuck is Mister Blades, motherfucker?’

Trainer handed Walter a folded fifty-dollar bill and told him to slide it between the bars and say: ‘Only those who know, know.’

Walter did as Trainer instructed. The face allowed itself a smile.

‘And what do you know?’

‘I know enough to know,’ Walter said without thinking.

Two fat fingers snatched the fifty and the door opened. He was led down a narrow staircase which opened up into a low-ceilinged club decorated throughout in black and red, straight out of the eighties with the booth seating and fake leather upholstery. The face took Walter’s coat and handed him a ticket stub.

‘Enjoy yourself, Mister Blades.’

They took a booth in the far corner. The black and red theme continued all over: walls lined with mirrors adorned with greasy handprints, small, circular stages nestled between the tables with brass poles in their centre that reached up into the ceiling - spotlights and disco balls everywhere. A heavy pair of thighs in heels and a black leather thong was dancing with her own reflection on the main stage as the house band crucified a seventies nightclub classic that Walter could not place. The whole bar reeked of anticipation and disappointment and the dichotomy made Walter uneasy. The Heartbreak Hotel had sold to new owners and become just another brothel in the belly of the town.

He ordered two double scotches and two bottled beers from a passing waitress as he scanned the place for professionals. Hidden booths held business suits and semi naked women of every calibre. Walter was distracted by the familiar, theatrical groans emanating from behind the beaded curtains, young women who needed to make money for rent or childcare or acting classes. They hid behind the curtains so the illusion of ownership would not be shattered, so they remained a blank canvas, unspoilt by the semen of strangers.

There were separate rooms at the back for those who needed extra special attention. The waitresses were topless and bored, their teeth glowed a neon blue in the ultraviolet light.

A fat, over-the-hill Elvis look-alike asked Walter if he would be using the casino today. Walter declined and the fat man took a bow. 'Thank you very much, uh huh.'

He didn't understand how the place had slipped his radar. He wondered if he had always played second fiddle to Trainer, even in depravity. He ordered another round as his old friend placed a tiny white envelope of coke on the table and put flame to a Lucky. The envelope glowed neon blue, as if one of the waitresses had lost a front tooth. Trainer exhaled two triumphant plumes of smoke and threw a smile that made Walter think of The Mother Dragon.

'This is where I like to lunch!' he exclaimed.

‘You can eat here?’

Trainer smiled and nodded as he unfolded the envelope and brushed his gums with the glowing powder. ‘I want you to test this with me, Walt. I’m thinking of doing a little business while I’m in town.’

‘I thought this was a holiday, T. And how many times do I have to tell you, you are a writer. Not a burger chef or a... a fucking coke dealer. A writer!’

‘All that is behind me, Walt, you should know that better than anybody. Besides, there’s no harm in doing a little business. Ladies love the guy with the coke, right?’

Trainer rolled a fifty-dollar bill between thumb and fingers and dived in. He kept his eyes on Walter the whole time, searching for that familiar twitch in the jaw, the deep, irrepressible hunger in the eyes. Walter declined when Trainer offered the envelope. He kept his hands in his pockets and scanned the bar for the waitress who should have delivered his fresh drinks already.

‘Not for me, T. I don’t do that anymore.’

‘Why fight it, Walt? It’s me. It’s Trainer. This is how we roll.’

‘I’ve changed, T. Improved.’

‘Bullshit. Self-improvement is a myth, a hobby, something we do on weekends to give this whole ride some kind of solemnity. Arses change, faces change, but who and what we really are never changes. It’s forced into dark corners, but it doesn’t change. You think I can’t see it? You stink of pussy and lies, my friend.’

‘I do, T. I probably have an STD just from sitting here. Look where you brought us for Christ’s sake.’

‘Don’t get me wrong, baby, I’m not judging. Who am I to judge? But don’t drag Angel down with you, man. Let her go. Let yourself go. I mean, look at all this.’

Trainer waved a hand into the darkness – into the hidden pleasure corners and backrooms

where men closed eyes and paid money and tried to fulfil the need that clawed at something deep inside of them. He leaned in for his closing speech.

‘This is your world, Walt, your kind of place. What are you gonna do, spend weekends playing eighteen holes with Breaks and worry about the next time he’s gonna whip out that monster fucking cock?’

‘You know about the cock?’

‘Look, Walt, I’m your friend, and as your friend I’m asking you not to drag Angel down with you.’

‘You’ve got the wrong idea, T. Sure I used to be an asshole, I know that and I feel bad about it, really, but that was a long time ago. You’ve been gone seven years. I’m reformed, I told you. Life is good. I love Angel. I’m happy. It’s not like before, when you were around. That was, I don’t know, that was a crazy time.’

Trainer slid back into the fake leather booth and wiped traces of the glowing white powder from his nostrils. He smiled but Walter sensed his best friend and enemy was disappointed. He was going to have to try harder if he wanted to tear it all down. It would take more than a couple of drinks and an Elvis impersonator to break him, more than the dark pleasure corners and the thick, treacle smell of satisfaction. Trainer asked:

‘So, what do you think?’

Walter straightened up in his chair a little and took a hit of his beer. ‘What do I think about what?’

‘My business proposition’

‘What proposition?’

‘I need back up on this thing, Walt. I don’t want to go it alone. This guy might turn nasty.’

‘What the fuck are you talking about, T?’

‘The coke thing. I’m gonna buy a lot of fucking coke from this connected guy and I’m

gonna sell it. I'm also going to snort a shit load, but not when I'm working.'

Walter could barely believe what he was hearing. 'What fucking use am I going to be if this connected guy decides to kill you or maim you, or just take your money and walk away? Do you think I am able to bail you out of that kind of shit?'

'I'd just feel better if you were there, Walt. What am I going to look like if I turn up on my own? This guy will think I don't have any friends.'

'No friends! Jesus, T, what the hell goes on in your mind?'

'You know, Walt, in the kingdom of the blind the one-eyed man would not be king. He'd be gang-raped to within an inch of his life, his one good eye gouged out with a rusty knife by the unseeing masses. Then they would all stand around and piss on the guy until the last of his dignity drained out into the mud and he was just a stinking empty shell.'

'What does that even mean?'

A pair of luminous breasts arrived and deposited Walter's drinks on the table along with some complimentary nuts. When she walked away, Trainer got up and followed without saying a word. Before he disappeared into one of the rooms at the back, he turned and winked at Walter and gave him a double thumbs up.

Walter was approached by a myriad of personal wet dreams. Lila claimed to have three nipples and said she would take it any which way he wanted to give it. Suzy, a tired looking blonde in her late thirties, specialised in S and M and water sports. But the biggest test came in the form of an athletic, hyper tanned college grad called Star. She had long, dark hair and piercing blue eyes. She claimed she could make him come and cry with her mouth. Walter offered her some of Trainer's coke and tried to ignore the stabbing pain in his groin. When he saw her inhale the white powder from the glass tabletop, lifting her head and allowing the acrid drip at the back of her throat, he snatched the envelope and cut himself a line without thinking. He snorted it down and felt the familiar gagging reflex in the pit of his stomach.

'Resistance is nubile,' he said, but the young star had faded and was no longer listening. She had retreated inside herself and left behind a shell that looked at once blank and nervous and ten years older than it should have. Her eyes glazed over, and her mouth became slack. She got up from the table and drifted into the darkness without another word.

Elvis jumped up on stage and introduced Dean Martin. The band played on and the heavysset man in the tuxedo and wig started singing about standing on a corner watching the girls go by. Trainer returned - flushed and happy - and the drinking continued. He wasted bourbon and long necks trying to convince Walter to come clean, share the guilt he must be feeling. Walter stood fast until eventually the temptation became too much and he insisted they get out of the place and into some daylight. He felt as if he was drowning, and he was beginning to sweat a little inside his shirt. It was always the same when he wanted something badly. Trainer acquiesced with a knowing smile and they rode the stairs up to street level.

* * * *

Chapter V.
Give Me Shelter from the Storm

Time passes but the story does not come. Walter often sits on the bench with the book open in his lap, pen in hand, but nothing happens. There is just one line that hovers at the top of the first page, unrecognisable to him. A line he had scratched into the book after a dream he could not fully remember...

*His marsupial eyes scan the walls and ceilings of shadowy corridors. The
darkness threatens to suck him in.*

He watches his fellow inmates drifting around the grounds or working in the gardens and the olive groves. He cannot help wondering how much story they have dragged up from the dark places inside and committed to the yellow white paper. Whenever he sees one of them writing, shoulders hunched over their book, lost in their creating, he feels a pang of intense jealousy and has to turn away.

He continues to meet Benedict from time to time and they talk over this and that. More often they sit in comfortable silences. Walter had come to appreciate the silences, and more than once realised he had never been able to occupy the same space as another human without filling that space with words. The old man asks how things are going and Walter shrugs and sometimes tries to explain about the shadows, but it never comes out right. Mostly they just smoke and observe the morning sunlight making its way across the wooden desk. The old man tries to talk about faith, about what it means to trust and to believe. He tells Walter that faith is perhaps humankind's greatest achievement. This is when Walter closes himself off, shuts down like a child and pulls hard on his cigarettes until Benedict gives up and moves on to safer ground. He has no time for faith. What he wants, what he yearns for, is everyday beauty. One day Benedict asks Walter what it is that does inspire him. Yesterday's

newspapers rolling across wet asphalt, he says. Driving up the 101 in the dead of night. Cold milk in hot coffee and the soles of beaten sneakers pulling the late shift in the diner on the corner of Chambers and Ninth. He continues: The smell of stale popcorn at KayMin's Chinese Theatre. Benjamin Franklin passed from palm to palm in the heat of midnight street commerce. He tells Benedict how he sometimes imagines the very last streetlight winking off on San Marino Boulevard as the sun creeps over the mountains in the east. Pink smog. Street food. Bubblegum. The Pacific Ocean. He longs for the rough and tumble and noise of it all, but at the same time he cannot imagine being a part of it, too weak or quiet now, still missing that important part of himself necessary to survival. He knows he should be making better progress. Sometimes he feels he is letting the old man down, letting himself down even. But the words to the story do not come, and self-reflection has never been his strong suite.

He signs up to work in the olive groves and spends much of his time tending to the squat little trees. He enjoys the simple work. His hands grow rough. His arms turn a golden brown. His beard grows and his hair grows, and he cuts neither because he cannot look himself in the mirror, so it no longer matters. One hot afternoon, he buries his sandals at the foot of his favourite tree because he likes the feel of the warm earth pushing up against the soles of his feet, up between his splayed toes. After work, he often makes his way to the river and sits with his feet in the water and imagines the ugly parts of himself dissolving, being washed out to sea and eaten by omnivorous, B-movie monsters.

One day he lies back in the warm grass and closes his eyes. The muscles in his shoulders ache. His hands are sore and blistered. He thinks about his mother working all week in the accounts department of the Selfridges store in Oxford so that she can make the money that will feed the kid, pay the rent and go towards a college fund the kid will one day use to get on an airplane and never once look back.

When he opens his eyes, the tall black man is standing over him, a halo of stars above his

head, a smile like a week-old moon. Walter is cold inside from the damp grass. His feet are numb and wrinkled when he pulls them from the water. He is confused and afraid, caught in that half world, only part aware of the life of the conscious mind.

The man reaches down and offers a hand. Walter takes it and the man pulls him to his feet and brushes him down like a father does for a son. The man asks:

‘You want to come sit by my fire? Maybe have a little tea to warm you inside? I have myself a stove so no worries on that score.’

Walter recognises the man from the clinic. He is always sitting in a rocking chair keeping an eye on the main doors to the west side of the building, the side without windows, the side that hides them from normal people until they are cured and clean and ready to begin again. He is tall with broad shoulders and strong arms, a little salt and pepper in his hair and beard, somewhere in his early sixties, but not so old you would want to wrestle with him to get to the doors and make a break for it. Walter had nodded to the man a few times as he walked from his sessions with Benedict back to his room, but they had never spoken. He wore the tunic with the hood like the rest of the orderlies, a masonic getup that used to bother Walter, but lately he had come to think of them all as in the thing together, inmates and guards, serving time and the soul for the greater good.

‘My name is Cameo,’ he says, in a deep voice that is thunder and honey and a hundred miles of desert highway.

Walter blinks at the man and tries to wrestle free of his dream state. ‘Walter,’ he replies eventually, then looks around at his feet as if he has lost something. For a split second he has the urge to check an imaginary inside pocket for his wallet. ‘I fell asleep I guess.’

‘No harm in that. Sleep’s good for the soul,’ the man says, rolling his vowels down the highway like he’s got nothing but time. ‘I have a place out here, nice and peaceful, out across the river. Got myself a nice patch I call my own and you look like a man who could use a

good fire.’

Walter nods and wants to thank Cameo, but the words do not come.

The two men walk along the riverbank until they reach a rickety old footbridge that Walter has not noticed before, even though he is sure he has passed this way many times before. The wood is rotten in places, covered in a patchwork of silvery green moss that catches the light of the moon. The bridge is only wide enough for a single person to cross and Walter is sure he can feel the current pulling at the rotten struts beneath his feet.

Cameo leads the way across the narrow walkway, then up a steep rise that ends abruptly before sweeping down towards a huge old cedar tree standing solitary in the narrow valley below. The two men walk in silence, and within the silence Walter feels himself becoming whole again: the rhythmic beating of feet over the cool earth, the certainty of night, the tall dark figure before him, Virgil guiding him home.

Cameo’s home is no more than a camp under the cover of the cedar tree, just like the ones Walter used to make as a kid when his father would take him over to Youghal in the summer holidays, after they had seen the family in Cork and shaken all of the hands belonging to the uncles and been kissed on the cheek by all of the lips belonging to the aunts whose names he could never remember. After all the raised voices and drinking.

He never asked his mother why she did not come; it was just something he did with his father in the summer, the two of them. There was a lot of silence once they arrived in Youghal, and his father would often disappear from morning till late at night, so Walter explored the abandoned railway tracks near the small fairground. He made the place his own, separate from the big empty house that smelled of damp. He did not mix with the local kids who spoke too fast for him to fully understand. So he made a camp beneath a tree next to the tracks and waited for the day he would get back on the boat and cross the rough sea and be with his mother again.

Cameo has made up a straw mattress covered in hessian sacks. There is a small fire pit dug out of the ground with a kettle resting on a flat stone beside it. The kettle is already on the boil when they arrive. There is a makeshift rocking chair leaning up against the trunk of the cedar, made from mismatched pieces of hardwood with half an oil barrel in place of rockers. There are glass jars with candles inside hanging from the lower branches of the tree. The jars are painted and give off a warm orange and red and green glow which illuminates the vast network of branches above and casts brightly coloured rings in the grass at Walter's feet. He feels at home right away, but he cannot shake an image of his mother bending down with open arms, waiting to wrap him up.

Cameo offers him the rocker but Walter declines, insisting the seat belong to the man of the house, not meaning it in any way sarcastically. He sits on the ground in front of the fire with his legs crossed and lets the heat work its way into his damp bones. The tall man pours water from the kettle into a teapot and lets it stew for a while on a wooden crate beside his rocking chair.

'Nothing like cooking on a real stove,' he says. 'Even tea tastes better this way, you'll see.'

After a few minutes of pleasant silence, Cameo hands over a tin cup of steaming hot tea which Walter holds greedily to his chest.

Eventually he asks, 'How long have you been here, Cameo?'

The tall man takes a sip of his tea and rocks back against the tree, feet wide apart on the grass, one hand resting on his knee. 'Couldn't say. You never know how long you have to wait. Been a while though. Sure been a while.' He takes another sip of his tea and pulls out a tobacco pouch and brown liquorish papers from his pants pocket. 'Still, I figure it won't be too long now, what d'ya say?'

Walter doesn't know what to say. He takes a tentative sip of his tea which tastes amazing.

'Used to work the land but now I'm here,' the tall man continues. 'Not in no good way,

though, planting and such. I used to drill holes and pull that black gold up out of the ground, blind for it and greedy too. Seen many men the same in those years.'

Cameo raises his eyes to the colourful branches above, as if, in that very brief moment, he is communing with some invisible force. He places the cigarette between his lips and thumbs a light from a match he pulls from behind his ear – an unconscious, lineal performance passed down and down and down. Walter says:

'I used to make movies, bad movies. The kind of movies you spend a hundred million dollars on but they don't mean anything.' He stares at the flames. 'I used women. Did drugs, lots of drugs. I cheated on the woman I love. Cheated in all kinds of ways.'

'That's a damn shame,' the tall man says.

Walter nods. 'It is, isn't it.'

'But you're getting better now.' Cameo looks right at Walter, right into his eyes like he's discovered some new thing inside of him. 'I can see that clear as day.'

The flames spit a burning twig onto Walter's lap which he idly flicks back into the fire pit. He looks at the little burned patch in his linen pants. 'Maybe I am,' he says.

There is a long silence between the two: comfortable, fire crackling, gentle night sounds all around. Eventually Walter asks, 'Why'd you get out of the oil game?'

The man rocks forwards in his chair and puts his tin cup down on the wooden crate. He leans down and places both hands on the cool grass at his feet, pushes his palms into the earth and spreads his fingers wide like the roots of the tree standing over them. He cranes his neck and fixes on Walter with his big brown eyes, swimming pool eyes, black hole eyes full of burning time. 'Got me some respect,' he says, 'some common sense. I plugged that hole with dynamite. And the next. And the next. I buried them good. I jumped on my horse with a whole bag of dynamite, and I crossed the country back to front plugging up those holes. I seen men drink that black stuff right out of the ground, drink it right up till their teeth were rotten

and their eyes dead inside, stealing from the mother without asking anything. I used up a whole lot of dynamite, but they just kept on digging fresh holes in the ground and sucking at that titty till it was all dried up. Nothing I could do in the end. I heard when those fellas couldn't get no more black gold, they tried to build themselves out of the situation. Hubris and sin and stupid blindness stretching out over the water like some godless snake creature to where the sun sets like they was gonna follow it to a new kind of dawn. Can you imagine that?'

The tall man releases his grip on the earth. He takes up his tin cup and rocks back in his chair against the tree. 'Some people don't learn till it's too late,' he says. 'But I suppose that don't mean the lesson ain't worth learning anyways.'

Walter cannot shake the image of a bridge stretching out over the ocean towards the setting sun. He laughs even though there is nothing funny about what Cameo has said. He laughs because he feels afraid and lonely and haunted.

Cameo blows smoke up into the coloured branches and hands the cigarette to Walter with a solemn kind of a nod. 'You take this now, hear.'

Walter takes a deep drag and fills up his lungs with the pungent smoke. His head gets that light, fuzzy feeling just like when he used to take a hit of coke. He thinks he hands the cigarette back to his host who is telling how he met this sheriff once who caught him plugging a hole in some border town outside of Nevada - '...thing is, the old guy could see what I was doing, could see the sense in it, and so he left me to my job and just rode off on his way because he knew and I knew...'

Walter stares up at the coloured lights set against a sea of shifting green. He lets Cameo's deep voice wash over him. He listens to the song, the ancient song of thunder and honey and a hundred miles of desert highway.

When he opens his eyes, Lilly is standing over him. She is silhouetted against the morning sun, but he can still make out her smile. Her hair looks like it is on fire, and as she leans down towards him, he notices the freckles on her pale skin, her green eyes alive with a kind of mischief. There is birdsong, and the leaves of the tree above him give off a sibilant, rolling ocean sound as they sway in the morning breeze.

‘You know he’s crazy, right?’ Lilly says this in a grownup voice, but she isn’t very convincing. ‘I mean, he’s wise and kind of oracular, and you can learn a lot from a guy like Cameo, but he’s crazy. All oil men are the same.’

Walter sits up and rubs at his beard. He feels great, like that one time he took a beating from Daire Braden, the school bully. Braden had stepped up on Walter in the playground during lunchbreak and hit Walter in the face with all that he had, but Walter had stayed on his feet. Braden was much taller than the rest of the boys in their year, but he hadn’t put Walter on the ground and that counted for something. It left him feeling pretty good, that feeling you get when you take a knock but keep right on going. It was the first time that Walter had tasted his own blood and it felt important.

When his father returned home several days later and saw Walter’s black eye and cut lip, he poured his son a half glass of beer from his own bottle and slid the glass along the kitchen table just like Walter had seen him do for his friends when they visited. The young boy could see his father had hope for his son in that moment, as if perhaps he wasn’t so different from the other kids on the estate. Walter always felt his father might want better for him, a college education even, but the man had limited horizons and he had to walk into the local pub, an Irish pub, with his head held high. You didn’t want a gay for a son.

The goat steps up and nuzzles Walter’s neck until he pats it on the head and rubs it under the chin which he knows it likes because it closes its deep ruby eyes and makes a kind of low throaty sound.

He gets to his feet and brushes himself down. There is no sign of Cameo, and in the daytime, without the candles and the fire and the quiet intimacy of night, the camp is almost invisible, as if he had imagined it, summoned it from his childhood in a time of loneliness and confusion.

The two of them walk in silence up onto the ridge, the goat following behind, stopping every now and again to enjoy a juicy tuft of grass. There is a moment when they reach the top of the ridge and look out across the river cast in silver and green, across the olive groves towards the old clinic with its terracotta hat and ivy trousers, and in that moment the backs of their hands touch and tiny sparks skip up the length of Walter's arm and around the back of his neck leaving goose bump footprints along the way. But they are not the old feelings, not hungry or blind. They are different. This thought fills him with an unfamiliar hope. Lilly turns to Walter, her head doing that tilting thing just like Angel, eyebrows ready with the questions.

'Eggs tells me you're a hedonist.'

Walter makes a note to talk to the old man about doctor patient confidentiality. 'Not really,' he says, in a quiet voice. He thinks about Angel, the look on her face when he walked into the apartment the day it all came crashing down, the realisation of just how much she had been deceived: the mascara like black tears, anger evident in the torn canvas and broken glass, the air electric with disbelief and sick horror.

'I was more debauched,' he says. 'Hedonism is a philosophy. I wasn't that sophisticated. I was too busy being seduced or seducing. I just... I just took everything. I can't say it was a pursuit of pleasure in any philosophical sense. The doc's just being nice.'

Lilly looks out across the countryside towards the clinic so that Walter has a moment to wipe his eyes, then she starts walking down the gentle slope towards the river where the bridge will take them across the field towards the olive groves.

'What do you think makes us who we are, Walter?'

She asks this out of the blue, after they have been silent for a while, both enjoying the sun against their skin, the damp morning grass under the soles of their feet. Lilly also has bare feet and Walter wonders if it is because of her that he had chosen to bury his sandals at the foot of his favourite olive tree.

‘I don’t know,’ he says, looking down at his dirty feet. ‘I used to think it was nature or nurture, you know? Something like that. But now I think that maybe it has more to do with belief, maybe even something simple like gratitude? I think about all the people I have known who had even a little faith in something. They seemed happier. They were stronger somehow, defined by the act itself. I guess that’s why us non-believers get kind of edgy around faith. We just don’t have the muscle for it. We need proof.’

Lilly laughs and turns on Walter and throws a mock punch, real slow to his jaw, and makes that *kapow* sound like Walter used to do when he was a kid playing at being Batman or John Wayne. He turns his head slightly and smiles.

‘I know, I know,’ he concedes.

Lilly skips ahead, arms raised in victory like a prize fighter. He squints up at the sun, the brilliant blue sky, then down at the lush damp grass sticking up between his toes, the gardens near the clinic with the fruit trees and vegetable patches and herbs and twisted olive trees. He wonders how much proof a person needs. What about love, or something as inexplicable as symmetry. How is it that humankind has the ability to understand the world in which it finds itself? Mathematics, physics, metaphysics - patterns in the universe, interrelatedness, causation, conscious organisms written into the laws of nature in a meaningful way, a birthright that enables us to better understand the beauty of our situation. He wonders if that is not a miracle. He remembers reading once that Einstein said religion without science was lame. Maybe the two are not separate, he thinks, not even co-dependent, but simply different languages used to explain the same things in different ways. Everything as one. No more

binaries. Inverted existentialism: not so much that human existence has no significance outside of self-determination, but that everything is significant. One giant happening!

Lilly is standing at the edge of the gardens waiting for Walter to catch up. As he approaches, she beams at him, arms folded across her small breasts, one leg lifted off the ground, the sole of her foot pressed against the inside of her other knee like an Aborigine on walkabout. He recognises that his thinking is jumbled and slow because he has not thought like this in a long time. His brain feels like it has been sitting in a puddle of silt, thoughts like arthritic bones. But he can feel himself waking at last, stretching like an old dancer before the mirror, seeing in their reflection the possibility of latent grace.

There was a time when he marvelled at the universe. He would spend countless hours staring up at the night sky. He didn't need a telescope, it was the invisible that captivated him, knowing it was out there, travelling outwards, exploding, collapsing, cycle upon cycle, a voyage of millennia. The light that reached him from long dead stars would often pull tears from his eyes and he would imagine himself weightless, up and out into the universe like a gas, a part of the unbelievable process. All of humankind was on a journey, astronauts and explorers; the earth was a part of the great expedition, travelling through space, expanding out into the unknown with the rest of the galaxy.

He used to try to explain to Angel what was going on up there. 'But they are just words,' he would concede. 'I can talk about the speed at which the universe is expanding. I can tell you about black holes and supernovas and dark matter, but the words just won't do it.'

'Not even if I imagine really hard?'

'Not even if you try your hardest. I've seen pictures. I've looked through telescopes and studied charts and computer data and read journals, but it all fails miserably. It is too big for us, too big for words and too big even to imagine.'

'What if I tried to feel it?' she asked, as she curled up in his lap on the damp grass in their

favourite spot which they kept for themselves and never told anybody else about, not even Trainer. ‘Can I feel it do you think?’

‘That might be the only way. Like music or poetry.’

‘Or painting.’

‘Yes, like that. If we tried we might be able to feel it happening all around us, expanding away from us, violent but organised, perfect in so many ways.’

That was life back then, just after they finished college, just before he was accepted onto the Astronomy and Astrophysics doctoral programme before he lost his love of the stars and became uncomfortable with being a broke nobody.

They weren’t broke, not really. Angel had money, but that was part of the problem. The town made Walter feel poor. The cars and clothes and glossy magazines made him feel he was lacking something essential. The movies made him feel poor. Angel coming from money made him feel poor, so that after his first year in the programme he dropped out and suggested to Angel that he might go and work for her father at Goodtimes, as a producer. And then he suggested to Trainer he also come join the movie game and let go of the idea of being a novelist. And when that happened, he stopped looking up at the sky and instead looked up at the screen and the giant letters set high up on the hill that stood for everything and nothing. He let go of the poetry and the impossibility of the universe and bought himself a car like the thousands that crept along the ocean freeway every day. And Angel did not see the change at first because she was having to grow used to people rejecting her art, peeling away layer after layer of her innocents until she became bitter and angry.

One night, in their private place, bellies warm with wine and minds all fuzzy with dope, she lifted her head from his lap and asked: ‘What if we can’t feel it, Walt. What if we know it’s going on but we can’t feel it? What then?’

Lilly skips over to Walter and punches him lightly on the shoulder. ‘Snap out of it, lazy

bones. Sometimes you must be in the here and now. Somebody has group therapy today.'

Walter curls his toes in the damp grass. 'What?'

'Don't be such a scaredy-cat. You can have this if it helps, but this is the very last one.'

Lilly reaches into her pocket and pulls out a copy of *The Great Gatsby*. Walter takes the tiny book and looks at the cover. It has a picture of Redford as Gatsby looking out over the water towards the light. You can't see what he sees, but the faraway longing in his eyes is tangible. This copy must have been printed after the movie came out. Walter remembers Redford did a pretty good job as Gatsby, even though there was no need to make the book into a film. They did the same with DeCaprio and added a heavily compressed, thunderous soundtrack that fused hip-hop and jazz. Story was not enough. The town just couldn't leave well enough alone. He knows in that moment he is done with all that. All gone.

'It was you,' he says, thumbing the book. 'You're the one who's been leaving the books.'

'Who else, silly? But that's the last one. No more hiding, Mister Stopps.'

'I've read them all before you know. Every book you've left for me. You've never chosen anything that... I don't know, like you knew all the books that made an impression.'

Lilly tucks her hands inside her pockets and looks at Walter in a way that makes him feel self-conscious.

'It's not like I could have chosen something you haven't read, silly. Now come on, it's time you mingled.'

She puts her thin arm around his waist and leads him towards the clinic. They take the stairs up to the first floor and Walter begins to feel like a kid on the first day of school. Lilly pulls his arm because he is dragging his feet, holding the copy of *Gatsby* too tight in his hand. She comes to a stop outside a set of high double doors with brass rings for handles.

'It's gonna be okay, soldier, you'll see. We are none of us so different from the other when it all comes down to it. We are all made of stars, right.'

She opens one of the doors and pushes him inside without another word.

There is a circle of wooden chairs in the centre of the white room. All of the chairs are taken except one. Nobody is speaking. Most of the people in the chairs have their heads bowed as if in prayer. Tall windows line the far wall so that Walter can see the river out in the distance. He imagines Cameo's camp in the valley beyond the rise and wishes he were there holding a cup of tea close to his chest, listening to the tall man spin tall tales. The net curtains billow like ghosts in and out of the open windows. He stands there for a moment, uncertain, then shuffles across the black and white tiled floor and takes the last remaining seat and holds the copy of Gatsby in his lap like a prayer book. He figures they are waiting for the old man to arrive and lead the session, but it doesn't happen like that.

A middle-aged woman with tired, frizzy hair and watery brown eyes is the first to speak. She keeps touching her face with her hands like she is afraid she has food around her mouth, or spit or something. She runs her fingers through her hair and holds her body in check as if waiting for some internal storm to quiet so that she can take a proper breath. Her hands settle in her lap for the briefest moment, and she begins. She tells how she was once a mother of two, married to a man she didn't love, perhaps had never loved. She confesses this while pinching the pale skin around her cheekbones. 'It was just what you did when you forgot to take your bloody pill and got knocked up when you were only twenty-one years old,' she says. 'I couldn't do that other thing again.'

She tells about the drinking after the birth of her first, just in the evenings over meals, barbeques, like that. 'But you know how that goes,' she says. She runs her index finger along her top lip, tracing the soft contour as if it is some new shape she has just discovered on the oily, shifting landscape of her face. 'Pretty soon I was cracking a bottle over lunch. Then I didn't bother with lunch, just the bottle. Thomas was a good kid, slept most afternoons.'

She drifted then, she says, drifted into more bottles, drifted into the arms of a neighbour

who had recently moved in up the street and worked from home – some failed TV sitcom writer. She drifted from consciousness to unconsciousness and back again, just as the car drifted too, across the yellow markers on the road, passed stop signs and red lights, through blind intersections.

She started in with the home shopping network, sitting on her sofa with the curtains closed and a bottle of cheap wine clasped between her thighs, maxing out the family credit card on figurines of dancers, electric knife sharpeners, clocks in the shapes of animals or famous landmarks. ‘You know that hole that opens up,’ she says. ‘You just want to fill that hole, right?’

She slept with the guy who delivered her laminating machine. She didn’t think he was attractive. He had sweat stains under his arms and three-day stubble, but he also had stale whiskey breath like an aphrodisiac. She almost smiles then. She says:

‘What the hell was I gonna laminate?’

She lights a cigarette and spreads her arms wide after a deep drag, palms of both hands turned upwards, fingers wide, just like Lilly had done that day on the bench. Walter keeps his head down so he won’t drown in her watery eyes. Her ankles are spotted with red sores. Her left foot beats out a message onto the tiled floor. She talks about getting pregnant again, how that slowed the drinking but didn’t stop it, how the writer made more and more demands on her body, demands that meant they didn’t have to look each other in the face, cruel acts that left her feeling dirty and ashamed.

After the birth, her husband had to take up extra shifts at the factory. He started drinking himself then, but not at home. He stayed out at the bar near work, a crappy place with a backroom where a guy could pay for stuff if he was lonely. ‘I could smell it on him,’ she says, ‘that sweet, musty perfume smell mixed with sweat and semen and beer. That’s how it passes, goddamn it. That’s how it passes you by. All gone and nothing you can do about it.’

She laughs a strangled kind of laugh, devoid of joy. ‘You turn around and it’s all behind you and you never even got a chance to take it all in. What a joke. I mean, what a goddamn cruel joke, right?’

She pulls hard on her cigarette and tells how her husband died in a car crash on his way back from the bar one night, a head-on at an intersection just outside of town. At the funeral the priest talked about a guy she had never met before even though she had lived with him for over thirteen years. ‘It didn’t take long before they came and took my boys away. For their own safety is what they told me because I kept leaving the stove on and forgetting to cook. Stuff like that. Some bitch of a teacher told them my boys wasn’t clean when they went to school. I guess... I mean... I guess she was just looking out for them. Thomas, he knew not to play in the basement because I told him plenty of times. All of that stuff down there his father used on the garden or the car or whatever. Stupid goddamn kid. It wasn’t as bad as they said neither. He was okay after I got him back home from the hospital and fixed him up on a daybed in front of the TV.’

Her voice is strained as she says this, pulled tight like razor wire, quiet so that Walter finds himself leaning into the circle. ‘Didn’t know my own kids. What kind of a mother doesn’t know their own goddamn kids?’

Nobody speaks. Walter knows the answer though, clear as day, as if he was there in that house every time she pulled her pantyhose down for the writer and turned her back and stuck her ass out and gagged on his unwashed, desperate smell; whenever she reached for the bottle hidden under the sink in the kitchen, or when she curled up on the bathroom floor crying into a towel. He was there the whole time from that humid mid-August morning she caught the Greyhound over to Marfa for the quiet abortion with the money her mom gave her, to when the woman from CPS came with the police escort and took the boys away. The heavysset black woman with the disapproving eyes who rested her hand on Thomas’s shoulder and guided

him into the backseat of the grey station wagon. He was there from the very first instance the regret and shame and greed made a home in that dark place inside her and birthed the disease that made anything possible.

He listens to the rhythmic tapping of her foot on the tiles, feels her sagging skin crisscrossed with tiny red veins from the drinking and the smoking. The skin wants to be torn from the face and burnt. In that moment he knows he must continue with his story. He will open his book and he will let the words free that have been inside of him for a long time, suppressed. It is a sad story about a man who is lost and alone, buried in the earth, listening. He is that man, and perhaps he does not want to write because he knows his life is a sad wasted life that has passed him by in the grip of disease.

He wants to thank the woman, but his head remains bowed. He stares at his toes and describes small circles across the top of the black and white tiles. He is sure he can hear a voice too, in the distance, mixing with the clouds and shadows inside of him, a woman's voice, frantic and pleading: 'Stay with me! Stay with me!. Can you tell me your name? Stay with me!'

He gets up from his chair and walks out of the room towards his story. He can feel the ink running through the nib into the course yellow white paper, the idea revealing itself. He can feel the weight of the book in his hands and so he walks faster, taking the stairs two at a time, pushing himself forwards, towards the words and pictures and loneliness of the story inside of him.

* * * *

Chapter VI.
My Falling House of Cards

Walter came across her sitting on a bench in the park near the office, feeding the birds like one of those mad bag ladies you see all over town, looking out over the ocean as she picked at the stale bread in her hands, letting it fall to the ground amidst a flurry of dirty grey wings. Walter didn't like the picture at all.

She was wearing one of her cheap suits bought from some resale place downtown, the thick rimmed tortoiseshell glasses that made her eyes too big and dazzling and full of questions that Walter could never answer. There was a brown paper bag beside her which he assumed contained her lunch. The bag was spotted with grease and he had to fight the urge to pick it up and throw it in the bin beside the bench.

'Good morning, Rhona.'

'Mister Stopps.'

'Did you have a good weekend?'

'Yes, sir.'

He wanted to carry on walking and get into the office, but it didn't seem possible now, even though he didn't know why that was exactly. He looked around absently. Rhona always made him nervous, like standing too close to a nun or somebody else's grandma. She insisted on calling him sir or Mister Stopps, no matter how many times he tried to get her to use his first name. He always imagined a tall, leggy type for a PA - platinum hair and red nails, more like Julie - that's the kind of woman he imagined fielding his calls and arranging his professional life. But he got Rhona. He didn't know her surname because she would never tell him. Just Rhona: plain Rhona with the ill-fitting suits that pinched her waist, ankles that exploded out of her cheap imitation leather heels. She was somewhere in her very early

thirties, but she already wore the pale skin and mild manners of a woman twice her age.

Walter scanned the park again. It was filled with the usual suspects: dog walkers and fitness freaks avoiding an early grave, mad men in running pants and sports jackets, a vender on the corner selling warm bacteria snacks, cigarette hanging limp from his greasy lips.

Without thinking, he sat down next to Rhona and shooed away the birds that looked up at him with their blank eyes. He marveled at how expressive they could be with just a twist of their necks. 'You're feeding the birds,' he said.

Rhona worried at the collar of her suit, checked the top button of her blouse to make sure it was fastened properly. Walter noticed she had delicate fingers for a woman her size, pale with the nails filed close, no varnish.

'It makes me feel a part of something. Needed, I guess.'

'It makes you look a little like a crazy person, Rhona.'

'Caring isn't crazy, is it? Everything relies on everything else in one form or another. My mother used to call it the grand scheme. I just like doing my bit.'

He glanced at her big brown eyes then stared out across the park and tried to remember why he had sat down. He wondered how Rhona always seemed so cheerful. She did okay at Goodtimes but she could not have been earning more than a low five figure salary. She never raised her voice or lost her temper on the phone, even with insignificant clients. She never talked back to him or got upset if he asked her to work late. She was constant, that's what it was, like the tides or the passing of time, one hour after the next, from days to weeks to years. He wondered how she pulled it off, how was it she was okay with it all. How was it she seemed, not happy exactly, because he sensed that she was disappointed with the company somehow, or with him, but content at least to play her role without the usual dumb noise. He wondered what it would be like to feel content. He thought about when he was young: him and his friends playing marbles in the street on Saturday mornings, the afternoon matinee on

TV, mashed potatoes, the local corner shop where his mother would buy him penny sweets. Then first arriving in California and that first day of college, cheap clothes, dope, friends. The day he and Angel rented their first apartment together and ate Chinese food out of greasy cartons curled up on the hardwood floor with a single candle in the open window so that anybody who needed one might find their way home.

Rhona touched his shoulder lightly and proffered a piece of stale bread. 'You should try,' she said hesitantly, in that soft, unassuming voice.

Walter looked down at the birds with their heads cocked, eager and starving. He was caught for a moment between present and past. Rhona looked uncertain, as if she had just crossed a line.

'You just tear little pieces off and throw them. It's easy.'

'What, Mum?'

'Sir?'

'They're both dead. Did I say?'

'Are you okay, Mister Stopps?'

Walter jumped to his feet and handed the piece of bread back to Rhona. He had better things to do than feed flying rats. He was a big-time player. He would not be exposed.

'Thanks, Rhona, but I never really... I mean, not even as a kid.' He pulled himself together and eyed a speed walker with suspicion. 'Shouldn't you be at work? The start of the day is a busy time for us. I might need you.'

She informed him that it was lunchtime, concern ballooning in her innocent, saucer eyes. The speed walker speed walked past. Walter straightened his tie and tried to catch his breath.

'Well, I'll see you in the office then. Enjoy your lunch.'

'Thank you, Mister Stopps.'

As he made his way across the park it occurred to Walter he might be doing too many

drugs, drinking too much, indulging in distraction to the point of dislocation. He'd spent the start of the weekend with a few junior executives thrashing out the details for Biker Sluts II over bottles of European beer and MDMA powder balled up inside cigarette papers like little bombs. After that the weekend just got bigger and bigger, and Walter rolled with it like a veteran, rolled with the women and the booze and the after-hours parties and waking up in that strange apartment. But now he sensed a disconnection with the world, as if he were out of sync somehow and needed to reset the game and start over. And there was that message from the lawyer on Friday asking questions about one of his old secretaries.

Julie had also left several threatening messages on his mobile which he tried to ignore, but each time he pressed delete the voice stayed with him, got deep inside of him so that he inhaled too much coke and drank too much straight vodka. He hit the strip late Saturday night but even the sight of young, toned flesh under clean blue neon could not evict the voice. A woman drifted out from a darkened doorway and asked him if he wanted a good time. He just looked at her until she pushed him hard in the chest. He wasn't sure what he had done to offend her, but he was sure he had broken some unwritten rule. She had called him a tourist and she had looked at him in a way he had never been looked at by a prostitute before. She told him she knew his kind and he should fuck off to where he belonged. But he didn't know where he belonged.

Trainer had gotten himself a cheap room someplace off of North Fenton Blvd but he hadn't been around all weekend. Walter couldn't bare being with Angel and not talking about Trainer, so he stayed away from home and simply drifted from one place to another, and now he was feeling it, the beginnings of some kind of panic, a strange outside-of-himself feeling that made his heart beat a little too fast.

He made it up to his office on the seventh floor and closed the door behind him. He poured himself a stiff drink and tried to level out as he took his seat behind his desk and looked at the

silent flashing buttons on the desktop phone. He wanted to call Angel and tell her that he was okay, that he was sorry he hadn't been around but work was manic. Maybe he wanted to say he was lost and desperate and that he felt sick inside and wanted to start over, turn back the clock and just start the whole thing over.

When they were first together, Walter was sure he had found the one person in the world that completed him, just like they say in movies and country songs Angel completed him, so that when he saw her that first time sitting under a tree next to the running track at USC he knew she had been missing from his life, that she was in some way fundamental to his being. It was raining and she was sitting on the grass with her back against the tree and her knees up tight against her chest reading a book about a dead French artist. Walter was crossing over the field to his dorm. He stopped in his tracks the second he laid eyes on her. His mind went blank when she lowered the book and looked up at him, waiting for something. He asked if she minded the rain. She tilted her head towards the low, heavy sky.

'If I say yes, do you think it will stop?'

That was it. She returned to her book about the dead French artist and Walter was hooked. He spent days afterwards finding out everything he could about her: what she studied, who she knew, where she came from. It never once occurred to him to just walk up and introduce himself, maybe even charm her. He was no good with women back then. It was Trainer who introduced them in the end. He got tired of Walter talking about her all the time, so one day he just walked up to her and told her he knew this guy who was in love with her and she should really give the guy a chance because he, Trainer, wasn't getting any writing done as the guy, Walter, just wouldn't shut up about her.

That's how it happened. His best friend and enemy set him up with the love of his life.

Walter looked deep into his empty glass, he raised it up to his eye and the world appeared in kaleidoscope and made him feel dizzy. Rhona's voice suddenly leapt from the intercom

and he dropped the glass which shattered on the edge of his desk.

‘Mister Stopps, I have Agatha Lightley on line two.’

Walter stared at the jagged shards of glass on his desk and in the creamy carpet at his feet.

‘Sir?’

He pressed the button on the side of the intercom. ‘You’re all done with the birds then?’

‘My lunch is over, yes sir.’

‘Put her through.’ He snatched up the receiver and made himself sound cheerful. ‘Agatha, how are you?’

‘That depends, darling, but there is no need to bore you with it over the phone. Why don’t you meet me for a late lunch and I’ll tell you all about it.’

‘Something wrong with the script, with Larry?’

‘The script is all finished, darling. All done. Ta-da.’

Walter felt a surge of excitement come rushing up from his balls. He was back in the game, back on track, just like that. He was out of the slump and on to a winner. This was what he did. This was who he was. He was a big shot and he was going to attach himself as producer to Larry Lightley’s next script and he was going to earn a lot of goddamn money doing it. He thought about the woman on the strip, and he knew why she had called him a tourist, but he was back and if she were in his office right now he would show her that he lived in this town, that he owned this fucking town.

‘Agatha, I love you. Bring a copy with you and I’ll book the room. We can hide away for the afternoon.’

‘You throw that word around like yesterday’s newspapers, Walter. You really should be ashamed of yourself, you naughty boy. It would be absolutely yummy to hide away, darling, it really would, but I think I will be busy this afternoon. You book the table and I’ll see you at three.’

Agatha hung up the phone and Walter stood listening to the dial tone with a dumb smile on his face. His investment had paid off, all the naked hours and caressing of flesh, listening to Agatha talk about the problems with high society, the difficulties involved in getting good help, her sly comments aimed at undermining his masculinity. It had all been worth it. His losing streak was over and it was time to get back on top.

He arrived at La Pequod a little before their appointment. He was prepared. He was ecstatic. She would make her big entrance and he would be charming and sincere and humble. And he would offer again to impress himself upon her tired flesh to show his gratitude. He was going to be back in the game, this was the end of the bad streak and Breaks was going to eat shit for a change and be nice to the golden boy. He sipped on his scotch and smiled at nobody in particular.

The restaurant was a surgeon's pool of pinched skin and collagen fat cats, more cheated years than anybody would ever admit. That's what age was these days, he thought, a dirty little secret to be pinched and tucked away. Walter imagined an underground bunker full of grotesque aging portraits guarded by tall men in black overalls and leathery face masks.

Thirty minutes later, The Mother Dragon glided onto the restaurant floor with her big surprise in tow. He looked desperate and withdrawn, his face pale with hollow cheeks that revealed too much bone. He had dark bags under his watery eyes, nicotine stained with smudges of green like rotten fruit. His thinning hair was oily grey, plastered to his skull in a macabre comb-over that would have been comical if Walter wasn't so shocked to see him. Larry looked like the only reason he was able to stand was because Agatha had her arm around him as she led the way to the table and waved for an extra seat.

'Hello, Walter darling,' she smiled.

There was something unfamiliar about her, something in the respectful way she thanked

the waitress who brought the chair over, something about her eyes and the way she kept one hand on her husband's shoulder even once they were seated. He kissed her on both cheeks and offered Larry his hand. The old man looked like he was going to spit in Walter's face.

'Save all the bullshit, son. I didn't come here for all that. I've had a lifetime of people like you with your smarmy fake talk and fake fucking smiles. Put your goddamn hand away before I chew it off.'

The waitress pretended to be deaf until Agatha ordered a white wine for herself and a tomato juice for her husband. Walter recovered himself and asked for another scotch. Agatha looked at her husband, then at Walter. He thought he detected something like pity in her eyes.

'Larry is dying, Walter. He doesn't have very long. Cancer. He also knows about us, I'm afraid. I didn't tell him. He's got some rather compromising photographs to prove it. Neither of us comes off particularly well but I'll send copies if you like. The cheeky man won't tell me how he got them, will you, dear?'

Larry ignored his wife. He cleared cancerous bile from his throat and set Walter in his sights. 'Listen, Stopps, I've never liked you, not even for a little while. I write the bad movies and assholes like you get them made, that's the way the whole fucking cycle goes round and round, and nobody thinks to stop it. Just being in the same room with you makes me sick, do you understand? Sick!'

Larry covered his mouth with a bloodstained handkerchief and coughed until his eyes watered and his breathing became laboured. 'You've also been bugging my slut of a wife for god knows how long so that puts you at the head of my shit list.'

The waitress delivered the drinks and Agatha smiled and thanked the young lady and asked for a moment before ordering. Larry reached over and took a gulp from Walter's drink. There was a greenish mucus left on the rim which dripped down the inside of the glass and coated the ice cubes floating on the surface of the remaining scotch.

‘And now you want my movie,’ Larry barked amidst another coughing fit. ‘Well, you can have it, you son of a bitch! In fact, if you don’t make it, I’m going to ruin you in this town, do you hear me?’

Walter could hear the old man perfectly well. Most of the restaurant could hear Larry Lightley, which made Walter shift awkwardly in his seat and try to tuck himself inside of his starched collar. He could hear, but he could not understand.

Larry Lightley turned to his wife who obediently retrieved the script from her handbag and handed it to Walter. That was when he realised the pity he had seen in her eyes was directed not towards her husband but towards him. He was being screwed.

‘That’s my last work, Stopps. The last thing I will ever write, no time for another. I’ll be dead soon. You can fuck this bitch all you like then, although I suspect your beautiful relationship might already be in the past tense.’

A cipher on the next table dabbed at her thin lips with a napkin and made a tut, tut sound at the back of Walter’s head. He wished he knew where the underground bunker was so that he could douse all the paintings in gasoline and torch the place.

He read the cover of the script: Happier Times - The Very Last Feature Length Screenplay
By L. J. Lightley.

‘Sounds interesting, Larry.’

‘Fuck you, Stopps. It’s a serious piece, the kind of project that could break a company like yours if it’s not done right. Even if it succeeds, you’re looking at good reviews but no real money at the box office. But you are going to make it, Stopps. And I’m damn well going to stick around long enough to buy my ticket. One last walk down the carpet, but this time with a little pride, a little dignity.’

‘What’s it about?’

Larry reached out and tapped the cover of the script with a long, yellow nail. ‘What’s it

about he asks. It's about life, you fucking ignoramus. Life and death and pain and loss. It's about heartache. It's about disease clawing its way through bones and blood cells, destroying hope. It's about this!' he snarled and waved a paper-thin arm at the world. 'All this horrible bullshit!'

The old man closed in from across the table, threatening even in his condition. 'When have you ever cared what your films are about, you sycophant? You are going to make this movie so stop pretending like you have a choice. Do you hear me, Stopps?'

Walter grabbed at the chair beneath the table until he could feel pins and needles in his fingers. He took a hold of his glass with his free hand and gulped down the oily brown liquid, mucus and all, and smiled at the old man.

'Do you hear me, Stopp?.'

'Yes, Larry, I hear you.'

'Do you understand me?'

Walter took a breath. 'I make this piece of shit movie, your last will and testament, or you tear down my house of cards. Is that about right?'

Agatha smiled and waved for the waitress. 'I told you he was bright, dear.'

The old man brushed something from his shoulder, perhaps already feeling death's cold, indiscriminate touch. 'We're eating now, Stopps. You're leaving. We wouldn't want to keep a smart guy like you. You should be with kids your own age. I hear you have a fiancé. Why don't you go spend a pleasant afternoon with her. There is nothing quite like being in love. At least that's what I've been told.'

Walter got to his feet without thinking. He picked up the script and made to leave but Larry grabbed his arm and pulled him close so that he was sure he could smell the cancer on the old man's breath.

'We're all going to die, son. What matters is how we live. Do you understand?'

Walter tried to free himself, but Larry had a tight grip on his sleeve.

‘You will die alone, surrounded by strangers, covered in your own piss and shit and fear. And what will you know, what will you have learned from all of this? What will carry you across? Do you understand?’

Walter wrestled free. He was sweating, his heart racing. He rushed from the table, desperate to feel the sun on his skin, to be free of the old man and his cancer. When he got outside, he collapsed on the ground and sicked up the oily brown scotch. A supermodel valet in a red waistcoat reached down and touched him gingerly on the shoulder.

‘Are you okay, sir?’

‘Just get my car!’

The valet retreated. Seconds later, Walter’s BMW screeched to a standstill just inches from his face as he managed to pull himself up from the ground.

‘Jesus, Walt, you look like shit. Get in.’

Trainer smiled from the driver’s seat and revved the engine. Come on, Miss Daisy, chop, chop.’

Walter fell inside the car and Trainer hit the gas taking them onto East and 5th at an impossible speed.

‘Give me a cigarette, T.’

Trainer handed over a cigarette and offered a light as he piloted the car with his free hand. ‘Thought I’d play chauffer. You’re supposed to see Breaks and his cronies in half an hour by the way, some shit about production costs for this Charles Harris project.’

Walter groaned as he pulled a hip flask from the glove box and took a long hit before handing it to Trainer. It seemed like Breaks was scheduling meetings almost every day, creating the illusion of control when he knew the company was in trouble. Walter was his best hope but rather than admit that, his father-in-law made a big show of admonishing him in

front of the board whenever he got the chance, trying to make him look small.

‘You look like shit, Walt.’

Trainer reached into his jacket pocket and handed over two little white pills with a doctor’s serious expression. ‘Take these, kid. They’ll calm the storm.’

Walter thought it would take more than a couple of Advil to get through the day, but it was a start. He had Julie waiting at the end of it all and he already sensed he lacked the strength. He wanted to confess there and then and ask Trainer to go in his place and fuck her brains out so that she would forget about the job and maybe even hand in her resignation for personal reasons and just disappear. Could Trainer do that for him, fuck her so hard that she would just disappear into the ether? What the hell was he going to tell her now? There wasn’t going to be any job, that was for damn sure. He had met the girl from Idaho and when he reached out that time in the conference room, being friendly, she had given him a look that scared him to his bones. And now Larry Lightley and his script of death.

‘Hey, Walt, you ever get the feeling the universe is conspiring against you?’

‘I get the feeling people conspire all the time, T. I don’t think the universe gives a shit either way.’

Trainer pulled up in front of Goodtimes and asked Walter if he could keep the car for the rest of the day to run a few errands. Walter was too tired to argue and simply waved Trainer off before he limped inside the lobby of his building wondering what the hell just happened to all his best laid plans.

Breaks was standing at the head of the table, holding court with the zombies. The room filled with muted, compliant laughter as some of the younger executives played promotion poker. The older board members smoked thick cigars and talked over the front-page story in Calamity. It seemed there was a wave of young European auteurs making their mark and this was putting a few noses out of joint. The general opinion was the town didn’t need foreigners

coming in and taking jobs that belonged to hard working Americans. The other big news was a multiple lawsuit against Rob Langsdon. Sexual harassment was the word about town, although Calamity refused to comment on the nature of the charges. The news seemed to make the board members nervous and as Walter took up his usual seat, he heard Breaks say something about the nature of disgruntled women.

Rhona had prepped him as best she could but he felt he had no hand for the game. He held his espresso in a vice-like grip and stared at Larry's script which sat on the table in front of him like a tombstone, hidden by a few random script coverage notes which he hoped made him look busy and important.

'Good afternoon, sir. Gentlemen.'

He threw his biggest, fakest smile and took a hit of the espresso so he didn't have to look anybody in the face. He was feeling hot and clammy and a little unsteady on his feet. Breaks fixed him with a steely gaze and rolled his shoulders like a football coach minutes before game time.

'Never mind about good afternoon, son. You're over half an hour late.'

Walter smiled apologetically. 'Sorry, an unavoidable lunch date.'

The old man lit up a cigar of his own and chewed on the end for a second or two. 'I wish we could all indulge in unavoidable lunch dates,' he said, 'but some of us have to work for a living.'

The young executives performed a polite chorus line chuckle. The girl from Idaho was taking minutes in the corner. She looked prim and healthy and ambitious.

'Well, son, how are we looking with Lightley?'

Walter placed a hand over the script on the desk and tried to erase the image of Larry breathing death all over him. 'Fine, sir. Should be in the bag any day now.'

'That's good news. We need something big, something big and shiny with Larry

Lightley's name all over it. You've been leading us along for quite a while with this one, son, and it's time we got down to real bacon.'

Walter drifted off for a moment when he realised he could feel the hum of the air conditioning units through the soles of his feet. The vibrations travelled up the insides of his calves and made him want to walk on the spot. He felt like he wanted to get up and dance which didn't make any sense given the circumstances. He was hot. He wondered why the old man was talking about bacon.

'Walter?'

'Sir?'

'The projections for this Harris project. I hear we're looking at coming in way over. That won't do, son. We can't eat that right now.'

'Eat what, sir?'

'What?'

'Bacon?'

The girl from Idaho stifled a laugh with her shirt sleeve and scribbled something in her pad. This made Walter want to laugh but he didn't know why because the girl made him nervous ever since that time he tried to be friendly. He felt himself grinning from ear to ear as the vibrations from the air conditioning made their way to the base of his spine then up and across his shoulders which caused him to shudder and perform a sort of miniature, seated jig. The board members looked at one another and raised quizzical eyebrows. Breaks chewed down hard on his cigar.

'Son, just what the hell is wrong with you?'

Walter waited for an answer along with everybody else. Nobody said anything.

'I don't know what's got into you today,' Breaks continued. 'Maybe you're trying to impress the young pups by showing you can fuck with the old man, is that it?'

A distant voice from somewhere inside of Walter's head replied, Please call back later.

'Maybe you think just because we're going to be family you can cruise the rest of your time here. That's not the case, son. Don't think I haven't noticed you don't have a decent project right now. You need this Lightley script, and you better hope to god it's better than the low grossing shit you've been letting this company turn out over the past seven years. Our reputation is suffering, did you know that? It's not like I'm seeing the kind of returns where I don't mind being badmouthed all over town. I'm not seeing those kinds of returns!'

Breaks was building up a head of steam, his cheeks had a rosy complexion, and he was puffing hard on his cigar as he gesticulated all over with his beefy arms. Walter thought his father-in-law looked like a windup toy, something colourful made of tin like he used to have as a boy. He imagined a giant key rotating in the centre of the old man's back, a puff, puffing sound like a train. He wanted to dance. It was all so ridiculous and there was nothing he could do about it. Everything was moving very quickly and very slowly at the same time, and the girl from Idaho was writing it all down, occasionally looking up from her pad with steely blue eyes, accusing him of something.

'The company's reputation is my reputation,' Breaks screamed through thick clouds of cigar smoke. 'This is my company, and if you don't pull your shit together you are one-hundred percent out of my company. Do you understand?'

Walter looked down at his feet and tried not to laugh at the tin soldier.

'Go home, Walter. Go home and sleep it off, whatever the hell it is. I want you back in here tomorrow morning with a game plan that's gonna get me hard. If you don't impress me then my daughter will be due to marry an unemployed bum, and I'm not sure I can let that happen, not when there are so many successful young men in this beautiful town.'

Walter rose gently to the surface just in time to decipher the last few lines of the old man's tirade. Breaks was destroying his credibility in front of the entire board, in front of the junior

executives and the accusing girl from Idaho - threatening his marriage, making him look pathetic. Exercising the cock. At the same time, he was telling him to single-handedly save the company. The old bastard managed to exert his authority whilst making Walter look weak and dependent. You had to hand it to him, Walter thought, it was smooth operating all the way. Old money.

It wasn't until he reached the basement carpark that he remembered Trainer still had his car. He also figured out by then the little white pills his best friend and enemy had handed over were not Advil, or any other kind of prescription drug. It felt like speed mixed with a little molly, or maybe Ketamine. He remembered reading once about how they often used Ketamine to sedate crazed animals in captivity. He should have been pissed but he felt too good for that right now. He was light as a feather, a big smile stretched across his dumb face. He wanted to hug somebody, fuck somebody, fall into something and never climb out again. He listened to the soles of his shoes strike a beat into the car park asphalt. He was Richard Pryor on stage, Michael Jackson, Ali landing Frazier the killer blow: the only white man in town with any rhythm.

He headed up the ramp into a blistering white afternoon. He stuffed Larry's script into his back pocket and shook himself out of his suit jacket and left it hanging on a fire hydrant on the corner of Imperial and Boardwalk. An old woman walking a hairbrush gave him a suspicious, sideways glance. He returned a Fred Astaire smile and skipped off the sidewalk, giving the woman a tilt of his imaginary hat.

'Lovely day,' he beamed.

'If you say so, mister.'

The hairbrush barked and tried to bite his ankle, but Walter was too fast.

Pretty soon he landed himself on a wide stretch of beach near San Marino Pier and

marvelled at all the beautiful people: roller girls and dope fiends, hookers pulling tricks and boys pulling boys. Disco rejects and new age hippies gathered under palm trees listening to samba, while retirees smoked pot beneath expansive beach towels and watched the tide creep out. Young dudes played volleyball, and young girls watched and cheered in all the right places. They rubbed coconut oil into one another's golden flesh until they sizzled and sparkled in their tiny, multicoloured bikinis. The beach people had it made.

Walter wondered what it would be like if Trainer got his way, or Breaks. If he lost everything, would he have the energy to start over? What would that even look like?

He scanned the ocean and imagined the edge of the water suddenly rushing away from the shore, then rolling back towards the town tall as a building, black and shiny with a white crown, collecting screaming bodies from the sand and sidewalks and swallowing them whole into its cold, dark belly, wiping the slate clean once and for all.

He remembered a time when everybody was afraid of nuclear power. When he was a kid, B movie reruns were all about giant radioactive animals or mad professors intent on destroying the world with ray guns. Now it seemed like weapons of mass destruction were cars and kettles, microwaves and mechanised tin openers. Now nuclear power was the only real hope, at least for this town. The world was on the verge of massive environmental change, everybody knew it but nobody was giving up their SUVs or their winter holidays. It was a conspiracy of silence, even Walter could see that.

A roller-girl rolled past. He caught a flash of white teeth and the sweaty smell of lost innocence. He dropped his tie in the sand, crouched for a moment, and took a handful of the warm crystals in his palm. He let the sand slip between his fingers. He was not sad. He felt good, in touch with something real for once.

He kicked off his socks and shoes and abandoned them in the crystal sea like two miniature ghost ships. He rolled up his trousers and walked into the ocean. The warm water

insinuated itself into his bones and for a long moment he was lost in the gentle to and fro of life and loss.

Surf kids and beachfront meth-heads, perhaps they knew something he didn't. They stayed close to her side so they would be the first to go: a solipsistic subculture borrowing quality time on the westerly edge of the American dream. There were worse deities than the Pacific Ocean, worse ideologies. What about Hubbard? What about Botox, or colonic irrigation as a fast track to happiness? What about twenty-four-hour news coverage that tells people to stay armed, or those crazy bastards willing to fly jet planes into skyscrapers? Satanists. Quakers. The Home Shopping Network. Vegas. Slavery. Marriage. Fast food empires and porn kings. It all seemed like madness in that long stretched out moment.

Evening crept in around the edges as the sun began to set on the blue green horizon. Walter walked along the shoreline until the lights on Marino Blvd twinkled in the far distance behind him and there was nothing but the sound of the ocean. He was lost in memory and regret, and he searched deep within himself for a glimmer of hope, for something clean and unspoilt. One foot in front of the other as the chemicals mixed with his life blood and his heartbeat fast inside his chest. One foot and then the other, counting out his crimes, the ocean being pulled by the passing moon and all the hungry gulls silenced so that the air was uncut by frantic wings.

He only stopped when he came across the man standing at the water's edge wearing the chocolate brown suit and the yellow hard hat. The man was holing a clipboard and a steel tape measure. He was looking through a telescope on a tripod, out towards something further up the beach. Walter was amazed to see that the sand around them had been excavated by some kind of machine, leaving a huge lozenge shape pushed into the earth almost a meter deep, sharp edges all the way along its circumference. It must have been over ten yards wide and almost twice as long as that. It ran parallel to the ocean, its perimeter marked every few yards

by steel poles with red lights on top which flashed alternately and cast strange shadows along the edge of the shape which made it seem as if the thing was shifting back and forth in the sand, alive.

The man in the hard hat was humming a melancholy tune that Walter thought he recognised but could not place, and every now and again he would stop and write something on his clipboard and adjust the big dial on the side of the yellow telescope.

Walter coughed politely but the man seemed lost in his work. Eventually he asked:

‘What are you looking at through your telescope?’

The man turned to Walter, perhaps surprised to find anybody this far out from town.

‘It’s not a telescope,’ he said, ‘it’s a Theodolite.’

‘What are you looking at?’

The man tucked his clipboard under his arm and pushed his hard hat back on his head revealing a sliver of luminous forehead. He had kind eyes, a stormy grey colour like the evening ocean, a thick grey beard with patches of dirty gold running down either side like tobacco stains. He was heavysset, sturdy and wide with both feet planted firmly in the sand. He nodded at Walter as if, just this one time, he was happy to have an excuse to stop work. He pointed towards the rod sticking up out of the sand further up the beach, on the edge of ocean.

‘I’m looking at that surveying rod out there so I can calculate the rise of the land and make sure we build a solid base for this thing.’

Walter looked at the rod in the distance. ‘What thing?’ he asked.

‘The bridge, of course. This is where we break ground. Right here.’

The man seemed very proud as he patted his little yellow Theodolite sitting on top of its shiny tripod. ‘This is where we break ground,’ he said again.

Walter looked out over the ocean, towards the sinking orange ball and the transitional sky of fire and cool blue.

‘It’s a strange place for a bridge,’ he said, ‘out here on the edge.’

‘We have to try though, don’t we? We have to see. Otherwise, how will we ever know? This could be our only hope, what with the disease catching on like it is.’

Walter felt a cool breeze against his skin. He pulled his collar close. ‘I suppose so,’ he said.

‘You wait,’ the man continued with a smile, ‘it’s going to be magnificent, a thing to behold for damn sure. A real adventure.’

The smile fell away just as suddenly as it had arrived and the two of them stood in silence with the cooling ocean at their feet.

‘A real adventure,’ the man said again, softer this time, uncertain.

They stood and watched the failing sun paint the underside of the few remaining clouds in citrusy, toxic light before it finally disappeared without a sound.

* * * *

Chapter VII.

Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen...

He did not remember how he got back towards the lights on Marino Blvd, or where he lost his shoes and jacket. He kept his eyes fixed on the lights and listened hard for the sound of car engines and the hum of civilisation. He kept his head down and tried not to look over his shoulder at the cold black ocean. He tried to control the panic he was feeling, the sense of losing control.

When he reached the strip he collapsed into the back of a cab that was idling near the lights on the corner of Shelby. He felt his body relax into the warm aftershave and sweat smell, the cigarette smell with just a hint of marijuana. He pulled Larry's script from his back pocket and leaned back in the seat and let the stale, fuggy warmth work its way into his bones.

'What the hell do you think you're doing, buddy?'

Walter peeled his eyes open and gave the man his address.

'I didn't ask for an address. I asked what you think you're doing in the back of my cab.'

'I was hoping to get home,' Walter replied, flat and exhausted. 'You do that, right? You drive people around to places they need to get to. Places like home.'

The man turned in his seat and looked at Walter, at his bare feet and sweat stained shirt. 'Not for free, I don't. You walk to places like home, or maybe hustle up some change for the O.'

Walter pulled out his wallet and offered over a fifty-dollar bill.

'Keep the change, okay. I just want to get home.'

The man snatched the fifty and scrutinised it under the small light in the front of the cab, then folded it expertly into his breast pocket.

'Where are your shoes, brother?'

‘I think I gave them to the beach people.’

The man shifted the cab into first when the lights turned green and headed north towards the 109. He adjusted his rear-view mirror and kept one eye on Walter in the back. After a mile or two he said:

‘If I had a pair of shoes to match those pants, I wouldn’t be giving them away. I’d sell them maybe, but I wouldn’t give them away.’

Walter shrugged. ‘Maybe the beach people needed them more.’

‘Are you high?’

‘I was, I think. Did you know about the bridge?’

‘You’re high, right? A man always needs his shoes no matter what he’s doing. The place where I grew up, you kept your shoes on when you were sleeping, just in case.’

Walter asked the man where he grew up, but he just shrugged the question off as if to say there wasn’t any point in remembering.

The two of them drifted through town at a steady speed, letting the billboards and neon wash over them, catching the shouts of drunken night people through the open window at the front of the cab. Walter held Larry’s script in his lap and let his shoulders sink back into the seat. He closed his eyes and listened to the engine shift gears, third through fourth, then felt the car hit the ramp as they sailed onto the 109 leaving the ocean behind them.

‘You a writer? I see you got a script there.’

Walter pulled his eyes open again and looked at the guy in the rear view. ‘Producer,’ he said.

‘That’s cool, that’s cool. You make anything I would have seen?’

Walter reeled off a few titles, including his big hit with Trainer – Titans. That got the man’s attention. He sat upright in his seat and slapped a hand on the steering wheel. ‘Shit!’ he exclaimed, ‘I loved that fucking movie! You really did that? That was a good movie right

there.’

Walter nodded and smiled and wondered where Trainer was right then and what he was doing.

‘I got a script, man, a solid gold winner. You probably hear that a lot, right, but I’m for real.’

Walter let this hang in the air for a while. What he really wanted was to close his eyes and feel the road rushing beneath him, but instead, perhaps out of executive instinct, he said:

‘You wanna pitch it to me...’

‘Eddy. Name’s Eddy.’

‘You wanna pitch it to me, Eddy?’

‘Right now?’

‘I’m listening.’

‘Okay then, sure.’

The man pulled a soft pack from his shirt pocket and offered one to Walter. They both lit up and Eddy went to work on his pitch, one hand resting on the wheel, navigating by instinct, only half eyeing the road.

‘The whole thing opens up in Washington DC,’ he says, eyes flashing white in the rear-view mirror. There’s this cab driver called Edward Stones. Edward, he looks like a regular driver but he ain’t. Eddy... I mean Edward, he only picks up around the Embassy District or those swanky hotels and restaurants nearby, like that. Political movers and shakers, decision makers, you know. Everybody thinks the back of a cab is the most private place on earth, for real, so they don’t mind what they say back there. The things I could tell you, brother... Anyway, Eddy is like the keeper of all this secret information and shit which he picks up from his fares, and we think the nigger is going to send all that shit back to his ruskie superiors...’

‘Wait. What?’

‘Oh Yeah, I didn’t say. See, when the movie opens up we realise that Eddy, I mean Edward, he’s this Russian spy cat, you know, just pretending to be a driver so he can listen in on all these political motherfuckers and learn all their secrets and shit. Anyway, what happens is Edward starts liking life in America, you know, because he has a decent job and makes good money, and we got Señor Tacos and Happy Burger and shit. So he starts sending back all this made up shit cos he don’t want anything bad to happen to old Uncle Sam.

‘So one day he takes this fare and it turns out to be this high ranking dude he recognises from back home. The guy is talking Russian on his phone, oblivious like everybody, like this fucking Plexiglas is sound-proof or something, and our man learns about a plot to kill the president. And, you know, Eddy just finds himself getting involved because this is his home now and he figures fuck it, I’m getting involved. Like John McClane and shit. I’m thinking of a way to get a fine lady in there, someone like Hali Berry or Joy Bryant. You know her, from Get Rich or Die Tryin’ with 50 Cent? I figure she could play the dispatcher or some shit. Every protagonist needs to get laid at the end of the movie, right? I wouldn’t have Fitty in there though, cos he’s an ugly motherfucker and he can’t act for shit.’

Walter nodded at the mirror. It wasn’t such a bad idea. He’d heard worse over the years. He had to admit Eddy understood the basic rules of the action movie genre. The plot had just the right jingoistic feel with the driver being won over by the American dream, then defending it with a gun. It was also good that he was a cab driver rather than a White House aide or executive. Audiences loved the everyman thing. They liked to be reminded they lived in a beautiful and brave country based on meritocracy and the right to bear arms. You would have to change it so that Edward originally worked for somebody in the Middle East someplace. Russians were old news.

‘So what do you think, man. It’s a winner, right?’

‘Why does Edward have to actually drive the cab? I mean, why doesn’t he just sit around in his apartment and make up the stuff he sends back to his bosses?’

Eddy ignored the freeway and turned on Walter with the same expression you throw a child covered in its own shit. ‘Because the Russians might be watching that nigger even though they think he works for them, man. Come on! Besides, the man has to get paid. Why, you think there’s something wrong with driving a cab?’

‘Not at all. I can see you’ve thought this thing through, Eddy.’

The man returned his attention to the road. ‘Damn right I thought it through. I’ve been working on this shit for years. I got it down, the whole thing.’

‘Would you like to give me a copy? I mean... Well, I might be able to do something.’

Eddy adjusted the mirror so that he didn’t have to look Walter in the face. ‘I ain’t actually written any of it down yet. I got shit to do, man. You see me working here, right?’

Walter nodded. ‘I guess that’s the difference,’ he said eventually.

‘The difference?’

‘Between cab drivers and scriptwriters.’

There was a pause. Walter felt the car slow on the freeway, then Eddy shook his head and returned his full attention to getting Walter home.

‘Fuck you, man.’

‘I just meant...’

‘Yeah, yeah, I know what you meant. Fuck you... sir. I’ll have you home soon so why don’t you just sit back and enjoy the ride.’ Eddy sucked at the air through his front teeth and pressed down on the gas a little too hard. ‘Motherfucker.’

The rest of the journey passed in uncomfortable silence. Walter regretted being an asshole. He was enjoying Eddy’s monologue - his voice, its rhythmical, easy nature, the deep bass rolling around the cab’s warm interior, bringing him into the now.

When the cab pulled up to his condo, Walter instinctively dropped another bill through the Plexiglas window and jumped out in a hurry. He waved Larry's script as Eddy backed the cab out of the drive, then realised it looked like he was being sarcastic. He turned his back and went inside feeling stupid and ignorant and utterly separated from his fellow man.

He called out into the dark apartment, but Angel was not home. As he struggled out of his trousers, he tried to remember if maybe Angel had an exhibition he was supposed to be at, but then admitted to himself it didn't matter anyway because he was in no condition to head back out right now.

He put Sinatra on the stereo, cranked up the volume and headed for the shower. The scolding water blasted sand from his neck and shoulders as he scrubbed at his feet to remove the beach tar. His jaw would not properly relax but he felt pretty good considering. He dried off, grabbed Larry's script up off the floor where he'd left it, then fixed himself a drink. He went out onto the balcony without bothering to dress and stretched himself out on the lounge. He figured if Larry was going to fuck him with this script he might as well know what it was about.

The story revolved around the life and self-realisation of Harrison Longwood, a womanising pro-golfer who has his left eye punched out in a bar room brawl on the eve of the championships. After the accident, Harry loses his golden swing, his Park Avenue address, and his trophy wife. With little else to surrender, he heads for open country and spends most of his time in shady bars on the edge of trailer parks in a dystopian desert landscape. He grows angry and mean and can't understand how a god, if there was one, allowed such tragedy to befall a good man.

Harry figures his luck is finally on the up when a local barmaid takes a shine to him. She's much younger than he is but remembers seeing him on the pro-circuit when she was growing up. The two of them end up getting close and one night, drunk and high on dope, they end up

making love in the back of her 74 Mercury in the parking lot of a Fast Willie's Bowling Alley.

It turns out the woman - her name is never mentioned in the script - is HIV positive. A doctor at the local free clinic breaks the news three months later after Harry makes an appointment over mild chest pains and a bad stomach. The woman skips town as soon as she hears the news. She doesn't have insurance and she doesn't want to fight it anyway. She just wants to see the ocean before she dies.

The disease takes a hold fast, leaving Harry nauseous and suffering terrible headaches. He bleeds from his ass, can't hold down food or water, wakes in the night with cramps all over his body as if he is being plunged into freezing water then thrown onto a burning griddle. The disease scenes are visceral and unflinching, and Walter had to stop reading several times to take a breath.

One day Harry wakes up in a clinic unable to move. That's when he takes a hard look at himself. The script reveals a lot of back story during this time as people and situations around the clinic trigger memories from Harry's past. He's forced to examine his actions, his attitudes towards women and family and friends. He ends up thinking that maybe he does deserve everything that is happening to him after all. It's never said out loud, but there are moments in the script that allow Harry to demonstrate a genuine remorse for some of the things he has done during his life, especially the way he treated his wife who is a shadowy but important figure throughout the narrative, as if Larry had deliberately written her in such a way so as the audience, the male audience, might project onto her.

Harry's last days are spent in the company of an intern named Michael Walker: a cocky young dude fresh out of med school. Harry sees a lot of himself in Michael and feels a responsibility towards him. There is a scene towards the end of the script when Harry practically begs the young man not to make the same mistakes as the broken-down old fool

lying in the hospital bed before him – Half blind, he shouts, rotting from the inside, no family to console me or love me or miss me when I'm gone!

The story plays out like a dark version of *It's a Wonderful Life*. The ending is bittersweet. Walter reads it as inevitable but heart-breaking. As if, in the end, Harry has to pay the price for his callousness and greed because we live in a world where things, all things, have a price.

The final shot is of the young intern finishing his night shift and walking out into the bright morning sunshine. The shot begins to solarise as the young man dials his estranged father on his cell and the camera pans out over the bleached, desert landscape beyond the clinic.

Walter had to wipe his eyes in order to be able to read the last few lines. He could hardly believe Lightley was capable of writing such a sad piece. A lifetime of blockbusters and cheap thrillers and the old fucker pens something that makes Walter cry like a baby. He didn't know what to do with himself, so he just sat there staring at the cover of the script wishing he had a fresh drink, caught up in the story, that melancholy feeling that follows the end of any good narrative.

Eventually he pitched the script onto the table and got up to fix himself another drink. As he lay back down on the lounge, he couldn't shake the feeling that he was being dragged someplace. Perhaps he was just in touch with the inevitable ebb and flow of things. Perhaps, he thought, it's all just repeating itself over and over and it always plays out the same way every time and that's why we often feel as if we have no say in the things that happen to us.

He was thinking about destiny and fate, and whether they essentially amounted to the same thing, when he heard Angel's expensive heels scrape against the marble floor from inside the condo. He knew she was tired. She could never walk in heels when she was tired. He listened as she fixed a drink and kicked the heels off against the liquor cabinet. Then her arms fell lightly on his shoulders.

'Hello, baby.'

Her voice was warm and soft against his skin. She slinked into his lap and took a hit of her drink as she reached over to the table and picked up Larry's script.

'What are you reading,' you naked little minx? I've never seen you read a script at home, not ever.'

Walter put his glass down on the table so that she would not see his hand shaking. 'It's really sad,' he said, trying to sound casual.

He felt stupid and exposed when her eyes fixed on his. She pulled him close and kissed him on the lips, slow and curious, and he was afraid that by touching like this she would be able to read what was going on inside him.

She was always slow. She never pushed herself on him. She caressed and explored until he fell into her with a mixture of excitement and panic, a reluctant but inevitable coalescing, his body aching from her touch, her gentle summoning of his limbs and heart and blood. She stared into his eyes.

'It's okay,' she whispered, 'sometimes we need the sad things to show us what it's all about.'

'But the guy in the script figures it out too late,' he whispered.

Angel gently pressed her pelvis against his. 'Sometimes we learn our lessons too late,' she whispered in return, 'but that doesn't mean they are not worth learning.'

He wrapped his arms around her, wanted to hold her close enough so that he would disappear. Her thighs wrapped around his legs, and he could feel her skin against his. She reached down and took him in her cool, slender fingers and squeezed gently as she bit down softly on his lower lip. She began to move up and down, pressing his hardening cock between her legs so that he could feel her warmth through the thin material of her dress. She stood and removed her panties and pulled the straps from her shoulders so that he could admire her small, luminous breasts. She allowed herself to be looked at, just for a moment, caught in

time, before she lowered her body on top of him and took him inside of her so that nothing existed that was not experienced in touch. He lifted her skirt and placed his hands on her thighs and closed his eyes to better feel her body's every movement through his fingers, each muscle contracting and relaxing, the tendons in her long legs pulling tight, her body accepting him, melting over and around him so that his blood rushed out of him and into her.

The alarm on his cell phone went off at ten thirty later that night. He opened his eyes to find himself trapped beneath Angel, their bodies intertwined like tree roots on the rug at the foot of the bed, the sweat dry and itchy on his back.

It took him several minutes to remember why he had set the alarm on his phone that day. Julie. They had arranged to meet at the place near the airport. How could he have forgotten? She was threatening everything under the sun and he was popping pills on the beach and making love to his fiancé like he didn't have a care in the world, like he wasn't on the run, like he wasn't dumb and lost and a total all out greedy fuck-up. The sick feeling punched him in the stomach. He wanted to close his eyes, to remain in one place, in one moment, just for a while longer, just once. But he was on the run. Always on the run. And he no longer knew why, or where it was he was supposed to be running too. For the thousandth time he tried to remember when it began, the running and the greed. He wanted to remember which came first.

He wriggled free of Angel and slinked into the shower as quietly and as he could. He was totally disoriented and almost sure he was suffering from exhaustion. All he wanted was to go to sleep, but he knew that he needed some kind of plan or he was fucked. Larry's script was the last nail in the coffin as far as getting Julie a job was concerned. He still wasn't sure if he would have a job himself once word got out about the script. He Still could not believe Larry was that good a writer, but the project would finish him for sure unless he had a way to spin it

to Breaks. Maybe if he was just starting out somewhere small it would work, that way it might actually do him some good, being the one to discover Larry Lightley's artistic swansong. But Walter had been on a losing streak for too long and Breaks was expecting a big grossing blockbuster, not an insightful piece about redemption and death. And Julie, what would she do when he told her there wasn't going to be any job?

He used his cell to call a cab from the bathroom, all the time cursing Trainer for stealing his car. Then he crept back into the bedroom to grab any suit he could lay his hands on.

Angel was awake, sitting up in bed, wrapped in the white sheets like a child.

'Where are you going, Walter?'

'I'm sorry, baby, I forgot some stuff I have to do at the office before tomorrow. I kind of lost it in front of your old man today and I have to be ready to defend myself in the morning.'

'Can't it wait? It's almost eleven.'

He wanted to shriek like a little girl when Angel mentioned the time. He took a breath and reeled out the usual line about dedication and commitment, but Angel couldn't see what he could achieve by going in so late. He was up against the ropes. He didn't want to get defensive and show his hand, but he also had to make it perfectly clear he had to go.

Julie. He could see her sitting there, already annoyed that he was late, stewing over a cocktail and thinking up revenge scenarios.

'This is my job, baby. I mean, it's your old man's company, you know. I'm just doing what I have to do. After the next project I'll slow down, okay? We'll have a bunch of kids and buy a station wagon and we will only leave the house to walk the red carpet, how's that?'

She pulled the sheets up around her shoulders and he wondered how she survived out there with her pale skin and small breasts. How was it that she did not get crushed by the weight and heat and disease.

She looked him right in the eye. 'What if I'm not asking for all that, Walter? What if I just

need you to spend time with me? What if I just need you to hold me?’

His mind went blank. In that instant his mind went blank because the answer was too simple and too terrifying for him to say out loud. He fell onto the bed and wrapped his useless arms around his beautiful fiancé. He felt sick. He half realised a terrible truth, that he was a child who was afraid of being left alone. She remained limp in his arms, and he knew that she knew he would leave no matter how much she pleaded with him to stay. His late nights and constant absence had robbed her of something vital. She was no longer the young woman sitting under the tree in a storm. She was a quiet, brooding version of her former self; not beaten or bloodied, but smoothed over by disappointment and neglect, made less distinct by disappointment and absence.

He kissed her on the cheek and jumped off the bed as quickly and casually as he could, as if by doing so he would somehow shake himself loose of the terrible truth. He tried to pretend that whatever was happening between them wasn't happening. He would buy her something nice and take her to dinner. It was just work, no big deal. He told himself that although she was upset, she knew he was doing it for them. Everybody has to work, he told himself. That's just life.

The cab beeped out front in the driveway and he hoped it wasn't Eddy.

‘I have to go, baby, okay. Don't be mad, please. I won't be too long. I'll make you breakfast. I love you.’

She looked at him blankly. They both knew he had not answered her simple question. He blew her a kiss and ran out of the room before he caught fire. He moved fast so that he would not think about it. He moved fast and tried to figure out what he was going to say to Julie. But no matter how fast he moved, or how much he tried to distract himself as he sailed along the 109, there was no escaping the question which rolled around and around inside of his head like a sharp stone.

He arrived at The Whiskey Sour a little after eleven-thirty so he knew it wasn't going to go smoothly. As soon as he walked in the door, he saw Julie at the bar hanging from the shoulder of a tall, well-built man in a cheap suit. Walter thought the guy was probably a salesman or rep of some kind waiting on his connecting flight, but he turned out to be wrong about that.

When she spotted him across the bar, she kissed the guy on the cheek and excused herself with a wry smile. They grabbed a table in the darkest corner and Walter noticed straight away that she was drunk, the mean kind of drunk. He placed an order with the middle-aged, disinterested waitress and hoped that a couple of cocktails and some fast talk might patch things over until he could come up with a better plan.

Thelma, that was her name according to the plastic name tag pinned to her sagging breast, demanded the twenty-three dollars upfront before setting the drinks down on the table. She had dirty blond hair worn in a loose bun and Walter could not take his eyes from the creased skin at the edges of her eyes that held crumbling rocks of black mascara. Her lips were ruby red and matched her shoes perfectly. He asked to open a tab and told her to keep the drinks coming.

'That's great, Mister Trump, but this is a cash establishment. Being so close to the airport means Sam likes to know his customers have paid up front, you know what I mean.'

Walter handed over his American Express and told the woman she could keep it behind the bar. 'It's not like I'm about to walk out without my platinum card, right Thelma?' he said with a poor excuse for a smile? 'And if you do me this favour, this courtesy, I will leave you thirty percent on top of service, okay? That's a hell of a deal.'

Thelma eyed the card with suspicion and Walter half expected her to bite down on it like a gold coin.

'Okay, mister, but I see you make so much as a move towards the door and Sam is pretty

good with a baseball bat. He doesn't have a conscience when it comes to freeloaders. He ain't nice like me.'

Walter thanked the woman for her kindness and ordered another Margarita for Julie, a scotch for himself. Thelma walked off towards the bar mumbling something about big shots being full of shit.

Julie downed her drink in one and lit a slim. She blew smoke in his face and kept looking over his shoulder towards the bar.

'You must have a fucking good reason for keeping me waiting in this shit hole, Walter. Something important came up, right? Something unavoidable that only the big movie producer Walter-fucking-Stopps could deal with, is that it?'

'I'm sorry, I was...'

'Too busy sleeping with the little lady?'

He almost faltered then, scared he had not showered properly or that she could see something in his eyes. Perhaps hear the voice in his head, the question.

'Come on, Julie, don't be like that. Can't we just relax and...'

'And what, Walter? You blew me off Friday and you didn't return any of my fucking calls all weekend. And now you keep me waiting all night like some stupid little bitch fresh off the Greyhound from some fucking dirt town. Who do you think you are? Just who the fuck do you think you are?'

She pulled hard on her slim, all the way down to the gold filter, and fixed her gaze on him like she wanted to chew his face off. In that moment he could see exactly what she was going to look like in ten more years if she kept up with the smoking and drinking and disappointment. After a short silence, during which she lit another slim and finished off his drink without asking, Julie shook off the bad mood and broke out a smile and her best take-me-to-bed eyes, like putting on a mask. The transition made Walter feel nauseous and he

knew he had just been afforded a glimpse behind the curtain. People are not real estate; they are tigers and beaten dogs with claws and teeth. They are angry and disappointed and ashamed. They will kill you and skin you and eat you, because you do not respect them, and you do not see them and you do not love them.

‘Now then, baby, why don’t you go ahead and tell me all about my new job.’

Walter took a deep breath. ‘It isn’t that simple, Jules.’

‘I know what you told me before, lover boy, but I’m not buying your bullshit anymore. Just go ahead and tell me all about it. How much do I get paid?’

He counted to ten inside his head. More drinks arrived and he ordered the same again. Julie gulped hers down in one and returned the empty glass to Thelma’s tray before Walter’s scotch hit the table.

‘Make mine a slow comfortable screw against a wall, would you, Thelma darling. That’s what I really need right now.’

She flashed the smile again and left her slim to die alone on the edge of the table as she lit another by striking a match with her thumbnail. Walter couldn’t help being impressed by the fluidity and ease of her movements even though he was getting annoyed at the whole scene: annoyed because he was helpless and scared, cornered by Julie, uncomfortable in the cheap bar with all the commuters and Thelma’s ugly face looking at him like she knew him all the way through. Julie said:

‘Do you want to get high and fuck me all night, baby? Do you want to make me do all of the special little things you like?’

Walter’s mind fizzed and bubbled. Julie was too many people at once, moving at too many different speeds.

‘Men are pathetic,’ she snapped. ‘You are pathetic. I told you before, Walter, you don’t buy pussy, you pay for it. There is a difference. You promised me a job. You lied so you

could have me in any way you wanted. I feel sick when I think about it. Sick! But now, baby... Now I'm afraid it's time for you to pay.' She waved at the cheap suit leaning on the bar. Thelma arrived and Julie stood and downed both drinks in quick succession. 'Thank you, Thelma dear. That really hit the spot.'

Before Walter knew what was happening, the suit was leaning over the back of his chair.

'Time to settle the tab, mister.'

Walter turned and looked up at the tall man. He must have weighed around two-sixty. He had a crooked nose and huge hands with flat knuckles. His eyes were black pinpricks, and he gave off a cold, hard smell like rusted metal.

Walter got to his feet and was disappointed to note the guy was a good five or six inches taller than him. 'There's been a mistake,' he said, trying to sound calm. 'I think you've got the wrong guy.'

'Don't you worry, I got the right guy. You owe the bar a hundred and thirty-six dollars plus tip and I'm not in the habit of extending credit to ignorant motherfuckers who don't know how to treat a beautiful lady.'

Walter was confused. What did a salesman care about his bar tab? Why was Julie just sitting there lighting another slim as if waiting for a show to begin.

'Listen,' he said, a high-pitched edge to his voice he was unable to control, 'Thelma there has my American Express behind the bar. I have every intention of paying my tab.'

The man raised an eyebrow at the grinning waitress who pulled Julie to her feet and wrapped an arm around her waist, smoking a cigarette of her own now and shaking her head from side to side. Both women had an animalistic look of anticipation and hunger in their eyes. He had seen that look before and it was always rewarded with blood. His legs became weak so that he was worried he would not be able to hold himself upright for much longer. It was happening. It was finally happening and there was nothing he was going to be able to do

to stop it.

The man asked, 'Is it true you have this gentleman's card behind the bar, Thelma?'

Thelma rubbed her hips against Julie's and blew a perfect smoke ring into the air above their heads. 'You don't take credit cards, Sam, you know that.'

Walter looked at Julie. She shrugged and giggled and blew him a kiss.

'Did I tell you, Walter baby, I got a call from a lawyer. He asked me some very difficult questions, but I was honest with him, about you, I mean. About the way you treat us and the way that makes us feel.'

Julie curled up her free hand and rubbed it in front of her eye making a sad face.

Walter didn't understand what she was telling him. He tried to slow his brain so he could take in the situation, make sense of how he got from a place called there to a place called here. He looked at the man who had already taken a hold of his lapel with one impossibly large hand and was pulling him close. It was happening. There was nothing he could do to stop it. He had been in this place before on the estate growing up. He had met this man before. He breathed out. His body relaxed. He said:

'If this is how it's gonna be, then fuck you all.'

The first punch hit him square on the nose. Tears blurred his vision. The sting was almost unbearable. He raised an arm to protect his face but the gorilla just punched right through, crushing Walter's hand into his jaw. He tasted blood and felt hunger in the air. His chin snapped upwards as the room started to get fuzzy. The next thing he knew the two of them were near the door to the bar, but he didn't know how they had gotten there. He was pulled upright. Something pushed against his temple, something hard and unstoppable. His head exploded in white light as he felt himself pushed again and again by this thing, this unstoppable thing. He fell in and out of blackness: first silence then terrible noise like cheering, a woman screaming, laughter, then blackness again. Something pushed at his jaw

and his mouth filled up with blood and he began to choke. There was a damp, cracking sound, a stabbing pain in his ribs. He came to the surface, to the laughter and the screaming, and screamed himself because he was terrified that a knife had punctured his lung because the pain was unbearable down there and he couldn't take a breath. The man shouted something in his face, but it was a blurry noise like a storm and he screamed as hard as he could so that somebody would stop this from happening to him before it was too late. Then he felt his body pushed through the doors, his knees scraping hard on the sidewalk, a white heat shooting up from his ankle. Then silence.

The ground was cold and slick against his cheek, and after a long moment of the blood rushing in his ears like a tornado, his heart stilled a little and he was able to take a proper breath. He vomited over himself then instinctively reached for his sides, convinced he was going to feel hot blood oozing from his ribcage. There was no knife. His insides were intact. He rolled onto his back and wiped his mouth with his sleeve. He let the rain fall on his face and could not help smiling at the streetlights overhead. After a long moment, he dragged his body up from the sidewalk and gingerly brushed himself down as best he could. His suit jacket was torn at the pockets and collar and his shirt was covered in sick and blood. His tongue was swollen and bloodied, and he could feel that he'd chipped a tooth. He looked at his hands, pale and unharmed. He lifted his palms to his nose and inhaled the coconut smell of scented moisturiser. He watched his vomit and blood wash into the gutter and thanked god he was alive.

Once he had pulled himself together a little, still shaking from the cortisol which had flooded his bloodstream, he put some space between him and the bar and eventually relaxed a little. But as the adrenaline subsided his whole body came alive with pain, especially his temple and his right knee and ankle which caused him to drag his leg and wince with every step.

He scared a young couple out of a cigarette a few blocks north. The guy told Walter he could keep the lighter as he escorted his girlfriend across the street. At one point, a black and white cruised alongside him for a while as he dragged his body through Templeton towards the station on 10th but nothing happened.

He jumped on the first train that came through the platform and after a minute or two he worked out it was heading uptown. This didn't mean anything because Walter had no idea yet where he wanted to go. He just needed to keep moving away from the bar.

It was strange being back on the O. He hadn't taken the train since college and he'd forgotten about the smell and the florescent lights. There were video screens now with images of the train lines crisscrossing over a map of the town, and an automated female voice which called out the stops along the route so that it felt like something out of a science fiction movie.

A gang of youths jumped on at Bleaker. As soon as Walter spotted them entering the compartment one over from his, he instinctively got up out of his seat and stepped off the train onto the platform. The doors swished shut behind him and he relaxed his shoulders and limped towards the exit, no idea where he was or where he was going.

His whole body pulsated with an insistent dull ache as if it was trapped beneath some heavy object and was being slowly crushed. It was getting harder to keep moving now the adrenaline was almost gone and all that remained was the dull, all-over pain. He should have stayed on the O and rested a while longer. The youths wouldn't have bothered him tonight. He had adopted the stench of those who had nothing, the defeated. He had become, he told himself, one of the invisible people, the others: the ones who are ignored so that the rest of us can enjoy our expensive sneakers, our bespoke coffee and SUVs.

He kept worrying at his broken tooth as he took the steps down from the station and made his way onto the street, almost delirious now, shaking all over. He was one of them, he thought. He looked and smelled like one of them: the homeless, the crazy, the cold naked wild

eyed, curled up in the damp shadows beneath the bridges, the subalterns whose self-respect hangs limp in gift shop windows, the foreign man whose country exists beneath the broken banks of the Yamuna. Hadn't he earned the right to count himself among them, to be one with the othered? Hadn't he paid his dues this night?

After a mile or two he came to an abrupt stop outside of a MegaVid that smelled of old popcorn and toffee syrup. The window display was full of posters for Teenage Vampire Biker Sluts and he stared blankly at the repeated image of the teenage starlet in torn stockings draped over the vintage Harley Davidson in such a way that her cleavage was exposed to maximum effect. There was blood on her red lips, and you could see the muscles contracted along her inner thigh as she gripped the saddle with her long legs. She had on red heels like daggers.

It was no use. He was not one of them, he knew that. They wouldn't have him. He was the guy who ignored them, who walked past them every day enjoying his skinny latte, planning his next big vacation. He was the guy in the sneakers who pretended to himself they weren't made by a teenage girl in a sweatshop in a foreign country without unions or child labour laws. He was the guy who put change in the slot and held his breath as the curtains parted to reveal the naked, dancing women on the other side of the plastic glass stained with semen and greasy handprints. No, he was not one of them, he was just visiting for the night.

He pushed his finger into his mouth then drew a heart shape on the windowpane in blood. He thought about curling up on the pavement and going to sleep. If he had some internal bleeding he didn't know about, maybe he would die right here. He wondered how long it would be before anybody noticed. It would be the smell that would get to them, he thought. It's hard to ignore something that gets right up your nose.

He was trying to figure out how to apologise to the starlet draped over the motorbike when Rhona came out of the video store and almost walked right into him. He detected a fleeting

moment of blind panic in her eyes but she got a grip on herself remarkably quickly.

She did drop her DVD, then dropped most of her groceries while attempting to rescue the rental box from the wet sidewalk while Walter just stood there, dumb. He watched a juicy Mango roll off the sidewalk and plop into a puddle near the storm drain.

Once she had regained her composure, and most of her produce, she asked:

‘Are you okay, Mister Stopps?’

‘I’m fine, Rhona. And you?’

She looked up and down the street, maybe for hidden cameras or passing paramedics. ‘I’m fine, sir,’ she said, trying to sound cheery but obviously confused. ‘I think you might need a doctor though. You’ve chipped a tooth.’

‘I know.’

Walter could tell he was making his assistant nervous, but he didn’t know what to do about it. He walked to the edge of the sidewalk and scooped the mango up out of its little swimming pool. He dried it off with his sleeve and offered it to Rhona.

‘Mister Stopps?’

‘Rhona?’

‘Would you like to come back to my apartment and clean up a little? Maybe phone a cab or a doctor?’

It was Walter’s turn to look up and down the street, but he had no idea what he was looking for.

‘I would appreciate that, Rhona, thank you. Would you like your mango?’ Walter placed the colourful fruit on top of Rhona’s grocery bag. ‘I think I got some blood on it,’ he said, ‘but I’m sure it will wash off.’

She lived only a few blocks from the video store. She had cats: Bergman, Faulkner, and Gillespie. Introductions were made and Rhona showed him to the bathroom. She ran a hot

bath and pulled out her best towels which she left on the edge of the sink. She showed him how to work the toilet which had a broken handle, then she left him alone to lick his wounds while she set about brewing a pot of strong coffee in the kitchen.

The hot water stung his body, but it also felt amazing, like being baptised. He was shocked at first to see most of his body alive with blues and greens and bursts of burgundy like the marbled paper on the inside of old books. There was a large, swirling pattern over his right kidney, almost black in the centre like a galaxy. He was too afraid to touch it. His right knee was green and black and swollen. His cock, he noticed, was clean and pale and shrivelled. The head bobbed on the surface of the bathwater like a miniature periscope. He leaned back and closed his eyes and tried not to think about the man towering over him, the storm coming out of his mouth, the clarity in his eyes.

He ran his fingertips over his ribs, one at a time, slowly, like climbing two small ladders. He was pretty sure nothing was broken, but it hurt when he took deep breaths. All in all, he wasn't in too bad shape, considering. The man could have killed him if he had wanted to.

Walter wiped his eyes and smiled at the little periscope bobbing on the surface of the water.

'We made it,' he said. 'We're still here.'

Once the water started to cool, he climbed out of the bath and stood in front of the mirror with the towel wrapped loosely around his waist. His bottom lip was swollen and he had a deep cut above his left eye which had already begun to clot. The eye itself looked as if blood had been injected into its centre around the iris and had leaked out along tiny channels like spiders' legs. His jaw was a pallid green colour, ears too. The tooth hurt like hell and looked ridiculous, but again he thought he wasn't in too bad shape. He combed his hair and snarled at the reflection in the mirror. 'You're nothing but a bum, rocky! You hear me! A goddamn bum!'

He dumped his ruined shirt and jacket in the laundry and made do with his pants and vest. Rhona was waiting in the kitchen with a bottle of iodine and some pain killers. She poured coffee while Walter scanned the cover of her video rental.

‘This is a damn good movie,’ he said, flashing the box at her.

‘One of the best,’ she agreed.

‘Nobody ever talks about how the real love story is between Bogart and Claude Rains, though. Why is that do you think?’

Rhona smiled and pushed a steaming mug of coffee across the table along with a little brown sugar bowl in the shape of a honey pot. She tipped iodine into a wadded cotton ball then dragged her seat closer to Walter’s. She paused for just a second, then went to work on the cut above his eye.

‘It should be called CasaBrokeback. They’re flirting like crazy the whole time, you notice? Especially Rains. Poor moody Ingrid doesn’t stand a chance really, and Bogie’s big speech at the end is just to get rid of her so he and Reins can run off and join the resistance and be in love without her brooding all over the place and bringing the vibe down.’

This time Rhona laughed. Walter had never seen her laugh before and he noticed how her nose wrinkled up and her eyes came alive. She looked younger in that instant and he wished she had a boyfriend or a husband to hold her and take care of her. There was an awkward silence as Walter stirred sugar into his coffee and Rhona dabbed at the cut above his eye.

‘You don’t like my movies, do you? Or what I’ve done with the company?’

He could tell he had put her on the spot and he felt bad because this was her apartment and she shouldn’t feel uncomfortable in her own place. ‘You can say. It’s okay.’

Rhona kept working on the eye. ‘I chose Goodtimes because I thought it was committed to real cinema.’

‘And I don’t make real movies?’

She threw the bloodied cotton ball in the trash and reached for a box of band aids.

‘No... No you don’t.’

She was right of course. He made shit movies and he knew it. Titans was the only good movie he was ever involved in, and Trainer thought even that was a vacuous piece of shit they should both be ashamed of. Walter knew it was mainstream, but he was still proud of it. Despite what Trainer said, he had penned something original. Between them they had managed to produce a big budget movie with a brain. It was all down to Trainer’s writing, of course, but Walter loved being a part of it that one time, loved that it was popular. If he was honest with himself, he didn’t mind so much that it wasn’t highbrow. He had produced nothing but shit ever since and he wondered why he hadn’t even tried to get anything decent off the ground in almost seven years. Maybe Trainer leaving like he did, his absence like an accusation. Trainer was so upset with them both, the kinds of people they had allowed themselves to become, that all he could do in the end was leave town and start over. Maybe after that Walter just wanted to see just how low he could go all on his own. He didn’t know anymore. He didn’t know much of anything.

Rhona put the band aid over the cut and snapped two pain killers from a foil wrapper. She handed them over as a kind of peace offering.

‘I thought I might work my way up,’ she said, ‘you know, or at least be a part of the whole thing. I really liked My Mother’s Story. Did you ever see that? I think it was that film that made me choose Goodtimes over some of the other companies at the time. I thought I was going to be involved in films like that and I couldn’t wait, I really couldn’t. Then you started and it all... well, it changed I guess.’

Gillespie jumped up onto the table and threw an accusing glance at Walter.

‘But the place wasn’t making any money when I turned up, despite what Breaks was saying at the time. A company has to make money to survive. I probably saved your job.’

She seemed to think this over for a moment. Walter sensed that Gillespie didn't need to think it over. His eyes said it all.

'I know Mister Breaks was pleased with Titans. I just thought maybe there would be some good stuff along with the bad, you know, a Casablanca for every Biker Sluts franchise.'

'And you're saying everything I've produced has been bad?' Walter instantly raised a hand. 'You don't have to answer that.'

He took a hit of his coffee and wished Rhona was a smoker. Nobody seemed to smoke any more, as if the art of dying had somewhere along the line become a dying art. Another of the cats landed in his lap and pushed its head into his groin. Walter looked at the animal and tried to resist the urge to fling it onto the floor where it belonged.

'You stroke them.'

'What?'

'They just want to be loved,' she said, as she rescued the little lion and placed it in her lap. 'They're just like people. That's all we want really. The rest is just confusion.'

Walter looked at Gillespie but neither of them was into it. The cat jumped off the table and went to do whatever it is cats do in small apartments all night. Rhona said:

'I used to think it was all pretty complicated when I was young. I wanted so much out of life. I guess that's what youth is all about. The older I get the clearer things become, like a narrowing of priorities.' She sipped at her coffee and stroked the cat that was purring like an engine in her lap. 'I hope I'm around when everything is finally reduced to a single truth,' she said. 'I hope I can see what it's like when the rest of the stuff just falls away.'

'What do you mean?'

'I don't know. I just get the sense we are distracted by so much that isn't real. I like to think a day will come when all that other stuff will just evaporate, you know, like steam.'

Walter thought about this for a moment. What was the single truth that Rhona was talking

about? When it revealed itself, what would it look like or mean? Would they sell it at the local mall? Would it come in a choice of colours? What sizes would it come in, or would it be a one size fits all kind of thing? How would they market the truth? And most importantly of all, would anybody actually buy it?

He scanned Rhona's second floor walk-up: used furniture, small TV and cheap DVD player in the corner. The curtains looked handmade, a few threadbare rugs in the hallway and at the foot of the couch. He felt shamed by the modest surroundings. He was also sad because he knew that the single truth Rhona was talking about was love. She just wanted to be loved.

That's when she got to her feet and reached out her hand and escorted him silently to the tiny couch. He lay down without question and she placed a blanket over his limp body.

'Why don't you sleep now,' she said. 'In the morning everything will seem much better. You can fix your tooth and forget all about whatever happened to you.'

She pulled the blanket up around his neck like a mother for her son.

'Rhona?'

'Yes, sir?'

'What is your surname?'

'You know I don't like to say?'

'Please. I really want to know.'

She looked around the apartment for a moment then down at her broken boss curled up on the sofa like a small boy.

'My name is Rhona Elizabeth Gowes.'

There was a long pause as Walter's tired brain made the simple connection.

'You're Miss Gowes calling on behalf of Mister Stopps?'

'Over a hundred times a day.'

'We're Stopps and Gowes?'

‘I get that a lot.’

‘I’m sorry, Rhona.’

‘It’s not your fault, Walter.’

She reached over the couch and turned out the lamp as the little boy floated away.

* * * *

Chapter VIII.
Goodbye My Angel

Rhona had set a travel alarm clock and placed it on the coffee table next to the couch. The horrible bleeping sound got inside his head and ruined a dream in which he was sliding on his chest down a grassy hillside as easily as if it were covered in ice. Every muscle in his body was telling him that he could fly. If he could just pick up enough speed going down the mountain, arch his spine just so and push upwards through his chest, really push, then he would pull away from the hillside and glide upwards into the cool blue sky and look down to see the world rushing away beneath him. He tried to hold onto the excitement, the beautiful certainty of imminent flight coursing through his body, but the bleeping sound was rallying his consciousness, putting all the pieces of him back together, his entire life in less than a second - everything said and done and thought. Every sin - and the energy of this piecing together meant the dream evaporated as it had done countless times before.

He reached out and pressed the button on top of the alarm. It was eight thirty in the morning, the day after. There was a scribbled note next to the alarm clock

*Please help yourself to cereal and coffee. I've booked you an
appointment with Dr Harding for 11.30 and I will let Mr Breaks
know you will not be in until after lunch. I'll send a cab.
Hope you slept well.*

Rhona.

Walter dragged his body up from the couch and made a mental note to give Rhona a pay rise once everything was sorted out. If it was ever sorted out. He moved slowly, stopping each

time the stabbing pains shot up the back off his neck and exploded behind his eyes. Every inch of him ached all the way into his bones. He had trouble working his jaw open. His teeth felt loose. Even his forearms were covered in bruises, and he wondered how he was ever going to make it out of Rhona's apartment and across town.

He crawled to the bathroom and took a piss which he noticed, quite calmly, had a little blood in it. He ignored the mirror this time as he assumed he looked just like he felt.

Rhona had left a pot of coffee on the stove and there was a mug and a spoon next to the little sugar bowl shaped like a honey pot. The woman was priceless.

He poured himself a coffee and tried to call Angel on his cell. There was no answer. The machine kicked in but he couldn't think of anything to say. He stood in Rhona's kitchen and listened to the sound of his own breathing, his mind completely blank until the machine beeped and cut him off.

He took a big gulp of the hot coffee which he knew was going to burn like hell because of the open cuts and chipped tooth inside his mouth. He swallowed the hot liquid down and swore at the top of his voice, over and over until he felt a little better apart from the explosions behind his eyes that made him want to vomit. That's when he noticed the copy of Casablanca sitting on the kitchen table next to the pain killers. He popped four of the tablets, limped towards the television set, and delicately placed the DVD into the tray like a wafer into an open mouth. He fell back in the couch and punched the buttons on the remote control until the room filled with sound and Technicolor. The trailers dragged him from the present, from the pain all over his body and the silence he had left on the machine, all the way back to his youth, to the stolen matinee afternoons behind closed curtains - Chariots of Fire, Ben Hur, the ingenious sweeping shot of the apartment building in Rear Window, Charles Foster Kane's brooding eyes, a delirious George Bailey running ecstatic through the streets of his beloved Bedford Falls. Then, coffee cup held close to his chest, Walter grinned from ear to

ear - a little boy once more - as the Warner shield appeared on screen and La Marseillaise rushed out from the speakers at him. There was the hand drawn map of Africa, then closer and closer until the globe appeared spinning amid white clouds and the solemn newsreader's voice told the desperate tale of forced migration. Then a montage of the journey to Lisbon, the map of Morocco, Casablanca: the sweeping shot over the rooftops of the bustling city. Then, finally, resting like a bird on the branch of a tree outside of Rick's club as Dooley Wilson's honeydew voice rolled over the opening bars of We'll Meet Again. It was absolutely perfect.

It wasn't until the credits rolled almost two hours later, he noticed all three cats were curled up with him on the sofa, one in his lap purring away like a generator, the other two nestled in the blanket at his side. He felt totally refreshed and hoped, not for the first time, that Bogie and Rains went on to survive the war and maybe open up a coffee shop or a haberdashery someplace. France perhaps. Walter could hear them bickering about patterns or colour swatches over morning coffee, Reins teasing his lover about his past luck with the ladies as he darns a hole in the heel of a pair of mismatched socks.

Walter grabbed a shower and straightened himself out as best he could before the cab arrived. Harding made him up a pretty convincing temporary crown and didn't mention the fact Walter was wearing a vest spotted with blood and looked like he had just been hit by a bus. He even gave him some extra strength pain killers. They had never been close, but Walter had a newfound respect for the guy after that. The same cab was waiting out on the street where he'd left it and he made it into Goodtimes a little after twelve and hoped his spare suit was back from the cleaners. If he could just keep moving, he thought, keep putting the pieces back together, then things might just work out.

He glided through the lobby with his head down and called the elevator. On the ride up, he repeated over and over to himself all he had to do was keep moving. The trouble, he realised, was he didn't know in which direction to move. He had become detached, undone, could no

longer make simple connections or piece together the disparate pieces of his life. He was falling at a terminal velocity and if he didn't pull his shit together it would all be over. The elevator made a pinging sound and Walter clapped his hands together and decided to focus on one thing at a time. He had to get into a clean suit. He had to deal with Breaks.

He played out various scenarios with his father-in-law as he made his way down the corridor towards the open plan offices of Goodtimes. Then he saw Rhona behind her desk against the far wall and noticed almost immediately that she had been crying. The door to his office was open and somebody was crashing around inside. The timid little clones peeked out at him from their grey cubical nests, and he was suddenly aware of a sibilant whispering all around like escaping gas. The air had an expectant, clammy feel like a bomb was about to go off and everybody was staying put to see what kind of damage it would do. He coughed into his hand and half walked half limped across the floor towards his office.

'What's going on, Rhona?'

Breaks cursed as something crashed onto the floor from inside the office. In that instant Walter knew he wasn't done paying, that it was still happening and would keep happening all the way to the end. A wave of calm resignation washed over his bruised body. He told Rhona not to worry and thanked her for looking after him and for renting Casablanca.

'What's this all about, sir. Mister Breaks is...'

'Is that Stopps out there? Is that you, you cock-sucking motherfucker!'

Walter composed himself and walked into his office for what he knew was the last time. The old man was throwing all Walter's personal belongings into a box on his desk. His face was red from exertion, eyes wild like he'd been up all-night sniffing coke and amyl nitrate. He locked onto Walter, finger pointing like a bloody dagger.

'You fucking motherfucker! I should kill you! You're finished in this town, you hear me! You're fucking finished here, you cock-sucking piece of shit!'

Walter cleared his throat and told himself to go out with dignity no matter what. Don't be like those guys who fall apart and start begging. Don't give him the satisfaction.

'Would you like to tell me what's going on, sir?'

'What's going on! What's going on! How about you bugging Misses Lightley, you sick bastard! How about you sexually harassing female employees! How about drinking and drugs and god only knows what else! And you were going to marry my daughter. If this was any other town I swear I'd kill you, you motherfucker! Julie Sheridan tells me you practically raped her in this very office. In my fucking building! That poor girl came to me this morning with the whole thing, even showed me photos of you and Agatha-fucking-Lightley, you sick bastard! Did you send them to her, did you? You're out of my daughter's life! And if I have anything to do with it, you're going to jail. You will go to jail. There's more than one, the girl tells me. And more will follow. There's talk of an actress coming forward. You sick bastard! You are going to ruin this company!'

Breaks had to pause to take a breath. He slammed the last of Walter's personal belongings into the box and pushed it across the desk.

'Take your shit and get out of my building, Stopps.'

Walter wondered then if he had always known it was coming. He stared at the box on the table and tried to imagine a collection of more useless things. Breaks was breathing heavily as he bit off the end of a cigar and patted down his suit for a lighter.

'The hatcheck girl at the Hacienda,' Walter said, in a flat tone, staring the old man down like he was a stranger. 'What about the fitness instructor who did that promo work for us last spring? David Lerner, wasn't it? Nothing yet? What about the hooker and her boyfriend who work out of Bells and Whistles on the strip? You think I don't know?'

Breaks smoothed down his hair, turned and stared out the window. He tucked in his shirt and waved Walter off as if that was the end of it. The wind was knocked out of him and all of

a sudden he looked like he was carrying every one of his sixty-two years upon his sagging shoulders.

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about, Stopps. Get the fuck out of my building. This is my company. Mine.’

‘You think being Angel’s father gives you the right to pass judgment? When was the last time you even talked to her? Do you really think you’re any better than me? Does Meredith know about your little parties, the boys, the room at the Lancaster?’

‘Get out, you bastard. Get out!’

Walter felt cold and hard and poisonous. He had eaten so much shit from his father-in-law over the years, smiled and nodded and said yes sir and no sir, and the whole time he was always scared the old man was going to take it all away from him. Well, it was happening now wasn’t it. The fear was gone and all he had left was loathing.

‘Don’t worry, you broken down old fuck, I won’t tell your wife. It’s not her fault you’re greedy, that you need it and can’t help yourself. You’re afraid of dying just like all the rest of us and you’re reaching out just like the rest of us and you don’t know a goddamn thing. Just like the rest of us. I won’t tell your wife because she’s suffered enough already.’

Walter took one last look around his old office. ‘I don’t suppose you extended me the same courtesy, did you.’

Breaks collapsed in the chair behind the desk and loosened his tie. He refused to look at Walter, instead he turned the chair towards the window with the unlit cigar limp in his hands and stared out at the sky as if there were absolution in the faraway clouds.

Walter closed the door behind him and approached Rhona’s desk. He leaned over and kissed her lightly on the cheek and thanked her again for everything. She looked up at him with genuine affection and he was utterly disappointed in himself that he had not gotten to know her in all the time they had been together.

‘It’s not true is it, about the ones who worked here?’

There was nothing he could say so he turned and limped back towards the elevator and rode it down the seven floors to the lobby. He waved to the guard who was sitting behind the desk watching the video monitors. He pushed on one of the big chrome doors and walked out into the street and hailed a cab.

As Walter rolled through the mid-afternoon traffic, he tried to work out what was going to happen next. Suddenly it was as if he could see what he had been doing these last nine years. He could see what it looked like in the daylight, and it scared him and made him feel naked and angry and lost. What does it mean to not know one’s own motives? And how could Angel forgive him if she knew everything? Even if she did forgive him, even if she swallowed it down and was willing to try again, he would always be against the ropes. It would always be there. She would remember the little details every time they argued over what to order at the deli or what movie to watch on TV. She would sometimes feel awkward and ashamed in his embrace for no apparent reason and that is when she would tell herself she should have let him go when she had the chance, even chastise herself for being weak and dependent. She would get drunk and ask difficult questions she didn’t want to know the answers to. She would pull at the hem of it until the whole thing would unravel around them. The good times would be borrowed, the bad times would be unbearable.

The cab pulled up before he was ready. He wanted to ask the guy to drive around a little, but he was down to his last twenty dollars. He stepped out into the harsh afternoon light and handed over the twenty through the open window. He stood and watched the driver back the cab out onto the street and head back to town. He stood on the drive with his keys in his hand and listened to the cicadas hiding in the bushes. He thought about the silence sitting heavy on the answer machine on the other side of the door and tried to tell himself there was still a chance. He didn’t ask why he needed that chance so badly. Instead, he lifted the keys to the

lock and felt the soft click, click, click as the little pins all lined up inside of the barrel and the door inevitably gave way.

She was sitting on the couch clutching a bottle of scotch close to her chest. Her cheeks were lined with black tears from where her mascara had run. Her hair was pulled in all directions as if she had been clawing at it, as if she had wanted to tear it from her head. There was a ruined canvas on the floor at her feet, the colours all blurred and muddied by handprints, a reddish- brown liquid like wine dripping from one corner as if the image were bleeding out onto the floor. A bottle of expensive cognac was frozen like a bullet mid-air in the fractured glass of the patio door leading out onto the balcony. The air was thick with anger. Everything had been moved or pushed or smashed against other things. And amid the chaos, as if floating, a suitcase: neat and sterile. And on top of the suitcase was Larry script, resting like a limp sail amid the sound and the fury.

Angel's voice was cracked with pain and alcohol. She looked up at him, eyes red and sore, lips swollen. 'I've been sitting here trying to work out if I've always known. I mean, how could I not know? The late nights, the quiet phone calls. Your obsession with showering before we have sex. You always smell of perfume, always look sick with yourself. I put it down to stress. I even blamed myself for not helping out more. Can you believe that, the way a woman's mind can work? It's pathetic really.'

She reached behind a pillow on the couch and retrieved a fresh bottle of scotch, cracked the lid between her teeth and spat it away in contempt. She looked at the empty bottle in her other hand then threw it against the wall where it shattered into a million sharp pieces. Walter flinched but tried his hardest to keep looking at Angel.

'You've made me foolish, Walter, made me live a lie. I believed in us. Why did you have to bring me with you? Why are we both here? Are you so fucking weak that you had to have me along for the ride? You could have just let me go, you bastard. Instead, you had to drag

me down here with you. I trusted you. I trusted you.'

Angel's hand snaked behind another pillow. 'I trusted you,' she said again, 'and look what you did.'

Walter felt a sudden pain in his gut that made him want to collapse in a heap on the floor and hide his head in his hands. He experienced a tightness in his chest like a heart attack. He wanted to scream out and tell her not to move, to stop moving, to not reach behind the pillow, to get up off the couch and walk away, leave forever if that was what she wanted; leave and never turn back, but just stop moving.

'This is who you are,' she said, as she pulled the photograph out from behind the pillow: the picture of a man standing behind an older woman, naked, his hands in her hair, the woman smoking, admiring herself in a mirror, her free hand squeezing her breast, the man's eyes closed, leaning into the woman as if listening.

Walter opened his mouth but no words came out. His eyes filled with tears and Angel became a blur on the couch in front of him. He clutched at his belly and winced at the shooting pain from his kidney.

'Angel I...'

She screamed then, a terrible tribal scream full of helplessness and anger and regret, from deep within her broken body the sound emanated, filled the apartment and shook the windows and pulled at the foundations. Walter's head began to spin and he thought he might pass out. She tore the picture into tiny pieces, sucked at the liquid in the bottle and fixed on him with new eyes: cold, ruined eyes, sterile. A stranger's eyes.

'What would you say?' she asked. 'What the fuck would you say? I don't want to hear any more of your lies. I'm sick of being a part of it, don't you see. It's finished. All gone!'

She took another long pull on the bottle and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. Her lipstick smeared across her cheek and in that moment, struck dumb by his own cruelty,

Walter tasted her tears and the waxy, oily lipstick on the back of his throat.

‘You are leaving now, Mister Stopps. I packed you a case, see. All neat and tidy. You like things to be neat and tidy, don’t you. Take it and get out of my life. We were supposed to be different. We were going to show them all. You’ve turned us into a fucking cliché and I hate you, I fucking hate you for that.’

He made a move towards the couch; he said her name out loud. She screamed at him to get out and never come back. She threw the bottle at him. It bounced off his bruised thigh and rolled across the floor. The foul-smelling liquid spilled out over the flat white marble. Pain shot up his leg into the base of his spine and he swallowed down hard to stop himself from screaming out.

‘Get out of here, Walter. It’s all over.’

These last words were spoken with a stranger’s voice that matched the eyes, words that made his hands take up the script and fold it and place it in his back pocket, final and lasting words that made him take up the case by the handle and turn and head for the door. Words that meant he dropped the keys on the countertop beside the answer machine and limp forwards and open the door and close it quietly behind him and walk down the drive into the white heat, one foot and then the other, counting out the crimes, lost in the terrible silence.

Trainer’s directions were a little vague and Walter had been drinking and swallowing pain killers all week so it took him a while to find the place. It was right on the edge of town, far north, just off of the twin lane highway that ran all the way in from Sallow Valley, lined with multicoloured flags, car lots, building supply warehouses and expansive swimming pool showrooms handing out free hotdogs on a stick.

When he thought he must be close, he asked directions from a slim Mexican who was working out front of a garage forecourt next door to a patio furniture wholesaler. The man had

his head under the bonnet of a jet-black Lincoln Continental but he was quick with the directions because he had a cousin, he said, staying in the same motel. The man told Walter the place was a real dump and asked if he wanted to buy some very excellent tequila for cheap. He popped the trunk and Walter handed over a twenty-dollar bill and took a bottle in each hand. He thanked the man and headed over a block and a half towards the Wild West Inn.

He had been on the move for a while, lost track of time and place. He'd lingered in bars and all-night strip joints, walked the streets in search of familiar faces in doorways and the backs of certain parked cars. He'd sucked from cans and bottles wrapped in brown paper bags until he couldn't feel anything except the dull throbbing from his busted-up body. One night he pulled a clean jacket from his suitcase then handed over the case and the rest of its contents to a young prostitute who was working the bleachers at the back of St Christopher's. She had sores around her mouth, thick black hair scrapped back from her face in a ponytail, lips painted black to match her pinned, faraway eyes. She unzipped his pants and reached inside, pushed him against the steel struts beneath the bleachers and bit down hard on his swollen lip until he tasted blood from a cut that wasn't quite healed. She licked her palm until it glistened with brown saliva and started stroking his cock while she whispered into his ear all the things he could do to her if they got a room and a couple of caps of heroine. After a moment or two, when they both realised he was still pale and limp in her hand, Walter began to cry. He reached his arms up around her shoulders but she shook him off and shouted 'Puto perdedor!' in his face before she snatched up the suitcase and vanished across the playing field. A man moved in the shadows and Walter quickly zipped up his pants and headed towards the streetlights on Taylor.

He slept in booths at the backs of clubs and pulled out hundreds of dollars from ATMs all over town. He passed out in an alleyway one night and woke up covered in trash, his hand

still clutching an empty bottle of PJ Morgan's. He got tired after that so he rented a room and curled up on the bed until the phone rang in the middle of the night with Trainer on the other end telling him to come to the Wild West Inn on the edge of town.

Walter looked around the semi-vacant parking lot then knocked three times on the door to room 61. Trainer opened up with a massive grin on his face, towel around his waist, whiskey in hand. He snatched one of the bottles from Walter's hand and thrust the whiskey at him before ushering him inside.

'It's tuff stuff,' he said. 'Tuff stuff indeed, buddy, but this is how it was meant to play out, you'll see. From here on in you're leading an honest life. It might be cheap and seedy, but it'll be honest. No more lies!'

Walter fell into one of the two single beds and downed the whiskey. The room had dirty orange carpet with curtains to match. The sheets smelled of cigarettes and something else Walter couldn't place, maybe sulphur. The furniture was plastic painted in a mahogany veneer, pockmarked with cigarette burns and peeling at the edges as if shedding its skin in the orange gloom. Trainer whipped the towel from around his waist and started drying his bald head while he refilled Walter's glass, his damp balls bouncing around happily between his legs like they owned the place.

'Drink up, buddy,' he chirped, 'we've got company this evening and I want you to be sparkling for Papa.'

'What?'

'You were always good at witty conversation, that kind of thing. Just be entertaining.'

'What do you mean, company?'

Trainer told Walter about the aspiring porn star he'd met the previous night. She had a partner. They were fishing for deals.

'They call themselves something or something, I can't remember. Isn't that wild? Anyway,

they're a team.' He pulled a hefty looking bag of coke from out of the top drawer beside him and threw it at Walter. 'What dya say, buddy, you up for a party?'

Walter tipped a little of the coke out onto the dresser beside the bed and started chopping it into lines with a credit card he found next to the phone. The name on the credit card said Dr. H. S. Thompson. Walter didn't feel like asking.

'I came here to straighten out, T. My life is a fucking mess and I have to get it together.'

'And what's the best way to do that?'

'I don't know yet.'

'Yes you do, Walt. You move on. You fuck two aspiring porn stars and you move on.'

Trainer donned his trademark blue suit but didn't bother with socks or the white Cuban heels. He threw a red silk scarf over the bedside lamp and went to check himself out in the bathroom mirror. He was having a whale of a time, Walter could tell.

'I can't fuck hookers, T. I'm lost.'

Trainer peered out from behind the bathroom door. 'You mean anymore hookers, right Walt, because that cat is out of the bag, buddy, you have to let that one go. I hear there are even photos, you little minx. And talk of harassment, you son of a dog. Power plays in the workplace, which I must say I do not approve of. They're not furniture r cars, Walt. You don't own them or take them, or sue them... Haven't you got that yet? Anyway, our guests are not hookers, they're porn stars. Don't call them hookers when they get here, okay. I don't want you messing this thing up. They think we're producers. They don't know you got shitcanned and are probably gonna do time.'

'How do you know about...'

'Just smile and be funny. You look great, baby.'

Walter was still wearing the vest spotted with blood stains, same trousers scuffed at the knees. His suit jacket didn't match, and it had white powdery stains around the pockets. He

had stubble and bloodshot eyes like a junkie. His gums were the colour of blood and his face was still bruised around the edges. He cut up another couple of lines and smiled to himself.

‘I thought we didn’t lie, T? I thought you said the whole point was freedom in honesty?’

Trainer leapt out of the bathroom. He pulled an elegant cigarette holder from his inside pocket, screwed in a Lucky and lit up as he slid his shades down over his eyes, careful not to smudge his freshly penciled eyebrow.

‘Honesty to yourself, you mad bastard. I said nothing about the others.’

‘I feel sick, T, seriously. I need time to think, to get it together. I can’t just jump in the sack with a couple of hookers.’

‘Stop calling them hookers, you mad bastard.’

‘We’re all hookers, you goddamn maniac!’ Walter cut the powder into more white lines, spoke to himself softly, a whisper almost. ‘We’re all growing old, all dying, all selling ourselves for something.’

Trainer shrugged this off with a smile, snorted a big line of coke and pulled an old 8-Track out from under the bed. He punched in a cassette he had on the dresser and put the 8 Track on the floor in the centre of the room.

‘Exile on Main Street,’ he beamed. ‘Best album ever recorded.’

‘What about Revolver?’

‘Don’t be naïve, Walt. Now get in the bathroom and clean yourself up a little. Splash some water on your face or something. There’s some aftershave I got from this gorgeous Chinese chic upstairs. She said the ladies love it, like an aphrodisiac. Dragon’s Lagoon. Can you believe that? Try it, baby. Lagooooon.’

Walter hit the bathroom and closed the door behind him. He placed both hands on the edge of the sink and faced the man staring back at him from the mirror: The beaten man, pale, drug addict man, womaniser, ex-fiancé with the wild eyes and bad hygiene. There was another

word floating on the periphery. A word for him he was too scared to think or say. A word for men like him, an act performed by men like him.

He squeezed his eyes closed and splashed cold water on the man's face and brushed the man's teeth using his index finger and cheap motel toothpaste. There was a plastic comb in a clear wrapper in a cup below the mirror. Walter tore the wrapper open and ran the comb through the man's greasy hair. Thick clumps fell into the sink and stuck between the teeth of the comb. He'd never seen that before and it scared him. He wished he'd bought a sack of oranges from one of the Mexicans working the central reservation over on the freeway.

He wet the edge of a towel and rubbed at the man's jacket to get the stains out, smoothed down the vest and buttoned the jacket to hide the blood. He took a drink of water straight from the tap which made his teeth hurt, then Trainer said:

'Come on out and let me take a look at you, Walt.'

Walter sneered at the guy in the mirror and walked out of the bathroom.

'That's what I'm talking about!' Trainer said, as Walter walked straight passed him and headed for the coke on the dresser. 'Now you look the part. Suave like a motherfucker. Did you try the Lagoon?'

'No.'

'Never mind, you smell like a million dirty bucks.'

Just then there was a light tapping at the door, a high heel maybe, a baby pinkie ring. Walter imagined two platinum blondes playing mirror for one another on the other side, checking their breath against closed palms, blotting lipstick with old credit card receipts while they pulled their skirts straight. Trainer's face lit up like Christmas. 'Porn stars!' he exclaimed in a childlike voice while clapped his hands together. 'You answer, you answer!'

Walter reluctantly got up from the bed and opened the door. The older woman smiled and mouthed a silent hello as she leaned in and kissed him softly on the nose. She was somewhere

in her mid-thirties, a brunette with disappointment in her eyes, or perhaps resignation. Walter could not tell at first. She had on a denim skirt and matching jacket with a white sequined boob tube beneath that showed her cleavage. Standing next to her was Flower. That's how she introduced herself as she tiptoed into the room and kissed the air on either side of Walter's cheeks as if he might be on fire and she didn't want to get burnt. She said:

'I'll show you why they call me that later if you're a good boy.'

She giggled and handed over her white fur coat. She was in her mid-twenties with big blue eyes, a trace of acne scarring on both cheeks beneath thick foundation, and ruby red lips that looked ready to burst. She was wearing a tight white leather skirt which she assured both Walter and Trainer was one hundred percent real and cost an absolute bundle from a cat named Slick Steve.

Walter offered the coke and Trainer poured tequila into plastic cups lined up on the dresser. They sat down on the edge of the two beds and faced each other across the burnt orange carpet: Flower beside Walter, Tiffany beside Trainer who was grinning like a fool. They leaned into the invisible centre as the coke was passed around on a small mirror and cigarettes were lit. Trainer turned up the volume on the 8-Track and made sure that Walter kept topping up everybody's cup with the clear liquid that tasted of acid sunshine.

Walter was amazed and confused at how easy it was for him to keep going, to smile and ask the right questions, to play the game. He sucked up the white lines from the mirror but made sure to close his eyes each time so he didn't have to see the man staring up at him, hungry eyed at the prospect of Flower's ruby lips on his bruised skin.

Trainer shook off his jacket and stepped out of his pants as if clothes had been a temporary formality whilst introductions were made. Flower pulled down her skirt and took off her tight black denim shirt. She wasn't wearing a bra and her breasts leered up at Walter. Her nipples were hard, the colour of raspberry milkshake, the right one pierced with a silver stud. She

leaned all the way back on the bed and spread her legs impossibly wide. At the top of her inner thigh, resting in its bed of tanned flesh, a single yellow rose. Walter inhaled its scent, a light musk mixed with suntan oil. He misplaced a breath and reached for the mirror and the doctor's credit card.

'I had it done a while back by this cat who works skin all night over in La Riva. You know the place? A real dump, right, but we were all drunk as hell by then so it didn't really matter.'

Flower straightened up and took the mirror from Walter. 'That was the night I met Tiffany and we decided to team up, you know, and call ourselves Tiffany and the Little Flower. You have to have a thing in this business if you want to stand out.' She looked over at her partner. 'That's what you always say, right moma?'

'I sure do, baby girl.'

Tiffany pulled her boob tube up over her head and released her breasts. She leaned forwards and grabbed Walter's chin and kissed him hard and wet on the mouth as dirty blues sung by rich white kids leaked from the 8-Track on the floor.

Trainer sucked at the bottle of tequila and waved his cigarette holder in the air like a baton. 'Wild, baby,' he exclaimed as he passed Walter the bottle. 'I told you they had a thing, right Walt? They're special. Didn't I tell you they were special.'

Tiffany smiled at Walter and he could see in her eyes that she thought things were going well. Maybe this would get them somewhere, she was thinking. Maybe this guy is our big break.

Flower raised her head from the mirror and wiped traces of white powder from her nose with the back of her hand. She said:

'We've been doing this a while but we have standards. We have our thing and we're going to work it, but in our own way. None of that basement porn where you're always getting your nipples half twisted off and your ass pounded by some ugly fuck with a cock the size of a

Mac truck.'

'That's right, baby,' Trainer enthused, 'you're better than all that big truck jazz!'

Flower took her pert breasts in her hands and squeezed them close to her like lost children. Her eyes were watery from the coke and her curly blond hair had fallen across her face so that she peeked out at Walter like a little girl misbehaving.

'We used to do private parties and stuff, you know, but we got tired of that whole scene, right babe.'

Tiffany nodded her agreement as she got up off the bed and stood in the centre of the room gyrating to the music. She undid a zip at the side of her skirt and let it fall to the floor. She stepped out of it without missing a beat and kicked it up against the wall with her naked foot.

'We would roll around on the floor with our tongues in each other's pussies for hours,' she purred, eyes closed, lost in the music. 'Just so fucking jap businessmen could stroke themselves. Or stroke each other and stare at us like they didn't know what the fuck else to do. They always smoked those big cigars. Where was that gonna get us anyways?'

'That's why we quit,' Flower chimed in. 'Those guys were funny.' She looked at Walter. 'All men are funny, don't you think.'

Trainer stood up and sidled over next to Tiffany. He didn't crowd her, just stayed close, dancing slow, his tongue sticking out of the corner of his mouth as he concentrated on keeping time to the music. 'What a goddamn waste of talent,' he said.

'That's a waste of talent,' Walter agreed.

Flower peeled her knickers off and kicked them over her head. 'Exactly,' she said. 'A waste of goddamn talent. We can do so much more.'

Walter realised that he was the only one still wearing most of his clothes so he shook himself out of his jacket apologetically. Neither girl mentioned the dots of blood on his vest. Flower just giggled and wrestled his shoes and socks off, then pulled his trousers down

around his ankles and rested her head in his lap. She looked up at him with her big saucer eyes.

‘It is a waste, isn’t it,’ she said again.

Walter nodded and lit a cigarette as Flower absently stroked his thigh.

‘Tiffany used to do me with this massive dildo we called Uncle Frank. They always loved that, the Japanese fellas, but it hurt if I wasn’t in the mood. It’s hard to keep that mood going sometimes.’

The music came to a stop. The room fell into unexpected silence. Trainer rummaged in his suitcase for another cassette. After a moment or two, he turned around and faced the room with his biggest grin yet.

‘I got two things,’ he said as he raised a cassette in the air. I got the one and only Janis Joplin, and,’ he opened up his other hand to reveal four little white pills which he placed in Walter’s open palm, ‘I got these little babies!’

He punched the cassette into the 8-Track and lifted his shades up onto his head. ‘Janis-fucking-Joplin I love you so.’

Flower raised herself up onto her elbows and kissed Walter on the neck. She sucked lightly on his skin until the hairs on his arms stood up and his cock grew hard. ‘What ya got there?’ she asked.

Walter half smiled at his open palm and tried not to think about the sun setting over the ocean. ‘Little white pills, is all.’

The room closed in after that. The pills were swallowed and the edges of everything softened with heat and cigarette smoke and the red light from the lamp, as if the space was melting around them, collapsing. Janis begged and pleaded and Walter snorted line after line of cocaine. He washed the coke down with liquid sunshine and tried to remember the last time he ate any real food. He lit a cigarette and blew the smoke up at the ceiling and let his eyes

roll in his head as waves of pleasure collapsed down the length of his spine and made him shudder deep down in his soul and grin like a child who didn't know any better.

Flower told him how she left home when she was young because she didn't like the whole scene with the family. She said she was much happier these days and was always meeting cool cats and going to cool places all over town.

'It's like a giant theme park,' she said, 'all the lights and the crazies and... I don't know, the dream, I guess. It's cool, right, like a fairy tale.'

Walter asked what it was she didn't like about home, but she just shrugged him off and lit a cigarette. 'You know what it's like,' she said. 'My old man always... I wish that fucker was dead. Maybe the cancer got him, or some disease anyways.'

Tiffany reached over and stroked Flower's leg and looked her right in the face. 'It was all meant to be,' she purred, 'like Joan of Arc and all the goddamn flames in the world. You got me now, baby, and all that other shit is long gone.'

Flower smiled and leaned forward and kissed Tiffany on the lips. 'Fuck that guy,' she said, and took a big hit of sunshine and pulled hard on her cigarette.

'Fuck him!' Trainer exclaimed. 'You wanna kiss me, Walt?'

'No thanks, T'

Trainer lunged across the gap between the beds and kissed Walter hard on the lips and took his head between his hands and stared right in his eyes. 'I know you loved me, Walt. I know you did. And I forgive you, I really do.'

Flower pushed herself up onto her knees and curled herself behind Walter, her breasts pushing into his back, her hands on his shoulders. 'Don't look sad,' she said. 'This is a party.'

Tiffany cut up more lines and they all dived in. Time melted, space melted, bodies melted – into one, into movement, into each other. Janis sang lonely from the floor as legs intertwined and lips met. Hands reached out, hungry and sweaty palmed, into the spaces

between words, over skin and bone alive with need, every nerve standing erect with a chemical alacrity. Walter was their last hope, their big chance, and they used their bodies to make a case for their future: damp, sweaty persuasion, an agile argument of limbs and secret knowledge, into the pale hours, into semi-consciousness and final exhausted stillness.

His eyes snapped open when Trainer whispered in his ear. ‘Wake up, buddy, we’ve got a little business to take care of.’

* * * *

Chapter IX.
So Long, Farewell...

Walter makes it back to his room, the woman's story still echoing in his head. He can feel her guilt on his skin, the regret she feels over the loss of her child. Also, what does that mean He wonders where the boy is now. Does he think of his mother, does he blame her for allowing herself to become lost, or is he still so innocent that he does not know what lost is.

In the early evening, before the sun has even set, he climbs into bed. He rests his book in his lap and stares at the cover. He runs his fingers over the letters that spell out his name. Eventually he turns the cover and cannot help getting a fright when the spine cracks. The pages are made of a yellowy white laid paper, uneven at the edges like pressed cotton, crisscrossed with tramlines from the deckle and sewn into place. He stares at the intricate gold and blue stitching on the inner curve of the spine and cannot help admiring the craftsmanship involved in creating such a simple object.

He feels like he should put the date at the top of the first page, but he has no idea what the date is. He picks up the heavy pen from the sheet by his side and unscrews the lid. The nib is gold with the letters W.S engraved on the back. It takes him a moment to realise the letters could be his initials.

He likes the sensation of the pen in his hand, the cool sheets against his skin. The story is inside of him - not all, just shadows gathering into storm clouds, but even this half knowing causes him to shift his weight in the bed as if to try and break the spell. It is not a happy story. Some truths are terrible truths, he thinks. The shadows swirl and shift, they push at his chest making it rise and fall. The words want out into the world, to help explain that world to Walter. Words have a life of their own after all. This he knows from the books his mother made him read when he was just a stupid kid.

The little arched window is open. The air in the room is chill. He can smell damp grass and mist drifting on the surface of the river. The nib of the pen lands on the paper and begins a laboured dance across the page...

His marsupial eyes scan the walls and ceilings of shadowy corridors. The darkness threatens to suck him in.

These are the only words that find their way into the book. He does not know where they came from. He reads and rereads the line at the top of the page. He imagines a man that looks like him, living in a dark place all alone. He senses the place but cannot see it. He rests the pen on the page and waits for more words, but the pen remains motionless and the ink leeks out of the nib onto the paper creating a black puddle. Walter rubs at the puddle with his thumb and draws a thick cloud over the word darkness. He screws the lid back on top of the pen and closes the book. He is as tired as he has ever been. He hopes the nightmares will not come. He never meant for any of this to happen. He had not wanted to become this man. Life, it seemed, was a series of terrible accidents and there was no use in pretending otherwise.

He wakes to the sound of birdsong as night gives out to a pale blue canvas brushed with white cirrus. A sky full of angel's wings, he thinks. He walks down the corridor towards the shared bathroom. His fellow inmates are still sleeping, but Walter almost wishes they were awake. He wants to say hello to somebody. He wants to make a brief connection, to be part of something both prosaic and profound.

When he returns to his room he sits on the bed and waits. He thinks for a moment about trying to write some more but the story is still unclear. He has a sense of it, but it is just out of reach. He can see a dystopian landscape full of broken things, but even this is unclear, as if windswept, like a television with poor reception when you keep having to move the little aerial on top.

After a while he hears his fellow inmates in the corridor outside his room and walking out

into the gardens below to check on their vegetables: the general muted hubbub of the clinic gaining momentum as the sun clears the few remaining clouds to create an impossible, swimming pool sky. Off we go, he thinks. Another day on the farm for us lost souls. He looks at his feet, clean and tanned after his shower, although he notices his nails could do with cutting. He lights a cigarette and only then realises what he is doing. He is waiting for Lilly to deliver his breakfast.

When he finally hears her footsteps approaching, when he is sure she is right outside the door, he opens up with an expansive smile, eyes wide like a child. The boy looks shocked when the door rushes inward and he is confronted with Walter and his goofy smile. He had probably been assured that the man in the room at the end of the corridor never talked, never opened the door, but always waited until the tray was placed on the floor and the coast was clear. Walter feels his smile evaporate as soon as he sees it isn't Lilly and they both stand there, confused in personal ways.

The boy lifts the tray a little higher. 'Breakfast,' he says eventually, stammering a little. 'I brought you breakfast.'

Walter takes the tray. 'I don't have anything on me, kid, but give yourself a big tip on the bill, okay. Twenty percent. My treat.'

The young face goes blank and Walter feels bad because the joke comes off all wrong and makes it seem as if he is ungrateful for this simple act of kindness. 'You know,' he says, 'like in a hotel.'

'Oh.' The kid looks at the tray then back at Walter. 'I've never been to a hotel, not a fancy one anyways.'

'You're not missing much, kid. Wait there just a second.'

Walter retreats into his room and places the tray on his bed. He grabs the copy of *The Great Gatsby* from the table and returns to the door holding the book out towards the boy who

stares down at it suspiciously.

‘Have you read this? It’s a good book. One of the best if you ask me. A popular choice but I have always been kind of unoriginal in most of my thinking. It really is good though, really.’

‘I don’t read. Computer games are my thing, sometimes comics.’ The kid shrugs. ‘Who can understand all those words? People don’t really speak like that or think like that do they? In real life, I mean.’

Walter considers this for a second. He supposed most of the books he had read had a stylistic element, unreal almost, but they all contained what he considered to be an emotional truth. Perhaps that is why he wanted the boy to read the book.

‘This is a good one,’ he insists. ‘Better than comics. You can just skip over the words that don’t make any sense. It won’t make that big a difference, honestly. Fitzgerald was good like that.’

‘Who?’

Walter cannot help smiling as he realises he already likes the boy. His hair is cut short back and sides and if he needed to shave at his age he had done so that morning because Walter doesn’t see any shadow. His linen getup is clean and starched, and his sandals are spotless. Walter hasn’t seen himself in a mirror for as long as he’s been in the clinic, but he imagines he must look pretty unkept with his uneven beard and long matted hair. He only has the one set of clothes which he washes some nights and hangs from his window to dry in the morning sun. His hair smells of wood smoke and his trousers have a burn mark in the crotch the size of a dime. But the boy does not seem to notice any of this as he takes the book from Walter and looks at the picture of Redford on the cover.

‘Old F. Scott Fitzgerald. Honest, he’s good.’

The boy holds the book in both hands and looks like he is about to pass it back, but then nods and mumbles a thank you before walking away.

As Walter sits down to eat his breakfast, he is sorry he hadn't asked the boy's name. He wonders why the how he had ended up in the clinic. Maybe he just worked in the kitchens, maybe even they were required to wear the linen getup, for continuities sake. He seemed too young to have a real drugs problem, although he suspects that kids get started pretty young these days. It's not like when he was young. Maybe it is a solid case of rose-coloured glasses, he thinks to himself, but everything seemed more stripped down when he was growing up. There wasn't the technology for a start, or the television programs that tell you what it is you must own in order that others are able to define you. Of course, there was stuff back then, there has always been stuff. Walter can remember hassling his mum for a pair of red Converse All-Star for his tenth birthday just because Jimmy Hanagan had a pair and said you were a loser if you didn't wear All-Star. But it all seemed somehow less important back then. They don't stand a chance, he thinks. Everything is for sale.

He looks at the food on his tray and wonders how it is that mankind can consume so much, even one another. The sickness made anything possible.

He cannot eat so he takes his book and pen from beneath the pillow and walks out of the room leaving his food to go cold. He needs to keep writing his story, needs to get to the end.

He spends the afternoon pushing the nib of his pen into the course yellow white paper, watching the ink spread like blood into the uneven skin of the pages. The words come slowly at first, as if out of fog, a distant part of his brain not yet engaged. He stops occasionally because his eyes fill up and he cannot see the words properly. The story is beginning to reveal itself to him: a silo deep underground, a sad place, dark and cold and full of poison. The man in the story is alone. He is dying. The story is difficult, but Walter rushes the words out onto the paper because he feels better when there are less of them inside of him. It is coming now, word after word. He does not know if it is well-written, this is not even a question he asks himself. Perhaps because he is not a writer. Perhaps because this story is not about style or

plot.

He does not look up from his place on the bench. He does not notice the perfect swimming pool sky turn a shade of dusted purple as the earth rotates around the sun. He moves his hand across the page and thinks about a disease with no name that will bring about an end. He thinks about blindness and sees the woman's hands pulling at the loose flesh of her face. He sees his mother sitting at an open window looking out over the neighbourhood waiting for her boy to come home. The window is open, the rain is coming in and wetting the curtains. She does not notice because she does not care. She used to have a son. Where is my son?

Walter imagines the birthing of the earth and closes his eyes and tries to conjure up the image of a silent explosion in the blackness. But the moment, bright and magnificent and impossible, is obliterated by the look in Angel's eyes that day he walked into the apartment, that day she found him out and turned him lose forever.

He writes page after page, not aware of the individual words, but sensing the story unfolding as if it has always been there inside him, waiting. Just for a second he can smell a warm gasoline smell. The woman's voice comes to him again. She wants something. Does she want it from him?

'Stay with me! Please stay with me!'

He stabs the words into the yellow white pages of the book in his lap. The ink bleeds, his heart bleeds. This is what it feels like to tell something real, he thinks. This is what it feels like to try. But try or what

He only stops when her hands land gently upon his shoulders and squeeze where the muscles run into the neck. He drops the pen into the open book and closes his eyes which are tired and sore.

'That's enough for today,' she says, in that soft voice, that childlike yet wise voice of

warm milk.

He holds on to the edge of the bench. Her hands push down into his shoulders, and he feels calmer and lets the images melt back into cloud and shadow. He opens his eyes and notices they are alone. His fellow inmates have all gone back indoors. The day is nearing its end.

Lilly walks around the bench and sits next to him and takes a hold of his hand. ‘Long day, cowboy?’

Walter shrugs. He looks down at his hand in hers. ‘Tough stuff all of this.’

‘You’re doing real good, Walter. Try not to be so hard on yourself.’ She tucks a stray hair behind her ear and squeezes his hand so that he pays attention. ‘There is a leaving dinner tonight,’ she says. ‘I want you to come. It can be a date if you like.’

Walter is about to say something. He doesn’t know if he is going to object or just shrug it off.

‘It’s what we do when somebody comes to the end of their story,’ she tells him. ‘Bob finished his story and Winnie agreed to read it and so he’s outta here. You don’t know him. You don’t know anybody do you, silly. Anyway, you’re coming. There’ll be wine.’ She squeezes his hand a little tighter. ‘Please, Walt.’

He nods a silent consent and Lilly jumps to her feet and claps her hands together and all of a sudden he feels lighter.

‘You take a little time to, you know, powder your nose or whatever. I’ll pick you up at yours. You want me to bring a corsage or something?’

‘Just make sure I’m back before eleven or my parents will freak.’

He meant for this to come out as a joke but he is aware that he is suddenly holding the book too tightly and he can see his mother sitting at the window with that faraway look in her eyes, staring out over eternity to a place where she lost everything she ever loved.

Lilly rests a hand on his shoulder very lightly before walking away. Walter scratches the

goat under its chin and wishes they could swap places for a while.

After he washes his face and feet. After he hides his book beneath his pillow with the pen beside it. After he sits on the edge of the bed for an eternity smoking one cigarette after another, regretting saying yes to dinner, Lilly finally knocks lightly on his door and pulls him from his quiet room all the way downstairs and out onto the patio where various guests are assembled around a long dining table. He is seated without introduction and keeps his head down the whole time because he has forgotten how these things are done and he misses his mother and regrets not getting on a plane and holding her in his arms and thanking her for always being there for him.

Lily tightens her grip on Walter's hand beneath the table. 'Are you going to stare at that candle all night?'

He smiles and brushes his sleeve over his face and squeezes her hand in return. 'Sorry, I was just thinking.'

Benedict comes out onto the patio from the dining hall holding several bottles of red wine in his arms and places them on the table with a smile.

'Here we go. I got us the good stuff as it's a special occasion.'

The old man winks at Walter and hands over a bottle and a corkscrew. 'You do the honours, Walter, as you look like you need it the most.'

Lilly nudges Walter with her shoulder and releases his hand so he can open the bottle. He feels naked without her touch. It has been such a long time since he was around other people, and he is still lost in his story. He doesn't recognise any of the faces at the table and he feels like it was a mistake to come. He has never said hello to Bob. He doesn't even know what the man looks like. He is nervous but he is trying his best to smile, even though he is haunted by the image of his mother, a bridge reaching out into nothingness, the look of anger on Angel's

face when she realised how he had failed her. I am a ghost, he thinks. But I am the one haunted.

He looks at the bottle of wine in his hands, at the table with tall candles placed in a row down its centre, white roses picked from the garden, placed in small glass vases. There is a gramophone player sitting on a spindly three-legged stool playing a tune that reminds Walter of the old black and white movies where everybody used to dress like penguins or clouds and lived in apartments that overlooked painted backdrops of sparkling cities. The people in the movies were always dancing on white marble balconies and falling into one another's arms declaring their undying love. The music seems incongruous and makes him uncomfortable.

The old man kisses Lilly on both cheeks before wrapping his arms around Walter and squeezing him tight.

'Nice to see you at one of our little gatherings,' he says. 'Very good indeed. And important too, wouldn't you say.'

Walter is sure he senses something pass between Benedict and Lilly, something warm and paternal exchanged in a single glance, something knowing. The old man rescues the wine from Walter's failing grip and releases the cork with a single, practiced twist of bottle and corkscrew. He pours a large glass and hands it to Walter with a theatrical little bow. Walter salutes the old man and downs half the contents in one gulp. The wine is sharp and dry and makes him cough.

'I guess I'm out of practice,' he says apologetically as he watches a ruby stain spread into a wide circle down the front of his linen shirt.

Lilly nudges him again and tops up his glass after pouring one for Benedict.

He feels like the little kid at the grownups table, allowed to stay up late on a special occasion. He is scared he is going to say something silly, or spill more wine, or start laughing or crying and not be able to stop, not ever.

That is when he notices Bob. The man is tall and muscular with a strong jaw and soap opera hair parted to the side. He looks unbearably healthy and utterly alone, adrift at the helm of the table, eyes scanning the darkness beyond his dinner guests, out over the invisible garden like he wants to get up and walk away without the inevitable goodbyes.

People keep touching his arm or raising their glass in his direction. He smiles for the briefest moment or responds in a polite, distracted way until they release him so that he can go back to looking out into the darkness, beyond the gentle waltz from the gramophone player into the cool starless night. It strikes Walter that he cannot remember a single night since he arrived when there were no stars in the sky, but tonight it is like a velvet blanket wrapped tight around the flickering candlelight.

When their eyes eventually meet across the table, Walter feels the weight of the man's crimes and remembers Cameo saying how some folks learn their lessons too late. He raises his glass and instantly regrets the dumb gesture.

When Lilly walked him from his room, she explained how Bob used to be a senator someplace. 'Someplace where they all look like white bread and eat nothing but cow.'

He was accused of selling off land that should not have been sold. He was in the newspapers for a few days and had to get himself a lawyer who helped to sweep the whole thing under the table. She couldn't remember when he arrived at the clinic, only that he used to cry a lot. She told Walter that Bob had always been brave about things like that, like he was in a hurry to get it out of him and didn't care who was watching. Walter felt silly then because he wanted to tell Lilly about all the times he had cried since arriving at the clinic, as if to show he too could be human.

He notices that the man isn't touching his food. Everybody else is digging into the potato salad or snatching up the buttered corn. There is a silver platter full of chicken thighs that glisten in their oily skins beneath the candlelight. There's roasted beetroot, coleslaw, garden

salad, all freshly picked and prepared that day, a whole table full of food that Bob seems happy to ignore, or politely accept onto his plate only to push around with his fork, perhaps hoping that nobody will notice, perhaps wishing he could just get the whole thing over with and hurry up and leave the clinic.

Walter had assumed that the man would be happy about leaving and getting on with his life, ecstatic even, but instead he looks like a timid child worrying over the last days of summer holiday. They are just little boys, the two of them, and Walter wishes he had the courage to get up and walk around the table and share this information with Bob so that he might not feel so alone.

When the main course is over, Bob is called upon to make a speech. Lilly leans over and explains that this is a tradition, a speech from those who have completed the programme and are about to move on. Walter wonders how long Lilly has been at the clinic. He cannot believe he has not asked her this before.

Bob looks uncomfortable as everybody raises their glass and encourages him to stand and say a few words. He shifts his weight and keeps running his hand through his thick hair.

‘I...’ He pauses and clears his throat. He reaches for his wine glass and takes a hit. He tries once more but grinds to a halt over that one weighted syllable. There is a strange, expectant silence around the table. The waltz comes to a sudden stop and the needle plays across the blank wax surface in the centre of the record making a scratchy, muted rat-tat-tat sound like pistons on an old steam train.

Bob falters again and this time has to lean on the table for support which makes Walter want to scream out to let the guy off the hook. He can’t even smile. He isn’t even capable of that. Leave him alone!

As if reading Walter’s thoughts, Benedict gets to his feet and rests a hand on Bob’s shoulder letting him know that it is okay for him to sit. Bob silently melts into his chair with

an apologetic smile that he fixes on his plate of uneaten food.

‘Funny thing...’ the old man begins, then stops and seems lost for a moment. He smiles to himself and clears his throat. He looks at Bob, then at the table full of expectant faces.

‘This is always a night of mixed blessings,’ he says, starting over. ‘On the one hand we celebrate the journey. On the other, we mourn the passing of a friend. But there is indeed cause to celebrate. Bob here is leaving us, and this simple act reminds us all that there is hope. There is always hope. We each of us face a task in this place, including myself. We each of us carry within ourselves the ability to achieve what must be achieved. Today, Bob here shows us that what I say is true and so he is leaving. This part of his journey is over and now it is time for him to move on. I must say that I for one will miss him, even though I know that whatever comes next will be better than what has come before. I suppose, also, that I am just being a selfish old man because nobody likes goodbyes, especially at my age.’

Benedict raises his glass and everybody around the table does the same. ‘Here’s to one of the good souls, and to the journey that shapes us all.’

There is a general murmuring of agreement. Bob shakes some hands and receives some well-meaning pats on the back. Somebody changes the record and a muted jazz trumpet mingles unobtrusively with the gentle hum of table conversation.

The wine is going to Walter’s head because, like Bob, he did not eat the food. He feels warm and fuzzy and light-headed. He looks at Lilly, her hair falling over the sides of her luminous face like the sails of a ship, lips curved into a smile, eyes like a pussycat in the half-light. She admonishes him for staring which makes him blush. She tells him he better not think she is that kind of a girl. Then she wrinkles up her nose and tucks her chin down low and he wants so very much to tell her how beautiful she looks. But he knows that she never wants to hear that. Not ever.

He watches the old man who is sitting next to an old woman, rounded at the edges like the

doc, wearing the same spectacles and woolly clothing. They seem close and it occurs to Walter they might be married. He is overcome with a sense of familiarity at the way in which they seem to say so much to each other without ever actually talking. At one point they both reach for the same bottle of wine and their hands touch. They linger for just a second too long before the old man coughs and smiles and takes up the bottle to fill the woman's glass. Her cheeks flush a beautiful rosy colour as she pushes her spectacles up the bridge of her nose and glances furtively around the table as if to make sure nobody had noticed. He watches them watching everybody else. Whenever the conversation dies down, one or the other steps in and comments on the vegetable gardens, or something to do with the running of the clinic, or some story about a former patient that gets everybody laughing. They are the centre, the candle in the window, and Walter wonders how long they have been together and how it is that he has not known of the woman until now.

Despite the wine and the music, the newness of company and Lilly's hand always close to his, Walter is nevertheless unable to shake the feeling of melancholia he experienced when he looked into Bob's eyes. He knows why the man cannot smile, even now. He had smiled too much in his old life: as he signed over land rights, as he waved his wife off to work before taking the babysitter up to the spare bedroom – knowing the housemaid would clean up after him and not make a fuss because she didn't have the right papers. He smiled as he drove his shiny SUV to the local mall, as he made speeches about progress and development, or cut red ribbons and stood aside to allow the giant machines to claw at the earth. He smiled at himself in the mirror as he brushed his white teeth, smiled at his big house set way back from the road where the others sold fruit and newspapers from shopping carts to passing motorists. Walter knows so much, feels so much, that he is sure his mind and body are no longer entirely his own.

Eventually the old man stands and the table falls silent. Walter senses that Bob wants to

thank his fellow inmates for coming, wants to apologise for his awkwardness and wish them luck. But in the end, he just drops his napkin onto his plate and takes a hold of Benedict's hand and allows himself to be led away from the table without ceremony.

The woman stands and waves after them. 'Goodbye, love. You're doing really well. We're all going to miss you.'

She sits down abruptly and removes her gold rimmed spectacles and wipes her eyes with a plain white handkerchief and pours herself another glass of wine. Nobody is looking at her except Walter.

The old man leads Bob out into the garden, into the velvety blackness that swallows them whole and quite suddenly so that the dinner guests seem at a loss for a second or two until the woman at the head of the table raises her glass and proposes a final toast to the big adventure. Glasses are filled and raised, and everybody smiles and wonders quietly when their day will come. Walter strains his eyes out into the blackness but there is no sign of either man. He feels a strange apprehension that makes him curl his toes against the stone paving beneath the table because his body yearns for the touch of something elemental.

That night, curled up in his bed, still drunk from the wine, he pinches at the skin on his face and is afraid at how easily it comes away from the bone, how hollow his cheeks feel, how fragile he has become. His chest is flat and his arms and legs feel insubstantial. In the stillness, in the darkness, he marvels at the strange creature laying in his bed. As if reaching out to some sacred totem or talisman, Walter slides his hand beneath the pillow and allows his fingers to rest gently on the face of his book.

He remembers the doc getting to his feet and offering his hand to Bob. He remembers Angel kissing his cheek and whispering how she would love him forever. He remembers the sun setting out over the ocean, the terrible silence, his heart beating frantically in his chest. He can see the man in the yellow hat standing beside him, silent also, gazing hungrily out over

the horizon, the blood of frontier ancestors persuading his body westwards, a slave to hope, to the promise of an ocean and the pull of a silver moon. He remembers the young girl, her eyes locked on his, uncertain of how to react to the boss who could fire her so that she would not be able to make the rent or pay her health insurance. That first meeting when he tested the waters, and felt in his veins the greed that drove him forever towards the edge:

INT. GOODTIMES. FILING ROOM. DAY:

Rebecca is holding a stack of files, blowing a stray hair from her face as she tries to place the files in the right compartments along the wall. Walter enters.

WALTER

You look like you're struggling a bit.

Rebecca is surprised but composes herself quickly.

REBECCA

I guess. There's a lot to do. I'm not sure

I realised.

Walter approaches the young girl and takes the files from her and places them on the table.

WALTER

You'll get the hang of it, once you

settle in.

Rebecca steps backward to create some space between the two of them. She looks up at Walter and smiles.

REBECCA

I hope so.

WALTER

I'm sure of it.

As he says this he rests a hand on her shoulder and smiles as she involuntarily steps back a little further.

WALTER

You don't need to be scared of me...

REBECCA

Sorry... I mean, I'm not scared.

WALTER

You shouldn't be. We are a family here.
You know, I was responsible for hiring you because I need somebody I can work closely with. I saw your CV and I knew I had found the right person.

Rebecca reaches up and pulls her shirt collar tighter.

REBECCA

Thank you. I...

WALTER

Do I make you nervous, Rebecca?

Rebecca lowers her hand, her body visibly tightening.

REBECCA

No sir, It's just...

WALTER

Good. Because that would make me feel awkward. I don't think I could work with somebody who made me feel awkward.
It's unprofessional. Do you know what I

mean?

Rebecca looks Walter in the face but her smile has vanished.

REBECCA

I really like this job. I'm trying...

WALTER

I'm joking. Relax.

Walter steps towards Rebecca and touches her arm, moving his hand up towards her shoulder.

WALTER (CONT'D)

I can tell we are going to get on.

I can tell you want this job. And

you're going to do well here. Why

don't you come see me after work. I

always work late. It drives my fiancé

crazy, but it's just part of the whole

deal here. We do it because we love

movies, right. We'll go to Benny's on

the corner and grab a drink and you

can tell me all about yourself.

Rebecca looks towards the door, then down at her shoes.

REBECCA

I told my boyfriend...

WALTER

A boyfriend. Well tell him to come too.

We can raise a glass to your new job.

Walter's other hand lands on Rebecca's shoulder and he steps closer.

WALTER (CONT'D)

I'll see you after work. You know where
my office is.

Walter reaches around with his hands and runs them down Rebecca's back. Suddenly he steps back and releases her.

WALTER (CONT'D)

You better carry on with this filing.
I have a project I am working on I
Want to ask you about later. Maybe
You could give me your opinion. It's
a low budget script but with the right
people on my team, I think we could get
it to pre-production by fall. Would
you be willing to help?

Rebecca looks surprised. The smile returns to her face and her shoulders relax a little.

REBECCA

I... I would love to. If you thought I
could help.

Walter smiles and heads for the door.

WALTER

I can spot talent a mile away and
I have a feeling about you. See you
later.

Walter exits without another word.

He wipes the tears from his eyes, his wide, marsupial eyes, and wants to kick his legs against the darkness that threatens to pull him in. The old darkness, the disease that made so much possible. Some lessons are learned too late, he thinks, but that does not mean they are not worth learning. His mouth open and the words are whispered into the darkness: I am sorry.

* * * *

Chapter X.
The Great White Cadillac

He pushed himself up onto his elbows. Flower and Tiffany were curled up on either side of him, their tanned bodies in stark contrast to his pale skin with splashes of blues and reds and dirty greens. Trainer was pulling his pants on in the centre of the room and searching for his sunglasses.

‘Come on, we’re gonna be late. We have business to deal with and we’re gonna be late.’

‘What business,’ Walter whispered. ‘I got fired.’

‘The business of pleasure, Walt. Remember, I told you about the guy?’

‘What guy?’

‘The guy with the coke.’

‘Jesus, T, not that again. I’m not going to a fucking coke deal with you.’

Flower made a sound like a kitten being stroked and both Walter and Trainer stopped talking and admired her for a moment.

‘You really should be there, Walt. I mean, it’s your money after all.’

‘I didn’t give you money for this thing. I wouldn’t. It’s a crazy fucking idea. You’re a writer, T. A writer.’

Trainer located his sunglasses beneath a pile of clothes and slipped them on as he lit a cigarette. ‘I was a writer,’ he said, ‘once upon a time. But I’m a short order burger chef now. Anyway, I sold your car to raise the capitol so you really should be there.’

Walter left a scribbled note on the dresser. He included his number and said the girls should call him in a few days for a party. He’d signed the note Walter Stopps, Producer, Goodtime Productions.

He regretted the signoff because he realised they might contact Goodtimes? Walter could see

Breaks having a seizure right there in his office, that or he would offer them a job. Why hadn't he put Independent Producer? That would have given him some wiggle room at least. He was still kicking himself for the mistake as he sat opposite Trainer at a street table on the corner of Pico, Walter giving his vanilla espresso a look he hoped conveyed deep and lasting contempt. He lifted the foul-smelling liquid to his lips but couldn't follow through.

'Why didn't you just get me a regular coffee?' he asked Trainer as he replaced the little cup gingerly onto the little saucer and lit a cigarette.

'They don't do regular coffee. Nothing is regular anymore, Walt, you know that.'

Trainer gulped down his almond and honey skinny latte and peered over the top of his sunglasses. 'I miss the old days,' he said, 'the halcyon days when things were simple.'

'But you're drinking your coffee.'

'Because it tastes amazing.'

'Then why did you get me the vanilla espresso?'

'I don't know. You seem the type.'

Walter shook his head and tried again with the little cup. 'So what's this guy's name, anyway?'

'Rico.'

'But he's not the man?'

'No, Rico is the cat who hooked me up with the man. He's gonna meet us here and give us an address. The man's waiting for us. He pays Rico to act as, I don't know, like the guy who makes the introductions and lets you know the terms and shit.'

'Seems like the long way around, don't you think?'

'He's protecting himself, I guess. Hey, I just thought...'

'What.'

'We're waiting for Rico on Pico.'

‘I can’t believe you sold my car.’

‘Don’t be silly, Walt. You can’t snort executive cars with sexy hookers.’

‘They’re not hookers, T, they’re porn stars.’

Walter took a hit of the vanilla poison and sucked hard on his cigarette to hide the taste. His head hurt and he was sweating in the bright morning sun. He had on his mismatched suit and the vest with blood stains down the front which meant he had to keep the jacket buttoned up. He could feel his body trying to expel the chemicals and alcohol from the previous night through open pours up and down his body, especially down the inside of his legs and under his arms. He smelled of sweat and sex and cheap tequila.

Trainer had on his blue suit and White t-shirt, his Cuban heels resting on the table next to the old, battered sports bag which contained the twenty-five thousand dollars he got from the sale of Walter’s BMW. Just two regular Joes waiting on a coke deal on the corner of Pico, he thought.

He wiped sweat from his brow and thought about Lou Reed and wondered just how utterly illegitimate the pair of them looked compared to the fresh faced commuters drifting by on the morning tide, pretending not to see them, feeling lucky not to be them. Walter asked:

‘So Rico comes and gives us an address and then what?’

‘Like I said, the man’s waiting for us. We catch a cab, we give him the fifty percent down, and we take our coke. Lagooooon.’

‘Then?’

‘I figure it will all take care of itself after that, baby.’

‘Jesus.’

Trainer suddenly pushed his shades up tight to his face and hunkered down between his shoulders as if he were hiding, as if he were suddenly invisible. ‘This is him,’ he said in a hushed, conspiratorial voice. ‘You do the talking. Just get the address and get rid of him.’

‘What the fuck! Why am I talking to him, he’s your...’

‘I can’t stand the guy, but he loves me, love me like a crazy bastard. Who wouldn’t? If I get talking, we’ll be here all day... Here he is. Be cool.’

A tall Spanish kid, no older than twenty or twenty-one, sidled up to the table dragging one leg behind him as if it were a loose piece of unwanted flesh. Walter had seen a lot of kids with the same walk, an affectation, but he could never work out the purpose of the exercise. It looked like hard work.

Rico was skinny all over. He had on a stripy vest top, baggy jeans, and bright red AllStars just like the ones Walter had wanted as a young boy.

‘Damn, boy, you look like you been pistol whipped like a motherfucker!’

Walter sipped determinedly at his espresso, but Trainer stayed silent, hunched, not even drinking his amazing honey latte or smoking his cigarette which lay idle in the ashtray on the table. Rico looked expectant.

‘I fell over,’ Walter relented. ‘Then I seemed to just keep falling.’

‘You still fallin’ boy, look at you. You’re all green and swollen like the Incredible Hulk, except you ain’t got the build.’

Rico looked at Walter sideways on for a second as he stroked at his bottom lip with his index finger, then he started flicking at the bright pink afro comb that was sticking up out of the tight braids at the back of his head. He said:

‘You still fine though, underneath all that shit. But you do look fucked up right now, for sure. You need somebody to treat you right, show you some love, for real.’

Trainer spoke out of the corner of his mouth: ‘The address, you mad bastard. Don’t get sucked in.’

Walter put the little cup down and rallied himself. ‘Can I just get the address, Rico.’

The boy seemed genuinely hurt. He looked up and down the street as if he might be lost, a

child who had misplaced his parents in the drifting morning crowd of folded newspapers and Styrofoam coffee cups.

‘Just like that,’ he said. ‘You ain’t even gonna offer me no drink or doughnut or ask how I’m doing or anything?’

‘I’m sorry, Rico. How are you?’

The boy brightened up and dragged the loose leg flesh closer so that he could stand a little taller. ‘I’m good,’ he said. ‘Got myself an audition today. You’ll be seeing my ass in Street Crime Lab. And not some walk on bullshit either, this time my star’s gonna shine.’

‘I’m pleased, Rico, really I am. So what about the address?’

Rico waved this off like a bad smell. ‘You’re one insincere busted up motherfucker, ain’t you. Don’t even ask what part I’m up for or offer me one of those little banana coffee things. I love those.’

Walter took a breath. Rico was just like the extras on set, just like the wannabe starlets, the runners, the fluffers, the secretaries who wanted to act, the actors who wanted to star, the waiters and waitresses who made up the endless open audition lines that crisscrossed the town like fresh scars every dawn. He wanted to be wanted, wanted to be recognised, appreciated. He wanted to shine. That’s what the town did to people. It wasn’t enough to play your part and keep the whole thing moving and make a wage. You had to shine in this town or ‘own it’, whatever that meant.

‘Rico, don’t go all girly on me, okay. I’m pleased about the audition, I really am. I know you’re going to nail it, really. You look good. I’m getting that vibe off of you.’

‘Yeah?’

‘The million-dollar vibe, honestly. I would love to sit here and chew the fat all day - hear how you’re approaching the character, what you intend to do with him, all that. Because I know you have it, that certain something, I can tell. But right now, right now I’m on the clock

and you already got paid for this thing right, from the man. This is just business. You don't sit around on the street with a bag full of money and your dick in your hand. You do the talking at the party.'

Rico thought this over for a second or two as he played with the comb in the back of his head. 'So, I'm coming to the party?' he asked eventually.

'You're the man,' Walter beamed, as he finished off his disgusting vanilla poison drink. 'Without you there wouldn't be a party.'

'Why didn't you say, holmes. I didn't know there was gonna be a party. I love to party, you know that.'

Rico handed over a folded piece of paper and Walter bumped the kid's knuckles like he'd seen done in countless movies and on countless street corners all over town.

'Don't let me keep you, kid, you have to work on the role, right. I'll call tonight and let you know where we are.'

Rico blew Walter a kiss and slipped quietly into the commuter tide dragging his vestigial limb behind him like a broken rudder. Trainer lit another cigarette once he saw the old one had burned out in the ashtray.

'You are the man, Walt. You're kind of cold and calculated, but you're the man.'

'Tell me I'm never going to have to see that kid again, T.'

'He's too good for you anyway, Walt. And stop being so prissy. You're telling me you've never taken it in the ass from a good-looking Hispanic gentleman before?'

'Can we please just get a cab and get this thing done.'

The 'meet' was up in Hallandale Drive. The man owned a concrete and glass walled cube that looked as if it had crawled from the set of a seventies sci-fi movie but had gotten stuck on the edge of the canyon and had long ago given up all hope of escape, allowing shrubs and small trees to take root at its feet and climb up its spindly steel legs.

Trainer paid the cab with a crisp twenty straight from the sports bag. Walter peered out of the window at the gleaming white cube at the top of the driveway and felt like a kid being dragged around by his old man. All he had to do was keep quiet and not complain and he would get a milkshake at the end of the day.

Trainer grinned at Walter as they stepped out of the cab. He clapped his hands together then massaged his scalp as if rallying himself. ‘Okay,’ he said, as much to himself as to Walter, ‘this is it, our first really big fucking coke deal.’

‘Our last and only big fucking coke deal, T. And you owe me a car.’

Trainer punched Walter lightly on the shoulder as they ascended the driveway. ‘Don’t be square, Walt, this could be the beginning of a beautiful friendship. Just remember, the guy likes to talk, he doesn’t like to listen. Rico said it’s best to just nod in all the right places and make sure to have the cash where he can see it. We can do that, right? We’re good at nodding. We can nod, I’ve seen us.’

Trainer pinched Walter on both cheeks, then, without warning, knocked loudly on the vast black door set in the centre of the white cube in front of them.

‘This is it, baby.’

Nothing happened for a minute or two. Trainer shrugged. Neither of them was willing to knock again for fear it might seem pushy. Just as Walter was about to call the whole thing off and walk away, the door opened a crack and an impossibly small woman - old and grey-haired with leathery tanned skin, dressed all in black - peered out at them from the cool interior of the cube.

‘Cocaína?’

Walter didn’t know what else to do so he bent down and offered the old woman the bag of money. She asked again:

‘Cocaína, sí?’

Trainer smiled and nodded. ‘Cocain, yes!’ He nodded at Walter who nodded at the old woman and smiled. They all smiled.

Walter relented: ‘Cocaína, sí, yes.’

The old woman waved off the bag and opened the door. She turned and limped into the semi-darkness, the leather soles of her black shoes click, clicking on the cool, white marble. She stopped and turned and beckoned Walter to follow her inside.

‘Cocaína,’ she repeated, and nodded in affirmation to herself before she continued her journey along the cool, angular hallway. Trainer pushed Walter into the cube and the two of them followed at what Walter hoped was a safe distance. They were led out onto a balcony at the back of the cube overlooking the valley. The old woman offered them a seat before she turned and shuffled back inside without another word.

Walter looked out over the scrubland and felt a shifting in his stomach as the vanilla espresso pushed at the walls of his swollen bowels. Suddenly it seemed as if everything wanted to escape his bowels in a hurry.

‘I need the bathroom,’ he told Trainer, leaning into him, whispering almost.

‘It’s just nerves. Hold it together. Think what Tony Montana would do.’

Walter leaned a little harder. ‘Seriously, it’s that fucking vanilla espresso you made me drink. I’m going to explode.’

Trainer spoke through his teeth as he smiled at their reflection in the wall of mirrored glass that made up the south facing side of the cube.

‘Hold it in,’ he said. ‘This is a coke deal. You can’t ask to use the bathroom in the middle of a coke deal, especially not to take a crap.’

‘Why not?’

‘I don’t know but it just... People don’t do it is all. You can’t take a guy seriously if he asks to use your bathroom to take a crap when buying cocaine from you. It sends out all the wrong

signals.'

Just then the glass wall opened up to reveal a short, balding man wearing an open silk gown that stopped at his hips, and a pair of shiny black swim trunks that were conspicuously swollen around the groin. He had golden tanned skin covered in curly black hairs matted with suntan oil. He had on large plastic sunglasses and was puffing on a Cuban cigar. In his other hand he held a cocktail of green liquid with red cherries floating on top. The man threw Walter a smile that was both pleasant and vaguely sinister.

'So you come for my Cocaína, no?'

Trainer couldn't stop smiling so Walter simply pushed the bag across the table towards the man. He didn't look inside but he seemed satisfied enough by the gesture.

'Did I say it was good? I should tell you that it is good, no? The-absolute-fucking-best is what it is so that takes care of that, boom.'

The man puffed on his cigar and contemplated his drink for a moment. He kept nodding his head as if continuing some internal dialogue that might have started somewhere within the white cube earlier that morning.

'Only the best,' he said all of a sudden. 'You know the terms, no? You owe me the other twenty-five next week or I break some bones. Only little ones at first, but those are the ones that hurt the most and take the longest to heal. You know the scaphoid, the little bone in your hand? That hurts like hell it gets busted up, trust me. If it don't heal right they take a piece of your hip out as a replacement.'

Walter suddenly wanted to throw himself over the edge of the balcony and take his chances with the fall, but Trainer had a tight grip on his thigh which he was concerned made the two of them look a little effeminate, like a gay couple waiting to hear about a mortgage application for a trailer park home.

'I'll see you next week on time with no hassle. The whole bones thing, I have to say it, you

understand.’

Right on cue the old woman shuffled onto the balcony carrying a white package wrapped in tape about the size of a bible. She let it fall from her arms and it rolled along the table and toppled into Walter’s lap. He jumped like a girl, despite Trainer’s iron grip on his thigh, and was suddenly afraid that he was going to mess his pants.

The old woman turned and went back inside. Walter imagined her deep within the bowels of the cube, cold fingers forging coke from the scooped-out brains of tiny infants.

‘...Don’t you find that, kid?’

The man seemed to want something. Walter shifted in his seat. Trainer was nodding so Walter did the same. They both nodded again and the man seemed pleased with this and nodded back as he puffed on his cigar and took a hit of his green cocktail.

‘That’s what I’m talking about,’ the man continued. ‘It’s un-fucking-believable. Women!’ Right on queue she floated onto the balcony with a matching cocktail. She was also wearing a similar silk gown, but it made a hell of a lot more sense hanging from her slender shoulders, front open, revealing an expensive one piece bathing suit in gold, high at the hips like they used to wear in the eighties, a hat with a wide brim that kept her face in its very own shadow, all except her lips which seemed to reflect the sun.

‘Jesus, Freddy, you’re not giving your “broads want it all speech” are you? When are you going to let that go?’

Freddy gestured with his cigar. ‘Boys, this is Anna.’

The lady received a matching set of nods from Walter and Trainer.

‘All I want is a son for Christ’s sake. You don’t want a son?’

‘When did this shit start costing so much, that’s all I want to know?’

He turned on the rookies. Walter’s stomach shifted up a gear and made him clench his teeth and hold his breath. Freddy said:

‘You know what I mean? You want a kid you do it the old-fashioned way, no? This fucking quack has me on pills and all kinds of shit. I can’t wear tight pants. I’m not supposed to take hot baths. I hate showers. Never trust a man who can’t sit in his own dirt.’

Anna pulled a gold lighter from her silk gown. She rolled the flint wheel with an elegant finger and lit a gold cigarette. Walter thought she looked like a French movie star, an assassin in lamé.

‘What are you telling him for, Freddy, He’s young. He’s not the one with the problem. And Doctor Willis is just trying to help. We’re lucky to have him.’

The man baulked at this. ‘Two hundred and fifty gees,’ he exclaimed, waving his cigar in the air, ‘and we’re lucky to have him.’

The lady was not deterred. ‘Do you have a book,’ she asked coolly, ‘a best seller? Are you a fertility specialist? Doctor Willis has been wonderful and you’re talking about money. It’s obscene.’

Freddy looked like he wanted to eat glass. ‘A quarter of a mil to tell me when I can and can’t fuck my wife and I’m being obscene. This guy has me doing it to a schedule, can you believe that? And she’s going along with it. Now you tell me, is that romance? How is a guy supposed to perform? Could you? And this fregado el tramposo has his hands all over her like she’s a slot machine!’

‘Jesus, Freddy, don’t be crude. Doctors don’t see things the same way as you. He’s not interested in... that.’

‘It’s fucked all the same, am I right?’

The man received another couple of nods for his troubles and Walter threw in a shrug which he hoped would convey just the right amount of sympathy without angering the beautiful assassin.

‘That’s what I’m saying,’ Freddy continued. ‘So maybe I should think about breaking his

little scaphoid, no? See what he does with his hands then.'

The lady waved this off. Walter shifted in his seat again, terrified his stomach was going to let him down in a spectacular fashion in all the excitement. Freddy picked up on the change in atmosphere caused by Walter's ass and played the genial host. He leaned forwards and tapped the packet still resting in Walter's lap.

'You got better things to do than listen to this crap, no? You know the terms. There's your coke. Don't snort it all at once. Remember to spread the love and the cost with others.'

Trainer and Walter got to their feet and Walter stuffed the package under his vest and buttoned up his jacket. He offered his hand at the last minute, but the man just looked at it like it was something dead Walter had dragged in from the desert. The lady stifled a laugh and waved them through the glass. She pointed her cigarette in the direction of the exit and warned Walter against tight underwear.

On their way back into town, Trainer and Walter shifted and shuffled about in the back of the cab like children. They pushed and punched each other, dizzy from relief, high on the prospect of getting high. Walter kept lifting his shirt and looking at the package stuffed in his vest. Trainer kept laughing and doing an impression of Freddy. He waved an imaginary cigar in the air and talked about constriction of the balls until his eyes filled with tears and he couldn't breathe properly. It reminded Walter of the day they graduated, drunk and dizzy, full of young pride at what they had accomplished. They practically ran back to Walter's apartment where Angel had stored a whole crate of expensive French champagne Breaks had sent earlier that month in anticipation of the big day. Trainer kept talking about finally having the time to really write. He'd been crashing on their sofa all spring, but he had plans to get a cabin north of town, somewhere quiet where his imagination could go wild among the ancient Redwoods. Walter didn't want to think about his application to the Doctoral programme so he listened to Trainer tell how he was going to grow weed all around the cabin so he could just

roll up whenever he wanted and smoke on the porch. If he was honest with himself, he didn't want Trainer to leave. He loved the three of them hanging out all the time, loved hearing about Trainer's ideas for stories, his aching to get at what he called the shared truth of it all. They were like kids that day, giving each other piggy-back rides, howling at the perfect blue roof of the world, a whole lifetime stretched out ahead of them.

Trainer asked to see the package again and Walter lifted his shirt like a schoolgirl and started giggling as soon as he saw the plastic wrap.

'It's like when we were young,' he told Trainer, without knowing he was going to say it. He felt a strange sensation as soon as the words left his lips. Trainer fell silent and looked out of the window of the cab at the first signs of town filling the empty spaces on the edge of the freeway - used car lots, the billboards advertising whiter teeth, smiling Mexicans with their two-dollar bags of oranges.

'It is, isn't it. We had a lot of fun the three of us back then. I really miss that.'

Walter suddenly felt an incredible sadness. He could not take his eyes from his best friend, he missed him so much. Trainer's absence was like a constant hunger in Walter's life, and nothing had been the same since that day he disappeared. And then the letter.

'I'm sorry I didn't come, T. I should have come. You wrote me and... I don't know why I didn't come. I'm really sorry.'

Trainer turned and looked at Walter. 'Don't worry, Walt. That's life. That's what happens sometimes, right? It doesn't matter now. It's all gone. Time to let go.'

Walter felt himself welling up, like he was going to start crying and not be able to stop, like something far too important was about to happen and he would fall apart and never be able to put himself back together if he should face it head on. He shouted for the cab driver to pull over and tossed his last crumpled fifty onto the front passenger seat.

'It's okay, Walt, seriously. It's time to let go.'

Walter wasn't listening anymore. He reached for the door and pulled on the lever. He was moving too quickly. He couldn't shake the image of the three of them that day, horsing around in the apartment, drunk on champagne. He felt so lucky to be with his best friend and his true love, the two most beautiful people in the world whom he loved and who reminded him constantly what it was to put yourself on the line. They made a pact that day, the three of them, to love each other always, to be there for one another no matter what.

He pushed at the door of the cab and a car beeped its horn angrily and swerved to avoid him as he climbed out onto the road. Trainer looked at him from inside the cab, with his sad eyes, the eyes Walter did not recognise. He was smiling but there was something wrong with the smile, too brave, too knowing. Walter couldn't look. He heard Angel laughing, felt her arms resting on his shoulders – the promise of everything heavy in the air. A letter arriving, a cry for help:

Come see me, Walter, please. I need a friend

He turned and ran for the opposite side of the road, away from the cab, away from his friend whom he had abandoned, away from all the lost years and silver laughter of his one true love. There was a vicious sound then, like a screaming train. Darkness flickered at the edge of his vision and caused a sudden silence that pushed itself hard into his head like a hammer. Something out of the corner of his eye, white snow in the dark, a flash of chrome like a knife, a man's face twisted in fear.

* * * *

Chapter XI.

So Very Far From Where We Know

He is sitting with his legs dangling in the river, the book beside him heavy with words. He is close to finishing the story but he has not been able to write anything for a long while because he is unsure of the ending, or scared. Until recently the words had poured out of him, but the closer he gets to what he knows is the end, the slower the words move, as if time within the story is becoming sluggish.

He imagines an ending, but it is half hidden and eludes scrutiny. He wonders why any writer would do it to themselves, even for the promise of money. He thinks about Trainer a lot. The blank pages make him bury his head in his pillow at night and he wishes Lilly would bring him more books, real and accomplished and admired books, so that he can ignore his own feeble attempt at story. Sensing the ending is torture because it is just an instinct, and always there is the feeling that the ending will ruin everything that has gone before, his hard work and long midnight hours, as if he were a real writer, as if this were more than some task set by the old man to help the patient focus and heal and move forwards.

It is a sad story of isolation. There is no getting around that. It is sometimes painful to push the pen into the yellow white paper and reveal more and more of the world he has created within the pages. The man in the book is a wretched creature alone in the dark. Walter wonders where the world comes from, what part of him summoned it or how long it has been inside of him, waiting. The book is getting heavier and heavier. He doesn't like to carry it around anymore, but he knows he has to, so that whenever the words come he will be ready. He does not know if he is any good as a writer, or if it even matters to Benedict. The old man never mentioned anything about style or voice or trope, just the importance of getting the words onto the page.

Trainer used to talk about the process a lot when they were in college. Walter remembers his friend saying how important it was to try and remain objective, to give yourself to the story but also to remain outside of it, to listen. He thinks he knows what that means now but it is hard work to be outside of his story.

He pats the face of the book, his name faded from sun damage and evening air, the pages swollen with moisture and words. He stares at his pointy knees wrapped in pale skin, vivid against the lush grass in the sunshine. He is still haunted by images of the man and woman in the olive grove. They were working further down the row from him, the man checking on the olives while the woman cut away the dead leaves and cleared the ground at the base of the little trees. They looked about Walter's age, or the age Walter had looked not so long ago.

The woman was humming a beautiful tune which seemed to float on the breeze and mingle with the fresh, chalky smell of the earth. They moved in a symbiotic way, her leaning against his legs as she cleared the ground, him picking olives from the tallest branches and dropping them into the basket which she pulled along the ground beside her. Their hands operating as if from one body, soft music governing the languid movements of shared limbs. Every now and then they would say something. Occasionally they would laugh. He noticed, very briefly, her hand wrap itself around the man's calf then unwind and pull the basket along the ground just in time to catch an olive that fell absently from his hand.

Walter did not notice at first when the humming stopped and the strange electricity gathered between the knotted, compact trunks of the ancient trees. He brushed the hair from his face and sniffed at the air. He wondered was it about to storm. Then he looked up the row towards the couple. She was on her knees gazing up at him. He was standing motionless, head bowed, gazing down at her like some ancient illumination. He dropped to his knees in front of the woman and they collapsed into one another's arms and kissed with such hunger that Walter was sure they would create lightning. He could feel the desperate need in the muscles of

their thighs and arms, the longing to push against the other, that hot feeling in the core of the body. He got to his feet as quickly as he could and turned and came to sit beside the river so that the man and the woman could have the olive grove to themselves. Not that they noticed him, not that they cared. They were in that other space, burning.

He looks at his pale legs in the water and feels the gentle pull of the current. He and Angel had once been just like the man and woman in the olive grove, falling into one another, oblivious to the world. They would lose themselves in stolen time for days on end then resurface like children, flushed and proud and made whole again. But one day, Walter found that he could no longer keep in that space - distracted by guilt and need and a fear of his own mortality. And rather than face what was happening, rather than admit something important, he chose to drag Angel out with him, silently, obstinately like a spoilt child. She had resisted, of course, but the resistance only helped to shatter the illusion.

They did not speak then, not in important ways. They kept moving, kept touching and kissing and reaching for one another's flesh because if they ever stopped pretending, they would have to face Walter's truth. This space, this new space, was not like the old; it was always connected to the world, to the guilt and regret. It was jaded and murky and borrowed. They were both in denial for different reasons. She acquiesced for love, he conspired as a child conspires, unaware of his own motives but resolute in his ignorance. That was how he lost her, slowly and painfully.

He lifts his legs up out of the water and takes up his book which he tucks under his arm. He stands so that he can feel the warm grass between his toes. He takes several deep breaths then, without thinking, he begins walking at a brisk pace along the riverbank, away from the naked bodies writhing in warm chalky earth, away from the voices and lingering melancholy. The sun is hot on his back. He takes off his linen shirt and throws it around his neck. He keeps the book tucked under his arm and takes long strides so that he can feel the tendons

pulling tight down the length of his skinny legs. Without knowing why, he suddenly starts running. The balls of his feet pushing hard into the soft grass, his free arm pumping at the air, head down. He runs until the words in the book become quiet. He runs until he can feel the sweat on his back, the jolting pain in his knees. He runs until the blood rushes in his ears like thunder, until Angel and Trainer and the wretched creature evaporate in the white heat, until there is only the burning in his lungs and the hot feeling in his blood like a cleansing fire. Eventually his muscles give out and he collapses into the soft grass and rests his head on the book and closes his eyes. He feels his chest rising and falling, sweat dripping from his back as if he were slowly melting into the warm, dry earth.

When he eventually opens his eyes, he finds himself looking at a pale pink flower growing in the tall grass beside his head. It is like tissue paper, a wildflower the colour of sunset, almost translucent. He sits up and pulls at the flower which comes away from the earth too easily. He lifts it to his nose but it has no scent. He notices another flower next to his foot, also like paper, this one is washed out red with darker, almost bluish lines running down the centre of each petal. He picks the second flower and holds it next to the one in his other hand, the one that is the colour of sunset. They seem impossible, a magician's trick plucked from the green tablecloth around him.

He gets to his feet and retrieves his book. There is a tall tree next to the river and he walks towards it so that he can be in the shade for a moment. He lays on his stomach on the riverbank and scoops his hand into the cool water to take a drink. When he sits up, he notices there are more flowers at the base of the tree: oranges and purples against the silver bark. These flowers are bigger and more complex, but the colours are still powdery, their petals also frail. They remind Walter of the dog roses that used to grow in his back garden. He pulls at the closest flower growing at the base of the tree. It is a chalky lilac colour. It smells like corn syrup. He can see his fingers through the petals and wonders how something so fragile

can survive in the world. We are surrounded by impossible things, he thinks.

He discovers more and more of the delicate flowers as he makes his way back towards the clinic. He has never noticed them before, not once in all the time he has been at the clinic. Each time he bends down and pulls a new colour from the green tablecloth, another appears close by, always just up ahead, like breadcrumbs. Soon he is clutching an impressive bunch of the wildflowers which he mixes with some of the taller grasses and a few fallen leaves from the trees along the riverbank. And it isn't until then he realises he has been picking them for Lilly. He has been avoiding her ever since he got writers' block. He feels that by not writing he is in some way letting her down. That's what he tells himself. But it is also true that he is afraid to finish his story because of what that will mean. He lifts the flowers to his nose and grows dizzy with the sweet smell, like being in a candy store on a hot afternoon. All the colours of the rainbow.

She is just where he knew she would be, looking out over the rolling hills, a tuft of grass held loose in her hand, Ermintrude standing beside the bench chewing idly, those blank ruby eyes revealing nothing of the intense pleasure she is feeling. She has her knees tucked up under her chin, her bare feet resting on the bench. She is scanning the horizon, the shapes and shifting colours of the world reflected in her wide eyes. He sits down beside her and waits until she is done looking for whatever it is she is looking for out in the distance. She turns to him, and smiles and he immediately offers her the flowers like a child on mother's day, eager and clumsy and wordless.

Ermintrude relieves Lilly of the juicy tuft of grass in her hand so that she can take the flowers. She sniffs them and smiles a soft smile. Walter wants desperately for her to stroke his hair.

'They are beautiful,' she says, all sleepy in that southern voice. 'I must have been a good girl.'

Walter shrugs, embarrassed. 'I just... You know, they were... They are nice, aren't they?'

'They are, Walter. Thank you. I'll put them in a vase and keep them on my windowsill so that I can see them every morning when I wake up, first thing all of the time. They will remind me of you.'

'Until they die.'

Lilly looks at the flowers. 'They won't die,' she tells him.

Walter leans down and pulls up a tuft of grass for the goat. 'I can't seem to finish my story,' he says.

Lilly looks at him and scrunches up her nose. 'But you have the ending already. I can tell. You just have to scratch it into the pages. You know the drill, Mister Stopps, you just gotta do it.'

'I think I know the ending, but... I don't know. I don't want...' Walter pauses and looks out over the river towards the hills, out towards Cameo's camp hidden in the valley.

'It doesn't have to be sad, Walter. It's your story. We all make mistakes, but that doesn't mean that the ending has to be sad. You have to let go sometimes so that you can move forwards. You have to forgive yourself and see what happens.'

Lilly lifts her feet from the bench and lets them float to the ground. She curls her toes in the lush grass. 'Do you know who Humphry Davy is?'

'The guy with the lightbulb?'

Lilly nods and points a finger at Walter like a kindergarten teacher. 'The lightbulb guy,' she says with a smile. 'It was in the early eighteen hundreds sometime, at London's Royal Institute where all the clever science guys used to hang out and talk over their inventions and stuff. Volta, I can't remember his first name, he'd already invented the battery. Davy builds a whole bunch of these things, like eight hundred or so, and links them all together in the basement of the Royale Institute. All that hissing and sulphur, the smell must have been

horrible. Upstairs they were all gathered around in one of the auditoriums to see what Humphry was cooking up, all crammed up in that place, some of the cleverest people around. No women though, so maybe they weren't all that clever.

‘Anyway, Davy stands there at the front, the hissing and sulphur brewing in the basement, and he has a carbon filament in each hand, like a point of metal with a wooden handle, sort of like two giant pencils. You have to remember that electricity hasn't been around long and they are still figuring out what to do with it and they don't really even know how it works. And Davey, he brings those two filaments together and that auditorium explodes into light, electric light for the very first time. Can you imagine what that moment must have been like? Out of the orange gloom, after hundreds and hundreds of years, no more candles or oil lamps, a new light created from a strange new power. It must have been like the birth of fire, everybody in that auditorium knowing all at once that nothing was ever going to be the same again, knowing that it was the beginning of the new world. Can you imagine? Can you imagine what that moment must have felt like?’

Lilly sniffs her flowers and looks out towards the horizon. She gets to her feet and hands Walter the length of rope attached to the goat's neck. ‘You keep her for now,’ she says. ‘Finish the story, Walter. Just push the pen into the paper and come what may.’

She walks off without another word and Walter is left contemplating the birth of light while Ermintrude chews absently on her tuft of grass. He sits quietly, a little lost, and listens to the sounds of encroaching night. Not so much the sounds of night perhaps, as the quieting of the daytime, revealing the more subtle notes of what is to come. He sits completely still, he breaths slow and steady. On the bank of the river the willow dips her long arms in the cool water and whispers like a snake, like gas from a stove many years ago, the burners up full, the oven door open. The whisper becomes a death song and Walter is dragged by the slow current towards that moment, out of the darkness and into the light. He can see his friend sitting on a

camp bed drinking beer next to the hissing stove. The kitchen is a morbid green colour. Paint peeling from the walls in places where damp has seeped through from the outside. The windows half covered by creeping ivy so that it feels close and muggy inside. There are dirty dishes and pans piled high in the sink, crusted food stuck around the rims of the plates. He forces himself to look hard at a child's dummy sitting on the counter in a puddle of spit.

Walter knows that his friend feels sick because his dick is still dirty from that woman and he is suffering from something impossible to define, a disease contracted in the town he ran away from in the dead of night. He thought he had escaped, but the disease has been with him the whole time, born of need and mortality fear and a selling of the soul. The causes never died so the disease lived on. Walter wishes he could wrap his arms around him and pull him close and tell him he is sorry. Trainer is hungry but the beer is helping. The gas is starting to make him feel nauseous. His body feels hollow and bloated, like his own bullshit is filling him with methane and he is just like a balloon, a clown, a fucking greedy clown. He curses himself under his breath and wonders why he was never a stronger man, a better man. He drops the can and makes for the sink where he sickens up the beer over the dirty dishes. When he is done, his stomach continues to dry retch until it calms. Walter can feel the tight ache in his friend's belly and the dull thudding in his head as he sits back down on the camp bed and cracks another beer.

He'd sent Walter a letter. He was desperate and sad. He'd waited. In the letter he asked his friend to come out to the house in the woods. He explained what had happened, about Audrey skipping town with the kid, about how he was lost, how he was sorry he left the way he did. He had never asked Walter for anything, not ever, but he was asking now. The letter was clear. He needed a friend. He was afraid and he was asking for help. There was no reply. He waited. He watched the mailbox each morning, alone in his hallway, anxious, listening. No reply, as if the letter had been sent out into the cold ether, a message in a bottle, floating,

unread. He was alone. Walter watches as Trainer picks up the photo of his wedding day from the floor next to the remaining beers and runs his thumb over the image of his wife. How had he not noticed the brave, solemn look on her face that day, as if she had known the risk. It was not a celebration for her like it was for him. Trainer was convinced they would make it. He had turned his back on the disease and was ready to start over. But she had known the risk, the long odds, and still she said yes. He used to write back in college, stories about what it meant to be in love or to suffer the slings and arrows and still come out fighting. Walter always admired his friend, the way he could use words to express shared truths, revealing things that Walter sensed existed but was never able to articulate himself. Trainer would read his stories out loud to Walter and Angel when they were stoned out of their heads, late nights in the living room of their rundown place in Shelby Oaks, the three of them curled up on the wooden floor with bean bags and blankets, inseparable. Trainer had a great storytelling voice and Walter and Angel were transfixed by his words. The stories were often jumbled, but there was always that yearning for truth, as if Trainer was to remind himself he was not alone.

Walter had opened the envelope and pulled out the napkin with the childlike writing scrawled all over. A cry for help from a friend. Then he screwed up the napkin into a tight ball and threw it in the trash without telling Angel. Because he was angry. Because he resented Trainer for leaving. Because he had the disease and was not able to care in the old ways. His friend needed him, but he didn't care.

He watches Trainer crack a third can of beer, the death song all around. There is spittle and dried sick in the corner of his mouth. He keeps gagging on the gas, but it won't knock him out and Walter can feel his friend's frustration. Trainer figured he would be unconscious by now. He hadn't planned on the sick feeling and the ache in his belly. He didn't want or need all this time to think about what he had done to Audrey and Dylan. He looks at the pillow taken from his son's bedroom, resting at the end of the camp bed near the open stove. It has a picture of a

cat and a dog on the front and something about the happy union makes him certain that he will never see his son again. He picks up the pillow and inhales deeply, searching for the scent of his boy - that warm, milky smell - but the gas is everywhere, and his son is far away. Walter knows his friend feels ashamed because he cannot see his son clearly in his mind. Audrey had taken the photo from the front of the fridge, the one where Dylan is riding on the plastic frog at the street fare, eyes wild with joy, hands holding tight to the frog's bright green ears.

Walter looks into the open mouth of the stove and imagines gleaming white fangs dripping with venom. He can feel his friend trying hard to summon an image of his boy: the crooked smile, the uneven fringe cut low on the forehead, wide blue eyes. But the boy is a shadow. He drinks more beer and squeezes his eyes shut. His body inside the dirty dressing gown feels thin and gangly and reminds him of being in hospital when he was a kid, the time he had to have his tonsils out. He looks down at his beaten sneakers and wishes he had not given up trying to share the truth. This is when he decides he needs a cigarette.

Walter looks at the packet of Lucky Strikes in the basket on top of the fridge, way at the back with the baby medicine, scratched sunglasses and old shopping receipts. He wants to hide them, but he can't. Trainer reaches up and finds the pack and pulls out a cigarette. Walter watches as his friend searches the kitchen until he finds the book of matches. Trainer opens the book and Walter wants to cry out as his friend discovers the single remaining match.

Trainer had written a letter. He had asked for help. Walter had ignored him.

There is an explosion of colour as flames erupt from the mouth of the stove and reach out into the forest of green and wrap themselves around the two men until there is nothing but heat and movement and everything is both chaos and stillness, and in that moment, Walter discovers something about himself that he had buried deep down inside, in the darkest place now illuminated.

He lowers the pen to his side and watches the ink bleed out into the white sheets. He drops the pen and rubs his hands up and down his forearms as if there is something on his skin, something cold clinging to him. He looks at the words scrawled into the rough yellow white paper and does not recognise his own handwriting. It is desperate and angular, but his story fits perfectly, the last words pushed into the bottom of the last page as if the book had been designed for his story alone. He closes the book and turns it on its side and runs his fingers across the gold lettering along the spine. Even the name seems foreign to him now.

He slides the book beneath his pillow and gets up out of the bed and breathes in the night air from the open window, naked and cold. He looks up at the impossible sky, a million dead lights. He inhales the cold smell of silver and liquid blue. He closes his eyes and tries hard to smell the moon. In the daytime, when it is hidden behind angels' wings, it smells different, softer.

He reaches for his cigarettes on the wooden table beside the bed but his hand hovers above the white packet and he knows in that moment that he will never smoke again. He is unsettled but does not know why. He enjoys the cold, chalky moon smell and thinks for a moment that he can feel his body communing. We are all made of stars, he thinks. How strange.

He wakes the next morning to the general ebb and flow of the clinic outside of his door. A woman is laughing at a man doing a kind of monkey impression. A door slams. Feet, like soft brushes on a snare, play out a lazy jazz number on the wooden steps, the old ensemble stuff his dad used to listen to.

It is a new day, as if nothing special had happened the night before, as if the story, like so many stories before it, had changed only the writer and not the world. He sniffs at the air but cannot smell the moon. He grabs his towel from the hook on the door and makes his way towards the bathroom. A man spots him in the corridor and tucks his head down low into his

chest. Walter recognises him instantly. The guy had tried to say hello so many times before, but Walter had always ignored him. This time he stops dead and smiles and tries hard to keep his arms by his sides. He says a quiet hello. The guy stops in his tracks and smiles right back as if he is seeing Walter for the very first time, no hard feelings.

He is quite a bit older than Walter, familiar, with a receding hairline combed over into a neat parting, leaving in its wake a smooth white forehead above wide blue eyes. He has thin, moist lips and rosy cheeks that make him look a little like a china doll. 'About time, fella. About time for sure,' he says as he slaps Walter on the back. 'You got any smokes?'

Walter reaches into his pants pocket and hands over the crisp white box with the sharp edges and the neat little flip top lid.

'You can keep them.' He smiles but feels that tinge of sadness creep into his chest again. 'I gave up,' he adds as an afterthought.

'That's swell, just swell. More for me. And no need to be so glum. We all gotta give up sometime, am I right?' The man pats his pants pocket as if looking for his matchbook or some loose change. 'Well, it's good you said hello. Important, wouldn't you say? You're doin' just fine, kid. Just fine.'

Then, without warning, the guy opens up his arms and folds Walter into his chest like a bear. He speaks softly then, his mouth close to Walter's ear. 'I'm real proud of you. Real proud. Don't you forget that.'

Just as Walter is sure he is going to collapse, the guy lets go and waves the packet of cigarettes in his face and grins a child's grin. 'More for me!' he says, then tucks his head back into his chest and heads for the stairs. Just as he is about to go down, he waves back at Walter. He doesn't turn around or break his stride, just pushes his arm up into the air and spreads his fingers wide like they are old friends just finished the day shift and he's late to get the train home to the wife and kid.

Walter waves back even though the guy is already gone.

In the communal bathroom he runs a shower. There is a man in the next cubical singing a song about missing your sweetheart in the old, old town back home. He has a terrible voice, but Walter enjoys the song all the same. The hot running water feels great against his skin. He stands there and lets it all wash away down the plughole and tries not to think too much.

When he gets out, the place is empty. He towels himself dry and gets into his pants. Then he eyes the mirror from across the room, unable to see his reflection because it is set against the wall above the sink which is in a kind of alcove at the back of the room. He wills himself forwards, step by step. He takes a hold of the edge of the sink and waits for his breathing to steady. The man who eventually looks back at Walter from the mirror is skinny with hollow cheeks. He has a pronounced jaw jutting out just below his ears before disappearing into an untidy beard spotted here and there with silver. His skin is tanned which makes the whites of his eyes sparkle. His hair is matted and falls down just above his shoulders. Walter tilts his head back a little, turns left and right whilst keeping his eyes on the man in the mirror. He is a biblical figure, especially in his linen pants. The blue in his eyes is vivid and searching. His lips are soft and almost pale against his tanned skin. He is a little beaten, but there is also something youthful and vibrant in his sharp features. He looks kind. That is what Walter finds most shocking. The man in the mirror looks gentle and kind.

He picks up the scissors from the little wooden shelf next to the sink. Later he reaches for the clay bowl with the fresh smelling white lather and the wooden brush with the thick bristles. Later still he reaches for the razor hanging next to the strap from a small hook in the wall beside the mirror. He is preparing for something but he is not sure what he is preparing for.

‘Looky here, looky here!’ Cameo rocks forward in his chair and gets to his feet as Walter walks down the stairs into the hallway towards the main door. He rubs his chin

self-consciously just as Cameo wraps an arm around his shoulders and squeezes tight.

‘You clean up pretty good when you wants to.’

‘I guess so.’

‘You guess, huh?’ Cameo lets go of Walter and pokes him in his skinny ribs. ‘See you got your book there, too. Feels to me like it might be full of words and all finished.’

Walter looks at the book under his arm but cannot think of anything to say about its contents.

‘Best get yourself off to the doc. I can see you got a lot on your mind today. You know where I’ll be.’ Cameo gently pushes Walter towards the corridor where Benedict keeps his office, right down at the end. ‘You go along, son,’ he says with a wink.

Walter knocks and hears the old man sing song his usual cheery invitation. He steps into the office, unsure for a moment how to play it, or even how to feel about all of the stuff going on in his head. Benedict nods and waves a hand at the seat in front of his desk. He says:

‘Why don’t you sit down, Walter. It’s good to see you.’

Walter takes the seat and lifts the book up like a kid with his homework. ‘Did it,’ he says, then feels stupid.

‘You did, son. Although it took you some time I must say.’

The old man is standing next to the window with his back to Walter. He is smoking on his pipe. The rich, grey clouds waft up into the shafts of orange light above his head. His hair really does look like it is on fire and Walter remembers the first time the old man walked into the room and smiled that smile.

‘Well then, you must be excited?’ Benedict turns to look at Walter then makes his way behind his desk and falls into his seat. ‘Smoke?’

‘No thanks. I quit.’

‘Well, well, whatever next,’ he says. There is a pause. The old man smokes on his pipe.

Walter sits there, waiting, wishing something would happen.

‘There is really nothing else to say, son,’ the old man eventually proclaims from behind his curtain of grey smoke.

Walter thinks about the Wizard of Oz, then feels stupid again because he knows that if the old man is the Wizard then he is Dorothy and he cannot stand the thought of being that naive all over again.

‘Nothing?’

‘You’ve said it all, right there in that book.’

Walter is confused. He hadn’t known what to expect. Maybe he wanted to talk about the story, about what it meant or how it made him feel. Maybe he just wanted the old man to share a beer and tell how proud he was, or how everything was going to work out just fine from here on in. Benedict says:

‘You better find somebody to read the thing now. Not much time left.’

Walter stumbles over a few words then gives up. He feels cheated.

‘Don’t look so glum,’ the old man says as he pushes himself up out of his chair and walks back to his post in front of the tall window. He puffs on his pipe and wafts the smoke up over his face with his hand and coughs a tight cough that is somehow final and dismissive.

‘Off you go now, son. It’s time.’

Walter gets up out of the chair and walks uncertainly towards the door. He turns the handle and opens the door and looks back at the old man, expecting a smile, a laugh - something to fill the small hole which has opened up in his heart. Benedict is busy with his pipe. He keeps his gaze fixed on some distant object outside the window. He pushes the tobacco around with a match, unawares that his hair is on fire or that he has hurt Walter in an old, familiar way.

Walter turns his back on the old man, closes the door quietly behind him and uses his sleeve to wipe his eyes. He walks up to Cameo sitting in his rocking chair, humming that sad,

familiar tune. He looks at the massive doors standing tall and ominous behind the man: the intricate carvings, the heavy iron lock with the large keyhole, the scarred voussoirs and the majestic keystone abutting the stucco ceiling above.

Cameo looks up at Walter and gives him a gentle smile. ‘Guess you want yourself a peek?’ he says. ‘You could always come back to mine for some tea. Got me a stove as you know, so no worries on that score.’

Walter nods. ‘Maybe later.’

‘Sure thing. You know where I am if you need me.’

‘Are you going to let me take that peek?’

‘You go ahead, son. Door ain’t locked.’

Walter laughs to himself and a little of the hurt dissolves. ‘Not locked?’

‘Now why would it be locked?’

Cameo unfolds himself out of his chair and reaches for the iron handle. As he pulls on the door Walter feels a sudden rush of fear. He wants to turn and run up to his room and hide under his bed. He forces himself to stay, imagines himself immovable, even when his feet rock backwards a little and he feels like he might topple over.

The door swings open and the sun streams into the gloomy hall. Walter looks around to see the reactions on the faces of his fellow inmates, but the hall is empty except for Cameo and Walter and the wide point of sunlight burning into the black and white tiled floor.

‘Thanks, Cameo.’

The man lays a hand on Walter’s shoulder. He starts humming his sad tune and Walter takes a breath and steps out into the harsh sunlight on the other side of the door.

The lawn is an impossible flat green carpet that stretches all the way down to a high stone wall with a single black iron gate in its centre. There is a yellow brick pathway that leads from the steps to the gate, but Walter is afraid to move. He can see something through the

bars beyond the gate: a thin black line, a brown line, then silver, less distinct, sparkling in the sunlight, shifting in rising heat waves.

Suddenly sprinklers explode into life in uniformed rows up and down the lawn. The water whooshes up into the air then arcs downwards creating crystal spheres that look as if they have dropped out of the sky and half embedded themselves in the soft earth. The surface of each sphere ripples and undulates and plays a prism with the light, casting rainbows over the green carpet. The water makes a splat, splat, splat sound as it shoots up into the air then falls back to earth.

Walter walks towards the iron gate at the end of the path. In his head he hears Cameo humming his mournful tune. His feet move slowly over the uneven paving, a steady pace in time with the music. When he reaches the gate, he leans his head against the bars and takes a breath. The book is heavy under his arm. With his free hand he reaches up and holds onto the gate for support because he feels hot and faint. The water splat splats up into the air and casts amorphous colour shapes behind him. Just beyond the gate there is a two-lane blacktop with a broken white line running down its centre. He can feel the heat rising from the highway. Beyond the highway there is a beach, and beyond the beach he can see the ocean: a thick silver blue line in the distance that separates the land from the pale chalk sky. He can see the sun reflected in the ocean and realises it is much later than he thinks. The clouds around the sun are bathed in reds and oranges, they seem to be lowering the sun into the ocean like silent handmaidens.

Then Walter notices the bridge further up the beach. It has changed since he last saw it. They have constructed another hundred metres or so of the steel framework that supports the wide, silvery road on its back. There are several trucks far out on the bridge, one is carrying lengths of curved steel. He can see men in yellow hard hats working with welding equipment. They are suspended beneath the bridge, illuminated by the sparks from their arc torches which

cause strange shadows to appear and disappear on the surface of the rolling ocean below.

Suddenly halogen lights burst into life, suspended from steel poles that line the edge of the bridge on either side of the wide road. The lights reflect off the silvery surface of the road and make it seem as if the bridge is floating above the ocean without legs. There are more trucks on the beach delivering mixed cement. There are diggers and land movers and more men in yellow hats, each bent to his work. They look like robots crawling over a steel skeleton that has risen from the depths of the earth, up out of the water, illuminated. The bridge is impossible and gleaming and proud, its neck stretched long and elegant, its spine slick and strong and smooth.

That is when Walter is sure he can hear the woman's voice from somewhere up the beach near the bridge.

'Stay with me, please.'

Her voice is softer this time, almost musical, but still insistent.

'Stay with me. Come on, stay with me.'

She is too far away for Walter to know if it is him she is calling to. He is nervous. He does not like the voice, the way it keeps pushing.

'Stay with me.'

He wants to drown out the voice with Cameo's song, but his mind is blank in the heat.

'Stay with me.'

He wants to scream out for the voice to stop.

'Stay with me.'

He wants the voice to leave him alone, leave him in peace.

Then she lays her hand on the small of his back and he can feel her fingers push gently into his skin, just enough to slow his breathing, to slow his heart and allow his grip to loosen on the bars of the gate. She has come to rescue him. Her voice is close and he knows she is there

for him. She will not ask him to stay. She will ask instead to read his story. She will take the book from him and she will read his story and she will understand.

The clouds deliver the sun to the ocean, which erupts for a moment in violent colour before silence engulfs the world and there is only her.

* * * *

Chapter XII.

The Book

His wide, marsupial eyes scan the walls and ceilings of shadowy corridors. The darkness threatens to suck him in. He never pauses. He remains in the centre, counting his footsteps out loud just so he can hear the sound of his own voice.

Beneath the bleached earth of White Plains, Arizona, encased in concrete, feasting on information supplied by thousands of metres of umbilical cord, his brain grows fat and crazy while his body wastes away inside his yellow stained lab coat.

The air above is thick with poisoned dust. There is no sun, no day or night, just the burning wind that eats at the frail, skeletal carcasses of shopping malls and abandoned tower blocks. Freeways glitter with broken glass and broken bones. Everything is forgotten. But he is alive, listening.

Shrouded in the sickly pale computer light within the labs, he shuffles from station to station, the soft thud-thudding of his naked heels dissolving into the electronic sing-song from the tiny speakers.

One mile beneath the earth, he listens to the musical echo of the universe. On the surface, satellite dishes raise their heads and commune with far away probes on the edge of the galaxy. Row upon row, like mechanised geese, they crane their necks in the name of science, of hope, and regurgitate their findings down the umbilical cord. Far below, in Silo 17, he listens.

The tube lighting flickers and buzzes. The speakers in the wall hiss and burble. The amplifiers switch on and then off again in response to surges from the main distributor. The fuel cells are dying. Everything is dead or dying. Soon there will only be enough power to run the computers: perhaps a month, maybe two. His calculations are often wrong. His mind is fuzzy and only has time for the music - an undulating cacophony picked up by the probes

orbiting far away planets in search of new truth.

This morning he took apart the food machines to see how many packet meals were inside.

Thirty-six.

Thirty-six meals is thirty six days. The packets are small. In the beginning he would eat three a day. There used to be fruit and vegetables grown under artificial lighting, tinned juice and little white pills that contained vitamins and minerals. Now his teeth are loose and his gums bleed. How long has it been?

He remembers.

They reached the silo site in a small convoy of armoured vehicles. They wore oxygen masks and transparent polythene suits over their uniforms. They had radio mics, but nobody talked until it was time for him to enter the tube.

At the height of the programme there were twenty-eight scientists, one doctor, and the Chief. But he was the first. They shook his hand, the large men in thro grey uniforms. One, the tallest of them, had a row of shiny gold medals pinned to his chest. This man told him he was important to the programme.

Thirty-six packets is thirty-six days. The water purifiers are failing. The water is murky. It smells bad and hurts his stomach. He wants to clean the filters, but he is afraid. He remembers the silent maintenance personnel in their blue overalls and oily black face masks. He remembers her.

They were the first to arrive after him, the faceless men and women in blue overalls, heads bowed. Like ghosts they hovered around the machinery hidden within the silo. He would listen to them crawling in the voids above and below: giant termites breathing in the poisoned air. It was their job to clean the air filters and water purifiers. They were the first to become contaminated. Their hair thinned and fell out in clumps. They retched up a pale yellow liquid that smelled of sulphur. When this happened, they were quarantined inside the med lab. The

doctor injected them with heavy doses of a blue chemical which caused angry contusions along the veins of the forearms and at the temples.

Their sickness made everybody nervous. Once it was known that contamination was possible, he became convinced that he could smell poison in the recycled air, taste aluminium or mercury in the water. He had nightmares that he was listening to nothing more than the antiphonal ebb and flow of long extinct planets. He felt he was being abandoned, the universe expanding away from him.

Now it is his hair falling out. Yesterday he pulled out a large, greasy clump and rolled it between his right thumb and forefinger. He watched it float down to the floor like a feather and rest at his feet.

He sits in his chair and punches his password into the computer. Today the dishes will pick up a signal from the probes, the message he has been listening for. There is not much time left.

Thirty-six packets is thirty-six days.

And there used to be fruit that would grow under artificial lighting: oranges, kiwis, blueberries. T13 looked after the plants. He remembers the man. He was young and thin with blonde hair and kind eyes. He would talk to the plants, play music for them. But F13 never talked to him or played music for him. Nobody ever talked to him, except for her, that one time: naked, foetal. 'I'm scared.'

He was the only one in the beginning. There were the maintenance personnel, but they always remained behind their masks, inside of their greasy, contaminated overalls. They were not allowed to speak to the scientist, they were below him. That is what he was conditioned to think, and that is what he came to believe.

He is tired and cannot concentrate. He punches in code to record all input from the probes, then switches off and returns to his quarters.

He wakes in a cold sweat. His lungs ache. There is blood on his pillow.

He remembers.

The man with the medals was smiling and shaking his hand. He was tall with cropped silver hair and wide shoulders. But he was nervous, he already had the sickness. 'We're not sure how long we have left, son. The project failed. We failed. None of the units returned so we are all counting on you now. The work you do down there is important to us all.'

He stepped into the tube and entered his personal code into the keypad, the one printed on the aluminium tag around his neck. The doors closed. The men disappeared. The tube began its one- mile descent into the earth.

There was a popping sound in his ears, his chest began to ache. After a while the tube stopped and an automated message informed him that the pause was to allow time for his body to adjust to the pressure. He sat down on the floor and took deep, steady breaths. He was not nervous. He was chosen. He told himself, over and over in a quiet voice, that his mother and father would be proud. He was important to the programme. The bridge had failed, they had lost many men, and now it was down to him to pick up a signal, to find a new kind of hope.

They are both dead. They died of the sickness soon after his thirty-second birthday. His mother had given him the combination to a safe hidden beneath the floor in the kitchen and begged him not to forget the names of things. That is what happened: a collective forgetting of everything before Day Zero. The surviving land mass across the globe was divided into two parts after that day. There was The Sections and there was The Outlands. The rest was desolate waste or swallowed whole by hungry oceans.

People believed that those within The Sections were the lucky ones, the ones who would survive, but that was already changing by the time he entered the tube all those years ago.

The names of people and places dissolved into nothingness. That was old knowledge,

already extinct.

His mother had been a seamstress who worked all day with her hands and made and fixed beautiful, practical things. She liked to write in a book which she kept with her at all times. The son had never been allowed to see this book when his mother was alive, but he had it with him in the tube that first day. He had smuggled it from the safe, wrapped it up in his yellow jumpsuit and buried it at the bottom of his case. They had forgotten to search him before he entered the tube, before they shook his hand and smiled a collective smile, nervous. One of them, tall with silver hair, already carrying the sickness inside. They had forgotten to search him, so the book was with him, wrapped in his jumpsuit: his mother's wisdom.

He hadn't stayed with them when they got sick, when they needed him. He had walked away to save himself, to be part of the new world. He assured himself, over and over until it became a mantra of reason, they wanted him to leave even though they did not say it out loud, even though they were weak and hungry. He packed his bag early one morning and snuck out of the house in his clear polythene suit. He thought he had made a clean escape, but when he looked back he saw his mother sitting at the window watching him. The window was open and he wanted to shout for her to close it, to protect herself, but he just turned and walked away and didn't look back.

The automated message informed him that it was safe to continue the final descent into the silo. He was the first. It was be his job to establish initial contact with the probes in all four quadrants. The giant satellite dishes on the surface would need to be repositioned using the computer systems in the main lab. He was to decipher the information that would be sent back to earth. He was to listen as he had been trained to listen.

There are no longer names for things. There is no meaning. There is only the sickness.

He can feel the world above him now as he walks through the dark corridors of the silo. He is careful to keep in the centre, counting his footsteps aloud as if this simple observing of

slow progress, his childlike mantra, will save him from the shadows, from the memories of that first day when the tube doors opened and the disinfectant smell and gentle hum of machinery filled his body with hope, his whole body, where now there is only a small pocket left inside, a feeble chamber that holds too tight to an idea grown pale and sickly.

He begins to weep inside the darkness of the corridor and forgets to count his footsteps out loud and so becomes lost and disoriented. He cannot forget the blood on his pillow. When he looked in the mirror, he saw a ghost. His hair is almost all gone. The whites of his eyes have turned a murky yellow colour. He is dying.

Everything is dead or dying.

He stops and reaches out into the liquid blackness and finds the cold concrete wall. It is damp, smooth except for the raised ink of a stencilled number five. He pulls himself together. He remembers instead his first tasks within the silo: putting on his lab coat, switching on the mainframe and uploading the software to decipher the multi-strand code that will be relayed from the probes, unpacking his mother's book and placing it on the empty steel shelf in his living quarters.

He makes it to the lab. The music comes to his rescue: the gentle bleeping and blip blipping. The probes are out there, up there, in darkest space, searching for a sign. He takes a seat in front of his computer and punches in code to review the probes' trajectories for the last... how long has he been away from his computer? His sleep patterns are erratic. He decides to review the previous nine hours. Nothing. He tears open a food packet and drinks the thick liquid down in one. It tastes sour. A moment later his stomach tightens. He is cold all over, can feel a layer of sweat forming on his forehead. He rubs his head. When he looks at his hand there are a few strands of long, greasy hair tangled in his fingers. He falls to his knees and sickens up the sour food onto the silo floor. He is an animal: basic, reduced. He pushes himself into a corner of the lab and rests his back against the cold concrete wall.

He has the sickness. He is dying. He stares at the lumpy yellow brown liquid on the floor near his feet. His toenails are long, dirty and yellow, like the liquid on the floor, like his eyes. He used to wear clean white pumps and white socks. At the end of each day's work, after he had showered and brushed his teeth, he would sit up in his cot and read from his mother's book.

After Day Zero his father seemed to lose a part of himself that never returned. The man was broken that day, as if he knew instantly what was to come. He would walk around the house drinking whiskey straight from the bottle. When the whiskey ran out, he confined himself to the basement. Government had no need for carpenters, builders of old things. There were no trees. The future was micro-processors and information. The bridge would save them, technology would save them. Being smart and strong would save them. But the ones who crossed over did not return. Whole platoons would arrive on the beach day after day: specially trained soldiers dedicated to the cause, to the future, but they were never seen again. Eventually the men in uniform ordered the bridge to be closed so that nobody else would be lost.

When he walked away from his parents that day, he enrolled in The Section S17 training programme where he was told he would learn to interpret complex information which would eventually be supplied by the probes. That was a long time ago, before the silo. Before her.

Pushed into the corner like a child, the smell of the foul liquid invading his nose, he remembers her naked body huddled against the tiled wall of the shower cubicle, knees pulled close to her chest, eyes frantic like a caged bird.

'I'm scared.'

He does not like to think about her, or his mother or father.

Soon after the first day he descended, after he had positioned the dishes and located the probes, masses of complex information began filtering into the silo from invisible space. The

computers stalled and whirred and complained. It was too much for just one person to decipher. That is when the Scientists alighted one by one from the tube with their heads held in a manner that made him uncomfortable, their faces blank.

Then the new Chief arrived to take control of things, to make sure that everybody was operating to their full potential. The Chief informed him that things on the surface were bad. Experimental crops were refusing to grow in the polluted earth, all meat was poison. He said people never quite got over the failure of the bridge. There were too many mouths to feed and not enough food. That is what he said, smoothing down his oily grey hair as if starvation and hunger and drought were some new invention.

This simple equation, he said, had given birth to the Citizen's Lottery. Those whose numbers came up disappeared. That is what people told each other. Nobody admitted that for a person to disappear everybody else, the lucky ones, had to look the other way and be grateful it was not their turn. The Chief had lost a sister and a niece. He explained that Government selected the numbers at random from the Citizen's ID Bank, but those who were banished to The Outlands were always those less able to contribute to the programme: the uneducated and poor and sick. The man explained that his sister was nothing special and so that was that.

In his tortured mind he often sees the sister and niece being dragged from their home. The woman begs for them to leave her child behind. She will do anything if they forget about her baby. Anything. The little girl clings to the ponytail of a melted, faceless doll. The woman collapses into the broken glass and bottle tops that litter the street. She promises to do things for the soldiers the little girl does not understand. She tears open the poppers on her polythene suit and lifts up her skirt. Her knickers are stained yellow with a frayed seam at the waist. One of the soldiers spits in her face and the little girl flinches.

The smell of his own sick drives him from the lab into the dark corridor which will return

him to his living quarters. He counts his steps out loud but cannot hear his own voice, as if everything is being swallowed up by the dark, or within its cold liquid embrace he is becoming insubstantial.

He remembers.

Rumours of cannibalism had already begun to leak into The Sections even before he joined the programme. His mother refused to believe it, but his father retreated to the basement and that is how the boy knew it was true.

A miracle: that is how his father used to describe the forming of the universe. In the liquid blackness of the corridor he can picture the ultimate inception. Fourteen billion years ago. Not a bang, rather a quiet creation of space and time caused by the separation of strong nuclear force from elite weak nuclear force. Everything hot, the intense heat of life in progress, unleashed into nothingness. He imagines that instant as a single breath held then released - protons, neutrons, electrons creating atomic nuclei. In their cooling, high energy electrons allow photons to drift freely in the murky fog above a dream of future oceans. Four hundred million years of blackness, then particles, anti-particles. Gravity creating stars creating galaxies: $E=mc^2$. It is almost impossible to imagine. You have to feel it: violent supernovas, the symphonic crash and boom of cymbals, primordial tympani. An orchestra wild with vision, hell-bent on stellar and supernova nucleosynthesis. And from thunderous crescendo, sublime adagio: the gentle birthing of the elements necessary to create and sustain life.

He marvels, not only at the miracle itself, but at mankind's ability to comprehend its own creation. Then the music stops abruptly, the symphony nothing but a cruel joke. Fourteen billion years wasted after all. Is this what becomes of miracles? There must have been - lurking, invisible - a malignant gas creeping between the particles of light, infecting protons and anti-protons, a cancer burying itself in the foetus of creation, waiting.

What will be left when the protactinium dust settles? Will the creatures of the Achaea

kingdoms rise from the depths of their single-celled worlds beneath the earth's surface? Will they grow eyes and blink at the empty sky? Will Prometheus steal fire from the gods once more? Will they split the atom and give birth a second time to that abomination, proud yet haunted by vague, primordial memories. He can feel them slithering and crawling in the mud on the other side of the concrete wall, ready to rise. Are they already infected with the disease or have they evolved?

He makes it to his living quarters, collapses onto his steel framed bed and allows his eyes to close. He hopes they might never open.

He wakes. The sheets are wet, stained yellow, almost translucent so that he can see the curly indentations of the springs in the mattress. There is fresh blood on the pillow.

He limps towards the sanitary block that adjoins his living quarters. He uses one of the steel sinks for support, raises his face to the mirror and the terrible truth. He does not recognise the thing that stares back from the cold glass, no longer a man but a wounded animal.

He remembers finding her curled up in the centre shower cubicle, naked beneath the running water, hair clinging to her face.

'I'm scared.'

He remembers her blue overalls scrunched up in a dirty pile on the wet tiled floor, stained with the yellow liquid. The mask laid beside the uniform, oil and blood spattered around the mesh of the mouthpiece.

'I'm scared.'

He approached slowly. He reached up and turned the steel dial on the shower head. He watched the pink water as it swirled around the steel basin and disappeared into the black hole in the centre. She had the sickness. He wanted to reach out and move the strands of wet hair from her face and tuck them behind her ear, but he was too afraid.

Her lips were blue from the cold, her shoulders and arms bruised and pricked with goose bumps. He thought of dead flesh plucked of feathers, wings clipped and discarded into troughs. A trickle of blood ran from her nose to the edge of her mouth.

The memory is too much. He cannot look in the mirror, cannot bare the hollow eyes, the sunken cheeks. Damp papery skin draped over bones and decaying muscle. He cannot bear that he did not reach out, did not take her in his arms and hold her close and whisper his gratitude. She had looked after them all, looked after him, for so long but he could not reach out and thank her.

He walks in the centre of the darkness towards the labs and listens to the tap tapping of his toenails against the cold, concrete floor. He remembers a brown labrador running in circles on a kitchen floor: the thud thudding of stubby paws, the wag wagging of the thick tail. The dog wants to play in the woods but it is the last day of the holiday and the mother is packing the car and closing the shutters and doors of the little cabin. It is time to go home. The boy and the dog are not allowed to play outside in their camp. The mother has told the boy but she has forgotten to tell the dog. The boy drops to his knees and explains in simple language, in his grown-up voice, that it is time to go home.

The father is sitting on the porch. The mother is doing all the work. Then something strange. A far-off thunderclap that shakes the cabin. A rushing wind. A sucking sound, unnatural. One of the shutters comes off its hinges and clatters onto the wooden decking. The boy looks to the father. He can tell instantly the father does not have the answer. The boy and the man are equals in that moment.

He takes his seat in front of the computer. He switches the screen on, then the speakers. The information from the probes - the opposing construction of bleeps and blips and deep gurgles coloured in static and hiss - fills the room. He closes his eyes and listens, turning chaos into music, electric confusion into symphony. Slow undulating bass notes combine with

higher sharp notes - staccato birdsong over whale song. The bass notes play out in his mind like cellos laying a melancholy backdrop for the violin two octaves above the open E-string, in search of truth and freedom. And perhaps, between bass and high treble, a flute played softly, ethereal: the offering of a middle ground, of hope. Then the roll of tympani, thunder and undulation that brings about an end to harmony and ushers in oratorio. This happens when a probe encounters water ice particles and microscopic chemicals that orbit in colourful rings around larger planets similar to Saturn.

All the time he listens for the single irregularity that might signal contact.

There was a time when he would sit at his computer and play composer to the invisible orchestra for hours on end. He would wave his arms to and fro and and grab at the air, pulling the necessary frisson from the woodwinds, raising his arms in supplication to the grand trombone. Like Moses he commanded the impossible of the elements. He imagined the day when the music would reveal to him and him only the answer to the question. He would lead them to Canaan. He would part the Red Sea, the burning oceans, and deliver them all from evil to a new beginning.

‘We’re not sure how long we have left, son. The bridge failed. The work you do down there is important to us all. We must know if we are alone.’

The man with the medals - the tallest of the four, in his smart grey uniform beneath the clear polythene suit. He is dead now. And her. All dead.

She would not have been allowed in the sanitary block on level 4. It was for scientists only. The maintenance personnel lived in the sub levels near the furnace. But she was there. She was dying. He wanted to reach out, but he was afraid to touch her. He simply turned off the showerhead and watched her blood mix with the water. He wondered where the blood would end up. Would it be recycled, consumed by the others after filtration?

He ran from the sanitary block and reached the intercom in the corridor. He pressed hard

on the red button and called for the Doctor to come immediately. He did not go back inside. He did not want to look at her, to breathe the same air. He walked away, towards the music, the question, not knowing that she was the answer. He left her to die alone.

The probe makes it through the rings of ice and chemical debris. The orchestra settles into a mundane singsong. He is too tired to drink the liquid food. The packet remains unopened on the desktop in front of the screen.

He feels sick and empty, aware of the massive space within the protons that make up his fragile body. He can sense the neutrons inside the protons, dancing in the cathedral dome, defying laws of space and time.

Before Day Zero there were more than seven billion people on the earth's surface, but if you removed the empty space within the protons, you could fit all of humankind into a cube the size of a dice. He imagines the numbered cube sitting in the palm of his hand. He tosses it into the air and catches it. Then he brings his palms together with a loud clap that echoes inside of the empty lab, empty body, and feels the beginnings of realisation.

He remembers a night when he was just a child, curled up in bed, soft blankets wrapped around his shoulders. He feels safe. He hears the door to his room creek open, a sliver of orange light casting an angular pathway across the wooden floorboards. He closes his eyes and pretends to sleep, concentrates on the rise and fall of his chest beneath the blankets. Slow, steady breaths that speak of a deep sleep that will fool his parents into thinking he is not with them but someplace far away, a place where small boys become daring astronauts. He imagines he is sitting in the capsule atop a giant spacecraft, completing final checks before liftoff, pushing buttons and turning the dials that illuminate the console before him. He does not want them to know he is awake, even though the deception is almost too painful to affect. He likes it when they sneak into his room to watch over him. They do not talk to each other, not even in whispers, but he senses shared glances floating back and forth in the air above.

They are in love. And they love him, their only child. That love fills him with a delicious warmth that makes the pretending all the more difficult. He listens to his father's deep breathing and mimics the metronomic rise and fall within his own chest. The in and out, up and down, and knows even as a child the impossibility of forever containing life within such a chamber. He feels that he might explode if he does not open his eyes and sit up in bed and reach out towards his mother and father and hold them, and in doing so know that he is precious, irreplaceable - their only child.

He has not loved for such a long time, not in any meaningful way. Not her, even though she had reached out to him before the sickness, before the blood and fear. She placed her hand lightly on his shoulder, then an outstretched finger that delicately traced the zero and the number one printed onto the breast pocket of his white lab coat. He could feel her eyes fixed on his from behind the black mask. He said nothing. Her blue overalls were stained with streaks of machine oil, but her hand, free of the heavy work glove, was pale and delicate: childlike, but too slender, too knowing and cautious to belong to a child. He was alone in the silo, the only scientist, and she had known somehow that he was lost and needed to be held. And she risked everything to reach out and place her hand on his shoulder so that he would know he was not alone. Somewhere inside of the lab a machine beeped and a red light began to flash. The system needed his attention. Her hand darted back to her side and she moved off down the corridor without a word so that nobody would ever know there had been a breach in protocol.

He did not move for a long time because he could feel her hand upon his shoulder and he knew that if he moved it would evaporate into the filtered air. He stood there, caught between two worlds.

He had walked away and left her to die alone, even though he knew instinctively that she was the one, that she had always been there watching over him, cleaning the air and the water,

being invisible, giving life.

He opens the main circuit panel in the lab and turns on all of the speakers within the silo. The universe is unleashed into the stale corridors and dark, empty spaces. The undulating signals from all four probes fill his chest with a lightness that causes him to buckle at the knees and reach out to the wall for support. No longer a symphony imagined, but the simple truth revealed. The universe is out there, a miracle expanding into eternity. It is time to let go.

He limps down the corridor towards the tube, no longer afraid of the shadows. He carries inside of him a lightness inspired by the magnificent hiss and burble and bleeping of deepest space. He steps into the tube and descends into the sublevel. He is the last: no more scientists bent on discovery. No more searching for something he is now convinced exists.

One by one they had stepped from the tube into his underground world. There was too much information from the probes, too much for him alone to decipher. He knew there was a possibility of missing something, that the project had become too big for him, but he was ill at ease with the new faces. They did not like him. They were better than him.

The isolation within the silo had born a strange creature unable to find a place within the group. They avoided him in the mess hall and the living quarters. When he was in the labs nobody spoke. The tension distracted him from the listening, muddled his ears to the more subtle frequencies and undulations within the signal. A decision was made by the alpha males. They approached the Chief and requested the strange scientist be removed to his own quarters and assigned a lab in which to work alone.

It was explained to him, with pleasant affectation, that he was the most important member of the team and deserved his privacy, that by assigning him his own personal lab he might be of even greater use to the programme. He packed his few belongings and set up a lab and living quarters below the main level. He was closer to them, the silent, industrious tribe huddled around the refuse furnace in the sublevel disposal chamber, mesmerised by the

sibilant whisper of blue flame.

He did not know there were fewer and fewer of them to maintain the air and water purifiers, to watch over the generators and fuel cells. He did not know how they gathered around the flaming sepulchre in memory of their dead.

It wasn't long after he was banished to his new lab that the last of the maintenance personnel succumbed to the disease. The Chief announced the news to the assembled scientists. They gathered in the main lab, a nervous group unable to look one another in the eye. He explained they were alone now, looking after themselves. The workers had all gone. He asked if anybody had any practical knowledge of the machines. He said there must be somebody among such a group, somebody who might try. He let the information sink in, perhaps calculating how long they would survive without the faceless shadows to watch over them, perhaps wondering if the sickness was already inside of his staff, inside of his own body. The old man shifted his weight from one foot to the other. He pulled himself together and smiled into the room. He stood straight and said that efforts should be doubled. He said that he would contact his superiors and request new staff. This was a lie. There was no communications equipment anywhere except the computers that received the information from the probes. The silo allowed information to enter but not to leave. The old man knew there was nobody left on the surface. They were the last.

Standing at the back, watching the Chief, watching the scientists and the doctor, he knew they were alone.

He was called to the office. The Chief explained how he found the last member of the maintenance personnel slumped over the furnace controls. It was also explained how they were required to burn their own in order to prevent contamination. That job now belonged to him, due to his superiority over his fellow scientists and his extensive knowledge of the silo. The Chief was resolute, placing his hands upon the young Issac, lowering his eyes to the

ground in prayer.

He remembers stepping out of the tube into the blue light of the sub level corridor. The walls were wet and sticky with the sickness, the floor patterned with sharp edged pools of oily water that reflected the light in strange hues as if a giant mirror had fallen from the ceiling and exploded across the surface of the corridor. He could smell the disease in the air, in the dirty water and blue light.

A bloated body was slumped across the control console on the far side of the furnace room. He noticed the timer had been set for three minutes – long enough for the man to cross the room and lay down on the steel rollers that would pull him inside the belly of the furnace before the compressed oxygen would be injected through the gas valves. There was a strong smell of sulphur. He tried not to breathe as he lifted the body and placed it onto the rollers. He tried not to think as he set the controls. The door slid open behind him. He tried to block out the creaking sound of the rollers, the whisper of the flames. He never knew the man, or the shame and anger that must have guided his hands across the controls.

Now, as he rides the tube one last time into that same world, as he exits and limps from puddle to puddle towards the furnace room with the music of the universe in his chest, he knows it was not shame or anger at all.

This is where they brought her. They would have placed her limp body onto the rollers and watched it being sucked inside the belly of the iron beast. Through the small window they would have watched as the flames subsided for just a second before the tubes fed oxygen into the main burners. Then the silent explosion of colour, bones to ash, to nothing.

One by one the scientists contracted the disease, and it was his job to feed them into the furnace. Some of them continued to work, listening at their stations as if this act of dumb compliance might save them from the disease. Others roamed the corridors ranting and cursing, pulling at their hair, scratching at their eyes and skin. Others made love to one

another and sucked down the packets of liquid food like slugs. Some fell silent by their own hand.

He drifted among them, the ferryman, the one who would burn them when the disease had taken their soul. He listened to the probes for hours on end. He forgot to shower or shave or change his clothes. His hair grew long and tangled, his nails turned to claws. He ate less and less as he did not want to be seen in the mess hall. He made them nervous.

Once, when he was walking the corridors searching for corpses, a woman followed behind screaming insults and accusations which made him feel sick inside. She rushed at him swinging her arms, hitting him on the back of the head and shoulders. He turned to defend himself but one look at her face, at her pain, rendered him mute and helpless. Her eyes were shot through with blood. She had open sores around her lips and on her face and arms. She scratched at his chest, but he did not resist. She spat on him. She slapped him and punched him. Eventually she collapsed into a heap on the floor and fell silent. She did not cry, simply folded inside of herself.

He found it the next day in the labs, the body, curled in a foetal ball beneath her desk. The lab was empty. The computers hummed from vacant stations. Nobody was listening. Nobody wanted to be in there with her. It was his job to deliver her to the other side, to silence the accusation.

The body was stiff. He slid it out from under the desk and thought of the time he discovered a dead mouse in the cabin in the woods. It was curled up tight in a corner of his bedroom, head buried between its front paws, pushed right up against the skirting. When he picked it up by its tail he was surprised at how brittle and light it was. He wondered then if it was the soul that gave things weight, made them substantial in the world.

He remembered the mouse as he lifted her without effort onto the steel gurney, nothing but an empty vessels, a collection of cavernous protons freed from the burden of the soul. This is

what allowed him to carry out his duties, to place them onto the rollers, to set the controls and cast them into the flames.

Eventually the silo was swallowed up by a beautiful silence. He checked the living quarters, the mess hall, the labs. He walked through the sublevel and the machinery rooms, but they were all gone. He was the last. The first and last. A ghost. Listening.

There are no speakers inside the furnace room but he can hear the signal echoing up and down the corridor just outside. He is smiling an old man's smile, a veterans smile. He reaches inside his pocket and pulls out a syringe and a small glass vial of clear liquid. He uncaps the needle and plunges it into the thin metal lid of the vial. He rolls his sleeve and taps on his arm until a weak vein rises to the surface of his papery skin. He sticks himself with the needle and empties the syringe into his vein. He presses buttons on the control panel and sets the timer for three minutes. He limps towards the furnace and lifts himself up onto the rollers. He pulls the empty syringe from his arm and lets it fall to the floor. He lies down on his back and rests his head against the warm steel rollers and marvels at the strange and impossible places mankind will look for answers. His breathing slows. He rests his hands on the rollers at his sides. He is scared but he knows that it will soon be over.

He closes his eyes and finds himself standing in the sanitary block, half blinded by the light reflected from the white tiles. The air is cool, it causes a shiver to spread out from his spine across the backs of his arms. Then he sees a naked woman curled up on the floor in the centre shower cubical, her knees close to her chest. She is smiling, beckoning. He is happy to see her, an angel. He takes off his dirty, blood stained clothes and drops them in a bundle next to the blue overalls on the tiled floor. He steps into the shower and kneels down beside the woman. She reaches out to him, her pale fingers describing a strange pattern on his naked chest. He feels regret, something from a past that cannot be remembered or undone.

The blood and foul-smelling liquid are washed from his pale skin.

'I am scared,' he tells the angel.

She takes his head and pulls it to her breast. 'Stay with me,' she whispers.

'Stay with me.'

She strokes his hair until he feels calm, then she places a finger beneath his chin and lifts his face towards hers and smiles.

She stands and beckons for him to follow. They step out of the shower and walk hand in hand out of the white tiled room towards the steel tube at the end of the bright corridor. The silo emits a gentle, industrious hum. The tube lighting flickers and buzzes and hurts his eyes. His skin is wet and cold and he is scared. She keeps a firm grip on his hand and her steady pace across the clean concrete floor does not falter.

They arrive at the steel tube at the end of the corridor and she reaches out and punches 0 and 1 into the keypad on the silo wall. The doors slide open. They step inside. The lighting in the corridor flickers then dies, leaving a black void that is wiped clean as the doors slide closed with a soft hissing sound.

The capsule begins its gentle ascent. Red numbers on a black panel count down as the tube glides upwards towards the surface. After a very long time the doors slide open and a warm wind rushes into the capsule. Everything is bathed in a strange new light, a burning light that he can feel on his skin, an ancient light that grabs a hold of him inside and causes sweat to prickle on his pale skin. He takes a deep breath and can taste salt on the back of his throat.

She leads him out from the capsule into the orange heat. He steps onto warm sand and feels billions and billions of crystals shifting against the soles of his feet. He cannot take his eyes from the ocean.

They walk to the foot of the bridge at the edge of the water. The size of it, the way the silver road catches the light and sparkles, the way it rolls over the horizon, makes him feel small. He looks at her. She has tears in her eyes, but she is not sad. He wants to ask her what

is on the other side, but he knows she will not say. She smiles and pulls him forwards onto the smooth glass surface of the road, and he feels with each step a lightness in his heart and knows that the years are falling away, millions upon millions, from something old to something new.

* * * *

Chapter XIII.

E=MC²

A woman screams from the sidewalk, she knows what is about to happen, knows it will not be stopped. The man is moving too fast, climbing out of the cab with his head down. He looks upset. The cab driver is calling after the man, waving his arms frantically, but the man keeps moving.

The first car swerves across the central line. It beeps its horn and the driver shouts through his window for the guy to wake up and get out of the road. Other people stop on the sidewalk and look at the man. A small boy holds his breath and closes his eyes because he does not want to see it happen. Another woman screams and points as a white Cadillac slams on its breaks and screeches in the road. Everybody on the sidewalk knows the car will not stop in time. The man and the car are the only things moving in the world.

The Cadillac screams and lifts the man into the air. Something explodes out of the man, white dust from his stomach like a snowstorm, like the immaculate paintwork of the Cadillac has atomised, become a cloud that carries the man through the air then pushes him down hard and angry onto the black asphalt, twisted and bleeding, eyes wide in shock.

The woman reaches into her purse to find her phone. She turns the bag out onto the sidewalk and riffles through the detritus of her life, still no phone. She screams out for somebody to call for an ambulance.

A young black woman, tired, dressed in shabby clothes, steps out of the crowd which has already gathered on the sidewalk. She drops to her knees in the middle of the road and feels for a pulse. Her hands are sweaty, they feel swollen and clumsy, she is not sure if there is anything there.

She asks the man his name, but he does not respond. She pulls open his shirt and locks her

fingers palm over hand and starts regular compressions on his sternum just below the Manubrium. ‘Stay with me!’

She pulls his chin up and gives him the kiss of life, counting out five breaths, her fingers locked on his nose. She cannot help screaming at the man, ‘Stay with me!’ She does this because she does not know what else to say. She does it because she is exhausted from a fifteen-hour shift at the hospital and wants to be at home and she is not thinking straight because she has lost two bodies already today and cannot stand the idea of losing another.

The man opens his eyes, she watches his pupils dilate then relax like the turning of a kaleidoscope. A terrible, familiar rattling sound escapes from his mouth and his chest falls. His eyes take on that faraway look that makes her want to stand up and walk away. But she knows she will wait it out until the paramedics arrive. She will do this because it doesn’t seem right to leave him in the road all alone like this.

The crowd seem to sense that something has changed, a shift in tempo that keeps them together, keeps them from their long commute, from their families and lovers and TV dinners. They move as one from the sidewalk into the road and form a tight circle. They stare at the woman kneeling over the twisted figure with the blank eyes.

She is tired. She wants to ask them to back away, to give her some space, but she does not have the energy to say anything.

She remembers her mother holding her hand a long time ago, a cold November morning with a white sky and hard ground. There were other people, all of them dressed in black, standing over the grave in silence. She began to cry when a woman she did not know threw a handful of dirt on top of her daddy’s coffin. ‘Don’t you fret now,’ her grandmother reassured. ‘He isn’t gone at all. He’s just passed over to the other side is all.’

The End