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Ferguson: A Moment in Time with a Half-Rate Tragedian

# A Moment in Time with

# a Half-Rate Tragedian

Thomas Ferguson

## I

An old ghost rose to sweep and tidy up an empty apartment one morning.

A girl, blonde-haired, swatted the sunlight from her eyes and threw her legs over the side of a double bed, hesitant to face the winter's cold.

## II

"It's a second chance world. There is no thing as perpetual innocence; the key to permanence is dilution. Then again, I could be self-sbsorbed."

Those were the thoughts wafting above the young man's head as he squeezed his way through the Greyhound station. The terminal was crowded and musty, thick with the smell of bodies and impatience. It would be assumed by the number of fluorescent lights in the ceiling that this was meant to be a well-lit and safe place, but one could also infer by the number of these lamps still working that light and safety were attributes long ago neglected. Like the Red Sea, the crowd of waiting men and women collectively leaned back in their attempts to relax, exposing a trail to the one illuminated space in the murk, a small convenience store, packaged in a corner of the terminal. He was casual in the shop, briefly leafing through the racks of tabloids before approaching the formica counter, and the tall Greek standing behind it.

Looking up, as he wasn't the tallest of men, he asked, "Can I just get a pack of Lucky Strikes?"

"Filter or no?"

"Whatever. Whatever you've got too many of."

"With a quizzical look, "Sure. Two forty five."

He handed the Greek a bill and stuffed two dollars in his pocket. Holding his change in a fist in front of him, he walked to a homeless man lost in his own doubt and confusion, and dropped the change into the man's hand. "How are you doing?" he asked as he sat down next to the man.

"Fine."

"Pulling out a book, and under his breath, "Just fine."

A tinny female voice advised the masses that the next bus to Chicago would be taking passengers in five minutes. The young man's chin rose, eyes lifted from his book, a fable of indecipherable Aesop, and with a heave, he was walking towards the buses, into the thin air acute with gasoline vapours, outside.



The line outside this next bus to Chicago had barely formed, skeletal in contrast to the din of the lobby, and the overhead light illuminated the lone man's features. (A few fidgets of the electricity caused a flicker or two.) His face was built slightly clumsily, yet not without an embryonic grace, as if formed by the stubby fingers of a child Rodin. His ears were rather large for his head, but not overbearing when combined with his rather large nose and rather large lips. His eyes were cutting and chilly, small slivers of ocean as iris; indeed, his face spoke of burgeoning with something, undefined but nearing completion. The portrait was finished by stubble bordering beard, and the slight hint of an amused smile. He wasn't tall but not short either; neither slender nor stocky. The grey sports jacket and trousers he wore, spotted with mud, blended into the evening's bleakness. If it were not for his eyes, one could sum up his appearance as 'nondescript'.

While many people go through their lives longing to be beautiful, to be noteworthy, the young man appreciated this nondescript quality. No unnecessary attention, no unnecessary action.

The door to the bus swung open, and his features were again obscured as he left the incandescent halo and approached the door.

The young man chose a seat in the middle of the compartment and slid across to rest his cheek on the window. He was most obviously fighting sleep, his eyes heavy with the day's monotony. In his slight delirium, his lips began to move, half formed words escaping.

- "I've been sleeping more and dreaming less;
- "Probably due to lack of drugs I guess;
- "If I'm on the stand I wouldn't think to confess
- "All this air between us."

Gibberish, but nonetheless it brought a childish grin to his mostly sleeping face.

"That was a very nice little song of yours," a voice to his right informed him.

The voice's scent was that of a decade of chain-smoking, followed by a year's cessation, the memory of tobacco forever lodged in her blue wool-coat. The lines on her broad forehead and eyelids and cheeks said something of a thousand excesses; most of these excessive attempts to end her excess. The depression in the seat caused by her weight leaned the man a degree or so towards her, as if implying her wish for attention.

Already as these words were drawing him in from sleep, he could feel the movement of the bus, and the woman who had sat herself down next to him. "My name's Deanna; how are you?"

- "It would be nice to be a bird and just fly home. This bus is so cramped I can hardly breathe. It's like I have a vague understanding of what a claustrophobic feels. Or maybe a sardine."

- "With a smile, "I used to be one."

- "He returns the smile. "A sardine?"

- "Patronizingly, "No, a claustrophobic. Three years ago I wouldn't have been able to look at this bus. Now, well, just look at where I am."

- "Quite an accomplishment. Here I am, healthy and all, and I'm the one complaining. Congratulations."

- "Oh now, it wasn't anything to be congratulated over."

- "Oh I'm sure that it was. Probably quite a few hours of therapy over time, I'd guess, and of course the power to face and overcome your fears. Defeating a demon like that is very impressive."

- "Oh no, actually it was just a few minor surgeries. All I really overcame was the taste of the food at the hospital." Smiling.

- "A... few minor surgeries? For claustrophobia. I didn't know that they could... *perform* that."

14 "They were really quite marvelous. Even offered to cure my agoraphobia for half-price.."



Couldn't take them up on it, though. Finances and all."  
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- "It's going to be terrible getting off this bus, then."

- "Oh I know, but I'm saving every penny I can. I hear that they can even cure superstitious tendencies with a few snips of the scissors."

- Confused, "You're superstitious?"

- She laughs, "No, I'm Protestant."

- "And you feel this is a problem?"

- "Of course, dear! Just weighing me down. And for a couple of copays, I'll be both phobia and dogma-free."

- "I'll have to look into this, Deanna. Thanks."

- "Really? What, can I ask, is your illness?"

- "I'm a robot, as it were."

- Thinking, "They haven't mentioned anything for that in their literature. But you should at least ask, they're really very good. They have a practice downtown."

The bulk of the conversation thankfully over, and the subtle stutter of the bus luring him back to sleep, the man gently explained his need for rest, and excused himself to recline against the window. The buzzing of the glass transferred to his jaw pulled him into a light trance, memories of a lifetime of cars flickering in him. He instinctually drew the window partly open, allowing a crisp, thin shard of cold air to pierce his neck. He dreamed of winters on acid, of hanging out windows to let the smoke drift outside. He dreamed of driving to the eastern seaboard in a borrowed car, frozen air the only thing keeping him from dozing and falling off the Appalachians. He dreamed of watching the sunrise over the Atlantic, watching the credits roll, and why he decided to return. At this question, he dreamt of a girl, and a car crash, and the bitter flashing of ambulance lights. At this, the warmth of the suspended sun brought him back to the bus, and back to Chicago.

### III

Walking in what could be vaguely described as the warmth of the early afternoon, the young man traveled down a road from the Greyhound station, all his possessions on his person, trying to recollect what it was that he had missed about the city. Entering a gate to a derelict park, as close to an oasis as he could find, he stopped to light a cigarette and rest.

Sitting upon one of his boxes, he noticed a girl walking with her back to him past the central cement fountain. It made him mildly content to watch her stretching and enjoying the day, but the suspicion that he *knew* her lent him a quiet panic. He quietly approached her, taking her image in, absorbing her presence in an attempt to place her figure, until what he would have beforehand deemed impossible occurred.

This girl, this young woman before him, had once been so silently entangled in his life that he had left town for three years because of her. And returned for a similar reason, or so he supposed. Regardless, it was a situation that's sheer serendipity warranted, necessitated his meeting her again.

Walking to the tall blonde figure, he whispered, "Hey, Jules, it's been years... can we talk for a while?"

- Concealing surprise, "Hey, sure. Where did you?... yes, you can talk to me."

- "I find this strange... I see you here, and I feel like I can just... continue the conversation where it left off. But it's good to see you."

- "You never came to visit me. No one knew where you were."



-Looking down, ashamed. "Well, you know... I wanted to pretend that it never happened."  
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- "What you did was enough, I guess. More than enough." She touches his hand. "You're a good man, you know."

- "Unfortunately."

- "Unfortunately?"

- "Yes, it's unfortunate. I would have made a really good asshole." Laughing, "I'm a good man. It's my definition, or more like a program. I didn't have a choice in what I did that night, it's just in my blood... and that's why, if you can understand, I resent it."

- "That doesn't change how I feel about it, nor what I owe you."

- He looks straight in her eyes. "Same thing you owe a space heater. I was just serving my function."

- "You make it seem cold, ceramic. Lonely."

- "That's about how it is, though. When I say that it's good to see you, I have to question if that's how I feel because I choose to or because I must. I second guess everything I think, every breath." Pauses. "I'm tired. When I look in the mirror, I swear that I suck in the light."

- "Machinery wears down. I can't argue that. But you aren't obliged to be a machine. Could you just be afraid of the responsibility of being human? Like you're scared of what can happen when you're an asshole. There's no guilt if you think you're acting out your design. There is guilt in taking chances, though."

- "I prefer shame; it's much more fashionable."

- She is cautious. "Are you sure you don't mean manageable?"

- "Maybe... no. No, I don't."

- "Look, I can't beat this into you. All I'm saying is that maybe you should try being human some time. It might be a little messier, but it's rewarding."

- He smiles, "Thanks for the advice, Jules."

- "I'm just returning a favor. Not because I have to, but because I want to. That's what us humans do. But I've got to get going."

- "Well, it was nice seeing you."

- "Do you mean that?"

- "...I'm trying."

- "I guess that's the best I'll get right now."

- "Yeah. Right now."

The young woman hoisted her back pack up and began to walk towards the gate and out to the city, but was stopped by a few more words. "Hey, I'm back in town now... can I call you later on?"

She turned to him, and with a little smile said, "Yes. Sure you can call; the number's the same."

"And by the way, since I didn't get to say it before, thanks for what you did."

#### IV

A box under each arm, a bag slung over his shoulder, the young man walked up the stairs of a decrepit tenement, and, unlocking the door with a shiny brass key, entered an empty room. Empty save for a worn blue couch sitting against the wall left of the door.

- Making his way through the gloom to the blinds, "Romain? You still live here?"

As he shifted his view to catch a movement, the man noticed a geriatric man with a bald spot and a grey moustache sitting on the very couch that was empty seconds before.



The man looked up as if interrupted, "Wouldn't call it much of a life."

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"Christ! I was afraid you wouldn't be around anymore."

"What else am I going to do, take a vacation to Germany? It's a little late for that sort of thing."

The young man smiles, "You sour old thing. I'm surprised that I was able to get this room again."

"Well, I did have a hand in that." Smiles mischievously.

"Really I hope the last tenant wasn't anyone I liked."

"Henry's boy moved in after you left. All that damn house music and the parties... I couldn't take it for too long."

"Romain, I know you kept it open for me. How'd you know I'd come back?"

"I only did it because you keep the noise down. Don't start thinking that we're friends or anything."

"Of course not." The young man pulls a bottle of cognac from his knapsack. "You want to have a drink?"

"Sure thing; just what I need to put some color in these cheeks."

"Alright then."

The young man picked two plastic cups out of one of his packing boxes, and poured two drinks for his friend and himself, there on the kitchen counter.

"So what do you know about stolen art?"

## V

-Over the telephone, "Hello, I'm looking for Julie?"

-A girl's voice answers. "This is."

"Hey.. it's me. I... got a phone. At my old place."

"Oh, hello. How are you? How've your first few days back been?"

"Slow; fairly uneventful."

"And?"

"I'm looking for a place to start."

"How do you mean, start?"

"...I don't know; I'm acting out of my head as of late. Start... start with you. I've got a schematic plan worked out in my head, you see, but I can't tell where to put the first step down..."

-Interrupting, "I know a good way."

"You do?"

"Yes. Drop the blueprint. Drop the planning and the concentration, just take a step. I'll forgive you if it's the wrong one."

"I may have to rely on cliché at first. Just warning you."

"Cliché is okay by me. Much better than a blueprint."

"Then, Jules, how about dinner with me?"

"Sounds great. How've your first few days been?"

"Oh, well, I've been furnishing my apartment, if you can call it that. I'm looking for a used coffee table right now. Got any ideas on where to find one?"

"Garbage night is still Saturday."

"Then how about dinner followed by garbage-picking and a moonlit walk?"

"I'm there. And that was better than cliché. We've got you moving in the right direction."



Sitting on the floor, glasses of vodka in hand, the young man and his elderly associate sat and smoked. A palatte of old torn blankets covered the floor, and made for a comfortable place to catch up on old times.

The young man raised his glass with an inquisitive look in his eyes, and asked, "So it's been quite a few years since it changed for you, right? I mean, is it any different living a life of leisure?"

His companion smiled poignantly, and replied, "Oh when I was younger, right after I left it all behind, I thought it was wonderful, all I'd ever hoped it would be. A more serene life." And he laughed somewhat callously at this, turning up his glass. "But now the leisure is wearing on me."

"Believe it or not, Romain, I understand. Somewhat," the young man retorted.

-Incredulously, "You're what? Twenty-five? And breathing, I might add."

-In a different context, I assure you."

-I'd hope so, young man."

-It involves a girl."

-The old man chuckled patiently, "Yes, I heard your phone call. Nothing ages a man as such."

-She could be important. I can't put my finger on it, however."

-They're all important at some time or another, if only an afterthought. This young woman have a name?"

-Jules. And I think that this may be my chance to make good on the afterthought."

-How long has it been again?"

-Damn, about three years, Romain. I've been gone for some time."

-And you just come waltzing back in... I'd play my hand delicately if I were you. Do you know what cards she'd be holding?"

The young man looked lost for a moment, as if trying to dredge up something that was floating on the surface. A look struck his face, a look of acceptance, and he replied to his friend, "One of them, perhaps."

"One?"

"Yes. Right before I left, I saved her life."

They were quiet while they finished their drinks after that.

## VII

"Well, well. We've hit the whole street; all the alleys. The block is really dry tonight."

The young woman looked back to the man, through her investigation of a broken wagon on the side of the thin Chicago alleyway.

-Not completely. There's that decrepit blue dollhouse we've got to pick up and I found these old 78's."

-Jules, do you have a 78 player?"

-No but when I find one, I'll get to rock out to... let's see..." Looking at the records, "Oh Whistle, and I'll Come to You My Lad'."

-Smiling, "Or you could just use them as frisbees." The young man pauses. "So what now?"

-I don't want to go home right now."

-Neither do I, Jules."

-We could go clubbing; I know a place where it's Salsa Night tonight."



"Of course."

"Bad?"

"No... I've got you."

"Alright. Sounds good. Just guide the way."

"Yeah." Smiles. "Shit, do you think we can check the dollhouse in along with our coats?"

"If you smile, I'd bet they'd do it. Just act cute."

They walked through the few blocks as if the cold were not there. It was as if the cold conceded defeat on this count, knowing that its bitter touch could not invade the couple in their bright steps. The young man, carrying an unpainted balsa dollhouse, the young woman gently holding his arm, fair beside, confident in its substance and presence.

The twenty minutes spent on an icy bus stop on Halsted were a minute lost in time; the bus ride (the girl exhausted) was slower. The revolving menagerie of persons arriving and departing the bus cautiously regarded the pair as the trip progressed. The young man, face awash with dissolving stoicism, a ragged house in his lap, and the woman, child-like, fighting sleep with head on his grey-clad shoulder, seemed a picture of a beggar's Christmas. The gangsters traveling to their clandestine arrangements, replaced by college students going home from their own, replaced by irate businessmen contemplating the short hours they'd be able to sleep, replaced by the kids traveling to make the after-hours scene at the clubs, supplied an endless backdrop to their portrait. It lent the young man a feeling of melancholy, the sad sense of missing that walks hand in hand with years of deprivation.

And it had been deprivation, all these years, self imposed or not, righteous or foolhardy. The scenes brought forth by a ride north on Halsted were a kind of music, comprised of piece-mail conversations and echoes of lives, the swells always changing but nonetheless familiar, and sung to his yearning ears that he was home. Confused, and taken with the many layers of the moment, he found himself crying silently. The curious glances of the passengers he ignored, but turned his head slightly to meet the determined gaze of a middle aged woman, sitting in a faded sundress and resting her arm on an oversized Gucci bag. Her mouth closed, he listened to her stare, and her sad eyes spoke to him through the heavy mascara.

"You foolish thing," she seemed to say, "Do you envy the worry and weather on my face?"

The young man broke their gaze and contemplated the face of his companion, breathing softly against him. His movement woke her, and her powder-silk face, more white than snow, rose to meet his.

Feeling the coolness of the tears from his cheek to hers, she asked, "What's wrong? Do you want to turn back?"

"No," he told her. "Nothing's the matter, I don't know what happened. Would 'something in the eye' suffice?"

"Do you need me?"

-Sighs, "I'm not sure."

"Oh." Uncomfortable, she looks around. "Should be a couple stops. I've got transfers if you want to go home."

-He raises a smile, apologetic. "But it's Salsa Night."

"Best night of the year." Seeing his levity, she laughs.

And as they stepped out into the frozen street, the bass from the club was already buzzing in their feet, striking their bones. In a crazy zigzag, drunk with the chill and each other's company, they moved towards the doors. The wave of heat and treble that greeted the couple beyond the doors brought them to a stealthy high. The young man immediately forgot the girl's offer to pay the cover, and briskly offered a tall bald man a wrinkled twenty.



The bald man was ambivalent to his request to check the dollhouse in with their coats. "You'll have to ask Sugar. He does coats."

"We close in an hour," he quickly added. "But there's a free after-party down the street."

They thanked the man and made their way to the coat check. The Hispanic man who took their jackets was too concerned with gazing longingly at the mass of bodies dancing to care about their dilemma; he muttered an apology, eyes averting them, about wanting to help but it wasn't policy, and that the club could get sued. He seemed to the young man an androgynous Ken doll, stripped of his confidence, a Ken doll sighing. The man called Sugar then looked at the table, smiled sadly, and told the young woman that if she put it on the speakers for a while, he'd cover for her. "Don't listen to me anyways," he called to her. "I'm self-absorbed and a bore anyhow." Self-obsessed? "No, self-absorbed. Which translates as, 'I'm so full of shit.'"

Hand in hand, the two cut their way through the revelry, a flock of mock-tango, the rhythm finding its way to their legs, irresistible. The man set the dollhouse above the highest bass speaker that he could reach, and watched as the tiny cellophane windows vibrated in time with the bass drum, as if being accosted by a miniature and pulsing hurricane. When he turned back, a tall drag queen was lathering compliments upon the woman, and he excused himself to buy drinks.

He returned with a Heineken and a vodka held aloft. As he called her name over the din, she turned to him with a face lit with delight. The look upon her took him aback for a moment; never that he could remember had anyone looked so happy to see him. She placed her hand on the back of his head and brushed his lips with hers; in the minute he had spent at the bar, she had absorbed the glow of the club, and in that second her lips touched his, she imbibed him with it as well. He placed the drinks on a table, and laid his cold palms on her sides. She shivered dramatically, in parody, smiling, beginning to guide him, wrapped in her glow and reluctant, into the music.

Never had a music that fast-paced led a dance so clumsy and delicate. Had it not been for the constant disco yelps, he could have mistaken it for the last dance of a high school prom. With each step his reluctance melted a degree, and his clumsiness in turn, yielding to a captivation by the movement, tuned and intimate. Every so often, he or she would attempt a faux-salsa step, and fall into the other's arms, laughing at their lack of skill.

Soon, their attention flew to the couple next to them, a diminutive Latino man, with a bobbed haircut and the stern look of concentration peculiar to Prince (circa *Under a Cherry Moon*), leading his lover, a larger black man whose movements were not so graceful nor as precise as his partner's, yet just as beautiful. They floated an inch from the floor, or so it felt, as if they were colibri, twisting and spinning with impossible speed and precision, all performed with magical inemotion. Yet under the machinery-cool eyes, there was a terrible infatuation, every turn and meticulous movement hinting chapters of feeling, teasing the onlooking crowd with glimpses, but only glimpses, into their life beyond the closed doors.

The young woman giggled and threw her head to his chest, whispering, "They're going to have sex tonight," delighted with the little phrase, or perhaps the thought.

And the men danced on, matching every complex action, lost in an exquisite tangle of art and closeted passion. Watching them made the man begin to feel self-conscious again, his steps seem heavy, and he leaned over to the girl and said, "Let's get out of here."

As he walked back to the door, dollhouse held close, he eyed their two untouched drinks sitting on the table. He didn't mind leaving them behind.



A small stream of light fell through the curtained window of the dollhouse.

The young man woke in the early morning, the girl nested naked next to him, her arm thrown over his chest. He slid from her embrace and, naked himself, walked to the kitchenette.

-An old man's voice out of the air. "Breakfast?"

-"Smirnoff and Tropicana."

-"Very continental of you. I'll go for a double."

-"Romain, consider it done."

-"Looks like you had quite a night."

-"Christ, you weren't watching, were you?"

-"Exculpable, "Of course not."

-"Oh well, I shouldn't have minded that much if you had. What've I got myself into? This is bad."

-"Looks like a decently half-normal life is what. With the exception of vodka at five in the morning."

-"Different strokes for different folks. The FDA's got it all wrong." Smiles.

-"With a dry laugh, "Look, all humor aside, you looked pretty happy last night."

-"You were watching, you bastard!"

-"How could I help it, It's a studio apartment."

-"Look... you want another? We're out of orange juice though."

-"Why not?"

-"Pouring another round of Smirnoff, "Alright... this happiness thing; I don't think it suits me too well."

-"Wary, "Really?"

-"Yes. Brother, how can I focus on anything if I'm constantly giddy?"

The old gentleman reached over and touched the young man with fingertips as cold as a cloud. "If I were in the mood to entertain you," he said, taking a drink. "I would say that no one is saying that you should be 'constantly giddy'. And I'd follow that up by asking what it is, exactly, that you have to focus on. But I'm not entertaining your damn half-assed philosophical bent. You hop on that bus and you become unbearable."

The young man looked at his drink, and began, "I have to focus on...", but from the shadows came a small groan, the kind of noise he would have imagined a doe would make, yawning in the Thousand Acre Woods' first light.

"Bullshit," said Romain, setting down his empty glass and disappearing, leaving only the faint rattle of ice behind.

The silhouette of the young woman rose, draped in bedsheets. Her voice was subdued by sleepiness, faint, the memory of an overdub. "Don't have my contacts in," she creaked, followed by a little contented sigh. "What time is it?"

"Five or thereabouts. Go back to sleep. I'll be there in a minute," the young man told her.

-"Hmmm. What day is it now?"

-"Thursday. Jules, have you got school or anything?"

-"Hmmm. Set the alarm for ten, 'kay?"

-"Not a thing."

-"Kay."

-"Hey Jules?"

-"Hmmm?"

-"Quietly, "I've been thinking that I shouldn't have left town."



-She looks up, "Just don't leave again."

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-Whispering, "Why did you make love with me? Just now?"

-"Because... it's a possibility that I love you."

She lay back, nuzzling the cotton pillow, blonde hair splayed across it. He waited a minute to set the alarm clock, then walked to the clothes mercilessly strewn about the floor, glass in hand. Finding his grey trousers, he produced a package of Lucky Strikes. After illuminating the room with a match, and enjoying the scent of sulfur that invariably followed, he lit the cigarette and crawled over the girl to the wall. Blowing out the match with half a breath, he rested against the wall, his legs bent, forming a bridge over hers, and smoked half the cigarette before extinguishing it in the vodka. The glass set upon the floor, he rested his head on her satin belly, worrying he might lose himself in her warmth.

"I'm so full of shit," he said to himself, before he did indeed lose himself in her warmth. Sleep took him over, and for a while, he was safe, even from dreams.

## IX

Romain glared at the young man after the girl had left. Perturbed in a fatherly manner, he stayed silent all morning and just stared at every action the man took. Eventually, this disturbed him enough to put out his cigarette and scream, "What is it? Didn't we already talk about this earlier?"

"Yes," said the old man, "We did. Remember the talk we had about how we play our cards? It seems to me that she's laid hers all down and you haven't had the courtesy to do a damn thing."

"I've let some fences down. You don't think I would show all of them at once do you?"

"She laid her trump card down this morning, at your request. I'm not in a position to tell you what you should do, but you're holding that which directly relates to her. There are things that she should know, aren't there?"

"Romain," he half growls. "I think you should go now."

"Done."

And once more, the man sits alone.

## X

Late afternoon, up the stairs from the man's apartment, the young woman and he were sitting on some makeshift chairs, watching the sun set over Chicago atop his rooftop. He wetted his lips for a moment, as the cold had dried them, and asked, "What would it take for you to not want me anymore?"

"I've always wanted you; I don't think I could stop."

-Frowning, "If I had done some bad things."

"I'm sure I could forgive you."

"And if I'd killed someone?"

"I'd have to ask why, why you did it."

"Let's say it was anger."

"Would you have regretted it?"

"Not in the least."

"...are we talking hypothetical, or are you trying to admit something to me?"

"The accident. How well do you remember it?"



-Blank, pallid. "Oh shit."

"How well?"

"The other driver..."

"... he died."

-Angry, the girl is beginning to be flustered. "Why are you trying to fuck everything up?"

"I'm not trying to fuck anything up. I just want everything on the table."

"So what are you saying?"

"After I got you out of the car, after you were breathing again... I went to check on the other driver..." Pauses. "He had dragged himself out of his truck. Splayed out on the shoulder, choking on his vomit. I leaned over to try and clear his airway."

"So you tried to save him..."

"The smell of alcohol was all over him. He was choking."

"The girl just looks down at the street below. "..."

"I covered his mouth. With my hand. I covered his mouth and looked into his drunken eyes and let him die."

-As if searching for something, "...that's all?"

"That's all?"

"That doesn't make you a murderer. It's not like you shot anyone."

"Hell no, 'it doesn't make me a murderer'."

"He was fucked up, a drunk driver. Not like he was innocent. Anyways, he would have probably choked to death if you hadn't been there."

"And you would be dead too. What, have I got the right to decide these things?"

"I thought you didn't regret this."

"I don't."

"So shut up, I forgive you."

-Quietly, "Just like that?"

Obviously frustrated, the girl looked around, and drove her nails into her wrists, and said, "I'm trying."

They were quiet as they sat up on the desolate rooftop, cold chewing on their skin, but imprisoned in the chill by that suspicion that moving to somewhere warmer would extinguish something forever that they were now trying to cling to. The two reminded themselves that the warmth in their hearts, bolstered by forgiveness and honesty, should fill them and negate the weather, and convinced by this they failed to note that the furnace was empty. This concept was taking form, slowly and dimly, in a crawling desperation seeded in the back of their hearts, seeded in the slow, stiff movements they began to make towards one another.

Searching for heat, for evidence of the validity of their decisions, they groped for one another. Each item of clothing shed was a searing frost of reality and consequence, and the deeper the void, the more impassioned they became to fill it, like an insect caught in an antlions' trap, or any animal, when it knows that it's doomed. (Neither of the two had, as of yet, actually met a suicidal animal.)

The two lay naked and exposed on a moonlit Chicago rooftop, and were too exhausted to fight the frigid night. The only movement was the occasional shiver of the lips, as all energy was diverted to their despair. What they sought they had found, and subsequently fabricated, eschewing reality and forgetting the original conception in the process. The past half hour was spent as actors, not believing in the part, but working paycheck to paycheck. Tired, and discouraged, the young man rose to look at his companion.

"We are just one of many sinking skies. Lights go on, lights go out, but the blind just



stare blankly as the world envelops them. Nothing can work between us because we don't have the magnetism to power such a device, we reserve all our spare energy for flailing around like flagellists whenever we feel guilty, or lonely," he told her, plainly, calmly.

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And just as calm, just as plainspoken, the naked girl reached for her sweater and said, "Speak for yourself. You are so full of shit."

"I know that Jules. All three of us know that."

As she got dressed, he sat nude and shivering and watched her. As she left him and walked to the door, he called to her, "Why did you make love with me? Just now?"

She giggled sadly, and without turning even her head, as to conceal her tears, called back, "Because it's becoming a possibility that I hate you."

The door opened and closed, illuminating the rooftop with incandescent light and then darkening it. The young man followed her with his eyes, but couldn't follow himself.

He blew upon his hands with half a breath, to warm them, rose and dressed, and hastened to the door himself.

## XI

"Deanna, right? Funny seeing you again."

"Oh, yes... I'm returning home. You?"

"Pretty much the same thing, though I'm not sure where that home would be."

"Wasn't here, was it?"

-Looks up at the woman. "Sadly, no."

The two were sitting on the bench awaiting the next bus east when they saw each other again. After this exchange, they sat silent for a few moments.

-She smiles, "So, did you go see the doctor while you were in town, like I suggested?"

"Part of me thinks I should have, but no. I'm assuming you did though?"

"Oh, it was great as always. Agoraphobia free, though a few dollars lighter."

"Well, Deanna..." The boy touches her arm with a veiled mock reverence, "I'm glad you can enjoy the open now."

The two smiled, and after a while, the bus rolled off towards the west, leaving an empty bench in its wake.

He ran his finger down the spine of his book, thought of telling her about this Aesop's fable that had overtaken his mind, but then decided he couldn't find the moral himself, and wouldn't feel comfortable confusing the poor woman in that manner.

## XII

At that moment, the sun's early morning yawning reflected off a window, warming the face of a blonde girl, alone in a twin bed and a wholly disorganized room.

And an old ghost rises disheartedly to close the blinds in an empty and lonely apartment.