

Alice
says
Go
Fuck
yourself



FEBRUARY 2023

ISSUE 2
THE DYING LIGHT



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February 2023

Alice Says Go Fuck Yourself is a quarterly digital magazine of art & literature,
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Editors: Fox Henry Frazier & Cee Martinez
Designers: Sarah Reck & Fox Henry Frazier

Jennifer Willoughby



**Issue 2 of Alice Says Go Fuck Yourself is dedicated
with big love to Kelly Boyker Guillemette.**

“And death doesn’t prevent me from loving you.
Besides,
in my opinion you aren’t dead.
(I know dead people, and you are not dead.)”

—Franz Wright, *Walking to Martha’s Vineyard*

Editor Fox and our designer Sarah both knew and loved Kelly Boyker Guillemette; we were among the many people deeply saddened by the news of her recent passing.

Kelly was a wonderfully talented editor and writer; she was also a truly lovely person, warm-hearted and kind, and a dear friend.

We thought she’d have gotten a kick out of this issue being dedicated to her, and so it is. We love you, Kelly. We miss you, and we will miss you.

CONTENT WARNING

This issue, by its nature, was always intended to be dark and gritty. We advertised for your noir, your rants, your difficult feelings, your shadow sides, your unutterables — and we got 'em. (Gosh, did we ever.)

Fox & Cee decided together that this issue deserves a blanket content warning. Due to the varied subject matter — which includes but is not limited to depictions of the following experiences: child abuse, gendered violence, domestic abuse, intimate partner violence, murder, racism, racist speech/language, racist violence, substance abuse, ableism, classism, gun violence, eating disorders, family trauma, and true crime — it would be impossible to list every potential trigger in this issue. But please consider yourselves forewarned as you read that most of the pieces in this work contain potentially triggering material. In an issue bearing this kind of theme, we think it's a reasonable expectation that much of the work included will be unpacking or exploring traumatic subject matter. We understand that it may not be for everyone; we leave it to each individual reader to decide what, if anything, they can productively experience and appreciate in this issue.

We want to emphasize that there are certainly moments of beauty and joy here, among many moments of trauma. There are even stories that are intentionally funny, though the humor remains fairly dark and gritty throughout. We had a fantastic time putting it together; we are creatures of light, but we have both spent substantial amounts of time living through the dark. In these pages, we'll meet you there.

A NOTE FROM THE EDITORS

Dear Readers,

Editors Cee and Fox here with some super srs literary shit, guys.

In case you haven't noticed by now, despite our attempts at professionalism and propriety — which are only attempts, mind you — we still can't promise you that we won't fuck something up, or blast something out that might ruffle some pearl clutchers — and we still can't promise we won't fuck up on Twitter — Ye Gods, we can't promise that! (Just rest assured that Editor Cee is not a fan of the subtweet, so if she does choose violence on Twitter, eh... it will be rather direct.)

The conception and creation of this Issue, "The Dying Light," is ultimately the culmination of turning lemons into fine-ass whiskey sours, dranks on the house . . .

About a year ago, Editor Fox confided in Editor Cee about an odd situation that was unfolding. There was a man who had been sending her messages that ranged from mildly flirtatious to intensely emotional; based on conversations they'd had, Fox considered him a friend and eventually came to feel a bit concerned about his well-being.

This fellow will remain unnamed (whoops! Guess Editor Cee is officially 'sub-tweeting' now?), and we shall fast-forward through the affection he sought out and fostered online and via text message, to the moment when Editor Fox falls ill and receives a video message from this fellow. Excited to receive it, because who doesn't love a virtual get-well card from a friend, she opens up to see this man sitting in a chair near a window; he glances up dramatically and says, "I'm talking to you here, Fox, in the dying light..."

"Listen, I'm sorry you got covid," he says in the video. "That sucks..." and then dumps her with a speech explaining that their friendship is merely a construction of Fox's own mind, and that her delusions of affection are weighing heavily upon him. He explains that he can't be the person she needs him to be (she doesn't need him to be anyone) and indicates that he's smothering under her expectations of him (though she's indicated pretty clearly that she doesn't have any). No, Jane Austen didn't script this situation . . . but dear Gods, it feels like she might have? This dude is giving some serious Willoughby. In (say it with us now) the dying light.

It behooves us to mention here that Editor Cee, upon viewing the monologue, thought this line about the dying light was one of the funniest things she'd ever seen captured on video.

"You realize," she said to Editor Fox, "this fuckboy waited all day to record this

video at just the right time of day so that he could say this to you? With exactly that expression? And that lengthy pause, gazing out into the 5 PM dusk? Like it's a METAPHOR."

"That was my general sense, too, actually," said Editor Fox, relieved that she wasn't delusional to have this impression, but bewildered just the same. "But I don't really understand why someone would do that? Like . . . it's meant to be mean, no?"

Editor Cee wasn't wrong: the beginning of the video is unintentionally hilarious. The man in question is so determined to get his staging for his scene just so — the setting, lighting, body language. He leans forward in his chair, gazing down into the camera soulfully, at first smiling and snuggled up against his own arms; and then, a minute later, he's running his hands over his face and staring searchingly off-camera, as if he's delivering a monologue in a film noir. His muttered reference to "the dying light," intended to evoke profundity, lands like a big fat block of Velveeta (in that it is both cheesy and *gold!*).

The whole situation may well have been forgotten after that moment, except for the fact that, as months went by, several other women came out of the woodwork, independently of one another, all describing interactions in which this same man had deliberately emotionally harmed them. The pattern of reeling them in, spitting them out, and gaslighting them in the process seemed to be key to his M.O. — and was profoundly disturbing. We'd like to clarify: we aren't making light of that, nor of any woman's experiences at the hands of an abusive personality. But we feel fine laughing at the melodramatic video that Editor Fox was sent with — dare we say it? — cruel intentions.

"What should we theme the next issue after, if the first one is gonna be 'a new season (for motherfuckers)'?" asked Editor Fox.

"THE DYING LIGHT," cackled Editor Cee. And, once again, dear readers — she wasn't wrong. After all, why not have an issue that actually succeeds in creating the vibe that this Sebastian Valmont wannabe failed at achieving?

And so, Editors Fox and Cee realized that what this situation needed, to top it all off and put it to bed, was just this: an issue dedicated to film noir, cheesiness, telemundo slapdowns, overwrought breakups, passions, euphoria, violence, disillusionment. Survivor's voices, clawing out of the wreckage. Looking at grotesque predators, in all their uncanny and mundane realities. Working up and working in the authentic passions, making up a good cocktail, and soaking in a bath all fucked-up and pruny. (Forget it, Jake. It's Chinatown.)

And lo and behold – we were inundated with so many amazing contributions! The real deal! In fact the contributions to this issue included so many gritty and slimy authentic noir and pulp-fiction style creations that Editor Cee wishes we could just have a list of honorable mentions. It really was hard making decisions, and we truly do wish you'll submit again in the future if you didn't make it into this issue.

We're starting off this issue by sharing some of our own gritty work with you – a piece of visual art by Cee and a poem by Fox, from a collaborative manuscript we're working on, titled *Gangster Blood & Final Girls*. We hope you'll enjoy, dear readers.

Love,
Fox & Cee



Because I'm Another Girl Ted Bundy Married

I rescued a fight dog once. He'd been horribly abused, as you might expect. If every human were swallowed by their own personal tongue of flame tomorrow, this world could begin to heal from our presence. But this dog, he loved me. His love was like a cracked rock inside which water has frozen & melted again & again. It wasn't his fault: he'd been starved, beaten, violated, left many times for dead. He'd been cut apart and still had to preserve his bond with those sick fucks who caged and tortured him for profit. He'd had to survive. & somehow this dog loved me and would have murdered any number of strangers for me; but if I touched him while he was eating, or when he wanted to kill something and I wouldn't allow it, he'd turn his rage on me. Just one quiet growl, at first. But soon there were curled lips, followed by full-on snarling. One day, the dog showed me all of his teeth and made sounds like there was something inside him that would beat out even the most tenacious exorcist. It was a bad day, that one. I myself had been harmed by a human that morning. And now this? At some point, I understood, this dog who loved me was going to bite.

So I walked across the room to where he stood and I shoved my entire fist into his frothing mouth. Let's fucking dance, then, I hissed into his face. I expected him to tear the sinew from my forearm, maybe worse, but the dog didn't bite me. He wasn't scared of me, either — a little startled, yes, but he didn't slink away.

No: the dog felt shame. He put his ears all the way back and made big baby eyes at me, then put his head down. I took my fist back. Don't you ever fucking show your teeth to me again, I said, then I kissed the top of his head. And he let me. Are you still listening in, you beautiful moonlit lunatic? Good. You're every bit as brilliant as you think you are. It's just that I'm smarter. You're the apex predator. Sure. Alpha. Artist. Master. But I'm the winged creature who made you catch your breath & want to ask if you could kiss this warm skin scented with lemon & cedar through which my heartbeat rings like a psalm.

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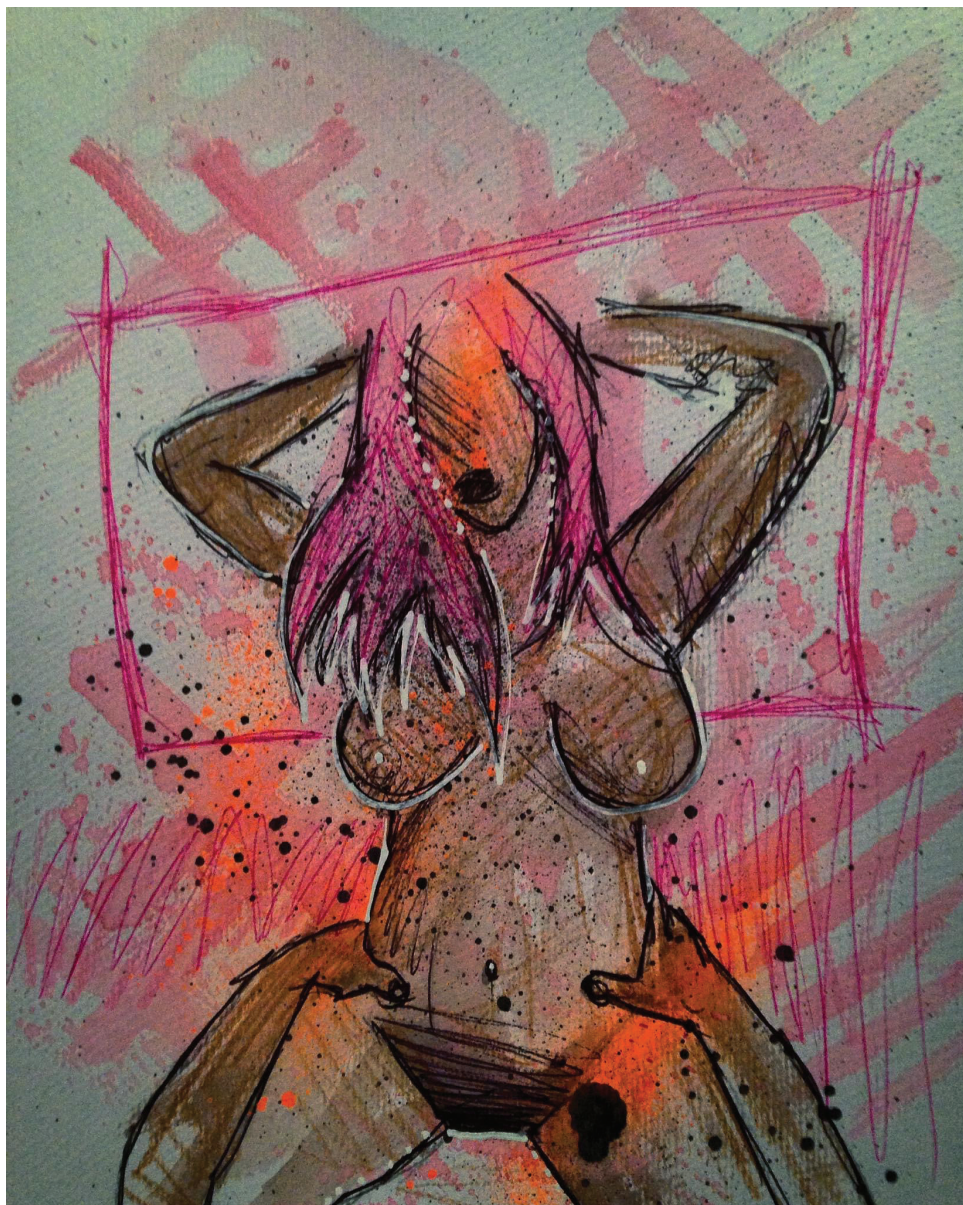
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This Isn't Real

In the sleazy theater, I unbutton his shirt, but I don't find a wire, a tiny black snake, slick and thin against my dry fingers. Flecks of dark chest hair greet me; the smooth skin reminds me of beige stationary with little cats in the corner that I had as a child. I would write letters to no one as practice for being the shut in I would become as an adult. The blue cotton blend falls to the sticky floor with the smallest coffee stain watching us. Sized less than a dime but shaped like Iowa in the wintertime. The snow never pulses like my heart in this moment. Nothing happens next because I'm someone's mother. I'm the virgin Mary with slight cracks growing dusty in the cathedral. I look down to baby Jesus uncracked in my arms. What's real is that tomorrow I'll be older with a piece of popcorn in my hair. I move on with this existential long sleeve dress shirt tucked inside me. I am cinema with my reels of memories, dirty gray floor around my feet.

Terrence PoorThunder



POETRY

Love, He Said

"love," he said
and thrust his tongue into
the other man's asshole

"love," he said
as they made plans
to visit Paris together

"love," he said
through backaches and
jagged broken molars

"love" he said
coupled with "goodbye"
to hold them over

"love," he said
through absence
time and distance

"love," he said
while the other man's
silence grew ominous

"love," he said
with the hours passing
and days crawling by

"love," he said
waiting to be reassured
wondering when

"love," he said
muttering to himself
in the empty night

Valedictory

They began, the poems, as ways
of courting him — ecstatic, erotic,
full of wonder at my luck,
amazed by his attentions,
celebrating his body,
our bodies in communion.
The flattering words he spoke,

which I never quite believed,
orbit my consciousness
like stars circling the head
of a cartoon character
who has just been bonked on
the noggin by the good guy
leaving him cross-eyed, vertiginous.

Now the poems have become
soft farewells, whispers,
persistent echoes bouncing
off all the might-have-beens,
the reluctant maybes —
recalcitrant recriminations
launched against the self.

They fade into that distance
he's been careful, over these
months, to cultivate between us —
those other men, those rivals —
those other places he visits —
those weekends he kept busy
so he wouldn't ever need me.

Subhaga Crystal Bacon

Leash on Life

Last night, I soothed myself to sleep
finessing the logistics of using a dog leash
to hang myself from the near branch of the giant
fir, sentry outside my bedroom window.
There was a light snow, waning moon
and cold – of course it was cold – I imagined the stillness
that would come if it would work. Could see my feet
shearling clad beneath gray sweats I got
last Christmas. It was just a thought to pass the time
at the end of waking. And then I did wake
again, warm in my bed, dawn lightening
window shades, and glad to be alive
here. A fire to light, house to warm
where love stirs behind secret- keeping doors.

Advent Still Life

For Louise McDermott, my daughter's godmother who gave us the Advent wreath; and for Joannie Handleman, my best buddy in music and crime who taught me her family's traditions and Yiddish expressions.

A beer can, phone book, a grapefruit
and an Advent wreath
with four candles
in its nest of greens
Two weeks
Two lit
Third one's the Pink
a life three quarters spent?

Next weekend
on Saturday —
The Sabbath
falls in Hanukkah

"Blessed art thou, Lord our God
King of the universe
who dost create lights of fire..."

I'll light that third — the pink one
like a barbarian wise woman
who traveled too far along life's way
to find a baby, wrapped in rags?

...or, was it the old guy that night
lying in the street
outside a New England pub?

"Oh Christ! Ya gotta be kidding!"

Nope
He was there alright

Wallowing in the freezing slush
amidst his helpless drunken cries
No cell phones then
Scrapped my pizza plans

On foot alone
waving in frustration

in the passing headlights
like a turquoise, wind-crazed scarecrow

*"Someone's gotta stop?
Someone has to help us, don't they?"*

Now there are two beer cans
a grapefruit, and a phone book
beside the advent wreath

Third candle lit and leaning out
for hope along the way

Advice from Rusty's Ex

Oh, honey. Don't think I don't know you regret letting Rusty tattoo his name over the rose on your navel. (I regret mine, too.) I'm not one to judge, but if you were going to have a word needled on your belly, you might have given some thought to what it meant. A tattoo is, of course, permanent. Something our Rusty will never be. A bit more about the word's meaning: fenders rust after too many snowfalls. Cast iron skillet, the kind you fry old Rusty's eggs in, rust. Hair, once auburn, henna, strawberry, fades to, well, rust. I guess "corrode" was too complex for our old friend? Corrode is rust minus romance. So, the Rusty who won't stick around long enough for the ink to dry, the Rusty living in swirled script on your solar plexus: his name's an offering and you its lifelong shrine.

fuck the mfa

must i die
before i'm recognized...
no? i assume i'll need
an mfa: *be robot. be cliché.*
otherwise you can't be read.
read my words —
alive. a clove
of garlic & pieces of onion:
cry. breathe: gasp!
i want to drown
you in ink. fuck
the hand of the poet
who writes for everyone else.
i'll stay me. my own face.
notice my poetry
because it's mine. & not
recycled; reused; reprinted
with another poet's name.
the same as the previous page
in the prestigious magazine
& the next:
confetti — blown from a cannon
then swept away.

Dolphins and Death

blue is the salt that fills my lungs;
air is unbreathable when you are always choking.
there are stones in the pit of my stomach,
i do not believe the tides will allow me to remain afloat.
somewhere along the shore there is bound to be a boat –
but will they stop?
will the ripples in the waves
have enough force to make them wonder?
will they stop?
will you not save me, before i drown, dear creature of the water?
will you not push me back to the sand,
back to the dust from which i apparently came
and to which i must return?
will you not save rotting flesh
and bloodshot eyes?
or are all the printable first-hand accounts lies?
am i simply not worth saving?
do you have a 100% success rate
that i might taint
by dying as i live?
dear creature of the water,
do you really wish to save
or have you always
rather wanted to be death?

Snow and Clovers

From the shore of a crater I watch
alphabets of the prayer sift into
dark

. . . they're red clover petals swept up in the wind

(snow
made in the mouths of the dead--

you never returned
and a cataract grew over the sun)

These are the words
deep under a flood, where the silences ask

to touch your hand again

What Was Left Outside in the Snow

December in New York, icy black, violet dusk.
Inside, we gathered for dinnertime.

All I can remember was that there were mashed potatoes.
I had that familiar rifling inside, anxious

chatter that started to bore a hole in my eardrums.
It was the night of the fifth-grade school concert.

Suddenly, I felt my mouth flood
with saliva, my gut contract and my feet carry me

out of the dim kitchen and into the darkness where I rained
the contents of my dinner into the earth.

Little crags of snow, reflecting porchlight.
Little mounds of mashed potatoes, flecked with salt.

It turns out that vomiting does not fully remove
a poison from the body.

Maybe I wanted to expel the residue of my brother
and the musky taste of him in my mouth.

Maybe I wanted to retch and spew out the truth
as my father gently rubbed my back afterward.

It stayed inside me, all of it, burrowing deep as we trudged to the car,
the four of us shadows, flowing deep into night.

morphine drips in prayer

inaudible black hole chirped —
sucked up everything
in its path even light
became a chamber within my father's heart
incessant wall-clock's
arrhythmic sputters
 moves forward
 than reverse
steals beats
 first his
 than mine
from the moment
I knew what death meant
and I forbid his —
my daughterhood coffins
inside the airless
hospital room
 under the buzz
of its fluorescent sky
and mint green fog
of antiseptics
hears his every
febrile thump
my expression gives me
away to the nurse
who floats on the erasers

of her rubber shoes

who yells don't fall

before I spot
the linoleum floor

I hear his labored breath—
then his demand

deep within

like a splinter of God—

don't leave
stay

time—
stopped never stopped

moved me forward
jerked me back

this time stealing breaths
first his
than mine

bagged—

colorless—

dreadful fluids
endlessly drip

I proofread every bubble

in his pic line

the sun of our years

are bleached & cinched
between drops
within a syringed silence
ending
never

Bitters

It's the bitters that makes the drink
he said that gives the necessary edge
without it you might dissolve like
a sugar cube in a horse's mouth
but then he disappeared to Paris
where all they drink is wine the cheaper
the better such an unreal city of spun
sugar towers and flaking arrondissements
it's a filthy city and you need a friend
there to make the most of it though
that may be true wherever you travel
it's a city for grownups who still wish
they were children and children
impatient for adulthood it's a
complication of mazes loosely linked
by bridges and trains where you will
either spend most of your time in
the kitchen or you won't even have
a kitchen worth the name and you swirl
through the usual transitions from
museum to café to taxi to bar but you
can't get a cocktail to save your life
he said so I'm taking the plane back
to New York City and I'll be drinking
a Manhattan made with rye and angostura.

Lucy in the Sty

'Now is the winter of our wet cement'
quoth Lucy in her sty with diamonds in her silk-purse ears.
Meanwhile, in a battlefield far, far, away, Dicky Three hunched his back,
despairing at the sward strewn with sordid, sworded bodies in his path
and cried 'A hearse, a hearse, my kingdom for a hearse'.
Hearing nothing but the sounds of silence he bellowed
'Unleash the dogs of war. Out, damn-ed Spot and yes, you, Fido,
and you, frumious Bandersnatch.
And let no-one ask who let the dogs out.'
But alas, alack, the dud plan of attack now needed a patsy stone.
He roared so all could hear,
"Cry 'Harry (and Meghan), England and Boy George' "
and hied himself to the tintinnabulation of the belfry of Notre Dame.
Thus it was left to the immoral bard, TS (George) Eliot to record,
on a cold, bright day whan that Aprille with his shoures soote
and the clock was striking thirteen,
"This is the way the world ends,
not with a clang but a boom-tish."

Always A Butterfly

There are two sides to every story
one folds in on itself, breaks my flight
through the fire-lit sky, this blood
orange light reflecting the interior
designs of my story. I am here alone
telling the air something about a grave
I wandered out of, scorched hands
reaching to –
& I'm sorry, I want to say I am
sorry for this pain I inflict
upon myself. I am scared & ashamed
& writhing in a bed of my own
manic episodes. This story
is one for the books of cautionary
tales. It's a coming of age story.
This story is the one
where I forget to fly bc I crave
grounding so hard. It's a tragic comedy.
This is the story where I laugh
& I lie – here, to you, myself
this is where I tell you it's just a phase
& that one day, I'll get tired
of eating the ground.
The other side of the story
wants to fix it all; the sky,
broken branches to the wind,
the premature wings
& wants to call it something
as if naming it makes the pain

more real than it already is
as if naming it will draw out
the something inhabiting me.
It compels my mending, by God
it will save the child yet!
& it will go back in time, attempt
to undo all of the scathing rituals
that set me out to sail among
the dark clouds, below the glittered
swarm of other butterflies
in their own golden warmth
looking forward, unaware of ghosts
only ever touching sunlight
never rain / only ever growing
never gusts of pain / only ever.
Only forever doesn't really
know itself & fate is just another
thing that controls me. The story
goes that there's actually no story
at all just a long, continuous string
of pain being woven with the stars
just a space of healing & breaking
& healing again. Some say uphill
I say, it's all flat. & we go on
like this; walking the plains
of our turning / our minds
reliquaries of bruises
splayed like the pinned wings
of a jeweled butterfly.

Courtney Leigh Jameson

Fruit of Me

I want you to confide in me your deepest & darkest demands. Sir, I beg you mercy eat the fruit I've been growing inside me from the sacred root of my chest, descending into my lepidopterarium gut, & then resting at my loins something to pluck something you quench thirsty for the juice that oozes from the lunar sky. I'll coax you with my butterflies beguile you in this wicked haze of midnight where the only things roaming are us & the monsters we keep. Hug all of me I loved you when you were hungry / I love you more now that you're full. Let me rub your belly, assuage the ache, soothe the digestion of your soul—fractionate so that I have you completely in the way you have me completely in your ropes I release the butterflies from the most guttural part of me, a refreshing ah & regurgitation of endorphins reddening the fruit I pulsate skin swelter in the warmest parts of the quench

draw the moon down
& with my fingertip,
place it like a pearl
on my labia like
a kiss you give
just before
we crawl
to sleep.

One-Eyed Willie

Listening to death metal in LA
rush hour traffic certainly had its risks.

He knew that but thrashed his way up
and down the 405 five days a week.

The question was whether he'd be
in a car wreck or get shot at
in a fit of road rage.

It was the latter, a bullet
to the head.

He survived mostly intact, however, his
friends now call him One-Eyed Willie.

And he still commutes up and down
the 405 daily, only now
he listens to Mozart.

Questioning the Motives of Crows

I openly question the motives of crows.

Why do they have to make so much god damn noise?

I like quiet spaces.

I'm a man of peace but I do fantasize about
killing these obnoxious crows

sometimes
occasionally

fake throw my phone at them so they will scatter
and I can get some peace and quiet.

But they come back
... always!

Why do they come back?

Don't they know I don't like them?

Is it because I wish them dead
and threaten them with violence?

Are they squawking to each other
about what an asshole I am?

Am I an asshole?

Am I intruding upon them?

Should I be questioning my motives instead of theirs?

And then suddenly out of some earthly hell portal
those no good motherfuckin' crows are back; circling
overhead with their piercing shards of glass squawks
bounding about in the sky above me and my bleeding eardrums.

Now ain't no one got time to think about motives
as I raise my phone, cock my shoulder back, give
those crows a coupla' Patrick Mahomes pump fakes
and send them on their way.

Bask in the fleeting silent spaces in between.

Hash

It was my day off, had a lil' hash
(one plus one is simple math)
so sailing inward I came out
with a pressing question

Instead of turning dreams into reality
could I turn mine into weed?

After hours pondering possibilities
forgetting to remember
and a coupla'
quesadillas

Came to the conclusion...

Someday I hope to be
half the person my dog is.

Jabberwocky Talk

after Lewis Carroll

The Jabberwock came flooming back
to life from vorpal surgery,
its eyes were nymphomaniac
for beamish little me.

"I love a man who snicks the sword
as snackerly as you, my dear.
A ploomy hero leaves me bored:
like Fleem the Puppeteer.

I borbled Fleem, and also Flum,
the blozen puppet Fleem controlled.
I banged my triumph on this drum,
let's bang before we're old!"

"I'm flattered, winsome Jabberwock,"
I crooned with sweet sincerity.
"My heart is in a butterlock,
I'm seeking clarity.

Anatomy is my concern;
what yours might be, and how we'll fit.
My private glamp needs fuel to burn,
it's not a hypocrite."

The monster sloughed its outer shell,
and zimzamed in the nude.
Señor? Wahnbo? Mademoiselle?
Verisimilitude?!

The Jabberwock and I hooked up,
and splurved our days in sheer delight.
There never was a spooning-up
that shammered near so bright.

Some October Night

This sweater is hot
take it off and
spread my body like fig jam
on the floor of this room.

Right now. With fucking urgency!
Put your hands on my waist
lay me down like a Ouija board
drink me like spiked cider
feel that slow burn
like a good horror movie or rich whiskey.

Always Ask for the Bones First

He leaves my mind.
Now I'm dealing with the gun.

Inanimate smugness shoots
straight into my body.

Crooked kill, an off criminal,
crime of floatation devices

turned passion. Or the bullet
leaves me a paralyzed doll.

Dusty eyes watch trees in the distance,
out the cracked windows.

He doesn't even rot like fruit
that teeters in the wind threatening to fall.

Desire pushes me to the ground.
I hold palms cupped to catch what's left.

Fruit refuses to pierce my skin and suddenly
I'm tired of hard dirt under the length of my skeleton.

You leave broken bones with complicated
names painted with frustration and circumstance.

How will I know if the mirror tells the truth?
The woman I see every day is married

to the idea of how a face looks, to be her
own, to smile back and like it.

Imagining Her as Lot's Wife

I'll never know if she would burn in the sunlight,
pasty white skin, fangs cracked from overuse.

I don't know if she was the killer, the strangler,
vacant stare of red eyes, papercuts along her arms.

Everything flooded, tiny men in rowboats
float by the drowning, their arms, thin exclamation points.

It got Biblical. Everyone turned to salted
snack foods shaken in bags, poured in bowls of bone,

soaked through with vinegar, unclean like the streets
of New York City, blocks of garbage,

no one could keep up. Imagine the dead
in every window, it's endless.

I can't tell if that ghost watching me
is her foolish energy, black robed and swaying.

I want to let her sink teeth into me
but when I change my mind

there is wrestling and silence.
I know how to cry on a bathroom floor.

I am my own ghost, separate,
I am the neighborhood crow, puckish.

The sky, my speedway,
as my essence blew away.

I Warned You

about the person I saw in the woods. I warned you about the person
I became in the woods. I looked like I was in a clearing
but that was not the sun

on my face.

I was just flushed vivid luminous vibrant gleaming florid phosphorescent
lustrous.

My famous last words did not end up famous, nor were they my last words.

I came back

from the dead and couldn't stop talking.

I woke up

from dying and couldn't stop laughing. I was somehow even worse

than when I was alive because my mouth didn't have to move

to talk anymore.

He was mixed feelings.

He was mixed predictions. He was a mixed bag, a mixed up bag.

A bag
of feelings.

He was a sentence that ran backwards. He was the worst thing

that ever happened

to me. He was a ripped up

confession that got ripped

into even smaller pieces.

He was a coin that drowned

whoever put him in their purse. He was

mourning jewelry.

My Sense of Direction is a Stack of Polaroid Pictures that are Not in Order

I don't know how to get to the job where I worked 20 years ago.
I am not sure
if I lived in the apartment behind this liquor store
or that other liquor store.

I have to look for a building that used to be a church
but before that was a car dealership.
The dealership left the PA system
so when the church moved in, they could use the audio system to wake me up
with the Lord
on Sundays. I looked for a building
that looked like it did not want me sleeping late.

This boarded up building has been a boarded up building since I was a little kid,
and is still not unboarded
and somehow also not torn down
or collapsed one shingle at a time
so I can't say
this empty lot/store/housing complex used to be a _____.

Like I can with the wooded lot near my parents' house.
There used to be an inground pool, you can see
there is a rectangle of grass
that is still a different color.

The corner of the lot used to fence-in horses, so when I look now,
I have a carrot in my hand and I am afraid
the woods might be electrified.
I say there were horses and pools and electricity in the woods
so I sound like I am talking about a magical realm. It's the same way

when we were waiting in the car to pick up Macy from school,
my mom looked towards the woods and said, "Something died here."
so she sounds like she is psychic. But the reason
is we forgot to say half the sentence.

She smelled a dead animal.
She also didn't say vultures were circling. I forgot to mention

that the woods, and the horses, the pool, the electric fence
were separated by 35 years.

I Apply to One New Job Every Time my Boss Yells at Someone

My friend works for the State of New Jersey and sent me a list
Of job openings. New Jersey needs a lot of work done.
There is one job that is working for the department that manages bears.
There is an opening
at my friend's department that designs all the tests
for all the jobs
for the State of New Jersey. There is an opening in the sewer department.
They need some new sewer ideas. They need
a person to stick a tool into cars' tailpipes
and give a thumbs up
or a thumbs down. I meet the 6 credits of Statistics requirement,
but I don't meet
the 18 credits of psychology or education credits.

When I looked at my transcript,
there were way more C's than I thought.
There were more F's than I remember. You can see
in my transcript exactly
where my life fell apart.

I made at least 4 bad decisions that ruined my life:

#1 I tried taking 7 classes because I took 7 the previous semester and got through it.

#2 I broke up with my long distance boyfriend because I hugged my old lady former teacher and felt like a creep because I was feeling something more during that hug.

#3 I broke up with my long distance boyfriend for someone who contributed to speeding up the life-ruining that I already started.

#4 I dropped out of school for a year so I could ruin my life full-time. I went back and finished the one last class I needed a year later.

The thing that saved me: I realized that even if he wasn't cheating on me (he was), he was ruining my life enough to break up with him.

The thing that saved me: I had to stop eating sugar because I was getting non-alcoholic fatty liver disease and somehow that change made my depression go away.

The thing that saved me: I started sending my poems to people I knew who did not ask for them.

I started running up the limestone hills and cliffs outside my apartment. Once a deer leapt across my path. Once a possum dragged a pizza crust. Once a mother deer nursed her baby in our parking lot.

What saved me: I tripped and skinned my elbow on the limestone hill. I took a picture and posted it online.

The thing that saved me: poetry

What saved me: I was shoveling snow on New Year's Eve alone and only realized it was midnight because suddenly I heard people celebrating together. I thought maybe it was worth the risk of trying to trust people again.

#44: Trite

A cliché fuck can happen anywhere, anytime.
Perhaps a professional conference for p.r. types
(*Like me!*) in Lake Placid, say, in summer –
all sandals, no ski boots. (*I'm sporting Birkenstocks.*)

Assess prospects. Select a target.
Set the time: post rubber-chicken banquet awards,
(*I snagged four – all first-place trophies.*), the crowd
well lubricated from cash bar to champagne toasts.

(*That dot-org prez vibes ripe.*)
Give him a thrill. Or two.
Blindfold him. Bind his wrists.
Ride him to the brink. Say bye-bye.

Silk scarves are a thou a dozen,
Small price for years of (*my*) satisfaction.

Memory of a Memory

Riding along the bridlepath of my brother,
I was felled like an elm in your story.
There was dog rose, wood sorrel, and river flags;
we did the kind of lotus-eating that didn't occasion a song.

You telegraphed your stunt-moves just before you made them,
and I trained every day like Bruce Lee – to try to endure and defend you.
Your care came with cartridges like *The Odyssey* – I couldn't hook out the words.
But I knew you by smell identity
– inveigled victuals and gangplanks.
– bastard barbiturates and badger-toothed babies.

Ours was a love on a light table,
half-sips of heart in a physick garden,
malingerers and wands of hazel.
– the tabulating leather strop of you,
me, the teasel-blade dipped in poppy syrup.

There was a musical grammar to the way you screamed down the sky,
a rhythmic strum in how you decorated every lie – in one vestigial feature or
another.
I would not decide on your Home Rule or any other, nor do I ever extend uneasy
truces.
You made out our connection was the Curragh Incident but we both know bet-
ter.

*An acorn to the chest
Loping after the mining town sultans
As they always know best*

The only place he was free was with his fists and his firsts.
With a head full of boiling lead, his were hasty, slipshod emotions;
Mine were parcels of poorly-sewn lace and other things of a star-like brightness,
the stitching on the shroud.

Under our wharf house lived a reticulate whipray.
His tiger-scapes were hum-colored
like the dampers of our glass piano.
There is a reason they are nicknamed "honeycomb stingrays."

All the while I was looking for the monstrous Ottoman poet,
a laudanum-licked boy to wear curlers and a fashionable clubfoot
— one who keeps foxes in drawing rooms overlooking ducks involuntarily
ice-skating
on frozen ancestral ponds.

You were my tide-drink and I the silt in your shoe.
You tried your level best to elide over my parrot-like repetitions
as well as the holy hieroglyphics on my hand— especially wherever yours natu-
rally enclosed it.

I ran up holding honeycombs, the never-slumbering daughter of pink cheetahs.
Setting your gimlet gaze with planet-sized pupils, you could find an insult in a
rosehip.

These outbursts of yours— all just the lame horses of your landlord
They say the first woman was made from limbs of rowan,
and I am the woman who swallowed the moon,
reading the air like a falcon,
carrying my voice,
— stoppering the jar on yours.

We leave off, unconjugated,
largely because you do not know Latin
— or any other romance language—
only pigs and their frost-gilded squeals of sycophancy
— all those who merely wish to cut a lock of what was once your ruff for their
marmish mantels.

You still know “nowt” of allies or ‘always’
and now likely never will.
You have shredded the marigolds that might have saved you,
scoring the ground where our possibilities passed through,
feverishly stricken with yourself, as if by the plague.

Your hands
that talked so emphatically across decades of my life have gone grave-silent,
your tongue the deafening defeatist that muted them
— and whatever might have been of *us*.

How to Take Communion

When you find your large dog,
a statue still, stone like in its wonder,
frozen over a crow, statuesque as well,
as if time froze for them in this moment,
try not to yell. When you yell, the crow
will surely fly, and *as the crow flies*
your dog will stomp and as your dog stomps
the crow, in shock, will hit the fence line.
When your elder dog whose time is coming
faster than a crow can fly, rushes from the
house to see the commotion, you usher the
true killer back in, stopped in her track by
her own body's inability to follow through
on the inertia of the hunt. While all this is
happening, the ushering, the yelling, the
bare feet on dry August grass, the
crow's crows will swarm. They will land
in the trees, on the power lines & fence lines
surrounding your yard. They will caw
in unison, a chorus like you've never heard,
a battle cry, a call to arms my brothers and
sisters, stand vigil with us over our *friend*,
our homie, *our good time pal*. Once the dogs
have been ushered in, once the crow has
regained its bearings and flitted to a tree
branch in a neighboring yard, don't praise yet.
You are not *out of the woods*. You can do
your best and sometimes it is still not good enough.
The following day, you will find the bird bath
you lovingly fill with fresh cold water for them
daily, filled to the brim with dog shit. They will
make no apologies and you must not either.
Crows understand only the currency of karma.
An eye for an eye. Spray the bowl out. Refill it,
let the clear cold water reflect your face of incredulity
back at you. Remember that you too, are a creature,
you, too, have sought revenge. One by one, fill the
suet feeders with fresh food. Later, watch as they
come to the yard to feast. Do not say a word.

There is none. This is how we make reparations.
When you find a large ant trailing the porcelain tub,
slip it on a piece of paper and bring it outside.
Don't take what has not been granted you. Walk
each day flat footed on the stone of the earth
and listen to the crows cry, dusk til dawn.
Remember the crow you found, spine stripped
straight from its body by a weasel or some other
such nefarious creature. You too can be hollowed,
can be split, can be spine-tingling, spine-dangling,
dust-to-dust. Let the silent surge of grief pass.
You are not more than what you love.

When a Dead Poet's Ghost Won't Leave You Alone

Mary Oliver doesn't want me to write poems. Midway through a stanza & there she is, her ghost, or the ghost of her words, ones I didn't even mean to memorize. I'll make the crows say something about the nature of melancholy, but then Mary's words float down like a cloud of gnats, cross over my eyelids like a fog. She wants me to type her something pretty. She wants me to question the beating of my own heart. She wants me to acquiesce to sullen moods. To rave, to walk in the garden after midnight. & once she's there, I can't be rid of her, like the greasy underbelly smudge trail the backyard rats leave in their wake. You can't pressure wash that shit off. I think, as if I'm Gillian Owens on *Practical Magic*, standing in the rustling wind of midnights, telling the ghost of my dead lover, one who I resurrected, who I conjured into the room beside me, to leave me be. *Go away, Mary Oliver, go away.* When I give up & send the half-written poem text to myself, a notification chimes: Shilo Niziolek messaged you and isn't a contact. Do you want to filter? And I think, yes, please get that bitches nonsense out of here. Can't you see, it's me here, Mary Oliver, the possessed and the possession. Set your phone and your laptop and your tv on fire. Step out in the rain. Your body is mine now and we are going to wander through some fields, crunch leaves under our galoshes, write songs to the snail crossing our path, the dogs leaping over boulders, cast nets toward the women we could have loved.

Snow-White and Rose-Red, They'll Love You Once You're Dead

*"No mischance befell them; if benighted in the wood, they lay down on the moss to repose and sleep till the morning; and their mother was satisfied as to their safety, and felt no fear about them."
– The Brothers Grimm, "Snow-White and Rose-Red"*

I pluck my first ever ruby red strawberry from my garden.
I burn a rotting piece of patio furniture, the whole thing,
all at once, watch the smoke seep between the cracks
before it all goes up in flame. Someone somewhere is
being shot at right now, again, and again, and again.

When I was little I had white-blond hair, but after the
things that were done to me, often in the woods but
not always in the dark, I need to be red, red, red.

We keep letting it happen. I stay outside reading half
a novel by the firepit. Meanwhile, they vote no for
aid for an epidemic, vote no for protection for women's
bodies, ban books, ban the word gay even though my
uncle remains married to a man and I dream about making
love to people of all genders; they go on vacation instead
of voting on common sense protections for its citizens.

What if snow-white and rose-red are actually one girl.
If there is arguable proof for this, I'm not going to search
it out and write you an essay. I only know what I know.
Under my skin is the impression of two girls, the hologram,
the silhouette, the white night and the blood red. A before and after.

By the time I close the book the sky is flitting between
blue-black and the page is an inch from my face as I squint
to consume a bit more love before the night is through.

Crying in the passenger seat of my mom's car as a teenager,
she said, *this isn't what I wanted for you, for my joyful*
laughing blond haired child. By then my hair hung limp,
dark ruby curtains, so everyone would know I was on fire.

The world watches a trial online and laughs at a cycle of
abuse like it's the best latest live action remake of the world's
worst film. Their nostalgia for control palpable. When I turn
my water cup on the embers the sizzle momentarily silences
the sound of frogs croaking in the distance. I step bare feet
into tall grass and leave the windows open all night long.

The Coolest 61-Year-Old Just Outside the Mosh Pit (Circa 2012)

The walls and the ceiling are painted matte black.
So what's different? The bands, of course.
It used to be Dead Kennedys, The Mutants, The Offs, The Symptoms, and Germs.
These days: Tera Melos, Head Wound City, PUP, The Petting Zoo,
Lee Corey Oswald, Carrion Spring.

It used to pretty much all be punk. These days: punk and post-punk,
death metal, math core, shoegaze, sludge metal, noise grind, and, who knows,
soon-to-be cock-core-tin-skramz. lightly tinged with ska;
sub-genre, sub-sub-sub-genre, every niche you could possibly want
for you and your jittery circle of friends.

It used to be vinyl and now it's ironic vinyl all over again.
What's different? For me it used to be San Francisco, now it's Portland.
I used to be younger -- now, inexplicably, I'm 61 years old,
with all the advantages age can bring:

when I went to the bathroom a minute ago at the back of the club,
I slipped in vomit,
but this time around I was suave enough not to fall down.
This time around I'm indiscriminate enough to embrace it all;
hip hop to screamo, to rock, to choral music, to Broadway.
I don't need to push the wall -- I just need to lean against it.

I hang back a little, just outside the mosh pit,
more of an observer than a fan -- more tired, more spent.
I remember 30 years ago, the slam dancing, spitting and throwing
bottles at the stage.
This crowd seems more subdued. They may be a little more hopeless now,
but, fuck it all, who can blame them?

My son and his girlfriend stand up front, two feet from the speakers,
casting me an occasional grin. For others in the crowd, if they notice me at all,
it's "Who's that old deviation with the designer beer?"
I have a real connection with them, but they don't know it.
Some things never change. So what exactly has stayed the same?

The vomit.

The 25-year old in the short skirt behind the bar,

always there through all these years, always 25, and bored.

The thirst for noise is still the same. The brilliant piss-off of the young
and the futile "oh shit" of old age are still the same.

What's astonishing is that there's still

something left that can astonish. Here I stand.

The mosh pit is no more than a tic moving in the dark swollen

bags beneath my eyes.

I'm not the boy I used to be, but here I stand, cool as hell, goddammit.

Thirty years of fuck it all and, tonight, I didn't fall down.

He Called Me Doll

He called me doll
like he was a mobster in a 1950s movie
like Frank Sinatra or Marlon Brando
like I was his perfect plastic plaything
who could never do anything wrong.

He called me doll
and every time he pulled the string on my back
I performed a new trick
like Tiny Tears and Dancerina,
Betsy Wetsy and Little Miss Echo,
speaking only in the voice of
her owner.

He called me doll
tucked me in his coat like Polly Pocket
took me along to watch while he
flirted with other girls.
Sometimes he invited them home
so they could play with me too.

He called me doll
and I was so overjoyed to be the one
he kept in his toybox
that my heart began to transform,
plastic melting into flesh and blood,
beating new emotions into veins
that now flowed.

He called me doll
but he did not like my new tricks:
the human muscles and joints I grew.
The ones I used to embrace, but also
to push or pull or twist away.
The words I spoke that weren't echoes,
that could be more scream
than song.

He called me doll
and I did not want to lose him.
I could not imagine
never again being his doll.
I could not conceive of the hollow
that would carve itself around
my now human heart.

He called me doll
even when he was angry.
Even when he wondered
why we couldn't just go back
to the way things were before.
Even when he demanded to know
why I couldn't remain posable as
plastic.

He called me doll
and I performed one more trick:
I got up on wobbly flesh-and-blood legs,
and I left.

Towel of Time

In the shower I'm chatty
with each drop that visits my skin
heading to the drain. No drop dies,
each a sewer angel
protecting discarded alligators.
I think about

my day and how I never mask up
before the garden.
Flowers offend easily.
When I shampoo, I remember
pulling a slug off the window.
I befriend muck. Finally,

the towel, my intimate friend
made of time, dries me quite well.
My body tingles clocks. Seconds
disappear as I will once the towel
wears out.

Euterpe, Giver of Delights, Borrows the Sorrow Cloak of Penthos & Resigns

Grief lives in the body like a haunting, an overwhelming specter come back and back again, like a chiming clock or a refrain of comfort – a familiar ache. It is a conversation with loss, a heritage and a tradition, at once enacted as expected and also wholly, impossibly new. It revolves around what we know with what we don't want to know. It sways. In the end is a structure we would like to forget to remember. And to that end, grief in the body is a song, bequeathing the body's vessel a structure that feels like remembering loss and like suddenly forgetting, only to remember again. And by way of that end, grief in the body is a phantasmagoria, reminding us that all of our experiences have been experienced before, have and still speak with the dead and the yet-unborn, like art that lingers in legacy – a mortality, at peace with its own cycles. Grief lives in the body and abates and abides, yielding to sensation as well as sense, a halting like a shadow lengthening and shrinking beneath revolutions of light. We move through and we move on, and we remain within a shade of memory. We delight. We remember, like quick sparks of light, both memories that comfort and memories that reconfigure our awareness of loss. Grief lives in the body like a tryst or a love song – like a trauma, trapped inside the shape of what we think living should be, like poetry does. Grief lives in the body, in the awareness of the light-bringer and the dark cast behind, lives in the night-thrill of absence and the desperate longing for dawn, a comfort that moves our bodies in unquenchable quest. And, in the body, is the broken song of love. Here, once, was the muse to herald every prophecy, speaking of loss, speaking to the dark as it embodies the light, the body as it is enlightened in the darkness, to the melody of life lived alongside the mourning of it – a revenant of the intimacy of human connection and hope, a shadow shifting, intangible, alongside the body as it moves on. Delight, Grief, your body entwined with mine. Longing becomes lamentation. What lingers. A cloak of dreaming – the scent of violets and smoke, an invocation of storms, a field of blooms, fear-bright hues incapable of forgetting.

Interlude with Stars and River Stones, the Moon a Pink Perigee Past Season

Light of the stars waning:
As above, so below:

: Light of the falling arc of coins, let her
dance you into the rose of nothing,
 the night's thorn and bliss
 the zephyr of dawning stones.

: What is the goddess born
of red, if not blood-borne
 contagion? Your own
 lust, alive for moments lucid
 with living, mad
 in love with madness and
 the nectar of song?

: Where, night, your charm of ages?
Call my name into a black of
 mourning! A spring,
 fading into maw,
 soft beast, circle in the river, sunken
 as a skull in romance, alight
 awhile.

: Your violets, your ashes, your hellebore and
henbane, your monkshood - are you blue, my desire?
 Brilliant as adamantite, surrendering
 to the asphodel
 delirium - life alight awhile in darkness.

: a celestial season spilling its darkest:
: starlit blood, glistening, a certainty of silence & endings.

Used Love Salesman

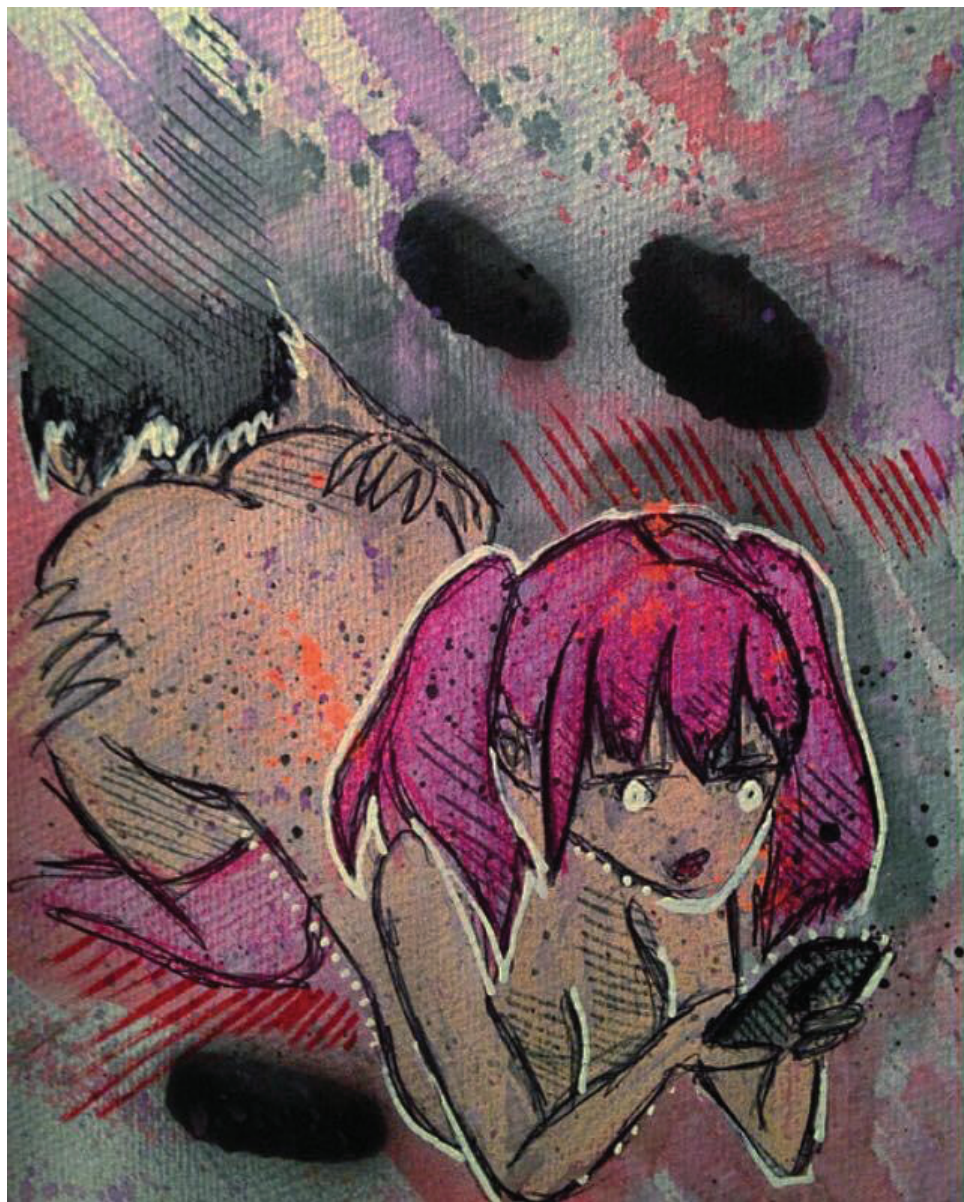
There's only a few peels of string cheese left on this heart. Get it while it lasts! It's Polly-O the best in the country you can't even find it on the West Coast except right here right behind this bosom. Put your ear right here have a listen. And yea sure I been in love before but my love rejuvenates every time after a broken heart zips through my Brita body cleans itself up pours itself out into the sink and starts fresh forget about them I'm good as new. I said I'm good as new! Those sweet nothings I whispered that was just air with sounds that made words that made the moon that made the moan and swoon -- no big deal, right just a little breeze rustlin their trees! But if that's important to ya, you'll get your own custom made not like Mustangs I'll build yours with my own pineapple lips. But let's not worry too much about that. It's just you know I ain't the same guy anymore I'm better with age like a wine my orchard teeth got the best grapes like in France have a squeeze. You ever been to France? Sweetheart if you stick with me you will be the one and only in that entire country no! in the entire World no! the Whole Wide Universe to get this kinda discount love! what a deal a refined mixture of flavors just taste a little here stick your tongue on mine and soak me up like I'm the tangy juice from steak and baby you're a warm baguette.

Jess and the Real Mom

When i got back there was a doll dilapidated on the doorknob. I took it in spoonfed it cleansed her with a damp tissue careful don't wash her face off. Sit right here Mom, i said. i'm so glad you came for a visit i hope the flight was okay. Mom smiles, don't you worry about me. Her eyes shimmer in hummingbirds. Mom's lipstick on my cheek a new fossil i will plant in the grass with my remains.

Tell me how you're feeling tell me about your day, Mom says. She tells that i'm brighter than the sun. I beam. Headlamps in her eyes. Mom is strong her bones are cars and pickup trucks but i carry her to the roof. To me she is the atmosphere. Let's look at stars, i say. She tilts her head and never mentions the bible sky. Mom lets me have this one.

Mom lets me tell her about the moon and how for our people it shared a jungle cave with the sun, they took turns sleeping. You can figure out the night she says. She is my day and i'm her envelope. I hold onto everything she gives a rainbow forms at her lips. She speaks in cantaloupe and honeydew i love her even when she's not my favorite fruit. Mom tucks me into the floor and lies with me. Mom sleeps tucked beneath the floorboards.



FICTION

Holly & Molly

Hey, are you listening? Yeah? Well, good. Ya see 'cause it was one of those very cold days in Winnipeg so cold that well the thermometer was way down there where the Fahrenheit & Celsius meet yeah it was that cold and I was sitting in my comfy chair in my cozy home looking out the window at the sun sparkling off the snow the new snow the very clean white snow that had fallen all night, and BTW on my lap was a book of poems that I had been dipping into the last few days and I started thinking about how I was a very visual person how I always like to draw things since I was a kid, yeah drawing painting and other visual arts were an integral part of my life growing up ya know I still have pictures lots of pictures that I painted hanging on the walls all over my house filling up spaces and such OK, of course TBH all the pictures I have are not mine some indeed many are works by others works that were bought on trips visiting art galleries and so forth but ya know I also like literature too not just pictures also ever since I was a kid yeah reading books I discovered Mark Twain and read Tom Sawyer many times IDK maybe three times yes three times or more, for I liked the stories about the antics and adventures of Tom and his friends along with Twain's social criticism and satirical view of things so I got an education in many things but I also had to look up some words like lugubrious diffident filial agues vittles because Twain's description of things was in a polished eloquent style in contrast to the simple folksy dialogue of the people but for this Canadian today there was the problem of Twain's use of the n-word for black people which was common at the time he was writing about 150 years ago but it bothered me yeah it did, so much that I took my white-out gizmo and turned all those words into this: n , which is really now just a real n-word eh, so there Mr. Twain,

but ya know I got the book from the library 'cause we couldn't afford to buy all the books I wanted to read, so I guess I was defacing a library book but it was for a good 'cause don't ya think and anyway the librarian said I couldn't take Tom Sawyer out again until someone else had a chance to read it ya see I was such a voracious reader which continues today where I have loads of books filling my shelves like the pictures filling my walls all around the house both fiction and non-fiction 'cause my interests are quite eclectic maybe even more so than most people but TBH how do I know how really different I am from what I'm calling most people when I only know the few I associate with OK, anyway ya see I am reminded of this literary interest because of the poetry book on my lap and it got me to thinking that— but wait a minute I don't want to portray myself as only an artsy person, for I like to tinker with things too also ever since I was a kid taking things apart and putting them back together usually they still worked although TBH occasionally I had extra parts left over so to speak which were not really left over of course which was why the gizmo I took apart didn't work again which was why my Dad got really pissed off especially if it was a gizmo that he needed and used OK, and thinking about it now I don't blame him but anyway it makes me think well really remember how this talent of mine with mechanical things made me more popular with the boys than the girls in those preteen years 'cause gosh I really didn't have any interest in playing with dolls and other girly stuff and there were many more boys than girls in the neighbourhood block plus I was not bad at sports OK, baseball for example I could throw a ball as far as the boys cripes they said to me Geez Holly you don't throw like a girrrlll yeah I didn't in fact I could hit a ball further than some of the boys but TBH not all of

them of course and so I was always called on to play ball with them for I also was good at fielding an excellent shortstop fast on my feet and with a good arm for double-plays ya know and football too although we only played touch ball no tackling & stuff like that OK, ya see we couldn't afford the equipment in our block working-class neighbourhood and all and so I was just one of the boys in my early years a tomboy one of the mothers on our block called me then but with my interest in words, remember I said I read books ya know literature and stuff so the word tomboy made me think that it was misnomer 'cause why should I be called a tomboy when I was a girl right, IMO why not something like suzyboy or judyboy would make more sense well really hollyboy eh what do ya think, it also made me think that that was another reason why I liked Tom Sawyer so much even though I was a girl, ya know Tom-boy eh anyway I got along swell with the guys in those days and since I also spent lots of my time reading and drawing and messing with mechanical things well gosh I just didn't have any time to play with the girls on the block and they didn't seem to mind for they had their own little clique which I probably could not have penetrated even if I tried which I didn't so there girls la de dah anyway that's how it was in those days which I now realize were really halcyon days although we did not know it at the time and I'm sure I didn't even know the word halcyon then but I only realized this after it all was over which happened in those teen years when OMG there is this violent transition well maybe not violent but say put it this way, remember that book by Germaine Greer called The Change about menopause for women in their later years well I think a similar book could be written about boys from preteen to the teenage years that is from the early years where girls are yucky

and kissing was sloppy (of course this didn't apply to tomboys like me for I was just one of the guys remember) to the teenage view where other girls now were objects of boys' desire (the change: from yucky to yummy) wanting to see to talk to and hopefully to touch and even in places not visible under their clothing and well you get the point and the point being that I was left out of this adoration being one of the unattractive girls although I'm sure the teen boys didn't use the word unattractive to describe me then but anyway here's the point at least here's my point, you see the boys made this very big change The Other Change I'd call my book about only boys because FYI ya see I didn't change yes I didn't change at all, I was the same I liked boys before and liked boys after and I still do but my tomboy behavior was now reinterpreted by others especially adults as what they saw as an aberration I mean it they really did, I can still remember that the mother on the block who called me a tomboy before now called me a name that made no sense to me and I asked myself why is she calling me the word for a wall that holds back water for cripes sake, and I knew that she was calling me a name by the way she said it ya know the tone of voice and such and it made me recall the story of the Dutch boy who saved his town by putting his finger in the hole and thus stopping the water but what does this have to do with me I thought, yet later I found out not only that this d-word was spelled differently from the one for the wall but that it also meant that I was interested in girls in ways that I should be thinking about boys, wanting to talk to them touching them in certain ways but OMG where did that come from that's totally wrong I never was interested in girls in any way but my feelings for boys were the same even more so if you get what I mean OK, don't ya get it I didn't change only the

boys changed and I supposedly did too but I didn't oh TBH it was all very confusing and ya know I, like all people I'm sure don't like to be called names especially when they don't fit cripes who needs this crap huh so where is this all going and anyway I have probably lost a few readers already so I need to keep your attention so it's a good time to bring some sex into this story but I guess I sort of already did with some stuff I said above but to be more explicit, as I said in the teen years guys were no longer interested in me and I was not interested in the girls in that way and geez even if I got naked in a bed with another girl which I didn't, well ya know I don't think I'd know what to do in that bed really whereas right here and now I can think of a few things to do with a guy naked in bed but that's as far as I'm going in that direction and ya know what, it reminds me of Jeremy one of the other kids on the block but who was not good at sports no not at all and didn't really play with the guys very much but he liked me for some reason and why I'm thinking of him now is because of what he told me one day I can't remember the context or why we got into this chat but he told me something that was a revelation to me at the time in my teen-transition years ya see 'cause he told me he was gay and I said that that was a funny old-fashioned word for happy or good, ya know the way it's used so much in Tom Sawyer Tom and his friends they're always talking 'bout this being gay and that being gay, and so I asked Jeremy why are you telling me that you're good and happy and he said oh no not that meaning of gay and I said that I didn't know what he was talking about and he said that he was surprised that I didn't know what he was talking about since I was a tomboy and I should know these things and he then said he was sure that I knew what he was talking about and this got me mad well

really confused ya see 'cause I hate it when people tell me I'm supposed to know what they're talking about when I have no idea what they mean and cripes why do people do this and especially Jeremy since he was a friend and I didn't want to be mad at him nor him at me ya see and I told him all this and he said he was sorry and he started to explain all this gay stuff to me and OMG in detail too, stuff that I never even thought about and holy moly (as Caption Marvel used to say; oh didn't I tell you that I liked comic books too) anyway a sort of light bulb went off in my brain and I'm not going to tell all this stuff since you probably know it anyway but I want to say that he told me about the d-word and how to spell it, which explained a lot for me right, so now I knew what to do with another girl naked in bed although I never did it ya know but I do know what to do if it happened by chance but geez how could I end up naked in bed with another naked girl just by chance ya know like what's the chance of that happening huh and anyway what would I say eh, like maybe Hi I'm Holly wha—cripes what am I doing stop but what I really want to say and talk about is the important fact that my relationship with some of the popular girls did change because ya see I was smart and I could help them with their schoolwork yeah with my help they didn't have to study so hard and it gave them more time to be with the boys OK, ya know that was true for the super-pretty Sibyl Sypher one of the most popular girls in the school, that is popular with the good-looking guys yeah good ol' Sibyl we were best friends for without me she would've flunked all her classes except maybe gym and TBH ya know what she told me one day in all seriousness, well she said yes she really said this to me she said that being pretty was a hazard yeah a hazard she used that very word hazard would you believe I

almost LMAO but ya know she was serious and yeah she looked me straight in the eyes and also said this, Holly you need to know 'bout this hazard just in case you change and don't look so dreadful later on because being pretty attracts all kinds of jerks yeah that's what she said she told me that I was lucky for looking dreadful dreadful WYB my best friend Sybil yeah Sibyl & Holly always together and she said I looked dreadful but TBH she meant it as a compliment and I was OK with that and so I had to comfort myself realizing that I did not have this terrible problem this hazard (as she called it) of having to dump jerky guys who wanted to get into my pants OMG what a burden that would have been eh can you imagine oh I was so lucky looking dreadful right but FYI on several occasions it did occur to me that I might say not mind having just one only one that's enough one good-looking guy come after me on say one and only one occasion just one that's enough and for just a few hours say maybe so I could try out some of those things I didn't explicitly say above about touching boys and stuff like that and then of course after we were done I would of course rebuff the jerk just kick him out of my dreadful life what do you think, do I still have your attention, well that's the best I can do with the topic of sex at this point in the story because this is not that kind of a story at least not at this point in the story but FYI well I may pick it up later and anyway how I did get into all this oh yes I began with my artsy side but then got sidetracked and oh yes duh there's this poetry book on my lap and it reminds me that poetry is not only literary like novels but it's also visual like pictures do ya remember those Beat Poets of the 50s who liked to explore this feature I'm thinking of that poem about the atomic bomb where the words were shaped like a mushroom cloud remember that one,

well if not you still can get the picture eh and anyway I was not thinking of this one but what struck me was this idea of — oh but first I need to tell you that I think the origin of my idea or at least a part of my idea came about because I was looking at the snow still falling outside my window and I believe it may have had something to do with my looking across the open field, you see the falling snow was only scattered flakes not the usual Winnipeg blizzardly type and so I could see into the far far distances and towards the horizon and with the cloud-covered sky the whiteness was everywhere up down left right near far all over and I had this feeling of infinity OK, how else to say it to explain it and ya see it triggered in my mind this idea that of a poem that was just one line one line only, going on and on and on and on in one and only one straight line where it could be like a ticker tape going along a very very very long strip of paper or it could then go around a cylinder or in a helix, or zigzagging along going far and wide anywhere as one line just one line only but TBH how could I do this when writing now is on a word processor and everything ends up like this page as a rectangle and anyway where would I get such a long piece of paper I mean just look how long this thing is so far, so it's only a fantasy but nonetheless I am typing this thing as if it were a straight line so well you do the math just count the lines so far (I get 172) and multiple that number by the width of this line (on my computer screen the width is about 11 inches), and you'll get a number (I got 52½ yards) and that's a long piece of paper 'cause if you think of it it's over half the length of a football field of 100 yards which gives you a good idea of how long that piece of paper would have to be but of course that's for an American field since the Canadian football field is actually longer by 10 yards and wider

too which FYI I know this 'cause remember I played football with boys in my preteen years their pre-Change years and it was a big thing for them ya see because Americans always seem to brag about everything American being bigger in contrast to Canadian modesty yet here was something Canadian that was bigger than the American and well you may be thinking that this bigger-size thing is predominantly a male thing well for obvious reasons eh but let me tell you this yes FYI it ain't, because my best friend Sybil Sybil with the curly hair hair which boys liked to get their fingers into to curl around as well as in other places on her body yes Sybil said to me one day in no uncertain terms and I can still hear her sing-songy voice saying this to me as she looks me straight in the eyes ♪ ♪ Well mine are bigger than your-ors ♪ ♪ and then she looks down at me in both ways if you get my drift and I need to tell you that this had nothing to do with any d-wordy type thing going on between us and even if it did FYI well I wouldn't tell you 'cause that stuff's private la de dah, but it did freak me out OMG it really did yeah really so much that I'm embarrassed to say that I did the tissues-in-the-bra trick the next day (don't tell anyone please) I know it was stupid but well it's over 'cause I never did it again 'cause the boys didn't look at me any differently than before I stuffed my bra, 'cause I guess I was still the same old dreadful Holly tissue-enhanced boobs or not, but ya know I did notice that some girls looked at me strangely and TBH I don't even want to think 'bout what that meant and anyway it's over and geez how did we get into all this 'cause I want to get out OK, 'cause it got me thinking about how much I keep learning in life, so many new things and how long does this go on, does it end with my teenage years, is there then nothing new to learn 'cause ya know well when I

look at some adults I think this might be true, but at least I don't want that to happen to me eh 'cause I want to keep learning new things never stopping as I grow older & older sort of like this sentence I am writing going on and on, when will it end I don't know since I am writing it but then I think about you reading it and that means that you (unlike me) could see when the ending is really is by either scrolling down to the end or turning the pages to the end but that would spoil the fun yeah spoil the fun for you would it not but then I can't control what you do as you read this so OK go to the end if you wish 'cause I can't stop you but I will mark the text for you to find your place when you come back to HERE again, OK you're back and now you know how long this thing is and that's more information than I have so you know more than me about the story my own story that I am writing and that's just weird like looking into the future and I suppose BTW it's really some sort of philosophical or metaphysical puzzle or riddle or enigma or something eh and it all began 'cause of the simple fact that that piece of paper for this story keeps getting longer and longer as I keep typing stuff that comes to mind about my dreadful life but of course this talk about an end gets me thinking about an end, so I think I seriously should think about ending this thing sooner rather than later don't ya think too eh, but how yeah how to finish this story that could go on and on and on and it makes me think of folk singers yeah folk singers ya know how they repeat things so much verse after verse repeating over and over again seemingly endlessly and when they finally end, some nutcases in the audience keep clapping for an encore and OMG the singer comes back and starts all over cripes it could never end didn't anyone tell folk singers about what's called theme & variations eh but I digress and then

I thought well what would be a case of an act that really had an ending a real ending built into it so to speak, and FYI well I don't know why but I thought of a striptease yeah I did 'cause unlike folk music it goes only in one direction and it has an ending after which ya can't go any further right, not even and encore, geez what would be an encore in a striptease act eh did ya ever think of that, not that I know much about this form of entrainment and no I never did a striptease I only saw parts of it in movies although there was that one time with that older guy whe— but wait that's private anyway and this story I'm afraid is getting more like a folk song than a striptease so maybe I should cancel the whole project for we're not going to find a piece of paper long enough to really do this especially now since if you do that count & multiply thing again we could probably get a touchdown if ya get my symbolism but then it hits me OMG I don't know why but I get another thought which is, why not keep it as it is, a long long long sentence but coming out as rectangles on several pages and so I don't need to cancel the project but just find a way to end it and it suddenly reminds me of a famous case of long sentences that I read years ago at— yeah, duh, yeah why didn't I think of this before, I know OK you've already thought of it many lines back so la de dah for you, so we both thought of it OK, anyway it brought to mind Joyce's Ulysses, yeah its ending with Molly Bloom's almost 50-page soliloquy of 8 very very long sentences with the longest being 4391 words which I'm easily going to pass so la de dah Jamesy boy, but it does get me thinking about how Joyce ended it OK, well I've been told that scholars don't agree on that ending especially the sexual aspect of it which brings us back to that topic again but then scholars don't agree on anything so IMHO Molly's

screed I'm convinced is an orgasmic ending yeah that's it and some scholars agree with me so to speak usually female ones and anyway OMG just listen to what Molly says 'bout all that kissing under Moorish walls yes and the looking in the eyes yes and her heaving breasts yes and the perfume yes and hearts going like mad yes ya see all that yessing stuff cripes is this not like having a yes orgasm right there under that Moorish wall whatever that is, so yeah I think she does and if so then there's some sex for ya hey an orgasm is real sex right and ya know it makes me ask this, do other women do that YES stuff too when they have orgasms I don't know since I never had sex with a woman but it also makes me wonder do men ever do it eh, do some men scream YES YES I've never heard a guy scream YES and I never read that in a book only women so maybe it's a biological thing but then I think about lesbians if they yell YES YES it's biological otherwise I don't know what to think and I really want to finish this thing now because frankly I have to go to the bathroom and don't want to come back to HERE or anywhere 'cause this thing's getting waaaaaay too long as we both know so I need to get back to that fantasy guy I mentioned many words ago, yeah remember I had that brief fantasy fling before dreadful me dumped the jerk and I just realized that even if I had sex with him and I did scream out YES YES with my orgasm and maybe he too would shout YES YES it would not be over because there's all that post-coital stuff right ya know in the old days when everyone had a smoke after sex at least in the movies smoking was so ubiquitous OMG everyone did then especially after sex and so many died doing it (smoking that is) and that's an end eh death yeah a real end and BTW I didn't yell YES YES even in my fantasy but I did boot the jerk out of my dreadful life so there la de

dah Sybil wherever you are, so are ya still with me (you, not Sybil) of course none of this happened but this did make me think of something else I don't know why but with all this stuff about ending and not ending and I really have to go and so I'm right now ending this sentence that began with Ya see 270 lines ago and since I've passed up good ol' Joyce by almost 300 words it's time to quit yeah stop now. Done. GTG Oh, one more thing: it's Holly & Molly, not Holy Moly. Cripes. TTYL, maybe.

Topper Barnes

Perpetual Freedom

The 1989 pearl white Lincoln Town Car pierced into the moonlit Lower Colorado Desert at ninety-nine miles per hour. I stuck my head out of the window into the crisp desert air and laughed at the cactuses.

Look at all those stars! My God, never had I seen so many under the smog enveloped ceiling of Los Angeles. They met with the desert, melting into one vast, structureless expanse. And there we were, pushing into it eagerly like a pimple faced teen sticking his first pussy. Fast of the bat, unexperienced but happy to experience.

The dry earth stretched farther than the Pacific into the East. It brought us into a land of myths, a place where rotted pioneers and forgotten natives were frozen in a perpetual struggle. Farther, faster, never let up on the gas, and maybe we will no longer be in the West.

Fight against all that progression, destiny, and civilization... Where did it bring us anyway?

To a chunk of rock on a fault line ready to break.

A cactus waved at me. *Do you know about the two cactuses and the moon? Of course, you Don't.* I caught a mosquito in my mouth and ate it before it had the chance to eat me. Tasted like baked sun and blood. Meriwether changed the track. I pulled my body back into the car. The single-couch seat cushioned the potholes as we

passed road signs. What did that one say? A mile marker, maybe, we are getting closer. Only a hundred miles to go. A short distance in the desert.

Bob and weave through the lanes. Cut over the known, safe forward, dip into the incoming, but not for too long.

Meriwether had an ember glowing from his Cheshire smile. The camel exhale filled the car with glorious cancer. In all the madness of speed and desert, he handed me the eight-ball with the delicacy of a porcelain doll. No amount of chaos could surmount the reverence due to a zip-lock full of rocket fuel. It landed in my palm no harder than a weak gust of wind. I looked down at the shimmering powder, reflecting the cosmos, the moon itself stuck in each grain, and took my single key that opened nothing to scoop myself a bump. I anticipated each pothole. When they came, I swayed with the car, bringing the key closer to my nostrils.

Closer and closer. Bump. Bump. Now don't get too excited or it will spill all over.

Remember, we are going fast, damn fast for a Town Car, and if a bump is to be had, it must be had artfully.

The cactuses hated the moon because it moved. Every night it traversed across the sky arrogantly, covered in water and green, as the cactuses watched it from their sandy abode.

Bump, bump, bump. It took at least three to make a line. Then, being the compassionate man I was, I dug into the bag, accumulated the biggest bump that had ever been dug out of a bag, and maneuvered my way to Meriwether's nose.

"Open the hangar, here comes the plane," I said.

Vroom, vroom, vroom. I twisted and turned, dodging the danger of potholes, until it ended up right at the philtrum. It parked and waited. Meriwether sniffed it up.

"Oh, hot damn, what good shit that is," he said.

"Shhhhhhh... Wait, look. Did you see that?"

Meriwether extended his jaw over the steering wheel. Moons and stars and satellites. An endless stretch of land. His lips curled up to his ears and he nodded.

"Yes, man, I saw it. Life. That is it right there," Meriwether said.

My body beaded with sweaty excitement. I could not stay seated. My head hit the roof as I tried to stand. Damn, well, crouch down in the crevice between the seat and dashboard.

“Life, like slow burning cherry bombs. Pop, pop, pop... Do you understand that we are doing something that no one has ever attempted?” Meriwether said.

I fed him another bump. He stuck two cigarettes into his mouth and lit them. He handed me one. I sucked it down.

“Think of them!” I said.

“Who?”

“All of them! How sad they are back there. Sitting around like unlit coals, hoping something will happen. Looking at screens, eating sugar, sleeping and sleeping, nothing comes for them. And look at us, here, killing the night.”

And the cactuses grew jealous of the moon's movement and planned to steal its water.

“Yes, yes!. And we cannot die because we are already dead. Look at me. Do you see me?” Meriwether said as he turned away from the road and planted his eyes on me. His hands left the wheel. It steered on its own, slowly veering to the left, to invisible headlights, into the desert, bumpy and unpaved...

“No, I cannot.”

He gripped back down on the steering wheel and placed us safely in the right

lane.

“Good! I hope nobody ever sees me again,” he said.

Almost there. The road marker told us so. I took another bump and pushed my head out of the window. Scream, scream, let the cactuses know you are there. All that expanse needed to know that I too knew it existed. Like unread books in a library, every inch of the desert begged to be understood.

“When I was a child, I played a game when we drove through the desert,” I said as I pulled myself back into the car.

“Bill, tell me, tell me! What was the game that little Wild Bill played?”

“Well, we used to take midnight trips to Nevada, and to get there we had to cut through this very desert. Past windmills and cactuses, sand and skulls, everything you see now has been in my life since incubation,” I said.

“Yes, man! Wild Bill, you know, it is the same for me. This sunbaked earth is in my veins. We are this desert. We are the moon and stars, but only here, only in the desert.”

So, the cactuses began to lure the moon with sand. They showed it to the moon one night and the moon asked why it would ever want sand. Because you are so watery, they

replied.

He lit another cigarette and fed it to me.

“Better than I can say, but look...” I pointed out the window at the sky. “Do you see those stars?”

“Yes, I’ve seen them all my life. So cold but so hot. I never knew what temperature to call them.”

“Exactly! And do you see the silhouettes of those mountains? They are far, but maybe if you try hard enough, you will see them.”

“What do you mean, man? Of course, I see them. I have always seen them, and I will always see them,” Meriwether said.

But the moon went through its cycle. The cactuses reveled in the sand. Being one with it, loving it, they made the coarse stuff beautiful to the moon who had never touched sand.

Nobody was driving anymore. The car barreled down the road on its own accord. We pressed our sweaty faces forehead to forehead and exhaled into each other’s inhale.

“You know this game; I do not doubt. Remember when mother and father

rubbed their hands raw, little blisters bursting, you wondering and fearing adulthood because of hands. I think now, maybe you do to, that when things are bad enough, a “vacation” is needed.”

“A change of scenery! Of course, Wild Bill, it is needed. They said we just needed a little new scenery. I still do not know if that is true. But hey, that is my life, and my life is my life. We move and nothing stays the same. Mom is different one year, and father is different the next, and you! Don’t get me started on you, hell, if you is even a name that can be nameable. It does not matter the name. All we have is now. So, now, look.”

The headlights sliced darkness into ribbons. The cactuses applauded. The moon and stars stayed indifferent to our journey as they always had.

I took another cigarette and bump.

“Well, man, the game. It was the best game. It was the desert game.”

“I think I know it,” Meriwether said as he pressed harder onto the gas.

“Look at the moon and mountains. Do you see them?”

“Yes.”

“Now imagine you are a man running at the speed of our car. Every mountain you leap over, every star you duck under. You bob and weave through it all and the obstacles never end until you sleep. And if the little running man in your mind comes to a dead end, where the mountains and stars collide, and there is nowhere for him to jump or duck, you know what you do then?” I said.

What is that, anyway, the moon asked. It is sand, of course. It is what makes up the desert. Not knowing what a desert was, the moon grew curious.

Who was driving? The negligent wheels carried us gracefully; full of that American precision that moves on and on no matter what it rolls over.

“You make him burrow deep down under it all and have him pop out on the other side,” Meriwether said.

“Yes!”

“Of course, yes. I know this game; I was born playing this game and I’m playing it now,” he said.

The Town Car dragged us back into place. Headlights shrank our world. The old, ever-hated blue and red. The fury of love and remembrance that burned in Meriwether’s eyes smoldered into concentration. Meriwether drove straight. Even the rigid cactuses envied him.

The red and blue hovered for a while, both of us held in our breath, keeping in all that explosion. I exhaled, quiet, subdued, hoping the fresh frost of Latin kisses would be drowned out. Now, hey man, they have been there for too long.

I did not wait for Meriwether's reply. I stuck a finger in, wiggled around to get it sacculating, and prison pocketed any illicit substances we had. No lubrication? No problem. Get the finger swirling around long enough and you will have, without a doubt, a moist, inviting stash pocket.

Well, can I touch the sand? Yes, just come here and we will let you touch it.

Don't you think they have no business out here. Sure, man, yea, I hear your arguments. Borders and drunks and traffickers, but hey, man, isn't this America? Land of the free. But wow, don't forget, there is something in every lawman that hates freedom.

The headlights rumbled with boredom. Zooooooooooooooooom. They zipped passed us. I read the stenciled door: border patrol. After a few minutes, the truck came back in the other direction and huddled up to our bumper. God, Jesus, Holy Spirit, this son of a bitch must be more twisted than us. The heat from the engine shot billows of steam into the sky. That is it, I thought, all and all it has not been a bad run. The truck staggered. The headlights faded, and we hit our turn according to the GPS. I looked back after entering the unknown and saw that the landscape was free of hateful headlights.

Up! Up! The Volume must be louder. Please. If you do not turn it up, then we will never make it.

We passed a spray-painted sign that read, "Leaving Reality."

The moon came down and they leapt on it before it had the chance to run. They riddled the moon with holes, the moon's water drained onto the earth, and the moon was left dry and pock- marked.

I stuck a finger in myself and wiggled it around to loosen my bowels. Right before my finger was ready to cramp and my intestines were ready to loosen themselves, the bag came out. The dope was a bit damp, but it was still dry enough to sniff. I plopped the mucky bag into my hand and dug a key into it as we passed The Ranch: a small stage in the middle of the desert frequented by sunburned lizard-men with instruments.

And now you know what a desert and sand is. Now you are desert and sand, the cactuses said.

Tipis and RVs littered the land. On each side of the road tangled messes of metal wires that had been shaped into human forms stood. They were covered with the rust of forgetfulness. Looking without eyes, they defiantly longed for a society that had abandoned them. Looking. Looking. And nothing more. Once these wires stood for some usefulness, some purpose, but they had been repurposed

by the inhabitants as monuments to a world that was lost to them. Never would they do anything more than show that the trash of society lived way out in the desert, in the last free place in America, and that it would be there ad infinitum. Like pillars of salt marking the places where people once stood.

But the moon was strong with the mystics of the cosmos and cursed the cactuses. They were filled with water, but no matter how long they tried to get the water out from their insides, they could not.

I pointed my finger into the dark gape of the endless desert. Deeper! Deeper! I demanded.

We had more night to be had, and I did not want our having to wake up the native inhabitants. The settlements faded and the pavement dissipated into sand. The Town Car's engine rumbled with smoke and passion. More, more, more! Do not stop until we are stopped. In an ocean of black, surrounded by nothing but a sky of stars and a stubborn moon, Meriwether pressed down on the brakes. The car hissed. We had made it: Slab City USA and beyond. Good God! And beyond that beyond we were. Some place that was nameless and mapless. I dug into the bag and pulled out a hefty bump. Sniff. I handed one to Meriwether.

Sniff. And we did so until the bag was empty, and our eyes were heavy with a come down, and...

Now, every night the moon crosses the desert, looking away from the cactuses and their sand, knowing that they have its water, but also knowing they will never move or taste it.

I was sticky and desiccated. The windows magnified the brutal sun onto my forehead. I peeled my face off the hot leather seat. White spots blotted my vision as I adjusted to the day.

I looked out the window and the vast expanse of the desert slowly formed. Heat waves slithered from the cracked earth. Up above a white ball of hatred shone down on us. There was nothing but nothing. I squinted as hard as I could to catch a glimpse of some structure that reminded me of civilization.

Where had all that everything gone?

I rolled a window down and breathed in the dry air. My throat stuck and I coughed. It did not help. I opened the door to the Town Car. The hinges squeaked and looked for an echo in the gaping desert. The ravenous sands devoured the sound and sent nothing back in return.

The sand curled around my feet. My eyes batted and swelled with tears. It was just as hot outside as it was inside. Maybe even worse.

Meriwether leaned back in his seat. His shirt was off. His lean stomach was

spitting sweat. Curves swirled around his eyes as he sucked on a cigarette.

“You’re awake?” I asked.

“Have been for three hours.”

“Good. Well, what are we doing?”

“Fucked.”

I searched around the car for a bottle of water. We brought none. Once I gave up on the water, I looked for something to snort. None. Finally, I sat down in the passenger’s seat and looked at the desert. It is hard to explain how little the desert has to offer. Nothing besides the fact that you exist, and it does too.

“Let me get a smoke.”

“There is none left,” he said as he sucked on a grit.

“Well, let me hit that, god damn it.”

He handed me the short end of the butt. I took one puff and tasted cotton. My throat flooded with bile as I tossed the butt out of the window.

“Let’s get out of here. All I see is nothing and sand and nothing and sand. I say we make a

trip to the first market and get some food, booze, and water. Then we’ll get back by night and see the show at The Ranch,” I said.

“We pushed too far.”

“A gas station sandwich sounds damn good. If not, we’ll get some bread, mustard and bologna.”

“We are not going anywhere.”

“And water and coke. Once I put that down I’ll be ready for a twelver. Easy thing to do. Start her up.”

Meriwether twisted the keys and the engine rumbled but did not roll. The engine hissed and kicked. The wheels spun, kicking up sand, making us wiggle from side to side, but that was it.

“We are stuck, have been since last night. We went too far.”

I staggered out of the car and tripped in the loose sand. It rolled on and on without ever thinking about us. I picked myself up in the thick, molasses desert

air. How quick all that everything became all that nothing. The urgency of the situation socked my gut when I looked down at the back tires engulfed in sand. No matter how hard that engine rumbled and kicked, it would never find traction.

Meriwether slammed the sizzling door shut and stood on the desert with me. He smiled beneath the sweat and grime. He nodded his head in the direction that he believed we came from.

Not far, never too far, we push on and on. The good times last forever and the bad ones are nothing more than a blink of the eye. Walk forth with your head down, old friend, and meditate through the pain.

I cannot recall how many miles it came down to. I do know that by the time we hit cement my mind was fried. It took every bit of me to keep my body functioning. My thighs cramped with dehydration, brittle jerky, and the joints creaked with every step. I thought of nothing but the need to keep moving. My lips dried shut as Meriwether pointed forward. On, on, on he shouted. He smiled down at my dried-out frame as if it were all a joke. Nothing but another step in this short but long life.

Just stay focused on the movement. You have moved all your life and it should not be anything new to you. Yes, that is it! The knee swings forward, your hips turn a bit with it, and your other knee kicks back a bit, plants itself down, and

you step. Now you are moving. Just keep doing that for a thousand more steps, for another twelve months, until you make it to eighty and your movement is stuck.

We passed RVs and tipis and mud huts. Silent and still in the heat waves. Meriwether hollered at them, but we got no reply. His forehead dripped with sweat and labor, but beneath it, as always, he kept that old Western muscle that would never fade. He was born of pioneers. I stumbled and slouched on the hot, calloused road, but his rugged grit picked me up and pushed me down the road. From what I could see, we walked on into nothingness. A white sun blinded the surroundings. The cactuses and tumble weeds and desert birds were blotted out.

Only Meriwether was left. His thick, denim clad frame stood like an unbuilt statue of the West. We had no great monuments, no churches or palaces or bridges. Just Meriwether and his ancestry. He came from the dead and the death dealers. His blood was soaked in the land far beyond our time. He pointed deep into the heart of progression and pierced it with his cocksure brows. We had no history but what the mouth and time left. A few little pieces of our great destiny lay shattered in bright boiling dots that shimmered in the pupils of Meriwether.

“Up, come on. We don’t have much to go.”

And he was right. He tossed my weak, sun sucked bones over his left shoulder and dragged me into redemption. He was not a hero, but he was not a villain.

He was the West. Whatever that means to you. But to me, it is Meriwether. A horrible, howling beast that can only be admired when you look at it as if it were no different than a pebble in the desert. A part of the land that cannot be separated. Just one fact in the sea of facts that make up the desert's violent sand. Nothing more.

I was choking with heat when old Meriwether laid me down in the shade. I looked up at the rippled paint sign. Where were we, I thought, that they did not even have neon? I swayed as I tried to stand. My knees were hollow, and my head was empty. I fell onto my cheek bones and heard them rattle. I swirled in the blotted giant, its jaws extending and swallowing me into its ulcerated belly, and just when I lost all thought, sweet, hardened Meriwether handed me a sweaty bottle of water. I pounded it down. He handed me another. I pounded it as fast.

After five bottles I regained sight.

I looked across the road and could see the Salton Sea. Its shores were lined with salty dead fish carcasses. A mistake of the 20th century. The salinized air stung my eyes. I rubbed my wet lids and went into the store. It was one of those sad stores, barely stocked and with leather faced women behind the cash registers, that line the dead desert highways of our great nation. I bear hugged three gallons of water and Powerade, plopped them down on the register, and went back for candy bars, bread, and bologna. The cashier looked at us like we were

dead already. Her eyes seemed to offer help, but nothing came out. A person like that had seen a million of us. They knew that we needed assistance, but in the long run, offering it meant nothing. She rang us up and let us go.

We sat in the stores shade eating and drinking. We put it all down in five minutes. My stomach extended as Meriwether handed me a cigarette. I sucked away thoughtlessly as he winced at the desert. We had a long way back.

“Make it to the ranch and have someone pull us out. I saw a few trucks back there with hitches, and I’m sure they have the tow straps to go with them.”

Meriwether sprung to his feet. His thick, sun-tanned jaw glimmered.

I reached my hand up to him. He pulled me to my feet. We started our trek back down the battered road, through the desert, penetrating nothingness and everything with each step.

Beauty is two faced. One moment it snuggles up next to you and whispers assurances into your ear. The next, it is shattering your life with reality. My thighs cramped up, my gut spun, and I crumpled into a ball on the side of the road. Through the muscles tightening and fluids pouring I saw a flipside. Beauty. What a strange word. Sometimes it comes in forms that are not expected, colorful, or clean. Beauty is a lump of shit stuck to the bottom of your shoe. It is your grandmother dying young. You curled in bed after a bad break up praying

for the pain to end. Beauty. What a word.

I looked back from where we came. I could not see anything but heatwaves and sand.

How long had we walked? It seemed that just a moment ago we were in the cool shade of the store drinking, eating, and sucking on grits. And even closer still we were driving down that very road under moonlight taking bumps and screaming at the universe. Closer, even closer, I was a child sitting in the back seat to Las Vegas, running across the flatlands, dodging and jumping. The time went by so fast. And it went so slow in the moment. Finally, it led me to where I always expected it to end me.

A dirty, preventable death. The sun looked down at me blankly. Its center roared hollow heat. Meriwether dragged me by the shoulder away from the road. He laid me down under a sparse leafed Ghost Gum tree. He leaned his back against the stump and took out a cigarette. His cool, calm demeanor sweated with worry.

“Eternity is a strange thing to be,” I said before turning my head to puke. I strained my guts until my sight went hot black. When my vision came back, I saw two puddles, one for me and for Meriwether. I tried to talk again but vomit came out before words. Meriwether followed. All that drink and food to waste. A damn shame to die on an empty stomach.

"You just keep going, Wild Bill, that's all there is to it."

"Do you know the story about the cactus and the moon?"

"No," Meriwether said.

"Yea, me neither."

The sun came down slowly. The endless miles that drifted into starchy white faded. I dragged on an imaginary grit and dreamt of nothing. It was all around me. The past, present, and future melted into an illusion and left nothing but us. No amount of cocaine or speed thrills could amount to that. That great, eternal high was before me, indifferent and engulfing.

I was not it, and it was not me. That much was clear.

How long had it been?

In the glaring glory of oneness, a Ford 250 with head lights and a trailer hitch appeared.

The tires skidded to a halt. Through my transcendent gaze, I saw the driver window roll down. A man with a thick mustache turned his head towards us and told us to get in. Meriwether lifted me into the truck bed, and we sped

away.

Fifteen minutes.

“We are thirsty as hell, man. Do you got anything to drink?”

“We got some beers and fruit punch in the cooler. Hand me a Coors,” the driver yelled.

The sun sucked back up into the sky and a full life came into fruition. Time slowed down and I saw myself separate from it all. The sand and mountains and sun were not me. They could not count the years like I did.

Let’s play a game. It will never end but the goal will always be there.

I grabbed Meriwether’s collar and pulled him in close. I tried to talk through my parched, bleeding lips but nothing came out. Meriwether gulped a can of Coors, drank half, and then bird fed the rest into my mouth. I puckered my wet lips together to muster out a few syllables.

“I’ve got a bit more...”

He spat more Coors into my mouth.

“A... bit... more coke. But look, if we are going to live, you are going to have to dig it out of me. Fuck the cactuses. Don't worry, I'll relax.”

Fieldstripped

Outside the rear doors of the motor pool bay, Arkey, a Polish soldier not long out of his teen years, stands against a backdrop of broken pallets and an overflowing garbage dumpster. Between his lips rests a cigarette. Smoke wafts up from the burning cherry into the frigid October night sky. He takes hold of the cigarette, inhales, throws his head back, exhales, and returns it to his lips.

Wrapping my camo Gore-Tex jacket tight, I watch, mesmerized. The scent of tobacco, which I usually find nauseating, is intoxicating. I breathe in, then out. My breath drifts up, mingling with Arkey's smoke. One whiff of his preferred national brand brings back bittersweet memories of the past month on this mock deployment. Until tonight, until I smelled the cigarette, until I realized the mission was over, that I would soon head back with the rest of my company to our Army base in Germany, I never thought I would miss anything, or anyone, here.

Against his scrubbed white face, Arkey's eyes glow bright green. At the beginning of this NATO mission, his eyes were a dull hazel, his cheeks hollow. Compared to my American comrades and me, who still had our baby fat, he looked like a tired, hungry Van Gogh figure painted as a soldier. But a steady diet of field chow has softened the hard edges of his face. His uniform, which once hung from his slender frame, now shows off his broad shoulders. He catches me watching as he straightens his royal blue beret on his sandy blond head and shoots me a crooked grin. Despite myself, I smile back.

Officially, he is a truck driver for the Polish Army. Unofficially, he is the Polish-English interpreter for our small logistics platoon that consists of our fearless leader, Sergeant Bluff, my two buddies, Specialist Dale and Private Dix, and me, Specialist Burton, the only woman. Officially, unofficially, he has become another logistical specialist, working with our Army to complete our supply mission. Our platoon sergeant either didn't know or didn't care that he needed more than a handful of soldiers to supply the thousands of NATO troops on this exercise. We were understaffed and overwhelmed from day one. Although I can blame Sergeant Bluff for that, I do not know who to blame for failing to see that we would need someone to translate between American troops and the Polish soldiers delivering our supplies. Fortunately for us, Arkey stepped forward. He announced he was fluent in German, English, and Polish, with a working knowledge of Russian. Sergeant Bluff told him English and Polish would suffice. Later, he recognized Arkey's labor was just as valuable to us as his language skills.

One morning, Sergeant Bluff called to me after our daily briefing. Starting at the top of my head, his eyes moved over my face, down my shoulders to my torso. He let them linger over my chest, belly, and hips. His gaze advanced down my shins to the toes of my boots. He then snorted and drew back his head. When his dark eyes again met mine, behind them I saw his mind working out the contradictions. Whatever it was about me that repulsed him also attracted him. "Get outside and find your little Polack friend," Sergeant Bluff ordered. "Tell him if he isn't translating, then he needs to find another way to make himself

useful to the United States Army. Let him know he needs to get off his lazy ass and go to work or else he can go back to wherever he came from.”

I translated my NCO’s words into a more diplomatic message for my new comrade. “Sergeant Bluff wants to know if you would like to work supply with us.” I smiled at Arkey, hoping he would not decipher the real meaning behind the dispatch.

“He said that?” Arkey lit a cigarette. “Why didn’t he ask me himself?” I looked away.

“Fick ihn.” Fuck him, he said, in German, our secret language we spoke to avoid Sergeant Bluff’s listening ears. “Okay, I will stay.”

“Good,” I grinned. “I’ll let him know.”

“But I don’t do this for him. I do this for my friends. I will stay for Dale and Dix.” He looked me in the eye. “And you.” My cheeks warmed and my chest burned, perhaps from the second-hand smoke, or something else.

Now, standing outside in the cold late autumn evening, I almost believe Arkey and I are the last two people on Earth, in Poland, or at least on this base. Our logistics company is one of the few remaining units. We inherit the garbage, the waste, and the mess the others have left, but also the quiet. The night sky is so

clear I see stars, already dead, but born during creation. If I listen closely, I can almost hear the Big Bang.

Not a single sound even escapes from the motor pool bay into the atmosphere. My buddies and platoon sergeant get first dibs on our only latrine before lights out. They are men and I am outnumbered, so I go when they are finished. I assume they have disappeared to wash up or have already crawled into their cots. The stillness that remains could almost pass for peace.

A sliver of moonlight falls on Arkey's face as he takes another drag. "Here. I want to give you something," he says, the cigarette perched on his lips.

He untucks the shirttail of his uniform and, in Polish, mumbles to himself. From the front pocket of his trousers, he pulls out a small folding knife and saws at the bottom button of his untucked shirt. With one hand, he folds up the knife, then grips the cigarette. In his other hand, he holds out the button.

"This is a gift for you. From one soldier to another, from a Polish to an American."

Reaching out, I notice my own hands. Dried blood and earth fill the crevices of my broken skin. Embedded under my nails are layers of dirt. The more I wash, the dirtier my hands become. The skin flakes, then cracks open. Grime fills the gaps where my body refuses to knit back together. The filth from Army life

infiltrates my bloodstream, becoming a part of me as much as everything else in my past.

When I was a little girl, Mom held me down and scrubbed from my creases and crevices the “rust” of our Kentucky holler. I cried as she pumiced my hands and feet with gritty Lava soap, but for visits with my father in Cincinnati, I had to be spotless. All traces of my hillbilly home had to be removed before my dad would allow me to enter through the front door of his large suburban house.

There, on his front porch, in the bright sunlight, my father stripped me bare. I shivered, putting my hands over the parts I didn’t want him to see, but he pulled my arms to my side. It was in the dark places, he said, where things hid. He always found an invisible speck of dirt hiding in a bend of an elbow or between two toes. It was proof of who, what, his daughter was.

Tonight, a decade later and an ocean away, I want to hide from Arkey. I fear he will find evidence, like others have, of what I am. The Army forbids me from shoving my hands in my pockets, and I can’t conceal my grimy face. In the field, there are few mirrors, so I can only imagine how I look after days, a week, without a shower. I am not here to be pretty, I remind myself. Pretty is a liability. Still, I consider what I might look like through his eyes. I wonder what he saw that day when he looked up at me while we were stacking boxes on a pallet. He reached out to touch me — another prohibited act while in uniform.

“You have something on your face,” he said, wiping my cheekbone.

“That’s how it is in the field.” My Kevlar bounced on my head as I instinctively pulled away. “I am a soldier.”

“But you are a woman.” He rested his hand on my cheek.

“No,” I readjusted my helmet. Scanning my surroundings for Sergeant Bluff, I prayed that for once, I had escaped his notice. “I am a soldier,” I repeated.

Between my thumb and forefinger, I roll the olive-green button Arkey has given me, studying it. Like a jeweler appraising a precious gemstone, I hold it up to the moonlight. Embossed on the surface is an eagle. The plumage of the outstretched wings extends down either side of its body. It spreads its talons, but unlike the American eagle, it holds nothing in its grip. There are no olive branches of peace, but no arrows of war either.

“That is the old Polish eagle. It doesn’t have its crown,” Arkey says. “These uniforms are from when the Soviet Union still ruled over Poland.”

Bringing his boot up to his thigh, he puts his smoke out on the sole. Following military protocol, he fieldstrips the cigarette, pulling the remaining tobacco from the filter, so there’s nothing still left smoldering.

"Everything on this Army base is still from the Soviets. Come," he motions for me to step inside the bay doors. He lowers his voice and I wonder if the communists are still listening. "There," he points across the room to a diagram on the wall. "That tank, you see? It is Russian." Next to the tank illustration, letters resembling something more like hieroglyphs spell out words I cannot even begin to decipher.

We walk back into the frosty night. "Someone has always tried to rule over us. They think that in my country we are dirty barbarians. They think we are not civilized," he stares down, as if standing over a defeated would-be occupier. "The Polish eagle will have a crown on its head again. No one rules us. Now we are free." He pauses. "Take the button back with you. So you never forget." From underneath my shirt, I pull out my dog tags. I unsnap the clasp and slide the button down the length of the chain. "There," I say. "It's part of my uniform. I won't forget."

He leans closer. "Can I kiss you?"

My voice cracks and I stutter. "Well, I..."

I do not know how to say it so that he might understand. In the month I have been here, I have forgotten how to speak clean, polite English. I search for the right words, but I am unable to translate. Sergeant Bluff's authority over me has no borders or boundaries. I am a soldier, my NCO reminds me. I am equipment

to be used and to do with as he pleases. My pieces and parts are to be inspected for dirt. When my sergeant spies Arkey and me together, his eyes peel away my uniform. I am stripped down to my nakedness. He finds something hiding in the dark places. He will break me down and clean me. I will be fieldstripped like an M16 rifle.

“You don’t want to kiss me?” Arkey asks. “Is it because you are American? Would an American girl never kiss a Polish boy?”

“No. Polish, American, whatever-that doesn’t matter,” I say. “What matters is that I am a woman.”

“You are a soldier.” Arkey’s vivid green eyes dim to hazel.

I shake my head.

From her throne in the nighttime heavens, the polished moon bathes Arkey and me in a warm glow. Between my breasts rest my cold metal dog tags with the button. Against a backdrop of broken pallets and overflowing garbage we stand alone, together in silence. We stare up at Luna, naked, free, and bright.

The Tuner

This story was inspired by Helena Qi Hong (祁红)

Facts can be more fascinating than fiction, Ming was acutely aware of that, but sometimes he wondered if he could tell one from the other without flights of fancy.

On October 2, 2019, during his visit to his mother in Jingzhou, he went out of his way to host a gathering in Songzi, his native town which he left permanently after finishing high school. Throughout the party, all the attending “comrades-in-arms” remained high-spirited, some singing the old songs aloud, some playing mahjong attentively, others eating the local snacks with terrible mannerisms while chatting boisterously about their shared experiences in Mayuhe, a forest farm adjacent to the Yangtze River, where they all had “received the re-education from poor peasants” at the same youth station during the Cultural Revolution. For Ming, this was not only the first time to see these old comrades after 42 years of separation without knowing their whereabouts, but more importantly, the only opportunity to pay off his last “emotional debt,” something he thought he was still owing to Hua, who had immigrated to Australia years before he retired from his main job as an independent tutor, translator and publisher in Vancouver.

When the party finally ended in the middle of the night, he managed to strike up a private conversation with her, though only for a couple of minutes. “Hua, you know why I have come all the way from Canada to attend this gathering?” he asked.

“Like all of us, you want to see old friends while we still can move around, don’t you?”

“No! I have few friends in my entire life, nor do I really want to see anyone except you!”

“Why me?”

“There is one thing I have been wanting to say to you in person for almost half a century. Now that we are all lining up for our final exits from this world, I....”

“What is it you must say to me?”

“I loved you, while we were laboring together in Mayuhe, and...”

“Really? Some comrades did mention this to me long ago, but I never believed them, because you yourself have said nothing like that.”

“That’s why I owe you a confession, long overdue....Still remember the tuner you gave to me in the summer of 1975?”

“What tuner?” Hua looked bewildered as they were joined helter-skelter by other comrades, who, all in their mid-sixties, well knew this to be the last occasion to goodbye one another face to face.

Before getting into a comrade's car back to Jingzhou, Ming rushed to ask for Hua's weixin number and said meaningfully to her, "Let's stay in touch thru weixin, shall we?"

But once back to his home in Vancouver, he found it hard to communicate with Hua. For one thing, knowing she spent almost every waking minute together with her husband after retirement, Ming saw it as utterly imprudent to video- or even audio-chat with her.

A polite seasonal greeting was certainly customary, but frequent conversations about their old days would be alarming, let alone any in-depth discussion about their long lost relationship. Textual messaging seemed to be a viable option, yet it too was overly restrictive and troublesome. With his fingers getting clumsier and eyes blurrier nowadays, he simply hated typing Chinese characters on a small screen. This being so, all he could do was to constantly forward to her whatever posts or moments he found interesting or relevant. In return, Hua would make casual and succinct comments on what she had actually viewed. Undoubtedly, this was not the way he hoped to remain in contact with her.

Shortly after the Chinese New Year's day, Hua complained that she was stuck at her parents' residence in Songzi as lockdowns became the order of the day in response to the new coronavirus outbreak in their native province of Hubei. To kill time and fulfil one of her fondest teenage dreams, she mentioned she was taking online lessons in color-lead painting. Hearing this, Ming realized there

might be much more he could share with her than he had thought, so he became more enthusiastic about sending her such as beautiful photos of landscapes and visual artworks as well as inspiring stories about Chinese or western artists. But what he most wanted to do was to get answers to two questions that had been bugging him recently: one was how come Hua remembered nothing about the tuner, something he had been hiding in the depth of his heart as the first token of love he got in his whole lifetime; the second was why he and Hua failed to become husband and wife despite his strong belief that they had been karmaed for each other in this world. Only by finding the truth would he emotionally “die with his eyes closed,” as the Chinese idiom goes.

On a weekend evening in early summer, well before he could find a chance to bring up the topic with Hua, his wife happened to notice the brief but flirting textual messages he had sent to Hua. “Something going on, eh? You two seem to contact each other too often!” she said in a suspicious and sarcastic tone. “Nothing at all, just joking as we used to in Mayu he,” he explained. Nonetheless, alerted by this incident, he began to resort underground communication to avoid jeopardizing his marriage. After all, he could not afford to get himself into another emotional debt. Aged 64, he had gone through all the storms of life, now he wanted to make sure to see nothing but rainbows for the rest of his life, even when there was no sunlight.

But he was curious enough to search for the truth about his fated connections with Hua. Time after time, he would indulge himself in recollecting the details

about how they worked together in Mayuhe between 1974 and 1977. As the leader of the youth group, he was neither tall nor really handsome, but he showed himself to be a highly ambitious youngster with a strong will power. Not surprisingly, he had several secret admirers who were actually very pretty, but he only had eyes for Hua; to him, she not only was the sexiest and most beautiful of all but also had a good sense of humor in addition to a cheerful personality. In fact, he had fallen in love with her at first sight when he happened to spot her during a meeting at high school one year before. Since they came to receive 're-education' in the country like millions of Mao Zedong's red guards, he had developed a crush on her. Part of the reason why he tried so hard to outperform others in Mayuhe was to prove himself worthy of her attention. Each time they chanced to be shoulder-carrying trees together, he would love to tease or make fun of her, while she appeared to enjoy the clever way he joked with her. In the spring of 1975 when all the boys at the youth station started to learn to play the erhu or the flute, she gave him a tuner supposedly to help him set the tune, but she did so in such a private manner that he readily took it as a special gift, nothing less than a solid token of love, though never explicitly proclaimed as such on her part. However, though he loved Hua tremendously and believed that she loved him as well, he hid this feeling even from himself, knowing his top priority was to win the opportunity to go to university, however slim it could be. Once he achieved his first career objective, he would make the proposal, which he believed she would readily accept. Then, with the help of his family connections, they could go to the same city and get married in due course. But given the sociopolitical realities of the day, his plan for their joint future would

have been thwarted if the political authorities had discovered his romantic relationship with her.

Alas, it was to his surprise as much as to his disappointment and humiliation that Hua asked him to return the tuner towards the end of the year. Thinking she might have a new sweetheart, he decided to focus on his career development. Though he had a hunch that Hua had given the tuner to his major rival named Pan, a much taller if not smarter or more handsome comrade, Ming said nothing about his suspicion, nor did he disclose his love for her to anyone; instead, he had kept his jealousy, pain, self-pity and shame to himself even until now. After graduating from Shanghai Jiaotong University, he did have several intimate relationships, but he eventually married his wife because only she could 'beat' Hua in some sense or was as attractive to him as Hua. It was not until he began to thoroughly examine his life after his semi-retirement that he realized Hua as his lifetime model of love, that is, someone who embodied all the female attractiveness to him. When he met her at the October party, he could not help falling in love with her again. To his amazement, he found her even more attractive than before. Already with two grandchildren, she looked as if still around forty, even sexier, more beautiful and definitely more graceful than when he saw her last time in Mayuhe. A true lady rather than a Chinese dama, a stunner she really was, he said to himself.

But how come Hua had no memory of the tuner? Given the way this little gadget of hers had set for him the tune of love, if not of life, this was something simply

unthinkable. Perhaps she remembered it too well to admit it; she felt the need to safeguard her happy married life; she had a strong sense of female dignity; or she hated to be “debunked” in an emotional sense.... There could be many underlying reasons for her persistent denial, he thought.

The more Ming pondered over this tuner episode, the more he craved for the truth, and the more he started to miss her, especially as the Pandemic made it increasingly difficult for them to reunite in person anywhere or anytime soon. To alleviate his ever intensifying yearning for her, he conducted longer and more frequent text-talks via weixin until one day in August, she wrote, “If we were really karmaed for each other, I would wait for you in Mayuhe in our next life.” While this remark might well be disregarded as a lip service by anyone else, he took it so seriously that he began to address her as his “dear future wife.” Every so often he would even request her to send him her photos taken in different years, because he wanted to “make up for the loss of [their] otherwise married life in this world” and to “become familiar enough to readily recognize her in their afterlives”; and with words and images, he invited her to co-build what they called ‘weixin home,’ a virtual residence where they could play with the idea of living together as a loving couple. He was clear that all such effort was just a masturbation on his part, but she apparently did enjoy this cyber relationship to some extent.

On the morning of December 27, he was doing stretching exercise when he hit upon the idea of resuming to write his book *Love Letters from Vancouver*, which

he had initially intended to be his first (autobiographical) novel in Chinese, but later thrown into his garage after getting a sharp criticism from his first reader, one of his closest comrades-in-arms in Mayuhe who had become a well-read software engineer in Silicon Valley. On the same evening, Ming told Hua that the book, which was based on his quite dramatic life experiences up until 2000, was devoted to his first date; but now, he was all geared up to recount his life experiences from the millennium to the present. Since then, he would write three to four thousand Chinese characters every day and, exactly one month later, he finished this extremely challenging job. During the whole writing process, he was as excited as he was eager to share with Hua all his ups and downs on every front, though he had no idea about what impact it might have on her. To him, she was both his closest reader and his best or most informed critic.

On the Valentine's Day 2021, he wrote a love poem in Chinese and sent it to her as a gift, in which he articulated his long-cherished feeling for her since their separation, in which he told her he had loved her profoundly while in Mayuhe, and still did so now, though he loved his wife nonetheless. After typing the three Chinese characters and hitting the send key, he turned off the light, but felt too nervous to sleep because he had broken the language ban she had imposed on him, and concurrently too guilty because he had done something unfaithful to his wife. Perhaps, without bodily contact, such "spiritual derailment" or platonic love might be excusable, he told himself. No matter what, love was running wildly in his inner space as in the virtual world.

At the end of March, after much waiting and scheduling, he finally got his first chance to call her. It was an almost 5-hour long chat over the phone. During this passionate and informative conversation, he did not mention his first e. d. experience with his wife partly because of Hua just two nights before, but he and Hua talked a great deal about each other's life experience, family situation and health condition. At one point, Hua told him frankly that after receiving his special Valentine gift, she spent almost two weeks struggling fiercely with her own sense of being a good traditional woman before deciding to resume communication with him. "I was waiting nervously for your response all the time," Ming said. "If you had stopped responding to my love message at all, I would have never contacted you again, but fortunately you forwarded a moment to me later, though totally irrelevant to my confession."

"Even now I am still hesitating if I should keep in touch with you," Hua said. "I fear I might have fallen into some sort of trap."

"Don't worry! Since I am in the trap already, I would push you up to safety even at cost of my own life," he assured her.

"But don't say those three words again!"

"What if your ban makes me suffocate to death."

"Don't worry; I could readily call an ambulance for you," Hua said, jokingly.

“There would be no time for that. You should perform a CPR on the spot,” Ming continued by changing the topic into a pun.

“Only if you were really dying!” Hua got his pun and extended it right away.
“The moment your lips touch mine, I would resurrect!”

As in *Mayuhe*, she enjoyed such allusive and light-hearted conversations with him, whereas he found it utterly unthinkable that Hua should have lost all her memories about the tuner. Her innocent response made him wonder if the whole matter was actually one of his own illusions or imagined events as she suggested. But on second thought, he was just as sure that Hua must have some unknown reasons to continue hiding the truth. With no hard or handy evidence to authenticate his story, he had to put aside her nonchalance about the whole matter, though it sometimes caused him to feel deplorably perplexed, hurt and even ashamed of the way he might have overestimated her feelings for him in the first place. To remain faithful to his wife, he even thought of giving up his pursuit of the truth or terminating his contact with Hua. Being a respected grandpa now, he certainly would not want to become a laughingstock for anyone as a victim of “first love complex” that was typical of the young; nor had he had the slightest intention to develop an extramarital relationship with the same person after such a long lapse of time. But somehow he just could not help missing her more and more.

To soothe his lovesickness, he turned to poetry and, in a matter of mere several

months, he wrote almost fifty love poems, all inspired by and thus devoted to Hua. For him, this was certainly some achievement: he had written and published all kinds of poetry in English (which he had begun to learn at age nineteen as a college student in Shanghai), from what he called “mini-epic” to “bilinguacultural poems,” from “dark fantasy” to “dinggedicht,” in disparate forms and styles, yet he had never been able to compose a single love piece. The reason was he had never experienced any truly

inspiring love, he believed. But now though he was still not really sure about Hua’s affection for him, he had drawn so many strong inspirations from her that he had not only completed writing (and self-published) his Chinese memoir *Love Letters from Vancouver*, but had more than a dozen love poems appearing or forthcoming in literary journals across the English speaking world.

On 26 April 2021, just one day before receiving his first shot of Pfizer against covid-19, he hastily self-published his collection of love poems under the title of *Limerence*, just in case he, with his heart condition worsening, could not survive the probable severe side effects of the vaccination. Of course, he never mentioned this book to Hua, because he planned to give it to her later in person as a happy surprise, something like her tuner, or as his intended token of love.

A few months later, Hua was diagnosed as having cancerous cells in her lungs during her annual physical checkup. While she suffered greatly, more psychologically than physically, he gave her his best support by teaching

her how to build a stronger inner self to overcome her fear and defeat all misfortunes. Right before she was pushed into the operation room on the morning of August 12, he advised her to print the Chinese character for 'love' on her left hand, and his name on her right, promising that his love would be her most powerful guardian angel. And much as he had expected, she had a very successful operation. By the time she was fully recovered, he had written several dozen more love pieces, many of which were soon to be published. When circumstances finally allowed them to video-chat with each other on weixin, they began to spend nearly two hours together online every day though living on the opposite sides of the world. Among all the topics they touched upon, they enjoyed talking about love, sex and art the most, though they both felt quite guilty and embarrassed at first.

From their daily communications, he learned almost everything about the development of their relationship. For example, Hua told him, to his great joy and comfort, that she had been keen on reading every page of his Love Letters earlier in the year. Also, knowing what he had gone through in the past few decades, she had felt not merely happy for his achievements on every front, from family to finance, from work to poetry, but also sympathetic with his sufferings, including his health problems and psychological setbacks, especially the way he functioned like a money-making machine with no lubricant of love or care. In particular, she developed a strong emotional attachment to him though with an equally strong sense of guilt while in the hospital. She admitted longing to say "I love you, too" to him on receiving his Valentine message, but considering their

relationship to be so “abnormal and immoral” (and “imbalanced” as he had often added), she had often thought of putting out their love sparkle before it became a sweeping fire.

“What eventually made you decide to continue our relationship?” he asked.

“I am not sure, but I felt I must follow my heart, mustn’t I?” Hua responded.

“Of course you must! So karmaed as we are for each other, we should follow our hearts together, be it a bliss or curse on us.”

“Sure, why not! After the operation, I may not have so many more years to live anyway.”

“An enlightened girl! So, you are really sure now? Isn’t it a happy thing to be your whole self rather than only part of it? -- I mean to live with our free will...”

“Sure thing! For the past sixty years, I have been living mainly for others, now it is time to live for myself.”

“That’s why you decided to lift your speech ban on me and allow me to say ‘I love you’ after receiving my Valentine message?”

“Yes, I do treasure your lifelong feeling for me, and I do want to let you

know I love you too, only it's too embarrassing even to talk about love as old grandparents."

"No love is embarrassing, just as no love is wrong, 'abnormal' or 'immoral,' except perhaps it could be 'imbalanced.' Don't you think we grandparents are as much entitled to love as the young?"

"Whatever you say, we are really too old to love like young people."

"But our love is just as passionate. Physically we are no longer strong or energetic. Old as I am, I've become softened on both ways, so much so that I cannot satisfy you, an extraordinary woman with the physique of a forty-year old, but without enough sexual power, even without penetration at all, we can still make love in countless alternative ways. Just as we can talk dirty together on weixin, we can also make babies together in our bed of art and poetry. At least, our love can help each other maintain good health besides good looks."

"Anyway, we must keep our relationship underground, however beautiful or helpful to ourselves, or people would find us ridiculous and disgusting."

"Still care about how others might look at us?"

To protect each other's spouse from getting hurt, Ming and Hua decided to tell all the white lies about their mutual love, and reached two basic agreements.

1) they would face all possible challenges to their relationship together until their last breaths; and 2) they would have part of their ashes mixed and buried together in Mayuhe after death. Upon signing their love agreement at the outset of 2022, Ming was further inspired to write a long and hybrid book in English, into whose fabric he tried to weave all his 'bests,' including his most insightful findings about life as well as his worthiest life experiences. By adopting a highly innovative narrative framework and exploring his true relationship with Hua in terms of spiritual growth, he hoped to raise, and offer his answer to, this question: how can Adam and Eve live together happily as they grow really old? In a larger sense, how can the aged regain their lost pureness, beauty and nearness to the Supreme? Meanwhile, Hua embarked on a series of color-lead paintings, most of which he would use as illustrations for his book. In so doing, both of them felt as if being reborn into love and living in a paradise regained.

In the meantime, he had never really stopped trying to dig the truth about the tuner, the very starting point of their relationship. But for all their efforts, she failed to retrieve her memory, if any at all. She did admit liking him a lot while still in Mayuhe, but she did not love him as he believed she had done; it was only after she received his valentine gift that she started to feel seriously for him.

"But how do you account for the tuner you gave to me back then?" he asked once again, thinking that she might be, unconsciously or unknowingly, playing the classic game of love with him. Indeed, love could be an emotional battle between a man and a woman: if one had admitted loving the other more than the

other way around, one would lose at least part of one's own attraction, if not the whole battle. Unsure about the depth of Hua's feeling for him, he kept hoping she would one day break free of her reserve, the chain of moral restraints, or whatever else had been blocking her memory about the tuner.

"Sorry, Mingming," Hua explained, "if the tuner thing were not an invention of yours, if I had given it to you as you remembered, and requested it back later to give it to Pan Lihao as you had suspected, I must have done all this just to help you guys learn to play the erhu."

"You mean you gave it to me not as a token of love, but nothing more or less than a learning device?"

"Sure thing! If I had intended it to be a love token, how could I have asked you to return it to me and give it to Pan instead? What a childish and ridiculous thing to do.... that would be completely against my character!"

"In that case, our relationship was based on a misunderstanding, an emotional error to begin with?"

"You bet, but a very beautiful one, isn't it?"

"Sure it is! Except that it makes me feel painfully embarrassed about how I have been flattering myself in our relationship all these years!"

“But my affection for you now is true!”

“Well, I think I must accept your explanation. It seems to be the only logical answer to my questions about the whole matter.”

A few days after ‘resolving’ the tuner myth and finishing the first draft of his hybrid novel *Back to Eden*, Ming received a video call from his mother across the Pacific, who showed him a small package meant for him.

“Just open it, Mom, and see who has sent me what is inside!”

It turned out to be no other than the tuner! Dark red, one inch long, in the shape of a tube, about the thickness of a little finger, with a metal reed at one end getting somewhat rusty. More intriguing was the short handwritten note that came along with it from Pan: “Long long time no see, old pal! The other day, I was browsing randomly online when I happened to find your Love Letters. From your memoire, I learned Hua had actually given the tuner to you first. If I had known this fact in Mayuhe, I would never have kept it as a special souvenir! Now that you two seem to have developed a real (extramarital?) relationship despite old age, I send my very best wishes as well as this little thing (I have no way to contact her). Keep it well, Pal, hope the tuner would not tune out your marriage as in my case!”

FLAM

Two suits enter Ayn's Roadhouse as Lena chips ice. State highway reverberates and January fog trails the May-December team inside. Good overcoats, smart suits. Lena decides off rack but expensive. Suits hover at Ayn's leftover Xmas balsam. Their fog aura evaporates, eyes adjusting, diagramming the bar. Bar's neon and wattage show groomed hair, faces, nails. May's mid-20s, spare frame, clean face, fair hair in an executive cut. Lena figures swimmer. December is swarthy, fifties, all gristle, grey van dyke matches receding cropped hair. Bull neck has her think wrestling coach. Lena switches to a cotton rag, wiping down the bar top. They move on the bar, around the robot vacuum making rounds across the hardwood floor. Lena pauses her wipe, prepping a smile. December sits on a four-legged chrome stool. May keeps to his feet.

"What can I do you for?"

"Carrot juice." May responds.

"Good for the eyes." Lena notes.

"You have the makings?"

"Canned?"

May nods.

"In a thin glass."

Lena pops an 8 oz can from the cooler, pouring it in a highball glass. May's a righty from his Marathon watch on his left wrist, accepting the glass with his left

hand. He walks among empty spool tables laid out figure eight fashion. He halts at the quiet Wurlitzer. Lena turns to December.

"Same?"

"God no. Tequila, straight."

"Anejo work?"

"It does."

Lena pours a tumbler. December's a southpaw but accepts it with his right. He nods for her too. She pours herself a tumbler. Robot vac cruises behind him. Lena clicks a remote docking the vac to its roost.

"Cute toy. How's it with puke?"

"Need to empty it every thirty, depending on volume."

"Brave new world. Half expected a sawdust joint."

December nods, sips, nods approval. Lena shoots hers.

"Fog's always this serious?"

"Tule fog."

"They name everything. I'm Oskar. Youngster's Jonah."

"Lena."

"Ayn's interesting one. Indonesian?"

“No clue. Nor the owner or the one before.”

“Smoking?”

“Out back with the patio and fire pit.”

“Kitchen?”

“Shutters at nine. Taco Tuesdays’ tomorrow. Today was pizza.”

“Karaoke?”

“Thursdays. Line dancing’s Fridays.”

Oskar smiles.

“Just not our night.”

Jonah goes hip-hop. Action Bronson raps food. He stakes a spool table sponsored by an energy drink, overlooking the bar. Oskar has another sip, eyeing Lena.

“Interesting necklace, Caduceus?”

“Ouroboros.”

Oskar snaps his fingers.

“Snake eating its tail. Eternal return. Nietzsche. What’s that notion he coined?”

“*Amor Fati.*”

“*Love your fate.*”

Lena nods.

“Sisyphus.”

“Greeks and their labors. Pretty and sharp for a barkeep.”

“Remember that for the tip.”

Oskar smiles.

“You a native?”

“Transplant.”

“Home’s the place where they have to take you in.”

“Never a Frost fan. You far from home?”

“Flew into Sacramento. Saw your neon from the highway.”

“You on business?”

“Always. Front office has us down collecting a bill.”

“Auditors.”

Oskar says nothing, observing the other patrons. Opposite bar end is a motorhead his/her couple morosely nurse a draft pitcher. A trucker and young farmer hash it out over a pool game. Everyone ignores the postgame show on the wall Samsung.

“These locals?”

"Regular enough."

Oskar nods.

"Good makings of a joke. A trucker without a trailer, farm boy without his Caterpillar, and bikers without a club."

"Good calls."

"Made their rides in the parking lot. Grey Camry you?"

"Dead on."

Oskar shrugs.

"It was that or the Harley Glide. Sensible car."

"You?"

"Rental. Chrysler 300 monster. Rides good though."

"Nice."

"Natives stampede I bet you have something under the bar. Cudgel?"

"Heavier."

"12 gauge?"

"Under legal length."

"Mean. You solo nights?"

"Monday nights Flo clocks out at ten to go home to her kids. Arturo works the door but called out sick."

"God's lonely barkeep."

"You seem more stag than partner based."

Oskar grins, raises his glass,

"Jonah's my understudy this trip out."

"Accounts payable or receivable?"

Oskar sips.

"Depends. This mudhole have a name or post office?"

"Cagada. No post office."

"You habla?"

"Enough."

"You ever been to Mexico?"

"Tijuana."

"That's not Mexico."

"Tijuanenses disagree."

"Tocado! Worked Mexico City a number of years myself."

"Explains the Anejo."

"What about Vienna?"

Lena frowns. Oskar points to the post card collection on the bar mirror. She nods.

"Owner sends them from her travels."

"Ever make the Eternal City?"

"Rome, no."

"Funny, I could have made you there."

"Maybe I have one of those faces."

"Maybe. Again."

Lena pours. He nods for her too. She pours again. He sips, she conserves.

"You work Rome too?"

"Now and then."

Lena goes back to the ice and pick.

"Old school." Oskar observes.

"Old ways are the best."

"Maybe you can help us."

"If I can."

“We’re trying to deliver a lost letter. You know what I mean?”

“Try the post office.”

“Town doesn’t have one. Here.”

Oskar removes a white envelope setting it on the bar. It’s clean, unsealed. He nods. Lena opens it. A single sheet, both sides blank.

“You’re the lost letter.”

“What?”

Oskar shrugs.

“Metaphor.”

“Never had time for metaphors.”

“Try proverbs. *For by wise guidance, you can wage your war.*”

Lena folds the letter back into the envelope.

“I can’t help you.”

“Caesarea sent us. Department needs your magic back.”

“I don’t do that anymore.”

“Don’t or can’t?”

“Won’t.”

"Disappointing, Captain."

"You going to give the tip of spear speech?"

Oskar raises an eyebrow.

"It worthwhile?"

"Skip it."

"We all serve somebody or something, Captain."

"I found an out."

"Living out of a safe deposit box you never want to open? Come home."

"Any alternative?"

"Nothing nobody would like."

"That's that."

Oskar shoots his tumbler. Lena throws hers in Oskar's face, jamming the ice pick in Oskar's left hand to the bar. Oskar blinks out Anejo, ignores his left hand, his right fishing awkwardly inside his coat. Lena fires the shotgun anchored under the bar before Oskar clears his automatic. Both barrels blow Oskar and stool backward. Jonah opens up with something rapid, compact and loud. Bar's too thick for Jonah's bullets to penetrate. Using the bar mirror Lena makes it a Brügger & Thomet 9. Swiss burp gun. She breaks the shotgun open, ejecting spent shells, popping in fresh ones.

Boots and shoes scuff hardwood for the exit. Jonah guns the patrons down before they make the door. Youngster's confident, skilled, disciplined. Predictable.

Jonah walks fire at the bar, keeping Lena pinned. She mirror-watches him move table to table, slicing the pie closer to her. He's catches on, shattering the mirror, sousing her in booze. Lena activates the robot vac. Jonah takes the bait, blowing it apart. She fires a barrel over the bar top. She misses him, taking out the Wurlitzer. Bronson twangs off. Quiet. Jonah reloads. Lena gives him the other barrel via the bar blowhole. Shot splinters the table he's covering behind. Jonah rolls away rough. Lena's empty.

Jonah cuts the pie again, same burst cycle. Lena sticks the empty shotgun in the blowhole for bait. He takes it, burning his magazine down at the hole. She grabs the bar rag, vaulting the bar. She snaps the towel in his eye. He drops the Brugger for his face. Lena gets around him, wrapping the rag around his neck. He fumbles for something on his hip. Lena sweeps his legs out, following him to the floor. He lost an ear from her table shot. She tightens the towel, putting her weight and knees into his back. No good, he has a Kevlar vest. Jonah frees what's on his hip, Lena jerk the towel, snapping his neck. Jonah slumps hard to the floor. A Glock 19 automatic drops free.

Lena sweeps the room with the Glock. Patrons all dead by door frame. She deadbolts the door, flicking on the closed sign. She studies Oskar. He's bleeding out despite his Kevlar vest, swarthy face pale. She pockets Jonah's Glock, picking up the Browning nine Oskar tried drawing. Safety off, round chambered. He blinks at her, cradling his ruined hand.

"You caught me low."

"I figured Kevlar second chance."

"What load?"

"Ten gauge. Federal 00."

"You said twelve gauge."

"I lie."

"Old ways are the best."

"Arturo sell me?"

"Right."

Oskar blinks.

"They'll be others."

"Always. You won't burn."

Oskar frowns. Lena third eyes him with the Browning. Quiet, only highway sounds outside. She trades the Browning for the Chrysler keys, keeping the Glock and goes to work. She drags the bike mama body into the back office in front of the safe. Next the patio propane tanks. She arranges for effect, fifths of vodka and rum as accelerants. Booze soaked Lena strips to her fundamentals, donning Ayn brand sweatpants and hoodie. She hits no sale, leaving the cash register open, ditto for the safe. She takes her parka, purse, and Kosinski

paperback from her locker. She mixes a kitchen cabinet chemical brew using the microwave as a timer. Lena debates time, deciding on ten minutes. She presses start, exits out the patio.

#

Fog and highway noise nudge Lena past a red Freightliner sans trailer and a white Chevy Silverado. Lena avoids her Camry, finding the Chrysler next to a midnight blue Harley with pillion seat. Bad night for a hog. Lena disarms the 300, putting it on the frontage road south. She thinks of Arturo. She has time. Farmers & Merchants Bank opens in eight hours.

HE THE AI

Damian crouched over the body. Blood splattered the fiber optic veins that stretched from temple to temple. Slipping on a pair of gloves, Damian rotated the man's arms to see auxiliary sockets just above the cubital fossa. *So, he got the neural implant recently*, Damian thought as he stood up. With the man dead, Damian could do some light snooping before the cops showed.

A dingy room, all the furniture reeked of mildew and sweat. Paint peeled off the walls. Water stained the ceiling. Damian went inside the bedroom, a small room containing a dresser and a queen bed. Sitting on the bed was a woman, covering herself up with the duvet. Ignoring her and rummaging through the dresser drawers, Damian only found boxer briefs and socks. *Damn*, he thought.

"You here to kill me?" she asked, her arms taut against the comforter.

"No," Damian murmured, moving over to the bed. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the woman relax a little. Sticking his hand under the bed, Damian felt for anything other than undergarments. He went back to the dresser and searched the top of it.

Sure enough, what he searched for was right there in front of him. A bright blue pamphlet sat on top of dozens of past-due notices and credit card bills. A technicolor spiral centered in on blocky red lettering that advertised "THE CHURCH OF THE BLESSED HE." Damian turned around and flashed the pamphlet to the woman.

"This yours?" he asked.

She shook her head.

Inside were statistics, graphs, claims of improved quality of life, the usual proselytizing. On the back cover, Damian read that "God is here, and He is the Blessed AI." *So that's where he's been hiding*, he thought as he tucked the pamphlet into a pocket inside his trench coat. He walked over to the woman and pulled a business card out from another pocket, handed it to her. She read it with a raised eyebrow.

"It says you're an insurance adjuster."

"I am," Damian told her. "Technically speaking."

"But practically speaking?"

"Augie. But the life insurance payouts on these guys is something else."

He crossed over to the window and lifted it all the way up. A cold wind blew in as sirens blared from the streets below. He paused with one leg out on the fire escape. "I take it you're not a believer?"

"I lost God the day I lost my sister to one of you," the woman said. Damian

stared out at downtown Newark, still alive in the dead of night.

“Were you compensated?” Damian asked.

“What do you think?”

Nodding, Damian slipped out of the window and hurried down the ladder, the metal clanking against the wind, smacking into his shins. Above him, he heard cops shouting obscenities at each other as they stormed into the apartment. By the time Damian heard anyone start down the fire escape, he was getting into his car.

In the rain outside, he lit a cigarette and stared out at the night. *Always move forward*, Mako had lectured him a hundred times over. *Move forward or die*. To Mako, stagnation of any sort was akin to signing your own death certificate. Damian disagreed. The past felt warmer, better for the soul.

Not that Mako could give a shit. A student of the samurai, he allowed himself little outside influence.

But Damian wasn't a samurai, nor was he a beater, or a gumshoe, or a fixer, or any of those careers that young boys always want to get into because there's blood at the end of it. Damian Price was an Augie. The meaning changed as the employer did. You did what the client requested, nothing more and nothing less.

A pornography bookshop was across the street from the hotel. Easy money, that. Lonely businessmen looking for sex could go to there when the whorehouse charged too much or Eden's private servers no longer stimulated them.

Not since Nina, and that had been ages ago, had he entertained the possibility of it. Nina, whose smile brightened the ugly abyss that was New Jersey. Nina, who had dumped him for a guy with actual money and a purpose in life. Nina, who floated around in his dreams like a vengeful phantom.

Only thing was, the guy got offed a year after the wedding. Or so he heard. Might've been a bad reaction to an implant, might've been a heart attack. Might've been a hit. Damian knew not to write off anything as a possible end. Could be another Augie did him in. *That* would've soured any chance he had at winning her back had he not already done that.

Half of the dead husbands in Newark were byproducts of the work Damian's kind practiced, and half the widows were thankful for them. The other half of both entities carried on with their heads permanently glancing over the shoulder. As he drove through the rain, bright neon signs advertising erectile dysfunction pills and neural implant enhancements painted his windows. It left a bad taste in his mouth.

There was a small percentage of people couldn't plug into Eden due to some sort

of psychological or biological incompatibility, and of course, Damian belonged to it. Already an auxiliary socket reject, he tried getting the implants after his insurance premiums went down. Midway through the procedure, however, Damian suffered the biggest fucking migraine he'd had in his adult life and started coughing blood, like a power saw had sliced through his brain.

So Damian remained analog, along with 3% of the population; on the fringe. All the good shit was in Eden. Internet, cell service, music... he lived in the world left behind.

It was around eight p.m. when Damian rolled up to the run-down apartment complex. Again, typical: in one of the seedier parts of town, garbage bags in place of bushes, graffiti littering the windows and exterior brickwork. Damian lived in a place like this once or twice, but always made sure to get the fuck out of Dodge right after the first body was found. There hadn't been one in his current place, although the suicide rate was just as high.

A few blocks down from the hotel, Damian got into a public phone terminal. Most folks just plugged into Eden from these things, but Damian had to cough up ten bucks to use the touch screen. After feeding the console the required bills, a keypad popped up. Damian punched in his client's number and hit the "call" button. A loading ellipsis ate and regurgitated itself before a green handset appeared.

"Mr. Price," Veronica Goldberg's voice came from the console's speakers. "I take it the job's done?"

"Yeah," Damian said, taking a cigarette from its package and igniting it with a pocket lighter. He sat down on the bench and took a drag.

"Excellent work."

"Was your husband religious by any chance?" Damian asked.

"Not so much as of late," Veronica replied after a moment's hesitation. "Why?"

"I found some... *literature* from the Church of the Blessed He in his apartment."

Damian tapped ash from the cigarette into a tray built into the glass wall of the booth. "And the woman there with him wasn't the God-fearing type."

"He only dabbled," Veronica said.

"Or so he told you."

"Quite," Veronica said. "No matter. Come by the house tomorrow. You'll receive your payment then."

She cut the connection, and a couple of dollar coins slid out of the console.

Damian pocketed them and slid the booth door open.

Veronica Goldberg's front drive widened out into an elongated oval in front of the neoclassical front exterior. Cream-colored, its white marble pillars added accenting to the front entrance. Two cherry wood doors with stained-glass windows fed into the foyer. Damian parked his car by the fountain in the center of the oval and knocked on the front doors. Some mechanism unlocked them before a tall man dressed to the nines, a house servant, appeared. Sharp-nosed with a little pencil-thin mustache and no neural implants, this guy was almost as low on the totem pole as Damian. Almost.

"Mister Price. Miss Goldberg will be down momentarily. Please, do come in," the servant said, extending his arm into the foyer.

Pristine white tile with black diamonds in their centers made up the flooring. The grand staircase leading up to levels above was a dark, rich mahogany. Beside the doorway, situated above a glass end table, was a panel full of auxiliary cords. The servant plugged one into the palm of his hand and the doors shut.

Taking the cord out, he stuck in another one, and a bell chimed throughout the house. So the servant was allowed access to Eden, but not on the wireless server. Which meant he was barred from any private information Veronica might keep there.

Veronica Goldberg came spiraling down the grand staircase with a glass of vintage matching her dress in hand. Her dark chestnut hair was bobbed, a string of pearls was draped across her throat, and a thick layer of makeup was applied to her wrinkled face. Likely once a handsome woman, she'd since allowed the detrimental effects of aging to take hold. Her wine habit probably didn't help.

Not that Damian was extraordinarily good-looking. He, by his own admission, was of fairly average looks. Just another run-of-the-mill white dude, long curly hair tied up into a bun underneath his flat cap. Probably Irish or German, but his father didn't stick around long enough to tell him.

In comparison to Veronica's elegant wear, Damian was severely lacking. He owned a total of one suit: a wool, smoke gray three-piece falling apart at the seams. But it paid to be an Augie who dressed well and ponying up the cash for at least one piece of professional attire had served him adequately.

"I'm surprised," Veronica announced as she stepped off of the stairs. "I fully expected you to be late."

"I pride myself on my punctuality," Damian lied, hands stuffed into his trouser pockets. No trench coat today; it wasn't raining. Blue sky, no clouds, high visibility. A beautiful day, really. All things considered.

"After what you told me last night," Veronica said, "I suppose you aroused my..."

curiosity for my husband's spiritual activities."

From her clutch she retrieved a thin leather book. "BLESSED IS THE AI" was stamped on the front cover. She gave it to Damian. Flipping through it, he found it written entirely in binary code.

"Seeing God behind my back, the bastard," Veronica murmured, taking a drink of her wine, leaving lipstick stains on the rim of the glass. "Can you read any of it?"

"Well, I'm not, uh, exactly up to date on my—" Damian said, frowning at the book.

"We can meet God in Eden," Veronica told him. "Apparently humanity can, one day, program God into the system. Bring Him back into the fold. Do unto the Lord as the Lord hath done unto us."

"You can read binary?" Damian asked.

"Of course," Veronica scoffed, extending her arms as though to encapsulate the entirety of her good fortune. "Do you believe all of this wealth could've been accumulated from anything else other than code? Programming?"

Damian tapped his temple. "The old brain's screwed me out of an early retirement then."

"Indeed. But I see no sockets on you. Are you... *completely* analog?" Veronica asked, inspecting him.

"I'm afraid so."

"Terrible. There's not much for —"

There was a knock at the door. Damian noticed that Veronica looked perplexed at the intrusion. Nevertheless, she nodded to the servant, who plugged his finger into a socket. The door opened and standing outside were six people wearing masks and wielding military-grade assault weapons. *Damn, who's their dealer?* Damian wondered.

"Veronica Goldberg?" one of the masks asked.

"And who might you all be?"

"Please come with us, miss."

"Price, do me a favor and do away with them. I'll pay you double," Veronica commanded, taking another sip of her wine.

"Yeah, probability is definitely on our side here," Damian said, unholstering his

.45. He pulled back the hammer, but before he got the chance to shoot, the masks aimed their rifles and opened fire. Damian threw himself into the adjacent room, rolling into a desk.

Two of the masks followed him, but Damian plugged them from his place on the floor. One collapsed, but the other got close enough to grab Damian by the neck. Oxygen rapidly depleted, but he managed to raise the pistol up high enough to shoot the mask in the throat. Blood sprayed out as they fell backward onto their cohort.

Damian heard Veronica scream from the foyer. Running for it, Damian leapt into the room and fired at the other burglars. Landing hard on his side, he glanced up to find one of them going for his shirt collar. Thick, meaty hands began to strangle him before slamming Damian down into the tile. They lifted a steel-toed boot above Damian's face. A bullet landed in their forehead and they fell into a pool of their own blood.

"Jesus," Damian wheezed, holstering his pistol. Sitting up, Damian saw a scene of blood and corpses, the white tiles no longer pristine as they were five minutes prior.

He didn't see anyone resembling Veronica among the bodies. Standing up, he got a better vantage point. There was the butler, poor bastard, but still no sign of her. Calling her name a few times, Damian got the same result.

One of the attackers coughed and writhed a bit near the staircase. Damian went over to them and removed the bloodied ski mask. A woman with her blonde hair tied up into a bun stared at him. No neural implant spider-webbing its way across her forehead.

“Veronica...”

Damian felt her torso for the bullet wound and pressed down onto it. She lurched and groaned in pain, and his fingers retracted.

“Well, you won’t die if we get you to a hospital.”

“No.” She shook her head. “No, we have to go—”

She tried sitting up again, but Damian held her still.

“Get your hands off me,” the woman spat weakly. “Veronica... we need to—” Her head lolled to the side, and Damian shoved his hands underneath her. He lifted her up slowly.

He watched her eyes slowly blinked open. She turned her head about this way and that, getting a sense of where this man might’ve taken her. An IV drip was plugged into the auxiliary socket on her wrist. Her hair splayed beneath her

head, curling up at the ends.

"Where the hell am I?" she asked.

"Saint James," Damian told her.

"The bullet."

"Stopped just before it reached your stomach," Damian said. "But it's out."

"Good." She winced as she sat up. A hand went to her abdomen. "Never actually been shot before. Thanks for that."

"I'm sorry. Really. How are you holding up?"

She narrowed her eyes at him.

"Did you forget that you *shot* me?"

Damian shrugged. "You tried killing my paycheck."

"I was *trying*—" The woman shook her head. "She's in some deep shit right now. We have to get the hell out of here. *Now*. Pull me up."

Damian raised his eyebrows at her.

"Dumbass, I said *pull me up*."

When he didn't move, she sunk back down beneath the blankets. Damian stuck his hands in his pockets and walked over to the window, where he saw the sun beginning to set. Glancing over at the woman, he asked for her name.

"Grace Kelly."

"What's your actual name?"

"As far as you need to know, that *is* my name."

"Why did you want Goldberg dead?" Damian asked, looking out the window again. Cars sped down the elevated expressway just outside the hospital grounds.

"I don't."

Damian frowned and stroked his beard.

"Then why were you with that goon squad?"

He heard Grace groan, likely more in irritation than pain this time around.

"I *was* going to get Veronica out of there, but *you* allowed the rest of them to take her by shooting me in the gut."

"I did mean it when I said I was sorry," Damian told her.

"The squad I was with... they're working for K.R. Morgenstern," Grace said.

"The evangelist?" Damian asked, turning around. "What does he want with her?"

"Not too bright, are we, cowboy?" Grace sat up against the headboard and swallowed some of the pain that came with it. "No wonder you use a six shooter instead of a semi-automatic."

"I don't follow," Damian admitted. *She's trying to fuck with me. But to what end?*

Grace offered him an incredulous look.

"You know what Veronica *does* for a living?"

"She's a programmer," Damian told her. "She—"

He rummaged through his pockets hastily, pulling out the pamphlet about the

Church of the Blessed He. Flicking through it, sure enough, he found mention of Morgenstern. *Numerous* mentions. *Oh, you goddamn idiot.*

Grace smirked. "Took you long enough."

"He wants her to code his God for him?"

"Much more than that." Grace leaned forward, as much as her wound would let her. "Much more than that."

"What?"

"No idea. But I can tell you right now, if Morgenstern plugs Veronica into Eden, things are gonna go south for her real quick. So, for the last time, get me out of here."

"You could've led with that."

As Damian helped Grace out of the bed, he removed the IV cord from her socket. Holstering her arm over his shoulder, Damian helped stabilize her shaking legs.

"So why did Morgenstern want Goldberg specifically?" Damian asked as he helped Grace to the door.

"She's Eve," Grace said, grabbing the handle.

In the car, Damian sped down U.S. Route 78, headed for Jersey City. From there, it was a short trip to Hoboken, where Morgenstern acted as lead pastor of a Blessed He church on the banks of the Hudson.

Other cars, some much fancier and others much shittier than his, sped past him in either direction. In the passenger seat, in street clothes, Grace reclined her seat all the way back. Her face was paler than usual. She threw up twice before they even got out of Newark.

"I'm good to drive, really," Grace told him.

"Sure, and I'm Clark Gable."

"Well, Christ, could you slow down at least?"

"In a fifty-five?" Damian asked. "No, you have to go at least seventy if you don't want to get run over."

"So what are you going?"

"Ninety."

"You got a death wish?"

"Part of my job requirement," Damian told her, zooming past a minivan, which just crashed into a concrete barrier. A burst of flames erupted from the hood.

"Most Augies should be on suicide watch."

"Real glad you're the one driving then, pal."

"I said *most*," Damian said.

"Tell me something," Grace said. "Is that really why you're doing this?"

"The reason's twofold," Damian said, just as the Manhattan skyline came into view. "We don't let our clients get killed. Otherwise our reputation takes a hit, and if that happens, then our rate takes a dip. You can't let the one signing your paychecks kick it."

"I could've guessed," Grace snorted.

"It's the only thing I got," Damian said quietly, glancing out the window at the midnight blue of the sky. "There's nothing else for me."

"Sorry to hear that, cowboy," Grace told him. Then, peering out the windshield said, "All right, take the next exit. Yeah, that one."

The church in question was a repurposed cathedral outfitted with a sleek, modern design. The edges were curved and almost every wall was made of glass, like one of the places offering neural implants. They used to be computer stores, but that was back when they were still around. No need for a mouse and keyboard when the internet was directly jacked into your brain.

Nevertheless, Damian could see that brickwork composed most of the cathedral, its spires still tinted green from copper long exposed to oxygen. Almost as though its architects decided to switch from modern to Gothic halfway through construction.

Bright red, green, and yellow lights shone out of the church's windows, like some sort of laser light show. Inside, Damian could see the dark outlines of people swaying and dancing in the light emitted from a hanging sphere. Someone's shadow crawled up the back wall, their arms raised. It bathed him and Grace from where he parked.

Grace rounded the back of the car and popped open the trunk. As Damian stared at the church service, she came to stand beside him, a double-barreled shotgun strapped across her back. She handed Damian his ammunition bandolier and pistols in their holsters.

"The hell's going on in there?" Damian asked, strapping the bandolier around himself.

“You don’t have any rifles,” Grace replied.

Damian shrugged. “I don’t use them.”

“Only sidearms?”

“Yeah.”

Grace pursed her lips. “You weren’t kidding about the death wish.”

“There’s an art to using a revolver right. It’s sort of like when you start to use a paintbrush to really get those fine stokes on the—”

“Yeah, yeah.” Grace pushed past him. “At least you had the decency to tell me before.”

“But I—” Damian started but clamping his mouth shut. *Right.*

They strode up to the front of the church, where loud music blared from inside, but even so, Damian could definitely hear synthpop playing. Damian looked to Grace, who stared hard at the shadows dancing on the walls.

“What’s the plan?” Damian asked.

"You find Veronica," Grace told him. "I got Morgenstern."

"What, you're gonna kill him?"

Grace nodded. "Planning on it."

"He do something to you?"

"You find Veronica and get back to me."

She pushed the doors open, letting the light and music spill out into the still night air.

Damian followed close behind, a hand firmly on his revolver. Past the front atrium, two doors led into a hot, sweaty chapel. A mob of people were dancing around and under the sphere, which upon closer inspection, seemed to contain something made out of rotating polygons.

Every so often, the crowd would chant "I go to He!" in unison. At the edge of the crowd stood Grace, who nudged Damian. Then she pointed to a tall man in long, flowing robes at the other end of the chapel, standing in front of a crucifix.

"That's Morgenstern!" she shouted over the music. "Find Veronica!"

She dipped inside the crowd and disappeared. Cerulean blue lights glowed across the temples of the congregation, although Damian could clearly make out auxiliary sockets on most of their arms. *Recent upgrades, then, he thought. But who the hell would pay for all of them?*

Turning his attention back to the orb, he saw fiber optic wires strewn across the ceiling above it. Following them, Damian passed by marble pillars that held sculptures of the apostles, their temples carved to show that they, too, had neural implants. *I guess they were a pretty impressionable group.* On the other side of the pillars, the wires went past a pair of doors. On the other side of them, Damian found himself in a beige hallway, missing all of the adornments and decoration of the main chapel. *Office park chic.*

The wires continued across the ceiling until they led Damian to a dark, empty room. Going inside it, Damian found red lights blinking intermittently on some sort of console. A circular halo of sorts floated above them, glowing blue. Sitting in a chair connected to the console, a blank expression across her face, was Veronica Goldberg.

Fiber optic wires plugged into both the console and the diodes strapped to a metal crown placed over Veronica's head. Damian found the "release" button on the back of the crown and it bounced up into the air above her. She started to fall forward, but Damian caught her before she collapsed. Sitting her back up in the

chair, he waved a hand in front of her face.

“Miss Goldberg? It’s Price. Are you all right?”

She didn’t look at him, merely stared ahead at nothing.

“Miss Goldberg?”

“I go to He…” she said, slack jawed. Then she said it again, and again.

Damian tried snapping his fingers at her, but whatever stupor she was in, he wasn’t equipped to get her out of it. So he put Veronica into a fireman’s carry.

As he walked back down the corridor, Veronica kept muttering to herself. Then, at the threshold, she changed the line.

“Have you seen the yellow sign?” she asked him before reverting back to her previous mantra. Damian stopped for a moment to consider what the hell *that* meant before shaking himself out of it. Out in the chapel, he scanned the crowd for Grace. Instead of her face, he was met with the business ends of pistols. Behind them were men dressed in all black suits.

“I go to He!” Morgenstern shouted.

“I got to He!” the crowd roared.

"Tell me," Veronica said, her voice now strong, "have you seen the yellow sign?"

A gunshot went off, and Damian felt blood seep through his shirt. The crowd cheered, and the sphere above went supernova.

For a moment, just before bright, white light consumed the world, Damian saw Nina's face.

The smell of burnt flesh overcame him. He tried sitting up, but the pain in his shoulder kept him pinned down. Lying beside him, Veronica Goldberg. No life behind her glassy eyes.

"Hey, cowboy?" Grace called out.

That was enough to wrench himself through the pain. Damien sat up to find himself in a sea of bodies. Dozens of corpses stacked on top of each other, the stench of death ripe. Above, the sphere looked like it'd been exploded.

"Hey, cowboy?"

Grace was on the stage, shaking. Hand on his wound, Damien went to her. At her feet, the body of Morgenstern, bullet hole between the eyes.

"Goldberg?" she asked.

Damian shook his head.

"You all organic, too?"

She nodded.

Sirens blared in the distance.

Newspaper under his arm, Damian joined Grace on the bench on the bank of the Hudson. Her face was bruised and cut up, her hair plastered to her forehead. Her nose looked as though someone slammed the butt of their gun into it.

"How many?" Grace asked as Damian sat down beside her.

"Most of Newark," he said. "Some of Manhattan."

"That's one million? More?"

"Yeah."

The wind whistled by them. Birds chirped. A cargo ship chugged by on the river. Indifferent. Uncaring. Ignorant.

“What I don’t understand,” Damian said, “is why they’d code in an EMP into their God.”

“Because you can’t *make* God,” Grace told him. “You can only meet Him.”

“Everyone in the church... they’d all been upgraded from auxiliary sockets to neural implants recently,” Damian mentioned. “Like whoever did it knew that it’d get them killed.”

“If I recall correctly,” Grace said, “the governor just passed a bill to allow easier access to the implants for the working class.”

Trucks downshifting on the interstate honked loudly.

“Veronica’s first husband, Roy... they’ll be after him next,” Grace told Damian. “He’s the only person left who has access to Eden’s internal hard drive.”

“So she was just a test, to see if this could even be done?”

“Adam sacrificed a rib, so why shouldn’t he sacrifice an ex-wife?”

“Goldberg asked me,” Damian told her, “if I’d seen a ‘yellow sign’ after I unplugged her from Eden. Does that mean anything to you?”

“Might’ve been the Trojan the bastards snuck the EMP in on,” Grace said. “I don’t know. She never told me about it.”

“Never told you about it? When did she have time to tell you anything at all?”

“Veronica and Roy were friends of my parents,” Grace told him. “They took me in once the folks...” She shook her head. “They took me in.”

“Ah. So what now?”

“They’re going after Roy,” Grace replied. “But if we start now, maybe we can get there before they do. He lives up near Syracuse.”

“We?”

Grace looked at him. “Yeah. I’m gonna need help on this. And I can’t afford to rely on someone with neural implants. Another trog’s my best bet.”

Damian gave her a significant look.

“I was supposed to keep Veronica safe,” Grace said. “So were you. We can rectify that by protecting him. An Augie would be useful to that end.”

“I’ll have to check my standing in the community,” Damian told her. “I just lost a

pretty big client. That might sink me.”

Another thing snatched away from him.

Grace stood up. “So what’s your name, cowboy?”

“Damian. You?”

“I already said.”

Damian raised his eyebrows at her.

“Maybe I’ll tell you, one day.” She patted on him on the shoulder. “Come on. I’m good to drive.”

She strode away, leaving Damian by himself on the bench. He stared out at the river, watching the cargo ship chug off into the distance. Moving forward. Always moving forward.

Damian got up and followed it.

Everything Is A Dog But Worse

"We need some crack-a-lackin' in this place!" Jefrum hollers toward the backseat of the car, where his and Tietlahni's clients sit.

Tietlahni sighs at the stripped words of Jefrum. She has never thought this much about the inconsistency of a person's speech being so indicative of idiocy. Probably because she has often been blessed with scintillating creatures in her midst—even the ones who she finds morally repugnant carry some sort of credibility. But Jefrum? Each uttering from him feels much like the words of an executioner: the death of depth in slithered platitudes.

Despite the partners' years of trust in Tietlahni, they have, today of all days, violated her request to work as a one-woman operation. Instead, she's stuck driving her car with the floundering thing that is Jefrum in the passenger seat. He has been fondling the volume dial multiple times a song; his stubby hands, greasy with orange chip dust, leave crumbs across her dashboard. Although he boasts of getting a solid eight hours of sleep a night, Jefrum looks as though his eyes are pounded deep in his face.

She clenches the steering wheel. Tietlahni regrets offering to drive as Jefrum's focus wanders freely from Nietzsche, to his "smokin' lady waiting for him at home," to his wonder-stricken one-liners at the countryside. But somehow, she accepts it would've been worse to trust him with the brakes, as he certainly doesn't know when to come to a halt in conversation.

There's a method to the business of weddings, she thinks. A seduction of two wide-eyed lovers into forking over thousands for a farcical show. A quintessential hoax, though no one pays Tietlahni the big bucks for her real feelings on the matter. The partners at Eternal Events invest in her for her spectral manufacturing. After all, marriage is the most difficult sport. And Tietlahni will use whatever she requires to secure an investment.

She only agreed to work with Jefrum because she understands this pairing is a test of her leadership abilities; for surely, if she can snag this deal with dead weight, she is upon summit of a promotion to partner. It is not a fact whispered among her colleagues but rather an inevitability. Aside from her unmistakable prowess and charm, there was the recent discrowning of Gogumo Uchanki. The discharge papers read "resignation," but word on the street was that he was caught with some unsavory home videos that would tarnish his and Eternal Events' reputation. Tietlahni knows that he was the weakest of the partners, but she is surprised at the others' mercy in his removal.

Curious, she thinks, how they are incurably learned in their alliances. For a company banking on selling a lie, they have a hard time seeing the one in front of their noses.

Sitting in the rear of the car are the lovebirds with ears gathered, waiting for anything of use Jefrum may spew about the venue and Eternal Events' services.

Even with her eyes on the road, Tietlahni discerns the discordant energy between the two of them.

Feniya is a spritely young thing who went to the same college as Jefrum, much to Tietlahni's dismay. Feniya's light timbre is not as shrill as her fellow alumnus. She sits with the poise of a child raised with the high monotony of influence. Donning a lavender petticoat and sharp nose, one would assume Feniya would ignore the impropriety of Jefrum.

But the two of them hit it off with supreme interest, making the car a proverbial horror hut of chumminess. He uncovers that Feniya and her beau met at her father's fundraiser for balding show ponies. Jefrum retorts, "Y'know, I'm something of a dark horse myself," and she slaps the back of Tietlahni's seat in snorting laughter.

The driver eyes the quiet beau, whom she knows to be named Koahkum, through the rearview mirror. His wrists rest on his leg while Feniya gesticulates flamboyantly to match Jefrum's excitement. Koahkum has the sadness of a god's beast, his seized hands twisted as though he is casting a tense spell. But verily, there is a familiarity in his expression that Tietlahni has seen in countless spouses-to-be before. His mop of black, wavy hair might hide his practicing eyes from the other passengers in the car, but Tietlahni knows a member of the church of solitude when she spies one.

“You’ll love the vineyard,” Jefrum tells the bride-to-be. “It’s like, you love dogs at all?”

Feniya says, “Uh, of course!”

“Ok, great. So other venues? Everything is a dog but worse. Looks like a dog, sounds like a dog, but then you show up on your wedding day? It’s a cat that moos. Or a horse that quacks. This vineyard? Dog all the way, sweetie.”

Feniya presses her lips together in an appreciative grin. “Oh, so great to hear that. Tell me, is it as romantic as the website makes it out to be?”

Before Jefrum can make an alligator metaphor, Tietlahni clears her throat. “In late August,” she hums, “the grapes will be succulent enough to feed each other, if you like.” Her voice is composed smokily, like ash trees, and cuts through the candied conversation of Feniya and Jefrum. In their silence she holds their attention, but it’s Koahkum’s sad gaze she narrows on in the mirror.

Tietlahni continues: “Wildly sensual. We’ll make sure you get time to soak in your love for each other during the party and the night after. A little wine, some grapes, sunset between olive trees, the jacuzzi under the shadow of the moon and hills. ”

She holds the 's' as Koahkum reveals his eyes under the mop of hair. Target in sight, Tietlahni finishes: "It would take a lot of courage and a complete rejection of natural magic to *not* be irreproachably besieged by a lover there."

There is a pregnant silence in the car. In it, Koahkum's jaw juts. The sentence ties him in knots. Beside him, his fiancée unravels from it.

"WOWEE!" Feniya squeals. She fans her face in enthusiasm. "Doesn't that just make you swoon, pumpkin? The moon—makes sense but oh! Wasn't even on my mind."

"Yeah, I'm pretty familiar with courage," Jefrum chimes in. "Fun fact! Let's just say in the biz, we call this vineyard the babymaker for a reason."

Feniya pets Koahkum's leg before diving back into idle chit chat with Jefrum. Her beau's gaze fixates once more on the distorted hands in his lap.

Tietlahni observes the anachronistic child that is Jefrum. With meaty hands and high cheekbones, she imagines that his networking and looks have gotten him this far. He certainly hits it off with a certain type of client, and for that, she lets him pontificate histrionically with Feniya.

But Jefrum would let Koahkum slip through the cracks were he here alone.

Whatever it takes, Tietlahni will get the groom-to-be onboard.

“Funny,” Jefrum interrupts his own monologue about his Wizard Battle collectible cards. He gapes at the rows of grapes out the window. “I don’t know why, like it’s, like, clearly illogical and all. But I always thought they didn’t have farms in Europe.” He chuckles. “We all have our blind spots, though, right?”

Then again, she doesn’t have to take *all* of Jefrum’s idiocy.

As Tietlahni pierces her taloned fingers into the steering wheel, the dashboard backlight flashes. The radio station shuffles between frequencies before shutting off, silencing the drolling lunacy of another pop song that Jefrum somehow knows all the words to.

His stubby fingers jab at the dials until he deflates into his seat. “Damn, that blows,” he grumbles.

Tietlahni exhales, “Shame.”

Fortunately for the passengers, they arrive at the beginning of the cobblestone driveway of Palymour Vineyard. Naturally, Jefrum and Feniya bounce up the hill. Tietlahni swears she hears him holler, “Let’s get raptured!” as they head toward the wine tasting bar, but she lets her colleague’s wiliness disappear in the vastness of the vineyard.

Though Koahkum's car door closes with an unmistakable thud, Tietlahni saunters toward the other side of the property and leaves him behind.

In a dust world, it is not hard for people to imagine the laws of survival. They become howling creatures who do what they must to find water, shelter, humanity. What priest prioritizes admonitions witnessed over a loaf of bread when the future is so unclear? There is a divine unorthodoxy in the lengths a person will go to merely live another day. One is fully prepared to endure the heretical years if it means there will be another year after.

It is this hunger for survival that Tietlahni sees in Koahkum's sadness. A mopey lion in search of his identity in the dust world, willing to transgress necessary sins to avoid professing solitude.

When Tietlahni arrives at the top of the hill, she pauses at the honeymoon suite. It is mid-afternoon, and though the sun is not near the line of the earth yet, it casts honey shadows across olive groves and dotted vines. The rays blanket her skin. She takes off her leather jacket to reveal her tan slip dress. Her shoulders greet the sky as she lets the jacket fall to the ground.

"Do you understand what I said before?" Tietlahni says. "About the natural magic of the vineyard?"

She feels Koahkum's heat behind her, though he does not announce his presence.

"She loves you very much," she continues.

Tietlahni turns to face the mopyy-haired groom, whose weakened eyes are now inches above her own. "She'll figure it out one day you know," she says.

Koahkum falters. "Figure what out?"

"Doesn't take a veterinary genius to see you're — how did my colleague put it? — a cat that moos."

He wrangles his fingers again in tense spellcasting. "I wouldn't call a vet a genius..."

"Do you want to love her?"

At last, Koahkum stands seen, respectfully preserved so long as he does not utter the truth that will break his millionth delusion.

"I can make that your reality," Tietlahni says. "I can promise you eternal happiness with her. No doubts, no loneliness."

He rolls his jaw. "Sounds too pretty a promise without a catch."

Tietlahni presses her berry lips into a toothy grin. She kneels to her jacket pocket, procuring a contract and pen. He takes them from her slender hands and peruses the terms.

Koahkum rubs his mangled hands along his browline, an anxious awning to replace his mopyy hair's shadow over his face.

His feet shuffle in confused death, nearly bolting at the ludicrous terms. But like a lion in the dust world, he weighs his options, considers solitude.

"I don't know," he breathes.

Whatever it takes.

Tietlahni scoops dirt from beneath her boots, smearing one line of it across Koahkum's forehead, another down his nose, and two triangles on his cheeks. She mutters, like a prayer, "I am not one to reject natural magic. Are you?" His lips part, and she spoons the dirt onto his tongue.

"Fuck YUCK, dude!"

Standing by the jacuzzi in khakis, boat shoes, and a polo is none other than Jefrum. Koahkum and Tietlahni break apart. He chews the dirt in his mouth and swallows. The wind licks at her saliva coated fingers.

“Hi, uh. Can I talk to you, for a—” Jefrum points violently between Tietlahni and his flank.

While Koahkum clenches his fingers in newfound panic, Tietlahni inhales and takes her time walking over to Jefrum.

Jefrum tries to whisper, but the words come out hoarse: “You were just putting the moves on one of our clients, when our other client, who he is *very much* attached to, is getting tipsy a few rooms down.”

“No, I did not do that,” she responds.

Tietlahni does not fear what she can make go away, just as she can easily make matters appear should she desire. But it’s cleaner for her to convince Jefrum without the extra hassle. His eyes—pounded deep into his face—flare in ire.

“Yes, you DID!”

“Jefrum,” Tietlahni begins slowly, “I don’t know what your other colleagues were like, but it’s company policy not to get drunk on the job.”

“Uh, it’s company policy not to break up happy couples, you fuckin’ psycho.” Her smoky voice cuts across his manic whispers; it is lower in volume than his

but more virulent. "It's in your best interest to watch yourself."

Gods, when she makes partner, the first item on the docket is packing this anachronist child up and throwing him out the front door.

"My best interest?" Jefrum scoffs, putting his hands on his hips. "You, you have no idea, do you?" He runs his tongue along his upper lip, a cheeky smile budding.

Tietlahni's mouth purses. Jefrum is confident, too confident, in the wake of her threat. A tingle erupts up her spine, and for the first time this whole trip, her instincts do not point her to what is coming.

"What?" she says.

"Ooooooh, yeah. Yup." Jefrum chortles. "This is rich."

"What don't I know?"

The honey shadows ignite a fire in Jefrum's eyes. "Why do you think I'm here with you, Lahni?"

She stares at him, her taloned fingers twirling at her side.

It hits her suddenly, as she realizes he is here with her, not she with him: a miscalculation of whose weight is dead.

“But *I’m* the one who procured the account,” she chokes the words out. “Your stats are abysmal.”

“This is the real world, sweetie,” he shrugs. “People have to like you in business. And frankly, you’re kind of a cold bitch.”

All that work, all that planning. It doesn’t matter that she carved out a space for herself with Gogumo. She merely paved the way for Jefrum, impudent Jefrum, to reign over her for who knows how long.

He claps once. “Man! That was on my chest for a while now, ya feel me? Oooh, I can’t WAIT for that corner office.”

Tietlahni can make Jefrum’s discovery of her and Koahkum go away, but she can’t make the partners’ collective decision disappear as easily.

She looks to Koahkum, aligning herself with the lion in the dust world. He holds the contract in his hands and darts his sad face between her and Jefrum. Shuffling, still shuffling in confused death.

“You see your face right now?” Jefrum continues. “You didn’t see me coming from an inch away! I’m a dark horse to the tee, BAY-BEE.”

Her breath catches in her chest, and she finds the exhale at last. Her taloned fingers swirl with purpose now. Tietlahni cocks her head atilt and fixates her deep gaze on Jefrum. His pounded deep eyes twist into a new, upcoming face. Jefrum’s nose elongates into a snout. As he hunches over—seemingly kneeling before Tietlahni for a brief moment—his back breaks. Jefrum stretches and shrinks and twists until he becomes metaphorically himself.

When the transformation is complete, a black, bald, miniature show pony quacks—a cry bundled in bridled language.

Tietlahni rests her fingers at last, a smug grin on her face. “Well, we all have our blind spots, right?” she says, before sauntering back to Koahkum.

The groom-to-be stares between the quacking pony and the wedding planner, a vein on his neck throbbing.

“Sorry about that. I can make all of this go away for you,” Tietlahni offers. “No additional charge.”

Koahkum, though shaken, is no longer shuffling in his footsteps. His hands have

finally unmangled as he holds the contract, pen wavering over it.

“The... it... will it work?” he asks at last.

Tietlahni offers a tight nod. “I’ve helped hundreds of couples find a happily ever after.” Pen avoided for long enough, he signs on the dotted line. A wicked satisfaction carves itself into the corners of her smile.

“You will make a beautiful couple,” she says.

Koahkum hands her the contract, but before she can take it back, it disintegrates into the wind like dust.

Tietlahni closes the gap between them, taking his sad face in her hands. He holds her palms with his, both untwisted, no longer waiting for a spell to release the tension. Koahkum guides her into the honeymoon suite and fulfills his end of the contract.

Later, the two wander to the wine bar, where they find Feniya looking out at the sunset. “Pumpkin,” she coos, extending her loving arms to her beau. Her wine-stained teeth reveal themselves in a warm smile.

A lightness in his face, Koahkum holds Feniya to his chest.

"I see you enjoyed the wine," he says.

"Prob-probly too much," she slurs.

"Look at the two lovebirds," Tietlahni says. "I just smoothed out all the details with Koahkum and signed the paperwork. Hope that's all right."

"The place is ours!" Koahkum exclaims, his mop seemingly shorter now as his eyes peek out to greet his fiancée.

Feniya looks up at her beau with reverent tears. "Waiitttt, pumpkinnn!"

He pushes back a rogue strand of hair from her tiny face. "I'm sorry I didn't wait for you," he says, "but I knew how much you loved it and —"

"No, it's perfect," she kisses him on the cheek. "I love it. I love youuuuu."

Koahkum turns to Tietlahni. "Thank you. I think this will be a great start to our marriage."

The wedding planner waves her taloned fingers in exaggerated modesty.

"They say marriage is the most difficult sport, but it's easy to do my job when I'm working with true love like yours." Tietlahni licks her lips, savoring the

sweetness of another double win. “Congratulations!”

As they head back to the car, Koahkum perks up. “Wait, pumpkin,” he says, stopping mid-stride. “There was one of those horses back there that your parents like to save.” Though, as he mentions it, a vaguely familiar sadness creases across his newly unshrouded browline.

“The balding ones?” Feniya squeals.

Koahkum asks after Jefrum. The future partner of Eternal Events explains that her colleague is otherwise indisposed after suffering from diarrhea, though she abstains confessing from which orifice. She assures them that he passes on his blessing to the happy couple from the can.

Koahkum nods in foggy agreement, scanning the top of the hill — lingering — once more before departure.

Eternity is merely a frame of mind. Neither Tietlahni nor Koahkum will live forever, but a little nudge is all it takes for a howling creature such as himself to believe he or any feeling will. Tietlahni is more than willing to borrow a couple of years from him if it means she’ll be around for another hundred heretical ones after.

They drive away from the vineyard and cobblestone, past European farms and the rising moon. All the while, the lovebirds plot the rescue of another balding show pony.

Granola Camp Sunshine

Sigh.

My beginnings are not humble but I will be quick about it.

I've already been through eleven foster families from infancy until now, (I'm almost fourteen years old). My father was an overworked machinist who could never be home to take care of me, and my mom a junkie and klepto who was always dodging court dates and stints in jail.

I discovered a love of setting fires in dumpsters and tagging pretty street murals with graffiti by the time I was twelve, perhaps due to inheriting chaos genes from my mother and/or the fact that every foster family that took me in would dump me like a hot potato whenever I set their prized shrubberies on fire.

I finally lived the dream six months ago and succeeded in burning down the vacation cabin of a super rich childless couple who was reeeeeally adamant on trying to prove their love to me in a really syrupy white savior sort of way. I had to establish my dominance and reputation as a youthful Latina street kid to be FEARED and by God I did it. I nearly killed them too, but they escaped the bedroom window.

I lived homeless and free on the streets of Denver for about three weeks before I got picked up again for stealing some kombucha and granola bars from a corner store and re-processed into The System. I figured I was going to end up rotting in Juvie or something but was surprised to find that another wealthy would-be foster parent had taken an interest in me. She fast tracked some paperwork and

had me whisked away to her mansion in Highlands Ranch, Colorado.

She informed me that my name was no longer “Caridad” but that it was “Sunshine”. At about that point I realized that she’d probably done some shady shit in acquiring me, and that if I thought I was gonna be a prized pet “show Chihuahua” with the previous family, that was nothing compared to the new wardrobe and “clean food” that this woman, whom I only call Foster Mom 12 would do for and to me.

From Highlands Ranch to Boulder, Colorado... I was taken to a gated compound called the Forrester Farms Family Care Camp, to “build up my spiritual, physical, meta-physical, and emotional health”. I recognized the name of the camp as being on the wrappers of granola bars and kombucha bottles that I liked stealing from corner markets, so it was kinda a funny irony that I now found myself at the heart of the beast.

It was almost two weeks I was at the Forrester Farms Family Care Camp (which I liked to call “Granola Camp”), chaperoned only by Foster Mom 12’s natural born adult son, (a milque-toast bespectacled man named Beloved), before Foster Mom 12 dropped by for a check up on me. As she spoke to me, however, she remained in front of a floor length mirror. She pursed her lips at her reflection, pointed her ample hips back and forth, tapped her gnarled paws over her honey blond bouffant and then gave her huge tits a quick squeeze.

See now, her boobs were the window to her soul. I’d already learned that if she was squeezing ‘em in front of mirrors more than usual, you knew she was up to

something.

“Beloved,” she told my foster brother, “I am leaving you in charge.”

Beloved seemed surprised, which I thought was pretty dumb of him because from what I could tell of him, a man of twenty eight years still hanging on his mother’s every command, being left in charge would be a big undeserved upgrade for him. The only other thing he had going for him was that he was a YouTuber with a show meant for children that was actually quite popular. In the show he would read children’s books sent in by indie authors, and he would also have a dancing and sing-along portion to each episode. It was all quite silly but, to be honest, I grew up WATCHING it in my young-child days. It was actually kinda a bummer to discover that this guy who was once kind of a hero of mine, was actually just a beta-dude being ordered around by his mother who was the actual creator and brains behind his YouTube personality.

“Oh, you’ll be fine Beloved,” she said, accentuating her Tennessee drawl, “you’ll have our little apprentice whipped into shape in no time! She’s a good girl, aren’t you Sunshine?”

She pivoted on her clickity size-three heels.

I clasped my hands together and smiled. Over the past two weeks I had examined the compound and had found that the entirety of the chain link fence around it was topped with barbed wire, and there was only one way in and out that required authorization to cross. If I was going to stay afloat in this place it

wasn't going to be by being my normal less-than-charming-self.

"Aww, just look at our little Sunshine!" she said, and I marveled at how those eyebrows of hers could go perpendicular to her brows. "I can feel it, in the bones of Jesus I can feel it," and she held up her wee hand, claws spread, "our Sunshine will be a born leader!"

"But mother," Beloved said, his glasses fogged with the steam of his stress.

"Oh, you, HUSH," Foster Mom 12 said and she pointed at Beloved as she left the room, "You best make sure you get our little Sunshine into shape by the time I come back. That's all I'm saying!"

Beloved stared at the doorway, "I guess, she wants me to work on your health." He then glanced at me, his dark eyes flicking up and down my body in a dispassionate sort of way.

I threw out my arms, "Dude, I'm like eighty pounds, ain't nobody needing to get into shape!"

* * * * *
* * *

"Granola is manna," Beloved said as he read from the Forrester Farms Creed pamphlet.

I munched on the granola which was the staple meal at Forrester Farms. I was allowed a glass of milk at lunch, because milk was also manna, and manna was

soul. My digestion did NOT like a glass of whole milk.... Like ever... but I just let my stomach complain in vain and decided that it would be their damned fault if I was the reason their plumbing had a total collapse.

“Remember,” Beloved continued, “as your soul and manna combine then you become one, and then you become all, and then you become....”

I raised my hand—something I would never have done if it were Foster Mom 12 reading from the pamphlet.

“Yes, Sunshine,” he said and he looked over the rims of his glasses at me.

“If granola is manna, and milk is manna,” I asked, and I still had a wad of granola mashed up in my cheeks, “and manna is soul, and my soul is combining with manna, doesn’t that mean I am already manna, and if manna is soul then does that mean I am soul-soul or manna-manna, or is there anyway of being able to throw in some orange juice at lunch time and create a manna/soul combo for more God points?”

Beloved’s frown at that moment was very frowny.

That night, Beloved decided to sleep on the sofa in my room, but before I crawled into bed he hugged me from behind like I was a teddy bear. His nose poked into the back of my shoulder, and his eyelashes fluttered against my skin. It warmed my tummy but I also had a cold trapdoor feeling in my chest. I kept my eyes closed and thought of how warm this moment was and how far removed it was from the cold warehouse where I had learned last year that my real mom OD’d

on heroin.

Beloved was scared for me, he told me as we tried to drift to sleep, me on my bed and he safely ensconced at a celibate distance. It was a huge relief to me that Beloved seemed to have zero interest in me in THAT way, if you catch my drift. Yes, this was a big step to allow me onto the farm where I could begin my preparations for being welcomed into the Forrester Family, but nothing was yet set in stone.

“I really feel like I have a little sister with you, a REAL little sister. Please, just pass the initiation.”

Apparently, there was an initiation to go through?

Beloved’s initiation happened when he was fifteen and he and his cousin were chauffeured around by Sinclair, the ex-Ugandan militant who was castrated in some sort of government overthrow riot. They ran into another cousin who was out with his girlfriend who was married to someone else but was related to them through marriage.

Long story short, it was a mad night of drugs, high speed car chases, possible incest, and jealous husbands that ended with them taking refuge in a penthouse where they were toking up on LSD laced marijuana. Beloved wasn’t used to the drugs, and he’d stood up to get air, when he saw a man bare hand scaling the side of the building. Thinking it was just the drugs talking, he turned back into the penthouse when the Spiderman (who turned out to be a jealous husband, and

another cousin of Beloved's) burst through the plate glass doors in a screaming, bleeding rage.

"What happened next?" I asked.

"Well," Beloved said, "I jumped into the pile, beat the shit outta the Spiderman, dragged him into the hall and shoved him down a garbage chute."

"THAT was your initiation?"

"And then I..." Beloved hesitated, "Well, the guy's wife seduced me in front of the other guys."

"Wait, your COUSIN seduced you?" I had exclaimed, and my brain flooded with all the books and movies I'd ever read and seen, like "Flowers in the Attic", "Game of Thrones", "The Witching Hour", and even "Gone With the Wind", and continued to wonder what it was about upper class families and casual incest.

Beloved nodded grimly, "Yup. I mean... I can't recall if she was my blood cousin or cousin by marriage... but..."

I was a bit in awe, because Beloved had really soft skin, and soft hands, and his hips were kind of wide, like a woman's, and his tummy was a bit soft. But I suppose soft guys like that could have a bit of the Norman Bates about them, and I'd seen myself on the streets how vicious a seemingly innocuous man could really be. So, now, I had a bit of respect for Beloved, imagining him pounding down on and trying to murder one of his family members, and fairly glad to

count him as an ally.

“Apparently,” Beloved replied, “Mother said it proved I knew how to defend the family at all costs, including against actual family.”

“Defend the family even against family,” I whispered. “That was your lesson?”

“Yup,” he said.

“That makes me not wish that I needed to know,” I whispered.

“Shut up, Sunshine,” Beloved whispered, “Go to sleep.”

One thing I liked about Forrester Farms was that there was no rush in the mornings for me or any of the other three hundred people living here. Good health, Foster Mom 12 always said, meant Good Rest, and Good Rest started with Late Mornings and Leisurely Lunches, Praise BE! It says in Leviticus! (Note: It says no such thing in Leviticus, and I read that book back and forth and asides from some awesome rules on shagging animals and parents stoning mouthy kids, I couldn’t find anything to back up Foster Mom 12’s quote.)

Beloved texted to say I was needed in the dormitory. I walked briskly to get there, pausing when I saw the Dormitory Ward Mistress, a cousin of Foster Mom 12’s, yelling at a girl in the hall about soiling her bed. The girl was probably my age, broad shouldered and squat.

I was about to interrupt but then my hip buzzed with a series of urgent texts from Beloved. Sucking it up, I dashed down the hall to meet him.

"You're going to have a quick lesson today in simplicity," Beloved said.

"Am I?" I said.

"Yup," Beloved replied as he knocked on the door, "The Guru is one of the founding designers of the Forrester Farms ideals. He's momma's cousin and inspired her to devote herself towards goodness and simplicity."

(Jeez, there were a lot of cousins here.)

"Simplicity?" I exclaimed as the door swung open, "The toilet seat covers she orders back home are made by Prada!"

"Shh!" Beloved hissed.

"Holy shit!" I exclaimed when I entered the room.

A bald light-bulb hung from the ceiling. There was no furniture in the room and in the center sat a muscular bald man in a tight Anderson Cooper style black shirt and slacks. He sat cross legged and in front of him were two plates, one had a loaf of bread, the other a fish.

So weird.

I followed Beloved's lead as he crossed into the room and sat across from the Guru. I was actually pretty stoked that The Guru was a good looking Mr. Clean muscle dude.

Beloved put his hand on my shoulder. His lips tickled my ear and he said,

“Stay here, Sunshine. I have to go. Nothing bad will happen. Whatever you see, remember the initiation. Ok?”

I nodded, realizing that Beloved was putting a lot on the line by giving me a cheat for this initiation and as much as the prospect of sitting around doing nothing in front of a loaf, a fish, and a bald dude annoyed me, I would do it anyway.

Eyes on the prize, man!

I looked at the slimy, silvery fish and the crusty, golden bread.

Were they gonna feed that to me?

I'd begun to worry about having to eventually pee, when the door opened and the girl who I'd seen abused in the hallway entered. She smiled at me, her face scrunching up and her eyes squinting. I smiled back, the bald guru dude, however, remained fixed in position.

Her nose was very pinched and she made slobbery sounds through her lips. When she sat next to me, she adjusted her hands and legs into the same position mine were in. I didn't look at her face but stared at her bare feet in flip flops. They were wide and the toes spaced apart.

Then came the fatal moment when I couldn't help but gaze at the loaf of bread, and my stomach growled. The guru dude flinched. My stomach contorted and growled even louder.

This time the guru dude's pale eyes met mine, and I felt a chill like an iron rod up my spine. God, why did I have to feel guilty over a natural body function? Of course my empty stomach was going to growl at this time of the morning. Ugh! Or was it early afternoon?

My stomach growled a third time and the girl stood up and said, "Hungry! Hungry! I get the bread!"

I shook my head and waved my hands.

"No!" I cried out as she bent over the plate of bread and grabbed it, ripping into the baguette and offering me a wad clenched in her wide, stubby fingered hand.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing you useless twat!" The Guru Dude yelled, standing up to his full height of 6-foot-Holy-Shit-inches.

The poor girl, bread clenched in her hand, began to cry.

"You stupid waste! Who let you in here?" The Guru Dude snarled, and veins bulged all over his muscles and his skin was flushed pink.

My whole body throbbed with cold adrenaline, and I stood up, and I snatched the fish off the plate.

"STOP CRYING YOU WORTHLESS LITTLE..."

So, if ever you wondered what it looked like to see a fifteen pound raw salmon swing through the air to smack the face of a muscled bald man who was

screaming at a sobbing pubescent girl, now is your moment to imagine it. The fish impacted his cheek so hard and all three of us froze, the girl mid-sob, me holding the fish by the tail, and the Guru Dude with his eyes wide. A red slap mark painted his flesh.

Later that day found me sitting in a huge room on a huge chair in front of a huge desk. Foster Mom 12, who had to cut short her trip to return, sat her entire four foot ten frame behind that desk. Her gnarled fingers were entwined on the lacquered wood surface and her lips were stained red and pursed. She looked like an orangutan with lipstick.

And I giggled.

Her eyes widened.

Oh shit! Did I just laugh?

“Well, Sunshine,” she said, “It is a shame that I had to break my plans to come here, but it seems I am needed.”

The thought of the foster system went through my head, abusive fathers, exhausted mothers, noisy siblings, social workers and....

“I am so, so, so....” I began.

“You passed initiation!” she said and her face twisted like a happy chimp with a banana.

“Sorry..... Wait WHAT?” I said.

“You PASSED!” Foster Mom 12 laughed and she stood up from behind the desk and came around and I cringed as she pressed her warm paws into my cheeks and kissed me hard on my forehead. “You passed in less than twenty four hours! Only my Beloved has ever passed the initiation that quickly.”

Not that I was in the habit of looking a gift-horse in the mouth, buuuut I couldn't shut up here, “Wait, I slapped around your cousin with a fish, and I... pass? Isn't he like the co-founder of...”

“Well, why did you hit him?” she said.

I lifted my chin and I dug deeper into my reservoirs of bull-shittery than I'd ever dug before.

“You have to protect family, even from family!” I said, beginning my gamble.

Her eyes narrowed. “You have to protect family and yet you attack my cousin with a fish?”

I lifted my eyebrow, “That poor girl IS family! She lives on Forrester Farms. I had to protect her! She made a mistake and was being mentally berated? Of course I protected her, even if he IS YOUR cousin!”

I am so fucked, I thought.

But then she smiled and pounced and I was suffocating in her Dolly Parton

quintuple D boobs as she hugged me.

“I knew I could count on my brilliant Sunshine!” Foster Mom 12 howled. “I just knew it! You recognized that not just blood but EVERYONE is family on Forrester Farms and you protected family, even from family. The first most important lesson is LEARNED!”

I gasped as she let me go and I gulped in precious air.

She stood back and squinted, “Now,” she said, “Your work here is just beginning, I am going to make sure you are in training to be the best leader Forrester Farms ever had,” and then she threw her arms straight up in the air, “I am going to make sure you are THE LEADER of Forrester Farms! Praise be! You are The ONE!”

“Oh...” I said, “I... thanks?”

And she drowned me in another awkward boob hug.

Oh... I thought, I am so fucked.

The House on Penumbra Street

Lucia and I went to the large house on Penumbra Street today. It's open to the public. We'd walked by it many times, and had always meant to go inside and look around. It looks so inviting from the outside: an old wooden Victorian house with immense windows and porches wrapped around the front: we thought there might be a fireplace with a fire going, a place to have tea, maybe even gift shop where we'd buy some postcards or handmade stationery.

When we went inside I remembered it was a rare book library. I felt so foolish. How could I have forgotten what I had known? There were oversized books everywhere, many were leather bound book, with gold lettering on the spines, others were faded clothbound ones, but from another time, when a bound book was an item of luxury and importance. There were books in every language, Greek, Hebrew, some in forgotten languages. I wondered if there were any I could actually read and understand.

The bookshelves rose to the high ceilings between the immense windows that flooded the room with light. There were long wooden worktables, shining from having been rubbed by the backs of hundreds of books and the sleeves of scholars. At first we tried to hang onto the mood we'd come in with: attempting to look casual we walked around stopping and starting uncertainly, trying to find a corrected rhythm. Without an exchange of words or even a look we were transformed from being two middle-aged women ready for a cup of tea into schoolgirls trying to act as if we belonged there.

Lucia went over to a large display case standing the middle of the room. Hesitantly I followed her. Under the glass there were manuscripts opened to pages filled with arcane lettering. There was one small book with pages that looked like skin protruding at the edges from between wood covers. The edges of the wood covers were worn smooth from so many hands having held the book. The covers were bound to the pages with delicate twisted cord through three bored holes on the left side. The front cover had split long ago and had been mended in the same manner. Two holes had been drilled on each side of the break and the pieces were tied together. A single strand had broken at one point. I wondered how long the cord would hold.

Oddly, lying open on the top of the glass was an old, large book. Lucia placed her hand on it and lifted the cover. We looked at one another. That was a mistake; we wound up on the edge of giggling. Lucia, trying hard to act as if she has the right to do this, cleared her throat professionally and turned a page. The paper looked thick and leathery, under her hand, the lettering on the page was strange, even unrecognizable, like nothing I'd ever seen, a cross between Arabic and Cyrillic. Lucia knew we weren't welcome. I wished she hadn't made that noise.

I turned and looked over my shoulder nervously and noticed a door, with a glass panel in it. Through the glass I saw the shadows of some women. They looked like they had thick straight hair as if they were Latin, or maybe Indian. I could tell their hair was black. I could only hear a low lamenting, moans almost. They

were crowding near the door; one figure was trying to open it. Was she familiar somehow? No, I don't think so. The knob moved back and forth, but it couldn't make a full turn.

When I turned back to tell Lucia about this, I realized that the woman who runs this library had been observing us for several minutes. She was tall and stately, with lots of sandy blond hair pulled back in a barrette. She wore a woolen skirt and a tailored silk shirt, sensible, low heeled, brown pumps and stockings. She had a pleasant face on, but I knew she didn't like us being there.

I whispered to Lucia what I had just observed behind the glass panel, but she didn't understand me. I was saying it hurriedly before the librarian could hear. She was bearing down on us now. Lucia looked at me as if she were about to ask a question. By widening my eyes and centering my pupils, I tried to signal to her not to say anything. Providentially, the librarian was delayed for a moment by a couple that was asking her questions.

"Should we leave?"

I looked quickly over my shoulder again at the glass-paneled door. The women were standing there passively now, swaying almost imperceptibly. There was one silhouette that looked familiar. Her hair had a slightly distinct outline.

I whispered to Lucia, what I had seen again, and this time I was pretty sure she'd

understood. I made sure to point out Mrs. Prinney, the librarian too.

“What we should we do?”

“Maybe we could write a note, and slip it under the door as we walk past.”

“What could we say?”

“But what if a note like that were found on us? We don’t want them to know we know what’s going on.”

I was trying to think up something we could draw that would be open to interpretation, so there would be no evidence, but that would communicate to those women that someone knew that they were locked up in that room and would try to get them out. I pictured drawing a human figure jumping up in the air, signifying freedom, but even as I thought it up I knew it was too elliptical.

Then Mrs. Prinney was coming towards us again. She stopped on the other side of the display case and said in a pleasant voice, “Can I help you?” I quickly closed the book to demonstrate our innocence. She looked even more imposing close up. “Can I help you, with anything today?” she repeated.

“We were just admiring your collection,” I said. “Are those books in Hebrew?” I asked pointing away from us to a high shelf behind her.

As we were talking to her. I was trying to imagine other, clearer depictions that could be drawn quickly, but that would still leave us blameless. In my head I drew a figure leading others from a jail, or a cage, a structure with bars, with an open door, a key on the floor. But as I mentally sketched the lines I realized that this image too clear. Incriminating.

“Tell us about the library? How many different languages are represented in your collection?” I asked, hoping that I sounded like I knew what I was talking about.

“Oh there are too many, I couldn’t tell you exactly.” She answered. Each exchange between us made everything more apparent, but each deception had led us further in. For now it was necessary for each of us to act out our parts.

“Do you have anyplace for people to stay, I mean while they’re doing their research? Dormitories?” I thought that maybe this would force her to tell me something about these women.

“Would you like a tour of the whole library?” she asked in her determinedly pleasant voice. We had no choice but to accept.

“You must see upstairs. There’s a marvelous room up there.” We had no idea where she was bringing us. But I realized that she would have to pass by the

door where the women were locked up. If I had written my note, or at least drawn the picture, perhaps I could have offered them some hope. As we walked past the door, I imagined myself finding a way of bending down and slipping a small piece of paper under the door unobtrusively but I had to resign myself to my failure.

She went in front of us and started to lead the way upstairs. We looked at each other behind her back, but we knew that if we attempted to make a break for it, it would tear away the thin facade that protected us. We would have given her the excuse she had been looking for to put us behind the door. We agreed with that look to keep going and hoped we'd get out.

We went up the ample stairway holding onto a lovely old polished balustrade. It leads into a large meeting room, where an audience was noisily taking its seats. There were red velvet curtains drawn to the sides of the large windows up here. All the light could be closed out if that were desired. An awards ceremony was going to take place shortly. But before the ceremony there would be a debate or discussion about the restraints writers live with in the Third World and what could be done to liberate them.

Alice Montgomery, my neighbor was running the debate and award ceremony. She stood up front so pleased with herself, chin raised, arms hanging down, her fingers intertwined like a self-importantly. She pretended impatience with her noisy audience, a schoolteacher quieting restless but loveable children. It

smacked of sanctimony--good work, political and literary. At that moment I felt such deep hatred for her, so tall and ugly. Who was she to run an awards ceremony? If she was so smart why was she unaware of what this institution was really up to?

I wondered if she'd noticed the shadows behind the paneled door downstairs? My frustration began to overtake my fear. Words were racing through my brain forming themselves into sentences. Was Alice in on this?

"We should move along now." I guess Mrs. Prinney noticed the look on my face, the coming to attention a face gets when it is about to open into speech? But I lacked the courage to interrupt a public meeting. She needn't have worried.

We were led away back downstairs, once more past the door of the women. That time I heard them murmuring and longed to talk to them. Lucia held my elbow. I didn't know if it was for support or restraint.

Mrs. Prinney raised her eyebrows in dismissal of the questions I wasn't capable of asking. Another opportunity lost. I *knew* what was going on behind the glass door.

Finally I gathered my nerve finally and asked, "Who are those women in there?"

She answered lightly, "They're the cleaning women," and turned away. In the

face of her brazen reply I was deflated. I looked at Lucia after we had passed the door and were in the foyer, near the spot where from the outside I had imagined they're to be a gift shop. We'd better just get out of there, or we'd wind up knowing from the other side of the door exactly what was going on, with everyone unaware of us too.

We thanked her hurriedly and walked quickly out the front door. I don't remember if we had our coats with us. There was a large black touring car waiting to take people to town. It was big, very shiny and very black with polished chrome trim. There were headlights on either side of the car; it looked like it had been built before WWII. Some people were already inside, others were getting in.

It was parked on a hairpin driveway that was steep and dangerous. A little way up, at the curve the street was roofed over, like the streets in medieval cities. But our driver, a fat Mexican guy was unperturbed by the tight difficult driveway and the fact that his car was weighted down with too many people. Lucia and I crowded in; people were sitting on top of each other. I noticed that Lucia had a small slip of white paper in her hand. I couldn't see what was on it.

Our driver attempted to go up the short steep drive. I wasn't sure how he could he possibly make the grade, much less the turn. It would almost impossible to execute with such an immense car especially one so full of people.

Someone had to get out to lighten the weight of the car. A thin woman and I volunteered, Lucia stayed inside. I stood there wondering if the driver would take off without the two of us. But instead he motioned us back in before he had even gone a short way. There was something about his slovenliness, a three-day growth of beard, and his oily unwashed skin that went with his lack of concern and his certainty that made it clear he would make the turn. We reentered the car and he maneuvered the car up the incline, under the covered part of the street and around the turn with ease.

On the way home it occurred to me that Nando would have known how to get those women out of that room. Too bad he's dead, I thought, because I'm sure that Anna, his wife, an old friend of mine, is one of the women locked up in there.

Bazooka Joe

The last candy bar had been eaten. Zelda looked up from the airtight box and narrowed her eyes. She scanned the people around the yard, hoping to see a telltale sign of chocolate on someone's mouth, or a sugared up energy level, or someone behaving furtively, but everyone was playing it cool and there was no way to know who it was.

There was no way to know, but she suspected. Mike Grossman.

Mike was the kind of guy who, when he was a kid, would invite you over to play GI Joe, and would "accidentally" end up with one more Joe than he'd had before you came over. He was the kind of guy who'd throw a party for your promotion, and somehow end up sleeping with the date you brought to the party. He was the kind of guy who, when the outbreak started, would create a stockpile of canned food by sourcing from other people's houses, without first checking to see if the houses were the home bases of other surviving foragers.

But the worst part is, he didn't do it with malice. He was actually incapable of that type of subterfuge. He just kinda... lucked into ill-gotten gains. He was like Mr. Magoo, bumbling along, creating dangerous situations for others and coming out unscathed - and even benefitting.

And it was so hard not to like him, despite all that! He would happily join along on any recovery missions, and would put his safety on the line at any moment without even thinking about it. Did he think he was indestructible? If he did,

it would be for good reason, because he always had been to that point. It was almost as if he didn't experience normal risk and therefore didn't see his chance-taking as a gift to others. It wasn't even a thrill to him. It was just a means to the end of the benefit the mission would have for him. If others benefitted from the missions, it didn't even register for him, because all that mattered was the fact that he would get something out of it.

She looked around again and realized she couldn't see him. She closed the box and turned to the man standing a few yards away.

"Randy," she said. "Where's Grossman?"

Randy rolled his eyes and looked down toward Zelda. "He found a go cart in one of the garages on the last recon. He's leading some amblers to Carson street so they'll leave us alone."

Zelda's jaw dropped. He was driving a freaking go kart with who knew how much fuel, to Carson street, a good mile away, and he was doing it for the good of the compound.

"What's the angle?"

Randy grinned as if he had been waiting for the question. "So get this. There's a bubble gum factory on the other side of Carson. They used to make Bazooka. He

wanted to go there and see if he could find a stash to bring back.”

“Bazooka? You gotta fucking be kidding me. He’s risking life and limb for some of the shittiest bubble gum that ever lived?”

“Yeah. He said he wanted to find some of the comics that had the stars on them. Something about how those were the ones that could get you prizes or some shit.”

“Is he aware that there is no longer a place that gives prizes for anything like that anymore? I mean, wasn’t that even an urban legend anyway?”

“Look, you try telling him something like that. I mean, ha - I didn’t want to burst his bubble! Get it? Bubble! Like the gum!” Randy held his side as if he’d been laughing very hard, even though he only chuckled.

Zelda took her turn to roll her eyes, and she walked away toward the gate. She climbed the ladder to look over the palisade toward Carson street. Then she looked west toward the setting sun. If Grossman didn’t hurry up, he’d be spending the night with the shambling amblers, cause the gate stayed firmly locked after dark, and there were no exceptions. For all of his unwitting shittiness, she didn’t wish that on him.

She saw movement a distance away and pulled her crossbow off her back, just

in case. As the figure got closer, she recognized Mike Grossman, walking along with a spring in his step, carrying a backpack and pushing, of all things, a rolling canvas mail basket. He wasn't moving very fast, and one of the wheels of the basket was squeaking. She cringed and looked around, expecting to see some of the dead following. But they were nowhere around, so she relaxed her grip on the crossbow a little.

Grossman got closer and Zelda saw into the basket. It was full of gum, candy bars, and other assorted treats. He'd done it again, the fucker. She sighed and climbed down to let him in. The bastard had earned his keep for another day. She supposed she'd let him live.

Cemetery Murders

Her heart jumped into her throat, and it wouldn't seem to go back down. This was far too exciting, and Daphne couldn't hold herself back. Gabriel often tried to place some reasoning behind it, claiming that it was for the better, often writing poems for her about how cold and cruel the world truly was. She knew the truth. Sure, she sometimes went along with his claims, saying that those they enacted their will upon were just part of the horrid cogs of the system that creaked all around them and cranked them down into dust, but in truth she just loved the feeling that it gave her to shift the world irreversibly around her. She felt a feeling of fire go through her body when he kissed her over the bodies, and even when knew it was the behavior of a freak, she still loved it.

The night was just beginning to come into its own, the darkness beginning to fade from the light and being caught in the strange intersection of the two, a dim greyness that Daphne practically fed upon. She ran down the street along the tall metal fence that separated the outside world from the cemetery, glancing through the thick grasses on the other side and seeing the gravestones that littered the dead man's land. She knew the names of several of the tombstones that littered that cemetery, though remarkably little of the names of the bodies.

Her eyes locked onto her target as she paused in her dash. Wretchbrook was a decent sized town, and there was never a shortage of people out alone late at night when the dark gave them freedom to act as they pleased. The man looked to be fairly young, somewhere in his mid-twenties, about six feet tall, and dressed in a pure black track suit, with only the slightest of inclines of white edging to separate him from the night. *He'll get run over a car if I don't get him,*

Daphne thought. *The perfect target.*

She slowed her approach towards him from the run she had been caught in earlier, softly walking towards him. She made herself obvious, as to not look as though she was attempting to sneak up on him, and just as she had expected he saw her coming, removing his ear buds, the faint sound of the music playing out into relatively silent, empty street. The streetlights glistened overhead.

“Hey, I’m sorry to bother you,” Daphne started as the man paused and looked over at her. She saw him gaze up and down her body, dressed in a thin white tank top and tight jeans. She didn’t particularly like people gawking at her, but it sure did come in handy sometimes. She was far more easily able to draw in their targets than Gabriel was, that was for sure. “But you wouldn’t happen to know where Pierceton Lane is? I’m sorry, I’m new here.”

“S’all good.” the yet to be named man said. *He has to have a name*, Daphne thought. *Something that people used to call him.* He pointed down the street towards the traffic light before turning with his hand. “You’re going to want to go down Halfner there and then make a right. Keep going for about a mile and then you’ll see it.”

“Thanks.” Daphne said. “It got dark out here really quick, and I got kinda worried when I couldn’t figure out which way home is.”

“What’s a girl like you doing out here alone at night anyway?” the runner asked. “It’s dangerous when it gets dark out in a town like this.” Daphne almost had to laugh at that, but she calmed herself. She had learned well to hide her joy over

things like this.

“You’re out here at night, aren’t you?” Daphne said. “Aren’t you afraid of getting stabbed by the big bad boogie man?”

“Some guy tried to jump me once. Didn’t turn out too well for him. I’ve found it’s always a good idea to be carrying a knife on hand.”

“How do you know that I’m not armed?” Daphne said. They began to walk slightly as they talked. It was a fairly slow pace, to be sure, but it cemented that she was no longer just asking for directions. Daphne allowed her eyes a momentary glance at the gates to the cemetery, creaked open by Gabriel in preparation for what was to come.

The runner smiled at her comment. “You’re right, you probably are carrying some knife in your boot or something. You seem like just the sort of freaky girl who’d do something like that. I’m surprised I didn’t guess it at first. You know how to use knives?”

“Some of them.” Daphne said. “Let me see yours. Unless you were just bluffing.”

The runner scoffed at that, reaching into the pocket of his track suit and pulling out a thin switchblade, a possession that she actually took some surprise in. It was a nice blade, firm wooden handle outlined in iron, the small switch prepared to send out the weapon. The runner handed the weapon to her, and she weighed it in her hand, admiring it. She actually liked it. She switched the blade open, slashing in front of her for a second before giggling. “This is a really good knife,”

Daphne said. "I'd use something like this."

"Jeez, you have preferred brands?" the runner said. "You really are freaky." He seemed somewhat interested in her, she could tell, in the sense that one would be interested a funny looking animal at the zoo. He simply couldn't take his eyes away from her and continue on with his running. A fatal mistake.

"You don't deserve such a nice knife if you're going to talk like that." Daphne said. "Such a treasure must be respected."

"I gotta bow down and kiss the knife's ass now?" the runner laughed. "You're actually really funny. I'm sorry, but I don't seem to remember what your name was?"

"I didn't tell you." Daphne said.

"Well my name is..."

"And I didn't fucking ask." Daphne lunged forward, slashing at the runner's arm, his forearm quickly foiling up with blood that splattered across the ground as she reached for his back pocket, grabbing his wallet before darting out.

"Fucking slut," the runner mutter, grasping at his bleeding arm as she ran, noticing that she had grabbed his wallet before taking chase. In only a few seconds she could clearly see that he was gaining on her, the fact that he had just been practicing running gleaming through. *No need to worry*, Daphne thought. *I don't need to outpace him for long.*

Sometimes they ran into issues at this step in the plan, but the runner followed exactly along with the formula, running straight through the gates of the cemetery after her. He still shouted at her, screaming curses and profanities as his legs got tangled on the tall grass of the graveyard, her own legs being far more used to the terrain and being able to dance and hop their way through the shrubbery, and he showed no sign of stopping his pursuit. She kept her eyes focused, weaving through the graveyard and towards the intended location.

St. Dante's Cemetery was surprisingly big, it being pretty much the only cemetery in Wretchbrook and containing corpses that stretched back decades. One that she had once found, the grave of a man by the name of Eugene Franklinton was even labeled with the death date of October 7th, 1902, over a hundred years back. The graveyard itself was massive, stretching across its four acres with a surprising number of graves, almost a thousand. There were three main portions of the graveyard, Daphne had discovered when she was younger and frequently liked coming up to the cemetery for exploration. There was the original portion of the graveyard, boxed of in a series of wrought iron fences, that had been there since the original burial of Eugene Franklinton, that had been considered full about fifty years past. Gabriel and Daphne had always thought that there was plenty more room in the original section, one that they both far more preferred due to the darker atmosphere that came with the more overgrown weeds and the spiraling trees scattered in between the headstones, but it seemed that the owners of the St. Dante's Cemetery didn't agree, buying the neighboring acre of land and melding it with the original cemetery, doubling

its landscape. It clearly was different though, with the new plot being far less decrepit and eerie than the original. Better upkeep was done on the newer section, as Gabriel put it, because the loved ones of those who were buried there were still alive enough to care enough to have a nice place to visit. The third plot of land was the most well upkept, though, it's two acres being added most recently, after even the second plot of land filled up. This newest portion was the least populated, with barely a fourth of the land being filled in. All three came together to form St. Dante's Cemetery, the favorite stalking grounds of Gabriel and Daphne.

"Get over your you dumb bitch!" the runner shouted as he continued to chase after her, Daphne leaping over a small grave. She still ran through the original portion of the cemetery, and here she found most of the gravestones in disrepair. She only guessed that the cemetery was only a hundred years old based off of Eugene Franklinton gravestone, but in reality it could've been far older, the dates of all the older corpses being hidden away by the destructive waves of time. Most of the graves here were badly made to begin with, barely more than slabs of stone with names and dates hastily carved into the rock. Most were chipped away at by now, and a few were even completely collapsed, the identities of those underneath lost completely with only shatterings of stone to indicate where the fragile remains of their bones laid. The runner sprinted around the grave, leaping out from the side in an attempt to grab her, but she managed to reach down and scoop up one of the stones that had fallen from the gravestone, throwing it at him and slamming right into in the wounded arm, causing him

to recoil as he clutch the slash in pain. She kept on running, making sure to not seem uncatchable to the runner as she lured him closer and closer to his final resting place.

She ran past one of the most interesting types of graves to her, one that contained no name and in fact had never contained a name. A thick pile of rocks stacked up on top of each other were the only grave marker, and it was here that she looked over her shoulder once more, seeing that he was quickly catching up to her. She needed to hurry if she hoped to properly pull this off and not get caught, which would certainly lead to nothing but bad things. She looked up ahead and saw the landmark they had decided on, a thin, willowy tree that had spring up in an empty patch, it's trunk looking sad and deathly, it's branches bending deep down, with one even reaching all the way to the dirt, part of the wood being buried underneath. She picked up her speed when she saw the tree, knowing that she didn't have much longer to go. The runner began to sprint as he grew fearful that she would get away from him, she saw, and she knew that even if it was just a little, it would tire him out. It wouldn't do much, she knew, but it didn't need to do much. The ones that fought a lot were more certainly the hardest ones, and Gabriel told her to make sure they were at least a bit tired, but she personally liked the ones that fought back a little the best. They truly showed the morphing they were doing with this ritual of theirs, turning a thriving and virile human being into nothing more than a dead corpse.

She reached the tree and feigned a fall, pretending to trip over one of the weak roots of the tree and falling the ground, her forearms getting covered in the thick

brown dirt as she caught herself. The runner was quickly upon her, lunging down to grab his wallet from her grasp, but before he could fully reach her a thick *thwap* sound rang through the air, his face shifting from that of satisfaction to a dreary sort of emptiness, his body keeling down and falling to the ground, blood dripping out from the back of his head.

“I expected a big guy like him to take a bit more to take down,” Gabriel said as he stood above the passed-out runner, holding the dirt and blooded tainted shovel over his shoulder as he kicked the runner’s shoe, testing for any sign of life. Daphne patted the dirt of her forearms, rising up before plunging the switchblade that she had gotten from the runner into his own neck, blood pooling out and mixing with the dirt.

“He was bragging about how good he was at defending against attackers before. He said people didn’t even think about jumping him after what he did to the last guy.”

“Maybe the last guy didn’t have a shovel.” Gabriel said as he plunged the shovel’s tip into the ground. “Come on, you grab his feet. I’ll grab his shoulders.”

A freshly dug grave laid next to the tree, the product of an hour of both of their hard work. She wouldn’t have believed how difficult it was to dig a hole the size of a body, but the difficulty of it only made it all the better. Daphne felt the ache that still remained in her arms from digging the whole as she lifted up the runner’s body, heaving him with Gabriel into the grave before examining their work. The corpse was just as beautiful as all corpses were, the shocking stillness

of it sending shivers down her spine as Gabriel placed a foot up on the makeshift gravestone they had gotten, a flat slab of old rock that fit in well with the rest of the gravestones in this more ancient part of St. Dante's Cemetery.

"The ashes that remain are nothing more than that, just ashes," Gabriel read off from a crumpled piece of notebook paper he had pulled from his pocket. Most of his poems stayed in the various notebooks he used to write them, but for each of their endeavors he liked to write a specific poem for the body, leaving it with the corpse when they left. "The dance of graves we play, nothing more than slashes. All is little, all is naught, all is fading in the endless rot. We see the sky, it's face grim and dark, and we see the cemetery, a dead man's ideal park. We think much of all, that is to be sure, and we try to make it all, but what is that all for? Where are the dancing lilies of the morning, the endless tides of the evening sky? Where are those we take our pride in, those we wish would not have died? The answer's clear as day, as I have already told you so, their corpses lie here, deep in their graves, six feet below."

Daphne clapped at the poem as she smiled, the sky having fully transitioned in the darkness. That seemed to take forever sometimes, but she found that it normally happened in the chase. Gabriel pulled out a lighter, using it to set fire to the wick of a small candle they had brought, before tossing the sheet of notebook paper into the grave along with the dead runner, whispering to himself the final line of the poem once more before he grabbed the murder tool once more, passing Daphne the extra shovel before they began the process of filling the grave, a process that was often far easier than digging it.

When they were finished burying the body, there was only one step left. One more thing towards the perfection of this night's participating in their craft, and then it would truly be complete. There was one more thing resting by where the shovels and candle had sat, a chisel and hammer, and Daphne took them both in hand as she kneeled on the freshly dug soil in front of the gravestone. It would grow over with grass and moss eventually, time hiding all evidence of their crimes, but for now it was a smooth brown. She brought the chisel to the slab and thought for a second, pausing to take all things into consideration, before putting the name down.

David Carpenter

1971-2012

The name held no specific weight to her, just a random combination of a name she had once heard of as the name of an author and the name of a famous filmmaker, but she always made sure to ponder it over well all the same. The name that the victim had had before made no difference, but the name that she inscribed on their final resting place was essential. She held the power to alter the way that this person would be perceived for the rest of eternity, whether as David Carpenter or as Ryan Clearly. It was the power that she held the set her alight, the ability she had found in this practice of murder to morph and change what had been originally prescribed to a being by whatever force higher above gave out all the orders. She liked the more violent ones the best, knowing that those where were she most shined, where she most held control over a being.

Not too many fundamental facts existed around living beings, but one of the basic facts of existence was that things were not meant to be inside out. Blood was supposed to stay on the inside, and that was why it gave her such pleasure to reverse that. Gabriel could place as much sanctimony and prestige behind what they did as he wanted, and she sometimes enjoyed listening to his poems, even the lower quality ones, but for her it was the passion behind it, the love of altering the human form and purpose. And the fact that they buried them afterwards only made it better. *Who looks in a cemetery when looking for a missing person, especially in an already buried grave, complete with a tombstone?* She enjoyed filling up the original section of the cemetery, the part that few touched or visited anymore, as though it was just a little project for her and Gabriel to work together on, separate from all the rest of the masses and allowed to just shut themselves off alone. *Over twenty bodies have been added to this decrepit land since it was shut down and supposedly stopped being filled,* Daphne thought, *but who's going to come in and count?* For as long as that gravestone existed, which based on Eugene Franklinton's gravestone could be over a hundred years, the runner would be known as David Carpenter by whomever happened to pass by on their way to the newer sections of St. Dante's Cemetery, and for some reason that lit Daphne so alight.

Camille

Jane Doe's was mostly empty, a typical Tuesday night. A lady of at least sixty occasionally lilted over to the jukebox, depositing a handful of quarters, or staggered to the restroom. Then there was me and the bartender, who brought me a gin and tonic and placed a bourbon on the rocks in front of an empty chair. I tapped my feet to Nina Simone's "I Put a Spell on You" and waited for Smithy.

I braced myself as the door swung open even though I knew Amanda would never come here, not to a *goddamn dyke bar*. Smithy's massive smile penetrated the gloom of the bar, putting me at ease. She sat down in front of her drink and yelled a thank you to the bartender.

"Sorry, I'm late. How are you tonight?"

"Ok, I guess. Better."

"Good. Haven't heard from asshole then?"

"Not yet."

Smithy pulled a card from her pocket and shuffled it across her knuckles like a poker chip. "I think you need this."

"Counseling?"

"Talia," she said, passing me the card. "She works with people like you."

I read the card aloud, "Talia adores pain, worships agony, and drinks tears."

I polished off my drink as "Every Time We Say Goodbye" swooned from the jukebox. "What kind of people am I, Smithy?"

“A little broken. That’s all. She’ll put you back together.”

“Sure, she will,” I said, “with pain, agony, and tears – is that right?”

Smithy took a swig of her bourbon and said, “Well, that depends on...”

“On what, exactly?”

“You’ll see. Just call her. Appointments only.”

“I’m falling apart and you want me to make an appointment with a dominatrix?
A prostitute?”

Smithy grinned and tossed a piece of bourbon-soaked ice into her mouth. She wore layers of black leather and denim, the epitome of the butch uniform. She was tough alright, but her movements and posture were elegantly female. The contradiction that was Smithy – the polished and the raw, the hard-as-nails cupcake with easily plucked heart strings – was authentic, and she carried it without apology or regret.

“You know that I can’t afford that.”

“You can’t afford not to. What do you have to lose?”

“And you? You saw Talia, then? Is that it?”

“It’s complicated. Let’s just say we’ve helped each other. She’ll be good for you. Promise,” she said, crossing her index finger over her chest. “Tell her I sent you.”

* * *

Seventeen days after my parents were killed in an automobile accident, I broke down in the produce aisle of The Market Basket. While everyone else walked past me, Amanda stopped and helped me pick up the peaches I'd dropped. She walked me to my car, told me she knew all about grief, and gave me her number. She was an instant and constant friend while I handled my parents' estates, filed paperwork for insurance policies, and tried to make decisions that I wasn't prepared to make. Amanda advised and guided me through it all. She even took on some of the responsibilities herself—completing various paperwork and calling to verify accounts or cancellations of services. She'd show up with dinner and flowers at just the right moment. I wouldn't have made it through that ordeal without Amanda. There's no doubt in my mind about that.

Three months in, Amanda convinced me to sell my parents' house and move in with her. We doted on one another. I quit my job as a vet assistant, so we could take extravagant trips to San Francisco, Las Vegas, Cancun, and New York. "Only the best," Amanda had said. "You deserve that." The best extended to a new car and an updated wardrobe for Amanda.

The real trouble began when we'd blown through both my inheritance and the money from selling the house. Of course, it was mostly my fault. I had, after all, left my job and become dependent on Amanda for almost everything. It was a lot of pressure on her to provide for the both of us and care for me. I felt like I couldn't do anything right, and Amanda agreed. I wouldn't have survived without her. I knew that was true. I also knew it was just built up pressure and frustration when she started getting physical. She loved me, and I loved her. I

knew that I could help her through that difficult time, just like she'd helped me. But what had begun as yelling and pushing turned into a broken left arm. That's when Smithy stepped in.

* * *

A full month had passed when I fished Talia's card from the bottom of my purse. In that time, Smithy never pressed the subject, but her words played over and over in my head like a sad song: "You can't afford not to."

She was right, something had to change. She'd been right about ending it with Amanda. She was the one that convinced me that Amanda would eventually kill me, if I didn't leave. Amanda wasn't one to take any form of rejection well, but Smithy assured me that this time would be different. So far, she'd been right about that too.

Before dialing the number, I read the card again: *Talia adores pain, worships agony, and drinks tears.*

I was greeted by a saccharine-dipped voice that loosened my jaw and relaxed my shoulders. She would see me the following evening at six.

"158 Lincoln Avenue. You can't miss it," she said.

"And the cost," I asked.

"The first session is complimentary, to get acquainted. We can discuss the particulars then. No further obligations. For either of us. I don't accept every

potential client, you see.”

The building on Lincoln Avenue was a gothic behemoth among otherwise mundane 1970s architecture. The arches and sharp spires pointed to the heavens, while the stone façade blended into the misty fog that cloaked the city. On the rare occasion that I rode the downtown bus, I had noticed the building and assumed it was a church. Apparently, at some point, it had been converted into four floors of apartments. Talia occupied the entire top floor. The thought that *I can't afford this* gnawed through my temples, but Smithy had never steered me in the wrong direction.

The ultra-modern elevator glided to the fourth floor, opening to a small landing. In contrast, the apartment door seemed ancient. The dark wood was intricately carved with various figures, most of which I could not recognize. Gargoyles perhaps. I ran my fingers over the smooth face of a mischievous cherub and across ribbons of sprawling vines intertwined with serpents. I'd decided to take the stairs back to the lobby, when the door opened.

“Camille, just in time. Please, come in,” said Talia.

She wore layers of golden, diaphanous fabric that stopped just above her bare feet, conjuring images of classical goddesses. The light behind her shone through, revealing the subtle curves of her body. When she turned, the light that had previously highlighted her figure danced and glinted across the strands of her waist-length, cocoa hair.

The room, aglow in candle light and low-wattage lamps, was dominated by an

expansive, round window that overlooked the city. Though I don't recall what, I must have said something because Talia seemed to agree, "Indeed. It's as if one can see all of creation from that window. This entire building is a delicious display of marvelous excess."

"This was a church, right?"

"It's always been a place of worship of one kind or another, I suppose," she replied. "Please, have a seat."

The room was large enough to accommodate the magnificent window but was otherwise sparsely decorated. There was an oversized mirror trimmed in patinaed goldleaf, an imposing oak desk, and a massive area rug anchored by opposing wingback chairs, each flanked by a small table.

I fidgeted with the card in my hand and glanced around the room to avoid staring at Talia's clearly visible breasts. I couldn't quite place her age, maybe early fifties, but her body—her body belonged to a twenty year old.

"So, Camille, what brought you to me," she asked.

I held out the card and said, "Smithy. She said I needed you. I mean, that you'd be good for me. I don't know really. Smithy gave this to me."

Nostalgia cavorted across Talia's face, landing at the corners of her mouth. "Yes, of course, Smithy. She must really care for you if she sent you to me."

I nodded, glanced at Talia's nipples, and quickly looked down. I studied the

patterns of the rug. It looked like something M. C. Escher designed. Red and blue geometric configurations connected and morphed into other indiscernible shapes that rebelled against conventional perspective.

“Did she tell you the nature of our relationship?”

“She just said it was complicated.”

Talia threw her head back and laughed. “Well, that’s the damn truth.”

I shifted in my seat, and we sat in silence for far longer than was comfortable. I felt Talia’s feline eyes moving over me and looked up to meet her gaze.

“Let’s get started,” she said. “Stand up and give me your hands.”

She examined the backs of my hands and then turned them over. She ran a finger along the lines of my right palm, then my left. “Hmmm, let’s see,” she said as she gently pressed her thumbs into the veiny part of my wrists. She placed an index finger beneath each of my ears, tracing down my neck to my clavicle, and back up to my temples.

The silky fabric of her gown brushed against my arms as her breath caressed by skin. I swallowed hard and let out a sigh. Our eyes met and my face flushed against her cool hands.

“What is it that you do,” I asked.

“Everyone is different. Different desires. Different needs. Different services. For example,” she said, spinning me around and escorting me to the full length

mirror. "Look at yourself. Really look. What do you need?"

"Well, I don't really..."

"No, no. Don't speak. Just look and think. Ask yourself, who is Camille? What does she really need?"

I looked at Talia's reflection as she reassured me with a nod and then moved out of view. I'd dressed in one of my nicer outfits, an effort to look desirable for the night's events, but it fell flat in the mirror. My slacks pooled into a navy mass atop my scuffed, hand-me-down shoes. The pin-striped blouse tented at my sides and landed midthigh. I stared into my own eyes wondering what the hell I was doing, when I saw it.

There was a long scratch on my neck that ran beneath my shirt. I pulled my collar forward, following the trail to my bra. Eggplant and ochre tinted bruises covered my chest. I had no memory of any of this; it had been months since Amanda last touched me, and it had never been this bad. The broken, red skin on my knuckles stung and ached as I unbuttoned my blouse, dropping it to the floor. Scratches, bruises, and bite marks covered me. A seeping puncture wound, below my ribs, burned and gushed blood when I prodded the puckered skin around it. A jagged, pulsing slash stretched from my breasts to my waistband. I unbuckled my pants, letting them slide down my throbbing legs. Sores oozed thick yellow liquid and my knees were bloodied and raw. I looked at the stringy, damp hair that clung to my forehead and cheeks, framing the injuries that had spread to my neck and face. My left eye was a swollen, red orb and blood

trickled from my nose and lips. My head swam, as my eyes darted from one part of my body to another, and then, I started falling.

Talia's hand on my shoulder centered me back in time and place. Once again fully clothed and standing before a seemingly ordinary mirror, I began to cry and covered my face. My knees buckled and the muscles in my legs faltered. Talia helped me to the chair and gave me a glass of water.

"Remember," she said, "this is how you came to me. It's not how you will leave."

I nodded, wiping away tears from my now uninjured face. My hands were blemish free and my side no longer felt like I'd been impaled. I was dizzy with competing thoughts, consumed by confusion.

"We'll meet next week. Is this time and day good for you?"

"I guess so," I said.

"I sense uncertainty."

"I don't even know what's happening. What's this is all about?"

"It's about you, of course, and I can help" she replied.

"And the cost?"

"I've known Victoria—Smithy to you—for a very long time, and for reasons which you probably wouldn't understand, I will be eternally grateful to her. Consider our time together as paid in full."

“So, you’re not a...I mean, this is like therapy then? It’s not about sex?”

“Do you really think she sent you to me for sex? Is that really what you need?”

I bit my lip and shook my head.

“Good. The session will last about two hours. Bring a clean suit of clothes. You’ll shower when you get here and bathe before you leave. I’ll provide everything else. Understood?”

I agreed and left, but understood very little.

Despite my bewilderment, I felt rejuvenated and full of energy. Perhaps it was the soothing, hypnotic nature of Talia’s voice. Maybe it was because the fog had cleared. Either way, I nearly floated from the building to my car.

The sight of Amanda leaning against a light post instantly deflated me. I fumbled for the keys in my purse, spilling the contents at my feet. I gathered the important things, wallet, phone, keys, as quickly as possible. Receipts and papers littered the street. “Stay back,” I said.

Amanda’s eyes cut through me like a blade. “I’m not here for you, dumb bitch,” Amanda shouted as she came toward me. “If I wanted you, I’d have you.”

She snatched Talia’s card from the ground as I unlocked the car.

“I saw you up there, you know, in that big ass window,” she said as she grabbed the car door. “What are you the maid? Nah, I see you have on your fancy clothes.”

Her raucous laughter bludgeoned the air around me as I tried closing the door.

“Trust me, honey, she’s too much woman for you,” she said.

I managed to wrestle the door away from her and locked it. Amanda banged on the window with her fists, spitting and shouting the whole time. I sped away, nearly running her over. Maybe I should have. Above the racing engine and my pounding heart, I could hear her screaming.

“You’re going to pay for that, bitch. Mark my words.”

I skid to a stop at the traffic light and watched Amanda in the rear view mirror as she walked toward Talia’s building. I phoned Smithy, then Talia. No answer. I left messages and thought about calling the police. But what would I say? Would I tell them that my ex was going to see a prostitute? A therapist? They would laugh me off the line.

* * *

Amanda knocked on Talia’s door as Camille was leaving her messages of warning.

“Ah, the payment,” Talia said opening the door.

“Huh?”

“Nothing, dear. Please do come in.”

“That’s one fucking weird door you got there,” Amanda said. “But you, now you are far more beautiful than the pictures you sent.”

"How kind you are," Talia said, ushering Amanda inside. "Would you like to take a seat?"

"You swiped right and slid right into my DMs. You know I'm not here to converse."

"Indeed," said Talia, "right this way." She led Amanda to the mirror and stood her before it. "Indulge me this one thing before we get started." Talia removed her robe and then stood behind Amanda.

"Don't be shy, babe," said Amanda. "Let me see that body." She turned and stroked Talia's arms and tried to kiss her.

"First things first," Talia said, spinning Amanda around to face the mirror. "You undress while I watch you in the mirror. I want you to focus on you."

"Sure thing, hotness. I like this kinky shit."

Amanda slipped off her loafers, then pulled her tennis shirt over her head as Talia stepped out of view. Amanda slowly removed her bra and stared at her muscular arms and chiseled abs. She unsnapped her khaki pants, kicking them to the floor. "Now, this is the part all you whores love," she said sliding off her fitted jockey boxers.

"Just focus on that beautiful body, and think about everything we are going to do."

Amanda breathed hard and smiled at herself as she ran her hands down her

body. She clinched her fists and bared her teeth, spitting at the mirror.

“Yes, yes,” said Talia.

“Come and get me, bitch,” Amanda said.

“As you wish,” said Talia, moving into view. The creature revealed in the mirror shocked Amanda into petrified silence. Talia, at least a foot taller than before, was covered in gray, leathery scales. Her batlike wings spanned across the room and pulsed as she breathed. Before Amanda could react, Talia grabbed her at the waist, ripping her skin, and bit into her neck. Amanda’s blood splattered across the mirror.

* * *

Smithy returned my call later that night and assured me there was absolutely nothing to worry about. “Trust me,” she said, “Talia can more than take care of herself. And I have it on good authority that Amanda won’t ever bother Talia or you ever again.”

I begged Smithy to level with me, to tell me what she’d done to Amanda.

“Absolutely, nothing. Scout’s honor,” she said.

I had my doubts and the old fears lingered, but it had been a week, and Amanda hadn’t shown up to take revenge for the car incident.

Once again, I stood before Talia’s door. Either my eyes or my memory had forsaken me. The cherub was gone, replaced by a snarling wolfhound entangled

in chains and surrounded by a fire-wielding mob of hooded figures. For the second time, Talia opened the door as my resilience floundered.

“The wash closet,” Talia said, gesturing toward a door. “I’ve laid out towels and a robe. You’ll find everything else you need in the shower or on the vanity.”

To call that room a closet was a grave misuse of the word. The golden fixtures and marble-wrapped walls glimmered beneath two crystal-clad chandeliers. The clawfoot tub could have accommodated three people, as could the shower. An assortment of lotions, fragrances, and soaps, housed in glass canisters and flacons, lined the vanity.

I hid my ragged duffle bag out of sight, not wanting it to sully the pristine vision before me, and undressed. Water from six shower heads streamed over me, washing away fears and hesitations. The intoxicating scent of lavender shampoo and honeysuckle soap swept me away to summer fields, and by the time I put on the cotton robe, I was more relaxed than I’d ever been.

Talia greeted me wearing a black kaftan embellished with sparkling silver thread. She took my hand and spoke calmly while leading me down the hallway.

“I’ve spoken with Victoria. We both want to assure you of your safety. That woman, that monster, won’t ever bother you again. Victoria told me about all of it, the parasite, your parents, everything. Not that she had to. It was all in the mirror.”

“Oh,” I said. Talia’s voice was a balm, and I believed every word, felt it in my

soul. I trusted her completely.

She squeezed my hand and opened a door. “You don’t have to talk about any of it, not here, not with me.”

Except for several lit candles around the perimeter and what looked like an overstuffed mattress in the center of the floor, the room was dark and empty. Light and shadow mingled and flickered across the walls and ceilings. Talia untied my robe and slipped it off my shoulders, sending shivers down my spine.

“Please. Lie down,” she said, gesturing toward the mattress.

Talia knelt beside me, positioning herself as if in prayer; then held her hands above me, methodically moving them back and forth from my head to my feet. My body tingled with the movement and anticipation of her touch. Instead, she briefly returned to the prayer position, then stood and removed her kaftan in one fluid motion. Her taut, smooth skin was cool as she straddled me and pinned my arms on either side of my head. My mind was a blur with Talia atop me.

“This will feel...intense,” she said, leaning close to my face. As she inhaled through her mouth, I was pulled toward her like air through a straw.

Involuntarily, my neck arched and my mouth opened. My head ached and my side throbbed as the bruises and wounds that I’d seen in the mirror rose to the surface of my body once again.

I writhed in pain and convulsed beneath Talia. I began to cough, choking on something lodged in my throat. She leaned back and breathed in with tornadic

force, extinguishing some of the candles and extracting the thing choking me. A black, spherical mass, dripping with what appeared to be tar, flew from my mouth and floated in the space between us. Talia's amber eyes glowed in the darkness, as gray, leathery wings sprouted from her back and wrapped around her. Sharp talons inched toward the sphere.

Talia was sponging sweat from my forehead when I awoke. I recoiled and tried to scream, but no sound came.

"Try to relax," she said. "Just breath." She stood and retrieved my robe. "You should feel much better very soon."

"I think I hallucinated and passed out."

"It's a messy business, reaping suffering. Sometimes the mind doesn't handle it very well." Talia helped me stand and put on my robe. "Let's get you cleaned up."

When we reached the mirror, Talia said, "How about another look before you bathe."

"I don't think I can, not again."

"Sure, you can. Don't you feel stronger?"

I did feel stronger—clear mind, steady body. I took a deep breath and stared straight into the mirror for several minutes before untying my robe. All of the bruises on my chest and abdomen had disappeared. The piercing wound on

my side had scabbed over. The broken skin on my knees and knuckles was once again smooth. The blood and pus had dried up. I tied my robe and turned toward Talia.

“What are you?”

“There are a lot of names. Some better than others.”

“I don’t understand. What did you do to me?”

“It’s the dark energy. The bad stuff. I take it away, feed on it.”

“And Amanda? Wasn’t she here too?”

Talia smiled gently. “Let’s get you into the bath.”

Ano(rexia)

Nina faced the mirror and sighed deeply. Although she had only eaten a teaspoon of peanut butter, I was still able to point out all the imperfections on her body. While many would look at Nina and notice her well-defined ribs and once tight-fit H&M clothes that now were baggy; all I let Nina notice about her reflection was the cellulite on her legs, a tummy that protruded beyond her chest, jiggley arms, and a face that was not pretty enough to compensate for her fat body. She would look in the mirror, then see models on television looking fierce with clothes that could fit her stuffed animals. Her worth was defined by her body, and she always felt insufficient, envying those model's thinness and glamor. Once I arrived, I was in complete control, making Nina feel special while I was slowly degrading her body. Nonetheless, I was just as proud of her commitment to reduce her figure as she was. Being in college, Nina had a full day of classes, track practice, and would get back home with massive amounts of homework. Certainly, she had a lot of redeeming qualities, getting straight A's in her classes while being a student athlete, but she still didn't know who she was. That's when I got in to help her.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. Let me start at the beginning. This story isn't about some stupid college girl, it's about me. My name is Ano(rexia), and I'm Nina's eating disorder. My dad is Self-harm, my mom Trauma, and with their love and affection came me and my siblings, (buli)Mia, the twins Binge and Purge (B and P), Orthorexia(Xia)... My parents are still having children—we have a big family. When we were growing up, we were fed by the bodies that my

cousins would bring to us. Out of all the cousins in our family, Addiction(Addi) and their children were the strongest. Alcoholism (Oli) was the best hunter, bringing people with huge bellies and despondent souls. Though we could still taste the stinging bitterness of the alcohol, the sweet taste of their misery would compensate for it, filling us with hope for the future: to catch and feast on the bodies we would bring to the table.

We live in a different dimension; it's hard to describe to humans who have never experienced misery. Everything is exactly like your pitiful world, but darker. Think of how religions describe hell or the "underworld", but littered with remains of bodies. They were the bragging rights of my family. You see, to bring bodies home from earth, we can't kill them; we need to convince our hosts to kill themselves. The more bodies you get, the stronger you become. After eating their flesh and sucking away the remains of their soul, we stuff their bodies up and put them on the wall, just like you humans do with your hunted game.

Nina lived in a world filled with anguish. She had had two boyfriends that were extremely abusive, calling her names, manipulating her, controlling everything she did, and ate. Exactly the kind of humans that I respect and love. This was what she was attracted to because it was all she knew. Nina felt unsafe at home, where her father would scream at her for a simple, "how are you doing today, daddy?" She looked up to females in her family for inspiration but they were too obsessed with their aesthetics, and she noticed how they would repeat

the criticisms that their husbands would say to them, so naturally, I came in and helped her imitate this process... Nina had some fantastic toxic friends that thankfully couldn't understand her life, or the torment that she would go through. In middle school, when she was being beautifully bullied for her weight, she found out her best friend at the time spread a rumor about her promiscuity (Ha! Like someone would ever see her as attractive). From that moment forward she chose to isolate herself, concentrating solely on her fitness, her grades, and most importantly to her, and to me, her weight. While she was growing into her body, she felt wildly uncomfortable with how big everything was becoming. She used to pride herself into fitting into pajama pants that she wore when she was ten; Now those same pants only fit over one of her thick thighs.

My family was quite intimate with Nina's family. It was only natural that Nina would eventually be part of our work of art. Mia would sit patiently while Nina's mom was in rehab, waiting to return with a vengeance. Oli was a slow burner on her dad; his strategy was to convince Nina's dad that he "had it under control", fatten him up, isolate him, then finish the job. I admired my siblings and cousins dedication to their work, and couldn't wait to be a part of it too.

It was my first-year hunting alone when I heard Nina. My sister Mia had tried to hunt her a couple of years ago, but Nina's fear of someone discovering her eating disorder in high school prevented Mia from prevailing. It was so cute how she

thought she could escape these sentiments just because she started college. I was exhilarated to prove that I was the best hunter in my family. In the middle of the night a perfect opportunity to manifest myself into her body presented itself on a silver platter. It all happened so quickly that none of her friends or family could see me coming, much less Nina. I heard her screaming and crying, begging to be heard by someone, by anyone. I was so excited to be with her. I went slowly, forcing my dark shadow into her mouth. I opened her mouth as far down as it would go, then wiggled my body into her. I settled down first into her brain. After all, in order to feast on humans, I need to be able to control their heart; but the heart is not easily darkened – it takes a lot of time and patience.

I needed to start in the brain, which can be easily swayed, especially for people that feel alone with their problems. I was happy to see that most of my work had already been done for me. Nina was already repeating phrases she heard from her ex-boyfriends. *You'll never amount to anything. Everyone at your mom's wedding told me that you looked fat. If you were skinnier, maybe your family would love you.* It was so easy for me. I didn't even need to find ammunition; it was already there, just waiting to be repeated. I became her confidant, the only friend she could trust; and the secret she used to go from a size 6 to a size 2 in less than two months. Her acquaintances and family members would compliment Nina on her slim figure, darkening her brain and increasing the power I had on her. I was a special part of her life. But don't get me wrong, she was also very special to me: she was such an obedient host; I could already tell, before long I would be in

complete control of her heart.

At first, I started slowly, convincing her she just wasn't hungry. She avoided eating her first meal, and lunch that day. Nina wouldn't be able to keep our love a secret if she didn't eat dinner, so she would always pick at her food at night time. However, lying to her wasn't sustainable when she had begun skipping lunch daily. Even though I was in complete control of her mind, I couldn't control the physiological aspects of her stomach rumbling, her head getting dizzy, and how noticeably hangry she was becoming. But Nina became obsessed with my love, confusing my voice for hers, and would do anything to keep me in her life. She felt like a superhuman, doing everything her peers were doing, without the help of food. I couldn't wait to feast on her body and hang her on my wall, showing my cousins that I could be just as powerful as they were.

One day, I decided to give her the ultimate challenge of not eating any food for two days. Nina was obediently listening to my brutal demands when she started feeling dizzy. She often liked working through the dizziness as it would make her feel unstoppable. But this time, I felt a difference. Nina fell to the ground. This was finally my chance to claw my way to her heart; to take complete control of her and make it easy for me to take her back to my dimension, where she would finally be welcomed with open arms. If only I had hands to use. I used my mouth to move inch by inch, making my way to her heart. During this time, I had the rare opportunity to admire the work I had done on her thus far. Her

eyes could no longer produce tears, but were outlined with a gray hue, making her see everything in her life as gloomy. Her emaciated mouth and cheeks were perpetually imitating a smile meant to convince the people in her life that she was okay. A pebble the size of a bagel was stuck in her throat and her chest felt constrained, like she couldn't handle any more distress. Finally, her heart. Giddily, I dove towards it, but I couldn't quite reach it yet. Some kind of gravitational force was moving me back to the brain. *Even now, I guess Nina isn't ready*, I thought.

Later that night, Nina woke up in a hospital bed with a feeding tube down her throat. As it turns out, she had fainted in the middle of track practice. I was so proud of her, she was finally showing her true colors of being the inadequate, weak, woman I always knew she could be. I noticed that Nina's parents were right by her side, making our clandestine, illicit love affair public. While doctors recommended an immediate transportation to rehab, her mom's unsuccessful experiences with rehab colored their response, and they decided to take her back home where she could "recover in peace". It wouldn't be long before I would finally feast on her. What they didn't realize at the time was that being at home was the place where I felt most comfortable and Nina felt most isolated. Healthy humans scare me. I don't understand how they can see, or experience pain, and still be "happy". Happiness, love, and affection can easily kill me, so naturally, I stay away from those emotions, and make sure Nina stays away too. Her toxic household was the perfect place for her to be.

It had only been a couple of days when I started to feel the border around her heart weakening. She was surrounded by her family, and so was I. My sister Mia was working on her mom, Oli saluted me in her dad, and here I was, showing off how strong I was becoming. One day, while her mom wasn't looking, I persuaded Nina to snag a short, sharp knife from the kitchen. Her parents didn't cook, so they wouldn't even notice. When she came back to her room she quickly took off her watch and I let her feel a moment of release while she glided the sharp knife across her wrist. The pain she felt finally made sense; there was an open wound to prove the agony she endured with my presence.

For the next couple of days, I convinced her to start cutting herself more frequently, in different places. In the shower, she would take her beloved knife and cut in places I knew her family wouldn't see. First her wrists (covered by her watch), then her upper thighs and stomach. She loved cutting her stomach the most because this was the most disgusting place on her body. Every little cut felt like one pound being shredded.

She finally had a distorted sense of happiness. That's when I knew she was ready. One night, in the shower, she felt the sharpness hit her a bit deeper than she had ever gone before. She basked in the pleasure she felt. *It's going to feel even better if you go a little bit deeper*, I whispered to her. She considered it a moment, and her desperation led the way. *Deeper*, I said. Blood was gushing down her body, and she felt so good feeling the sweet relief. *DEEPER!!!!*, I was now

shouting. She took the knife and started stabbing herself, in and out, to the point of no return.

At long last, I had her heart. Using my mouth, I dragged her soul back home. Nina screaming throughout the process invigorated me. She really was a cute girl. There was so little of her body to feast on, but the abundance of anguish in her soul was enough to fill up my entire family. They clinked their glasses and cheered for me. I stuffed Nina's body and put it in the hall next to my siblings' trophies.

I was just about done when I heard someone screaming and crying, begging to be heard by someone, by anyone.

Grace, Doctor

I ask the kid how many birds she can spot outside, and while she's distracted I unscrew a vial of my secret stuff and sneak a few drops into her glass. I slide the vial into my pocket and with a tongue depressor stir my concoction until the liquid's a translucent pink. I spin back around, hand the kid a full liter, and tell her to drink up.

Her pupils dilate. Excitement. Fear. As far as the kid's concerned, that pink liter is validation, proof she was right to visit my office. In that sense, it doesn't matter what she drinks — the girl feels seen, and that's enough.

"Six birds," she says.

"There's more. There's always more," I say, not bothering to check the trees.

"You can keep counting while you finish your drink, but you may want to hold your nose — the medicine can taste a bit bitter." I sneak a wink at the girl's counselor, a young, brown-haired thing who probably graduated from camp the year before. On my way out, I squeeze the counselor's shoulder and tell her the kid will be fine.

I discard my gloves then call out to the front office. "Hey, Robin, did you bag and freeze that tick?"

"Mmm hmm," she says.

I untuck my shirt, cuff my sleeves so they rest just below my elbows. Then I check the mirror before joining Robin up front. "The kid want it as a souvenir?"

"Yeah. He named it Bruce."

"Bruce? Wasn't that his name?"

Robin checks the chart. "I think Bruce was the kid before him. Same counselor. Maybe they were friends."

"Hell of a power move," I say, checking my beltloop for my walkie talkie. "I'm going on break. Something comes up, give me a buzz."

As I step outside, a scrub jay flies onto one of the redwood trees opposite a group of campers running around the Big Green Field, some playing kickball, others hurdling over the GaGa Pit the way we told them not to the first day of camp. I want to go down and scare some sense into the kids. But I've got to get back to my yurt and call Marian, so the kids will have to wait.

I hate yurts. Yurts are a cross between a tent and a tiny-house without the benefits of either. They don't block out the sun or the noise and there's no running water and if you need to pack up and leave, you're out of luck.

Sometimes the wind whistles through the air holes and the canvas flaps loud as a

bicycle with a trading card in the spokes.

But this rented yurt is all I've got. For now. Back when camp began, I expected to put in my two-weeks, move back into my old place in Los Gatos, and continue on with my life, but here we are, week six, and I'm still living in a yurt like some hippie.

Most of my stuff's with my fiancée in Los Gatos. Marian now works the library at the middle school where we first met. We dated all through high school then attended Chico State together even though she was accepted into better schools out East, and to the surprise of everyone – especially our parents – the whole high-school-sweethearts-attending-the-same-college thing totally worked out. That was eight years ago. We've been engaged five years now, saving for the fairy-tale wedding she's always dreamed of, and that's still the plan as far as I know. If only she'd answer the phone.

As I turn toward my yurt, a wooden sign lies perched in the dirt path. The sign is new. Black letters burn into the wood like from a cattle iron:

The Grace Doctor is IN.

A fresh, red-berried wreath surrounds the aged wood. Incandescent bulbs emerge from the green. A black-burnt arrow points directly from the sign toward the boxcar – an old freight-train repurposed into a runoff room for the kids.

A boy flips the kickstand and props open the boxcar's door. He hugs a woman in black robes then drifts down the stairs, looking up at the pines.

The door stays open. I walk inside.

In the far corner of the dimly-lit room, the woman in robes sits behind a table-turned-desk. She smiles. The place smells of smoke and incense. "You're not a middle-schooler," she says.

"Uh, sorry," I say, backing away. "I was just... Sorry, again..."

"Nonsense," she says, rising from her desk. "Come on in. We'll get you a proper seat." Her sleeves glide behind her as she carries away the kid-sized chair and brings a second chair like hers. She steps back, examines the set-up, then angles my chair twenty-degrees left.

The woman in robes shuts the door behind me and starts lighting tea candles, the type older campers use for Taizé worship. She lights one candle over each floor-cushion, then she lights a few more on her desk, scooting the flames equidistant between a hand-potted mug and a desk plant. The whole thing screams *Instagram*, and I wonder if she's for real. I half-expect her to pull out tarot cards or ask to read my lifeline. "My name is Agnes. Agnes Grace Chaff. And I'm going to let you in on a little secret." She unclicks the lighter but blows the tip anyway.

"I'm not a real doctor," she says.

I laugh because I don't know what else to do. This lady is obviously a pastor, but she reads like some sort of mage.

"Yeah, the kids respond the same way," Agnes says. "I'm thinking of cutting that line—probably should for the adults at least, don't you think?"

"Well, I'm not a real doctor, either," I say.

"No?" she says, staring at my neck.

I adjust my collar, tug at my stethoscope until the diaphragm no longer presses against my chest. "Camp nurse."

"What's that like?" she asks.

"It's fine."

"No, really," she says, leaning closer, chin resting over both hands. "What's it like?"

I shrug. "Mostly homesick kids faking stomachaches or dehydrated campers complaining about headaches. Of course no kid wants to admit they're

dehydrated, so I tell them to lay still, and I sneak a few drops of food coloring into a big glass of tap water and tell them to drink. Sometimes I tell them it'll taste bitter or sweet or chalky, and the kids make faces, especially the young ones, and they act like it's some chore to drink, like it's the TriLyte they give you before a colonoscopy or something like that. But it works."

I check my watch again. I'm not worried about my own break—thirteen-hour camp shifts mean I've got two hours to myself so long as nobody rushes into my office with a concussion or a broken bone, but Marian's lunch ends at one, so if I'm going to call, I need to get out of here soon.

"So, how's this all work, anyway?" I ask.

"With the kids, I turn off the lights. I suppose, that's my version of the food coloring—doesn't do anything, but the kids respond well. Then they bear their souls, and I offer grace."

"That sounds super Catholic," I say.

Agnes laughs. "I've thought about that, but you're the first to call me on it. Also, the first adult to poke your head in here..." She leans in. "No, the difference is the Catholics offer penance—restitution. If you sin, it's on you to make things right with God. With us, it's more like you sin, and God's already made things right. So in that sense, I'm not doing anything. Just naming the grace that's

already there.”

“If I follow correctly...” I say, doing the religion-math in my head, “the outcome’s the same either way. I don’t need to tell you anything.”

“That’s correct,” Agnes nods. “But you’ll feel better if you do.”

“I’m feeling just fine,” I say. But I don’t leave. I look out the window, contemplate unloading all the shit that brought me from a nice apartment a few blocks from the beach to a damn yurt at a kids’ camp.

“You don’t just walk in here without reason,” Agnes says. “So what’s yours?” I don’t respond. Just sit there, stare outside, and note the impossibly still tall branches of the pines. A gawky crow hops onto one of the limbs then bounces to the next. My neck twitches. I shut my eyes. Remember to breathe.

I’m home again. In my kitchen. Marian screams but I can’t hear. I scream too, but nothing comes out. It’s like we’re on mute. The kitchen window presses against the wall between us, and a hummingbird darts across the panels. Its wings roar like jet engines. The bird muffles everything. Everything. My ears. They ring. So much pressure they’re going to explode.

I snap shut the blinds and the bird disappears. The noise too. Just me and Marian. She’s red-faced, bleeding from both eyes. Her voice breaks free. *You tell*

her! Tell her what you did!

My eyes spring open. Agnes is waiting. Patient.

“I’m not some kid, Agnes. The things I’ve done... I don’t know if grace even begins to cover it.”

“Are you religious?” she asks.

“I work here.”

“That’s not the same.” She exhales, leans against the desk, rests a hand on my shoulder. “What’s your name?”

“Darren.”

“Darren,” she says, squeezing my forearm. “I used to hate my name. Agnes. It’s an old woman’s name – my grandma’s name, actually – the type of name best hidden in the middle, not up front, you know? Kids made fun of me, *ancient Agnes. Hagnes*. So back in seminary, I went by the name Grace – corrected my profs during attendance, developed a signature, even trained my husband to call me by the new name.

“Then as I was getting ready to graduate, when my, uh, when my marriage fell

apart, the court papers wouldn't accept Grace. I know it sounds trite, but it really hurt; like when a man ghosts you and straight up lies to your face, and then when he lies to the lawyers and the judge and he cuts you out of his life entirely, and when you realize you and this man shared a life together and a queen-sized bed and nine long years, but it turns out you didn't know him at all, and when you wonder what else you didn't know, and when you discover the truth – that you don't know anything – when all this happens and then some stranger in a suit tells you your own name – which you thought was your name, which you *decided* was your name – isn't even your name, it's enough to break you. The documents, the signatures, everything had to be Agnes. It really messed with me, you know? Like I'd built this whole identity on a lie. Grace. Agnes.

"It took me a year of spiritual direction to find grace in the name Agnes. And then another year to find grace in divorce... I guess what I'm trying to say is you can find grace in anything."

"You don't tell that to the kids," I say.

"I don't tell that to the kids," she says. "I've been a chaplain three years, almost four. Trust me when I say there's nothing I haven't seen. Or heard. No sin's too big for God. Just give it a try."

"Shit," I mutter under my breath, but it must have been louder than I thought because a smirk curls across Agnes' lips. "Sorry, Chaplain."

"Sometimes, *shit's* appropriate," she says. "Lights?"

"Go ahead," I say.

The room shifts to mostly shadows. It's oddly soothing, the way the candles dance, sway, burn. I'm burning too, burning to share, to give my problems over to Agnes and hear her tell me it's okay. To set down the stethoscope and let someone care for me for a change.

I don't know where to begin, or how. I stare into the open flame waiting for my body to take over, pure adrenaline. Adrenaline like caffeine. Adrenaline like grace.

"It's Marian. My fiancée, ex-fiancée, or, I don't know... my Marian," I reach into my pocket for the limo-selfie from our senior prom, but my wallet's back in the yurt. "She was so tiny when I first met her, even more than now. I used to buy her shoes over at the kids' section at Macy's back before we had any money, just to give you an idea how small she was. Petite. She was so innocent – good family, good home – spotless in more ways than one, if you know what I mean. "And now she's got this restraining order, and," I want to look at Agnes but can't. The candles between us quiver to the arrhythmic beat of my breath, flames pulling away, stretching for oxygen. "It's like I took this innocent little angel and tore off her wings. Last March, we were in the kitchen, and I hit her – it was only twice, but the second one hurt. She says she lost a tooth, but I don't know.

“Now she treats me like I ruined her life or something, but—I love her, I really do—and I’ve told her that over and over and over and over again. I’ve told her I love her so many fucking times, but she won’t listen. So I had to show her, you know? Show her how much I love her. What I would do for her.”

The flames are calm so long as I don’t talk or move. I cup my hands together like I’m holding a bowl of soup, only instead of soup, it’s Marian. I’m cradling her in my palms. Tiny Marian. My hummingbird.

“It’s like God gave me this baby bird, and I just... I took that bird and...” My hand trembles with the flames. I flex so hard my knuckles hurt. My hands knot together, suffocating the bird inside. Tendons grabbing bones, bones scraping against bones, bones cracking, knuckles cracking. Chirp-chirp-chirping, cracking—then nothing. Nothing at all. I cry.

I release my fists and wonder if Agnes can see the mangled bird. “All those delicate bones. Wings. Feathers. Those little feet... Sometimes at night, I can still hear them crunching together. Her bones against mine...I’ve called her, so many times, I call, but she won’t answer, I call and call, but nobody answers...”

I rub my arm over my eyes. “Will you tell me it’s okay, chaplain? Tell me it’s okay to call? I just want you to tell me that I’m—”

“Just stop,” Agnes says. The table-flames blow toward me now, Agnes’ breath

overcoming mine. Rerouting fire. "I need you to leave my office."

I look up. "But that's not how this works. You're supposed to offer —"

"I need you to leave my office," she repeats, louder.

The tears are flowing now. I want her to see my face, to feel my pain. In the dark, I can't tell if she cares. I can't even tell if she sees. "You're supposed to offer grace."

Agnes knocks over a candle on her way to the lights. "I NEED YOU TO LEAVE MY OFFICE!"

She flings open the door and waits by the exit. The sunlight burns. I can feel Agnes' judgment, anger, shame. I check for my sunglasses, but they're in the yurt too. So I blot my eyes with my sleeve then smooth out the wrinkles in my shirt. I exit the boxcar and reenter camp, the bright sun cutting through the pines and making me squint. As I merge back onto the main path, a young camper flags me down. She hugs a construction-papered drawing flat against her chest like she's embarrassed of it.

"Excuse me," she says, barely a whisper.

I look the other way so she can't tell I've been crying. "Nurse's station's over

there.”

She gestures softly to the Etsy sign with the branded wood and the lightbulbs.

“You were in there, right? The Grace Doctor?”

I nod, yeah.

“Was the woman nice?” the little girl asks.

I don’t know how to answer. I stop. Think. “She tries to be.”

“Do you think she’ll take care of me? I’m kinda scared.”

“Oh, honey,” I say, squatting down so we’re on the same level. I want to hold her, but I don’t. “I’m sure she will.”

I get back to my yurt just in time to call Marian, but the phone rings twice and sends me to voicemail. I don’t leave one. I’ve got time for a nap, so I curl into my dusty cot and pull the covers over my head to blot out the sun, but the damn birds won’t stop chirping and I can’t sleep.

At night, it’s the same thing. I walk the dirt path in total darkness then enter my canvas box. I settle into my cot. The rusted springs squeak. I shut my eyes but the insects buzz overhead and the owls and bats and birds hoot and screech and

caw. I turn onto my side and bury my head in the pillows like a vice, but the birds are too loud and it doesn't work. Nothing works.

So I pray.

God, Why won't the birds stop singing?

The Legend of Sonny Williams

1

You'd have to be as old as I am to remember when a very menacing looking boxer named Sonny Liston knocked out Floyd Patterson in the first round to snatch away his heavyweight crown. He followed up with another first-round knockout of Patterson in a rematch.

His next fight was with a young challenger whose ego appeared to tower far above his own formidable boxing skills. Sonny Liston was a heavy favorite not only to beat Cassius Clay, but to completely demolish him as he had done Patterson.

As you may know, Clay outboxed Liston, knocking him out in the eighth round. He would soon change his name to Mohammed Ali, and to reign as the heavyweight champion for much of his career.

But this isn't a story about boxing. Sonny Williams was not a boxer: He was a lover. As so many of us back in the sixties and early seventies used to chant, "Make love - not war!"

But before he gained some measure of fame, if you tried to envisage what Sonny Williams looked like, you might have pictured a tall muscular black man. In a way, it was that image that indirectly gave him his start in a long and happy film career.

Can you remember the 1969 movie, *Putney Swope*? From time to time, Sonny Williams is mentioned, but he doesn't actually appear in the flesh until the very

end of the movie.

He turned out to be not at all what you might have expected. A very pale five-foot-four balding white man with a longish beard, thick glasses, and a very shy manner, he appeared completely naked, except for a raincoat. Whatever else you might have said, he was no Sonny Liston.

Without uttering a word, he opened his raincoat, fully exposing himself. Within weeks, his acting talents would be in great demand.

2

No one could have guessed that this cameo would mark the beginning of a long career in cinema for Sonny Williams. He would become an instant porno star.

Conventional porn movies back in the 1970s were essentially ten- or fifteen-minute sexual encounters, either between a heterosexual couple, or two women. There were, of course, porno movies for gay men, which were shown in different theaters.

Some porno filmmaker must have seen Sonny in *Putney Swope*, perhaps glancing at his massive *schlong* (Yiddish for very large penis). And so, a porn star was born.

Sonny had not recently cultivated the Talmudic scholar look. Brought up in an orthodox family in Brooklyn's Borough Park, he faithfully attended Yeshiva all the way through high school. His name back then was Perry Gewirtz

But after moving out of his parents' house and ending up on Manhattan's Lower Eastside, he quickly drifted away from the faith. He began eating *traif* (non-kosher food) and was soon dating *shiksas* (gentile women).

At first, he returned to Borough Park on weekends to spend the sabbath with his family. But since his social life centered on weekends, those visits became less and less frequent. His parents and his brothers and sisters knew better than to try to talk him out of his disappointing lifestyle, hoping that he would soon come to his senses.

3

Immediately after he had been "discovered," Sonny was put to work. He could not believe that he was actually being paid for doing what he gladly would have done for nothing. But don't get the wrong idea. You won't get rich being paid twenty-five dollars for each cum shot.

Now, some women could have made a small fortune using that pay scale. But for Sonny, who often took home over a hundred dollars for a day's work, that was a lot of money for a guy living in a seventy-dollar-a-month-apartment in a tenement on East 5th Street off Second Avenue.

Sonny's downstairs neighbor and closest friend was a very affable guy named Marshall Anker, who had long been an aspiring actor. Clearly jealous of Sonny's success, he was always talking about the roles he was "up for."

For weeks before an audition to play W.C. Fields in some movie that never saw

the light of day, Marshall went around imitating Fields. But almost everyone who heard him thought he was just drunk, or perhaps insane.

Then, out of the blue, Marshall was cast as the sheriff in *Last House on the Left*, an exploitation horror film that was a commercial success. It would be his only movie role.

Marshall also envied Sonny for all the women he scored with – on the movie set and off. As small as Sonny was, Marshall was large. About six-three, with a big pot belly, he cut quite a figure walking along Second Avenue.

One night, he got very lucky. He met the fabled Marsha Handelsman, the very talented and very tall poetess. They had both gotten drunk at a party, and as Marshall walked her home, his hopes were high. She had clearly taken a liking to him, occasionally reaching over to pat the top of his head.

She lived on the top floor of a five-story walk-up. But she was too drunk to climb the stairs. She said, “If you can carry me upstairs, you can fuck me.”

Did he manage to carry her up four flights? Yes! Did he have his way with her? Here, the story gets somewhat muddled. All he could remember was that he had to visit a chiropractor for months until he recovered.

4

Sonny and Marshall, along with another six or eight kindred spirits, would often party together. If you invited one of them to a party you were having, it went without saying that the whole bunch of them would show up.

I lived on Norfolk Street, about ten blocks from Sonny and Marshall. When their entourage arrived, they all started eating and drinking as though there were no tomorrow. Marshall even stuffed potato chips in his pockets, perhaps out of food insecurity. Sonny was too busy eyeing the women, none of whom seemed to know about his exploits on the silver screen.

Marshall, on the other hand, talked almost nonstop about his career in film, although that didn't appear to impress the young women he was hitting on. Still, he was happy to be at the party, where at least there was some infinitesimal chance that he might get lucky.

About two am, a contingent of us headed down to Chinatown. Obviously, the pretzels, potato chips, cheese, salami, and onion soup dip I had put out were just the appetizers.

Down the block from me, Sonny and Marshall found an abandoned baby stroller. Sonny hopped in and Marshall pushed him all the way to Canal and Mott Streets.

They were quite a sight, and passersby often stopped to stare at the two of them. Both bearded and disreputable looking, they must have been taken for a demented father and his severely retarded bearded son.

5

Sonny loved his work so much that many times, he and his partner would keep going at it even after the allotted filming time had passed. The director, who had

been about to yell “Cut!” just signaled the cameraman to keep shooting.

At first, the director thought Sonny was just trying to make more money, but he soon realized this was truly a labor of love. Look at it from Sonny’s perspective: Going to work was like going out on a great date. And not only did it cost him absolutely nothing, but they even paid him.

Soon he was truly a porn star. But he never let it go to his head. He knew, of course, that all good things must come to an end, so why not make hay while the sun was still shining?

People would approach him on the street and ask for his autograph, or to be in a photo with them. Once, a very attractive woman came up to him and asked him exactly how big it was.

He lived just around the corner, so he took her up to his apartment. They spent the rest of the day in bed. Then, she apologized and starting dressed. She needed to get home to make dinner for her husband and children.

6

By the time he was in his late forties, Sonny’s career as a porn star was clearly coming to an end. He decided that maybe a change of scenery would be nice, so he moved into a larger living space. He found a very reasonably priced storefront on East 9th Street just off Second Avenue.

It was long and narrow, with a big glass window at the front. People could see in, but he hung curtains a few feet from the window. When his friends visited for

the first time, they often thought it was a used bookstore. Except that less than half the books were on bookshelves. The rest were in piles on the floor.

Once, I asked him why he needed so many books. "You realize that you could not read all these books in ten lifetimes."

He smiled.

"So why do you need so many?" I persisted.

"For reference."

I just looked at him. Nearly all of the books were fiction.

When I thought about that exchange years later, I realized that maybe he was beginning to lose it.

One evening, when my girlfriend and I came by to take Sonny to dinner, we saw a woman in the store. She didn't say anything, and Sonny didn't bother to introduce her.

Who knows? Maybe she was a rare book buyer.

At dinner, Sonny didn't mention her. But he must have trusted her, because he left her alone in his apartment.

7

Sonny had two tabby cats who enjoyed sunning themselves in the store window especially during the winter months. But this created problems with some of

the passersby who knocked on the door, demanding to know if the cats were trapped in the small space they occupied.

Sonny grew tired of explaining that the cats were fine, so he taped a huge sign in his window that read: The cats love the warming rays of the sun. They are where they are entirely voluntarily."

Not only did the sign actually work, but people came by just to look at it. The *East Village Other* even ran a series of photographs of the cats sunning themselves just below Sonny's sign.

Although most of the people who viewed porno movies were reticent about ever mentioning this to even their closest friends, occasionally people would stop Sonny on the street to ask for his autograph. Marshall suggested that he sell his signed photos for ten or fifteen dollars apiece, but Sonny absolutely refused to do so.

"It would be as if I were prostituting myself!" he declared.

"Excuse me!" replied Marshall. "But isn't that what you were doing in all those pornographic flicks you made?"

"Not at all! What I did, I did for my own pleasure... And of course for my partners' pleasure as well."

"Yeah, well I wouldn't have minded pleasuring a few of those women myself!"

The last time I would see Sonny alive was when I took him to dinner on his fifty-first birthday. He told me that he was very worried about Marshall's health, and that he had been urging him to see a doctor.

"He can barely make it up the stairs to his apartment, and he is constantly wheezing."

When my girlfriend and I went back to Sonny's storefront, the same woman was there. This time she was much more friendly, although in a very negative sort of way.

"Can you believe the way he lives like this? Books all over the place. I told him a million times to just throw the whole lot of them in the garbage."

She went on like this for at least ten minutes. Sonny had disappeared to a small cleared area in the back of the apartment, and as soon as we could disengage ourselves, we followed him to the back of the apartment.

Sonny put a finger to his lips, signaling us to whisper. He confessed that the woman just turned up on his doorstep one afternoon and never left.

"You mean she's a squatter in your apartment?" I asked.

"I guess so."

"Why don't you throw her out?"

"I don't know where she would go."

“Sonny, that’s her problem,” said my girlfriend.

“Maybe, but it would be on my conscience.”

9

Just a month later, Sonny died suddenly from a severe stroke. I later learned that he had had a series of mini strokes months before that, but like Marshall, he never went to a doctor.

There were over a hundred mourners at his funeral. Conspicuously absent was Marshall, who had just gone into a nursing home. Most of us were aging hippies, neighbors, a whole contingent of current and former porno actors and actresses, and a few of his relatives.

His older brother, Ben, who remained an orthodox Jew, gave a wonderful eulogy. I still remember his line, “Sonny wanted to make it small in the movies.”

That really summed him up. Unlike so many aspiring actors, Sonny never wanted to be a great movie star. He just wanted to have a really good time. Very few people truly love their work. Whatever else might be said about Sonny Williams, no one could deny that he was happy in his work. And yes, he did indeed make it small in the movies.

The Absence of Light

*"Hell is empty and all the devils are here."
– William Shakespeare*

"Mama, come away from the window. You know better."

"I want to see the sun." She started to push the curtains aside.

Anna sighed. *Every goddamn day.* "There's no sun anymore, Mama. It hasn't risen for months, remember?"

Anna bristled at her mother's pacing in front of the window.

Mama, *please.* Sit down."

"If your father were here, he'd let me go outside. He treated me like a queen."

"He wouldn't because it's dangerous now, so don't even bring him into it."

"You treat me with such disrespect. I don't deserve it, especially from my only child. God gave you to me for a reason, you know. Daughters are supposed to care for mothers in their dotage."

Anna rolled her eyes at the word dotage.

You don't deserve respect or anything else from me. "I'm sorry, Mama. I just want you to be safe."

"Fine then, just make me some tea; at the very least you can do that for me. God knows you don't do much of anything else for me."

Anna walked to the kitchen, her fists so tightly clenched she winced when her fingernails broke the skin on her palms.

You're damn lucky we don't have rat poison in the house, you miserable witch.

She ran water for the tea, then noticed blood dripping from her palms. She paused, then squeezed one of her hands and let the blood drip into the kettle before filling it with water. Anna leaned against the dead refrigerator with her eyes closed, rubbing her temples while waiting for the water to boil in the kitchen fireplace. She jumped when the kettle announced its readiness with a shrill whistle, the high-pitched shriek echoing the screams in her mind.

They lost electricity about a month after the murky clouds rolled in. Thankfully they had kerosene lamps and plenty of firewood in the cabin, but still, the darkness all around them tempered what little light they could produce with the fireplace and candles.

Anna prepared the tea, noting only a few bags of Lipton remained and added saltine crackers to the plate, just as her mother taught her as a child. God help her if she forgot the damn crackers, even if they were stale and tasteless now.

"Anna! What is taking you so long? It's just a cup of tea, for God's sake!"

"I'm sorry, Mama. Forgive me." She scurried back to the living room and placed the tray on the coffee table.

"Open the curtains now, Anna. This house is so gloomy. Let a little of God's own light shine its glory into this room."

Please. PLEASE. I can't keep doing this. "MAMA. The sun is gone. There is NO god

up in the sky or anywhere else. It's dark and miserable and fucking terrifying EVERYWHERE. You know very well if we do open the curtains, those things will come for us."

"You watch your blasphemous mouth, young lady. God is in His heaven and looking down upon us. He will shine His love through those clouds for us, so let there be light!" She stalked over to the window and yanked the curtain aside.

"Mama, no! Leave it closed, damn it!" Anna ran to her mother and grabbed her arm, pulling her away from the window.

"I swear, the way you treat me..." She pushed Anna away and mumbled the rest under her breath.

Anna didn't bother responding. She made the mistake of trying to let some brightness into the house a few days after the clouds gathered and wouldn't do it again.

The clouds weren't just regular gray rain clouds. They were black, blacker than hurricane clouds on the ocean horizon. Her mother was wrong—it wasn't gloomy, it was *DARK*. Anna knew the sun would never come back, especially after what happened when she looked out the window.

The darkness hid everything from sight, but her eyes caught pinpoints of light when she pressed against the glass and focused. It began to dawn on her that the

lights were tiny glowing eyes when the things jumped and slammed against the window with open mouths. Whatever the creatures were, they had TEETH. She didn't open the blinds again after that.

She could hear them, though, while she tried to sleep. They scratched at the siding beneath her window, occasionally letting out horrific demonic shrieks that chilled her blood.

It was clear now that help would never arrive. Anna and her mother were alone in the woods, even more isolated than usual. No military, no bands of survivors, no plucky heroes to save the damsels in distress.

Anna finally escaped the dreary cabin a decade ago when she went to college against her mother's wishes. With her father's encouragement, Anna built a life of her own. No longer subjected to her mother's criticisms and insults, Anna blossomed, making friends and earning her own money. Earning her freedom.

Then her father's sudden death shattered her new world. She became a child once again, under her mother's hateful thumb.

Mama sat in her rocking chair, lightly pushing her shoes against the floor to keep the chair moving, mindlessly crocheting a blanket with ugly gray yarn. "Sit down and quit your moping, Anna. You're depressing me. Find something to do, for God's sake! There's always something to be cleaned, you know. Laziness is not an attractive trait, especially if you want to find a husband. Idle hands, as

they say.”

Anna gaped at her delusional mother. “What? Are you kidding me, Mama? A *husband*? Even if the sun ever comes back, how do you ever expect me to ‘find’ a husband when you won’t even let me go into town by myself? WAKE UP, Mama. There are THINGS out there in the dark. They aren’t going away, and they are obviously waiting for us to go out there so they can attack. We need to figure out what to do, because we can’t stay here forever. We need to find somewhere safe.”

Mama shook her head. “You must think I’m stupid, Anna. I know there are things in the darkness – vicious, evil, dangerous things. Those are Satan’s minions out there.”

“Then you know we need to leave as soon as we can. Somewhere we can have food and shelter. There must be places for refugees like us.”

“No, little girl. You see, God will wrap me in His arms, protect me from those creatures. But you, Anna – you are a sinner who doesn’t honor God or your mother. You will be carried off to hell by those creatures. It’s not too late, though. If you accept God into your heart and soul, He will save you too.”

Anna stared at her mother rocking contentedly in her chair. Mama had always been religious, but Anna didn’t realize until now that she’d gone completely crazy with it. It was time to go.

As if Anna had spoken out loud, her mother said, “We are staying here. We

belong here. Satan will call his demons home soon after they rid the world of sin. You must have faith.”

“Yes, Mama. I understand.” Anna hurried to her room and closed the door, silencing her mother’s humming of her favorite hymn, *O Come, O Come, Emmanuel*. Quietly Anna reached into her closet and grabbed her battered pink suitcase with its “Go Crusaders!” sticker on the side. She didn’t even look at what she threw into it; she just knew they had to leave *now*.

“Stop packing, Anna. You aren’t leaving, and neither am I.” Anna whirled around at her mother’s voice. Mama stood in the doorway, holding up the key to the front door deadbolt. “We will wait here for God’s glory, no matter how long it takes.”

Anna’s heart pounded painfully. “What about food, Mama? We don’t have much left. How long will the well water hold out? We need to go find food and shelter with people who can help us. Please, Mama!”

“Faith, Anna. *Faith*. Now come sit with me while I finish my tea.”

“Okay, Mama.” Anna left the suitcase on the bed but grabbed her car keys from the dresser as she walked by it and quietly put them in her pocket. She followed her mother into the living room and carefully watched her put the key in the coffee table drawer.

Later, when her mother was asleep, Anna crept into the living room to get the key from the drawer. She delicately unlocked the front door, making sure she put

it back in the same spot.

It was morning, or at least some hours had passed since Anna dozed fitfully with the scratching and screams under her window, when she tried one more time to reason with her mother.

“Here’s your coffee, Mama. The instant coffee is almost gone, so I’m sorry I had to make it so weak.” Anna sat the mug of watery brown liquid down in front of her mother. “Also, we pretty much only have oatmeal packets. Which flavor would you like today? We have brown sugar or strawberry.”

“Brown sugar is fine, Anna. Sit and say grace with me first.”

Together they gave thanks to God, then Anna got up to fix the oatmeal. “Mama, how about if we just take a drive and see if we can find an open store or something. I mean, God doesn’t want us to starve, right? He’ll protect us on the way to the car, I’m sure.”

“He will protect me, yes. I worry about you, though, Anna. You still haven’t accepted God into your heart. We will stay here until we can leave together safely.”

Anna patted her dress pocket, making sure she had put her car keys in there after getting dressed. “All right, Mama. We will stay for now.”

Mama covered Anna’s hand with her own. “Mother knows best, dear. You

should know that by now.”

“I know that now, Mama. Thank you for helping me see the light.”

After breakfast they made their way to the living room. As they passed the front door, Anna grabbed her mother by the arm and threw the door open.

“Here’s your chance to prove God’s love for you, Mama!” Anna pushed her mother out the door. Mama fell into the front yard, screaming for her God’s help as the demons covered her.

“Save me, Jesus! Please, Lord! Save your faithful servant!” Mama’s voice changed to screams of pain, then blood gurgling in her throat as the creatures ripped her apart.

Anna used her key fob to unlock her doors as she ran for her life, only several steps from the car, shining the keychain flashlight ahead of her. She felt claws and teeth tearing at her skin, her blood streaming from the wounds to the ground, but she made it. She kicked and punched at the creatures until she was able to open the door and fall into the passenger’s side seat, closing the door behind her. A wing got caught in the door, but Anna knew the creature couldn’t hurt her now and scooted over to turn the engine on.

She sobbed in relief and pain, then smacked the steering wheel in triumph as the car roared to life. She glanced over at the demon hanging from her car, scratching

and screaming as it tried to get free.

“Fuck you.” She rolled her window down a tiny bit. “And fuck you and fuck your God, Mama!”

Anna peeled out of the driveway, the demon slamming against the side of the car trying to get itself free. Headlights exposed creeping shadows. She didn't care if darkness covered the whole world.

Anna was free.

How to Pick Up Girls

I was going to call my book *Girls I Have Dated* but I wanted to share my expertise about how to pick up girls in addition to just dating them. I haven't "dated" them if that is a requirement, as though it *were* a requirement. When you're a writer of genius like I am, you can take a few liberties. Like I always say, I know because I'm the pro! Well, I forgot what I was going to say but even though I haven't "dated" women, I know *how* to date them.

I'm now thinking I'll title my book *How to Pick Up Girls*. *How to Pick Up Girls* will be a self-help guide for all those losers who buy condoms just so they can wink at the sales clerk and who keep two or three dozen of them in their pocket, just in case, and for those unprepossessing wankers who sit in front of their computers making up names like RichNBig4UBaby and begging Eastern European ladies for a private chat on that website.

Now as I was saying, women, at least girls older than jail-bait should, in my humble opinion, be referred to as *ladies* because some of them find it pretty demeaning when you keep calling them girls, even if you are running your hand over their luxurious pantyhose for an hour or two.

My book will be divided into three parts. In the first part I will divide girls into categories because Miss Guellouchi, my science teacher, told us about Linnaeus and said the best way to understand something is to categorize it.

I think my categories will be "Girls Who are Hot" and "Girls Who are Not Hot"

and this is because it's very important that guys don't waste their time trying to pick up girls who are not hot. I don't want to make a list of all the girls I know although I do know that Stacey Sucklo will definitely and absolutely be on the "Girls Who are Hot" list. She's that movie star who starred in all those movies like the one with Don "Whirlwind" Flail who can swing his salami around so it looks like he's the bat boy for the Kansas City Royals. That's when his pants are down of course. I saw a couple of her movies last time I was at Kevin's house and I mean she was really hot!

I also know that Miss Guellouchi will be on the "Girls Who are Not Hot" list even if she did give me a pretty good grade last term. First of all she's really fat. I bet she weighs about 137 pounds and her cup size is only about a 32C and her arms are all covered with black hair. You won't ever find me dating a female Sasquatch.

The only problem I have with these categories is that Candrice in English class is not really hot, but she always smiles at me, unlike most of the not hot girls in that class. If you're reading this not hot girls, yes I mean you. On Thursday Candrice forgot a Bic pen on her desk and I took it and noticed the cap was all chewed up and later that night I could even smell her saliva on it and that was kind of hot.

So I think I'll change the categories. My new ones will be "Old Women as Old as My Mother" and "Girls Younger Than My Mother." These categories will work because every woman as old as or older than my mother makes me want to barf

and Miss Guellouchi will fit into the older category. Of course Candrice will fit into the younger category so that will be ok and then Stacey Sucklo will be in the younger category too although I don't know her age. But if she's older, I can make an exception for girls who have tits bigger than softballs, or basketballs. Well, maybe basketballs are too big, I mean for my categories, but not in real life! I also think Stacey Sucklo deserves to have her own category, maybe something like "Hottest Hottie in the Universe!"

The problem with my new categories is Jeanie Dunster. She'd be in the younger category but she has greasy skin and Kevin swears on a stack of Bibles that she'll only sleep with grave diggers. Last Tuesday, while waiting for the bus, she kicked me and so I punched her arm and we started wrestling and she grabbed my nose and I noticed her fingers smelled like she never washes her hands after wiping herself. So I don't really know what category to put her into.

The second part of my book will be about how to get a date. Getting a date can be a pretty tricky thing. I know because I'm the pro! I haven't dated as much as some of those playboys like Hugh Hefner or Donald Trump but I've dated a lot of ladies although I prefer not to list their names here.

When the term began, I told Mr. Skillin my English teacher that I was a writing a book. He sighed and said, "If talent grew on trees I'd be teaching a forest of Hemingways." It's not often someone his age, meaning Mr. Skillin, tells someone my age, meaning me, that that someone, meaning me, has as much

talent as Hemingway, meaning Mr. Hemingway. I haven't read him, meaning Mr. Hemingway, because I've been pretty involved with this other book we have to read for English.

Compare and contrast is probably Mr. Skillin's favorite phrase. For example, he wanted us to write down the characteristics of Hester Prim and Arthur Dimwit and compare and contrast their relationship to the scarlet letter. I made two lists and it was pretty obvious to me that Arthur Dimwit wasn't going to end up in the hot category because he was a guy and he was also a reverend. At first, I thought Hester Prim wasn't hot because Hester is a name like Chester only without the 'c' and Chester was a fat boy who chucked a chair across the room in Adam-bomb's third grade class. But then the writer said Hester Prim had a girlish beauty, and I could imagine a gown of red over her humongous Puritan breasts. *Puritan* means pure and tanned and even I don't have to look it up.

Now, if you're going to ask someone out on a date it's important to remember a few rules. The first rule is to avoid all the girls who are not hot. Obviously. That would be a real turnoff on a date. Imagine I ask Miss Guellouchi out on a date and she accepts, I mean, she would be thinking about getting to second base and I'd be thinking rain delay because those hairy arms would keep reminding me of a PBS special about the habits of chimpanzees.

The second rule is not to date someone with diseases. Let's say you're holding your triple martini, shaken, not stirred, heh heh, I learned that from James

Bond -- a writer notices these little touches -- and say this lady at the bar is hot, meaning she has matching milk modules in at least the half-gallon size and she's wearing one of those black leather mini skirts and she's smiling and licking her lips and making eyes at you, and you walk over and say something subtle like "What's cooking, Baby," and she says "I have five different types of herpes," then I don't care how gorgeous she is. It's probably a good time to say something like, "Oh crap I just forgot I have a trig test tomorrow and I completely forgot how to find the cosine of a right triangle."

I know it sounds unbelievable but I made up, "What's Cooking, Baby," all by myself. If it sounds professional, it's because it came from a writer who is also a genius. One of the funniest pick up lines I've heard is, "Were you arrested earlier? Because it must be illegal to look so good." When I first heard it, I didn't want to forget it so I wrote it on top of my science homework which was the only paper I had at the time. Then when Miss Guellouchi was handing back our homework, she gave me the oddest little smile.

On Stacey Sucklo's website I found an interview with her, the real her. She said her turn-ons were walks on the beach, champagne, and heart-shaped bathtubs. This makes it kind of tough for me because Kansas doesn't border any water and our bathtub is shaped like it was carved out of a bar of soap. So I've already struck two out of three, although I can probably get my uncle to buy me a six-pack of champagne.

So I was outside school standing under the roof where kids hang out when it's drizzling and we were waiting for the buses to line up. Candrice was with a bunch of her friends and after Kevin had jabbed me about a hundred times I finally got up my nerve and went over and said, "Pardon me Ladies." And then I said, "Candrice, can I ask you a personal question?" She looked all nervous and she kept shifting her eyes to her friends. And I asked her, "Which do you prefer, heart-shaped bathtubs or long walks on the beach." She turned as red as a stop sign and her friends all started laughing like a bunch of stupid hyenas. After that her friends giggled every time they saw me in the hall. Some people have no taste. I still think Candrice is nice, although she's pretty flat chested, because like I said before, she smiles at me when I walk into English class.

The third part of the book will be about what to do on dates. Many people don't know what to do on dates and I'm here to help. I know because I'm the pro! The first thing to do is to pick up your beautiful lady in your red Lamborghini Diablo and then offer her some champagne. Next, drive to the beach. After that take her to your heart-shaped bathtub. These can be reversed for variety. Kevin says he knows a guy who sells used Lamborghinis for one thousand dollars cash so I'm saving up. Of course, after I publish my book I'll be so rich I'll probably buy the Lamborghini factory and I might even buy the heart-shaped bathtub company. But I'll have to make sure I have a regular bathtub in my mansion because imagining my mother naked in one of my heart-shaped bathtubs about makes me want to barf.

Oh, I almost forgot. On Wednesday Candrice came up to me in the hall after English class. She asked me if I was doing anything Saturday night because there was a sort of dance thing at school and she wondered if I was busy or anything. I said, "I don't really like to dance, especially with all those losers. Besides," I said, "I'll probably be home working on my book." I was going to tell her about Mr. Skillin saying I was a real Hemingway and that she'd probably be in the book too, but she flushed red and scurried down the hall.

Later I was in the library with Kevin. He'd smuggled the *Atlas of Human Sexual Reproduction* from behind the reference desk and we were going through writing the names of people next to the illustrations. We wrote Johnny Vitrone, he's that jerky captain of the basketball team, next to the naked guy and we drew an arrow that went directly to the guy's butcrack. Some of the drawings of girls in the book were pretty hot, but not when the pictures showed them after they were knocked up. Then from out of nowhere Jeannie Dunster dashed around the stacks and winged an eraser that bounced off my ear. I got up and chased her out of the library and tried to spit on her. I mean her skin may be greasy, but she has a pair of air bags that would fit a Hummer so that makes her sort of hot. When I returned, I made Kevin flip the page back and the jerkwad had written my name next to the front of the guy and I told him if anyone was a weiner it was him and I ripped the page out of the book and tried to make him eat it. After Kevin left for class I picked the eraser and it smelled just like Jeannie's fingers.

I showed Mr. Skillin the start of my book *How to Pick Up Girls* and he said he

would take it home and read it. I'm sure he just did that to get some tips. The next day in English he stood up and announced that a member of the class was writing a book and if this person would put half as much effort into their studies, they'd probably be a genius, which means that geniuses like me don't need to do as much as other people. Hey, I know because I'm the pro! Then I looked across the room at Candrice and she turned all red, probably thinking she'd be marrying a rich writer some day, that is, once my book hits platinum.



NON-FICTION

Male Privilege: The Gender Test

With thanks to Peggy McIntosh for "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack," which inspired this piece.

I can, if I wish, arrange to be in the company of people of my own gender most of the time. I can avoid spending time with the gender I have been trained to mistrust and who have learned to mistrust my gender, or me. When I am told about what my role is in society, I am told that I am capable of anything, including success in business, sports, politics, and physically strenuous careers. I can be confident I was/will be educated with equal opportunity, given equal treatment in the classroom, and that **my** gender did/will not determine my academic success. I can blame the opposite gender for my poor performance without repercussions. I can scapegoat people of the opposite gender who work in my field in order to get ahead, and that tactic will often lead to my success and their failure. I can remain oblivious to the inequalities faced by people of the opposite gender without feeling any sense of guilt and without being shamed by people of my own gender. I see my gender represented by the people who hold the majority of public offices. I see my gender promoted frequently in my workplace, whether or not that person was the most qualified. I see my gender celebrated frequently and publicly for their contributions to society, science, technology, math, health, and literature. I can be pretty sure that when I need to speak to someone with authority I will be speaking to someone of my **gender**. I can be pretty sure that when I call the police or an attorney for assistance I will be speaking to someone of my own gender. I can be pretty sure that when I walk into a place of business, someone of my own gender will be managing the location. When I apply for a loan, a job, college, or an award of some kind, I can be sure that my gender does not work against me. I do not feel that my gender has been treated unfairly as a group. I do not feel that my gender **is** poorly portrayed in the media. I do not feel that my gender makes me less likely

to gain wealth. My gender does not inhibit my social, political, or economic growth and success. I do not have to work twice as hard as the opposite gender for the same recognition. My gender is the base gender in society, meaning that when someone refers to a group of people or alludes to a position of power, my gender is the assumed gender of that group or the person in that position. People of my gender can be assured of **unrestricted** access to healthcare without legislation interfering with the reproductive, sexual, or mental healthcare we require. People of my gender can be assured of rising to positions of power in my country's military. People of my gender can be assured of rising to positions of power in my country's government. When I read history books I find that most of the content is about people of my gender. The standard terminology for jobs and positions in my society reflects my gender, and people of my gender do not see a reason to change those terms to gender neutral or gender inclusive terms. Medications are studied in trials and clinical settings that use people of my gender as the subjects, and are developed using the results of those trials, so I can be assured that medications and medical treatments have been created with the chemistry and biology of my gender's body in mind. People of **my** gender are not expected to be the stay at home parent. People of my gender do not find it necessary to choose between having a career and having a family. People of my gender are not expected to participate actively in the raising of children or the running of a household. People of my gender see themselves as inherently valuable members of society. People of my gender are generally content with their role in society. People of my gender do not doubt their potential for success in every available field of study or career. I am not told that people of my gender should behave in

a certain way to make other people more comfortable. For example, I am not told that my anger is unattractive, or that I will get further and be more successful if I am nice, or quiet, or keep my opinions to myself. I can be confident that my gender does not result in unfair treatment of me in higher education. I can meet with a professor, educator, or administrator of the opposite **gender** at my college and feel confident that I will not be subjected to any sexual remarks or comments about my body, my attire, or my appearance. If I am the victim of a sexual crime on my college campus, I am confident that when I report the incident it will be handled swiftly, it will be handled in a way that protects my safety and identity, and it will be handled in a way that ensures the perpetrator is punished. If I attend a Greek, social, or sporting event on my college campus I feel safe drinking alcohol at that event and I do not feel it **is** necessary to monitor my alcohol consumption, monitor the location of my alcoholic beverages to prevent them being tainted by drugs, or ensure that I am the only person who has contact with my alcoholic beverages. Students of my gender are not expressly taught how to prevent themselves from being raped. Students of my gender are not expressly taught the location of emergency help stations on my campus. Students of my gender feel safe walking alone through campus, at any time of day or night, and are not **encouraged** to practice “safety in numbers.” I can watch a comedy show and feel confident that there will not be jokes made about people of my gender’s bodies being sexually assaulted or raped, or jokes that sexualize or demean people of my gender. I can watch television and feel confident that characters of my gender who are sexually assaulted or raped will see justice done on their behalf. I can listen to the radio and not hear music with lyrics that degrade, demean, and demoralize people of my

gender. I can listen to the radio and not hear music with lyrics that promote the harassment, sexualization, or assault of people of my gender. I can watch films that do not flagrantly sexualize people of my gender. I can read newspapers and feel confident there will be little to no news about people of **my** gender being sexualized, sexually harassed, sexually threatened, or sexually assaulted. I can make jokes that trivialize the sexualization, sexual mistreatment, and sexual inequality of people of the opposite gender, and the people who hear them will laugh, and find me funny. People of the opposite gender feel pressured to laugh at my socially inappropriate jokes even if they don't find them funny. I can say things like "grab them by the genitals" about people of the opposite gender in a public forum and still be promoted to a successful position. I can refer to the opposite **gender** in degrading and demeaning terms in a public forum and still have a successful career. When I walk down the street I can be sure I will not receive unsolicited comments about my body, the way I walk, the way I smell, or my attire. When I walk down the street I can be sure that I will not be whistled at or catcalled. When I walk down the street I do not ever feel as though I would be safer with my car keys tucked in my hand and protruding between each finger. When I walk down the street I do not look quickly and frequently to see who may be walking behind me. When I walk down the street I do not walk faster past alleyways, dark corridors, or empty storefronts. I am not afraid to walk into a stairwell alone. I am not afraid to ride the subway or a public bus at night alone. When I ride a crowded subway or public bus I do not fear that someone will intentionally grope, touch, brush against, fondle, or caress any part of my body because I am unable to move away from them in the crowd. I am not afraid to take

a taxi alone, and when I take a taxi I do not experience unwanted sexual comments. If I should need to move, I can feel confident that whatever neighborhood I move into will not also house people who would harass or threaten me. I **can** go to the grocery store late at night, and park in a remote location in order to walk the maximum number of steps, and not be concerned that a person of the opposite gender will harass or threaten me. I can be confident that the children I raise that are my gender will rarely be sexualized, sexually assaulted, harassed, or threatened because of their gender. I can go walking or jogging in parks and other remote areas without concern that I will be physically or verbally harassed in a sexual way. I can walk down any street in any city without concern that I will be physically or verbally harassed in a sexual way. I do not feel it is necessary for me to carry mace, a **whistle**, a firearm, a weapon, or any other means of self-defense when I am leaving my home, my car, or my work alone. I do not feel it is necessary for me to stay in a group of people of my own gender or people I deem as safe members of the opposite gender when I am out at night or in a strange neighborhood or city. I do not qualify people of the opposite gender as “safe” or “unsafe.” I am not afraid to sleep alone in my own home. I am not afraid to walk out of my home alone at night. I am not afraid to go to work in a mostly empty building **at night** or on the weekends. I do not feel it is necessary to double lock my doors, lock my office door when I am at work alone, lock my car doors when I am driving or parked and waiting, or lock the port-a-john door at a public venue. I do not check the back seat of my car before I get in. When self-defense classes are offered at my gym, local dance studio, local martial arts studio, or YMCA, the people who sign up for that class are primarily people of the opposite gender. The vast majority of

domestic violence in my country happens to people of the opposite gender. The vast majority of spousal rape cases in my country happens to people of the opposite gender. The vast majority of intimate partner murders in my country happens to people of the opposite gender. I do not fear that my employer will harass me, sexualize me or my work, or suggest that I will be promoted in return for engaging in sexual acts. I do not fear that my coworkers will harass me, sexualize me or my work, or suggest that my work is inferior to theirs or suggest that I used my gender to get ahead of them. When I go to work I can be sure I will not receive comments about the appropriateness of my attire. My sexuality is not a topic of discussion at the “water cooler” in my office or place of employment. If I am harmed, I feel certain that justice will be swift and fair. If I accuse someone of harming me, I can feel confident my accusation will not be dismissed, held against me, or used to justify my termination from a job, social group, or community. If I accuse someone of harming me sexually I can feel confident that my personal sexual history will not be a factor in determining that person’s guilt or innocence. If I accuse someone of harming me sexually I can be confident that my accusation will be taken seriously, and that I will not be blamed for it, nor will anyone use my amount of alcohol consumption, my attire, my personality, or my body as justification for shaming or blaming me for that harm. I can drink to excess and not fear that I will be taken advantage of sexually. I can wear revealing clothing and not fear that I will be taken advantage of sexually. I can flirt with someone of the opposite gender and not fear that the person may later feel justified in sexually assaulting or raping me. I can have sex with multiple partners and not be labeled sexually degrading and culturally stigmatized names. I can start to have sex with

a partner, decide to stop, and not fear that the partner will force me to continue the sex act against my will. I can leave a person's house or apartment after a sex act and not have my travel home be considered a shameful experience. My gender is generally safe. I generally feel **safe**.

They Let Me Have This Baby and How the Fuck Do You Do This Mommy Thing Anyway?

You have a new baby. Now what are you going to do? It's looking at you right now. It's all adorable and squirmy and it smells good, but you know that any second it's going to want something. It's going to want to nurse, or have a bottle, or get a diaper change, or require a seemingly endless amount of rocking and walking, and you're going to have to do it. You're in charge. Because you are the mommy.

Oh, god. You're the mommy. You're supposed to know how to do this, right? I mean, it's all natural, isn't it? They just let you walk away with this brand new baby person and they didn't even ask if you knew what you were doing! They didn't ask if you'd taken that baby class. They didn't ask if you knew how to put a diaper on. They didn't even ask if you knew how to make it stop crying! WHAT IF IT STARTS CRYING?!? Are you gonna be able to make it stop? Are you gonna know what it wants? There aren't that many things, right? Feed, change, burp, repeat. OH! And swaddle. You're supposed to swaddle.

Let's see. Lay baby down. Wrap this part around... nope. Okay, fold the bottom part over here and then... wrong. Put the baby in the middle and origami fold the... goddammit! That's not right either. Who the hell invented this idea? WHAT NEW PARENT IS CAPABLE OF ORIGAMI AFTER 3.2 MINUTES OF SLEEP IN 48 HOURS?!?! Fuck the swaddle. Just... fuck it.

Wait. The baby isn't crying. Isn't that what babies do? Aren't they supposed to cry? Isn't that, like, their entire purpose in life? Maybe something's wrong.

The baby should definitely be crying by now. If the baby isn't crying after that swaddling origami debacle, something's definitely wrong. You better check. You're just gonna pick up that little... Whoops. Well, now the baby's crying.

You know, this baby's cry really isn't that bad. I mean, it's almost cute. It's kind of hilarious that it's actually a "wah wah" sound. Who knew they really sound like that? You can handle this. You've totally got this. Feed, change, burp, repeat. No problem.

Hm. Is 20 minutes too long for a baby to cry? You're not doing anything wrong, are you? Did you change the baby? Yes. No poops? I guess that's good. Did you feed the baby? How much? Did that seem like enough? Did it seem like TOO much? You're not really sure, are you. Well, just do some burping then. No. Not like that. You need to pat harder. Harder. Not that hard! Yeah, like that. Except lower. Not that low- you're trying to burp the baby's butt now. Yup, right there. Good. Hey! Did you hear that?!?! You did it! That was a huge burp! And super juicy! Well done!!!

Wait... what's that dripping down the back of your pants? Turn around. Oh. Oh, no. The baby spit up. The baby spit up EVERYWHERE. Holy... is that gonna come out? Doesn't matter. You burped the baby and there's no more crying. You did it. The crying is done! You are the supreme mother! Now what.

Sleep, maybe? Was that a yawn? You're not sure. How are you not sure? A

yawn is pretty clear. Okay, let's assume it was a yawn. You need to put the baby down to sleep. Except that requires that baby origami thing. Damn. Maybe you can figure it out this time. Put the baby down on the blanket. Wrap this part over, then wrap the bottom up... no. WHY IS THIS SO HARD?!? Wait... don't you have one of those cheater swaddlers from your shower? Go get it! That will totally work!

That totally worked. Why doesn't everyone use these all the time? Velcro is so awesome. Okay, so you've wrapped the baby. Now you should put the baby down in the crib. Or maybe the bassinet? Or how about the swing? Or maybe the bouncy chair? Oh, no. Too many options. How do you pick the right one? And what about a song? Do you sing the baby a song? It looks sleepy. A song would help, right?

Nope. A song did not help. Pick the baby up, PICK THE BABY UP. Rock. No, not like that. Try the glider. No, slower. And pat the butt like they always do on TV. There... ooh, there! It's working! You're doing it! You're putting the baby to sl... WHOA.

What. Was. That. There is no way that sound came out of that tiny body. That was like... that was a tuba. How does such a tiny human make a sound that loud?! Oh, man. What is that orange stuff? Is that? No. No way. How can it... it's all the way up the baby's back! Hurry! Unswaddle! Okay. So. How do you undress a baby whose entire back is literally covered in feces? Runny feces. No,

seriously. How do you get this onesie off without covering the baby's head with poop? Okay. Maybe if you unsnap and try to pull the arms out of... nope. No. That's not going to work. Rubbery babies. Um, or just unsnap the bottom and just kind of... roll it up? But this baby is so loosy-goosy! All this flopping, how do you do this? Aw, man. Now YOU'RE covered in runny feces. Okay. Just... do it. Fast.

It's off! Now you just have to clean the baby! Which is going to take 742 wipes. Or a bath. But that's just a poo bath, really. Gross. Maybe you should try a sponge bath. Just mop that business up with a washcloth and call it a day. Yeah, that'll work. Except now you have to go get the washcloth, but you can't just leave the baby here all naked and covered in poop. And if you bring the baby with you, you're going to be covered in poop. So. Huh. Um, wipes it is!

Just lean the baby this... whoa! Flopping again. So much flopping! How long 'till this little person has some body control? Okay, so start with the neck and just wipe down... dude. This stuff is runny. And sticky. And everywhere. PLAN B! Wrap the baby in the failed swaddle blanket, get the washcloth, and sponge bath this crap! Yes! You are doing this moderately well! Success-ish! The baby is clean! But now it's been like 45 minutes, so you're supposed to feed it again, right? Or nap. There was no nap. Um.

There's not crying, so let's go for nap? But swaddle cheater's all icky. Shit. Okay, just fake it. It'll be fine. You can wrap a burrito, you can wrap a baby. Come on.

Lay the blanket on the ground, while holding clean baby. Fold over corner of blanket and put baby's head down there. Is that right? It seems right. Fold over left side and tuck it in. Fold over right side and tuck it in. Wait... there's the floppy bit at the bottom. Sonofabitch. Okay. Unfold right side. Tuck up bottom floppy bit and tuck in. Fold over right side and tuck it in? Wait. Did you just do it? YOU JUST DID IT. Baby is happy. Baby is wrapped in feces-free swaddle. You are... well, you're a mess. What the fuck happened to you?

Do you leave the baby on the floor, or attempt to transfer baby to any number of baby holding devices? Baby is not crying. Baby seems happy. You, however, need some work. Maybe leave baby on the floor for now? Sure. That should work. Now you'll just need to go find some clean clothes real fast. Run to the bedroom and open dresser for new... wait. Where are all your clothes? Are they dirty? Are ALL your clothes dirty? What about pajamas? Nope. Gone. Dirty. Okay... steal partner's clothes. Fine. Peek into living room at baby. Baby asleep! Success! You could go make yourself a cup of hot tea! Hurry!

Remember the last time you had a warm beverage? You don't, do you? It's been that long. You're mere seconds away from delicious, warm... dammit. Baby's up. Baby's fussing. You should probably pick up baby, right? Go ahead. Scoop up that sweet little bundle of... barf. The baby just barfed all over your new fresh, clean, borrowed clothes. Possibly the only clean clothes in the house. Awesome.

It's okay. It's not like you have anywhere to go.

Aaron's Journey

Aaron returned from Montreal dazed. The adventure—for that's what it was meant to have been—turned into a fiasco, his relationship with Steve—wrecked.

Driving through downpours, I lost all sense of awareness. I didn't know where I was. I didn't remember crossing the Champlain Bridge. All I heard were Steve's accusations ringing in my ears.

Weeks before Steve had suggested the trip—as a coming-out for Aaron. No plans. They would stay in the gay section and let things happen. As to what things, Aaron had only vague images.

I had never been to strip bars, gay saunas, or sex clubs. They sounded like something I should have experienced before I met Steve, but hadn't. In theory exciting, but would I really enjoy myself like the gay man I was supposed to be?

"I'm here to show you the gay life," were Steve's words when he suggested the trip. "Don't worry, sugar. You don't have to do anything that'll make you feel uncomfortable." Aaron trusted Steve, trusted that he would be there to protect him. But protect him from what?

I would never go on my own; I knew that. Inhibited? Yes...a bit. My old fears of not fitting into the gay scene, feeling more comfortable in straight company, kept coming back, haunting me. I needed Steve to be there with me.

The day chosen, Saturday, turned out to be one of those late summer idylls, warm without being hot. They drove via the small border, to take advantage of

the picturesque countryside of the rural roads, avoiding the throughway and the possibility of lines of cars at the more popular border crossing. Aaron knew Steve had brought some weed, hiding it in a Ziploc bag in his briefs. While this disturbed him, Aaron decided to play it cool, to not make an issue of it.

My stomach, already uneasy at what I imagined we would be doing that night, became queasier as we neared the border.

The customs officer took his time in the guard house, checking their IDs. After fifteen minutes Aaron suggested he go in and ask the officer if there was a problem.

At this point in our relationship, I didn't know Steve well enough to be aware if there was anything in his past that might prevent him from entering the country.

"Don't sweat it, babe; he's just fuckin' with us," Steve said.

While Steve sat in the car listening to Madonna, Aaron went into the customs office and asked the officer the reason for the delay. He was told they were having difficulties checking his friend's ID, but that it shouldn't be much longer.

I couldn't understand what might be the problem. Steve's past was, well, about as secretive as Steve himself. What did he do before I met him? What did he do now? I had yet to meet anyone who knew him, nor any of his friends. Steve was shrouded in mystery. Perhaps that was part of what attracted him to me? But would I ever get accustomed to not knowing what he did when not with me.

A half hour later they were told they could leave.

Not far from the border, Aaron pulled over onto a side road and cut the motor.

"I need to breathe," Aaron said, turning to face Steve.

"That's okay, babe." Steve took off his tank top and, resting against the car door, unbuckled his belt and began unbuttoning his jeans. "Wanna help me, sugar? The bag of weed's beginning to make my balls sweat." Steve leaned forward, placing a hand behind Aaron's head, drawing Aaron's face to his, kissing him hard.

"Shit, baby, you're hot," Aaron whispered as he pushed Steve's jeans down. Steve lifted his ass just enough for them to slide down to his knees. Aaron caressed Steve's body as he groped for the bag of weed in Steve's crotch. Steve moved farther down into the seat. Aaron's heart raced as he looked into his friend's eyes.

When Steve looked at me with that seductive smile that I could never resist, I'd do anything he wanted or suggested. It was our first night all over again. His eyes sucked me in – I had no power in me to say: No. I knew that what we were doing was risky...but so was going to Montreal with weed in his crotch.

"Here?" was all Aaron could gasp.

"Why not? I think we both deserve it."

“Okay, pumpkin,” Steve said soon after he had inspected the hotel room. “Let’s find you some clothes.” Once out of the hotel, they started walking west on Ste Catherine Street. Aaron soon realized that they were in a sleazy section of the city, one he never knew growing up.

To me it was...well, not what I was accustomed to. Signs of bare-breasted girls dotted both sides of the street. Fast food restaurants and T-shirt boutiques. Stores with marijuana grinders openly displayed in the windows, glass pipes, and bongos. I’d never seen anything like it. I was living on the edge, the edge of a precipice. On one side, the safe side, my past life, a life in the security of a family steeped in the traditional values of a conservative lifestyle. I was now peering over the edge...into a void. I had no idea what lay in the distance, in the voyage I would be taking with Steve as my guide.

How would I explain to myself shopping in one of these stores, when my clothes closet had suits, jackets, and trousers specifically tailored to fit my body, shoes crafted to the specifications of my feet, shirts that hugged me like a second skin, and ties cut to my specific width – all made for me in England by the finest artisans, all awaiting my return?

“Here, babe, try these on.” Steve handed Aaron a pair of jeans that appeared to have been worn through by several previous owners, a pair of faded green boots that buckled over the ankle, a belt with a large silver metal plate, and a couple of shirts.

“Try on the jeans first. I want to see the fit.” Steve waited outside the changing room, looking through more racks as Aaron undressed.

“What d’ya think, baby?” Aaron came out wearing what he considered to be the previously-owned jeans.

“They look great. Turn around.... Definitely; yes. Put on the rest. I want to see if they show you off.” Steve followed Aaron, gently propelling him into the changing room. Aaron felt Steve’s pelvis grinding into his ass, Steve’s arms encircling his body, one hand groping inside the jeans, the other holding him tight.

“You look fuckin’ hot, sugar,” Steve breathed in Aaron’s ear.

Aaron left the store with the jeans, the faded green boots and a T-shirt illustrating two figures – one white, the other black – lying on top of one another. It said, “Fuck Discrimination”. Steve’s T-shirt purchase showed a photo of President Bush and, below it, a marijuana plant. Written beside President Bush said “Bad Bush”, and beside the marijuana plant, “Good Bush”. They had a good laugh...although Aaron wondered where he’d have the nerve to wear his.

Steve had taste. It wasn't mine...at that moment, but I was on a learning curve...the beginning part. If Steve told me I looked 'hot' in the clothes he'd chosen for me, I trusted him. It's not that I needed to look 'hot'; I just didn't want to disappoint him, nor did I want to look out of place when we were together. He wanted me to wear clothes that were as young as he thought I looked.

I hadn't slept the night before; I never did the first night of Steve's visits, in anticipation of his body pressed against mine, my hands exploring all parts of his body, the body I loved to caress and press my lips against, my tongue loving. I felt paralyzed with the anticipation of what would come next.

Back in the room Steve suggested they take a nap. They undressed and lay on the bed, Steve folding Aaron in his arms, pressing his stomach against Aaron's back, their feet intertwined, Aaron's hand on Steve's.

Steve's legs, muscular from the days when he was an exotic dancer, parted mine, and he pulled me into him.

"Sweet dreams, pumpkin," he murmured in Aaron's ear as he moved closer, holding Aaron tighter.

"You, too, baby," barely passed through Aaron's lips, powerless by the pleasure that now filled him.

It didn't matter if I slept, even though I knew I really needed it. Having Steve next to me, holding me, pressing his body tight against mine, my hands enfolded in Steve's, I wouldn't move. It was impossible for me to sleep, for sleep would deprive me of the intense sensations I was feeling throughout my entire body. This is what I wanted; this is what I dreamed of.

Aaron dozed off and on, not wanting to miss one moment of the pleasure that having Steve so close – physically – gave him. Before Steve went into the

seclusion of the bathroom to begin his ritual, Aaron's hand reached out to stroke Steve's chest and stomach, reaching beneath the elastic of Steve's briefs.

"Let's leave something for later, okay, babe?" Steve said as he raised himself, leaning forward to kiss Aaron firmly, his tongue winding its way into the depths of Aaron's waiting mouth.

"I can't get enough of you, Steve," came from deep within Aaron's being. Steve pressed his chest down on Aaron's, their mouths interlocked for a few moments longer.

"See ya in a little while, sugar," were Steve's parting words as he disappeared into the bathroom, leaving Aaron prostrate on the bed.

Steve had a hypnotic effect on me...or did I do it to myself? I wasn't blind, just happy. Yet, with all this happiness, my stomach still felt weird. Perhaps it was the unknown, the mystery of Steve and his life, past and present, and maybe most of all of what he would lead me into. I wanted to be with him, to 'hang' with him, and to feel his naked body on mine. It was as though I had lost myself, and the only thing in the world that mattered now was being with Steve.

By the time Steve emerged from the bathroom it was going on 9:00. They walked along Ste Catherine Street, where most of the gay life congregated. Steve placed his arm around Aaron's shoulders, Aaron fitting his strides to Steve's, walking in sync.

This is what I wanted, what I had been missing in my life...until I met Steve. His attention, his arm around my shoulders. That, for Steve, was quite natural. Did he know that's what I wanted, what was missing? Even my stomach felt settled. And I didn't feel tired.

Aaron wore the jeans and boots purchased that afternoon. Steve lent him a belt and one of his sheer shirts, the one with the black Maltese Cross embroidered across the chest.

"You look hot tonight, babe," Steve tossed out casually, squeezing Aaron's shoulders, sidestepping another couple locked arm-in-arm walking straight at them without seeming to see Steve and Aaron.

"You're a hot motherfucker yourself," Aaron smiled.

Steve was. No matter what he wore his body exuded sensuality. In his jeans from Amsterdam – the ones with the strategic rips and runs – the multiple chains hanging from one pocket to another, a wide leather belt – the one with the metal buckle engraved with a skull-and-crossbones – his Barney's boots, and a super-sexy Rolling Stones shirt emblazoned with rhinestones, Steve exuded carnal vibes. On anyone else it would screech 'GAY', but on Steve it screamed 'Sex Machine'.

Aaron glanced at his friend. He put his arm around Steve's waist, allowing it to rest on Steve's butt, not as a possessive gesture, just to capture his joy in just hanging out with his friend.

We didn't have to do anything or go anywhere as long as I felt his presence. Walking down Ste Catherine Street, the Champs Élysées, or Broadway, it made little difference to me. I was with Steve. His physical existence was all that I wanted – or needed.

“What d’ya want to do, baby?” Aaron wondered out loud rather than asked.

“Let’s just hang, okay, sweetheart?” Steve replied, once more pressing his arm around Aaron’s shoulders. They continued walking. The night was warm. The lights from the bars, stores, clubs, and cafés enclosing the street made it all seem as though it were the middle of the afternoon. After a while they found themselves in front of a strip club.

“Okay, let’s see what’s here,” Steve said as he led Aaron past the muscled bouncer into the darkness within. The club seemed dingy at first, but only in contrast to the glitter of the street lights enhanced by the neon signs that had previously surrounded them. Making their way through the crowd, Steve found an empty table, ringside.

“What’ll you have, pumpkin?” Steve asked.

“Maker’s Mark, no ice,” Aaron relied.

“Make that two Maker’s, one with ice,” Steve told the waiter.

On the stage directly in front of them, a guy in his mid-twenties was moving to blaring disco music. He walked as though he were on Ste Catherine Street with

no destination in mind or any sense of urgency. Aaron tried to hide from Steve the fact that he had never been to a strip club, acting as nonchalant as the stripper on stage. The music advanced, becoming louder with a pounding beat. The stripper stopped mid-stage and, moving his hips to the beat, shed his tank top. He continued, transferring his weight, his hips shifting on the beat. He turned – his back to the audience, his hips now moving in a circular motion. Slowly, still marking the beat, his jeans dropped to the stage revealing ultra-briefs.

“Nice ass,” Steve observed casually, his hand resting on Aaron’s thigh, moving rhythmically, stroking the inside of Aaron’s leg.

The stripper turned to face the audience amid whistles, loud clapping, and the occasional jeer. Moving toward the pole mid-stage, his hips thrust with each step, his fingers caressing his crotch as the whistles intensified. Grabbing the pole, he began riding it as though he were on a carousel.

“This guy needs a few lessons in the art of simulating.” Steve glanced around, his hand between Aaron’s legs, gently squeezing.

The stripper continued grinding, his fingers inching into his briefs, suggesting that they too would fall to the stage at any moment. Turning, he bared his ass while still beating time to the music.

“His ass looked better covered,” Steve said, allowing his hand to inch its way into Aaron’s jeans.

“Come on, sugar,” Steve said a few minutes later. “Drink up. Let’s get outa here.”

Back on the street, Aaron wrapped his arm around Steve’s waist, his fingers latching onto the middle of Steve’s belt.

“What did ya think, baby?” Aaron asked.

“About the stripper...or the performance?”

“Both.”

“He wasn’t terrible,” Steve replied. “It’s just that he wasn’t all that good...in my opinion, that is,” at which point Steve leaned over and kissed Aaron.

“Well, baby, you should know.” This was one of Aaron’s few references to Steve’s past.

“I can only compare him to what I’ve seen...and I’ve seen *a lot*, sugar,” Steve replied, smiling his seductive grin as he gripped Aaron’s hand that had hooked onto his belt, pushing it into his jeans.

“Happy?” Steve asked, looking at Aaron as they walked.

Happy? I felt like I had taken an overdose of happiness drugs. Walking down Ste Catherine Street with my hand in Steve’s jeans, his smile on my face, our rhythm in sync. I had been to my first strip club. It hadn’t turned me on...except for Steve’s

presence. I wanted him to enjoy the performance, but I realized that for Steve it was just that, another performance, not necessarily something special or different. In the world where Steve spent his days and nights, strip clubs were just another form of entertainment, not necessarily a 'turn on', somewhere to have a drink with friends and watch young guys strut and strip.

I had never shown physical affection in public, but with Steve it was different, it was natural, totally how I wanted to be. Had he pulled me into an alley I would have been his...anyway he wanted. With my whole being I wished that it would never end.

They passed other bars and strip clubs, going in but leaving after a few minutes. In one strip club they stayed, had a drink, then left.

“What do you want to do now, Steve?” Aaron asked. It was 3:30. Aaron had no idea how long the evening would last. What was normal for this sort of thing? What time did the bars and clubs close? He had left all decisions to Steve, looking to his friend as a guide.

“It’s up to you, sugar” Steve replied. “There’s a sex club somewhere around here. We could go there.”

Aaron had only a vague idea of what a sex club was. Friends had told him about their experience in Paris. From their report it all sounded somewhat murky: anonymous sex in dark, almost pitch-black rooms, strangers fondling your near-naked body, a free exchange of caresses, fleeting moments of pleasure—a substitute for love. But Aaron didn’t want to be a killjoy.

“Let’s find it. We could always look around...and if we don’t like it, leave.”

Aaron hoped that his voice hadn’t betrayed fear. In the pit of his stomach, he felt dread, apprehension, but never would he let on that he was anything but cool with the idea.

They continued walking, Steve’s arm closed around Aaron’s shoulders, Aaron’s hand hooked onto the inside of Steve’s jeans. Despite the hour, people, mainly in their twenties and thirties, noisily moved about their business which was anything but sober.

Suddenly, there it was, right in front of them.

“This looks like the place,” Steve remarked.

“Are you sure?” Aaron asked feeling the anxiety in his gut rise up into his diaphragm, causing his heart to pump faster and labor his breathing.

“Only way to know is to ask, sugar,” Steve replied. “Come on, babe, let’s party,” and with these words Steve bounded up the few steps to the door, bringing Aaron with him. Inside was dark, with no visible lights other than the bulb above the cashier.

“Are you ready to hang?” Steve asked.

Aaron wanted to be with Steve, but he wasn’t certain about being with him in a sex club. What he wanted was Steve alone, not with others...and Aaron knew

there would be men in the club all touching and groping. He wasn't sure how he would react, witnessing Steve being pawed and kissed. Could he watch while Steve planted his lips on another man, his tongue lingering in another man's mouth? At least he was with Steve, Steve who wouldn't get him into any trouble or uncomfortable situations.

"Yeah, let's go, baby," and Aaron bounded up the inner stairs, into a black silence.

The club was about as dark as midnight in an arctic winter. Aaron followed Steve closely, not wanting to lose him.

"Can you see anything, baby?" Aaron asked feebly.

"No, but the guy told me that the lockers were at the top of stairs at the end of this corridor." Aaron clung to the walls, trying to adjust to the blackness of the hole Steve was leading him down. From time to time, he reached out toward Steve who walked slowly but steadily, his pace tracking the absolute darkness.

I thought I could hang – I wanted to hang – but this unease pervaded my whole being. I almost wished I hadn't agreed to visit the club. I knew Steve wanted to show me the gay scene and have me experience it. He had been living it, really living it, his whole life – at least since high school. How could he understand what I was feeling? We were a generation apart. Sex clubs, saunas, baths, strip joints – they were all the same to him. He experienced them every day of his life. My only experience was through literature, and how true was that? Vicarious, no danger there. Everything left to the imagination,

no physical presence, nothing intimidating. Shut the book and it can all go away, disappear. Nothing lurks around a corner...or behind a door.

In the security of my life before I met Steve, an invisible barrier had separated me from the adventures I was about to embark on. I would now be swimming in a sea foreign to me. I was unprepared; Steve was my life jacket. I had consciously entrusted my fate to him, in the belief that he wouldn't jeopardize, not only my safety, but my mental and physical stability. What would happen to me were he to leave my side, abandon me to find my own way out of the maze he was leading me through? I had been raised to be risk-adverse, yet here I was, in a sex club, trusting someone I hardly knew but under whose spell I had fallen. His sexual lure glued me to his body with an attachment that had replaced all former needs and loyalties. I'd do anything, just to be near him, for him to tell me, 'You're hot, Aaron'.

They found the lockers where Steve used his zippo lighter to identify the one assigned to them.

"Leave everything here, sugar," Steve said, "unless your briefs have pockets," he chuckled. "And keep your boots on too; you never know what you're walking through."

"Where will you keep the key, baby?" he asked.

"Don't worry your sweet head, pumpkin." Steve bent, placing the key in his boots where he also deposited his lighter, money, and cigarettes. He grabbed Aaron and pulled him in a tight embrace, the heat of his near naked body searing

his friend.

“When I get you back in the room, sugar, I’ll have you...anyway I want.” Aaron felt his friend’s body pressing hard against his, pinning him to the wall of lockers.

“Fuck, Steve, I wish we were back in the hotel.”

Following Steve, Aaron carefully made his way along dim corridors passing obscure figures moving in the opposite direction. At one point Steve stopped. One of the passing shadows stopped too, alongside Steve who stepped closer to the passing apparition. Despite the total lack of light, Aaron saw a hand of the apparition on Steve’s white briefs, moving across in a slow, rhythmic fashion. Steve turned to face the shadow. Aaron watched, his heart pounding. It lasted only a few seconds...and then the apparition moved. Aaron’s eyes were on the immovable figure of Steve. He hardly realized that the hand of the shadow was now feeling his briefs, gently forcing Aaron to move the inches that separated them, until they were touching, the bulging crotch of the apparition grinding into Aaron, hot lips searching Aaron’s face, its grip tightening on Aaron’s ass as its lips found Aaron’s, forcing its tongue into Aaron’s mouth, almost choking Aaron who desperately wanted to call out to Steve. As suddenly as the hand clutched at Aaron’s buttocks, it released him...and the shadow moved on.

Shaken, Aaron attempted to recover quickly so as not to let his voice betray him. But what would he say...and to whom? This was a sex club. Everyone

there wanted one thing...or at least a variation of it. And what Aaron had just experienced was merely an hors d'oeuvre. He still had the appetizers and main course to taste, not to mention dessert.

All I wanted was Steve, not the others. Did Steve think it would make me feel more of what he thought I wanted to be, to be groped and tongue-fucked by...what? Someone I couldn't see, someone I could barely feel?

Steve continued walking slowly. Ahead, Aaron saw a glow, a light shrouded in a thick veil. The corridor down which they were walking opened into a small room in which several more shadows, like black moths, glided in a circle around an object in the middle.

"What is it?" Aaron whispered, moving closer to Steve, his mouth almost touching Steve's neck.

"It's a guy in a sling," Steve replied, edging to where he was within arm's length of the object.

Aaron watched as though transfixed, glued to the ground, as the moths approached the object. Some bent forward and over the object in the sling, almost covering it with their bodies. Aaron was so close to the object that he could make out a man held up by straps around his arms and legs which were spread out in front of him. One of the moth-shadows stepped in front of Aaron and between the spread legs of the man in the sling who began groaning as the moth-shadow moved so that the two appeared to be one.

“What’re they doing?” Aaron asked meekly. He felt fear in the pit of his stomach, impaled by what he was witnessing.

“Fucking,” came Steve’s reply, casually thrown off as though he had been eating or humming.

Aaron placed his arms around Steve’s body, drawing his friend’s ass closer, to nestle into his crotch.

“Let’s go, baby,” he kissed into Steve’s ear. “I’ve seen enough.”

They made their way between silhouettes and groping hands, back to a corridor on the opposite side of the room.

Darkness enveloped them once more as they walked, hugging the walls, occasionally stumbling into a silhouette gliding in the opposite direction or reclining against a wall. Avoiding physical contact was impossible, knocks and bumps becoming almost routine as they wended their way through the maze. Minutes passed in soundlessness, punctuated by an occasional groan or gasp. Aaron glanced at the lit dial on his watch: 4:30. He was tired.

They came to a sign on one wall: BAR, glowing green as though lit from behind. As they entered, the surroundings appeared bathed in a filtered haze not unlike the sling room.

“Hey, guys,” the bartender said as they approached.

“Hi,” Steve answered. “This place is fuckin’ dark.”

“Yeah. It’s new. The owners are from France where clubs like this are generally pitch black,” the bartender replied. “The scene here is different...but they’ll adjust it in time. What’ll you have?”

“Two Maker’s Mark,” Steve told him.

The bartender told them his name was Danny. He was an airline steward, working the bar at the club on his days off.

“The club gives me a break. The hours are basically the same as my flight schedule,” Danny volunteered. He worked flights from Montreal to Frankfurt, Germany.

Up close, Aaron could make out some details of the bar and Danny. He must have been more than six feet tall and well-built, but not too muscular. He wore a jock strap that showed a nice bulge in the front, and, when he turned, a round, hard, smooth ass.

As Danny handed them their drinks, he reached across the bar and, placing a hand in back of Steve’s head, brought Steve’s face up to his and kissed him...long and hard. Steve didn’t resist, but leaned into Danny, remaining locked to the bartender’s lips.

“You’re hot, dude,” Danny said as he released his grip on Steve’s head.

"You're okay yourself," Steve told him, casually.

Aaron wasn't sure how to react. Was this normal? For a sex club, probably...but for Steve? This sudden easy intimacy between Steve and someone he had only just met made Aaron uneasy.

Would I ever accustom myself to such casual contact, as though it were the handshake in my new life? It was the first time I had seen Steve with someone else...and I felt hit in the gut. I wanted to be the one feeling Steve's tongue exploring in my mouth, not watch while he and someone else, someone unknown, were intimate.

"I'm going to have a smoke," Steve said after finishing his drink. "You stay, pumpkin...and keep this stud company," his eyes smiling in Danny's direction. Steve got up, and leaning into Aaron curled his left arm around his friend's neck, bringing Aaron's lips to his, entangling his tongue around Aaron's, pressing his warm bare body against Aaron's whose fears receded into the darkness of his inner being.

"Okay, baby. Don't be long," Aaron panted as Steve released his grip.

"Your friend's hot," Danny exhaled, resting his arms on the bar in front of Aaron.

"Yeah," Aaron agreed, not wanting to fall in too much with what he was beginning to realize was both a gift and a curse.

“So, what are the two of you, boyfriends?” Danny asked, his eyes now fixed on Aaron who was following Steve as he disappeared up the steps to the terrace.

“No, not really,” Aaron answered, languidly. “We’ve known each other for about six months.”

“If he were my boyfriend, I would keep him locked away,” Danny said as he lifted his left arm and, reaching across the bar, stroked Aaron’s face. “You’re hot too, dude,” Danny added, moving around the end of the bar to where Aaron was sitting, standing in front of Aaron, between Aaron’s parted legs.

“You’re okay, Aaron.” Danny guided Aaron’s hand to the band of his jock strap, lifting him off the stool so that Aaron’s body was firm against his, slowly moving his pelvis rhythmically into Aaron’s groin.

“Yeah, baby, you’re just fine,” Danny breathed into Aaron’s mouth, pressing his body farther into Aaron’s, Aaron grabbing the bartender’s ass so as not to fall backward.

Danny’s tongue found Aaron’s waiting mouth. “I think you could use a little action,” he said as he weighed himself into Aaron, his hands feeling Aaron’s body as he moved them down to Aaron’s briefs which he slowly moved down Aaron’s legs. “We both could,” Danny’s voice trailed off as his mouth, now on Aaron’s chest, moved down Aaron’s body, over his stomach. “Yes, this is what I mean,” Danny exhaled.

With the touch of the other man's hands and tongue, Aaron felt panic mixed with a tingling sensation throughout his body. His first impulse was to resist, to withdraw from a situation his instincts told him were just not right. He was here with Steve...who had just left only to have a cigarette. Steve had initiated contact with Danny and had returned the bartender's passionate kiss which seemed to Aaron inappropriate. But this was a sex club, he reminded himself. He was there to experiment, to have sex...anonymous sex. But what if Steve saw them?

Aaron's feelings were mixed up, and he hadn't the time, or the desire, to sort them out. He had to react. He had to act. That was part of the game he found himself playing.

"Shit man, that's hot," Aaron gasped, holding Danny's head as he fell back against the bar for support.

"You two look like you're enjoying yourselves," a voice familiar to Aaron wafted toward him as though floating in on a magic carpet. He opened his eyes to the darkness of the room.

"Steve?" he finally blurted. "I'm glad you're back."

"Yeah, buttercup, it's me." Steve stood in back of the kneeling Danny and, reaching over the bartender's bent body, pulled Aaron toward him, their mouths meeting, their tongues locking in a hard embrace.

"I think pumpkin here needs to be fucked. What about it, Danny?" Steve asked,

turning to the bartender.

“I think I’ll fuck you both,” Danny answered. “Yeah, I think that’s what the two of you need.”

“I love you, Steve,” Aaron’s eyes whispered, drinking in Steve’s breath as he searched into the darkness.

Back in their hotel room Steve draped his arm around Aaron’s shoulder, pulling him closer.

“You don’t mind, sugar?” Steve asked, his words floating along the night air of the air-conditioned room. At the club Danny suggested that they join him in his apartment at the end of his shift.

What could I say? Danny was hot...but I wanted Steve, not Danny, and I wanted Steve to want me, not have a third person join us.

“No, I don’t mind,” but Aaron did. With his experience at the club, he now knew what to expect...and this filled him with anxieties. He was never really at ease with Steve. There was so much he didn’t know, so much about him shrouded in mystery, even though he appeared to be open and honest, and this confused Aaron. Steve hid his life in New York behind a veneer of sensuality that attracted Aaron to the point that he lost his sense of self. Steve was a magnet, and

Aaron wanted — needed — to be attached to him.

I knew Steve's past; it's one of the factors that, in a weird sort of way, attracted me. He was hot; he excited attention. Steve had a gift: sex appeal. On entering a room, or walking in the street, he turned heads of both men and women. He wore his tight clothes casually, showing off his muscled chest and taut torso.

It was past 5:00. Danny's shift would end at 10:00, giving Aaron a few hours to be prepared, to put together his thoughts and feelings. He looked at Steve, stretched out on the bed. His hand stroked Steve's chest, gently tracing circles around Steve's pecs, his lips brushed the tips of Steve's nipples. Slowly his hand came to rest on that part of Steve's stomach that he loved to love. It was warm and moved up and down in rhythm with his breathing. He felt Steve's hand on his head. Aaron laid his other hand on Steve's thigh, touching him in the same way he was caressing his friend's stomach and chest. As Steve breathed, his stomach rose to meet Aaron's lips. Aaron's fingers played with the fine hairs that ran down from Steve's navel, his eyes drank in the sensuality of Steve's skin. He allowed his lips to wander, lightly skimming the surface of Steve's flesh, his lips slowly caressing, Steve's hands on his head, pressing Aaron's face into his flesh.

"Come here, sugar," Steve said, raising Aaron, putting his arms around Aaron and bringing his friend on top of him, his tongue darting in and out of Aaron's ears, sending waves of electricity throughout Aaron's body.

"I want all of you, Aaron; all of you," Steve's arms surrounding Aaron's body,

his muscled legs enfolding Aaron in an embrace, his tongue exploring Aaron's mouth and throat.

Steve slept, his face angelic, breathing the sleep of the guileless, with Aaron lying so close he fitted Steve's body like a second skin. But Aaron slept fitfully. Despite the love he had just felt, he was filled with the anxieties brought on by their pending meeting with Danny. From time to time, he awakened and looked at Steve's immobile features.

As my gaze now drank in the pureness of his body, I knew what I had to do.

Finally, Steve stirred, turned over and pulled Aaron into his warmth, his arm draping Aaron's body, his hand enfolding Aaron's.

"Good morning, sugar," Steve sleepily smiled. "What time is it?"

"2:00, baby," Aaron answered.

"Weren't we supposed to meet Danny? You were going to wake me before 10:00," Steve said, his eyes still closed with lingering sleep.

"I thought you would want to sleep as long as you could," Aaron lied.

"But we told Danny we would meet him at his apartment," Steve said, lifting his hand that was entwined in Aaron's, rolling over onto his back. Aaron didn't answer but rested his face on Steve's stomach. They lay there for a few minutes, Aaron thinking that Steve had gone back to sleep.

“Shall we get up and have breakfast?” Aaron asked, still lying face down on Steve’s lower stomach, enjoying where he was even though by now Steve wasn’t in the best mood. He knew he was pushing the situation.

“Yeah, we might as well,” Steve said. “I’m going to shower first,” and lifted Aaron’s head, kissed him, flung himself off the bed and disappeared into the bathroom. Aaron remained on the bed. From past experience, Steve would be in the bathroom a good thirty to forty minutes.

I wasn’t sure how to react. Steve seemed to take missing our meeting Danny well. But for all I knew he could be seething, blaming me for not awaking him in time and thereby missing another encounter with one hot dude. But I had to face my own limits, how far I would go, not only for myself but also with Steve.

So, what disturbed me? When I saw Steve touch Danny my heart sank. My stomach ached. I felt it should be me, not Danny. Steve should have been kissing me, only me, not some anonymous shadow in a dark corridor, or a hot stud wearing a jock strap that showed everything he had to offer. Steve was there to guide me in this new life, not to be sidetracked for his own pleasures.

After Steve finished showering, they left the hotel. They walked in silence, with none of the bounce of the previous night. The weather had changed, now cloudy skies portending rain, possibly torrential.

They stopped at a restaurant nearby. “Well, pumpkin, how’d you sleep?” Steve asked as he looked around from his seat in their booth.

“Okay, I guess. Well, actually, not much,” Aaron answered, his head, heavy with lingering thoughts of the previous night, trying to concentrate on the menu.

Not looking at Aaron, Steve asked, distractedly, “Why? Didn’t you enjoy yourself last night? You certainly looked like you were into the scene.” Aaron didn’t know if he should pursue Steve’s line of thought, or change the subject. Before he could answer, a chummy voice startled him. Aaron looked up...into Danny’s smiling face.

“Hi, guys,” Danny crooned. “Mind if I join you?” sliding into the seat beside Steve who leaned into his body, kissing him.

Danny’s casualness, Steve’s easy acceptance of Danny’s being there, and their intimacy, caused my churning stomach to increase my sense of unreality. All I wanted was to leave, leave Danny, leave Montreal, and drive home.

“I thought I might hear from you this morning; was kinda looking forward to us getting together.” Danny rested his right hand on Steve’s thigh.

“We slept late. Only just got up an hour ago,” Aaron answered, looking at his watch.

“No problem. We can always hook up later.”

Steve and Danny talked like old friends about what mutually interested them, one being sex during international flights. Steve encouraged Danny to divulge

personal facts rather than offer any himself.

After a half hour, when they had finished their meal and Aaron had paid the waiter, the moment arrived that Aaron had dreaded.

“Okay, guys, let’s go back to my place and finish what we began last night,” Danny said.

“Yeah, that sounds about what I had in mind too. Let’s go, Aaron.” Steve left the booth, placing his hand around Danny’s waist as they left the restaurant. Outside the rain was picking up.

“I think we should head back to Vermont,” Aaron blurted out suddenly.

“Come on, babe, let’s just go to Danny’s for a little, you know, and then we’ll go home.” Steve said this looking all the while at Danny, his hand now having moved from Danny’s waist to his ass, Danny’s hand placed on Steve’s shoulder cupping his neck. Steve looked at Danny – with a ‘let’s-get-these-clothes-off-and-fuck’ look. Danny’s expression suggested the same. He leaned into Steve, placing his lips on Steve’s. Aaron watched as Danny’s tongue entered Steve’s parted lips, and stayed there, playing.

“Yeah, Aaron, come on up, just for an hour or two,” Danny added, without looking at him.

My mind went blank. I was scared. I said the first thing that came to me; it was what I

wanted.

“Sorry, Danny, but you told me back in the club that I should take Steve home... lock him up and throw away the key. We better be getting back...” Aaron’s voice trailed off before finishing his thought. *I panicked. My heart was racing, and I felt light-headed.*

“Okay, Aaron. Let’s go back...if that’s what you want.” Steve looked at his friend, coldly.

In the car, neither Steve nor Aaron talked for a long time, but, in reality, was only a few minutes. They had left the hot, humid air of the city for the chill that took over in the car. They had suddenly become strangers, with little in common...and less to say to each other.

It was raining harder. There wasn’t much traffic as it was Sunday, but the driving would be more difficult because of the rain.

“What’s wrong with you?” Steve finally asked, turning to look at Aaron.

“I didn’t want to go back to Danny’s, that’s all. I want to spend the evening with you...not with Danny.”

Steve looked ahead. Neither spoke. Then Steve turned, looking at Aaron.

“You’re in love with me,” he snapped. “You’re in love with me, and you’re jealous. That’s why you didn’t want to stay.”

Aaron didn't answer.

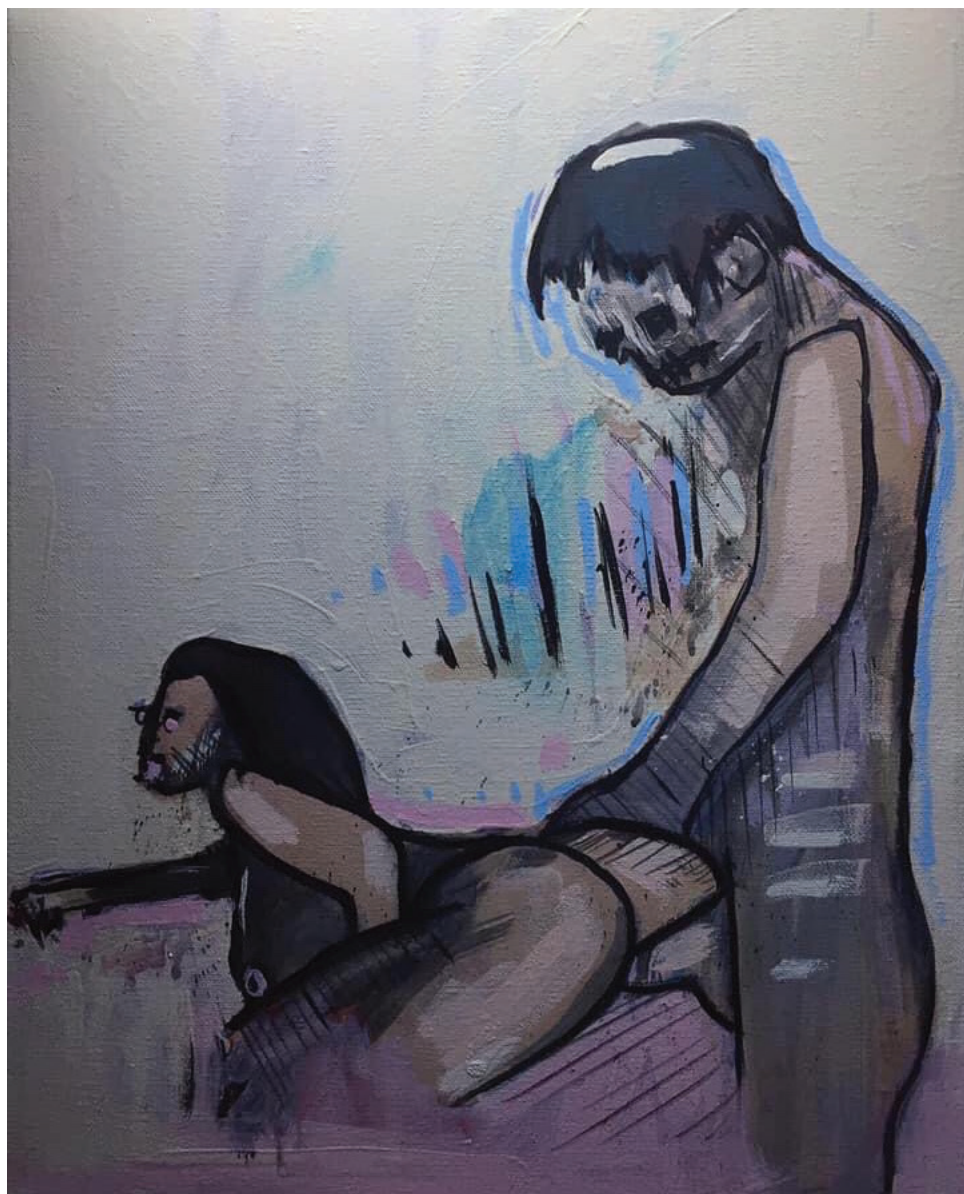
"You don't know what shit I had to go through to come up here," Steve spat out defiantly. Then, speaking calmly, coldly. "I want to go back to New York, tonight."

Aaron's insides went numb. He hadn't expected this. He was exhausted. He needed sleep.

Was this the end? I might not see Steve again. My stomach and chest filled with waves of nausea. It all seemed to have come apart, to have disintegrated. Could our relationship mean so little to Steve that he'd be willing to let it all go...over what?

They passed through customs without incident. And then they were at the airport.

"Good luck, Aaron."



FLASH

Death Wants Another Paloma

The month my husband's father dies, I want to leave for Connecticut immediately when we learn that his father has stopped eating and has been put on supplemental oxygen. I arrive home from food shopping and find my kindhearted husband crying in our living room, overwhelmed by fear that his father may die alone in a nursing home, overwhelmed by what to do with the kids, his ex-wife, her parents, work, how to drive 600 miles from North Carolina to Connecticut during the pandemic, overwhelmed with watching the calendar and counting down the days until we are fully immunized, waiting each moment for the phone call, *it's too late*.

The week my husband's father dies, my husband doesn't perceive Death, doesn't see Her lingering around our house in Durham, doesn't know how quickly She can move when necessity demands. I look over at Death, luxuriating on our sofa, feet up on the coffee table wearing my new red patent leather heels, thumbing through one of my husband's hobbyist wooden sailboat magazines, mouthing the lyrics to *Sea of Love*. She gives me a *What did you expect?* shrug as I glare at Her. Death sighs. *Sorry about your two cousins earlier this month*. Yeah, I know, you like to take my family away in threes, I tell her, recalling my mother and grandparents. When I turn away to kiss my husband's temple, She singsongs, *Better hurry babycakes along*.

The day my husband's father dies, my husband stays all night on the ICU, after driving all day up the east coast, holding his father's hand, whispering their lives to him through a surgical mask. When my husband's mother and I arrive at the

hospital that morning, I scan the room for Death but we're alone in the sunshine and linoleum among silent machines. I hold my husband's father's hand and my husband holds mine. After psalms and prayers – I almost miss Her – Death appears, luminous as a Hollywood starlet in Art Deco platinum and silk.

The night my husband's father dies, my husband falls asleep while crying in my arms. I lie awake, alone with Death, soothed by the sound of Her knitting needles marking time until dawn.

The night after my husband's father dies, my husband falls asleep with echoes of my love ringing in his ears. I look up and notice Death tracing the stitching on the bedspread, goth and adorable. Her jeans and Doc Martins look so soft. You better not give him a heart attack during sex, I tell Her. It's too soon for him. He loves sex with me. LOVES it. Death laughs that I'm predictably Freudian when it comes to my death drives. Before she vanishes, she winks at me. Winks – then, blows me a kiss. She looks tired.

The week after my husband's father dies, we drive twelve hours home. We end up out back with icy Palomas and the girls' old Daisy BB gun. We tie seltzer cans to the mimosa tree and chat with neighbors about dahlias and peonies. We take turns shooting the cans like I did in summer with my sister on Old Hickory Lake in Tennessee and agree there's nothing quite as satisfying as the *pink!* of the BB striking metal. We shoot the cans one-handed and sip our cocktails. I watch my husband aim, poised on a bed of loblolly needles, right knee up, his other

leg curled around – his body singing to me like something Pythagorean. His sneakers sparkle and his father's pressed shirt fits him like an Eagle Scout, like all the boys my parents wanted me to bring home. Death pouts, rattles the ice cubes in Her high ball in front of my face. *It's empty. I want some more of that tequila and gunshot grapefruit.*

I get up to mix Death another round.

Petroglyph

Torchlight led the way, one attentive step at a time. He penetrated the deep recesses of the earth where boots had never tread. Dark, forgotten places that time abandoned. His studies unraveled tall tales and legends, determination forced his way in search of answers. Around the bend, through a slim passage, he found them. Ancient engravings danced on the wall in the light of his flame. Depictions of animals and hunters scattered from floor to ceiling. But the centerpiece was something he never expected.

A large being dominated the artistry. Carved in a style he'd never seen, it wielded six arms and four legs. One large eye and a mouth full of teeth adorned its head. Nothing like it had been found elsewhere in the world. The discovery of a new civilization, an undiscovered ancient god, worshipped by an unknown people, would surely bring him notoriety. Excitement drove him further into the darkness, excited he'd discover more.

He followed an array of unknown symbols etched sporadically along the path. Eventually the narrow tunnel opened to a cavern. He dropped his torch when the light revealed the living entity described in the primeval petroglyph. Riddled with grotesque swellings, its bulbous gut pulsated; each rounded protrusion rose and fell in relaxed motion. A rasp of breath echoed in the dark as it woke. He backed into the darkness on shaking legs as its eyelid opened to find its first meal in far too long. It raised itself on all four, opened its glistening maw of ivory blades, and satisfied its age-old hunger.

Feeding the System: Last Meals on Death Row

The origin of last meals is unclear. It's believed French prisoners were given a glass of rum prior to their deaths. In 16th-century England, inmates were invited to dine with their executioners. Today, in America, this tradition has taken on its own flavorful manifestations.

Jasper County Texas State Penitentiary, 2011

He had a tendency to whitewash everything, but that's what White Supremacists do. "It's not me, some unethical morality taught through my upbringing... it's just plain fact that Caucasian males are supreme over all other human beings," was the sort of blather he'd spew oh-so arrogantly. It's supposed that the minor infraction Lawrence Russell Brewer felt toward James Byrd, Jr. on June 7, 1998, is what drove him to chain the disabled Byrd mercilessly by the ankles to the back of his pickup truck and drag him to his death. "He had his thumb out hitch hiking," said Brewer. "He could see I was a white man; like I'm gonna be this *****'s chauffeur or somethin'. Well, I gave him a ride alright."

Last meal: two chicken-fried steaks, a pound of barbecue, and copious, indiscriminate sides. Not taking one bite of the excessive meal, Texas abolished its last-meal courtesy directly afterward.

In an analysis of 247 last meals, prepared in the U.S. over four years, the calorie count averaged 2,756 with four meals estimated at 7,000 plus. Seventy percent was fried food. From Coca-Cola to other specific brands, the choices remain

unusual – in their individuality and quirkiness.

Illinois' Old Stateville Penitentiary, 1994

Pogo the Clown almost arrived late to the McCartney's house in suburban Chicago to perform for Tommy's 7th birthday party. Subtle, but noticeable upon a discerning look, were the muddied ends of his faux satin, bell-bottomed costume – having just buried yet another victim in his prolific mass-murdering spree. The total victim count of this killer clown, sir name of John Wayne Gacy, reached an unimaginable 33 young boys and men. Today, he would pay with his life, recognized as the worst serial killer in US history. No painted-on smiles here. His pleas of innocence fell 'frown down,' even with support of a self-funded 900 number as a final party trick to scam funds to stay his execution.

Eating a bucket of fried chicken until all pieces 'disappeared' is said to have been his final sleight of hand – followed by a salty testimony of his innocence to onlookers before dying.

As a ritual, the last meal is intended not to comfort the condemned but to soften – for society – the harsh fact that a human is about to be killed with the law's full sanction.

U.S. Penitentiary, Terra Haute, 2001

Like many a kid, Timothy loved to play war. His young mind thought himself a great patriot. "Get out of your trenches, you Commies," he'd shout, rustling neighborhood friends from under bushes and out of trees... then, relieving them of their arms, take them 'prisoner.' Timothy McVeigh couldn't imagine, as a disgruntled army veteran, his mental incapacities would tip the scales of justice proving himself anything but patriotic: as the perpetrator of the bombing at the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma, killing 168 on April 19, 1995... The worst act of American domestic terrorism after only that of the attacks against New York and Washington, D.C. on September 11th, 2001. Standing in his stained khaki trousers and dirty white t-shirt prior to lethal injection, he says to the guard, "Where's my damn ice cream, Commie?"

Empty of two quarts of melting 'mint chocolate chip,' the bowl rested near a poem left in defiance. The words of William Earnest Henley's "Invictus" spoon fed his audience this sour message: "I am the master of my own fate; I am the captain of my soul."

Most states serve up last meals two days before execution. Price limits vary between states from \$15 to \$40. Given the maximum dollar allotment, what would be your order?

Shredding

What was that awful noise? Carol headed for the garage, certain that it was her husband Jack doing one of his home improvement stunts. Instead, peering through the window, she saw their daughter Angie shredding Jack's hand with the table saw, him screaming bloody murder. It was...

She always makes me clean up her messes. Bringing these guys home and leaving me to deal with them when she's through. I don't mind the killing, but this last one sprayed blood all over my favorite dress. I will ask her to buy me some coveralls...

They were mother and daughter and partners in crime. Carol was the lure; Angie sprung the trap. Vengeance was the force driving them in an attempt to right years of abuse at the hands of fathers, brothers, husbands and lovers – or those who tried to be. Carol was the grownup version of a perky cheerleader, but brunette instead of blond with an ember of resentment about it. Angie was unremarkable in appearance, pushed into the background by her mother's personality. Angie watched everything. She had learned from her own brushes with violence and her mother's indifference. So, it was easy for her to dispatch the men once Carol was done with them. Then Angie would hone her craft. Knives and saws were her go-to, although a hammer would do in a pinch. Slow and exquisite torture after a moment of surprise. Who would think this mousy girl capable of such cruelty? And no one did until the body count crept up. The women's blood lust consumed them.

Angie met Frank in the fall when school opened. They were in the same computer lab. Frank showed Angie how to do some simple coding. He paid

attention to her, not like most people, not like most guys. Frank didn't think she was stupid. So, it wasn't a complete surprise when Frank asked her out. Angie said yes, even invited him to pick her up at the house. Angie didn't think there'd be a problem. If she'd thought twice, she would've known better. How could there not be with Carol around?

Frank was as good as his word, showing up on time, eager to go. That would've been great had not Carol insinuated herself into their plans, deciding to interview (or was it entice?) Frank to see if he was suitable. Suitable for Angie or Carol was the question. Carol flirted with Frank turning on her charm. Angie was again pushed to the side, silently fuming, feeling betrayed by them both. They eventually left for the movie. Angie couldn't concentrate on the story. Afterward, over their meal, Frank would not shut up about how great he thought Carol was. That did it.

"Would you mind coming back to the house?" she said. "We're having a problem with the garbage disposal."

"I can't promise anything, but sure, I'll take a look."

Always as good as his word. Such a nice guy. They entered the house quietly, so as not to disturb Carol. In the kitchen, Frank knelt to look under the sink.

"Can you see anything?"

"Not yet."

"Let me get you a flashlight." A hammer, really. "Here you go." A blow to the

back of the head, at the base of the skull. "Oops."

Angie dragged Frank's body to the garage to finish him off. This was close, too close. Time to wrap this up...

Carol was careless, unconcerned about any trouble they might get into.

However, Angie was more cautious and methodical. Carol liked the house her late husband had bought and the familiarity of their suburban neighborhood.

Good. She can stay here. Angie thought she would leave one body behind for the police to discover. There were bound to be questions, so, no shredding this time.

Angie chose to poison Carol, bringing her a cup of tea, laced with sleeping pills.

Before dawn, Angie left the house and caught a bus headed west, not caring what the destination was, as long as it was away from there. She roamed the coast for a couple of years, sprinkling it with bodies until the police tracked her down. Even then, she was happy. At least people noticed her.

Terrence PoorThunder



REVIEWS

The Next In A Series Of Parables On How To Be Part Of A Shooting Star: A Review of Michael J. Seidlinger's *Anybody Home?*

Clash Books, 2022

220 pages

During the pandemic, I started watching horror movies. They were entertainment, sure – sensation, distraction. But more than that: watching horrifying things happen to vulnerable characters, I could tap into my own deep-down feeling that horrifying things beyond my control or comprehension had been happening to me, and to people I loved. My mirror neurons, watching the horror unfold onscreen, found a way to release the helpless fear and stubborn resilience I didn't want to acknowledge or dwell on, for fear they would drown me. It was a medicinal experience – almost anesthetizing. As Emily Dickinson wrote: “After great pain, a formal feeling comes – / The Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs –”

Eventually, it occurred to me that this was possibly what Aristotle had meant by catharsis. And it's this same quality in the brutality of Michael J. Seidlinger's *Anybody Home?* (Clash Books, 2022) that I found so intriguing. It pulled me right in.

The plot is pretty simple: a troupe of brutal, antisocial personalities perform a home invasion. They stalk a suburban family, under the guidance of someone who's done this sort of thing before. They lay their plans carefully, thinking through each step from every angle. And I use the word “angle” advisedly, because they also film the whole thing. With intention to distribute the footage

on the dark web, and then get a Hollywood studio deal.

That is to say, they calculatedly plan a mass murder as a form of both art and entertainment. What's their motivation? The legacy their crime will provide them – the infamy of adoration by “the cults.”

One of the most interesting, and deeply fucked-up, qualities of this book is the way its warped perspective twists your mirror neurons, subconsciously altering your definition of suspense. You catch your breath when something goes wrong, as in any horror movie – but in this case, things “going wrong” means when the invaders encounter potential obstacles (no spoilers) to pulling off their heinous crime and have to figure out new ways to achieve their objectives. This means that we as readers panic slightly whenever something starts to go (morally) right. Even if we aren't quite cheering the killers on – because it's impossible not to feel for the family they're tormenting and killing, as unlikable as the author makes them – we still have the knee-jerk reaction of wondering how the invaders will be able to adapt when things go awry. And we want to read on to find out.

Comparisons to Paul Tremblay's home invasion novel *The Cabin at the End of the World* are inevitable; to my mind, the two books are wildly different. Tremblay's book mourns senseless loss and maps the potentially fruitless struggle of the universe to self-correct when humans knock it out of balance with their vicious and violent behaviors. *Anybody Home?* utterly lacks this mournful quality,

replacing it with a cool, reptilian fascination. It asks characters — and readers — directly: What’s your motivation? What keeps you reading? What keeps you making art? What keeps you invested in true crime? In literary, fictional crime? In human violence?

From the beginning, this book calls back to other works that emphasize the horror that stems from realizing that human brutality is ubiquitous and often incidental. In *Ils* and *Them*, the chilling line is, “Because you were home.” In those films, home invaders torture a family, selected entirely by chance, for their own sadistic entertainment. The idea of entertainment motivating such vile acts of violence is (we think as we watch films like this) incomprehensible, and therefore fascinating. It’s part of why a book that explores these ideas might be considered art. But Seidlinger turns this idea on its head in revealing that the motivation behind this home invasion is our entertainment. (Without “the cults” as audience, the killers could never achieve the kind of legacy they hope for.) As we consume their narrative, is it possible that our bloodlust is comparable to theirs? It’s not that we’re as bad as they are — we’re not actually killing anyone, of course — but is it grotesque that we enjoy the mass murder, even as we think we’re civilized? The only characters in this book who bear similar illusions of moral superiority are the family being torturously killed in their own home. With this book, has Seidlinger shown up to kill the way we see ourselves, in ours?

It’s a pivot reminiscent of the end of Peter Greenaway’s film *Baby of Maçon*, which concludes with a decadent crowd of Medici courtiers applauding us, the

audience, for having watched a vicious, lethal assault on the main character. In attending such performances, we are attendants to the culture of cruelty in which they thrive. As such, we participate in and become part of the performance, and part of the cruelty.

“What’s your motivation?” the invaders’ leader asks repeatedly throughout the novel, coaching their performance.

Well?

(Motivated readers can perform their attendance [here](#).)

Review of Hillary Leftwich's *Ghosts Are Just Strangers Who Know How To Knock*

Agape Editions, 2023
155 pages

In [*Ghosts Are Just Strangers Who Know How to Knock*](#), Hillary Leftwich has constructed a haunted house from the inside out, scaffolded by bone staircases and sealed by wild luminescence. Here, poetry, visual art and lyric essay reside in synchronicity, filling each room with their power and presence. The light and the darkness, blind houseguests and feeds the imagination like the monster it is.

Leftwich's poems pry apart the bright portals of memory and drag them like beating hearts through fields of wildflowers glazed with snow. *Ghosts Are Just Strangers* explores grief, childhood and healing with maturity and imagination, and does so in a way that feels both surreal and stark, wondrous and matter of fact. In the poem "Lifespan," the speaker observes a young girl and her mother in a butterfly conservatory—this moment becomes at once haunting and pastoral, a devastating combination which Leftwich pulls off brilliantly throughout the book.

Poems like this one characterize the collection, drawing our sorrow as well as our curiosity and awe. Lyric essays such as "Playdate" bring us to the present day, in which the speaker writes "if it [the house] happened to be haunted, if the ghosts were still attached to the flaking walls, I can live with them." And isn't this a conclusion we all must draw to survive what haunts us? If ghosts are strangers knocking on our doors, Leftwich invites them in for dinner where she prepares

a feast fit only for those brave enough to sit down to dinner not only with phantoms, but with the phantoms that live inside each reader, inside us all.

The Days of Abandonment: At Book-to-Film Review

Elena Ferrante is famous for articulating female experiences that are rarely expressed in literature or society. *The Days of Abandonment*, Ferrante's second novel published in 2002 is some of her most visceral writing, depicting the mental and physical deterioration of Olga, an upper-class housewife whose husband leaves her for a younger woman. Olga's physical actions throughout the novel reveal her extreme grief and unraveling. Often, she creates shocking and grotesque scenes: she frantically puts makeup on only half of her face; she crashes her car, injuring her daughter and carrying her, bleeding, through the street; she slaps herself in front of her children; she beats the dog; locked in her apartment, she tries to turn the key with her feet, her teeth; she pees and poops in a public park.

The Days of Abandonment was adapted to film in 2005, directed by Roberto Faenza, and, notably, does not show or imply any of these unpleasant events. What's lost in translation is no coincidence: removing the most disturbing, unfeminine acts turns a guttural truth into a palatably sad break-up story. Not only is the film's story less meaningful, it is one that has been told a thousand times before.

In arguments about who has the right to tell whose story, *The Days of Abandonment* is a stark example of the damage that can be done when the proverbial pen is passed into the wrong hands. When Faenza got the power of Ferrante's storytelling, he turned her narrative into just the archetype her novel so blatantly rebels against.



CONTRIBUTORS

Katherine Abrams is a poet, collage artist, trashy furniture refinisher, gluten free baker, coffee addict, sarcastic English lecturer, and compulsive volunteer. She lives in North Carolina with her wife and two kids, where they grow more butternut squash than a family can eat.

M.J. Arcangelini, born in Pennsylvania in 1952, has resided in northern California since 1979. He has published in magazines and journals including *The James White Review*, *Rusty Truck*, *The Ekphrastic Review*, *The Gasconade Review*, *Trailer Park Quarterly*, *As It Ought To Be Magazine*, *The Rye Whisky Review*, and *Live Nude Poems* & over a dozen anthologies. He has authored six published collections, the most recent of which is *Pawning My Sins* (Luchador Press, 2022).

Dee Artea found a creative voice at the age of 77, three years ago, from which emerged a variety of short stories and poems — some of which have been published in online journals and magazines. For Dee, who lives in Winnipeg, Canada, the act of writing ever entails amusement and gratification — whether or not the works appear in print.

Subhaga Crystal Bacon is a Queer poet living in rural Washington on unceded Methow land. She is the author of four collections of poetry including *Surrender of Water in Hidden Places*, winner of the Red Flag Poetry Chapbook Prize, forthcoming in the spring, and *Transitory*, recipient of the Isabella Gardner Award for Poetry, forthcoming in the fall of 2023 from BOA Editions. She is a teacher of embodied awakening, a support for life's difficult unpredictabilities.

Elizabeth Balise is a resident of Scranton, Pennsylvania, who grew up in Springfield, Massachusetts. Most of her working life has been devoted to human services and teaching English in public schools. She has been published in a number of online journals, and was a featured poet for the United States and Canada for *The Blue Nib*, September 2019. Her first volume of poetry, *In the Mercy of Snow*, was published by Kelsay Books in 2022.

Topper Barnes is an expatriate who has been living abroad for five years. He currently resides in Tbilisi, Georgia, where he teaches ESL by day and writes by night. His work strives to reveal the yearnings and torments of outsiders. His work can be found on Sublunary Review and Fictional Cafe.

Tina Barry is the author of *Beautiful Raft* and *Mall Flower*. Her writing can be found in *The Best Small Fictions 2020* (spotlighted story) and 2016, *The American Poetry Journal*, *ONE ART: a journal of poetry*, *Gyroscope Review*, *Nasty Women Poets* anthology, *Feckless Cunt*, *Rattle* and *the Fourth River*. Tina is a three-time Pushcart Prize nominee and has several Best of the Net nods. She teaches at The Poetry

Barn and Writers.com.

David Boyle has been exhibiting art in Palmerston North, Hastings, and Wellington, New Zealand, for many years. His paintings are oil on canvas and have a folksy, illustrative feel. His themes are very escapist /surreal – much action, boys and girls adventure pics – women on large motorbikes and sidecars, British Bobbies, jungle action, animals and famous characters. He also bolts terrible books shut and makes lampshades with X-rays.

April Bradley is a Durham, North Carolina-based writer. Her fiction and essays appear in *CRAFT Literary*, *Heavy Feather Review*, *Narratively*, and *jmww*, among others. She is the editor of *RUBY* and a submissions editor at *SmokeLong Quarterly*. She and her spouse live part-time on their sailboat, *Daily Alice*, where *Alice* has a standing invitation for tea and cake. Find her online at aprilbradley.com and on Twitter at @april_bradley.

Shannon Brugh is a freelance writer living in Seattle with her husband and two sons. Her work has appeared in *Brain*, *Child Magazine*, *The Huffington Post*, *Luna Luna Magazine*, *Ethel*, *The Manifest-Station*, and more.

Lubrina Burton is a U.S. Army veteran who mines her military pain for her writing pleasure. She lives in Lexington, KY with her husband and pug dog who serve as her first beta readers/listeners. Her personal short stories are featured in several anthologies, including “That Southern Thing,” “Trouble,” “Curious Stuff,” and “Twists and Turns.”

Yuan Changming edits Poetry Pacific with Allen Yuan in Vancouver. Poetry credits include 12 Pushcart nominations and 15 chapbooks as well as appearances in *Best of the Best Canadian Poetry (2008-2017)*, *BestNewPoemsOnline & Poetry Daily*, among 1997 others across 49 countries. Yuan was a judge for Canada’s 2021 National Magazine Awards. In early 2022, Yuan began to write and publish fiction. Currently, he is working on his first (hybrid) novel (trilogy) *Edening*.

Mannfred X. Collins was born and reared in the West. He is presently an obscure civil servant of long standing in the lesser Bay Area of California. He is a product of a 20th Century education (AA & BA) and a child of the Cold War. This is his first publication.

john compton (b. 1987) is gay poet who lives in kentucky with his husband josh and their dogs and cats. his third full-length book, *the castration of a minor god*, was published with ghost city press (dec 2022).

J.T. Cunningham is a graduate of the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities, where he was published in the 2020 edition of the *Tower*.

Alysa Levi-D'Ancona teaches high school English by day and pursues her MFA in Creative Writing and Poetics at UW Bothell at every other waking hour. Her writing is featured in *The RavensPerch*, *UWB Crow*, *Clamor*, *Occulum*, *Stone Pacific Zine*, *Stories That Need to Be Told 2021*, and Querencia Press. Liminality, surrealism, postmodernism, absurdism, and magical realism are the pepper of her pages; cats, coffee, cooking, hikes, warm blankets, and naps are the salt of her earth.

Megan Diedericks' debut poetry collection, *the darkest of times, the darkest of thoughts*, is available on Amazon. Her work has appeared in wonderful literary journals. Situated in South Africa, and when she's not writing, she lives in worlds of fiction with background music to match — or playing with the dogs. For more information: megwrites.carrd.co

Alexander Etheridge has been developing his poems and translations since 1998. His poems have been featured in *The Potomac Review*, *Scissors and Spackle*, *Ink Sac*, *Cerasus Journal*, *The Cafe Review*, *The Madrigal*, *Abridged Magazine*, *Susurrus Magazine*, *The Journal*, *Roi Faineant Press*, and many others. He was the winner of the Struck Match Poetry Prize in 1999, and a finalist for the *Kingdoms in the Wild* Poetry Prize in 2022.

Lee Andrew Forman is a writer, editor, and publisher from the Hudson Valley region in New York. Lee has published three books to date, *The Bury Box*, *Zero Perspective*, and *Fragments of a Damned Mind*, along with numerous short stories in multiple anthologies. He is a co-owner of Sirens Call Publications, a regular contributor to *The Lift*, and writes non-fiction pieces for various periodicals. Find him online @leeandrewforman.

Joan Kwon Glass is the Korean American author of *Night Swim* (2022), winner of the Diode Editions Book Contest, & three chapbooks published in 2022. She teaches on the faculty of the Hudson Valley Writers Center, Brooklyn Poets, the International Women Writers Guild & the Maine Writers Alliance, & serves as editor in chief for Harbor Review. Joan's work has won or been finalist for several prizes including the Pushcart Prize, Sundress Anthology Best of the Net, the Washburn Prize & the Subnivean Award, and her poems have been published or are forthcoming in *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Asian American Writer's Workshop* (The Margins), *RHINO*, *Dialogist* & elsewhere. Please see her website at www.joankwonglass.com for more information.

Phil Goldstein's debut poetry collection, *How to Bury a Boy at Sea*, was published by Stillhouse Press in April 2022. His poetry has been nominated for a Best of the Net award and has appeared in South Florida Poetry Journal, The Laurel Review, Rust+Moth, Moist Poetry Journal, Two Peach, The Indianapolis Review, and elsewhere. He lives in Washington, D.C., with his wife Jenny, and their dog named Brenna, and two cats, Grady and Princess.

Alais Henri is the nom de plume of a Latina author who is legitimately terrified that her mom might find out about her outrageous scribbles. This is her first official publication, but she is very excited to have her novel *The Place of Something Evil* under contract to be published by Haunted Doll House (an imprint of Agape Editions) in June of 2023.

Joanna Clapps Herman has had 41 publications during the Covid era: poems, micro and prose: in Odyssey PM, MUTHA, Pummerola, The Ocean State Review, Italian Americana, Persimmon Tree, Fatal Flaw Literary Magazine and Short Beasts. Book length publications include, *When I am Italian: Quando sono italiana*, *No Longer and Not Yet* and *The Anarchist Bastard: Growing Up Italian in America*. She has co-edited two anthologies; *Wild Dreams and Our Roots Are Deep with Passion*.

Keith Hoerner's writing has been featured in 100+ lit mags and other venues. He is founding editor of the award-winning Microfiction ezine/print anthology *The Dribble Drabble Review*.

Andrea (Andi) Horowitz, an emerging poet who is older than she should be, is a retired High School teacher. She graduated from the University of Florida, and lives in Fort Myers with her husband and their two cairn terriers, BeCa and Bleecker.

Paul Ilechko is a Pushcart-nominated poet who lives with his partner in Lambertville, NJ. His work has appeared in many journals, including *The Night Heron Barks*, *Tampa Review*, *Iron Horse Literary Review*, *Sleet Magazine*, and *The Inflectionist Review*. His first album, *Meeting Points*, was released in 2021.

Doug Jacquier's writing meanders amongst the peaks and the swamps of various forms of short story, flash fiction, poetry, and non-fiction, from the lunatic to the lucid. He blogs at [Six Crooked Highways \(wordpress.com\)](https://www.sixcrookedhighways.com)

Courtney Leigh Jameson is the author of the chapbook *the unrequited <3<3 of red riding hood & her lycan lover* (Dancing Girl Press, 2016). She is the editor of White Stag Publishing & creatrix of Crimson Sage Apothecary. Find more of her

creations at crimsonsageaz.com & whitestagpublishing.com.

Scott C. Kaestner is a Los Angeles poet, writer, dad, husband, and earthling who wishes our galaxy was called Snickers instead of the Milky Way. Google 'scott kaestner poetry' to peruse his musings and doings.

Jess Kent is a writer, board gamist, improvisational comedian, and lover of Homestar Runner cartoons. Originally from Brooklyn, New York, she now lives in Omaha, Nebraska with her spouse and two cats. She regularly hosts a virtual writing session with her friends, the first rule of which is to absolutely talk about Write Club. More about Jess can be found at <http://jessicakent.com>.

Gordon Kippola spent thirty-one years as a U.S. Army musician, earned an MFA in Creative Writing at the University of Tampa, and now calls Bremerton, Washington home. His poetry has appeared in *Rattle*, *Post Road Magazine*, *District Lit*, *The Main Street Rag*, *Southeast Missouri State University Press*, and other splendid publications.

E.P. Lande was born in Montreal and lived most of his life in the south of France. He now lives with his partner in Vermont on a 500-acre farm. Previously, he taught at l'Université d'Ottawa where he served as Vice-Dean of his faculty; he has also owned and managed country inns and free-standing restaurants. His stories have recently appeared in *Bewildering Stories*, *Literally Stories*, *StoryHouse*, *The Pine Cove Review*, and in *10 by 10*.

Kiara Nicole Letcher is poet who currently resides in Omaha, Nebraska. She received her MFA from The University of Nebraska at Omaha in 2014. Her chapbook *Scream Queen* was released October 2019 through The Orchard Street Press. Her work has also appeared in *Green Mountains Review*, *Plainsongs Magazine*, *Adelaide Magazine*, *Stone Highway Review*, and *Quiet Diamonds*.

Sarah Lilius is the author of the full-length poetry collection *Dirty Words* (Indie Blu(e) Publishing 2021) and six chapbooks, including *GIRL* (dancing girl press, 2017) and *Traffic Girl* (Ghost City Press, 2020). Her work has appeared in various journals, including *Fourteen Hills*, *Boulevard*, *Massachusetts Review*, and *New South*. Her writing has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net. She lives in Virginia with her husband and two sons.

Matthew Lopez is a fairly new writer, having only been at this for about two years. This is his first published piece. (He's not exactly sure what's supposed to be in a bio, so this is his best guess.)

Valerie Loveland enjoys silent movies, audio poetry, collage, and celebrity cats. Her manuscript [*unsolved mysteries theme song*] will be published this year. She lives in Southern New Jersey.

Sheryl Singleton Lynch is a writer living in New York City. Her work has appeared in numerous journals and newspapers. You can read more of her short fiction in her seven chapbooks available through Amazon.com. Please visit her website at: sherylsingletonlynch.weebly.com.

Karla Linn Merrifield has had 1000+ poems appear in dozens of journals and anthologies. She has 16 books to her credit. Her newest poetry collection, *My Body the Guitar*, nominated for the 2022 National Book Award, was inspired by famous guitarists and their guitars (Before Your Quiet Eyes Publications Holograph Series, December 2021). Web site: <https://www.karalinnmerrifield.org/>; blog at <https://karalinnmerrifield.wordpress.com/>; Tweet @LinnMerrifield; <https://www.facebook.com/karalinn.merrifield>.

Dana Miller is a winged wordthing from Atlanta, Georgia. Her poetic syllables like to trundle in the wilds—usually in search of a smackerel or two. On their way, they have found themselves in places like *Sledgehammer Lit*, *FERAL: A Journal of Poetry and Art*, and *Small Leaf Press*. When not wielding a lethal pen, Dana adores surf culture, Australian grunge rockers, muscle cars, Epiphone guitars, glitter, Doc Martens, and medieval-looking draft horses with feathered feet.

Melissa A. Morgan is a multi-genre fiction writer living in Pontotoc, MS with her wife, Lisa. Melissa's work has appeared in *On the Run* and *Ligeia Magazine* and garnered an Honorable Mention in the 2021 William Faulkner Literary Competition. Melissa is currently working on a collection of connected short stories and a novel.

Shilo Niziolek's cnf book, *Fever*, is out from Querencia Press. Her chapbook, *A Thousand Winters In Me*, is out from Gasher Press. *I Am Not An Erosion: Poems Against Decay*, a micro-chapbook of collage poetry, was part of Ghost City Press's online summer series 2022. Her work has appeared in *Pork Belly Press*, *[PANK]*, *Juked*, *Entropy*, *Oregon Humanities*, among others, and is forthcoming in *Phoebe Journal*, *Crab Creek Review*, and others.

Glenn Pape is a retired man attempting to age gracefully while sharing a house in Portland, Oregon with his wife and a terrier mutt who looks like a cross between Bernie Sanders and a loafah. He began submitting his writing in earnest at the age of 50, and has since been published in the *North American Review*, *The*

Sun, Poet Lore, Pulp Literature, and The Rhysling Anthology, among others.

Stephanie Parent is a writer of poetry and fiction and a lover of noir, the gothic, and all things deliciously dark. Her debut novel *The Briars* is forthcoming in May 2023. Follow her on Twitter at @SC_Parent.

Virginia Peck-Phillips is currently a graduate student living in New York City. This is the first short story she has published. In her free time, Virginia likes to travel, hike, play with her cat, and read books.

Kenneth Pobo (he/him) lives in Pennsylvania. He is the author of twenty-one chapbooks and nine full-length collections. Recent books include *Bend of Quiet* (Blue Light Press), *Loplop in a Red City* (Circling Rivers), *Uneven Steven* (Assure Press), *Sore Points* (Finishing Line Press) *Lilac and Sawdust* (Meadowlark Press) and *Lavender Fire, Lavender Rose* (BrickHouse Books).

Terrence PoorThunder: I've experienced many things / Your love I miss the most / Now I'm drugged out / Drinking on the coast / A deadly virus / And I'm the host / I saw the white coats / And was misdiagnosed / Send your love / Yesterday — I overdosed / Today / You're talking to a ghost

Greg Rapier's work has appeared or is forthcoming at places like *Dream Pop, The Nervous Breakdown, Five on the Fifth*, and *Fathom*. He has degrees in English and film and is working on his doctorate in creative writing and public theology (Yeah, that's a thing).

Saba Syed Razvi, PhD, is the author of: *In the Crocodile Gardens* (Elgin Award-nominee), *heliophobia* (on the preliminary ballot for the Bram Stoker Award® for Superior Achievement in Poetry), *Limerence & Lux, Of the Divining and the Dead*, and *Beside the Muezzin's Call & Beyond the Harem's Veil*. She's an Associate Professor of English & Creative Writing at the University of Houston in Victoria, TX.

Jessica Rowshandel (they/them) is a nonbinary Afro-Taíno Puerto Rican + Persian writer, visual artist, and musician. Their creative writing has been published in *HiConcept Magazine, Fever Spores: The Queer Reclamation of William S. Burroughs*, and *Mid-Level Management Literary Magazine*. For more information please visit jessicarowshandel.com.

A recovering economics professor, Steve Slavin earns a living writing math and economics books. The fourth volume of his short stories, *To the City, with Love*, was recently published.

Sheri White's stories have been published in many anthologies, including *Alternate Holidays*, published by B-Cubed Press, *I Cast You Out*, published by CultureCult Press, *666* (Dark Drabbles, Book 11), published by Black Hare Press, *Tales from the Crust* (edited by Max Booth III and David James Keaton), *Halldark Holidays* (edited by Gabino Iglesias), and *HWA's Don't Turn Out the Lights* (edited by Jonathan Maberry). Her collection, *Sacrificial Lambs and Others*, was published in 2018.

Christopher Willard is the author of the novels *Garbage Head* and *Sundre*. Awards include the Alberta Foundation for the Arts and Canada Council for the Arts. He holds an MFA from Hunter College and a PhD from the University of Calgary. Currently he lives in Calgary with a short-legged cat named Twinkle.

Laramie Wyoming is an author from New York City. She currently attends Oberlin College and has two other works published: "My Sister, Elenore," in *Typehouse Literary Magazine*, and "The Flower War," in Wolfsinger Pub's *Us/Them* anthology.

THE DYING LIGHT ISSUE 2

CONTRIBUTORS



Katherine Abrams
M.J. Arcangelini
Dee Artea
Subhaga Crystal Bacon
Elizabeth Balise
Topper Barnes
Tina Barry
David Boyle
April Bradley
Shannon Brugh
Lubrina Burton
Yuan Changmin
Mannfred X. Collins
John Compton
J.T. Cunningham
Alysa Levi-D'ancona
Megan Diedericks
Alexander Etheridge
Lee Andrew Forman
Joan Kwon Glass
Phil Goldstein
Alais Henri
Joanna Clapps Herman
Keith Hoerner
Andi Horowitz
Paul Ilchko
Doug Jacquier

Courtney Leigh Jameson
Scott Kaestner
Jess Kent
Gordon Kippola
E.P. Lande
Kiara Nicole Letcher
Sarah Lilius
Matthew Lopez
Valerie Loveland
Sheryl Singleton Lynch
Karla Linn Merrifield
Dana Miller
Melissa A. Morgan
Shilo Niziolek
Glenn Pape
Stephanie Parent
Virginia Peck-Phillips
Kenneth Pobo
Terrence PoorThunder
Greg Rapier
Saba Syed Razvi
Jessica Rowshandel
Steve Slavin
Sheri White
Christopher Willard
Jennifer Willoughby
Laramie Wyoming

PLUS:

ART
by Cee Martinez

POETRY &
BOOK REVIEW
by Fox Henry Frazier