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## the dazzled rope of lightning against the cloud is not the downward bolt but the compelled upstroke through the heated ether: stories

Jack S. Muth  
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the dazzled rope of lightning against the cloud is not the downward bolt but the compelled  
upstroke through the heated ether: stories

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Languages and Literature  
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by  
Jack Muth

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York  
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For Patricia Kelly Muth

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Thank you Annie Proulx, whose short story *The Half-Skinned Steer* served as the inspiration for the title.

I must also, in my humblest capacity, thank God, the natural world, and the human race. I love you all.

*the dazzled rope of lightning against the cloud is not the downward bolt but the compelled upstroke through the heated ether: stories*

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# Cantik



**M**uriel had long eschewed the convention that the conscious mind, if such a thing can be said to exist, resides in the brain. So, when the time finally came, she shot herself in the stomach. She had always experienced the entire spectrum of human emotion in her stomach. Her “gut” was what she called it, and the “gut” to Muriel was actually something entirely different from the stomach. It began three inches above her navel and encompassed the complete length and width of her stomach but flanked out to the left and right to include the dimples on either side of her mons pubis and even the interior portion of her hips. That was where she felt everything. Naturally, then, it was where she put the bullet.

I don't really remember in all honesty how I found out. The news was first presented to me either beneath so many suffocating layers of nervous decorum that it was impossible to understand or had been imbued with this cutesy, bashful gallows humor that similarly only alluded but never outright informed. Eventually, after a night out with a friend of mine, in the rattling subway car back home, I decided to finally ask.

“You made a crack at some point, back there.”

“I made a crack?” he said.

“Yeah, you did. About Muriel.”

“Oh. Yeah.”

“What was that about?”

“Uh, well. I heard she tried to, you know.”

“She tried?”

“Yeah. Tried. Botched it.”

“A botched suicide attempt?”

“Well, yeah. I thought you knew.”

“No, I didn’t. Nobody tells me anything, I guess. When was this?”

“Ah, Ger, this was like two months ago or something. She shot herself in the stomach.

I’m sorry. I really did think you knew.”

“Jesus Christ. No, I mean, hey, it’s all alright, I guess. You don’t know what I don’t know.

So how’s she doing?”

“Last I heard she was doing better. Came home from the hospital a couple weeks ago.”

“Came home?”

He nodded solemnly.

“She ought to be admitted for longer. Better safe than sorry.”

He nodded once more.

“What kind of hospital discharges somebody in such a state after only two months? With such a history?”

He could only shrug.

“That’s certainly some recovery.”

The next day I phoned Eve, Muriel’s mother. We had always had a fairly perfect relationship, Eve and I. There had existed between us a pleasantly cordial warmth, an almost victorian game of checks and balances that I came to enjoy playing. She very transparently sought to relive her youth through my and Muriel’s relationship, and after a brief period of discomfort, I began to appreciate the candor of her bid. Eve would do herself up right beside Muriel in the gargantuan marquee mirror she had precariously stacked on top of her dresser

before I'd take her daughter out for the evening. Upon our drunken, shuddering return home under the scornful eye of the morning sun, Eve would be waiting for us on the living room couch with her stash box and three soon-to-be filled wine glasses that couldn't be presented with more ceremony and less inconspicuousness on the coffee table. She wanted to hear everything. This time, I was the one seeking out information. We caught up the way old friends might, and even though it made my stomach turn a little bit to avoid the subject at the first, I understood that was just how Eve was. Slowly but surely, she began to fill me in on everything she knew, sparing no detail. Her voice was haggard and pulpy, but her tone was unnaturally upbeat. I suppose that even though her husband, a world-renowned philosopher, had died of Lou Gehrig's disease just a little over fifteen years ago, she still infallibly observed the same maintenance of appearances typical of New York intelligentsia.

How does a relatively sheltered and affluent young woman from West Seventy-Second Street, a woman of intellect and promise, acquire a firearm in this day and age? As Eve's story went, Muriel had swiped a semi-automatic pistol from a kitchen island at a party in the Bronx. It had brazenly been just laying there. She had broken onto the roof of her building in the early morning hours. Perhaps she wanted to see the rising sun light the lake aflame one last time. She fired only one bullet. Presumably the shock of the impact caused her to instantly drop the weapon. A couple of maintenance workers installing a satellite dish on a neighboring rooftop investigated the gunshot and discovered her. The paramedics arrived five minutes later and began a blood transfusion right in the back of the ambulance. Her vitals stabilized shortly after admittance, though she had only stopped breathing out an endotracheal tube a week before she left the hospital. Apparently a gunshot wound to the abdomen has an 88.3 % chance of

non-lethality, Eve explained. I wondered if Muriel had known this. I wondered laboriously over how much Muriel had known. How impulsive had her decision actually been? The acquisition of the gun suggested a certain degree of mediation, but the surprisingly high survivability of the particular way she decided to do it made me pause. As I tried to remember just how thorough a person she was, I grew saddened when I realized there was so much about her I couldn't remember. Even the memory of her face was like a tiled mosaic on the bottom of a swimming pool, shimmering under wobbling bands of blinding light. I scanned my living room for a memento mori of our relationship that might summon up a proper memory of her from the abyss of my thoughts. I thanked Eve and prepared to start my diligent search when she surprised me with an invitation to come over. Though it was less of an invitation and more of an imploring.

“Come by, Gerardo, please do. I think what Muriel needs most right now is a familiar face. It would mean more than you'll ever know if you come to see her. I want her to leave the apartment. Maybe you two could go for a nice walk, catch up, right?”

Why Eve thought Muriel might consider me a “familiar face” was beyond me. We had not seen each other in almost three years. Our union ended on fine enough terms but every time I saw her after our uncoupling I felt less and less affinity between us until eventually I felt nothing but that peculiar pang of resentment that comes upon the realization that the desire to feel such an affinity has long gone and will likely never come back. Regardless, I knew refusing Eve's request would undoubtedly lodge a seed of guilt in my stomach that would grow until it disemboweled me. What did I really risk by spending one innocent afternoon with Muriel? It wasn't me that had just tried to end it all. I told Eve I'd come tomorrow. If I waited too long I worried I'd go crazy with anticipation and invent some excuse.

“Come early,” she said. “Muriel haunts us between three-thirty and eleven most days. Her choice of phrasing made my hair stand on end.

Eve’s luxury pre-war apartment was shrouded in drawn-curtain-induced darkness as if she really had gone into mourning. I suppose there was no reason she couldn’t still mourn, in her own way. Something had definitely been lost beyond the appearance of a happy, well-to-do family persisting in the shadow of paternal loss. I tried not to dwell so much on the abstract as I sat on the same velvet armchair in the same corner of the same living room that I had sat in so many times before this, across from the same woman fixed in the same position she occupied in my memory of her, pallid and thin arm draped languidly under stooped chin, legs crossed high and back slumped into a profusion of cushions, fingers trawling absently at empty air as though she was stroking an exotic animal only she could see. A few used paper napkins stuffed in the crevices of the couch sprouted here and there like shrubs.

Adhering to Eve’s request, I had left the house at seven forty-five and arrived forty-four minutes later. She brought me fresh-squeezed orange juice from the store in a champagne flute while we waited for Muriel to join us. She had been in the bathroom since long before I’d walked through the door, Eve explained.

“She had a colonoscopy bag for the first two months out of the hospital, poor thing,” offered Eve freely. “Some sort of little complex remains, I worry, around going to the lavatory. Gross, I know. Sorry.”

Muriel glided into the room. “Introducing,” she monotoned, sitting on the edge of the barren kitchen table. If she was surprised at all to see me she didn’t look it.

“Muriel, baby, look who’s here,” Eve cautiously posited. “It’s Gerardo.”

“I know, you mentioned it. Hi, Gerardo,” she said. “What are you doing here?”

“Gerardo’s here to say hello to little old you. Isn’t that nice of him?”

“Hey, Muriel,” I said. “Good to see you.”

Muriel nodded and looked right past me.

“My,” said Eve, “you two haven’t seen each other in ages, you must have so much to talk about. You know, I actually have to go downtown. Muriel had an accident all over the carpet in the foyer, as I’m sure you noticed, and I’ve an appointment at the Afghan gallery in Flatiron District. So I’ll be off. Gerardo, please, help yourself to anything you’d like. There’s bagels from Kossar’s in the freezer.”

Before it fully registered that Eve was serious, she had gathered her things and left for wherever she was going. Muriel and I were now alone. I looked around for something to instigate conversation. Everything in the house that once had contributed to a feeling of luxury and repose now made me feel like I was an explorer spelunking in an alien tomb; the high, draft, ceilings, the blankets and pillows sprawled everywhere haphazardly; even the wall to wall bookshelves evoked a feeling of loss, like the knowledge contained within those books was congealing into unreadable paste with each passing second.

“You want some orange juice?” I asked after a little while.

“Can’t do acid,” she said. “It’ll erode right through my stomach lining.”

“Huh, no coffee then either, right?” When we were together, she would drink four to six mugs a day, sometimes more. She shook her head and looked at the floor.

“Must be brutal. I don’t imagine you can smoke.”

“You’re a right mentalist, Gerardo. What else do you know?”

“I could say nothing. Be an awkward lout and just sit here, waste your time.”

“What are you here for?”

“I don’t know, your mother, myself, I guess. She asked me to come, and I didn’t feel like I was in the position to say no. But even then, had I said no, I know I’d worry. I didn’t know, Muriel.”

She turned and walked into the kitchen.

“I came for you, Muriel. Why else would I? I’m worried. Scared. I didn’t know.”

“I didn’t see a reason to tell you. I know you’re busy. Why burden you with one more thing, right?”

She opened the fridge and peeled a side of lox off a gold sheet of paper with her thumb and dangled it into her mouth. Her face was not the only thing that had undergone radical transformation since the last time I had seen her. Watching her chew I noticed her jaw slid as it moved, oddly unaligned from her upper mandible, and from here on I noticed all manner of unconscious behavioral differences in the movement of her eyes, her breathing, the way she kept her hair from her face, her posture, all of which would be negligible under normal circumstances but when added up made my blood run a little colder than I had expected it to. I had expected to be steeled against anything, namely her standard-fare accusations of coldness and taciturnity, but no such accusations came. I realized no such accusations were likely coming at all, and I could not help but feel incredibly warm towards Muriel in light of that, so intent to close the distance that had grown between us, so intent to protect her from whatever it had been that compelled her to take her own life.

“You could never be a burden on me, Muriel. Not really. And I know the unique way in which you are a burden on me is mutual, of course. What’s a little more weight to that permanent burden?”

Muriel only smiled sheepishly and continued to stare out the window behind me. Then, like an apparition, she was suddenly in the same position on the couch her mother had just been sitting in, digging in between the cushions for what I figured was the remote. She recovered it and turned on the television. A program on an orangutan sanctuary in Sumatra began to play. Desperate for the sweet relief of further closure but fearful of overindulging myself, I stayed quiet and tried to follow the narrative of the show. It only took a moment or two of us watching in total silence for me to understand that Muriel had been a dedicated viewer of these orangutans for some time. The glassy sheen that had been sitting over her eyes since I had seen her that morning dissolved into total focus. On the television, various orangutans ambled across the forest floor on their flat feet and knuckles, each introduced by name, like characters on a sitcom. Muriel explained each orangutan’s role within the troop as they were introduced. Their social structure was unusual among primates, she explained. Social as children, the bulk of their interaction with other orangutans after sexual maturation amounts to not much more than an annual visit to their mother’s, and even that practice is disregarded after they reach the age of eighteen. After that point the life of an orangutan is largely a lonely one, except for the rare occasions on which they come down from the forest canopy wherein they sleep and forage to mate with one another.

“Just like people,” she said, though I didn’t know what she meant. It felt like a platitude, but I didn’t want to give her a hard time.



One of the orangutans, a sixteen year old girl named Cantik, was the case study of today's episode. She had discovered an empty gas drum left behind by a logging team, and was lugging around the tangerine-colored plastic barrel everywhere she went, the way a child lugs around a doll. She clenched it tightly with one fist as she climbed up trees to pluck durian from the branches. It slowly rose up and down with her exhalations as she slept with it nestled between her legs. Only rarely, maybe once every few hours from what I could tell, did Cantik actually raise the nozzle to her face to breathe in the nitrous oxide within.

"That poor baby," said Muriel. "I don't understand why they just don't take that thing from her."

I too felt a great deal of pity for this bastardized wild animal, but only for a second before I remembered how unfathomably deep the pity inside the heart of that ugly creature might be for me if it knew what my day to day life was like. True, wretched pity ought to be reserved for humans, the bearers of the most immodest curse. No orangutan ever shot herself in the stomach in an attempt to alleviate the agony of being an orangutan.

I remembered then the original purpose of my visit. I began thinking of something to do with Muriel, something to slowly reacclimatize her to the big world of people, sound, and light outside her window. The orangutans on the screen chirped and whistled like funny bedraggled automata, kissing and hugging each other, pulling insects from each other's fur and masticating in complete bliss. Another, smaller orangutan tried to snatch the gas drum from behind Cantik's back when she wasn't looking, only to run scared when Cantik turned around and caught her little inferior in the act. A smirk over Muriel's face came and went.

"I have an idea," I said. "How about we see some real orangutans?"

“Where,” she said. “Central Park?”

“I was thinking the Bronx.”

“Hm. Bit far.”

“Sure. Train and a bus. You can take naps where you can and we’ll be there before you know it.”

The orangutans on the screen were on all atwitter, whooping and flouncing over something the human researchers, and by extension we, the human viewers at home, were not able to perceive. Pheromones probably, but it was as if they were encouraging Muriel to go forth, to leave her cold, dark enclave in Upper Manhattan and venture up north to pay their cousins a visit.

“I’ll have to take a shower. You don’t mind waiting for me?”

“No, not at all. I’ll be here when you get out.”

“Is it cold outside?”

“You know, for the time of year it’s actually quite nice.”

“Oh, good.”

“Yeah, that is good, isn’t it?”

“Yeah. I’ll wear a lighter jacket, in that case.”

“You still have the suede one?”

“No, somebody stole it.”

“No, really?”

“Yeah, doesn’t that suck? I loved that thing. Sort of a pet. Stupid as it sounds.”

“No, not stupid at all. I loved that thing too.”

Both so charmed by the sudden prospect of spending an afternoon together, we were unable to stop the giving and receiving of these little conversational monographs, they just kept coming, released from our respective mouths to dissolve upon the tongue of the other, modest little libation after libation, a solitary sugar cube or candied petal, a single drop of glowing ichor from a rusted spout. We could not turn it off, we could not hide the gratitude we felt. On and on we prattled as the room got brighter and brighter, and before we realized it, it was almost eleven. The special had ended half an hour ago.

“Wow, we better get going.”

“Wow, yeah, you’re right.”

“You shower, I’ll fix you something to eat, you’ll need your energy. So what can you eat these days?”

She rolled her eyes. “Amaranth, lentils. Things like that.”

“Perfect, I’ll stew some lentils.”

Muriel left the living room to shower, and I began to boil water. Her spirits seemed surprisingly high, higher than I had expected, at the very least. Perhaps I had only caught her on a good day. Or maybe it was more auspicious than that. I thought of Cantik stumbling dizzy through the forests of Sumatra, a world-weary shaman among beasts, and wondered for a second if she had caught a flash of Muriel’s smile in the midst of a vision, from thousands of miles across the ocean. I gave her my quiet thanks, covered the pot, and sat back down, waiting patiently for Muriel to return.



# Hut

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## One: Udinbak

**I**t is for my benefit and my benefit only that I have chosen to review the details of my stomach-churning experience with Parth Rao. I smite his memory in my doing so, driving him away like a bat from an old neglected room. It's not as if so much has changed since our convergence, and in most of the ways that matter, nothing really has. The things that have changed however, I believe are worthy of some examination. Even back then, before all the events disclosed in my story transpired, I was lukewarm to the idea of therapy. By all logic I should feel even *less* receptive to the supposed "magic" of therapy now, given everything that has happened between Parth Rao and I. When thinking back on it though, I find my position more or less unchanged. Most of my experience feels far away and cold, as if it now belongs to someone else, and exists in some other place. A strange ice-realm frozen in eternal winter, populated by abominable snow-people, huddled in glacial caves and gnawing on the frost-bitten bones of caribou. If you can compartmentalize traumatic experiences in such a way, dressing them up in curious and senseless fashions, such as I am wont to do, I really would recommend it. Acknowledging the absurdity of terrible situations, perhaps against your better judgment, will allow you to manage them more readily than if you were to focus exclusively on the parts that make sense. If I am to have learned anything from Parth Rao, I suppose it should be that.

This is not to say that I have actually successfully severed the connection between myself and Parth Rao that he managed to establish against my will. I recount his doings primarily to cover all my bases, and to ensure that there are no lasting effects from his psychic torture that

have settled quietly on the edges of my subconsciousness, waiting to grow large enough to plague me into suicide or general feelings of inadequacy. I have no interest in being too extreme, or melodramatic, but since Parth Rao my view on “mental health” has grown to include a deep reverence for personal autonomy and for the taking of matters into my own hands, and so I feel that I cannot be too careful. He could still be out there for all I know, twiddling his thumbs in wait.

For some time I blamed myself for much of what happened, but what matters now is that I do not blame myself now for blaming myself then. There is comfort in self-blame, because it is simple. The equation is uncomplicated, and while the work involved in the realization of the equation itself is sickening and horrible, it can be solved and moved on from with brevity. Now I know better than to think myself important enough to be responsible for every misfortune befallen on me. I had always known this on some level since my mid-teens after knocking over a plastic lawn chair from the twenty-third floor of a Marriott balcony, narrowly missing a young child and his mother. I knew from then I was going to run into many different problems at many points throughout my life, ones that I would not always receive the cosmic grace to destroy instantaneously. I would be a vessel for misfortune at certain points, and a vessel for great luck at others. It just wouldn't be up to me as often as I would like it to be. Not everything would be my fault, and not everything I would be able to fix. Around the time of this realization I began to foster a disdain for all therapy and all therapists, all while never actually having been to one. I suspected they would offensively disagree with this world-view of mine, envious of the fact that I had arrived at it without their input. I held this suspicion unconfirmed for years prior to my excursion with Parth Rao.

Whatever the innermost root of my self-blame, I initially chose to interpret Parth Rao as punishment, wrath exerted upon me for betraying my intuition. I sought therapy for no real reason, or at least no reason that was particularly reasonable. I had disposable income, a difficult-to-place sense of urban ennui, and more than a couple friends in my hair telling me I would be doomed to a life of repression if I never found a good therapist before my thirties.

I had just finished a tour as an EMT in New York. I had saved enough money by paying a mostly-performative sum to my aunt for rent that I was able to find a decent studio apartment in Somerset, New Jersey for only \$500 a month without much trouble. I worked from home doing busy work for a data collection and research firm and had more than enough money to live on the margin between comfort and miserliness. I had developed a misanthrope streak after a year of over-socialization and late nights sitting in the ambulance. I would meet friends from college sparingly on the weekends, opting mostly to scroll thoughtlessly through random VRChat and Fediverse servers at night. I never had a great relationship with my parents and around this point I more or less lost all contact with them.

Every once in a while I would order the ingredients to synthesize analogue DMT and other drugs on the internet. One Friday night I stood over my stove for two and half hours, extracting lysergic acid from a mix of seeds I had received, vacuumed-sealed and unmarked earlier that day; a mixture of Morning Glory and Hawaiian Baby Woodrose. I looked around at my freshly furnished living space, tripping in my briefs, feeling more dehydrated than anything else.

*Have a place, have a job. I thought to myself. Have an electric toothbrush, work-ready flats, an iron. I order sheet set samples before I select the one I find the softest and most*



*comfortable. I no longer skimp on things like warm winter coats and facial oils. I have no idea how long I stood gently vibrating in the center of my living room with these thoughts racing through my head. Was it dark outside and dimly lit inside, or dark inside and dimly lit outside? The details evade me.*

*Hard to believe, but in a few years things will be different, I considered further. I'll get a loan on a bigger place, be in a different tax bracket, maybe even have a partner. Should I freeze my eggs? Things appear linear at work, could be smart. What if I find a partner in the next five or so years? It's unlikely, but not impossible. What's important is that I continue with these motions. To be successful in all areas important to me, I must replicate the behavior of those who hold the positions I currently seek, those who came before me and learned to live with the same benign listlessness I feel. Like it or not, all those berating me are right. Therapy is the intersection of both these concerns. I can continue to establish myself as a realized adult, while clearing up any mental cobwebs in the process. Tight ship.*

Because there was no real reason for me to be seeing a therapist, the process of finding one was made far more simple than I assume it usually is. I wasn't aware of any particular issue I had that required any certain type of expertise to treat, and so I put no thought into what sort of therapist to see. Humanistic, cognitive behavioral, psychodynamic, they all appeared to be equally harmless. What mattered most was that I saw someone reputable, someone my friends had heard of, someone with a wall of diplomas from prestigious universities. Someone with a profile in a fancy magazine. Unfortunately, nobody offered on my insurance's provider network met this criteria. I talked to multiple representatives on the phone and heard the same thing each time. Most professionals operating at the level of standing I was attracted to required a referral

from another therapist to be seen. So I would be forced to look elsewhere towards far more costly centers. Eventually, I decided the price of going to a therapist mostly to impress my peers and myself should not exceed the price of anything else that could functionally do the exact same thing, like a ultramodern glass dining table or a 4K LED UHD Smart Google TV. This decision narrowed my options even further, and so my strategy had to change. I would see a dirt cheap therapist at Raritan Valley Community College in North Branch, somewhat privately, and then see if the desire to treat the process as a way towards abstract self-actualization persisted. If it did, then I would bite the bullet and spend a few thousand dollars extra knowing the imagined contents of my sessions would be public affairs among my friends, discussed in hushed tones even when I was nowhere near them. If things went especially seamlessly, I could use a lower-rung therapist to write me a referral for a better-known one. I found a thrill in this thought, the idea that I had the emotional intelligence and street smarts necessary to trick multiple professionals and middle-management people. Hubris eclipsing my better judgment, I thought about what my friends would say.

*Only someone serious about bettering themselves would seek out the best of the best, they'd say to each other.*

*That's Willy for you, they only want the best. Everything in the right place, and right on time, too. It's so good to see them investing the same amount of effort into themselves that they put into everything else. They really do have it all figured out.*

That Saturday I headed to a bar by myself and picked out an RVCC student I saw milling about on the limits of his smoking circle. He seemed anxious. I asked him where he was from. "Dan," he responded.

He must have misheard me. He said he was an international student from Korea, staying with a host family in Sweetwater.

“No shit!” I said to him with a big, friendly smile. “That’s where I’m from.”

This wasn’t true, but it was surprising that this little lie was all I needed to extrapolate my character as a mentally struggling yuppie and get his university eMail, which I used the next morning to sign up for a free session plan. Mondays and Fridays from 10 to 11. My safety net was in place. Nobody would ever know I once relegated myself to a low-level professional. This was to be my first and arguably most damning mistake.

The next morning I caught a shuttle to the campus and reported to The Counseling & Advising Services Wing in The College Center. I had never been to RVCC. Never had any reason to. It was a typical college campus, washed out modernist buildings encroaching on older gothic ones. A great amount of care had obviously been invested in concealing the campus’s proximity to Route 28, but the unrelenting highway ambience cut through the greenery. It was all tucked away and closed off in the way that most college campuses feel. The building was large beyond any good reason, though nothing looms when you have a purpose like I did. I phased through the door as if operating on the physics of ghosts. The building was a massive block of glass and air-entrained concrete on the outside, poorly ventilated and too well-lit from the inside. I saw a directory on the wall informing me of the wing’s location as soon as I walked in. The receptionist was an earnestly disinterested young woman who tried her hardest to be friendly, which I appreciated.

“You know, I saw him for a few weeks last year,” she said. “The therapist you’re about to see. He’s great, helped me a lot.”

“That’s great.” I said. “We’ll see how the fit is.”

After a reasonable amount of paperwork was attended to I was permitted access to the unit, and given a number for the office I was to make my way to. Not at any of these points did it occur to me to stop and seriously consider what I was getting myself into. Walking down that long, dim, hall there were many opportunities to stop and ask myself what exactly it was I was doing there, opportunities I never took. If questioned about my intentions during these early stages of my encounter with Parth Rao I would’ve likened myself to some kind of explorer or scout, breaking bread with the strange but ultimately harmless natives on the industrialized shoreline of a great island, gathering information before it was time to head into the jungle to meet the truly wild pygmy tribe. In reality I was closer to the village lunatic, ascending to the mountain peak in a thunderstorm, challenging the wrath of God. How was I to know of the darkness that awaited me behind that door?

I made sure the number given to me by the secretary corresponded correctly, gave a few knocks, and heard a deeply stern, but hushed sound emanate from behind it.

“Come in.”

At the back of a surprisingly large room stood a cherrywood desk covered in stacks of papers, trinkets, and three-prong binders. At the desk sat a man in a simple gray t-shirt with overt sweat stains. Baggy gray slacks. He didn’t look like what I’d imagined.

“Mx. Choi?” he asked in a near-whisper informed by an accent that was hard to place, but possibly European, maybe German or British.

“Hi, yeah. That’s me.”

“Excellent. Take a seat in either chair, it’s up to you.” He gestured to his left, towards two navy blue accent chairs set off to the side of the office. A coffee table adorned with a modest Boston fern separated the two seats. I chose the one closer to the door.

“I’m so sorry,” the man said. “Just give me fifteen seconds, and I’ll be right over.” He seemed to be thumbing through some thick tome, taking notes furiously in a yellow pad at a speed that couldn’t have resulted in anything other than shambolic chicken-scratch. As I bided my time I looked around the office, and was struck by how strange in appearance it gradually became the longer I stared. The atmosphere was so dense with truly bizarre objects and sights I couldn’t believe I hadn’t noticed it at first. The walls were a bright, toxic orange, the color a poisonous frog or insect might develop to ward off predators. They were adorned sporadically with all manner of animal skulls, mostly reptilian and avian as far as I could tell, though I could not tell so easily. Bundles of dried branches from trees unrecognizable to me rested on the wall to the left of his desk, right above a battered little table situated with a small variety of clay urns, idols, and a cheap coffee maker. Obsidian masks adorned either side of the little table with crossed swords of ivory beneath them. A geometric lantern glittering with light of every color dangled in another corner, covered in Arabic. There was a garden store terrarium housing dense forests of mycelium and thick spider webs. Everywhere there were sapphires, furs, gold inlay, tusks, green granite, chalices. It was kitschy in the way a suburban home decorated for Halloween is. Though the individual pieces were inspiring, together they may as well have been back stock from Party City. Still, the strange hold the room commanded was undeniable. It rapidly became more than the sum of its parts, morphing into a living entity that breathed with the rhythm of a sleeping giant. A window looking onto a collection of dorms outside served as

the only stronghold of reality, tethering me to the material in this otherwise mysterious and unsound-seeming place.

In the blink of an eye he was hovering just inches away from me, arm outstretched to shake my hand.

“Parth Rao. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Nice to meet you too. What should I call you? Parth? Mr. Rao?”

“Parth Rao, please.”

“You want to be called your full name?” I stupidly asked.

“Yes, if you’d be so kind. Names are manifestations of who we would like to be, and I have lived long enough to know I like that one the best.”

“You have such an interesting office,” I said, persistent on keeping the ball rolling in the right direction. As I began to adjust to my surroundings, my long-term vision returned to my mind, unchanged.

*Don’t get distracted. This is obviously a bit different from what you expected, but don’t let it faze you. Just carry on with the pleasantries, slow roll into some harmless conversation about “mental health” as he’s likely to understand it, let him get on with the platitudes, and then you can be out of here with referral for a doctor that doesn’t have a vial with what looks like a calcified pineal gland floating in it on top of his desk.*

“Thank you,” he said. He sat down right across from me.

In the beginning, I found Parth Rao’s physical presentation completely unremarkable, especially when viewed in context among the almost assaultive array of hues and tones that made up his office. His looks only served to make his surroundings seem even more cartoonishly

extreme, and his surroundings made him appear out of place to a degree that was laughable, like watching a Mormon missionary accidentally walk into a nymphomaniacs anonymous meeting.

We sat in silence, smiling politely. I heard a clock from somewhere behind me ticking.

“Yongjae Choi,” he said finally. “Lovely name. It’s Korean, if I’m not mistaken?”

Not a good sign. I already saw exactly what he was getting at.

“Yeah.” I gave him a polite nod. “I think it’s the fourth or fifth most common name in Korea, actually. Quarter on my mom’s side,” I lied. “Having a common name has never really bothered me, though.”

“Fourth or fifth most common?” he responded, sounding genuinely surprised. “Well, I had no idea. Me, my father’s family is German, but my mother is from Gujarat, which is in India.”

I had no idea what to say to this. I had not expected to be confronted with the life story of my shrink so soon. Already I could feel the momentum of energy screeching to a halt. I would need to drastically redirect the conversation, and quickly. Not only was the security of the mission at risk, but my time was being wasted as well.

“I’ll never go to England, or India, either. They’re too far away and I hate to travel. Actually, I’m scared of being far away from my house for too long and if I start to find myself too distant for too long I am gripped with dread, and I retreat and get socially anxious and get depressed and get angry and lash out and... I just... have a really awful feeling that I can’t get rid of.”

Wow, I thought. *I’m really fumbling this.* At this point in time I became aware of a strange ambient hum that hung above the room like a fog. The specific nature of it, organic or artificial,

was difficult to place. I was sure it had been going on for as long as I had been in there, but my abrupt noticing of it still made my stomach do a nose-dive. I looked over at Parth Rao. He had what could be reasonably described as an expression on his face, but the dominant feeling that informed it seemed to be banality, and so for the life of me I could not tell what he was thinking. He receded into his chair just a touch and crossed his legs. Parth Rao would always let at least six or eight seconds of pure silence float into the atmosphere and evaporate into a dark cloud of tension before continuing or clarifying that he wanted a response.

“Ok. That’s quite a statement you just made.”

“Well, I just think I should be honest.”

“That’s definitely the right inclination. I’m confused though, you said you retreat, *and* lash out?”

“Yes.”

“Explain this to me, I do not understand what you mean.”

“What do you mean? Kind of self-explanatory.”

“How can one retreat, as in shut the world out, while at the same time, lash out at it, as in make themselves the aggressor?”

*Is he serious?* I thought to myself. *What a stupid line of questioning. Am I really going to have to explain this to him?* The silence was permeating. *Maybe English isn’t his first language. I could show a little more patience. After all, the referral to a better doctor must be given on good terms, or it won’t be given at all.*

“All right,” I began, trying to stifle the escape of a small, frustrated laugh. “You can retreat literally but also metaphorically, and you can do both of them in equal measures. I feel



like both of them allow for lashing out considering that withdrawal is a state as well as an activity. When I feel anxious of course I'm in that state because I don't wanna get hurt by anything. So I'm prickly, too. Opposite behaviors that result in the same thing."

"Hm. Ok. That's interesting. You know, to me it seems as if you've given this a lot of thought already. Do you consider yourself agoraphobic?"

"Uh, no. Well, I don't know. Sounds kind of extreme."

Parth Rao wet his lips. "Not at all. With more than 200,000 U.S. cases a year, agoraphobia is actually common any way you look at it." He took a long pause.

"Do you know the secret to success with therapy? You have to believe there's something wrong that's actually worth fixing. If you have even the slightest inclination that something might be wrong, you must do away with speculation entirely. You have to believe. That's simply all it takes. Once you make that leap, you'll have all the tools to change your reality available to you at a moment's notice. Still, we can return to this point at a later time. We're getting ahead of ourselves."

Something was very off about his way of speaking. It wasn't exactly broken, but it was endowed with a certain quality that made me process it as such, like we were communicating over a faulty phone line.

"Yeah," I said. "I feel similarly."

"Can I ask if you're religious? You know, you'd be surprised how often I get these young patients wracked with anxiety and the culprit turns out, at least in part, to be a religious upbringing. That's why I have real faith in young people. You seem to be learning from the mistakes of us old folks, forgoing silly superstitions and the like."

“Well,” I began to answer, “I did go to Sunday school.” *Now we’re getting somewhere*, I thought. *Reign him in, allow him to arrive at his own conclusions. It doesn’t matter if they’re pre-determined, what matters is that you get that referral.* My goal at this point was to make him continuously circle back to the agoraphobia thing, which seemed fine as an all-encompassing, ultimately harmless prognosis. I would gladly take it if it meant headway for the referral. I would’ve taken schizophrenia. I was closing in on my target.

“Interesting,” mused Parth Rao. “In that case, let’s take a step or two back. I still don’t think I know you very well yet. Why don’t you tell me about yourself, and why you’re here?”

My most hated question. Parth Rao must have taken notice of this, because he exhaled in a performative way and uncrossed his legs, resting his palms on his knees.

“I’ll go first,” he said. “I got my A.D. in medieval history, if you can believe that, but after a change of heart I returned to school to pursue a career in psychoanalysis. I know first hand how strange and difficult childhood can be, and I decided to make it my life’s work helping people defeat, or at the very least, live with that confusion, you know, deal with that unanswerable stress. I believe that anything you want, anything at all in life, it can be had. You must simply want it more than anything else. Wanting is the root of all progress. Real destruction, real creation, these are things most people will tell you are off-limits to regular people, people like you and me. I simply don’t agree. If you allow me, I will show you how to open your mind and heart to all manner of mysterious forces, forces that will allow you to do anything you want.”

By the end of his speech I had noticed a complete change in his tone, one that made his voice sound thrown, as if someone else was speaking for him. He was grinning ear to ear, staring at me like his brain would shut off if he looked away even if only for a second.

“As far as my interests go, I love standup. I have been pursuing my dream of being a comedian since before I knew I wanted to study psychology, before I knew I wanted to study medieval history, even. Tell me, if you are in school, what is it you study?”

Talking to strangers about myself has never been something I’ve enjoyed. Often what they seek is a laundry list of accolades, adjectives, and sob stories so they can put up the signposts of an identity straight-forward and digestible. “Oohs” and “Ahhs” aside, there is always only so much they want to hear anyways, and figuring out how far to lead them is seldom fun or exciting. Of course I knew this was territory I would have to cover in therapy sooner or later. I felt a cool wave of relief when I remembered that I was under no obligation to tell the truth or anything close to it. I was here under a completely different identity. Parth Rao obviously knew I wasn’t really Yongjae Choi, but what he thought didn’t matter as long as he thought I was a pathetic wreck with issues completely beyond his psychiatric capabilities. My mind swirled briefly with possibilities, then simmered down just as quickly as it had began bubbling. It would be better still to play with my cards close to my chest, leaving enough details excluded that with any luck Parth Rao would simply hear the doom in my affect and imagine the worst. Subtlety was to be my domain, and it’s generally where I tend to flourish. A great beautiful sense of security began to settle in, and I began daydreaming. The potter at the wheel. The painter at the easel. Me, in this uncomfortable accent chair. Tragically, it was these moments that required my vigilance the most, when I simply had none to spare.

I heard everything before I saw it. Heavy, wet breathing. The rapid bouncing of a belt buckle. My vision began swimming as I tried to adjust my eyes to the source of these noises. Anyone intimate with the surreal feeling of coming to after fainting can understand how I felt when I looked up from my daydream at the otherworldly sight before me. Parth Rao, still seated, had his slacks pulled down just below his hips, semi-flaccid penis in hand, and was masturbating furiously. For how long this had been happening, I still cannot say for sure. Maybe thirty seconds. Maybe two minutes. All systems previously deemed sufficient in the management of my surroundings were thrown into disarray. Even now, I can only remember the details through violently shuddering images, as if viewed on an old flickering film strip. Parth Rao's eyes had lowered tremendously, completely morphing the structure of his face. Pearls of sweat encrusted his bald head like maggots teeming on a rotten skull. His veins bulged. His muscles spasmed. He looked like Satan. Not in an allegorical way either, he literally resembled a caricature of Satan from a cartoon, like Robin Hughes in that old *Twilight Zone* episode. As I became more and more aware of what was happening, the wriggling, hairy, bony mass of flesh and skin seated across from me began to look more like a puppet than a human man. A broken, sputtering animatronic in a demented haunted house. Unreal, simply put. It was by the grace of my inability to process the event in real time as actually happening to me that I was able to gather my wits and undertake my departure.

In third person, I watched my senses return to my body, slowly at first, then jarringly all at once. I was fully within the confines of my body once more, and it was not a pleasant feeling. Ripped from my liminal state of dissociation, I rose slowly, never breaking eye contact with the now wheezing, fully inhuman Parth Rao. An image began to inexplicably play within my head,

stuck on an infinite loop. A body, without sex as far as I could tell, being obliterated by some large vehicle, a train I think, perhaps a semi, but in reverse. A cloud of thick red mist, speckled with amorphous clumps of flesh and bits of collagen, splinters of bone, swiftly assembling back into the shape of a human. A sick miracle. I blinked and it was gone. Parth Rao was still there, still in his trance. I floated the idea that he couldn't see me. It seemed entirely possible, he hadn't made a gesture of acknowledgment towards me since his entrance into whatever state he was in. I backed away from the table, taking stock of where I was. Everything felt cold in the office, barren. Colors appeared more subdued. Whatever air of fantasy and wonder the little items of interest might've held earlier had completely dissipated. Seeing them now just felt like happening upon a homeless man's shrine to some abyssal demon in an abandoned culvert.

I wasn't interested in sticking around to see what would happen. Heading towards the door, I tried in vain to gather my thoughts, but it was impossible to formulate one with the bottom of Parth Rao's enclosed fist smashing unrelentingly into his pelvis.

*Is this really happening?* I asked myself. *How long have I been here?*

Checking the time, I realized only twelve minutes or so had passed since Parth Rao had ushered me in from behind the door. Everything around me felt vast, impossibly so. The office was a giant black maw, and as I made my way towards the exit I felt an incline in the floor growing, pushing me away from the door, from any chance of salvation, sliding back down into the monster's gullet. Finally, with my trembling hand on the doorknob, I prepared to walk down the hall with poise, with elegance. Like someone who makes sense of things effortlessly, as they appear before them with no afterthought given to the legitimacy of whatever happens to them. Hearing the shuffling of furniture and slacks being pulled up, I jolted around and watched as

Parth Rao stumbled upwards, clutching the heave of his half-worn pants. Wobbling like a drunk, a thread of drool descending from his mouth to his shoe as he attempted to find his balance. Cocking his head, I could make out his glassy, cavernous eyes staring straight at me behind fogged glasses. He groaned as if to attempt speech. I slammed the door and dashed down the hall, past the waiting room and receptionist, back into the lobby, and out through the door. Hot and wet air met me. It was still distinctly August. The sound of my sneakers pounding against the moisture trapped in the pavement was all I could hear as I raced past ambling students returning from class and walking to dinner. I felt like I was being watched. Transitioning from a wild sprint to a frigid, modest walk, I wonder if passerby noticed something intrinsic was lacking. Maybe enough of the right pieces were in place, and they didn't notice anything at all. Maybe the trouble I had taken on was apparent even at that point. I can confess that it didn't matter then, and it doesn't matter now.

## Two: Eacht

As I wrack my brain for any memories of the period immediately following my visit to Parth Rao's office, I struggle to recall much of anything. Why this is, of course, is no mystery. I am really not in the habit of letting things consume me. On one hand, I found great satisfaction in my stoicism. *So what, some old, crazy guy just decided that day was as good as any to lose it. I got caught in the crosshairs, but nothing really bad happened. I'm safe, and lucky to be so.* It's true that things could have gone much worse for me. The violence of what I had seen was indisputable. Every sound and movement produced by my assailant in that short time was informed by such aggression I couldn't even be sure I was the primary target. Whatever had gripped him did so like a force of nature, a landslide or hurricane. It carried with it in my memory a particular senseless brutality that only those sorts of things have. On the other hand, everything about it had felt so extremely personal. It was hard to shake the notion that there was something qualitative about myself that inspired Parth Rao to choose me specifically as the witness of his undoing. Was there a quality to me that inspired something in Parth Rao? Either it had everything to do with me or nothing at all. Both were equally terrifying. Neither theory could exist on its own, both in the shadow of their respective deviations. All I knew was that I couldn't let it consume me. Appearances needed to be kept up.

My experience with assault and harassment prior had been, as strange as it feels to say even now, negligible. A few other people, women mostly, had confided harrowing accounts to me over the years, some with total sobriety and others in moments of desolation. Whatever the case may have been, I would do my best to support them in the moment, and then leave with a sense of total uselessness, like I had told them nothing new, nothing they hadn't heard a million

times before. Why should I have the ability to do otherwise? I'd only been catcalled a few times, which is as sure a part of city life as snow turning black the day after it falls. With no genuine references of my own, how was I to truly console anyone? It was a uniquely terrible feeling, that ineffectuality. I had forgotten all about it until the aftermath of my session. I was determined to not feel that same uselessness again, and so I set about my days as was necessary, falling back into my familiar waking daze when it was appropriate to do so, but when a trace detail of what had happened crept to the forefront of my mind, I forced my thoughts to become clearer and my vision sharper. It was a combative thing, violent in its own right, and it could happen at any time. I could be in a meeting, or buying something at the store, or sitting at the kitchen table, just starting out the window. A brief gnash of teeth, a quick fly of spittle, a white-knuckled hand against the dark blue arm of an accent chair. I knew there was no good to come from these memories, but that was besides the point. Their daily arrival could not be stopped. Sometimes a moment would be so tense, so charged by these thoughts, that at the first break of silence I would start to laugh, no matter who I was with, or where I was. I felt as if I couldn't help it, and would immediately stop when I noticed the discomfort in the eyes of whichever cashier or project manager had the misfortune of having to deal with me.

Getting in touch with a cop or even an administrator at the college was out of the question, obviously. I was privately embarrassed at my own naivety for even giving these things some brief consideration. Since I made the appointment under the name of another student, an international student no less that could've been back in Korea for all I knew, there was no true record of my session with Parth Rao. It didn't exist. I couldn't even prove we had ever met, let alone that he done what he had. I felt as though the situation was so undeniably hopeless that I



was left with no choice but to just ignore it totally. My other option was despair, but as I have already established, appearances had to be kept up. If anything, now more than ever it was important to act like nothing was wrong. If someone suspected something, they might take it upon themselves to rectify it personally, as people are wont to do when their friends and loved ones experience misfortune. As evidenced by the many times I had seen this play out during my three college semesters, I knew it could be disastrous. Nobody was to know what occurred. I was surrounded by sleeper cells, well-meaning individuals that would inadvertently destroy my life upon hearing a poorly-timed activation phrase. Who knew what could set them off? Small talk had to be cut out entirely, in order to not run this risk. Once a phone-call with my aunt or a conversation with a co-worker had run its course I would refuse to let it amble into personal matters, severing the flow of dialogue abruptly. It was a lonely time, one marked by a deep sense of regret, and later, of foreboding.

The fall that year was an overly eager one, fervent in its efforts to distinguish itself from a mostly pleasant if not indolent summer with no storms or hurricanes. Wet, dark, and aggressive, not a week went by untouched by howling winds that pelted the windows with acrid rain, noticeably fouled by the industry to the north. Normal rain evaporated quicker too, this variety ran like rivers in the street and sat heavy on the fibers of my jacket, feeling thick and somehow more undesirable than normal. To be outside in it for too long was like getting covered in blood. Eventually the Raritan River began to flood, and city officials began advising people to avoid certain areas of the park and the surrounding blocks. Every once in a while the river would regurgitate a clump of water-logged garbage large enough to block traffic if it floated into the street. Most of the bus lines were shut down.

All this was fine with me, I had already resigned myself to staying indoors for days on end. The rain would be falling as I fell asleep, and it would greet me unchanged in the morning, making it easy to pretend the outside world had lapsed for a brief period of time, and all the streets surrounding my own had been submerged under the black roil. I pictured white waves lapping at the asphalt like a shoreline, everything beneath them compressed into oblivion by a thousand cubic tons of pressure. My neighborhood, the houses of my friends, the snaking highways, the college they led to just a few miles north, the squat, brutal building sitting in its center, and Parth Rao in the center of it all, shaking and flexing like a horsefly in a spider's web. All gone beneath the surge, crushed by the weight of the world they dared to push up against. This was the only thought that got me to sleep every night. I knew these thoughts were nothing but fickle lies, albeit comforting ones, but since my meeting with Parth Rao I had given drugs up completely in favor of these new mercurial falsehoods to make myself feel better, and the effect was similar enough that the transition was so seamless I sometimes forgot that they were lies at all.

Reasonably content like this, I would've continued on for the rest of the downpour's duration if not for a frantic phone call I received from Reishi. As one of my oldest and most treasured friends, I knew I owed her the basic courtesy of picking up. I paced back and forth before the charging station, jogging my memory on the basics of human speech and interaction in a near-furor. A few weeks earlier I had stopped opening my mail, opting to let the letters pile underneath the letterbox. I didn't have the slightest clue as to how a phone call should go. Somehow I knew Reishi was in distress, someone who was in need of my help, but the main

feeling brought on by this intuition was just one of annoyance. I held the phone to my head, saying nothing.

“Willy. How are you?”

Jesus Christ. The down-tempo thud with which her words fell was undeniable. I had been right. Something was wrong.

“Hey! Hi, Reishi! It’s, uh. Good to hear from you.” I said, making sure the words I chose did not appear as scrutinized as I knew they were. I didn’t get the feeling she noticed.

“Yeah, same as always.”

A break-up? Miscarriage? No, it had to be something more external than that. She didn’t sound distraught to a point of near-hysteria so much as stoic, attentive and fearful of what the future held. Something must have happened to someone close to her, a parent or sibling. The inclination was so strong I didn’t feel the need to sit down after she informed me that I might want to.

“Listen, my mom just got back from Lenox, and, um...” exhaling deeply, she trailed off. Her throat sounded thick with phlegm, giving her voice an effect that had a gurgle to it like the bubbling cauldron of a witch.

“She’s got macular degeneration. It’s advanced because they caught it late. She’s gonna lose her central vision by next year, and become partially blind.”

“Oh my God.” I said. “Hey Reishi, I’m so sorry. That’s horrible. Is there anything I can do?”

“Thanks. That’s why I’m calling, actually. We’re all with her right now, down in Passaic where her sister lives. My whole family, basically.” I grimaced in anticipation of what I knew she was about to ask.

“Do you wanna come over? We have a lot to eat. To be honest I could also just really use you right now. I’m sure she’ll be really happy to see you, too.”

For all the prognostication I had at the beginning of our conversation, I had no idea what to say to Reishi. I was in no position to be around anyone, let alone provide comfort to anyone. I loved Reishi’s mother, always a mirthful woman, kind and helpful to a fault. Her father had left them before she turned one. Their family had been generous beyond words to me over the years. To go and pay my respects, it was really the least I could do. She had a sense of humor too, Reishi’s mom. It wouldn’t likely be a desolate scene of grief over in Passaic. I would show up, say a few trite words from the canon of hopefulness, then fade into the walls like a ghost until Reishi was able to give me a ride back. My sense of duty sparred with my self-pity for long enough that the struggle must have been palpable through the phone. Thankfully, Reishi broke the hesitant silence.

“If it’s too far I can pick you up in Plainfield. There’s still the train. Get an off-peak one way, it should take about a half an hour.”

“Yeah, yeah, no. I can make it. Of course I’ll be there.”

“Thank you, Willy. You know it means a lot to me.”

We spoke meanderingly for another ten or twelve minutes, about her new job as a production assistant, a police chase and ensuing car crash two blocks from her house, and her inability to keep a snake plant alive past two months. The conversation ran its polite course and

we said goodbye. I dressed myself in simple clothes, washed my face and neck, and began to boil water for coffee. These idle tasks felt like the rediscovered rites of an ancient ceremony, strange and non-intuitive, but once completed I felt slightly more equipped to face the elements outside my door. I decided while the coffee brewed that I should brush my hair. It was tied in thick, starchy knots that extended out in every direction, like a neglected sheep with filthy wool full of straw. I felt dry, like my blood had been drained and my organs harvested. My reflection confirmed that this feeling was reflected externally. I looked halfway-embalmed, as if the funding for my mummification evaporated before the procedure's completion, and the doctors threw me to the desert sands.

Standing in front of the mirror, pulling a barely-used brush across my scalp, I was struck by how innocent I looked. Not young exactly, but naive. Suggestible and out of my depth. I had previously thought harrowing experiences and long periods of self-reflection often wizened people, and added character to their faces where there wasn't any before. I looked tired, but in no way that denoted any sort of experience. I had aged neither forward or backwards, but somehow both at the same time. I was reminded of why I had been avoiding my reflection the past few weeks.

Kicking the pile of fallen letters out of the way like dry leaves, I stood in front of the door for a moment, then walked out without breathing. Lurching down the stairs with my back to the wall, I kept an eye out rounding every corner for any neighbors or visitors. Why I felt like they would stop me for interrogation, I do not know. Only now with more clarity do I see how foolish this paranoia was. It's not as if anyone who might be in the building would want to speak with me, I had no relationship to any of them. I kept on like this until I was out of the building,

walking down the steps into the dark afternoon. The rain had abated, but only by the newly adapted standard of the past few weeks, too soft to be a downpour but too dense to just be a drizzle. Pulling my coat up to my ears and my hat just beneath my line of sight, I proceeded onwards towards my stop.

Walking down a street so far from my own, for the first time in what must have been roughly three months, I might as well have been walking on the ocean floor. The air was dark, briny, bitter, burning as if it was a transmutation of fire rather than water. Every passing vehicle was a giant bioluminescent fish, every storefront an abyssal cave crawling with glowworms. Every smoking manhole was a hydrothermal vent, and every pedestrian was a drowned soul, moving in silence towards unknown destinations.

Telling the time during this period had become difficult for me. Between the constantly blackened daytime sky and my overwhelming disinterest in most matters that required timeliness, knowing what time it was, and the desire to know the time it was, with or without a clock, had been rendered obsolete. I imagine that when I arrived at the bus shelter it was still early afternoon. It was thankfully empty. A puddle of water pooled on the center left of the bench, fed by an intricate system of cracks in the ceiling. I took a seat on the right and began to wait.

Traffic began to pick up as work let out. I could see the bus approaching from some hundred yards away, big white headlights searing through the rain. The bus stop across from me began to fill up, as did mine, with elderly men and women in large windbreakers, and dishwashers and servers on their way to work, in what seemed like a perfect 1:1 ratio, as if the concentration of both groups had been previously calculated by an algorithm and was now being

rendered without any hiccups to speak of. The waking world was beginning to feel more and more normal, more as I had remembered it. Unbeknownst to me, I was to once again be punished for allowing myself to float comfortably above the calm surface of reality, treating the swirling black shapes beneath me as harmless and far away.

As the area around the stop filled more and more with the procedurally-generated, I noticed a curious figure on the opposite side, standing slightly taller than everyone else, with his head cocked slightly to the left in a fixed slump. I saw only his lopsided head bobbing above the shoulders of the others, the rest of him concealed by the crowd. He wore a large black bucket hat, the kind deep-sea fishermen wear, pulled tightly around his neck like twine over a parcel. His entire face was concealed by a large scarf, wrapped around his neck and stopping only where his hat began. As he shuffled towards the bus stop, this was all I was able to discern from him, his features, race, age, and even sex completely unknowable, but I assumed it was a man because of his broad shoulders and back. As the crowd around him began to thin out, a great sense of unease began to crawl up my stomach into my throat. Everything about this man inspired fear in a way I hadn't felt since Parth Rao. He wore a massive mailman's synthetic parka, crosshatched with big strips of 3M so frayed they barely reflected the light of the oncoming cars. He must have been carrying as much weight as a fireman in full gear. Huge rain pants, giant black boots, and large gardener's gloves ensured that just as before, he was impossible to read, shrouded in total anonymity. This alone would not normally be cause for dread, but coupled with his slow, creepily consistent lurch down the sidewalk my nerves were quickly pumped full of adrenaline. He walked with his legs far out in front his torso, as if a invisible string around his waist was dragging him here and there against his will, but resistance had been given up on long ago, so

resigned to his fate, he rested his head against his shoulder as he shambled onward, following the string wherever it took him.

I looked up the street in anticipation. My bus was coming. I stood impatiently and attempted eye contact with the driver, walking adjacent with him until the vehicle stopped and released a great hiss. I peered over the side of the bus in order to grab one last look at the mysterious stranger. As usual, I was a few seconds late to process what was happening, and my stomach dropped like an anvil when I realized he was changing stops, and walking straight through wall-to-wall traffic in order to do so. Cars blared their horns at him, one or two drivers rolled their windows down to curse him out. He marched onwards, completely unresponsive to all surrounding stimuli, his head bobbing to the left and right as he shuffled towards my bus. Not even a brief flash of his face became visible as he got closer and closer.

“Hey sir! Let’s go, sir!” yelled the driver through the torrent, which was starting to pick up again.

I told him I had no fare. He turned his gaze to the road, not responding. I entered and sat down on the farthest bench in the left corner, which allowed me to see every passenger’s arrival and departure. The stranger would be coming on, that wasn’t a question any longer. What needed to be monitored was his trajectory, where he would be seated, where he would be getting off. I couldn’t have explained why at the time, but I felt strongly that it was important to keep a tab on these things. It was a matter of unparalleled importance. Bracing myself, I attentively looked to the front of the bus, listening for heavy footsteps. They never came, but sure enough, in total silence, the figure rose up the steps like an apparition, lumbering straight past the driver and the packed rows of seats, sitting down right next to me. He lost a great deal of mass as he collapsed



into his seat, quietly losing air like a grounded balloon. If I remember correctly, I might have even felt thick, moist air released out from under his coat and sleeves as he sat down, right on my arm. It was unreasonably hot, like what I imagine air in a rainforest must feel like. I leaned my head against the window and began to quietly weep.

Like an ominous buzzard that will circle prey for an eternity before seizing the moment to swoop down and begin its grim feast, a distant memory returned to me as I wept for myself in the shadow of the stranger. A sexless body, obliterated by some unstoppable force much larger than it. A cloud of thick red mist, speckled with amorphous clumps of flesh and bits of collagen, splinters of bone, swiftly resembling back into the shape of a human. A sick miracle. I blinked and it was gone.

It was at this moment I was gripped with a dismal weakness, instantaneous and all-consuming. It started quickly as a burning sensation in my ligaments, then spread like poison to my limbs and torso, stopping just shy of my jaw, my neck trapped in a death grip. I clamped my hand on the back of it in an attempt to maintain pressure. This provided me with just enough sense to finally realize the obvious, that this all-too-palpable feeling of dread and inability was coming directly from the veiled spirit sitting next to me. Whatever feeling of shame was to come about from abandoning Reishi would pale in comparison to the darkness I felt sitting on that bus. I knew I needed to leave. Just being this close to the figure was exacting a kind of emotional tax I had felt only a few times in my life during moments of great tragedy.

There was something else about it too, this entire situation. I leave the house in a meaningful way for the first time in weeks, in the pursuit of real good, only to be driven to near-madness by the same kind of senseless, logic-destroying evil that had shuttered me inside to

begin with. The grotesque ineffability of what bothered me about the stranger's appearance and aura viscerally recalled the same shock I felt when I had begun to daydream in Parth Rao's office only to wake to his sudden frenzy. The images of his attack grew sharper and sharper as the bus drove north and the stranger's amorphous shape rose and shrank beside me in total silence. The panic was the same, even though why this still evaded me.

Trying to get a sense of my surroundings, I devised a way to hurry back home after getting off in a part of town I didn't frequent. As I waited for the bus to arrive at its next stop, I was torn between locking my gaze on the stranger's boots and the floor directly beneath my own. To ensure my safety, his every moment needed to be tracked, but the longer I looked, the more drained I felt, as if I was being bled by malevolent little sprites with pins and needles in their hands, hiding behind my ears and laughing maniacally in-between jabs. Whenever the bus braked, he would softly lurch forward just a little too far, but for the most part he just gently wavered left and right, like a great tangle of seaweed in a kelp forest. I knew he was in no way a traditionally real person, even though at the time I would not have been able to explain why. What's more was that I also knew, somehow, that he would be waiting for me behind every corner, every window and tree for the rest of my life. Any visit to the outside world, outside the little world I had cultivated in my apartment would be marked with his presence. These inclinations were so strongly felt that I knew the stranger must've felt them as well, that they were being beamed directly from his mind to my own was beyond a shadow of a doubt.

Shuffling by him in order to exit, my figure pressed ever so slightly into his own, as is entirely normal for strangers in tight public spaces. I nearly vomited when I felt a concave space,

an indentation in his form where I so badly wanted there to be flesh. He looked straight ahead, completely nonreactive. He would be there forever, and he knew it. There was no rush.

While walking home, past liquor stores with neon signs that lit up as most other stores began to board up for the night, I felt languid with despair, but the poison I had felt earlier foaming in my marrow had stabilized, giving way to a more manageable but still dreadful feeling, one that was much more difficult to describe. A black cloud of resignation hung above me. I felt like a failure. I was a failure. I had abandoned my friend in her time of need, abandoned her to the droll, crushing task of entertaining guests and accepting dry condolences as her future spun out of control. I was nothing more than a large anthropomorphized rat, retreating back to its nest at the first sign of danger, not even a token of the journey for posterity. It was all in my head, and I knew it. Unable to accept what I had done, I began to weep again. The weeping continued until I shut the door behind me. I called Reishi to let her know I wouldn't be making it, and as I combed my brain for a suitable lie, a sob escaped my throat and I rudely hung up before the falsehood could even be expelled. Dropping the phone and collapsing on the kitchen floor, I reached out and clawed at floorboards, desperately seeking warmth, some sort of understanding, something that could lead me to alleviation from the sickness upon me. Reishi called me back. The impossibly heavy mask I had been wearing for weeks fell from my face like an atlas stone, worn to its fibers. She pried only very lightly, and I told her everything. The misplaced desire for respect, Parth Rao, the weeks of immobility, and the monstrous stranger I had seen for the first time just that very day all passed from my lips like kidney stones, but eventually there was nothing left to say other than to beg her not to call anyone else. I made her promise, and she swore to oblige. On the brink of passing out, I said goodbye to Reishi and

began a slow march to my bed, upon which I collapsed like a gunshot victim. The comfort of the enveloping darkness clashed in silence with the fear I knew would still be there when I woke up. Both felt deserved. A dervish of troubling whips flew just above my head, happening both mere seconds and years ago. I fell asleep and didn't dream. When I rose early the following morning, with the autumnal sun burning through my window, my only wish was that I had.

## Three: Kudex

I began to see a lot of Reishi after that, far more than I could've readied myself for. I never directly asked her to, and I knew there was no point anyway. Reishi obviously found a great deal of self-satisfaction in taking care of me, even when she would arrive exasperated and overwhelmed, subliminally messaging to me in a way I must admit was truly masterful, that she had better things to do. Still, like a long book she'd always meant to read or a block of wood she'd let lie un-whittled on a workshop floor for too long, Reishi would stop by nearly every day for about an hour, dutifully so, so she could chip away at her magnum opus of sanctimony; my "mental health", as she put it. Whatever that meant for her I had no idea, but I humored her every impassioned request no matter how crazy it might have felt. She brought Gua Sha tools, comb-like medieval torture devices, and scraped the skin off my arms and back with them. She brought a pair of tuning forks which she would smack together and hold on opposite sides of my head directly next to my ears as we sat together at the kitchen table.

Her visits were all the same. She would paradoxically arrive in an explosive fashion without making a sound, bursting through the door in total silence, barely a hello, panting all the while like she had sprinted all the way from Passaic to my place. After determining which area of the house was in the most dire state of decay, she would set herself upon it like a vulture on a carcass, but not before looking me up and down and telling me what I needed to do to lift myself out of squalor.

"Brush your hair. Take a shower. You have to wash your feet, too."

These orders were solemnly barked at me, like a suicidal drill sergeant that had long abandoned all faith in the future of his sorry cadets. After all these tasks were behind us, she

would stay in the kitchen for the remainder of her occupation, either stirring a pot of buttered rice, spreading honey on toast, or slicing apples and bananas into a bowl for me to pick at. She had grown up in New York City all her life, so this was all she was able to cook. My fridge filled with stale rice and browning fruit. Finally, she would sit on my couch reading glossy, always brand-new books with names like “What The Heart Of Tomorrow Said.” This engrossed her enough to let me slip back into bed unnoticed for the remainder of the afternoon, at the conclusion of which she would promptly leave without a word.

The minute I could be sure Reishi was gone I would bolt the door shut behind her, shutter every blind, and turn on all the lamps and fixtures, frying every surface in artificial light. My reputation as a voracious worker had been well-established prior to my period of hibernation, and so being in the good graces of the bosses meant that work those days consisted only of de-scrambling massive walls of data in Excel and sending them back clean and orderly to my supervisor. I would do this for a few hours in the kitchen, stopping only to retrieve another bag of Skittles from a plastic CVS bag I kept beside the door at the bottom of the vase intended to hold the umbrellas of visitors. I kept this bag well-stocked with the exploits of my most recent visit outside my apartment, which consisted exclusively of hurried scrambles to CVS for candy, beer, and Benadryl. I had managed to hide the truly obscene amount of these three things within my apartment from Reishi, another testament to her obliviousness. When “work” was over, I would retreat to my room and sit cross-legged on the floor like a sentinel for hours and hours, searching message boards and forums on speciality interest websites trying to figure out what had happened to me. I looked everywhere, all the while giving details I wouldn’t give to anyone else over to strangers freely. Some hypothesized Parth Rao to be a CIA intelligencer who had

covertly drugged me with some delayed-release experimental substance, while remotely studying me in disguise, explaining both the stranger and his maddening effect. Some thought Parth Rao was a shapeshifting demon from a different dimension, torturing me into submission in order to finally strike once I had been sufficiently broken.

“I see no other possible explanation,” was how user pali515@netcom.com phrased it. “Kobe Bryant reportedly said almost everything in private that you’ve shared with us here in the weeks before his death.”

The consensus among them was that the experience with Parth Rao, which I was then still slow to label as assault, had caused a pre-existing condition of delusion or schizophrenia to flare up, and the otherworldly, invasive memories of the day of the assault coupled with the dismal solitary encounter with the cloaked stranger were evidence of this. Contrary to what most might assume about receiving a diagnosis like this, I think I might’ve taken a great deal of comfort in it had I actually believed it, but as much as I wanted to it made no sense to me. My mind had definitely begun to fray since the transpiration of those events, but I knew, deeply, and intuitively, that this had been thrown on me. I had stepped on a hornet’s nest, and was now in the process of remedying my stings and swatting away any wayward insects that had followed me home. Nothing about this had been written, the seeds for this event had not been planted a thousand or a hundred or even a few years ago. This was not fated, and I felt as if the end was in sight. I would not resign myself to mental illness, even if everything could be explained through it. As I stubbornly repeated this to myself like a mantra, as the list of troubles that a proper diagnosis would’ve welcomingly explained grew longer and longer. The most harrowing trouble to speak of, more so than my blooming paranoia and mental despoilment, was the proliferation

of the stranger's likeness, which I began to see everywhere. I had rearranged the furniture so many times in hopes of avoiding the stranger's hulking frame in the darkened silhouette of an armchair or bookshelf that my landlord asked, as far as I could understand through her rudimentary English, if I was being abused by a boyfriend. I guess the noise must've started to bother her. I decided anything that denoted mass, be it width or height, could harbor the monstrous being's image, and so I ultimately had to push all my furniture over two feet tall into the corner of my living room and drape everything in a large sheet the same color of the surrounding walls in an effort to keep my environment as visually simple and open as possible, like a domestic prairie of shrubs and short grasses, inhospitable to lurking predators. I arranged couch cushions all over the floor for Reishi and I to sit on, and surprisingly she never emitted a word of complaint. This kept the stranger's likeness at bay for some time, but eventually he phased into the digital realm, appearing in the background of TV shows, movies, even the news. Crowds would hurriedly rush by as reporters spoke of trade meetings and house fires, and for a brief second, the titanous stranger could be seen among them, sunlight glinting off his sunglasses, scarf pulled tight around incommunicable darkness, no matter the weather or region. I would always pause and rewind in order to get a better look, and always he would be gone. Some days, if my nerves were in order, I would open the blinds at the sound of shuffling footsteps or laughter emanating from the street bellow, and out of the corner of my eye I would see a massive shadow dissipate into an alleyway or open door, or that terrible profile staring out at nothing in particular from behind an abandoned storefront window. When asleep by some miracle, he was thankfully absent, but replaced instead with horrific images of bodies slowly bursting like grapes in reverse, the seemingly implanted memory known only in the presence of



both Parth Rao, the stranger, and now, in nightmare. Of course, I mentioned none of this to Reishi.

Prior to this period, I had never actually spent more than a couple days at a time with Reishi. Even during our college days she was something of a second or third-tier friend, a relationship best suited for banter while drunk and idle chat when sober. Very early on in our relationship I even looked up to her. Now she was sober “indefinitely,” as she put it, informing me with her big glassy eyes, rife with melodrama. I didn’t have the heart to tell her most of our mutual friends had been sober for years now, especially when it clicked that this gap in her knowledge meant she had stayed in touch with even fewer people than I had. It was a depressing thought.

I knew that at one point I was always happy to see her, but that time had come and gone. She had the cold, oppressive austerity of a nurse or a social worker, someone who believes they couldn’t mistreat you if they tried, as if it is outside the realm of possibility. The truth was she was invasive, self-righteous, and worst of all, incapable of realizing her faults. Her voice, razor-sharp and bitterly unaware, had an anti-conclusive quality to it, so that her final words were stuck in my head until I heard her speak new ones. It was at once enigmatic and deeply annoying to me.

Her mother’s eyesight, as I understood from droning accounts of hospital visits and doctor’s assessments, was getting worse and worse. She would speak at great lengths about her mother’s inability to recognize faces, the way she could no longer tell if lines were straight or curvy or what color the sky was. I assumed at first I must have been something akin to a distraction for Reishi, but as far as I could tell she was splitting her time between me and her

mother with complete parity. Regardless, anybody could've ascertained there was something off about her persistence to see me "well" again. It was demoralizing and demanding for me, but something told me this was so for her as well. In any case, I decided to indulge her, just to see what would happen. I ignored the fact that it brought me little joy to spend so much time with her.

I floated through this period of time like a lotus atop a maddeningly still lake, unconcerned with cleaning, cooking, or hygiene. I knew that like clockwork, Reishi would show up and make sure one of these areas was satisfied, either by her own hand or by an attempt to guilt me into doing it myself. The former method proved far more reliable. Christmas and New Year's passed by without fanfare, marked by nothing but two separate and equally polite sets of phone calls to my aunt and parents, their own hidden memories and troubles slightly more audible to me than they'd ever been before. Everyone sounded busy, and even though one could've interpreted it another way, I chose to believe they were happily so, and a vision of far-off solace was made visible to me for the first time in weeks. I slept peacefully for days, knowing Reishi was far away, spending time with her own family, undisturbed by dreams of ineffable colossi and sputtering maniacs.

On a brilliantly sunny, white-skied day in early January she arrived with specialized goggles that looked like cheap 3D movie glasses and instructed me to wear them for twenty minutes every day upon waking. They were worn and tattered, held together with fluorescent green and tangerine-colored masking tape.

"This will erode the top film of your eyeballs," she had explained to me very matter-of-factly. "The part that perceives blue light more readily than orange or red light."

When this explanation had ended, she made haste for the kitchen and began boiling a pot of tea. I waited from the other room for her to return and continue her explanation.

“It erodes the film?” I asked, throwing my faint, raspy voice as best I could.

“It’s temporary,” she responded flatly, as if that illuminated the matter.

My patience in this moment began to falter. What did Reishi even know of why she was really here? What parts of my story, a story nobody else had been told other than her, did she selectively believe and what parts did she chalk up to hysteria? What did she really think I was after? Attention? Respect and the acknowledgment of my experience’s legitimacy? Based on how she had chosen to respond, maybe she thought what I really wanted was a housekeeper, someone to distribute the chores of domestic living with, a final childish stand before total submission to modern living. A typical crisis. Nothing about my situation felt typical and the very thought that it might be treated as such was infuriating. I got up and walked to the kitchen. Reishi turned around briefly and then resumed to the tea. Had she stayed turned around for a little longer, she might have thought I looked ditzzy, as I stared slack-jawed and dead-eyed at a pencil sitting on the surface of the table. I imagined giving the back of Reishi’s thigh a quick, shallow jab with it, just enough to break skin without rupturing any flesh. Would she sprint in place for a handful of seconds before bolting out the door in a puff of smoke? I softly smiled at the thought. Maybe it was worth a shot, it’s not like she’d call the cops or anything like that. Our friendship could also be salvaged at a latter date, once this spell was behind me. I sat down at the table and rolled the pencil between my fingers, back and forth like a cigarette. The ceramic thud of two full tea mugs landing on the surface of the table snapped me out of my reverie. We sat in silence, staring lifelessly into each other’s eyes, sipping slowly.

“I can’t stay very long.” Reishi said after a while. “Some cousins on my mom’s side are coming to see her.”

“That’s sweet of them. Where from?”

“Baltimore.”

“Nice. Are you close with them?”

“Nope, I haven't seen most of them since I was nineteen. They were cunts, though. They would feed me Tecates and edibles and toss me into awkward situations with relatives at family gatherings. If I stayed over late enough they’d play gin with me, though.”

A headlong gust of wind blew powdery, granulated snow off of the street and onto my window, tucking it neatly into three of four corners. The low rumble of an overhead jet bore down on my skull.

“Oh! One year they got me to agree on every point being worth a quarter. I was pretty fucked up and eager to be just like them so of course I agreed. We probably played something like twenty games and they hustled me like crazy, ran me for almost four hundred bucks. Way more than a month’s salary washing dishes. Never paid though. The next time I saw them at a reunion in August, two of the girls got wasted and tortured me for the entire evening. They took pictures of me changing in the bathroom and said they’d show the boy cousins if I didn’t piss myself right then and there. They started getting physical, so I threw one at them, in self-defense, naturally, and they started railing on me. Busted lip, bruises all over my face and back. I hobbled to the parking lot and slashed the tires on their cars. I heard that if you only slash three tires on each car, insurance is unable to cover it..”

“Can I ask you something Reishi?” Her story had assuredly concluded, but the question still felt abrupt, like I had interrupted her rudely. When Reishi’s stories received no response, an air of disservice always emerged from the ether, sickly and unpleasant. This was another mysterious quality of her speech, the ability to foist immodesty on you if you left her feeling unacknowledged. She blinked in offense.

“Yeah, of course you can.”

I swallowed a great lump in my throat. What was I suddenly so afraid of? What did I fear I had to lose? My friend’s opinion of me? It couldn’t have been very high. She single-handedly restored my apartment from destitution every week and knew I did nothing to speak of all day long, other than wade in my own filth and occasionally collect a check from work for abject number-crunching. It was an unsightly, servile existence, leagues removed from the valiant life of service that Reishi lived. There was no way out but through with her, which I suppose I should be thankful for in light of all the other alternative ways a relationship can die prematurely.

“What do you think happened?”

“With what?” Surprisingly, she sounded nervous, as if she was personally alarmed by the prospect of whatever I was actually asking her, not nervous in the overly maternal way as I was accustomed to with her.

“With the therapist. In the office that day.” She waited in silence for me to say more. “Do you think I might be moving the details around in my head? Or that I might be playing certain parts of it up?”

“Like I told you the day you called me, I’m ready to go to the cops at your discretion. I’m ready to do whatever it is that you want me to. I’m just waiting for your word.”

“I know, but that’s not really what I’m asking about. Do you think what happened with Parth Rao really was as I remember it? Or am I embellishing it, maybe to stifle how awful it was? What do you think? I just wanna know what you think. You come here almost every day.

She sighed loudly and gulped down the remaining tea, which must have still been scalding if the temperature of my own was any indication.

“Let me just say I appreciate your question. But...I...don’t...think...I...,” She stressed each word thoughtfully, her awkward attempt to soften the blow of what was to come.

“...Feel...exactly...comfortable with answering it. At least not right now. I’m sorry.”

“That’s not good enough, Reishi.” I said. “You’re gonna have to give me something better than that.” Immediately her face and posture relaxed, as if that was all she needed to hear. The corners of her mouth droopily slacked in unison with her eyelids. It was a look I was familiar with. She was ready to lecture.

“Obviously, I think your experience is a hundred percent valid and again, I’m so sorry about what happened to you. I wouldn’t wish it on my worst enemy. But as your friend, when you confided in me, and told me you didn’t know what you were going to do, I worried, ok? Why shouldn’t I? You never were great at finding ways to cope. Do you still promise you’re sober?”

“What?” I said. “I never told you I was sober.”

“Yeah, you did.”

“I don’t remember that at all. When did I say that?”

“You said you’d been sober since the summer.”

“Well, I guess that’s true.”

“You guess?”

“Yeah, I drink. Just a few Sapporo's every night. I don't get what that has to do with anything.”

“How is that sobriety at all? That's literally the exact opposite of sobriety.”

“What do you want from me, Reishi?”

“I'm just saying you were never great at finding ways to cope. You were always all in on improving your life, or all out. When you were in, you were inspiring. To all of us. But when you were all out, it was terrifying. Honestly. It was like a spirit or something had a hold of you, we could never be sure who we were dealing with sometimes. I'm not saying it's like that now, but who knows? Things change. Things could go back to how they used to be. Your personality's not addictive, but I know you take things too far.”

Frustratingly, it appeared Reishi was even less interested in addressing the event in question than I was. Rather than sheepishly redirecting the conversation, I mimicked, how I imagine a poor soul caught in the throes of psychopathy might, Reishi's own watery melodrama, allowing my eyelids to affectedly crack open like yawning oysters, pupils shimmering like sea foam. The theater stage was set for me, much like it was months ago in that RVCC building, now an unspeakably evil place, forever bastardized in the mire of my consciousness. With unwarranted hope I trusted that this endeavor might prove to be more fruitful. It was too late to disengage, the ritual of emotion was underway.

“Reishi. All I want is your honest opinion. I really appreciate everything you've done for me, I really do. This doesn't have anything to do with how I see you or anything like that, it's more selfish than that really. I admire your resolution. I always have, even if I don't make it

obvious. You're a smart person. So help me out here. To be totally raw with you, I'm worried I might be schizophrenic."

I internally seethed with regret. Perhaps I had overplayed my hand. Now the only way out really was through.

"Completely serious. And before you say anything, of course I'm gonna get help. Real, professional help. But as a friend, tell me now, what do you think? Because I really feel like I'm going crazy."

"You're not schizophrenic."

"So that's what you think?"

"Yeah, I do. And you shouldn't talk like that. You've just hit a bit of a rough patch, that's all."

She leaned back in her chair and looked wistfully just above my head, like there was a crowning sun sitting just behind it instead of the snowy tops of townhouses sprawling out in every direction.

"It's hard, trusting your gut. I respect you for doing it. And I know you have your own best interests at heart. But whatever happened between you and that piece of shit, it was definitely the last thing you needed. Until I can see myself that you're well again, I'm gonna stay with you, every step of the way. You don't have to go through any of it alone."

A sweet thing to say. She was being completely genuine, that much I knew. In her own functional way she was just as crazy to me as I must have seemed to her. Now it looked like there was no way out. With the front of her rehabilitation program fully fortified, I knew there was no getting rid of Reishi until I deceived her into thinking a full recovery had been made.



Rallying my thoughts like soldiers, I stared blankly at Reishi with a placid smile on my face, hopefully communicating nothing short of total gratitude as I raced for an idea. When I depopulated my mind of thoughts, letting go entirely of any and all fear, it came down to me like a beam of light.

“One day I’ll repay you.” I blithely mused.

“Don’t worry about that,” laughed Reishi. “No reward needed.”

“What do you do to relax these days? It feels like you’re all over the place.”

“I don’t know, man. Not much. I read books. Watch movies. Being sober is like another full-time job in itself. Really it’s the only hat that I never get to take off. Sometimes I’ll write a bit, but I’m never happy with what I come up with.”

“We should go out.”

She sat up straight and pressed her tongue against her bottom row of teeth, big blue eyes widening in surprise.

“Like out-out? Where?”

“To dinner?”

“Are you sure? You don’t leave your apartment, and you wanna go out for dinner?”

I carefully examined the potential ramifications of what I was proposing. A night out would last an eternity as a defense against Reishi’s asphyxiating efforts to cure me. In light of my reform, she would surely take the opportunity to spend more time with her mother, or at work, as I figured she secretly wanted to. Then I could really get to the bottom of who Parth Rao was and what he had really done to me. Then of course, there was the matter of the stranger. I still couldn’t say for sure whether or not he could hurt me or what he really wanted, but I did

know the domain in which he really wreaked havoc on me was mostly psychic in nature. If I was somehow able to block his cognitive blows, his presence would remain intimidating, but not as anguishing as it had been. If my assumption was correct, I could always just leave and return to the safety of my home, extending the guarantee of Reishi's visits for some time. The risk, as far as I could tell then and there, my mind a whirl at the kitchen table, ended there. I had to do it. I had to defeat my reality on my own terms if I was to defeat it at all.

“I think we could both really use it. It'll be my treat. Pick a place.”

“Wow, Willy. I don't know what to say. You're sure that won't be overwhelming? I mean, if you're starting to get a little cabin fever I'll have you over. I have family staying with me right now but they'll leave us alone so I can cook for us.

The corners of her lips and eyes slowly upturned in excitement, like a reanimated Zoltar machine finally receiving a coin after decades of abandonment. She loved the idea, so I relaxed a little.

“Honestly, if anything that sounds a little more stressful. I'd prefer the anonymity of a public place. No offense. I'd love to see your family soon, but for now, I think a nice, quiet, night out would really benefit me.”

“Yeah, yeah absolutely! I'd love to, man! Sorry, I'm just really excited! I haven't gone out anywhere in like a year. I think I should go clear up my schedule, find something to wear, all that stuff.”

She slammed what was left of her tea, gathered her belongings, and started to walk towards the door, just as I had seen her do so many times before. As she sat on the floor, tying her laces, she began to take inventory of the titanic mountain of letters resting underneath the

mail slot, furrowing her brow in concern. She began to sort them into two piles with the proficiency of an assembly-line worker.

“Uh, real quick. I think you should look at everything in this pile. This other one is just junk, I’ll throw it in the dumpster on my way out.”

“How’s Thursday work for you?”

“Perfectly. Thanks again, Willy. Maybe I’ll see you before. Take care of yourself.”

I stood in the doorway of the kitchen for a few minutes after she left, looking at the pile of mail on the floor. I felt stronger already, simply at the prospect of blissful solitude and the room to amend what had just happened in solitude. Whatever the inspiration was, I decided to sort through the mail. Bills that had already been paid online comprised the bulk of the pile, but there was also a letter from my Aunt, and a couple from family friends, checking in from back around the holidays. At the very bottom was a letter with no return address. Something about it compelled me to open it. I’ll never know what it was. I looked it over and processed none of it. Registering the words on the yellow paper felt like jamming a square through a circle. Barely legible, the message slowly came together.

DEAR WILLY-MARIA,

I HEREBY ANNOUNCE THAT I, PARTH RAO, AM FINALLY A MAGICIAN. YES, PARTH RAO, COGNITIVE BEHAVIORAL THERAPIST AND PRACTICING MAGUS INITIATE. THE TWO ARE MORE CLOSELY INTERTWINED THAN YOU MIGHT THINK. YES, THIS IS REAL. I AM NOW A PRACTITIONER OF RITUALS, SPELLS,

DIVINATION, SCRYING, DEVOTIONAL MEDITATION, HEXES, AND MORE. I  
BECOME POWERFUL. I CONTROL YOUR MIND, WITH MY MIND. PARTH RAO  
POWER.

IN ANNOUNCING THIS I AFFIRM MY POSSESSION OF SUPERNATURAL POWER,  
MAGUS'S GAZE, VIZIONARY. HENCE I ANOINT THIS MOMENT AS THE MOMENT I  
WAS BORN ANEW AS A SEER OF MAGICAL REALITY OVERLAY, VISITED BY  
FORCES FROM OTHER REALMS. OUR CONVERGENCE HAS YET TO CONCLUDE.

BEST,

DR. PARTH RAO, PSY.D

I ran to the sink and expunged a month's worth of refuse from my stomach, heaving until the drain clogged. The last bit I swallowed in order to make the job of cleaning up easier. My hands burned where I held the letter moments ago, it sat on the floor and smoldered there, untouchable a smoking brick of uranium. Shrieking like a banshee, I ran around the house, tearing the curtains from the windows, dodging the falling rods as they clattered to the floor in a flurry of dust and the setting sun's torrid brightness. All the sheets on the furniture somehow got picked up like burs on velcro as I slammed into the walls. Unable to breathe, with my face on fire, I crumpled to the ground like a paper doll, hacking and wheezing. This was exquisite suffering, unlike any kind I had ever known. I had never accepted such dire circumstances so quickly. All this time, Parth Rao had known my address, and for whatever reason had himself convinced that

he wasn't done with me. The urgency of my situation grew insurmountably. The walls were closing in, and if I didn't figure out a sufficient repellent to the encroaching madness attempting to worm its way deeper and deeper into my mind, I would be lost beyond reproach, ash upon the wind.

Activating my VPN for the first time in months, I re-downloaded Tor, installed an antivirus OS, and disabled scripts. All antique rituals lost to indifference, returned to in a moment of impending doom. I went to Danaucolt Ghost Gun Vendor and purchased a Beretta 92F, along with 50 rounds of JHP ammo, running me \$369.99. I rerouted the billing address to the headquarters of the company I worked for. Closing my computer, I stood at the window, watching the blinking lights of planes headed to and from LaGuardia dot the sky like gargantuan bacteria. The outside world was like a multicellular organism giving rise to an increasingly bizarre and vile host of creatures and parasites that couldn't be controlled. I thought for a moment, then returned to my laptop, repeated all the security measures from before and bought 10g of 2-FDCK crystal. Burnt detergent taste preemptively entered my mouth, possibly remnant bile from earlier.

I had no idea what I was doing at all. I knew I wasn't willing to hurt anybody. Reality felt like it was slipping away faster than it had in months, except now I felt as if I was along for the ride instead of fighting the current. A player in the carnival. It was at once nauseating and invigorating, like a fetishistic revelation. With my head swimming, I returned to the window and opened it, letting the burning cold air sting my wet face. It was a true life I had begun to live. Horrible in many ways, but true. I began to care about it ending more than I ever had before. I

slept with a kitchen knife gently resting between my nightstand and mattress until Wednesday evening. The next day the gun arrived.

## Four: Hut

Trofim Lysenko, a Soviet biologist from the 30's, enamored with the rise of communist ideology, believed that organisms could inherit certain acquired characteristics from their parents, a "class-oriented" outlook on the natural world. I did a presentation on him in high school. Held by many scientists for centuries, it had never been implemented on a large scale until the rise of the USSR when Lysenko was appointed the director of The Lenin All-Union Academy of Agricultural Sciences, and subsequently the head engineer of Russia's agricultural reform. Agriculture was already completely non-natural, he argued, so why not double down on its status as a purely human domain and contort it to our will? For example, Wheat, Lysenko argued, could grow right through the depths of winter's frigidity if its seeds were yielded from a crop that was doused with freezing cold water, every day, strengthening its resistance to the elements. Genetics could be usurped by sheer force of will, rather than waiting around for random mutations to occur, inedible grasses could be transformed into entirely new species, and orange trees could be grown in Siberia. For how easy it is to condemn it all now, I thought of Trofim Lysenko as I sat across from Reishi in an mostly empty Thai restaurant in Easton Center, compressed into the corner of our dimly-lit booth by the earth's autocratic gravity, eyes glued to the surface of our table. Was I really doing anything fundamentally different with my own mind, my own well-being? Being here, in this alien landscape, with an illegally-purchased firearm in my bag, constantly looking over my shoulder for a sexually predatory, bespectacled therapist who thought he was a magician, I couldn't help but wonder If I was practicing my own personal form of Lysenkoism, terrorizing the flora of my mind and soul with misguided pragmatism. Compassion,

strength, love, these were delicate, barely preening creatures poking out of the soil, and there I was splashing them with ice-cold water, attempting to warp them into something unnatural.

I had no idea how long we had been there for. Reishi must have known that something wasn't right with me, because she said very little. I threw little cues at her, expecting her to run with them and fill the dead air with conversation, but nothing worked. She kept a light smile on her face and nursed her ice tea, pretending to be deep in thought about something. Maybe she was, but it certainly would've been a little too convenient.

"How's your mom?" it suddenly occurred to me to ask. Had I asked her this at all in the last few months? Surely once or twice. Hopefully.

"Nothing new. We're trying to get her a new insurance plan, one that will cover laser surgery."

"You're a great daughter, Reishi. I mean, it makes sense, seeing how great your mom is. You're gonna be just like her, in the best of ways."

At this she looked at the wall and tenderly held her own head with her palm. It was the first time I had ever seen her stop herself from crying. She was an emotional person, the only warning that an explosive bout of sobbing was coming tended to be a few seconds of welled tears suspended in her eyes. Here, she absorbed the blow of what I had said and wiped her face, grinning and looking right at me.

"Thanks, Willy. You know you've been invaluable to me."

"Yeah, yeah. I know. You wouldn't be shit without me. I put you on it all. You're like my little apprentice."



We both laughed, mostly at the acknowledgment that long ago something closer to the reverse had been true.

Once she had relaxed, we resumed our standard roles and she began to speak idly to me as I slumped deeper and deeper into my seat, trying not to show any sign of tweaking. I got lucky, clean batch. I had a slight compulsive twitch in my left eye, but other than that, I felt totally in control of my motor functions. Just enough to brave the world. Enough to point a gun at another human and make them beg me for forgiveness. A tight-rope walk that grew increasingly imperiled as the hours ticked by and the 2-FDCK wore off.

I had dealt with my fair share of people who could be considered “crazy” by the societal standards of most while working as an EMT. About 75% of them were patients on calls, the other 25% were other medics. I felt grievance at the fact there were people out there, condemned to a life of misery and isolation due to their inability to live in the modern world, while people like Parth Rao ran wild, doing as they pleased, living in comfort. Both kinds of people were just as equally unwell, but somehow they went unpunished. I remember finding the archetypal crazy people much easier to work with however. Winos and junkies fallen onto train tracks or passed out in subway terminals covered in shit and vomit, these were much easier on my psyche than married people, med students, and those I wouldn't have looked twice at on the street thrown into fits of lunacy. These were the people who in moments of delusion thought they were clones of ex-presidents, would strip down naked, and climb down the scaffolding of their building before falling fifteen feet onto the pavement. I knew that if I ever fell off the edge, it was likely the category of mania others would plant me in.

This was the class of insanity I had placed Parth Rao firmly within the bounds of, but gone was the pity I had once uneasily held for these wayward professional-managerial types that might've just had one bad day. If Parth Rao was really stalking me, I could ambush him tonight, scaring him away for good while staving off Reishi for the foreseeable future as well, two birds with one stone. All I needed to do was to make sure they never ran into each other, or the results would be disastrous, like the inversion of an atom splitting. A delicate operation, I was beginning to regret getting high before I left for the restaurant.

I excused myself to piss and wash my face. Sitting on the toilet, I looked down into my open bag, plopped it between my feet, and stared at the gun. It was still wrapped in bubble plastic, looking like an alien rock, an artifact out of time. I should've watched a YouTube tutorial on how to load it before I left, I would have to troubleshoot if the moment presented itself prematurely. I unwrapped it and turned it over, inspecting it. No serial code.

Something about sitting down with my pants around my ankles in a public bathroom with an illegal weapon in my hands began to induce a heightened state of vulnerability. It was at this moment the stupidity of what I had undertaken began to make itself apparent. *This whole plan, I thought, in some way hinges on the possibility that what Parth Rao said was true. That he is, within some reason, a psychic. What are the odds that I'm actually going to run into him? This is not a small city. Lots of people just passing through. Is it possible on some level that I believe him? Am I simply willing to take the chance just to stop him from stalking me for the rest of my life?* The weight of it all came very suddenly. There is a hugely disproportionate police presence in Somerset, considering its size. Traffic stops were routine. Unlawful possession is a serious crime in Jersey, ten to fifteen years, with little sympathy for first-time offenders.

Breaking my anxious trance was a knock from outside. To the untrained ear, it likely didn't sound unusual at all. Maybe a bit soft. But to me, it made the red light of the bathroom flicker in sync with my eye's own twitch. It was soft, yes, but reverberant, and cavernous, like a big, cold gust of wind through an abandoned house. Sort of like an empty boxing glove the size of a throw pillow rapping on the door. I recognized the tenor instantly and scrambled to my feet, tripping over myself in a hurry to fish out the box of ammo from my bag. The knock continued. I locked open the slide and fumbled for the magazine, which I struggled to find amid the nebulous bullshit strewn about inside my bag. I searched for it with one hand, holding the box of ammo in the other, my head swimming with despair and fear. I must've squeezed it too tight, because the bottom of the box blew out and bullets flew everywhere across the tile floor. Some even rolled out beneath the door. At this moment I noticed the knocking had completely stopped. Clutching the unloaded gun behind my back, I inched closer and closer to the door, until eventually, after pressing my ear against it and watching for shadows through the crack, I opened it. Nobody was there. Behind me, the bathroom floor was littered with bullets, every square inch hosting at least one glimmering shell. It would take forever to clean up, and if the stranger really was nearby it wasn't worth it to risk exposure. I couldn't stay here, I needed to leave, and not the way I came. No window in the bathroom ruled out any possibility of escaping undetected. Taking a deep breath, I pushed open the doors to the kitchen and bolted past line cooks and dishwashers, desperate not to look any of them in the eye. Bursting out in the freezing pitch of the night, I almost crashed into a sixteen-year old kid hosing down a pile of rubber mats in a parka. He leapt out of my way to avoid contact and splashed me with a stream of hot water as he did so. Some

semblance of my wits returned to me and I let my concealed weapon drop to the bottom of my bag. He was mortified, I must have looked like a bug-eyed demon to him.

“Miss,” he professed breathlessly. “I am so sorry. I didn’t see you coming, would you like to borrow my coat?”

I looked to the left and right of us and sprinted further down the alley, back out into the parking lot. Out of the corner of my eye I saw a hulking frame leaning against a pillar, and I kept running down the street past flustered couples and groups of rich laughing teenagers. I kept running until the cold made my dress stick to my body and burn like acid. The stranger’s likeness lurched out at me from behind parked cars, perched on street lights, looking down on me like great birds of prey. The ribbons of my stomach trailed behind me as I sprinted like macabre streamers, and every particle of flesh decomposed into dismal sludge. A sexless body, obliterated by some unstoppable force much larger than it. A cloud of thick red mist, speckled with amorphous clumps of flesh and bits of collagen, splinters of bone, swiftly reassembling back into the shape of a human. Again and again. A sick miracle. When I couldn’t run another step, it continued in the recess of my mind, only slower and quieter.

I collapsed onto the pavement and rolled over on my back, chest heaving. I have no idea how long I lay there for. Eventually, I heard music from up the street, coming from a small college bar. I was coming down then and my mouth made a sound like a bag of chips crinkling when I flexed it, so I decided to go in for a drink. It was the last one before the street turned into Hawthorne Park, not far from Rutgers. I would gather my bearings and return to the Thai place on Easton once I could be sure I wasn’t being followed.

Inside, a few patrons sat apart from each other, mostly older guys. A small group of college kids crowded around a TV fixed in the corner, watching the Winter Olympics. One of the skiing events, biathlon or cross-country, I couldn't say for sure. I went straight to the bathroom and guzzled water from the spout until the inseam of my stomach felt like it was about to burst. I walked out and sitting at a table at the very end of the bar, dressed the exact same way he was when I met him first, was Parth Rao.

I had thought for almost half a year what I was going to do when I finally saw him again. I ran the simulation through my brain hundreds of times, visualizing a myriad of possibilities and weighed each one for its positive and negative ramifications. They ranged from extortion and murder to acceptance and forgiveness, but when the time came, there was no obvious choice. No instinct kicked in. No angel descended from the broken sky and dictated that I act in any one way. It felt more like looking at an oil painting of Parth Rao than anything else. All I knew was the time for confrontation had at last arrived. I just stood there dumbly for a moment, walked up to his table, and sat across from him.

From such a short distance, I realized he had a smug smile on his face, the faintest expression of regret nowhere to be found. This lit a burning coil of anger within the pit of my chest, the first emotion since the panic and dread I had felt before arriving. I might've been so afraid that anger was all that felt natural. It might've mattered then, but it doesn't matter now.

"Yongjae Choi." He began.

"Don't say anything. Not a word," I responded. "If you say one word to me I'm going to make this a really bad night for both of us, mostly you though."

He pressed his palms together attentively and looked at me with his brow raised, the way one looks at a child explaining the rules of a game. I pulled the gun out of my bag and pressed it against his knee. A flash of panic crept across his face.

“If you ever contact me again, or stalk me, or whatever it is you’re doing, I’ll kill you. Do you understand? I’m gonna kill you.”

I scanned his expression and felt deep dissatisfaction at the fact that although panic had set into it, it had not increased since the verbalization of my threat. I continued, eager to lay it on more thickly.

“Maybe I’ll do it, probably not, though. I’ll probably just find someone to do it for me. I can do that, you know. I know where to go. It would weigh on me for a bit, but I would learn to live with it. If you ever cause a problem for me again, in any shape, way, or form, I won’t hesitate. I’m gonna kill you.”

I pressed the barrel deeper into his knee.

“Do you understand what I’m saying to you?”

He nodded.

“Now I’m gonna ask you some questions. Make your answers as concise as possible. About four months ago I left my neighborhood for the first time since you assaulted me. I was accosted by this thing, this guy, really tall and weird, and it really got in my head. I began seeing him everywhere. I even saw him tonight. Do you have anything to do with that?”

“How do you think I got us to cross paths tonight?” he croaked in his whispery, ambiguously foreign voice.

I dug the gun deeper.

“Please, keep your answers concise. So, what? Are you saying that was you under there?”

“No.” He said, lowering his voice even more. “That was my servitor.”

“What? What is that?”

“A psychological complex manifested physically. I created it.”

“How did you create it?”

“It’s advanced chaos magick. You wouldn’t understand even if I took all the time necessary to explain it. It is a budded-off portion of my psyche, a part of a thought-form continuum.”

“What do mean, continuum? Will it stop? Are there more of them?”

“There’s only one, although I’m working on a duplicate. The new one is to surveil someone else, however. You have been more than accounted for. Will it stop? My control over it frays with each passing day. You must understand it was once a mere sigil, now as a servitor it has the wherewithal to engineer its own evolution into an egregore, and ultimately into a minor godform. Very soon, whatever it does will be out of my jurisdiction.”

“Why did you make it then, if you can’t control it?”

“I could for a while. All these things are, how do you say it? Give and take.”

“So that’s it? I’m stuck with it?”

“I created it to protect you, in a broad sense. To make sure you recovered from that mishap of mine without doing anything drastic. Through it, I kept you contained, suppressed. After enough time passes, I can’t say if it will retain its interest in you”

“Do you know where it is right now?”

“I have a vague idea.”

“Of course you do. By the way, I don’t believe a word you’ve said. I think you’re insane. I think you prey on people with problems. Maybe you think you’re excused because you have problems of your own. I don’t know.”

I thought for a moment about what he had said. He had a large tote bag at his feet, stuffed to the brim with indeterminate materials.

“Hand over your bag,” I demanded.

“Is this a robbery now as well?”

“Do it.”

Almost immediately I found an XXL synthetic mailman’s parka identical to the one the stranger wore, rolled up tightly and bound with twine.

“Jesus Christ. It was you. I don’t even know what to say. The kind of help you need is beyond words.”

“What are you talking about? That wasn’t me,” he rebutted.

“This is the same jacket I saw on your ‘servitor.’”

“Yes, I’ve purchased more than one of them. Like I said, I plan on making another one identical to the one I made for you.”

“I don’t know what this is, if this is some crazy psycho-sexual thing or what, but I’m not gonna humor you any further. Everything I said still stands.”

“It was unfortunate, what happened between us, I agree. But you have to understand it was not my fault.”

“What are you talking about?”



“I have my mind open to many different planes of reality. All fixed models of life, in my mind, are rejected. This makes me powerful, able to do impossible things, like make servitors, but it also makes me vulnerable to possession. Sometimes, a wayward thought will assume full spiritual access to my being and drive me to do things I would never do otherwise. And that is exactly what happened when you came to see me.”

“Enough. I don’t wanna hear your ramblings anymore.”

“I’m only warning you, Willy-Maria. You have become entangled with forces you have no ability to reckon with. You’re weak. Your life will be rife with suffering if you don’t learn about these things. I can’t be the one to teach you, but I can lead you to people who can. Think of it as a referral of sorts.”

Something was compelling me to listen to him. I didn’t believe him, and had no intention of doing as he suggested, but he spoke too earnestly for me to just get up and walk away, even if I had no idea what he was talking about. I decided not to indulge him, but to hopefully finish whatever narrative remained between us definitively.

“What can you do to stop it? All the torment you’ve caused? It’s the least you can do.”

“There’s no guarantee it will continue to bother you, the servitor.”

“Let’s assume it will,” I said, digging the gun in once more.

“Well, first of all, you’d have to believe I’m telling you the truth, which you appear to be unwilling to do.”

“And then?”

“Well, to put it simply, stakes must be made. Belief is but a tool, and so you transpose your desires onto your beliefs. But there must be a conditional, as a tribute to chaos.”

“What do you mean, like a gambit?”

“Yes, exactly, a gambit.”

“A bet.”

“In a sense, yes. A bet. There is an accompanying ritual as well that must be performed perfectly.”

An antagonistic star rose above me. Part of me wanted to watch him toil, suffer, embarrass himself, mentally flagellate like a raving lunatic. The vindication I felt it would bring proved too alluring to resist.

“All right, how about that?” I asked, pointing to the winter olympics on TV. “Ski jump. Women’s individual, large hill.” I strained my eyes to discern the names of the athletes. “I will bet you that Germany wins. I believe that they will.”

“That’s not good enough. Not enough conditionals. How about you predict the top three medalists?”

“Ok.” I laughed. I hadn’t even noticed I had removed the gun from Parth Rao’s knee and placed it back in my bag. “Germany first, then Norway. Actually, you know what?” I asked in mock self-doubt. “Let’s do Norway first, then Germany. Then Japan.”

“Then we can begin. If that is the exact placement, the servitor will be destroyed. Otherwise, it lives. Are you ready?”

I looked to the TV. The college kids were cheering and laughing, slapping each other on the back, spilling beer and ruffling each other’s hair. On the screen, the jumpers soared through the darkness, pure streaks of brilliant color against the pitch of blackness. Pulled through the ether like stars by the hand of God. I was watching angels take flight.

“Yes, I’m ready,” I said.

Parth Rao stood up. He was such a small, scrawny man. His face turned red. I assume he was drunk.

“Are you sure this is a safe place for such a, uh. Ceremony?” I asked, stifling laughter.

“These people are inebriated. They are not paying attention to us. Remember, the key aspect of this ceremony is your belief. You have to believe there’s something wrong worth fixing. Then, anything you might need will be yours.”

“I understand. Go ahead.” I said.

He took a few deep breaths, then looked up at the ceiling. He stomped his foot on the ground.

“Hut!” he exclaimed.

“What does that mean?” I asked. I looked around. Nobody seemed to notice us. They were too engrossed in their own conversations, or in the game.

“It means start,” He said. “Do not speak to me during the ceremony. Do not ask the meanings of any of the words I say.”

“Sure, sorry,” I said, “Continue.”

Parth Rao began to enter a trance, speaking in indecipherable tongues. I watched the jumpers on the television shoot across the midnight sky, resplendent and completely unstoppable. It was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen.

I took the mailman parka out of Parth Rao’s bag and put it on, walking out into the quiet of the night. He didn’t seem to notice me at all.

“Hut!” I heard him shout as I walked away. “Hut!” he called out to nobody in particular, his voice diminishing as I continued onward.

“Xiqua! Uduinbak!

“Xiqua! Uzarfe, D’Kyeng!”

“Hut!”

“Xiqua! Kudex, Eacht!”

“Hut!”

“Hut!”

“Hut!”

# All Flesh Is Grass

**N**obody at DiStefano's was surprised when it happened. But nobody understood what really happened like I did. If they did, perhaps they'd have a little more sympathy for Davenport. "It's always the ones you expect," they said when it happened. They still say this, years after the fact. Giza, Massachusetts, however, where it all happened, is a small city, and I would do well to remember that there isn't always so much to talk about in a city as small as Giza. I understand that better now, better than I once did.

Still, I always feel like I should defend Davenport whenever talk of what happened comes up. I never do. I suppose this is my attempt to save face, to finally make clear what really happened. I cannot stress enough that everything that happened took place exactly as I intend to describe it. I want only to clear my name, and Davenport's. And before you say anything, yes, I know that the dead can't speak for themselves, and that their side of things must be handled with a certain grace and composure. Put your trust in me, and I will do no disservice to any involved parties.

I was once as suspicious of Davenport as any of us were. I'll admit at times I was even scared of him, seriously scared. The first thing that any of us noticed about him was what he looked like, which feels like as fine a place to start as any.

Davenport had a crop of platinum blonde hair as short as the velvet patina on a deer's antler. He had radial bones that bulged at the end of his skinny wrists like Elizabethan collars. Permanently upturned lips. Cubic Adam's apple. A frame too tall and lanky for the comfort of most, especially for the type of woman he dreamed of bedding, which he would confide in me

years later was short, five feet at the tallest. Pink circles terminally rimed the whites of his eyes, like a rabbit's. He winced as if tortured in even the faintest glimmer of natural light. As a gravely near-sighted man who worked outside from sunrise to sundown, transition lenses must've seemed like the obvious way to kill two birds with one stone, but if he only looked like a simple dope before, we, his co-workers at DiStefano's, all agreed these glasses were what drove his image out of the territory of the dope and into that of the serial killer. Rumors in the absence of any real information regarding Davenport's life ranging from playfully mean to outright cruel had been swirling long before he adopted those insectile lenses, though they grew in both quantity and viscousness after he donned them. The "serial killer thing" stuck and aged especially poorly, like a dying rat trapped behind a wall.

You could make the point that he sort of invited it in a way. He was a nice enough guy, and a very good worker, but creepy. Some guys coined the nickname "Doc" for him, which was for saying to his face, while others called him "Undertaker," which was for whenever he was out of earshot.

Everyone at DiStefano's agreed that you couldn't really help but put a wall up whenever Davenport came around. The way he had about him was simply an uneasy one, but what fueled this sense of unease was not anything he ever did or even said. All he ever did was his job, and he never said a word unless addressed, and even then he might ignore you. DiStefano, our boss, was the only guy who seemed to like him.

The irascible DiStefano was an ugly, little man, rarely had a kind word for anyone, but he had immediately taken a shine to Davenport, always had a jovial slap on the back for him, called out "Ho! Mr. GQ, how you doin,'" whenever they crossed paths. It made sense, Davenport was a

fastidious and hard worker, hadn't missed a single day in his three year hitch under the old man, as far as I or anyone else knew. Even on holidays he was known to come in, and on short notice. Work ethic aside, he gave us so little about himself, and so we assumed much in order to fill in the blanks. Here was where the rumors began to boil like a lake under rainfall. People said he lived alone in some dump outside Essex, could've been anywhere between twenty-five and forty-five years old, ate cat food slack-jawed in front of television static every night. Missing pets hung from his basement ceiling. Lost children congealed at the bottom of cooking pots in his kitchen sink. Anything was possible. We warily gave him his space, and he returned the gesture, until the Saturday night in late April when his path interwove with my own.

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The lid on DiStefano's was blown off every Friday around six, when all five weekday crews returned to the storage house that doubled as an office for the old man and a few of his bean-counters. As more and more guys trickled in, conversation over where to find booze, girls, and drugs burgeoned into an inferno of hollering and grab-ass. We kept busy as we shot the shit, re-gassing the mowers, cleaning clotted grass from upturned blades, hosing down truck beds, getting everything ready for the weekend crews. We sloshed around thermoses filled with Crown Russe and strawberry lemonade, Mad Dog, Kodoko Rakshi. The hardest tweakers among us had been sneaking lines in tool-sheds from little glass vials since three' o clock. These were the leaders of the ruckus, wiping noses with the backs of palms, wild-eyed, the grand marshals. One among them was Zebulun Reese, a crazy-eyed foreman with a face so red and rubbery it gave



away his penchant for fraudulence from the moment you shook his hand. Drove a third-generation pony car, claimed to be the last person in the whole state to own one. The suspension was so low it cast no shadow on the road below it, and when he turned the corner a dirge of extinguished beer cans could be heard rattling around inside it like a blender full of washers. Come Friday, Reese came down with a virus only boilermakers, decent weed, and teaching assistants clad in wrap dresses could quell. I tried to keep an open mind, figured there had to be more to Reese than just that. All I had to keep this hope alive was this strange habit of his I noticed, which was this proclivity he had for staring out into space for long periods of time, uninterrupted, with his hands on his hips, as if he was surveying something the rest of us were unable to see.

DiStefano frequently assigned me to Reese's crew, which was reason enough for Reese to always invite me out for a drink after quitting time. It was difficult for me to say who his real friends were, because whenever I met him outside of work his makeshift crew of drinking buddies was always comprised of whoever happened to have been working under him that day. I supposed he just invited whoever was around, had himself figured for a fun-loving, devil-may-care sort of guy, impulsive in the best of ways. Maybe others saw him that way, but I found him rather thin-skinned and boring, a grim blend that made him as approachable as an alligator bull that had learned to walk upright and play dice. That being said, once he was piss-drunk, and that never took long, he could almost be counted on to buy you a drink or two, a trade-off that at the time seemed reasonable enough to me. Besides, The Second Best, his oft-frequented bar of choice, was situated in the dead center of Wilmington Street, the backbone of Giza's main street, which was as fine a starting place for a wild night as any. Opportunities to

peel away from Reese and his companions often presented themselves, which I came to rely on. Just a quick drink, some niceties, and then I'd slip off. Irish exit. As long as you kept his company, your words with Zebulun Reese needed to be watched hawkishly, as any sort of grievance was enough to shatter his veneer of cool sunniness without warning or ceremony, especially anything off-color or possible to interpret as homosexual in nature, and the netting there was as wide as the day is long. Being all this as it was, my surprise was not easily concealed the evening I agreed to meet Reese for a drink at The Second Best and saw Davenport sitting with him, as out of place as a cockroach on a newborn's scalp.

"Reid," shouted Reese over the din. "Come and join us. Look who I ran into."

Davenport, who's first name was at that time completely unknown to me and would not be known to me for sometime after sat with few others, completely motionless, narrow shoulders starting far above the grass-green booth's sodden wood surface. As dark as The Second Best was, his lenses retained their impenetrable pitch. There was no drink before him.

Reese occupied the other end of the spectrum entirely. With his hair already plastered to his shell-pink forehead, flanked by two new additions at DiStefano's I had never met before, he seemed to be in good spirits, but warily looking around for something that once again nobody else could see, which in turn of course made me wary of something, but since I had nothing urgent to be wary of it just made me wary of him. He gave me a dull, dimly dissatisfied grin as I made my way over. I sat across from him, Davenport on my far left, at the glimmer of my periphery. In between us was a pretty woman who seemed fixed to her seat purely out of some extramundane decorum, like she had promised herself in a sinking car that if she could only escape she'd leave her shell and open herself to new experiences and people, and was now

begrudgingly fulfilling her end of that cosmic bargain. I introduced myself. Her name was Hyacinth, a twenty six year-old community service officer originally from Barre. She had been in Giza for five years now. A reformed flower child was my read on her. She had a slightly soiled adhesive bandage tied to her wrist she said was from a tray of hot commissary food that had been thrown at her. I got the impression that like Davenport she did not go out very often.

Reese's two new legionaries were Mike and Chuck, fair-weather transplants from UMass Amherst. Incoming sophomores, both of them, rakish, they seemed too eager to shed their waspy, sheltered ways, and had figured a blue-collar job was the best way to go about it. Conversation was without effort or content. Idle chat could exist for only so long in Davenport's presence before it was absorbed and reduced to nothing. He observed from his perch, an alabaster tower of silence. In a gulf of speech, I thought it appropriate to introduce myself to him.

"I don't think we've actually met before. I'm Reid. I work at DiStefano's."

"Davenport," he said, craning his great dinosaurian neck down to meet me with what I assume must've been his eyes. An oil-thick, viscous drawl lacquered his speech, as if his words were formed halfway down his esophagus rather than in his mouth. Vaguely southern. In his waxen hand he took my own.

"Subsidiary lawn service technician for Mr. DiStefano," he said. "I've seen your work. You are an excellent laborer. An exemplary mulcher. You always spread the initial layer of soil with a twenty-four tine rank before you switch to a smaller, hand-held one in order to properly remove trace sediment from around trunks and plant stems. An excellent practice."

"Thank you," I told him. "What brings you out tonight?"

"It was the craziest thing," answered Reese. "You wanna know what the craziest part is?"

“What’s that, Reese?”

“This motherfucker’s been livin’ upstairs the last three fuckin’ years, and not once have I ever seen him in here. Ever.”

“The rent is cheap here,” Davenport explained. “And I don’t often partake in alcohol. It makes me feel rather unwell.”

“So a few hours ago,” Reese said, looking at Davenport like he still could not believe what he was seeing, “we’re walkin’ up Wilmington, right, just seeing what’s up, and who do we find but old Davenport, jimmying a set of keys, gettin’ ready to just slip away from the crowd and go who knows where. So I stop him and ask him where he’s going, and he says he’s going home. The fuckin’ guy lives over The Second Best! Can you believe it? I tell him he oughta join us. He’s alright too, once you get to know him. But I mean really, what are the motherfuckin’ odds? I been coming here almost ten years, and never would I have guessed in a million years the five-over-one would have a guy like Davenport livin’ inside it. Guess you never really know people. And now look at us. Having a great time.”

Reese paused and took a long gulp of beer. A thin comb of the stuff ran from his chin to his neck.

“When you live in a city this small, I guess you can only go so long before you know everybody in it. Go figure.”

Hyacinth rose from her seat as if to conclude a business meeting that had gone on too long.

“I’m gonna have a smoke. Anyone,” she said, gesturing to the rest of us, “is free to join me.”

“I will abstain, but I could use the fresh air,” I heard Davenport say. Weirdly, I had somehow forgotten he was there. The two walked out, leaving me with Reese and his goons.

“Thank God she’s gone,” said Reese. “Can’t make any kind of move with her around. Did she tell you she’s basically a cop?”

“Community service officer,” I said. “It’s social work.”

“Two words for you, buddy: Mandated reporter. I’ve been high as a kite since five but I won’t be for much longer, and as much fun as it’s been doing blow right under this uppity bitch’s nose, it’s not a rush I’m willing to spend the night in the county jail for.”

“I don’t know,” I said. “She seems alright. How’d you even get mixed up with her in the first place?”

“I didn’t. She just sort of latched onto Davenport. I think she’s a dyke, tell you the truth. If she’s not gonna fuck me I doubt she’s trying to fuck. She’s killing my mood is what she’s doing.”

“You could just ask her to leave,” I offered.

“I’m a gentleman,” he slurred, holding his greasy mop of hair back with both hands.

“And besides, I bet I could get her to switch sides, if she really is a dyke.”

Before Reese could start his next sentence, Mike, who had been producing a noise like a garbage disposal clogged with chicken bones under his breath for the last thirty seconds, started to moan, loud enough that we were forced to give him the attention he appeared to be begging for. Reese slapped him on the back and he spat up a glob of yellowish vomit onto his own lap. A fair bit landed on the table as well. People were turning around to look at us, and I felt my neck heat up with embarrassment. Amid calls from drunken patrons to “take that shit outside,” Chuck

and Reese each grabbed a shoulder and dragged Mike out the door, sitting him at a little tempered glass table on the sidewalk. “Teenybopper,” someone yelled. Mike, pale and drenched in sweat, could barely keep his head up.

“Meet my gaze, man,” demanded Chuck, who was growing noticeably worried for his friend. Mike could do no such thing. Hyacinth and Davenport reappeared, the former producing a twelve-ounce bottle of water from her bag and trickling it into Mike’s mouth, his head in her hand. He pulled it away from her grasp and folded it between his knees like an airplane passenger bracing for impact. He puked once more. One of the two bartenders, who had been surveying the scene from the doorway with a sullied dishrag in his hand, came out to inform us that we’d have to move Mike somewhere else if he was going to keep retching. The bartender and Davenport exchanged an odd glance I could not discern the meaning of.

Reese, to no one’s surprise, was furious. For some reason, he seemed to feel responsible for Mike’s well-being, even though Chuck, who lived with Mike only a town away, obviously shared most of that responsibility. Chuck tried explaining this to Reese with little success.

“My whole evening’s shot to shit because of you, asshole. Learn to hold your liquor,” Reese seethed in Mike’s face.

“I’m soddy,” Mike blubbered.

Hyacinth was aflutter, rifling through her bag for some sort of remedy that was evidently nowhere to be found. She spun on her heels in a semi-circle for a moment, thinking, then began to dial a number on her phone.

“Don’t do that,” pleaded Chuck. “Don’t call 9-11. He can’t afford it.”

“Then what are we supposed to do?” she asked Chuck, though she looked at me as she said it. For some reason I was being afforded a certain authority I wasn’t used to receiving. Truthfully, I was looking for a polite excuse to depart. It was only seven-thirty. Let the kid sleep behind a dumpster was what I thought. Rite of passage. Next time he’ll watch himself. Tomorrow’s another day. I watched Hyacinth staring at me, waiting for a response. She was really cute, I’d only just realized. Her face was soft and inviting, and flushed with anticipation, but statuesque, like a durable, blanched coral tinted pink by the setting sun. She was tough and serious, and I did not want to appear as anything but tough and serious to this tough, serious, very pretty girl. I scoured my brain for solutions to the problem at hand. Reese’s lower jaw seemed to be on the brink of shattering, he was so perturbed. Chuck stood bug-eyed and motionless, his hand on Mike’s quivering shoulder. Hyacinth waited, imploringly. The only other attendant soul was Davenport. I turned to him, though my gut told me not to. I should’ve listened.

“Davenport, you live upstairs, right? I hate to ask this of you, but is there any chance we could put Mike up on your couch or something? I think he just needs to lay flat for a bit. He could use a bucket or something to retch in as well, if you’ve got it. I don’t wanna exert you. But he seems fucked up.”

Davenport removed his transition lenses and blinked like a lizard baking on a stone. With those pink-rimmed eyes burning through me, I wondered if I had offended him by asking.

“I was just about to propose the very same,” he said. “I’ve got a guest bedroom Mike is more than welcome to rest in. You all may come in as well, if you’d like to gather yourselves for

a moment.” Just like that, he was at the door, unlocking it, and gesturing at us to follow him up the stairs and into the unknown.

“Alright, come on, pussy-boy,” said Reese, lifting Mike to his feet and slinging his arm over his shoulders. Hyacinth rolled her eyes and followed, Chuck shuffling behind her like a young elephant trailing his mother. I took the rear of the party and closed the door behind us.

Davenport escorted us down a short, gloomy hallway which led to two flights of creaky, similarly dim flights of stairs, which opened suddenly upon his living room. His space was pristine. It was the first and most obvious thing you noticed when you walked in. The overt lack of dust and grime did not need to be seen, it could be felt. Every surface was visibly spotless, every particle of air felt eerily empty as it ricocheted through your bronchi. Not a single drape was out of place, everything slid neatly into the corner it was meant to. The second thing you noticed was that it was green, nearly exclusively. The polyester on the floor was a sickly pale green, and it made me feel like I was on the floor of an abandoned movie house or casino. The curtains hung heavy like sheets of fungus. The cushions on the couch, the armchair in the corner, the lampshades, anything that could feasibly be green was. Davenport showed Mike to his temporary quarters, a little room with nothing more than a folding cot, a bedside table with a lamp, and a few boxes. We had taken our seats, with Hyacinth and I together on the couch, when Davenport re-emerged from the room like a wraith, a ring of shadow on the ceiling cast off the lamp like a halo encircling his head. “I’m going to the kitchen,” he said. The odd room seemed to accentuate his qualities, like a house of mirrors that reflected only his visage. “I’m going to get Mike a glass of water. Would any of you like anything?”

“You’ve got a beer?” asked Reese.



Davenport pursed his lips and paused.

“I might,” and at that he departed into the darkness.

The three of us looked out into empty space, not saying much. As he often did, Reese seemed to be pondering something intently, something physical in the corner of the room, something growing, festering. Outside the slightly open window to my back I could hear the rowdy hum of night life emanating from the street. Despite the closeness of the sounds of shouting and laughter, I felt tucked away, sequestered from reality.

“There’s no TV,” muttered Chuck.

“Fuckin’ A,” Reese said. “This place is giving me the creeps. Hopefully we’re out of here soon.”

“I feel like we can go pretty soon,” I said, employing the royal “we.” “Mike seems to be in good hands. Maybe you can stay back, Chuck, but I don’t think it matters that much anymore.”

“Nah,” said Reese, “We can’t leave him here with this guy, as much as I’d like to. Who knows what’ll happen to him?”

“What are you talking about?” I said. “Nothing’s gonna happen to him.”

“I have to agree with Reese,” said Hyacinth. “I like Davenport, but none of us know him very well. Better to be on the safe side. Not to mention the polite side. We have to wait.”

Resigned, I sank into my side of the couch and watched Hyacinth cross and uncross her legs as she picked at the fibers of her cast, presumably feeling just as bored and indisposed as I did. A large cloud rolled by outside, its underbelly lit up in saffron and purple from the light of the city. The color of hyacinths. It reminded me of all the fun I might’ve been having, ideally,

though not realistically, with Hyacinth by my side, if something had gone differently. I grew petulant as the seconds ticked by. Davenport came back after a while with a silvery green tray containing four small green plastic cups, a large green glass, a pitcher of water, and a single cold bottle of Ziegenbock. He set the tray on the table, filled each small plastic cup to the brim with water, and departed to the guest room with the pitcher and glass.

“Hm,” remarked Reese.

“What is it?” asked Chuck.

“It’s just a funny beer is all. You don’t see Ziegenbock pretty much anywhere around here.”

“I had to borrow it from my next-door neighbor,” said Davenport, startling us all. Nobody had seen him come out of the guest room. “I tend to keep a dry household. However, I am more than happy to accommodate you all as best I can. Please let me know if there’s anything else I can do for you.”

Reese, smearing the back of his sleeve against his mouth, the bottle nearly empty and swishing around every which way, stood up and slammed his hand on Davenport’s bony shoulder.

“I tell you, I gotta piss like crazy, Davenport. You wanna point me to the toilet?” He seemed to nearly fall over for a second before catching his balance.

“Down the hall on the right, before the kitchen,” he said, smiling. That scared me. I’d never seen him smile before. I realized how jumpy I’d become. What a house of horrors I had found myself in. All I needed was for Reese to go the way of Mike and I’d be trapped in this bizarre realm until the sun came up. Reese stumbled into the wall as he sauntered away, singing a

little song to himself. Davenport stood right where he'd been standing, unmoving. We all looked at him. Then they all looked to me, for some reason. I decided I should say something.

“Thank you again, Davenport, this is really helpful. We really appreciate it.”

“Don't mention it,” he said. Silence descended upon the room once more. It was paining me, like a maelstrom of hail raining down on my bare shoulders. I had to cut through it any way I could.

“How do you like it at DiStefano's?” I decided to ask.

“I like it fine,” he responded immediately, as if he had anticipated the question. Still, it seemed like he was not so satisfied with his answer, and he frowned, pacing slowly to the window to rest his palms on the sill. Davenport, I was learning, had the remarkable ability to disappear everything around him when the time came to be with and only with himself. When it was time to re-enter the plane of materiality he shared with the rest of us, he could slip back in as if he had never left. I couldn't help but feel a little jealous.

“What we do, you know, is far more important than most people realize,” he said. “The gardener, like most important occupations, is a role akin to that of the soldier, the warrior, or the poet. Oftentimes the gardener is all three at once.”

“Uh, sure, sure,” I said, my mind elsewhere. I was passing the time by watching a thin film of sweat collect over the space between Hyacinth's breasts, and over her scrawny collarbones, hoping I wasn't so obvious in my doing so. When she pushed her hair behind her back a few thick strands remained slicked to her neck like boughs of brown kelp. I had hardly noticed just how hot it was in Davenport's apartment. Davenport wore a long-sleeve Oxford and pressed khakis and yet showed no signs of discomfort in the bizarrely sweltering heat. To feel

heat like this in Massachusetts, even with it being late April, ironically sent something like a feverish shiver down my spine. Davenport continued.

“The relationship between lawn and gardener is easily the closest analogue to the relationship between nature and man. More than any other line of work. I find a great deal appealing about that.”

“Hm. Say more,” I said in an attempt to keep him well-humored. It was his house, after all.

“Man and grass plant,” he said. I could almost hear a splinter of excitement in his voice. “The Apollonian and The Dionysian. The grass plant lives its life in a near-constant state of ecstatic, intoxicating, unity. That’s unity mind you, not uniformity, for each individual blade of grass is really a wild, unruly tussock in and of itself, a jungle in miniature, all different lengths, widths, sutures of bleeding, exposed plant-flesh, swarms of insects and other creatures completely imperceptible to us milling about, fornicating, consuming, laying eggs and dying. A feeling of terror would be only natural in response to such a savage landscape, and yet man does not cower, nor does he lash out in reactionary disgust and annihilate, but instead, man thoughtfully culls and cultivates. He preserves through destruction, achieves gorgeous, perfect uniformity through it, through such destruction, such violence, such trauma.”

Davenport’s voice was warbling with something I couldn’t detect. The flushing of a toilet from down the hall emulsified with the revelry outside. We had all separately at one point or another been removed from the haze of our own thoughts by Davenport’s monologue, the three of us hanging on his every word. He continued.

“A good lawn, comparatively, is one uniform mass, a realm stripped of all idiosyncrasy, like a binary code. Beauty cleaved from diffuse chaos. But the delicate soul of the grass plant, that lovely verdant sheen, brutalized as it may be, is preserved. Therein lies, in my opinion, the glorious balance of proper lawn lawn maintenance; man loves and so he kills. He cares enough to bear the ultimate guilt.”

I heard the door to the bathroom slam open. Heavy footsteps, inebriated and laden with rage, stomped closer and closer until Reese was once again in the doorway, his face as red as I'd ever seen it. His eyes bulged and popped like two boiling pits of excrement. In his hand he held something I couldn't quite make out. As he started to stride towards Davenport, I saw it was an outlet he had torn out of the wall, a few red and green wires dangling from the back of it.

Hyacinth was screaming and standing up on the couch as if the floor had become suddenly awash with writhing maggots, and Reese had Davenport slammed against the wall, both his hands on his neck, squeezing with all the force he could muster. All I could see from where I sat on the couch were Reese's giant back and shoulders as Davenport struggled in his grip. Even though he was at least a foot taller than Reese, Davenport had clearly not anticipated the attack, and was struggling to pull himself away. I leapt up and tried to remove Reese, but it was apparent from the moment I touched him that every nerve, bone, and muscle in his body was unwaveringly invested in crushing Davenport's windpipe. After a few moments of grunting and straining, I realized Reese was trying to push Davenport out of the open window and onto the street. I was going to have to take a more extreme approach to prevent Reese from murdering Davenport. I two-handedly grabbed the nearest thing I saw, a glossy, hardcover coffee table book on Greek architecture, about four inches thick, and smashed it into the back of Reese's head,

which disoriented him enough to temporarily loosen his chokehold for just a moment, a moment I took to pull him off of Davenport and throw him to the ground.

We all started screaming at him then. Me, Hyacinth, and Chuck. We demanded to know what was wrong with him, what his problem was. You better have a good reason for nearly killing a man apropos of seemingly nothing, we said in a number different ways. He lay on the floor before us like a medieval mosaic of a hunted wolf or elk, skin punctured with slews of arrows, rivers of blood streaming. What an animal he really did look like there on the floor, canines bared, breathing heavily, eyes festering with desire, a desire for what even knew even then could only be retribution.

“There’s cameras in the bathroom,” he panted. “There’s multiple cameras, spy cameras. One across the window, and then one in the socket above the sink.” His speech had suddenly become eerily clear and sober.

“What do you mean, there’s cameras in the bathroom?” Hyacinth said.

“What do you mean, what do I mean?” snarled Reese. “There. Are. Cameras. In. The. Bathroom. This is a pervert’s house we’re in right now. I only saw the two, but there have to be more. There have to be more,” he said, rising to his feet.

“Relax, man,” I said. “Just relax for a second. Describe to us what you saw.”

Davenport sat on the windowsill, exhausted, rubbing a periwinkle band of lesioned skin that had appeared on his neck. He looked straight down, only the top of his skull visible.

“I sat on the toilet,” Reese began with complete indignity, as if we were being so unreasonable for making him regale us with the details. “To take a shit, and in the bathroom mirror, which was facing the toilet, I saw a little red light in the window of the building next

door. It was easy to see, because I hadn't turned the light on in the bathroom. It was dark, is what I'm saying. I didn't think much of it until I noticed it wasn't blinking, the way that a VCR or TV monitor does. It was just on. That's when I realized, it was a security camera. Infrared lamp. It was filming me. Someone was filming me taking a shit in the mirror. I felt it. So I jumped up and turned around, to see if I could catch the peeping tom, and boom, the curtain closed. I swear I saw some dark figure pull the curtains shut, and the light was gone. I started panicking. I had this terrible sick feeling in my stomach, but I saw it though, and I started looking for others. I checked under the sink, inside the air freshener, in the air vents. Eventually, I found one. In the socket. Right in front of the toilet.

Nice, huh? I don't know what's going on here, but it's clear that you and your neighbor have some sort of sick operation going, and once I kill you he's next. Nobody violates my privacy like that. You're dead, Davenport. You hear me, you fucking fag? Dead."

Davenport hung dejectedly from the windowsill like a gutted scarecrow, his hands still working gently on his bruised neck. He said nothing.

"If not tonight, then later. Tomorrow, next week, maybe even next month," Reese continued. "But count on it. You're dead."

Davenport raised his head and looked at Reese. Ever hard to read, I mined his expression for all I could, but all I saw in his face was something I could describe only as annoyance. He was bothered, but not devastated, like how one might respond to the discovery of a roach in a box of cereal.

"Davenport," said Hyacinth, "You have to tell us what's going on. Does any of what Reese is saying make any sense at all?"

Davenport seemed to be deep in thought again. “No,” he said at the end of an agonizing silence.

“No, what?” asked Hyacinth.

“No, none of what Reese has accused me of is based in any sort of reality. He is clearly inebriated and not in a right frame of mind.”

Reese made an angry sound, lurched up and tried to jump on Davenport again. Chuck and I held him back. “He’s lying,” screamed Reese, eyes bulging, “He’s lying, I saw the light. I held the camera. It must be somewhere around here, I held it.”

“Find it,” said Davenport. “Be my guest. Show it to me and I’ll admit to everything. You just had it, supposedly, so it can’t be too far.”

Reese fell to his knees and frantically searched for the dislodged socket he had just held in his hand seconds before. “I just saw it, I just saw it,” he moaned. He threw coach pillows behind his back, peered under furniture, and checked every available crevice of space.

“If this is what it takes,” said Davenport, “to get you to relax, then so be it. Let him see the error of his ways. Let him learn a little humility.”

Reese naturally ran out of places to search fairly quickly, then looked to us for assistance. There was nothing for us to do. Reese was growing more and more inconsolable by the second.

“It’s in his pocket, it must be!” he said. “He must’ve picked it off the floor and slipped it in while nobody noticed. Check his pockets. Check his pockets!” he shrieked, lunging at Davenport once more. Chuck made a reach for his arm but Reese intercepted the movement, grabbed Chuck’s wrist and pushed him into the wall, hard, knocking over a lamp and smashing the bulb. The room was a little darker, but Davenport managed to keep the crazed Reese at arm’s



length until I was able to subdue him in a bearhug. “Check his pockets, check his pockets,” was all he was able to gurgle out.

“I’m so sorry about this, Davenport,” said Hyacinth. “I’ll stay behind and help you clean this up. And we’ll call the police, too, of course.”

“No need, no need,” said Davenport. “What Zebulun needs is a proper bout of rest, the kind not so easily found in a jail cell. Just see that he gets home and bygones can be bygones. But let me say this, I would appreciate it if I never saw him in my home ever again. I’m sure you understand, Zebulun.”

“Check his pockets, check his pockets,” Reese repeated.

“Well, are we?” asked Chuck.

“Are we what?” asked Hyacinth.

“Gonna check his pockets.”

Hyacinth, once again for reasons I did not understand, turned to me.

“Uh,” I said. “Uh, no. No need to. This was all a big misunderstanding. We should just get out of here and call Reese a cab.”

And so we did just that. We shuffled him out of the apartment, down the stairs, bid goodnight to Davenport and Chuck, who stayed behind to keep watch over Mike, and threw Reese in the backseat of a taxi, where he immediately collapsed, exhausted and harmless. I figured that was the end of that.

I asked Hyacinth if she’d like to get a nightcap with me, something to smooth our nerves after the surreal evening we had just shared. She was troubled, not in the mood to flirt or run the

risk of exposing herself to even more unpredictability. The best she could do was get one more drink with me at The Second Best. She wanted to be close to Mike in case she got a bad feeling.

We sat outside on the street and mulled over the details of what we had just witnessed. There was surprisingly, and to the misfortune of our chemistry, less to discuss than I had initially thought there might be. I suppose I actually did have lots of questions, but Hyacinth's overt disinterest in discussing the situation made me shy from asking any of them or even ruminating on them out loud. The veracity with which I desired to better understand what had happened, and the grace with which she avoided every chance for us to do so together ensured that our conversation was brief and fairly awkward. I asked if she'd be interested in staying in touch before we departed.

"Sure," she said. She produced a day planner from her pocketbook and took my name and eMail down in it.

"And my number as well?"

"What about it?"

"Wouldn't you like that too?"

"Oh, sure, I guess so."

After she left I sat by myself and pondered the excitement of it all. I ordered another whiskey, neat, and feeling it mix in skull and swirl throughout my gray matter like a coat hanger through a bucket of paint too strongly for my liking, I cashed out and walked home past sporadic crowds of drunk college students vomiting in the beautiful hedges of laurel and holly that hemmed sorority mansions. Davenport would be so upset, I remember thinking, to see such callous treatment of plant-life, but I figured maybe that was why he always kept to himself like

he did, because he knew himself and the things that made him upset well enough to avoid them. I could not help but feel like I had just unleashed a savage, invasive blight upon the picturesque, meticulously shaped and primed country of Davenport's life. Vexingly, I should have in turn understood that the land always plays the long game. The land always protects itself, and nobody is spared.

-

I don't know why, but for some reason I remember waking up the following day thinking that would more or less be the end of it. The inkling of responsibility I had felt walking home the previous night was gone. It was Saturday, my day off, and I could afford to relax. I could afford to be a friend to myself.

I decided to sleep in. The hours of the day had been made indiscernible by one of those warm spring rainfalls that lasts all through the day. After having showered, while brushing my teeth in the mirror I noticed a sizable chartreuse lesion just below my right nipple. I could not remember when I might've acquired it or who bestowed it upon me, but I know I did not have it the day before. Maybe I had caught a stray from Reese during my effort to pry him off of Davenport and hadn't noticed in the throes of adrenaline. Mysterious point of origin aside, it was real and sore all the same, and though I hadn't noticed until I saw it in the mirror, I would feel it underneath my shirt for the rest of the week after. I sat at my kitchen table crooked over a mug of instant coffee, a bowl of cereal, and an ashtray, all three objects spread out before me like a miserable diviner's tools, everything softening, dying, curdling, decomposing into the same

fibrous sludge. I realized a day spent inside with just my thoughts to keep me company was probably not the most self-serving choice, and so, I got dressed and went for a walk.

The world outside was shimmering, wet, and tender, like walking through the gauntlet of a bifurcated vein. I have always found spring to be the most psychedelic of the seasons. Wherever there is life death rises to mediate, and spring has both in droves. Amniotic fluid slicks leaves, runs through the gutters, fetuses squash underfoot with every step. It was starting to overwhelm me, so I turned left on main street, away from the forest reserve and the southern dike of the old Mill Lake reservoir, where I had been planning to walk to, and instead headed into the downtown of the city.

Despite the weather, the day was rife with tourists and college kids, everywhere crowded. This too felt more overwhelming than I anticipated, so I turned down some random side street and continued on until I came across some generic Irish pub. I had never noticed it before, oddly enough. I must've walked it past it innumerable times. I admittedly had nothing better to do with myself, and the rain had soddened my sneakers, so I stepped inside and ordered what I tried to convince myself was only a "desultory" pint, something to punctuate the afternoon with. If ordered in tandem with something like a brisket sandwich, or a basket of fried fish, you could convince yourself you were only enjoying a beer with lunch, and there was nothing sinister about that. It happened to be a fairly nice place, so I decided to stay a while. There were a few old, beat-up armchairs tucked away in the corner, all molted in color and watched over by a couple of floor lamps. A stack of magazines rested against the side of one. After crashing into one such chair at around two-thirty, I managed to see a couple hours pass in relative bliss this way, people coming and going at a trawling pace all around me, nobody saying a word. Perhaps I should've

used the time to chew over what had happened the previous night, but the truth is I had no interest. I was enjoying myself. The moment that I did start to give it some thought, around five, as if on cue, Reese burst through the door in a comically huge, billowing black peacoat I'd never seen him in before, and a Patriots cap pulled over his eyes like the mask of King Baldwin. He sat at the bar with his back turned to me and started in on a manic bout of alcohol consumption, even by his own standards. I heard the hollow ring of an emptied shot glass slam onto the bar top about every three minutes for the next forty-five, and with every reverberation I imagined Davenport's bloodied face swinging wildly from side to side as Reese tore through it like a child through wrapping paper. I kept my face buried in the magazine, and my ears open, doing all I could to remain inconspicuous.

Reese drank and drank as more patrons milled in. By the end of happy hour I could hear his warbling, guttural voice beginning to rise above all the others, complaining to anyone who'd listen about uncommunicative clients, stringent building codes, and the sky-rocketing price of organic mulch, the purchasing of which DiStefano had recently declared was now the responsibility of the foremen. I listened patiently for any mention of Davenport, Hyacinth, or myself among Reese's endless list of gripes. Sure enough, after a couple of our co-workers joined him at the bar, I heard the whole thing from Reese's perspective once more, just as he had told us last night after returning from the bathroom in a fugue state. He sounded no less hellbent on killing Davenport on the story's second oration. If anything he was more furious, furious at Davenport for humiliating him as he had, but he spared no consideration for the other parties present that night, telling the now small crowd gathering around him that he planned on killing us next. I know the term "kill" has been transmogrified into an embellishment nowadays, I

understand that. “Where is that kid, I’ll kill him,” angered fathers grit through their teeth. And yet, there was a firm and cold adamancy loaded into the “k” of Reese’s “kill.” He spat it out like a piece of chipped concrete lodged in the back of his throat. It didn’t make me truly believe him, of course. I didn’t think Reese had it in him to do something that drastic. But it did make me wonder just how close to death he’d be willing to take me to prove some sort of a point, and in the event he took me to that point if there was any chance his control over the situation might slip out from under him, and put me even closer past said point than either of us wanted. One word I kept hearing Reese say spun and dangled like the sword of Damocles above my head: “Tonight.”

I mulled over the best course of action, feeling a panic welling up from within like a festering tumor when nothing came to me. Did I have any obligation to diffuse the prospect of violence Reese continuously promised? That he promised against my person, even? Should I ignore him completely, holding out hope that he would run out of steam? What if he was right? What if Davenport really had outfitted his bathroom with an intricate web of spy cameras to film unsuspecting guests? What would he even use the footage for? Sexual gratification? It wasn’t an impossibility, but it just didn’t feel right to me. I suppose I had actually been charmed by Davenport, perhaps not how I might’ve expected to be, but charmed regardless. He was a secure, straight-forward, friendly man that invited me and a motley handful of strangers into his house solely for the benefit of someone in need whom he only just met. Would I be allowing violence to befall him if I stood idle? Could I really stop Reese from doing what he felt entitled to do? I could try talking to him. The extent of my power seemed to begin and end there. I didn’t feel like calling the cops for a number of middlingly petty yet complex reasons, owed mostly to my

tumultuous relationship with my stepmother, a dignitary police corporal back in my hometown. So I was stuck, and losing my mind in that sooty pub chair. I needed to make like I was stepping out for a smoke, then get as far away from where I was as possible in order to keep a clear head about things. My tab could be paid tomorrow. The more pressing matter was now sneaking past Reese without being seen. I got up slowly and tried to be as unobtrusive as possible as I weaved through slews of drunken forty-somethings. Out the door I went, thankfully unnoticed.

Outside, the slow-falling spring rain chilled by the evening air, I held my hand over my pocket and debated calling Hyacinth. I knew the only real boon to be found by calling her was companionship, specifically the kind I'd been lacking in and dreaming of since I'd moved to Giza. My judgment could only be so clouded, and I was glad I understood this. So why I picked up the phone, called her, and subsequently explained everything I'd heard that evening, I barely understand. Guilt quartered my gut like a crisp apple even as I tried my best to sound as calm and collected as I could over the phone.

"Oh my God," she said, "Promise me you won't do a thing till I'm off, O.K., Reid? I get off at seven-thirty, just do your best to keep an eye on him. Tail him, if you have to, but keep a low profile. Oh, please be careful, more than anything just please be careful."

"Meet me at The Second Best," I told her. Whose voice was this speaking now? Not mine. Too gruff, too self-assured. Could she hear my embarrassment? "He's gotta end up there, you know, eventually. I may as well beat him to the punch."

"Ok, but please, please be careful, Reid. I'll be there as soon as I can."

I set off towards The Second Best, feeling lower than I had in a long time. I'd neglected to mention the part where Reese had specifically threatened to hurt Hyacinth, and I'd done so to

keep her from feeling discouraged from the precedent under which our evening together was to exist. Now I'd endangered an innocent person all for a shot at getting lucky. I felt pathetic. I had left home after graduating from Bridgewater State with a degree in communications and moved to Giza with the intent of leaving the fuss and complication of both small-town family and insulated, squirrely college life behind for good, and here I was, mired once more in a fatuous spectacle of damaged egos, one that really didn't have anything to do with me but one I was trapped in all the same.

The Second Best was packed to the rafters so I sat across the street at an adjacent bus shelter half-enshrouded by darkness and waited for one of three characters in the nightmarish play I felt like I had been subconsciously directing to show up and do something. Twenty minutes later, it was seven-fifty, and Hyacinth had not arrived. I didn't even know if she worked far outside of town or not. Maybe there was a long commute involved. Maybe she'd gotten cold feet. My nerves were cutting through my muscles like wire through clay. It was physically paining me, the anticipation of it all. With trembling hands I fished a cigarette from a battered pack I'd been absentmindedly keeping in my back pocket. In my unsteady grip my lighter dropped straight through my fingers and onto the sidewalk. I bent down to retrieve it. When I looked up, I noticed that a window two floors above The Second Best was illuminated, the window that looked into Davenport's living room. I could see the anemic green paint on the walls. I couldn't believe I had been in there the night before.

So, Davenport was home, almost certainly. Had he been home all this time, alone with the lights off? Was he even alone? Was he filming more unsuspecting guests against their will and knowledge? I hadn't seen him enter the building. Where else could he have entered from?



I'd been watching the door like a gargoyle. Against the filthy aquarium-colored light outlined by that third-floor window I saw a shadow move, tall and ominous. So he definitely was home, that much was now certain. I watched for more shadows, but saw none.

“Hey.”

I nearly leapt out into the path of an oncoming pickup, I was so startled. Standing lopsided and slack jawed to my right underneath the shelter roof, his two feet pointed inward, his hair dangling over his face, was Reese. He looked horrible in that peacoat and baseball cap, like a poorly-taxidermied wolf dredged up from the basement of a flooded house. I don't know if I'd ever seen someone who looked drunker, and yet he was a chilling variety of drunk I had never seen before. He seemed bizarrely cognizant, calculating even, though completely out of his mind. He had drunk it away.

“Hey, man,” I said weakly.

“What are you doing here?” he said. I could practically hear his system working overtime to keep him alive against the deluge of alcohol in his veins. I could hear it in his voice.

“Uh. Waiting for the bus, actually,” I said, gesturing around awkwardly as if to double down on the supporting evidence that I was, indeed, sitting at a bus shelter.

“What happened to your car?”

I gathered all my wits.

“It's at Jaeger Service Station. Busted undercarriage.”

“Shit. So what happened to it?”

“Drove it into a finger planter this morning at the Dunkin' Donuts on Ruby Street.”

“What were you, texting or something?”

“Nope, just out of it. Stupid. Under-slept, I guess you could say. After last night. By the way, about last night, no hard feelings, right?”

Reese’s head slumped forward a little bit, then righted itself.

“I wanna show you something, Reid. Now, I know you think I’m fuckin’ stupid. Whatever. People always thought I was fuckin’ stupid. Shit. I like you, man. You’re O.K. So maybe you’re out here right now, across the street from the guy you know I’m gonna kill tonight, and maybe you got reasons for doing so that you’re not telling me about. You got, uh, a, what do you call it, an “ulterior motive,”” he groaned, exaggerating the “o” in motive. “Damn. But I have something on him, man. I finally got it. You’re gonna fuckin’ flip when you see this, man.”

Uncoordinatedly, he pulled his cellphone out his coat and began delving through it for something, almost doubling over as he did so. I thought he was having a stroke for a brief moment before I realized he had instead begun to laugh.

“See, see?” he screamed, turning the phone around to display the screen to me, thrusting it in my face. “I was up all-night last night, trying to find the website, you know, the website, where he posts the videos. Of the people in his bathroom. I was at it until three today, sifting through all kinds of fuckin’ hair-raising shit, nasty, evil shit, until I found it. There’s no mistaking it. Look.”

I could hardly make out the footage on Reese’s phone. The resolution was grainy and the color contrast was blinding, given that his phone wasn’t very high-quality and the video he was showing me was of an entirely different video playing on a computer monitor. I strained my eyes and tried to make out what Reese was trying to show me. On the screen, I saw a video of the back of some man’s head, from behind a window, as seen from the apartment across and slightly

above the one that the man being filmed was sitting in. A lighting fixture boomed above his head. After a few seconds the man got up, his lower half obscured, and appeared to do something with his hands I couldn't make out. Then he left the room. I looked up. Reese was staring at me with deranged fervor.

“Hold on, hold on. There's a hundred just like this. I found this website that hosts hidden camera footage, most of it surveillance, but some of it, the real cream of the crop stuff, is freelance. Creep-shots in crowded subways. Changing rooms. Public bathrooms. User seizurepersonnel58 is pretty active. That building look familiar?”

He scrolled through the archive of videos he'd taken to show me how many there were. There were easily somewhere between sixty and a hundred.

“Look at this one.”

The second video was virtually identical to the first. Back of a man's head, framed by a tall and narrow window, man gets up, appears to do something obscured with one or both hands, then leaves. He played a third, same as the first two, then a fourth, then a fifth. All the exact same.

“See,” he gloated. “It's all here. I'm going right to the cops after I beat the shit of this freak. He has some kind of partner involved, too, don't forget, filming from the next building over. My buddy's cousin married a P.I. That guy's head comes next.”

I waited for the subtle jab of intuition that supposedly visits those who find themselves at crossroads. When no such jab came, I fell back, perhaps stupidly, on a template, paper doll version of what I imagined a good person would be, which was honest.

“I’m not gonna lie, Reese,” I said, trying to choose my words with the utmost care, “I can’t really tell what any of the guys in that video are doing. To be honest I don’t really even think that looks like Davenport’s building, or his bathroom.”

“Well, how the fuck would you know?” Reese snapped. “You never used the bathroom that night. You have no idea what it looks like.”

He was right about that. I told him as such, hoping that might calm him down a measure or two. Though he said nothing after that, I could feel his displeasure with me and his general exasperation with the situation at hand growing, mutating. I too, had begun to grow impatient. I was fed up with this ugly, waxy, tough-guy persona, exaggerated and harsh like a stupid-looking Halloween mask. I was sick of the talk, the affirmations and promises of action that was ever-around-the-corner. I didn’t care about Davenport anymore. He wasn’t really any friend of mine, he was just novel, and no more deserving of sympathy than any other stranger. Maybe he was a lecherous sex criminal who filmed people in intimate moments for profit, or for pleasure. What did it matter? He hadn’t filmed me, or anyone I cared about. This had nothing to do with me, it was between him and the plastered, disheveled lowlife staring me in the face. This was no battle I needed to be any part of. Standing there in that dark bus shelter, in the cool air of the night, Reese’s eyes locked onto my own, I felt the impotence that had been stuck in my throat all day coming loose. I was staring at my equal. Maybe our backgrounds differed, maybe our choices leading up to this moment weren’t comparable, but I was no stronger, no wiser than he, not in the end. In a few years I’d be just like him. A drunk, strange man with his best years behind him. I felt my fists ball, prepared for whatever came next.

“Is he home?”

“I don’t know. I think so.”

He stumbled back towards the street, pulled a sad-looking roach from his coat pocket and lit it up, looked at me for a little while, then turned around and staggered back towards The Second Best.

He ambled in the frame of the door to Davenport’s walkup for a moment, then pulled an electric-blue canister of something out his pocket. He placed it in front of the lock and began spraying something inside it. For thirty or forty seconds he continued spraying whatever he was spraying on Davenport’s lock, as flocks of drunks walked past, all clueless and preoccupied. A stale cloud of yellow marijuana smoke caught under streetlight billowed around his head. Feeling as though I finally deserved that cigarette, I brought it to my lips and lit the end, breathing as deeply as I’d breathed in some time, when striding down the barrel of the cigarette like one of those angels that dances on the heads of pins came Hyacinth, hair flying behind her. She paused for a second when she was just a foot away, then she embraced me, her face tucked into my neck. I forgot where I’d been, where I was.

“Reese. Where is he? Did he come by?”

“Hm?” I scrambled to regain my thoughts.

“Did Reese come by? Or Davenport? Has anything happened?” She unattached herself from me. We stood before each other, blinking, no rift between us yet. A little voice told me to appreciate the moment. The feeling of being useful.

“I know I said I’d get here sooner,” she said. “I’m so sorry, Reid. So, tell me what’s going on. Have you seen Davenport? What about Reese?”

The hallowed, splintering crack of metal cleaving apart rang out, even above all the other noises of the evening; the low-end of hair metal from aged speakers, the speech of crowds. I gestured across the street with a leftward nod. Simple. That was to be the means by which my new system of being operated on, whatever was simplest. Hyacinth jerked her head in the direction of the mounting action happening on the other side of the street, and let out a scream disturbing to me in its abruptness, in how quickly it came and went. Like the stab of a knife. Over and done. Reese had shattered the lock and kicked in the door. A few people had gathered to comment on the giant rivet he had put in the door with his boot. Half of the door lay sundered on the ground, the dimly-lit stairs they'd been guarding fully visible to us even from across the street. Reese was nowhere to be seen, but we knew where he was.

Before I could utter a word, I turned to Hyacinth and caught only the silhouette of her frame in the light of the foyer as she raced up the stairs. I could've left, but my conscience tethered me to where I stood. The sympathy I felt for her was not as easily stifled as the sympathy I'd felt for Davenport. She was sweet, caring. Not too different from how Davenport had been. The latter at least. I suddenly felt very unsure of where I stood once again on the whole matter. Both were likely more or less good people. I knew this, even if I'd only just met them. Did my obligation to keep them from harm falter because of this? I knew that, technically, I believed it did, but even still I found my feet moving one at a time in a mechanical trudge across the road towards Davenport's door. What if something happened that I could've prevented? I kept repeating the question in my head until it hypnotized me. Each tread on the stairs passed beneath me like the slow crawl of a far-off horizon viewed from a gauzy train window. I repeated the question as I watched them disappear from view, allowing it to guide me to the open door of

Davenport's apartment, where Hyacinth stood, fixed to the wall in horror. I rounded the corner where Davenport stood, the expression of his face similar to that of the one on Hyacinth. In his hand he held a large kitchen knife dark red with blood, redder than any shade of red I'd ever seen before. Reese lay flat at his feet, groaning horribly and clutching his abdomen. When Davenport finally spoke it was as if a lobe encrusted sponge at the foot of an underwater volcano or a wind-shaped pine under the African sun had managed to throw its voice a thousand miles away to speak primordial knowledge only for a fleeting moment, unconcerned if it was heard or not.

“One of you should call him an ambulance. His condition appears to be critical. After that, feel free to stay, or walk if you must. I'll talk to the police.”

-

The segment on the nightly news allocated to local crime was replete for a couple of weeks, then other tragedies came along, a dumpster baby, a bridge fire, a university doctor accused of artificially inseminating unsuspecting patients, and it was gone. Gone as though none of it had ever happened. Zebulun Reese was buried out of state, near Newburgh, in a family plot.

Hyacinth ignored my phone calls for a while after that. I didn't judge her at all. Still, for whatever reason I just couldn't allow her to walk out of my life. We were linked by something so irrevocable that I thought it was foolish to pretend a titanium-fortified commonality hadn't been sutured in between the two of us. When she finally picked up one evening towards the end of a bitterly cold fall, Davenport was halfway through a ten month stint at Kelly Regional Correctional Facility. He had pleaded guilty to involuntary manslaughter. I asked if she'd like to

come with me to deposit a bit of money in Davenport's commissary. She said that she'd been doing just that since he'd been sentenced back in July. I met her outside the prison, a long, squat brick building crowned with bird feces, its corrugations stuffed with sheaths of loose feathers and frozen snow. She had cut her hair and dyed it, bright green and spongy like the floor of an overgrown terrarium. I didn't think it suited her. Our conversation was brisk and formal. She was still at the community service officer thing. I was still at DiStefano's. It turns out we did not have very much to talk about.

Inside, at the kiosk we dropped off the money without any difficulty. As we walked back towards the exit I wondered if our commonality was strong enough to still warrant anything between us. Before I could arrive at any conclusion, she softly grabbed my wrist, and asked if she could tell me something.

"The only reason I agreed to meet you here is because I wanted to tell you this. I think you're a coward. That, and I don't want you to call me anymore, all right?"

Taken aback, I laughed. "What?"

"I said I think you're a coward."

"And why's that? What business is it of yours to tell me something like that?"

"It's everybody's business."

"What? Who's everybody?"

"Well, I guess anyone you might cross paths with later in life. Anyone you already know. I would say it's their business. They ought to know they're dealing with a coward."

"And I'm a coward, how, exactly?"

"You told him he was home. You didn't even have the courage to lie to save a life."



“Whose life are we talking about right now?”

“It doesn’t matter. A life’s a life.”

I shrugged. “Well, that’s true.”

“You have some soul-searching to do, Reid. All this ‘floating above it all’ is going to burn you one day, when you least expect it.”

“Maybe so.”

“Maybe so? What are you going to do about it?” She wasn’t looking at me anymore, she was looking out into the distance behind me, as though she was surveying something beyond me that only she could see.

“Well, to start I’m going to wait another five months for Davenport to be released. Then I’ll see if he wants me to beg him for his forgiveness. If he does, then I will. If not, I’ll move on.”

And that’s exactly what I did. He did not ask me to beg for his forgiveness, but I did it anyway. Davenport’s my friend now, though regretfully I don’t always advertise it, especially at work. He keeps an even greater distance these days from everyone else than he ever has, besides me. “He’s bad news” - that’s all anyone ever says about him now. But he’s a pretty fine guy once you get to know him. We go fishing every other weekend or so when the weather’s good.

Although I know it’s foolish, sometimes my heart still stops for a couple of seconds when he plunges his hunting knife into the smooth, speckled underbelly of a wriggling fish, and sometimes my mind plays tricks on me, and I think I see him licking his lips from behind his expensive Nikon as he takes pictures of the scenery. I always manage to get a grip. It’s what keeps me out of situations like the one that Reese found himself in.

It's funny, turns out Davenport's first name is also Zebulun, just like Reese. I had always assumed the two of them had just preferred to go by their last names, but it was born out of necessity once they began working together.

# Mr. Buzzer Beater

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## One: Center Circle

**F**or nearly forty-six years Borja had lived on the edge of town. Two different phone calls found him on a Friday morning near the tail end of October, and they echoed throughout the empty, typically silent, halls and rooms of his house. He took both of them in his kitchen, adorned in an old tattered bathrobe that hung low from his thin, aged frame like the vestments of an oracle staring into the future. Appropriately so, for while the first call was an evocation of his past, the second forecasted his impending demise, though both made him think about death in fairly equal measures.

This was because death was all Borja ever thought of, or at least it was all he ever thought of nowadays. Ever since he was a young man, Borja had feared death. Even more than death, he feared growing old. An acute sense of dread pinched his chest whenever he thought of growing old, truly old, like the way he was now. As a young man, there were few people in his life over fifty, and the few that he did know all happened to be women, the majority of the men having met early deaths from heart failure, workplace related accidents, and other supposedly indiscriminate swings of the reaper's scythe. Borja had been lucky, sidestepping the trades to become a teacher at the local high school. There had been no drill presses to malfunction and disembowel him, no hungover crane operators to drop galvanized beams on top of him. He had retired right on time with all limbs still attached. Yes, he had been lucky.

The future had always been nebulous and dark for Borja, but he had soldiered on through the pain and made it to what was supposed to be his twilight of senility, but if that was the case,

where was the bliss that was promised to accompany ignorance? The fear of death after having spent a fair amount of time in death's immediate neighborhood no longer terrorized him, so what was it now that domineered him so, that made him wait until the last possible moment to take that first call?

Like two plops of falling leprous flesh the phone calls came one right after another that Friday. He lumbered over from the breakfast table to the kitchen in his bathrobe to take the first one, ruminating on the fact it was the first call he had received in a good couple of months. Maybe it was one of his many adolescent grandchildren, calling to ask if he or she could live with Borja. Borja could not imagine a more perfect shot at redemption. The chance to right his past wrong-doings as a father without the admittance of guilt that comes with directly apologizing. He was not, as he was known to say with such astuteness you might've thought he had invented the phrase himself, holding his breath.

"Hi, Apollo?" asked the voice on the other end, a man's voice, slow and deep, and a touch playful, perhaps even overeager. "Is this Apollo Borja?" The man asked again in the same stupid voice. "Polly? You there?"

Borja grunted in surprise. He hadn't expected to hear his old nickname, what his students at Ronald Chess Union had affectionately called him. Coach Polly. The sudden invocation of the old moniker forced a few stubborn words from his mouth.

"Yeah. Yeah, this is Apollo. Who's this?"

"You don't recognize my voice, Coach?"

"Enough, tell me who this is right now, or I'm hanging up."

The man's accent cleaved each one of his vowels into two separate syllables, undoubtedly downstate, maybe Jersey. Borja thought of other things cleaved in two. Old things. Giant sequoias, plume agate. He thought of Greek monsters with two heads, looming from mouths of caves to devour obstinate adventurers. He had seen a cow with two heads once, when the kids were small, on a family vacation to Vegas, where his parents had lived. Borja had brought all eight of them to The Museum of Natural History in Cedar City. Rodrigo, his oldest, smashed into a glass case containing a desiccated nautilus shell while playing grab-ass with his brothers. Borja struck his son so hard he hit the ground completely flat like a dippy bird toy. Over Rodrigo's choking sobs the museum manager explained that the shell was only a replica made of plaster, a surrogate piece for reasons exactly like the one at hand, and that Borja would only have to pay for the display. To calm the brat he led him to a taxidermic two-headed calf named Lausanne, the other seven brats quiet as a funeral procession behind them. Borja performed a little skit for everyone wherein the two heads of the calves spoke in goofy, bumbling voices. Against his best efforts, Rodrigo was wide-eyed and stiff like a trapped animal for the rest of the afternoon.

With arms outstretched Borja was always trying to grasp at an idealized simulacrum of himself, Borja the good father, Borja the good husband, Borja the good man, but each proved to be an effigy made from the stuff of dying stars, particles of rock and ice, helium and hydrogen that had coincidentally arranged themselves into shapes that only reflected his fantasies back at him.

"It's Jimmy, Polly. Principal Jimmy. From Ronald Chess Union."

Ah. James Anagnostos, Borja realized. Jimmy. Principal Jimmy. The two had been in talks about something a few months ago, before the summer had begun. What had it been? Yes, the game. The commemorative game.

Borja was surprised when Anagnostos had initially contacted him. He didn't remember Anagnostos as much other than a CRX-crashing, spoiled loudmouth, and a terrible student. He had a district attorney father over in Elmont that unsuccessfully ran for congress a few times. The kid's mother acted about as old and willful as her son did. Every guy in town had a row with her at some point, Borja himself once had his sights on her until she'd caught Jimmy's father in a tryst of his own with his intern. In the end, it was her that served Jimmy's father the papers. It had been quite the scandal in town, glamorous, show-stealing lady that Jimmy's mother was. She was tall and thin like some big-time supermodel, swan-like, but Borja would've still picked her up and flipped her around in the mirror to watch the aggregate of tortoise shell gemstones she always wore, allegedly even in bed, bounce up and down. Borja heard she fled to Arizona to live with her brother's family.

"I'm just checking in with you about tonight."

The details of their arrangement slowly returned to Borja.

"Tonight. Right. Listen, James, I was fixing the probe out in the garage when you called, and if it's all the same I'd like to finish what I started before lunch, so let me get down to brass tax.. I can't make it tonight. I'm sorry."

"You're kidding. Polly, you promised. The whole school's been abuzz for weeks. We had a banner printed out and everything. Christ, this is terrible news, Polly, I don't know how I'm going to break this to the kids."

"I'm sure you'll find a way, James. That's why you're in charge."

"I'm gonna be honest with you, Polly, I can't believe what I'm hearing."

Anagnostos, months prior, had discovered via his sister-in-law, the president of the town historic preservation society, that October 29th would mark the fifty year anniversary of the 1973 Ronald Chess Union Timberwolves's stunning upset over the Lansingburgh Knights. The conference championship was later that year, with Borja leading the team to victory. Mr. Buzzer Beater, they had called him. Allegedly on a mission to galvanize the students, Anagnostos had called Borja and requested to hold a commemorative game for charity against Lansingburgh in his honor. Borja, absent-mindedly, had agreed. The proposal, and the prospective game for the matter, had been so utterly unimportant to him that he had forgotten all about it nearly as soon as Anagnostos had hung up. Now that the reality of the situation was registering, Borja felt a headache breaking at the thought of being the center of attention. He thought about being wheeled out to the center of the court in total silence on a hand truck before a puzzled and uncomfortable crowd made up mostly of petulant high schoolers, like some ancient stone totem eaten with moss. Anagnostos in a ragged jacket of brown leather, a fedora fixed coolly below his line of sight like Indiana Jones. The explorer and the long-lost artifact. Borja had no desire to be an artifact, a link to the past. It sounded dreadful and humiliating, even if it was for a good cause. On top of that, to what degree the average townspeople knew of Borja's past transgressions against his wife, against his family, he was still not sure of. Maybe they all knew, and that's why no one ever came by to visit him or called to see how he was doing.

The phone lodged between his neck and shoulder like a bulbous cyst, he opened the door to his freezer and stared at its contents. It was a nearly fifty-fifty split of vodka and ice cream. It wouldn't be unreasonable to assume that it was an unsupervised teenager living in Borja's house



rather than an old man, if one were to hazard a guess based solely off of his freezer. He began to spoon hard slivers of vanilla ice cream into the mug he had just drained of coffee.

“C’mon Apollo. I can’t cancel now. What’s going on? Why the sudden change of heart?”

“Sorry, James, I’m just going to pass,” said Borja, making no effort to mask that his mouth was full. “I’m old, I hardly remember even making such a promise in the first place. And to be completely honest I don’t really see the appeal. For anyone.”

“Well, of course you don’t. I admit that the pleasure would be ours more than yours, sure. Word is you’ve become a real shut-in these last few years, Polly, if I can be blunt for a moment. I know if you wanted to do more for Ronald Chess Union you’d have done it by now. To simply grace us with your presence would do more than you know. So what do you say? We’re expecting quite a crowd tonight. Spirits are high.”

“I shouldn’t. My doctor says to avoid stressful situations. Bad for my heart. My mental health.”

“There’s nothing stressful about this. You’ll have fun.”

“I have no interest, James, in playing Rip Van Winkle for the rousing of a high school basketball team. It’s embarrassing. Self-mythologizing. Just have it without me.”

“We can’t have it without you. That would negate the entire point.”

“Hire an actor to pretend to be me, I don’t know.”

“Jokes, Apollo? This is serious.”

“I completely disagree. I’m struggling to imagine something less serious. Good luck with the game.”

“Wait, wait, Apollo, please. Let me call in a favor. As an ex-student, ex-colleague, whatever, just do me this one favor.”

Borja laughed. “A favor? You’ve got nothing to leverage.”

“I was eight years old when you beat Lansingburgh, can you believe that? Eight years old, and still I remember it. It was a magical night, there’s no other word for that kind of feeling. It was in the air.”

Borja groaned.

“I’m serious, Polly. People talked about it for years. My old man was ecstatic, he let us kids stay up all night like it was goddamn New Year’s Eve. Even when you were a teacher, we all respected you because of it. You were a legend, are a legend. Rise up and meet that legacy head-on.”

All of Anagnostos’s saccharine navel-gazing talk was making Borja sick to his stomach.

“I said I’m not doing it, James. Call it off or do it without me, but don’t call me again. Take care.”

Borja placed the phone on the receiver and ambled back to finish his breakfast of a halved pomegranate, two smoked perch, four stalks of raw lemongrass, and black coffee. No more eggs, thick slabs of bacon, or coffee with cream and sugar, how he had liked it. He was about to sit down and unenthusiastically resume when the phone rang again.

“Hi, Apollo, it’s me,” said the nebbish voice of Borja’s doctor.

Borja’s heart quickened. He gathered himself.

“Noam.”

“Everything well? No falls, headaches? Diet going well?”

“None to speak of, I guess. Diet’s fine. So.”

“Good, good. Yes, so, I have all your results right here. Whenever you’re ready.”

Borja could not help but notice his longtime family doctor’s less-than auspicious choice of phrasing.

“Just get on with it, it’s what I pay you for.”

“If you prefer, I have a dossier prepared. I could just send it to you.”

“No, I want to hear it from the horse’s mouth.”

“Of course. So then, the CBC tests. Your red blood cell count is fine. Four point thirty-five trillion, that’s more than acceptable for a man your age. Hemoglobin, thirteen point two grams per deciliter, that’s also good. Same story goes for hematocrit, white blood cell count, and platelet count. Of course, CBC doesn’t give all the data needed for diagnosis, which is why we did the nuclear cardiac stress tests, the coronary angiogram, and the CT scan.”

Borja had undergone all those procedures during what felt like a lifetime ago. He was reminded of just how slowly time had begun to pass. He only faintly remembered Noam’s frigid office, the bubbly young woman who worked the front desk, how cold and weak he felt inside the CT scanner. The 2D grayscale image of his brain sliced open like a side of beef tongue imprinted on wobbly plastic.

“If you remember, the CT scan was where I figured we’d find the source of the double vision, the pain behind your eyes. Unfortunately, my hunch appears to have been accurate, and the news is mostly bad. Are you sitting down, Apollo?”

“Go ahead, Noam. Dispel with it.”

“It’s a brain aneurysm, unruptured.”

Borja went blank. A mourning dove and cardinal spun in a playful helix over the backyard. The next door neighbor's car revved to life and the two birds darted into the woods behind the pool.

“You’ve got a pocket of blood inside your brain the size of a bottle cap.”

“I know what a brain aneurysm is, for Christ’s sake, Noam. I read the literature. My Uncle Dick died of a brain aneurysm.”

Noam did not respond, seemingly to provide space for Borja to ask questions. Borja, realizing he had forgotten nearly everything he might’ve once known about brain aneurysms, either from his Uncle Dick or the literature, could only think of one.

“So, what’s the deal? Is it terminal?”

“I don’t care for dealing in absolutes when it comes to situations like this, and in any case, as unhelpful as it may sound, the answer is both yes and no. The size and flow of your blood vessels is dwindling rapidly as your overall immunity declines. You have a window for further testing and in all likelihood, treatment, but that window is closing rapidly. Had you come in to see me as often as I would like, we would’ve caught this thing much earlier. So I want you to stop by tonight to meet with a specialized team of neurologists I’ve put together. We’ll develop a plan, run a few more tests, and decide how to best proceed from there. Personally, Apollo, I’d like to put you under care by midnight and get you under the knife before the weekend is over.

Because, like I said, you have a window, which is more than I can say for others who’ve found themselves in your position, but that window is closing quickly. If you don’t come in tonight, I cannot promise the same degree of security that I can if you do. Do you understand what I’m saying to you? This thing could burst at the drop of a hat, and if that happens, there’s a

25% chance you'll die on the spot. Forgive me for speaking so bluntly, Apollo, and I'm sorry for the short notice. I really pray you have no other obligations to attend to, this really is your life we're talking about. This could make all the difference between another decade, six weeks, or six days."

All the objects in Borja's kitchen began to assume a sudden and overt property of sharpness. The rims of his drinking glasses and the edges of his countertops narrowed to the width of an eyelash. All empty space began to fill with razor-thin latticework. A mocking ugly permeance had settled in without warning. This house he had thought he could not get any more intimate with, this empty home where his children once milled, where his wife once lay beside him, was fusing to his being, absorbing him. This was no home any longer, Borja realized, but the early makings of a dig site. He would be outlived by nearly everything that surrounded him, the coffee mug in his hand, the shower shoes on his feet, the microbes swimming in the beads of sweat that collected on his temples. Those same invisible creatures would soon cluster in the knots of his buried bones, eating his flesh with the same uncaring efficiency with which they ate soil. He felt less real than those creatures, less real than the coffee mug in his hand, the shower shoes on his feet. He felt less entitled to whatever the future held than the objects around him, be it a tumultuous future or a beautiful one. He was disappearing. Becoming irrelevant. Maybe in a couple of weeks, maybe in a couple of years. The difference between the two seemed to be of great importance to Noam. But what about Borja? What was to be his next action in a lifetime of many?

"Apollo?"

"Jesus Christ. Oh, Jesus, Noam. What am I gonna do?"

“It’s o.k., Apollo. Nobody knows what the future holds. Just come tonight at eight. I’m sorry for the timing, but it was the only available slot left. Not tomorrow morning, not sometime in the coming days, but tonight at eight. We can fix this, but we need to act fast.”

Borja swallowed like a chastised schoolchild.

“Again, Apollo, do you understand what I’m saying to you? Your confirmation is paramount. Tonight at eight.”

“Yes. I understand. Thank you, Noam. You said it’s the size of a, uh, bottle of coke or something?”

“No, a bottle cap.” Neither of them said anything after that. “Alright, then I’ll be seeing you at eight. Take care, my friend.”

Borja hung up and stared out the kitchen window. It was the only thing he had the nerve to look at. He became awash in something as he looked out, his thoughts asunder and whizzing like bolts of static, but something was already slowing them down to a manageable speed, something he suspected he was maybe supposed to feel at the very end of his life but not any sooner. It was like a great adamantine wall against which all his anxieties crashed and smoldered. It was relief. Who was delivering it to him in this moment, an angel? It had to be coming from somewhere. It seemed to stream in from the kitchen window. He stared out the window, transfixed. There was the distant weathervane atop of the gazebo at the far end of his backyard, which in that moment had just caught a flash of sun and was bursting into transient flame. Morning light through the sycamore spotted his lawn with dollops of slow-moving amber. The wind had begun to pick up a little bit, the sibilance of it softly braiding with that of the dutiful sprinkler system. Everything outside his window, unlike everything behind it, seemed so

peaceful, so content to exist for but an orderly, beautiful lapse in time. There was all of a sudden an unmistakable order in the arrangement of the world.

So, it was time for him to go. He thought of that game back in 1973, the blood pumping in his skull as the crowd chanted his name. A commemorative high school basketball game in his honor. Borja laughed out loud. What a depressingly appropriate send-off for a man mired in the past. He dialed the number for Ronald Chess Union from memory and asked the receptionist if he could speak with Principal Jimmy.

“He says he’s busy,” she said.

“Tell him it’s an emergency.” She obliged.

“Jimmy?”

“What do you want, Borja?” asked Anagnostos, clearly not pleased to be speaking with him again.

“I wanna apologize to you, Jimmy, if I was rude just now. Cut an old man some slack.”

“Alright. Fine. Anything else?”

“I wanna take you up on your offer for tonight.”

Anagnostos paused. “Thank you, Polly. Six-thirty. “Don’t be late. And for the love of Christ, try to be a good sport, will you?”

## Two: The Paint

Borja pulled into the parking lot of Ronald Chess Union at six-thirty exactly. The sun had set about twenty minutes beforehand and the evening sky was slowly being lacquered purple. Before him, Ronald Chess Union took up every available splinter of space, a gargantuan structure of molted red brick and stucco eerily lumpy like human fat. He studied his reflection in the rearview mirror.

He looked old, though he couldn't really say he minded all that much. At the center of Borja's fear of growing old had been a suspicion he still could not tamper, a suspicion that in old age certain aspects of his ancient childhood would return like the recurrent abscess of a skin disease thought cured. Two aspects in particular were lucidity and fear, but looks had nothing to do with either. At least he did not look like a child, the way many elderly do, at least he had kept that part at bay. He had managed to keep his head of once-handsome hair, though it had gone wispy and translucent, the zircon-colored moles on his scalp visible through it like woodland creatures in a snow-dusted thicket. His irises were now ghostly rings of silver, two impressionist watercolors of Saturn, the left a sorry reproduction of the right. Wrinkles parted and coalesced all across his face, his neck, his long sinewy limbs. But a part of him enjoyed how he looked. He felt distinguished in his appearance, paradoxically virile. But he knew that as the changes accumulated, his agency grew further and further under siege, and that this virile feeling came at a terrible cost. Once the levee broke for good, he wondered if he'd still be conscious enough to watch the last clumps of his mind's rendered foundation float past him in the froth.

He was now seventy-three, and his parents had been dead for years, and his eight yuppie children were grown and off hurting in secret somewhere else, and it appeared as though his



hypothesis on the circuitry of life had been proven correct, inexorably true in more ways than he could've ever dreamt up when he was still a young man. All this, troubling as it was, had been anticipated to some extent. What Borja had failed to anticipate was the return of metaphor. Borja remembered how metaphor had dominated his childhood, and the life of his children. Electricity could be electrons bouncing from atom to atom, or maybe it was nothing more than a phantasmagoric serpent so tightly coiled within the confines of the fusebox that once the switch was flipped it exploded out through the wire and towards the kitchen light fixture faster than the naked eye could perceive, like Rodrigo had once put forth as a possibility. What did it really matter, anymore? What more was there for him to learn, or rather to understand, in this lifetime? Perhaps kids said the darnedest things, but to the dying the darnedest things might as well be gospel, for how much lucidity could be hidden behind them. With every encroaching footstep of death, Borja felt his literality slipping away, and indifference was his best defense when caught in the crossfire between body and soul. Every song he heard over the radio may as well be performed live in-studio by the band, like his second-oldest daughter Esme believed until she was fourteen. The crescent moon may as well be God's forlorn toenail, just like his youngest son Michael had long theorized. Borja used to tell his youngest, Luna, the only child he could honestly say he loved in his fullest capacity for the experience, that the thunder overhead was the sound of angels bowling. He would tell her that a jolt of lightning corresponded to a strike, but who knew, now he wondered if lightning struck whenever one angel felt up another angel's wife in the bowling alley bathroom. That would be more in line with alchemical change, with a static charge splitting air with pure heat, with the course of one's life being re-routed forever. A strike,

or even a bolt of lightning for that matter, was small potatoes. Separation, divorce, now there was a force of nature.

He knew he shouldn't hold his breath, that life was stubbornly mutable above all else, but often discreetly so, like how the surface of a seemingly firm block of wood can be full of rot, and furrow under a press of one's finger. He knew he would have no idea what to make of life until the aneurysm detonated.

A weaker man would've gone with assisted living years ago, he thought as he fished a quarter pint of Chopin Family Reserve from the center console. He took little nips, watched sedans pull up in front of the gymnasium and unload parents with little children.

It was hard sometimes, so hard he could almost weep. A bladder once so reliable that it had been a point of pride for Borja now needed to be emptied five to six times a night. He had to wipe his ass at sporadic moments throughout the day, regardless of when his last bowel movement had been. His chest heaved after his weekly trip to and from the basement to fetch boxes of pre-packaged chocolate-chip muffins and twelve racks of Miller, all against Noam's orders. Thank God he had invested in a ranch-style house, or the MultiCare Clinic over in Medford would've been his second home by now. His body was failing him in just about every way imaginable. The only organ that still worked as good as ever was the same that had doubled as the shovel with which Borja had been digging his own grave since he was thirteen.

Breathing deeply, he got out of the car and walked into the brilliantly-lit, already packed gymnasium, and unsure of where he was supposed to go and who he was supposed to meet, he found an inconspicuous open seat in the front row, and sat down. The hardwood at his feet gleamed white like the surface of the sun, the bleachers rose like rows of blackened teeth in the

maw of some great beast posed to swallow the world whole. He craned his neck upwards, seeking some sense of presence in the familiar yet alien room. He checked the rows of black and maroon banners to see if his was still there. Sure enough, boys basketball conference champions, 1973, on the back wall off to the left. It had known many locations over the years, moved around to fit new banners as more championships were won. It was then he saw the biggest banner in the entire room hanging from the rafters, and how he had missed it in the first place he could not fathom. It was only slightly smaller than a school bus.

Ronald Chess Union salutes Coach Apollo "Polly" Borja. September Sixth, 1973, thirty points against Lansingburgh. The legacy continues. Sick em', Wolves!

To the left of the gothic print message was a pointillist, black and white silk-screening of Borja at seventeen years old, sinking a three with both feet in the air, a look of wild determinism grafted to his face. Borja couldn't believe he still remembered the exact shot that was pictured on the banner. He couldn't believe any of what he was seeing, none of it seemed real, it had to be a mirage, a mere temporary ripple of physicality, nothing more. He kept staring and staring, but no such relief came. He felt eyes reaming the back of his head. He was sure people were staring. Borja worried that he didn't look that different from the way he did in the banner above. He slowly turned his head from side to side and confirmed that, undoubtedly, yes, people were staring. Whispering, too. So that settled that. He was still recognizable as a figure of local gossip despite his long respite from the public eye. What exactly did they know? Surely, they knew about the divorce. She had been so hysterical, his wife, so terribly uninterested in maintaining

any sense of privacy, even for the sake of their eight children, that every facet of their uncoupling had become public record among all their neighbors.

Still, it had been thirty-three years since Borja's wife had left. She took a page from his book of womanizing ways and ran off with another woman herself, and took a job teaching computers to elementary school children five towns over in Norfolk, and that was the last Borja had ever seen of her, even though she wasn't that far away. Borja's father, who had grown especially touchy in the winter of his years, had practically disowned him over it.

"My own son's wife is a tongue-and-groove woman. God help me. God help us all."

Custody was finalized when Luna was ten years old. Borja's only condition was that he had her, his youngest daughter, the last diamond glint of joy in his obsidian day-to-day for two weeks out of every month. The other seven he saw at more or less the same rate, save for a holiday here or a weekend there, but that was his only condition. Some good it did, Luna ended up resenting him just as much as her brothers and sisters. Now, he had no one. Now holidays were nothing more than a phone call, and every phone call he got was like a recriminatory echo, a lecture for something he had done long ago, though they never said what it was. What did they know? He tried to put such thoughts away. Maybe he could still enjoy himself yet.

If anyone recognized him, they did not approach him. The young players emerged and set themselves upon the court, running simple drills, boyish haircuts bobbing as they jogged in place. A paunch-bellied leather-faced man with a slick of black hair painted on his head barked orders at the boys, licked his fingers and turned the pages of a clipboard.

As he watched the boys practice, Borja realized that the entire purpose of his visit to this place was still fairly unclear to him. It was clear why he had been summoned only in the aspect

that Anagnostos had outlined all that would be required for him, such as getting up at halftime and waving to the crowd, meeting the players, the coach, and yet it still seemed as though there was some mysterious, ulterior reason for his being there beneath the surface of the supposed one. The bleachers were beginning to fill with people and expectant chatter. Borja had forgotten how seriously these sorts of things were taken in small towns. Events like these were inherently ceremonial, rituals of power sometimes, and other times humiliation, but always of chance. The glint off the flying blade before it either whiffed air or pierced flesh. Whereas Borja had once found it infectious, that old swell of commonality felt deep in the chest was nowhere to be found. Perhaps that's because it was no longer him driving down the court with the ball in his tender, savagely practiced grip, that grip he had perfected over hours and hours of practice, moving beside him as gracefully as an exterior organ or a little animal familiar.

At precisely half-court two teachers were setting up a large folding table. Thick scorebooks were lugged out and slammed onto the table's surface, some indeterminate electronics encrusted with red and green blinking dots were set up in tandem, adorning the little workstation like a shrine. Out of the corner of his eye, Borja saw Anagnostos enter with a few subordinates in tow. He turned to face them, and to offer a faint smile.

“Coach Polly!” they bellowed. He was being summoned.

As Borja sauntered over he could feel more and more passing glances grafting onto him. The boundary between himself and the whispering faces in the crowd grew more pronounced with every step.

“There he is, Mr. buzzer beater!” said one of the men. Borja quickly realized that other than Anagnostos, he recognized none of them. Anagnostos stared at Borja like a disgruntled babysitter entrusted with a budding psychopath.

“Apollo, you remember Malik Salinas, Lou Owen, and David McAddie?”

“No,” Borja said reflexively, though it was possible he had met each of them once or maybe even twice before. Every face Borja had seen thus far into the evening was surrounded by the air of a face he had seen on the cover of a magazine years ago.

“Thanks for coming, anyway,” the man named Owen said.

“Well,” said Anagnostos to nobody in particular. “Maybe someday one of you will have the misfortune of having a reputation that precedes you.”

Borja winced inside at the comment. But what did they really know? What did any of them know? At the very least, considered Borja and accepted, they know about the other women. His wife, with the theatrics, she'd tell anyone about it, strangers even. Even so, it had been a game of numbers. His luck, like the wax in Icarus's wings, had simply ran out after a given point. There had been car saleswomen, social workers, theater directors, treasurers, secretaries, nurses, marketers, contractors, but most coveted of all for Borja were the doe-eyed teaching assistants and graduate students that came and went like painted horses on a scintillant carousel streaming across the dark, decrepit carnival scene of Borja's middle age. He liked them young. He found that women under twenty-five smelled incredibly different from women any older, who did not smell bad, but just not the same. It was only girls under twenty-five that had a certain buttery, almost porcine smell, like a pork loin simmered in cream. He was magnetized to it. He was willing to say whatever it took to engulf himself in such a smell. He would tell them he wanted

to marry them, to have his second set of children with them. Eventually, each one was forced to swallow the bone-hard, razor-lined truth, that he had only told them what they wanted to hear. Once, there was little he could do to keep them away from him, but at seventy-three, he assumed that finally, he had aged out from under the range of their affections. Men between thirty and fifty were usually what they preferred. Borja grew embarrassed amid the growing clamor of a high school gymnasium filled with teenagers with how preoccupied his thoughts had become with sex.

“Can I get you anything,” asked the man named Owen, “Coffee, something to eat, maybe?”

“Well, I couldn’t trouble you for a beer, could I?”

“This is a high school,” began the man named McAddy, but he was cut off by Anagnostos.

“It’s alright, Addy. There’s a few beers left in the teacher’s lounge, Apollo, just try to keep a low profile. Drink in there, if you can help it.”

“You know what? I’m alright, Jimmy,” said Borja, casting a glare in the direction of the man named McAddy. The man named McAddy returned the glare with one of his own that was a bit less intense, but not for lack of trying. For a brief moment Borja wondered if the two of them might fight, if he might have to slap the man named McAddy across the face quickly to disorient him, for men on the brink of fighting are always anticipating a telegraphed punch and never a slap. Borja would then barrel into him like a drill bit with his two thumbs placed just outside his balled fists, as he had done so many times when he was a young man.

“Where’s the wife? Kids?” McAddy asked.

“Dan,” said Anagnostos.

“We’re separated,” Borja said.

“Ah, sorry to hear it,” said McAddy.

“Let me show you to your seat, Polly.”

“Something tells me you already knew that,” said Borja, ignoring Anagnostos. “But don’t be. Best thing that ever happened to me.”

“Hm,” nodded McAddy. The little inflamed welt of a man raised his brow and narrowed his mouth into a paper cut thin smile as though to say, I don’t believe a word you say. Nobody does.

“Your seat, Apollo,” Anagnostos continued rather insistently. “We’re ten minutes from tip-off, you should take your seat.”

Borja was more than happy to oblige, and to rid himself of these shifty-eyed bureaucrats, and the miasma of empty compliments and cagey hostility that rose off of them like the stink of caked shit. Before he sat down, Anagnostos placed his hand on Borja’s shoulder.

“Thanks for coming, Apollo. I really appreciate it. I’m not gonna let anybody here mess with you or give you a hard time, alright? You can relax.”

Borja grunted and looked away. “Yeah, yeah.”

As soon as he took his seat, the feeling of menace that had been roiling in the base of his stomach since he had parked outside began crawling up his throat and clustering behind his teeth like oversized bacteria. An assault of noise, more noise than Borja had heard in many years was underway, though he was unable to say for sure when it had initially started, it had snuck up on him and utterly subsumed him, the screams of half a thousand strangers, though they couldn’t all



be strangers, for surely some of those half-a-thousand screams came from the throats of people who had worked with him, studied under him, slept with him, fought with him, and reviled him throughout the years, maybe into the years of his exile, yes, maybe they still remembered him, but then again, maybe nobody really did, except for Anagnostos, but that just wasn't good enough, not really.

As the players from Lansingburgh streamed in like liquid mercury to a wave of boos and jeers, Borja tried to decide which was worse, to be forgotten by a community that could've meant so much to him but never really did, or to be remembered as the leering and lecherous man he knew he was. The light fixtures above his began swaying as though blown by a gentle wind. Borja swore he saw them flicker, although the game had begun and nobody else seemed to notice. Everyone just threw back their heads and screamed.

There was a large electronic clock in the center of the back wall which grimly declared that the time was seven-fifteen. Thoughts of his aneurysm returned to him, in the same casual sort of way one remembers a missing item on a grocery list. How was his decision playing out, this decision of his to be a self-fellating glory-seeker instead of a responsible man, a man who lived with purpose and resolve? Not well. Then again, what was it that he had been seeking in the first place? Surely he had known that true glory, true gratification, or at least a sign that his life had been something more than just a series of knives twisted into the backs of his loved ones was not to be found in a place like this when he decided to call back Anagnostos and agree to his ridiculous plan.

So that's what it was, that's what it had all been about, it was the desire to be remembered differently than he knew he would be. What a desperate, mortifyingly-transparent attempt to be

loved. How pathetic, how unthinkably pathetic. His wife would've laughed him out of the gymnasium if she could see him now. Borja, trying to take his mind off the horrid realization, tried to watch the game. The screams of the crowd began to sound more and more like impish laughter from behind his ear. Borja was sure that his home answering machine was overflowing with messages from Noam asking about his whereabouts.

Lansingburgh, in regal blue and white, was putting up a strong first quarter, already with a six point lead before the twelve minute mark had been reached. Ronald Chess Union, adorned in the same maroon and black Borja once wore, raced wildly to ensure that Lansingburgh wouldn't push their early advantage. Some Polish kid started a scoring run that brought the house down again and again. Above the raucous mass of young sinewy limbs, this glorious display of youth and vitality, Borja's gray and black banner hung flaccidly, still rippling gently in the strange wind that only Borja seemed to notice. The contrast was pitiful. He hung his head, which had started to throb, and the game raged on.

## Three: Backboard

In the thunderous ambience of the game's second quarter, Borja made a deal with God. Or life. Or the animus of the world, or whatever you might call it. Sometime around the first, when the rules of the game had begun to slip away from him, and everything descended into abstraction, Borja began to see a message, specifically an invitation to strike a deal, in the mandala of color formed by the players running up and down the court. Reality gave way to metaphor.

Blood-flecked glacial shelves rolled over Neolithic fields of hardwood. Oil-soaked doves persisted through the air, their feathers heavy and wet. Everything was black and red, white and blue, black and blue, red and white, so on and so forth, until even metaphors were too limiting and there was nothing left on the court before him but slow-moving waves of color. It was in those waves that Borja saw the rules of the deal outlined. Here's how it would go. If the white-and-blue stopped the red-and-black from achieving victory, he would go to the clinic in Medford right away, late as he might be, and demand to see Noam, then in turn demand that Noam provide him with the consul, and the subsequent treatment, that he had been promised over the phone. He was prepared to wail like a child if that's what it took. If the innate black-and-red defeated the foreign, white-and-blue opposition, than Borja would stand up at halftime, smile and wave just like Anagnostos had described, then he would mill around in the resulting celebratory atmosphere, strike up a conversation with some single mother, fork over some cash for her to get a babysitter or something, take her out for a drink, screw her afterwards, then in the quietude of his home, lie down and die sometime before the next week was over.

With the paralysis of indecision lifted, Borja relaxed a little. The mania that had been bloating the inside of his throat and drying out his mouth turned into a more placid, childish state

of dissociation. Borja was genuinely curious to see where the game, or what the game had become, would go. It didn't feel as if it was his life was at stake. It was someone else's, some other poor, romantic soul, one of the trillions to walk the earth and pine for more than what was there, whose temporal existence hung in the balance. How curious. And what fun, too. Slowly, things began to settle. He could make out the reddened faces of the players, he could hear the giggles and shrieks of individual schoolchildren above the frenzied din, and the announcer's voice too, once again became audible.

"What a game! That brings us to halftime," Borja heard the disembodied voice declare. "Ronald Chess thirty-six, Lansingburgh twenty-three. Before the girl's varsity gymnastics team debuts their much anticipated parallel bars and tumbling exhibition, we have a very, very, special guest!"

Borja's senses had been gradually sharpening since he made the silent deal, but at the speaker's announcement all his faculties returned to him suddenly and violently. Thirty six. Twenty-three. These numbers jumped out at him for some reason. There was some underlying secret about reality in the close study of those numbers, perhaps. Or perhaps not.

"An exemplary alumni, legendary athlete, beloved professor, cherished coach, and longtime pillar of our community is with us tonight, and if you think that's too many accolades for one Ronald Chess Timberwolf, then you must not know Polly Borja, a man very near and dear to me and many, many others. Give him a hand!"

The gymnasium quieted somewhat, then hummed back to life with a polite chorus of claps and whoops. Borja realized the announcer was Anagnostos.

"Come on up, Coach Polly! Say a few words!"

Petrified, Borja sat fixed to his seat. He still didn't know where the voice was emanating from. He did not know where he would go even if he wanted to say a few words. The middle of the floor, maybe? Every nerve, every fiber of muscle in his body felt like it was dissolving, going away to the future, where he was to no longer exist.

“That's him! C'mon, say something!” cried a voice in the crowd, and at this the polite chorus of clapping and whooping grew into a cacophony from which there was no escape. The voices resounded in his ears like a siren's shredding alto. The call had found him before he was ready for it. In one swift, seemingly rehearsed movement, Borja got up from his seat, walked towards the exit, and then out of the gymnasium. A new feeling was growing inside of him, growing stronger and stronger with every step. In a day that had been full of new feelings, here was yet another one that was different from all the rest, a marriage between the dread he had felt upon learning of his imminent demise and the otherworldly dissociation he had been experiencing for the last however many minutes.

In a daze, he began to shamble through the luminous, winding halls of Ronald Chess Union, no destination in mind. It had taken him up until the very moment Anagnostos summoned him to the center of the gymnasium floor for Borja to realize that he had made a terrible mistake. He didn't want to be a spectacle, a historical relic, or anything like that. He wanted to live out the rest of his days in quiet dignity, and in relative health. He wanted to appreciate the unexplainably cerulean blue of the autumn sky just a few more times. He wanted to reach out to all the people he'd wronged, all the women he'd used and discarded so callously. He wanted to do something he'd never once done before, which was apologize to all eight of his kids. He sputtered their names out loud. Rodrigo, Patricia, René, Sulma, Gary, Vitor, Michael, Luna. Luna most of all,

whose faith in Borja had lasted the longest on account of her youth and darling naivety. By the time the others wouldn't even meet his gaze, Luna still bolted from her mother's Caravan to embrace him whenever her mother dropped her off. He said her mother's name out loud too, his wife. Sally.

He had a lot to do. But in order to do any of it Borja needed to be alive, at least for another few weeks. He needed to get to Medford and see Noam as soon as possible. His watch read three pm, which had to be a mistake, because no sun shone through either of the windows in the hallway Borja stood blankly in the middle of. The night had fully descended. He must've forgotten to take it off in the shower at some point, or broken it without realizing. Serendipitously, a clock hung from the wall just behind his head displaying a time far more likely to be accurate: eight-fourteen. So he was only fifteen minutes late. Noam was probably sitting at his desk, perhaps with a pleated cup of vending machine coffee before him, awaiting Borja's arrival. Medford was a thirty minute drive, but he could realistically shave off about five if he sped. With a burst of energy from somewhere beyond him entirely, he scrambled to collect himself and began racing up and down the halls, trying his best to remember the quickest way back to the ground floor. Why was it so difficult? He wanted to leave, didn't he? He did, more than anything, so why was he having so much trouble locating the correct flight of stairs, the identifying mural or window that would free him from this wretched place? He felt as though he was trapped in a shoddy simulacrum of the school he had taught at for so many years, its designs copied in haste by aliens. A cold dread rose up and down his back and surged in and out of his nerves as he stalked the halls, clawing at the walls, feeling for indentations that might give way to the outside. The shadow of a serpent with a human male sex organ dragging behind it slithered

through a fluorescent light fixture above his head. Though he saw it clear as ink on paper in the fixture, the serpent and the organ of completely equal dimensions, the ghastly sight made his head spin and his balance fall out from under him, and when he looked again the serpent was gone.

Surprisingly, the vision left him feeling grounded. He realized he was being hysterical, hysterical enough to start seeing things. If he had any hope of making it to Medford, he had to remain calm. That much was imperative. He was on third floor, wasn't he? Gathering himself, he made it to the main vestibule in front of the parking lot with a sudden sense of calm and direction that had been evading him so just moments earlier.

In the vestibule Borja could hear the muffled screams of the crowd emanating from the distant gymnasium. He was glad to hear them getting on just fine without him. He had one foot out the door when the weight of a man's hand fell hard upon his shoulder. Borja spun around in a panic and saw that it was Anagnostos that was pawing at him, tufts of Borja's jacket between his fingers, which had gone ivory with mania. The previously well-kept principal now looked like death, far worse than he had only an hour ago, his hair wet, his eyes wild, his teeth clattering and clenched. He had lost all color and essence, resembling a mannequin animated by dark forces.

"You have to stay, Borja. You never made your appearance."

Borja regained his briefly offset balance and threw Anagnostos to the floor.

"What are you grabbing me like that for, James? I don't have to do shit and you know it. I never signed anything," Borja said, huffing, more shocked than he allowed himself to appear. He gripped the wall behind him. "You got no right, putting your hands on me like that. I got half a mind to beat your ass right now."

“Oh,” Anagnostos grinned, “So you’re threatening me now?”

“Maybe I am,” Borja rebutted. “If I wasn’t busy with other things you’d be in a world of pain right now. Count yourself lucky.”

“I’m calling the police.”

“Go ahead, I did nothing wrong. You wanna inconvenience an old man even more than you have already, be my guest. Tell them to meet me in Medford.”

“You don’t know where you’re going, Borja. You don’t even know where you are anymore.”

Borja stepped out into the unexpectedly chilly evening. His head had begun to ache again, a pulse of discomfort flicked on and off like a broken pilot light with every step down the long concrete path from the exit to the lot. His car was not where he had left it. That was not good, but he had been so out of sorts throughout the previous few hours he wondered if he was just imagining the absence of his car. It seemed rational to Borja that if you could envision something that was decidedly not there, you could just as easily envision the absence of something that decidedly was. Not to worry. He closed his eyes as tight as they’d go, like a child attempting to telekinetically implode the head of an uncooperative adult. He kept them closed until a beat of pain began to dance upon his temples once more. When he opened them, his car was still missing. He heard the hydraulic hiss of a large truck coming to a stop some three hundred yards up the road. Borja, with a dreadful premonition, ran to the road’s edge as fast as his hips would allow, cursing their inflexibility as he maneuvered down two wide sets of concrete stairs. At the road’s edge he saw the red glimmering hull of a tow truck beneath a streetlight as it rolled out of sight with his beloved Probe dragging behind it. He had parked in



his old spot, reserved for employees of the school. Obviously, they'd given it to somebody else in the thirteen years since he'd retired.

The circumstances set in. There was nothing Borja desired more in the entire world than to race after the vanishing Probe on foot. He wanted to race after the damn thing until his heart splattered against the rungs of his ribcage. But it was already gone, as was all his physical energy. A depleted, out of breath husk, he stood dumbly in the wet manicured grass that rimmed the seemingly infinite road. Before he was totally sure of what the best course of action was, he was walking down the long dark road, the school shrinking behind him as he ambled away, his legs buckling from having just ran at such a breakneck pace.

Borja realized once again what he had been realizing all day, which was that he was about to die. Each new realization was marked by a tenor different from the last. He was exhausted, feeling spun on an axis that mired him on a different stripe of pegboard nearly every few hours, barely enough time to process how he felt about any of it. The exact order of the five stages of grief eluded him as he shuffled down the misty county road, but he was sure that since waking that morning he had encountered them all. Rather, he had been thrown from one to the next and beaten like a schoolboy at the mercy of a pack of hoods. Everything was down to the wire now. He had no time to feel sorry for himself. No time for anxiety, self-doubt, selfish, self-appeasing guilt, mysticism, symbolism, illusion, cosmic grandeur, or fear. Here he was with two minutes left on the clock in the fourth, down but not out, and the crowd roaring his name. He would win. He would get to Medford. He repeated the name of the town out loud like a mantra. Medford. Medford. Medford. Medford, where his medicine was. He laughed a little. That's dumb, he thought. Funny, though. The little joke sobered him a little. He welcomed the change

of pace. He knew he was heading in the right direction, though he questioned if he was going the fastest way. At some point he had turned onto a quiet back road lined with massive silver maples and dogwood trees, forming small forests interrupted here and there by modest country houses. The last generation of summer peepers buzzed from the confines of swampland beyond neat, little fenced-in backyards. Borja kept walking, brisker now. He had a ways to go. How long would Noam be in for, he had no idea. He didn't even know if the facility was twenty-four hours or not. Borja hadn't gone to bed any later than ten forty-five for the last twenty years. He marveled at how out of his element he was. He was surely no more than a mile outside of the town he had lived in his entire life, and yet he could be anywhere. A natural tunnel was formed by the dead branches hanging down above his head. His mind had gone strangely blank. It was one of those moments of great distress during which the waking mind takes its leave. Onward he went.

With little warning, the dark around him dissolved as a car roared around the corner and slowed to a crawl behind him. Borja spun around and realized he had been walking in the middle of the road all this time. Without thinking it over very much, or not nearly as much as he perhaps ought to have, Borja began waving frantically, gesticulating like the man in deep need that he was, but the car swerved around him, emitted a ear-splitting honk, and then departed into the darkness, tires shrieking. Borja fell on his bad hip and yelped in pain. He felt the burn of loose sediment from the asphalt searing into his bare palms as he rose to his feet slowly, cursing everything that had led him up to this moment. The aneurysm, his debauchery, his short-lived basketball career, the phone calls, the way he had treated his kids, the distance between them that he had allowed to grow immeasurable. The dark wood around him was once again illuminated

by the high beams of an approaching car. Borja decided he would not make the same mistake twice. He flagged the driver down with just enough tenacity to gain their attention, careful not to appear unhinged. All this was only assumed, as Borja no longer had any idea of how he looked to others. He realized that his sense of self had disintegrated at some point in the recent past, and while it could've happened in the wake of the dread he had felt when Anagnostos had called him to the center of the gym to speak, or in the wake of the dread he had felt upon learning of how he was going to die, or from some even more inscrutable point in his halcyon days, he couldn't say. All he knew now was his mission. He had to get to Medford. He wanted to live.

“Is everything ok?” asked the motorist, a heavysset, middle-aged woman.

“Oh, yes, yes,” said Borja, walking slowly toward the driver's side door. “Everything's fine. I just -“

He grabbed the door handle rather thoughtlessly and attempted to pull it open. She was not at all there to him, nothing beyond a simple means to an end. He was tired of stale negotiations preventing him from being where he wanted to be. Besides, time was of the essence. Predictably, the woman let out a gasp and reached for the safety lock, but Borja grabbed her wrist and clenched it as hard as she could, causing her to drop the cellphone she held in it. She screamed in fear and made another grasp for the lock with her free hand, but Borja caught it in his own, and now his entire torso was inserted into the driver's side window, and him and the woman were locked in a dark, convulsive embrace, citrus hair product flooding his nostrils, the two of them grunting and yelling like predator and prey wrestling for being-hood. The woman might've had an additional four thousand pounds of aluminum, steel, and carbon fiber to leverage over Borja, but he had taken her by surprise, and in his frenzied narrow-mindedness it

seemed that he had managed to overpower the physical limitations of his normally decrepit body, and had become as limber and strong as in his youth. The woman slammed on the gas in a last ditch-effort to rid herself of Borja, but it was no use. With no way to steer, she was sure to crash, and after a brief bout of swerving towards the road's edge, Borja's legs writhed in the air, she slammed the breaks and the car came to a stop. This was all the time Borja needed. He ripped the door open so hard he almost tore it off the hinges. He had worn her out. Borja and the woman looked at each other for a moment, breathing heavily.

"What do you want?" she asked him. Borja had nearly forgotten, he was so taken with the struggle.

"I want to drive," he answered her. She began to unbuckle her seatbelt. "Get in the passenger seat."

"What?" A new patina of fear incandesced over her eyes, like a slimy layer of lodged contact lenses. "You can have the car, but let me go. The cops will be here in minutes."

"How do you plan on calling them? You dropped your phone back there."

The woman wet her lips in dread. "Okay, okay," she said, swallowing a lump in her throat. "Just please don't hurt me."

Borja, though he had no plans to do so, said nothing. The woman, with some minor difficulty given her size, labored into the passenger seat and looked mournfully out the window with her round, crimson cheek clasped against her palm. She seemed to be trying to make her frame as small as possible. The car was expensive and pleasant to be inside especially after having walked such a distance in the cold. Warmed leather on the steering wheel kissed the flushed skin of his hands and caressed his aching back. The control center on the dashboard was

laden with a hundred more luminous features than Borja could've ever dreamed up. He pushed a button beneath the wheel and the car went into drive. They sped off into the night, the world around them homogenizing into a dark blur.

The woman began to sniffle. Borja turned to look at her, to really look closely at her, which in the blunted excitement of everything he had forgotten to do. She couldn't have been older than fifty. She wore a luxuriously quilted, plum velvet puffer coat, and an outlandish beaver-skin hat, the sort a French trapper in the fifteen-thirties might wear. The soft lines on her face bespoke strength, repression even. She had a certain dignified charm to her, Borja felt. He imagined that once she was really quite beautiful, even glamorous in a mundane, salt-of-the-earth sort of way, like an off-broadway actress or a lounge singer.

“What’s the matter, you don’t like me?” Borja tried joking.

The woman turned to face him directly, clearly terrified, but oddly resigned to the strangeness of her situation. Across the jellied hazel of her irises, Borja saw tears shimmering. She was sort of beautiful still, Borja thought, despite her weight and age. A certain radiant dignity was solemnly baked into her stern, worried profile, like an exquisitely well put together face of make-up.

“What’s your name, hon?” he asked her. She offered no response. Nothing could be heard but the undulating rhythm of rubber on concrete and the wind outside. Borja turned on the radio and somebody’s rendition of Chopin’s Nocturne No. 2 softly crackled out. Borja was gone, elsewhere.

“What are you going to do with me?” the woman asked after a while.

“With you? Nothing,” Borja replied. “You’re of no real interest to me right now, no offense. I’m sure you’re a lovely person, but I’ve got larger concerns at the moment.”

“Where are you taking me?”

“I have to get to Medford. To The MultiCare Center.”

The woman mulled this over.

“What does that have to do with me?” she asked.

“Again, nothing, really. I needed your car. But it’s cold out there, I wouldn’t want to abandon you on the side of the road like some cur. Just sit tight for a bit.”

“My family’s going to wonder where I am. My husband will call the cops if I’m not back by ten. You should take Exit 76 and drop me off at the Citgo. I’ll call my husband and say somebody stole my car at work. I’ll say I took a taxi but didn’t have enough fare to make it all the way back. I won’t tell anyone. Please, just let me go.”

“I’m sorry, but I just can’t do that. I have to take care of this one thing at a time. Letting you go would just complicate things right now. Just let me do what I must, and everything will be fine.”

“You’re a monster. You’ve attacked and terrorized me, an innocent woman, and you won’t even do me the courtesy of telling me why. May you burn in Hell.”

Borja cricked his neck and continued driving.

“Well, why Medford? Why the urgency? It better be serious.”

“About as serious as it gets. Brain aneurysm, unruptured. I was supposed to be put under care tonight, but I hesitated. It could burst at any time, killing me. It almost certainly will, but if I

get to where I need to be before that happens I can at least buy myself some extra time, time I've only recently realized is indispensable."

The woman was quiet again for some time.

"Well, I'm sorry to hear that. Clearly, you're a scared and frustrated man. It's no excuse for how you've treated me but at least I know why you've been driven to act so brashly."

Borja was impressed at the woman's understanding.

"You said you only recently realized the time you might be able to buy yourself is indispensable. Indispensable how?"

"Well. I guess I just wasn't a good man, didn't do right by the life I was given. No, I don't guess so, I know so. I wasn't a good man. I decided to have a family, have a big one, and I did wrong by all of them. I was cold. I was distant. I cheated on my wife, an innumerable amount of times, and when I lost custody of my children I was was selective with my affections in order to keep them wanting, always wanting for love, until one day they all grew up and decided they were tired of playing the miserable game I had been forcing them to play all their lives. I loved my youngest daughter above all else, and she doesn't even speak to me now."

"That's terrible," said the woman. "When was the last time you spoke to her?"

"Fourteen years ago," Borja remarked emotionlessly. He was still far, far, away, somewhere totally elsewhere altogether. "She thinks that I molested her."

The woman looked straight ahead and said nothing. Neither of them said anything for what felt to both like a very long time.

"Did you?" the woman eventually asked.

"Of course not," he said. "The thought rips me to pieces like nothing else."

“Why does she think that, then?”

“I don’t know. The mind of a child is an enigmatic thing. They see metaphors everywhere. It’s how they process reality. I think I was kind and tender to her at one point and then needlessly cruel and ruthless in such rapid succession it disoriented her. It made her unsure of who I was and how I felt about her. It made her feel violated. Her imagination did the rest.”

The woman continued to stare straight ahead, unspeaking.

“Do your other kids know about this?”

“I don’t know,” said Borja. “I really don’t. I imagine she must’ve told them her side of things at some point. They do still speak to me, though hardly ever. Whether it’s out of loyalty to their little sister or their mother I just don’t know.”

The woman, bashing Borja’s expectations, seemed to relax a little bit. She even took off her coat. Borja noticed she had unusual breasts for a woman of her size, they were smaller and perfectly rotund, perky, even. He made no effort to hide his obviousness. She stared back at him.

“Then go. Try to make right whatever horrible situation you’ve created. Whatever may have happened in the past can’t be corrected, but you can start something new, something different. You have to try, at least.”

Borja broke into a grin behind closed lips, soul suddenly aflame with vindication. He was beginning to feel his corporeal self falling back to earth, re-sealing itself inside his body. He began to shake.

“You understand. My God, you really understand. You know me, almost. You have known me at other ages, I feel.”



Desperate to confirm his aliveness to himself, to another person, he slowly reached out a trembling hand and placed it on the woman's shoulder. He could feel the warmth of her skin, the soft give of it, beneath the indentations of her sweatshirt. He swore he saw the crow's feet that hemmed her eyes crinkle in excitement. A quick smile. He circumvented the nape of her neck with his thumb and stroked her chin with one fluid motion. Borja was unsure, but he thought he felt her lean into his touch for just a moment. He lowered his hand and cupped her breast. To his surprise, it smeared off her chest like a dollop of oil paint across a pallet of glass. He felt it slide out from under his fingers and down her sweater, landing in her lap with a muffled plop.

"You're a bastard," she said, her tone charged mostly with annoyance and what Borja interpreted as a strange form of curiosity tinged with something more inscrutable. "An old, lonely, bastard. And they're prosthetic. I lost them to the radiotherapy two weeks ago. Cancer."

"Ah," was all Borja could manage to say.

"What's more, I'm married. You're a good-looking man, and you wouldn't even crack the top ten most deranged men I've been with, if you can believe that, but these days I'm faithful if nothing else," she said, sliding the silicon mold back up her shirt and against her chest. "Even if my own husband isn't always.

"So that's how you behave," she continued, "With your alleged new lease on life? It's quite obvious that you're still stuck in your ways."

"Perhaps," mused Borja. "It was always hard to know what I really wanted, to tell you the truth. I think I was going off of somebody else's template of a man, and not my own. I still am, in many ways. Or maybe I never had one." He pressed his thumb against the edge of his teeth. "I'm sorry about that."

“Apologize to yourself,” she said. “You are the architect of your own demise. You always were.”

Borja realized that he had forgotten how to get to Medford. He felt as though he was forgetting many things, that his thoughts were bouncing right off him as they came to his mind, like raindrops smashing against a waterproofed surface. Everything outside the car had blended into one long ribbon of night upon which he rode, him and his strange passenger. His faculties for reading people also seemed to have left him entirely, for he could not for the life of him understand how the woman to his left felt about the bizarre situation she found herself in. She seemed too lofty for this world, unnaturally resplendent in the face of everything lecherous and vile, the underbelly of human interaction that Borja represented. He felt like an infernal demon tugging at the frock of a levitating angel. He was struggling to see the road. The high beams seemed to vaporize the coming space before his eyes, to scour everything before him of detail. It was like driving across the bottom of the ocean floor with a giggling light sutured to the grill. They drove on in silence before the woman turned to him once more and ruptured the quiet with a query that caught Borja off guard.

“Do you think I’m a good-looking woman?”

“Yes,” Borja replied immediately. “I don’t think I’ve ever met anyone like you before. You could’ve been a great help to me, if only I’d met you sooner.”

“How strange you are,” she said. “You’re not like anyone I’ve ever met before, either.”

“You’re nothing like my wife. She pretended to be unaware of all my faults until it became suddenly advantageous for her to drop the act. Then, after she’d raise hell, she would sulk and moan and prevent either of us from finding a point of reconciliation. I’d dig myself into

a hole, but she was always the one pouring wet cement down it anytime I tried to get out, all predicated on nothing, pure vapor.”

“But you loved her at one time, I’m sure.”

“Yes. Every facet of every relationship I had with other women stood only in relation to the joy and pain she brought me. All of it existed on the axis of her being.”

“You speak rather frankly and clearly for a man in the throes of madness.”

“I guess.”

Borja turned to look her in the eye. He could hear the blood in his brain pump wildly when she met his gaze. He tried the same impish smile that had worked so well for him in his younger days. “What would it take?” he asked her. “I have to have you. There’s a hotel off of 30.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“Deadly.”

“I don’t believe this,” she laughed.

“This is how men in the throes of madness act.”

They had driven into a more developed, residential area. Bars of incandescent, orange light intermittently flooded into the car every thirty seconds. Townhouses and small, dilapidated businesses had materialized around them, like gigantic faces peering into the little windows of a caliginous dollhouse. A dense, opaque fog had additionally appeared at some point, enshrouding the vehicle. Borja slowed down. He was not sure if they had finally arrived at Medford or not. His memory was as foggy and poorly-lit as wherever he was now.

“I don’t know where I am,” he said out loud.

“I’ll say,” said the woman. “You really haven’t the faintest idea. It shows.”

“I just wanted to be remembered. Or at the very least not forgotten.”

They spent a short while just staring at each other, the two strangers. Borja felt as though the curtain between him and the mysterious, graceful woman was now lifting in this strange half-way place. Just as always, after the thrill of closeness and the promise of liquid pleasure had pooled in the base of his amygdala, overflowed and trickled down his spine, descended into his stomach with a rousing splash, and blended with his blood, it was over. In the woman’s face he read nothing, and so he saw everything. Unlimited potential, unlimited power, unlimited chances to proliferate himself inside of another, to destroy himself through proliferation. To become nothing, finally, for real this time. He reached and caressed the woman’s plump face with the back of his bony, aged hand.

“Well,” she said. Borja could not for the life of him decipher what intentions underlaid her speech. It was driving him wild. “Um, well.” Borja thought he might have seen her blush. It was difficult to say, she was looking down. “If we’re going to do this, we may as well do it properly,” she sighed. “To the backseat?”

Borja smiled and offered a cool nod, pulling off to the side of a quiet side street without very many houses. The woman was already crawling into the back with a sudden physical adeptness that filled him with excitement and anticipation. He was back. He vaguely recalled that there was somewhere else he ought to have been, but he couldn’t recall where it was. He turned off the car and stepped out into the oily dark of the night. He slicked back his hair, stifled a cough, and opened the back door. The woman was sprawled out on her back, her woolen boots flat on the leather upholstery, breathing heavily.

“Come here,” she said. “Let’s get this over with.”

“What’s your name, by the way?” Borja asked. “You never told me your name.”

“Christine,” the woman sighed.

Borja placed his both hands upon her heavy hips and proceeded to slither his way into the backseat, lowering his wiry frame over hers. His face was inches from hers, her features much sharper and more brilliant than they’d been in the front seat. As soon as both his legs were off the ground Christine shot her knee up rapidly, connecting it to Borja’s stomach with a sickening, audible squish. He slowly collapsed on top of her, dry heaving and failing to cry in agony for lack of air in his lungs. Christine, summoning all her strength with the shriek of a descending valkyrie, pushed Borja off her with both legs, sending him tumbling backwards out of the car and flat onto the pavement, moaning and clutching his stomach. Christine followed after him, a death grip on her designer handbag, face flushed and bedraggled like the lacy pink paper of a fussed over Valentine’s Day card. She smashed the heel of her boot against Borja’s chest and neck, screaming all the while, as Borja rolled over onto his side and tried to protect his skull. After a few satisfying impactions, Christine threw herself, still screaming, back into the driver’s seat and barreled away.

Borja writhed on the wet pavement, bile flecked with blood streaming out his mouth and nostrils from the deepest point of his stomach. He sat up to avoid choking on it, laying both his hands on the sidewalk’s edge for support. His senses had been practically extinguished, and he fumbled for a grip on his surroundings like a newborn. Slowly, he tried to stand up, and when the task proved impossible, he sat down on the curb and expunged the last few globs of bloody mucus from his sinus and throat.

In the distance he heard a dog start to bark, then another, then one more. He rubbed his eyes, and upon their adjustment held his face in his hands. Across the street was his old house, 43 Chrysanthemum Place, looking just as he had remembered it. At some point he must have failed to keep right and had ended up in Brunswick, where he and Sally had lived for the first four years of Rodrigo's life and the first two and half of Patricia's. The house looked well-taken care of, exactly as it had been during Borja's time, preserved as if inducted into an open-air museum. Two meticulously landscaped beds of roses and boxwoods secured the gravel path to the front door, the burgundy paint upon it without a single chip. The same bird bath, with the same mournful statue of a cherub pouring water from a Mediterranean vessel stood sentinel over the yard. The same sycamore enveloped the windows of the top floor. Borja had always meant to chop it down so he could see the kids playing in the street more easily, but they had moved as soon as Sally became pregnant with René. He heard their lovely cries, their sonorous laughter and sounds of play as he remembered sensations he hadn't recalled in years; laboriously washing their faces with an embrittled cloth, wrestling with them on the carpet, singing them to sleep in the early summer evening.

He could not stay away, he was called to the place like a spirit not quite ready to pass, groping at something just out reach. His lungs smoldered with pain and his head felt like it was on the brink of implosion as he stumbled down the gravel path of his old home and onto the front porch. He peered into the windows, but curiously, it was as though they'd been frosted with matte black paint, rendered as milky as the fog billowing all around him. All Borja wanted was to look through those windows, to see a sliver of the kitchen, a grain of the green shag that carpeted the floor of the living room, which had always resembled a bed of moss to him. Try as

he could, there was no seeing through them, though there was also no seeing himself, his reflection was just as scant. As he pondered this he realized that the laughter he had earlier was not imagined, there was surely laughter, the sweet, wild and untethered, babbling laughter of small children, echoing from within the house. There was the absent-minded humming too, of a good woman striving to make a best doomed situation. Borja banged upon the old burgundy door. He rattled the doorknob. He grew more fatigued with each passing second. The laughter and humming persisted, totally uninterrupted. He whimpered as it grew louder and slumped upon the doormat when it was all he could hear. Although, curled up on the doorstep, above the cacophony and the throbbing of blood in his ears, he thought he heard the door creak open, but he was too weak to crane his neck up and look for himself.

When he fell from the bleachers face first onto the lucent-white hardwood floors of the gymnasium, Borja's palatine and nasal bone was split in two, and blood began gushing from his nostrils. It pooled from beneath his motionless head. It formed an almost saintly shape around his profile. There was so much of it bystanders later told the reporters they were briefly under the impression Apollo Borja had been shot by some unseen assailant hiding in the rafters. Although it was his brain that had harbored the source of his demise, when the attending paramedic flipped him onto his stomach and settled him into the stretcher, she struggled to remove Borja's clenched hand from the left side of his chest, where his heart was. After applying a little force his arm came off with just a minor amount of give, and she laid it to rest by his side.