

Fall 2018

THX: Excerpts from Losing to the Sandman, a Novel-In-Progress

Matteo Waldinger-White
Bard College, mw0565@bard.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.bard.edu/senproj_f2018

 Part of the Fiction Commons



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

Recommended Citation

Waldinger-White, Matteo, "THX: Excerpts from Losing to the Sandman, a Novel-In-Progress" (2018). *Senior Projects Fall 2018*. 19.

https://digitalcommons.bard.edu/senproj_f2018/19

This Open Access work is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been provided to you by Bard College's Stevenson Library with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this work in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/or on the work itself. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@bard.edu.

THX:
Excerpts from *Losing to the Sandman*,
a novel-in-progress

Senior Project submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature
of Bard College

By

Matteo Waldinger-White

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
January 2019

Acknowledgements

To those I know who heard me and listened, and who, through their love, made me feel able to look back at my life fully for the first time and face the true nature of my experiences, and without whom I would never have had the courage or the resolve to begin this book:

Julian Dime, whose presence in my life I could not live without, for making me believe in myself, for perceiving things in my work that I did not, for sharing so much with me, for being my truest friend

Ellen Waldinger, whom I am incredibly fortunate to have as a parent, for knowing me as I am, for cherishing me, for guiding me through the world, for making me articulate, for giving me the gift of writing, for believing in me, for showing me how to have conviction, how to be resilient, how to be self-directed, how to be comfortable in one's self, for being such a spectacular role model

Dinaw Mengestu, for showing me how to refine, for challenging my expectations and for pushing me to write differently and to read outside my taste, for exposing me to new literature and to new narrative modes, for recognizing my talent and respecting it, for showing me what good writing could be, for undying patience and exuberance, for always being enthusiastic about my work, even when I was not, for keeping me tethered to reality, for helping me grow both as a storyteller and as a person

Garry Hagberg, for expanding my understanding of language and of artwork, and of how the two intermingle, for championing me as a student of philosophy, for supporting me in all my endeavors outside of philosophy, for advising me not just about my college career but in my life, for welcoming my aspirations, for broadening my horizons

So many other people who have touched my life in the past three years made this work possible, to all of whom I'm profoundly grateful, for their friendships, for their insights, for their time, for sharing themselves with me and inviting me to do the same, for conversations, for inspiration, for disagreement, for reconciliation. Their names do not appear here simply because of my own inability to thank them fully, in the right words.

*For anyone who was hurt the way I was,
Who wishes to remember, who is forced to forget*

*For anyone who was hurt the way I was,
Who is forced to remember, who wishes to forget*

Table of Contents

Prologue:	
<i>I Hanley</i>	1
<i>II Hanley</i>	6
<i>III Hanley</i>	18
Chapter I	48

Prologue

In the October 12th, 1966 edition of the *Toronto Star*, there is the story of one James Francis Hanley, his twelve-hour-stay under physician's care at the Alaska Native Medical Center on the evening of October 5th, and the occurrences that lead to his being treated for a head injury at the medical facility. According to the article, written by a Mr. Stanley Wilson, Hanley, a well-to-do district judge who oversaw trials in the Fairbanks court, was struck in the back of the head with a sand lime brick in the parking lot of Pike's Landing, a casual fair restaurant situated just outside of Fairbanks' airport, by an unidentified assailant. Initial investigators suspected that the attacker was likely a member of the Alaska chapter of the International Organization of Masters, Mates, and Pilots, whom Mr. Hanley had recently ruled against in a wrongful death lawsuit, related to the drowning of a longshoreman tasked with removing crates filled with oil-drilling equipment assembly machinery from a Maersk shipping freighter.

Mr. Hanley, however, claimed in the report he supplied to Anchorage officers who interviewed him after he regained consciousness at the hospital that, after stepping out of Pike's Landing for a Pall Mall at approximately 11:11pm, following what he described as an "unsavory encounter" with an air traffic controller enjoying a post-shift drink at the restaurant's bar, he began a conversation with a man wearing a bowling hat and a trench coat in the parking lot of the restaurant about inclement weather patterns in the broader

Fairbanks area. Mr. Hanley claims that the conversation shifted over to discussing anticipated flooding due to an early fall thaw in the Yukon. According to Hanley, the taller man leaned against the side of a streetlight that stood next to the parking lot's exit for the duration of the two men's conversation, doing so in a manner that hid his features. Mr. Hanley eventually asked the shadowy figure in the trench coat what brought him out to the Fairbanks airport at this hour of evening. The man in the trench coat and the bowler hat, who was lean in figure and slight in build, and stood at something around six-foot-five, answered with a mumble. Hanley then asked the man to step out from under the streetlamp, so that Hanley could better make out the response. It is at this point in his recounting of the evening that Hanley claims he felt a sharp strike against his head, more loud than painful, followed by his "seeing stars" (Hanley's own words), and then losing consciousness.

Police interviews—not mentioned in Wilson's article—with Ronald Wilkins, the man tending bar the evening of the attack, revealed that the air traffic controller at the bar stood up only once, to use the bathroom at something around 11:15, and that Wilkins discovered the man passed out in the stall furthest from the men's room entrance a little after 11:30, Pike's Landing's closing time. According to Wilkins, the only other people present at the restaurant in the timeframe of the attack were a few stewardesses on layover from a flight out of Seattle, and a family, consisting of a husband, a wife, and three-year-old boy. And though the husband *was* a pontoon pilot and a member of the MM&P, according to Wilkins and corroborated by the wife during a later interview, he at no point interacted with Hanley, and left his table only once, at around 10:45. Pike's Landing, with no history of any kind of security concern prior to the attack, being just a quiet, old-fashioned restaurant where people going to or from the Fairbanks airport got a chance to stretch out either before or after a bumpy flight, had no sort of surveillance system for its premises, save for

an ADT security alarm for burglaries. Therefore, no footage was available of what actually unfolded directly before Hanley lost consciousness. What is notable, however, is that Wilkins, who admitted to police that he had a habit of gazing out of the grid of glass windows that lined the restaurant's front doors while daydreaming, claimed that at no point did he see anyone in the parking lot of Pike's Landing who matched the description of the shadowy figure that Hanley supplied. None of the other patrons present at Pike's Landing at the time of the attack recall seeing a towering, slender man either.

So what is known about Hanley's loss of consciousness is what follows: Hanley went to a restaurant near the Fairbanks airport, ate a steak dinner, engaged in a bristly conversation with an air traffic controller, left the restaurant and lingered in its parking lot for a while, and was then struck in the back of the head and lost consciousness. To many in the criminal investigation community, and probably to some laymen too, this sounds like a relatively typical story of assault. A man was struck in the back of the head, and passed out. That's that. But what follows in Hanley's account of events, and the curious fact that Hanley was not checked into the Fairbanks Memorial Hospital, which sits at the other end of Airport Way, approximately three and a half miles from Pike's Landing, but was instead admitted to the Alaska Native Medical Center, which is in Anchorage, around three hundred fifty nine miles from Fairbanks, is what renders it an appropriate piece of news for the *Toronto Star* to report. Because although it took Mr. Hanley nine hours to regain consciousness fully after he was discovered on the edge of Far North Bicentennial Park at 6:46am on the morning of October 6th by a paperboy riding his bike on a dirt road adjacent to the park, Hanley himself claims he clearly remembers being awake for two events that occurred between when he first lost consciousness and when he regained consciousness. The first of these involves a mountain, and Hanley's seeing a face, just a face, belonging to a

younger man than he, streak across the snowy side of that same mountain. The second of these events proved more interesting to investigators. Hanley recalled to Anchorage officers that, at some time in the dead of night, he found himself in the passenger seat of a two-door sedan with aquamarine velour upholstery. The night was so dark that nothing could be seen from inside the car, save for the twenty-something-foot-portions of road illuminated by the headlight beams and the North Star. According to Hanley, an African-American man in at most his mid-twenties who wore a Los Angeles Angels cap sat at the sedan's front wheel, which bore a Dodge logo. Hanley attempted to scream at the driver, but couldn't manage to speak. The driver eventually noticed that Hanley was awake, and told him they were driving along Route 2, that they were just on the edge of the Klondike town limits, and that Hanley should attempt to remain awake, as, if he slipped back into unconsciousness, it would be much more difficult for him to wake up again. Hanley recalls faintly hearing Juanita Hill's rendition of *Bali Hai*, from the Rogers and Hammerstein musical *South Pacific*, playing on the car's radio. Hanley, according to police, knew the musical number well, as he and his wife had seen *South Pacific* two weeks after it opened on Broadway in 1949, a time when he worked in New York as a court clerk, and that the two had marveled at the musical, and at Hill's rendition of *Bali Hai* particularly. At the song's final refrain, Hanley once again lost consciousness; he reported to remember nothing else of how he arrived in Southern Alaska. Police initially treated these accounts Hanley provided as being nothing more than some sort of delusion, likely some after effect of his head trauma; however, the police opinion on Hanley's memory changed after a kindergarten teacher who lived near the Alaska Native Medical Center discovered a silver 1962 Dodge Dart with Oklahoma plates and an aquamarine-tinted-velour-upholstered interior in the parking lot of the school at which she taught.

After making a few calls, the Anchorage detectives initially tasked with the Hanley case ascertained that the same Dodge Dart had been seen at a filling station just outside of Gold Forks, one of the many towns connected by Route 2, one of the longer highways in the *Canadian Yukon*. Klondyke is in Canada. Gold Forks is in Canada. Route 2 runs through Canada before becoming the *American* Route 9. This led police to suspect that Hanley was not simply assaulted, but was also kidnapped, and that his likely being taken through Canada thereby rendered his case an ‘international affair.’

These are the details shared in Wilson’s *Toronto Star* article, which bears the headline “US Judge Goes Great White North against his Will”. Wilson draws no greater conclusions in his accounting for the details of Hanley’s case beyond those already uncovered by US investigators. No real speculations appear in the article, either, as to why Hanley was attacked in Fairbanks, near the airport, taken two hundred fifty miles Northeast, into Canadian territory, and then driven another five hundred miles Southwest, and then deposited at a tribal medical center. No explanation is given as to how Hanley made this entire seven hundred mile journey in just over seven hours, nor is any proposal made to account for the identity of the driver of the 1962 Dodge Dart. In his two page article, Wilson does venture that, due to the bureaucratic nature of an international kidnapping investigation, due to the dearth of reliable and consistent information as to the crime committed, and due to the absence of either a clear suspect or any real motive, it was unlikely any resolution would ever be found to Hanley’s case, and therefore the assailant would remain unknown. Wilson closes his article by mentioning that, after a week of searching, the assault weapon was finally uncovered on the side of one of Fairbanks’ six tarmacs, and that the brick found there bore streaks of blood that matched with Hanley’s. And the final sentence of Wilson’s

article mentions that the brick was made from sand limestone at a plant owned by Hanley Brick, Inc., in Reading, PA.

Then, in the August 18th, 1893 edition of the *Reading Eagle*, there appears also the story of one James Francis Hanley, a silver prospector and aspiring entrepreneur based in Texas, and the accusations leveled against him by Pennsylvania homicide inspectors and local law enforcement for the murder of his brother, one William Lee Hanley, Sr.. James Francis' biography, his actions, and the nature of the case soon to be brought against him in higher Pennsylvania court are detailed in a cluster of five articles contained within the front three pages of the August 18th issue of the *Reading Eagle*. The first of these articles speaks to the process by which the Hanley Brick Company, Reading's primary employer, would be making adjustments to its line of command, as William Lee Hanley, Sr. had acted as second-in-charge to his father, Winston Hanley, who had founded the brick company, and who acted as its chairman. With his favorite son and most trusted confidante now dead, Winston Hanley now found himself in the unfortunate position of having to make his nephew, Shep Hanley, 2nd-in-command and heir-apparent to control of Hanley Brick, as well as to the controlling stake of the Hanley family fortune. Shep was Winston's middle brother's son, and the article makes quite the point of how Shep grew up in Philadelphia, with little to do with the Reading Hanley's other than a few visits some 20 years earlier when Winston Hanley was a much younger man and Shep—and James Francis and William Lee, for that matter—were only children, and that Shep was being chosen in the succession line as the next runner-up purely out of necessity. The article speculates that Winston Hanley knew little about his nephew, other than that the young man—only 26—had a PhD from the University of Pennsylvania in Philology, and that he was unmarried, seemingly by choice.

As per this first article in the *Eagle*, Winston Hanley's younger son, William Lee, Sr.—while he'd been alive—had been an indispensable resource to his father, advising on the matters pertinent to the Hanley Brick Company's operation in a manner that was responsible, fiscally sensible, and sensitive to the needs of the plant's employees, and which guaranteed that the general ethos of the Hanley Plant fell most inline with the values of the Hanley family itself. Winston Hanley founded the Hanley Brick Company by himself, building it up to such a scale and such a measure of efficiency that Hanley Brick's flagship factory in Reading became the staple plant for all of New England and the Mid-Atlantic's brick needs (and bringing Reading to be one of the industrial cornerstones of the East Coast in the process); his industrious spirit and his sensitivity to how industry could allow for self-empowerment per his own experience informed completely and holistically how he conducted himself and how he conducted his business. But Winston Hanley was now 71—he'd married somewhat late—and, though he was still ever industrious and ever commanding, he was bound, inevitably, to step down from behind the mast of his brick empire; and Shep Hanley, from the perspective of this first article's author, a Mr. Reinhold Wedekind, did not share his uncle's gumption, likely did not share as much in essence with his uncle, in terms of his resolve and his integrity, as William Lee Hanley, Sr. evidently had.

The first article of the cluster closes with an aside by Wedekind to the reader about a different, long-running question of shared characteristics between Winston Hanley and his first child, one answered, Wedekind claims, by William Lee Hanley's murder: James Francis Hanley, in killing his brother (which, at this point, nobody, not even James Francis Hanley himself, disputed), confirmed unequivocally that he shared almost nothing in spirit with his father, at least as far as character goes. The second article in the cluster takes up almost directly on this question of character, attempting to parse apart through an abridged

presentation of James Francis Hanley's life indications as to the kind of man James Francis Hanley was, and how such a man could come to cave in his brother's skull with a brick manufactured by his own family's company. James Francis was the oldest of Winston Hanley's children, but Reading residents knew well that Winston Hanley showed only a meager degree of fondness towards his first son. James Francis Hanley showed promise in terms of ambition from an early age, but had little in the way of resolve, something that became plain to many at Hanley Brick when Winston tasked him in the summer of 1882 (when James Francis turned 16) with overseeing the operation of the factory's brick kiln. Under James Francis's watch, the facility suffered a significant drop in efficiency, sustained a series of serious mechanical difficulties which set back the entire factory production line, and, towards the end of August, fell victim to a fire that began within its furnace, but which, following a valve within the furnace closing at the wrong time, leaked out of the oven, eventually consuming the kiln and its housing, and, finally, the whole baking wing of the Hanley plant. Following the gaff, Winston Hanley sent James Francis to a newly-founded military academy in Cornwall-on-Hudson, Orange County, NY, hoping that the environment would recalibrate James Francis' personal and ethical constitution, so that he could fall more in line with the image Winston Hanley hoped his family would present both to the broader Reading community and to other esteemed pioneers of East Coast industry with whom the Hanley patriarch was known sometimes to hold court.

William Lee, Sr., in James Francis Hanley's absence, was always kept close to Winston Hanley, privately tutored in the Hanley estate by a retired professor of letters from Rutgers College during the early parts of a day, always at his father's side in the factory from the afternoon on into the late evening. Winston Hanley kept up this kind of dynamic with William Lee, Sr. until he felt the boy was old enough to begin work in the factory, at which

point he put the younger of his children up with a position in the brick kiln, an event which it was clear to his employees gave him great pleasure. It was no secret to Reading residents that Winston Hanley adored Wm Lee, Sr. and that he kept deciding to extend his older son's schooling and training upstate. James Francis Hanley, after finally completing his secondary schooling (he remained in the academy for an extra year past when he was initially expected to complete his course of study), was permitted to return home once again. But at 19 and finally decompressing from the stifling atmosphere of the military academy, James Francis Hanley had little other than distrust for his family, and an exuberant curiosity about the world outside of Reading, away from Pennsylvania and New York State and the East Coast altogether. And, following an especially blustery discourse between his father and him over an impromptu homecoming dinner at the Ugly Oyster, which ended with the restaurant having to be closed due to damages caused to the carpet in the dining hall of the establishment by a plate of ham overturned during the meal, James Francis Hanley departed from Reading, setting out for silver in Colorado in 1885.

Though he remained in the western territories in some capacity for the better part of a decade, James Francis found little luck in Colorado, this biography article notes. After some eight years' time (and two Fridays prior to the August 18th issue's publication), James Francis Hanley returned to the Hanley Estate, an arts-and-crafts style mansion that stood at the edge of Mt. Penn Forest and towered over the surrounding town. Though he was initially somewhat cagey about the matter following his arrival in Reading, James Francis revealed to his family that he had been living in Texas since 1890, following his acquisition of a parcel of land close to the border of Oklahoma Territory. The family quickly ascertained that the reason for James Francis' return was a financial one: James Francis hoped to secure a loan from his father to complete excavating work on his land, which an archeologist with

whom James Francis had consulted assured would unearth an array of distinct rare artifacts that would be of particular interest to the archives of the Smithsonian or the rapidly expanding American Museum of Natural History. James Francis assured his father that these deposits had been confirmed on the plot of land he owned by two other archaeologists, and that he planned to sell whatever he found on the property so as to finance his acquisition of another large tract of land much further south, a 600-acre parcel on which James Francis claimed oil regularly seeped up from under the ground and stagnated for weeks at a time above the earth. The terms of the proposal James Francis outlined with his father stipulated that, should Winston Hanley feel so inclined as to supply him with a loan, James Francis would pay it back with a 30% bonus, and that he would be able to repay his father within at most six months of the loan's issuance.

Winston Hanley naturally met his son's proposal with skepticism, due in part to what registered as an outlandish proposed return on investment, and due in part to inclinations Winston Hanley developed during James Francis' absence as to his son's true nature. According to an unidentified individual interviewed for the article who was close with Winston Hanley and who was on the premises on August 6th, the day that the financing proposal was made, James Francis Hanley met Winston's quite palpable skepticism during the meeting with a surprising, even-keeled, mature degree of clarity and understanding, responding to his father's swift dismissal of the proposal with warmth and with candor. The meeting between the Hanley Patriarch and his eldest son ended with James Francis saying that he understood his presence in the Hanley household likely caused some ruffling and discomfort between the family members, and that he, therefore, didn't intend to take up more of the family's time than necessary with an overlong visit. James Francis agreed to remain for two more nights, until August 8th, at which point he would depart via train for

Chicago, where he knew an acquaintance who ran a block of slaughterhouses with whom he planned to take a meeting. From there, he planned to make his way back down towards Lubbock.

The second article, which, though it presents little of James Francis Hanley's life, does seem to present it accurately, at least in terms of those things between him and his father and his father's image of himself in the world which influenced most how James Francis Hanley did lead his own life—a life that, because of his actions, was now all but likely to end soon—closes on a note about how James Francis Hanley conducted himself privately. According to what word of the eldest Hanley son did manage to filter its way across the broad Western swathes of the country back to quiet and woody Reading, James Francis enjoyed liquor. More accurately, James Francis had taken up an erratic relationship with absinth. How his relationship with the turquoise-tinted alcohol began nobody at the *Reading Eagle* quite knew, but the second article, written by one Wendell Murkman, notes that he likely consumed it with abandon, as indicated by an intake record from July, 1892, obtained by the *Eagle* from a Chicago hospital, which listed Hanley as having visited the facility in search of treatment for “visions—ether-induced.”

And then there is the third article, which gets to the night of August 6th, the meat of the incident at hand. According to one of the grounds workers at the Hanley estate, and corroborated by the unnamed Hanley employee, on that Sunday evening, after Winston Hanley denied James Francis Hanley's request for a loan, William Lee Hanley invited James Francis to dinner at A. Albright's by the Schuylkill, and James Francis agreed to the invitation. What was discussed during the dinner, according to the article, is unclear, and whether the content of the two Hanley men's conversation might be pertinent to the murder case against James Francis was not immediately evident. No real guess is given as to what

prompted the invitation made by William Lee, Sr., even though many close to the matter noted that William Lee, Sr. had especially little to do with his brother, even by the Hanley family standards, and that the two in many ways barely knew each other. And though factual accuracy is clearly not the tantamount concern of the article's writers, the actual presentation of the events that occurred on the evening of August 6th—between the end of dinner with William Lee, Sr. and James Francis Hanley and the discovery of William Lee, Sr.'s body much later into the night in a storage shed adjacent to the Hanley plant's brick kiln—is surprisingly tentative in its tone.

What is written in the article is as follows: William Lee, Sr. may have returned home following the dinner with his brother, as his journal and personal schedule both indicated he planned to do, and may have spent the remainder of the night, before falling asleep, with his expecting wife Mildred, whose physician initially anticipated her going into labor on August 3rd, and who was now overdue. He may have spent the remainder of his evening caring for her, helping her into bed and then going to sleep with her near 10:30, as he did almost every night without fail. He may have been woken by the call made to his home's telephone by one of the night foremen at the Hanley Plant, about how the guard heard the loud clangs of the kiln's chimney's flu opening, and how he could smell smoke from the ground floor of the factory building. William Lee, Sr., may then have returned to the Hanley Company, and—for some reason, without the assistance of the night foreman—may have looked around the factory's grounds himself. Upon reaching the brick kiln, if this scenario was the correct one, William Lee, Sr. likely encountered James Francis in some state of intoxication, and, following some sort of dispute, likely about the business proposal made to Winston Hanley, became embroiled in a heated disagreement, one that most certainly turned physical. At some point in this fight, then, James Francis—presumably in a state of panic, unthinking

and visceral—struck Wm. Lee, Sr. in the head with a sand lime brick, thereby rendering Wm. Lee, Sr. unconscious, likely concussed, and that William Lee, Sr. then expired.

This, at least, is the editorial take by the *Reading Eagle* of William Lee Hanley, Sr.'s murder, and the one it is suggested at the close of the third article favored by prosecutors in the case being brought against James Francis Hanley. And though other interpretations abounded among Reading residents as to the confirmed events and speculated occurrences that brought about William Lee Hanley, Sr.'s murder (something which the *Reading Eagle* itself makes note of towards the third article's close), only two possible accounts of events actually appear in the August 18th issue: the editorial account, and the description of the night in question supplied by James Francis Hanley at the time of his arraignment, where he entered into court the quite unusual plea of temporarily diminished capacity, which can be read as the same as temporary insanity.

According to Alan Smithee, who was present at the arraignment and authored the fourth article in the cluster (stating that the account provided maintains fidelity to Hanley's own words), James Francis Hanley claimed that his dinner with his brother on the evening of the 6th was more than cordial, and that their conversation over their dinner in no way factored into James Francis Hanley's ending his brother's life some eight hours later. In fact, James Francis Hanley asserted that he made no conscious decision to kill his brother at all, and claimed the nature of the killing—that he, with one of his family's sand-lime bricks in hand, struck in the head and killed his younger brother—belied how the death was in many ways an accidental one.

Per his own voluntary testimony on the morning of his arraignment, as it appears in the fourth article: James Francis Hanley returned promptly to his family's estate following his dinner with Wm. Lee Hanley, Sr. James Francis quickly retired, fully sober, to the guest

quarters, as the combination of the business discussions with his father and the dinner conversation with his brother had left him exhausted, and he hoped to have the energy to take advantage of the remainder of his short stay in Reading, as he was uncertain of when he would return to his hometown again. After drifting into sleep, Hanley claimed that he experienced a vision, one so rich in its vividness that it was indiscernible in the moment from the real, though some of its qualities were no doubt distorted.

James Francis provided little in the way of description of its particular details, but he qualified that the vision concerned his father, and that its beginning bore a resemblance in its vibrancy to a childhood memory. James Francis claimed that, after an especially discordant portion of the vision, he awoke, and that in the moments between the vision ending and the room around him returning to his waking vision, a voice, in a whisper, told him that he must go to the brick kiln, that there he would be granted an opportunity to rectify the wrongs of his life, and that he would know which course of action to take so as to move forward with what he hoped for in his future. The fourth article of the cluster uses the same esoteric and vague language as that found in the court transcript of Hanley's own testimony, and the fact that Hanley does not strain to make his recollection of the night of August 6th concrete or fully cohesive makes it register as being truthful, and not fabricated out of convenience or necessity to avoid facing a murder sentence. Smithee's article even notes that Hanley's voice cracked in the courtroom while he wrapped up his relaying what compelled him to bring himself out of bed and to walk, barefoot and in only a nightshirt, from the Hanley Estate, through the woods around Mt. Penn, to the family's brick factory.

James Francis recalled that, upon his arrival at the Hanley Brick Factory on the night of the 6th, he felt the impulse to go and light a fire within the brick kiln's oven, in part since it was cold within the factory wing, and in part because he could not find a way to switch on

any of the lights for the main building, and could barely make out anything in the windowless wing of the factory, and that the darkness frightened him. So he went and lit a fire in the oven of the brick kiln (at which point the night foreman likely noticed the smoke and phoned William Lee Hanley, Sr. on his home line), proceeding to sit in an iron stool, bolted into the floor and fixed beside the brick kiln, and waited for whatever it was he was supposed to do to become evident. James Francis Hanley notes that, after some time staring at the soot-blackened walls of the brick kiln, he started to see faces emerge into his periphery, almost floating from the walls for a moment and then drifting back into the shadows. James Francis claimed he did not know the people whose faces he saw, but he knew he could recognize them, like he'd seen them in passing once or twice before, maybe in a dream. And, on seeing these images, he wondered whether he might still be asleep.

As his uncertainty about whether he could trust what he saw grew, since the faces continued lapping into view and then drifting away, James Francis Hanley took in his hand a loose brick jutting out from the side of the kiln, gripping it and thumbing its corner for comfort. After around 10 minutes or so of his sitting upright in the steel chair in the brick kiln, James Francis felt convinced that he was not in the brick kiln at all, or in the Hanley factory for that matter, but was actually still at home, asleep in the horsehair mattress in the Hanley Estate's guest room.

But then James Francis Hanley heard the sputtering of an engine coming down the long road to the brick factory. As he remembered it, James Francis then got up from the stool, went and cracked open the door to the brick kiln, and then returned to his seat, so that he could see out onto the road without the driver of the arriving vehicle being able to see into the brick wing. He watched as a figure exited the car, tall and rail-thin in frame, its body blending together with their shadow in the darkness. As the figure grew closer to the large

French doors of the facility and the body became more apparent, James Francis registered a similarity between its shape and his father's (and the articles contained in the August 18th *Reading Eagle* note a number of times that William Lee Hanley, Sr. and Winston Hanley quite closely resembled one another, both tall and wiry, unlike James Francis, who, though he still stood at quite an imposing height, stood square, with a barrel chest).

Once the figure arrived at the threshold of the brick kiln's entrance, James Francis Hanley's panic became uncontrollable, and so he let out a brief call, what he said he couldn't quite remember—something to the tune of “who goes there”—to which the figure lurched forward, and its face became briefly visible. James Francis Hanley claims that, from the light emitted by the brick kiln's fire, he thought he could make out the figure's face as being his father's, as he could make out the same faded blue glint in the shadowy man's eyes as he often saw in his father's eyes, and that he could make out the arch of his father's nose and the same square, sharp, protruding cheekbones. James Francis Hanley said, during his testimony, that he saw his father's face for that instant, although it looked younger, like it had during James Francis' childhood. It dawned on James Francis Hanley then that his father had come to hurt him somehow—kill him maybe—for what he didn't know. But given his earlier vision (which he still worried might be ongoing), and given the shadowed man's continued approach, James Francis Hanley assumed that he might be trapped in that fateful moment he'd foreseen. James Francis was terrified too, fearing for his life and worrying that something supernatural might be acting against him (and the second article in the cluster notes that in addition to the Absinth habit James Francis had a propensity for the occult; written correspondences with members of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn about *the Lesser Key of Solomon* were found in luggage retrieved by Pennsylvania inspectors from the Hanley Estate following James Francis' apprehension by the authorities). James

Francis Hanley even noted in his testimony that this particular panic influenced his actions that evening far more than his inclination that what happened around him there in the brick kiln was predestined.

And so, when the figure quickened its pace, James Francis Hanley, out of impulse, lunged forward off of the iron stool, pulling loose the brick he'd been clutching in his right hand in the process, and struck in front of him with all of the force he could muster. Following a connecting blow, the figure crumpled to the ground, and James Francis Hanley finally realized that what he'd seen as his father's face was in fact his brother's.

The presentation Smithee gives of James Francis Hanley's testimony ends on this telling but rather abrupt note. Nothing is made of the fact that William Lee Hanley, Sr.'s body was moved from the brick kiln to the shed adjacent to it; nothing is made of how James Francis Hanley fled the scene of the crime, evading the night foreman's notice and leaving behind his nightshirt in the process; no acknowledgement is paid to the fact that James Francis Hanley surrendered himself to authorities on the morning of August 8th, naked and distraught; no speculation is provided as to why James Francis waited a day to turn himself over to the Reading Police, or as to where he went and what he did in the some two-dozen hours between when he killed William Lee Hanley, Sr. and when he turned himself over to the police. Smithee also chooses to provide little in the way of investigation into the validity of James Francis Hanley's account of the night on which he stuck his brother in the head and ended his life. Instead, the article ends simply with a brief acknowledgement that the murder trial against Hanley was to commence on September 3rd, 1893.

A fifth article—only a paragraph long—closes out the series pertaining to the Hanley murder. Written by a John Blunt, it gives a brief description of the case brought against New

York senator Daniel Sickles in 1859, where the temporary insanity defense proved effective, effectively unburdening Sickles of any culpability; it also presents the tactical deployment of the temporary insanity defense by Charles Guiteau, who claimed that the law made him insane, which led him to assassinate President James Garfield, a suggestion that was balked at during his trial, and which still led him to the gallows in the end. Given that these two cases alone featured uses of the temporary insanity defense relevant to Hanley's trial, Blunt makes little effort to tip the scales in one direction or another in relation to Hanley's guilt. Blunt asserts that what would prove critical to Hanley's defense were an evaluation from an alienist, as well as positive verification that James Francis had not imbibed Absinth on the evening he killed his brother, as that detail would have radical implications as to whether the visions James Francis experienced were a result of a slip into insanity or a drift into delirium. Blunt closes out the whole series on the Hanley Affair by mentioning that Reading Police and Pennsylvania State Agents failed to retrieve the sand-lime at the scene of the crime, and that its location remained unknown.

And finally, in the June 19th, 1985 issue of the *New York Post*, there is the story of one James Francis Hanley, a former journeyman late night radio DJ and current comic book shop proprietor from Staten Island, and the events that led to the opening of his second Jim Hanley's Universe storefront at 4 W 33rd Street, (between Fifth Avenue and Broadway, on the Southern side of the street). Beneath the cover article's headline, which reads, in typical *Post* fashion, "In Staten Island, Dreams Come True in the Strangest Ways," is a full-page photo of Jim Hanley standing in front of the new Jim Hanley's Universe, wearing a Green Lantern T-Shirt, a white fedora, and a pair of black frame prescription sunglasses (like Roy Orbison used to wear) over what look to be gauze bandages enshrouding his left eye, cutting

a white paper ribbon embossed with the insignias of the many heroes of the Justice Society of America. In the picture, New York Mayor Ed Koch, smiling with closed lips, stands to Jim Hanley's right; Mark Heller, Hanley's attorney, stands to Jim Hanley's left, staring at the novelty oversized scissors in Hanley's hands, his face betraying some unusual cocktail of excitement and concern. The article, written by a Ms. Barbara Sciaruto, opens with an expression of managed enthusiasm from Mayor Koch:

“Sometimes you have to see the titans of this city face a blow for the little guys to get a shot ahead. I believe that's what's happened to Mr. Hanley here. I believe that we had to see one of those goliaths of our city, one of our icons suffer a little blow, for this man to get ahead. And while it's not what many might expect me to say, given my position, I'm happy this has happened. I'm happy the little guy's gotten a foot forward here.”

Mr. Hanley felt 'getting a foot forward' was putting it especially mildly in his case (he said as much in an interview for a later article for the *New York Daily News*). What befell him, he felt, was too strange, and the monetary reward he received in his lawsuit too great to fit Koch's description. According to practically all of Hanley's close friends and relatives interviewed for Sciaruto's article, from his little league days onwards, Jim Hanley always talked about how he dreamt, one day, of opening a comic book shop across from the Empire State building. Jim Hanley felt that, opening that store across from such a location—a store that traded solely in what he saw as the most 'democratic' form of American literature—would raise comic books to a new level of visibility, potentially changing the appraisal of the narrative form altogether.

This was a lofty ambition, Jim Hanley knew—as did his family, frustratingly so, even, with his sister allegedly referring to it with language that is not suitable for publication in a nationally circulated newspaper, according to an aside by Sciaruto. And it was one that

nobody expected, realistically, for Jim Hanley to realize. When Jim Hanley described his dream store to someone, he'd always say it would be a place where people from all walks of life—"lawyers, taxi drivers, garbage men, police officers, and elementary and middle school age kids, most important demographic of all"—could find a new issue for any comic series currently in circulation. And Jim Hanley always insisted that new comics would be bagged and boarded before sale, not just crammed into the brackets of a newspaper carousel in the corner of the store. And the store would make sure to sell underground comix and compendiums of newspaper funnies right alongside the more spandex series. And the store would have back issues of all series—not just the Marvel and DC fare—available for perusal by customers, so that anybody could pick up absolutely any title and read it from the beginning.

Hanley even hoped to create a distribution subsidiary of his "soon-to-flourish" business, which, through his shrew management, would challenge Diamond Comics Distributions' decades-long stranglehold on the comic book industry, offering publishing opportunities and discounts to consumers in the process. Jim Hanley opened his first shop in Staten Island (on New Dorp Lane, between Edison Street and Clawson Street), hoping it would become the pipeline to an empire. But while Jim Hanley knew comics and the industry around comics like they were second nature, the first Jim Hanley's Universe struggled.

Jim Hanley's Universe on New Dorp Lane stood just down the street from where Jim Hanley had grown from adolescence into manhood. Jim Hanley liked the storefront when he first looked at it with a realtor precisely because of that feature. And while the store location fell just nearby the intersection with Hylan Boulevard, New Dorp Lane, only twenty blocks long and running largely through a residential area, stunted the store's growth. Sure,

police officers frequented the place, as did paramedics and students from New Dorp High and Staten Island Technical, but the inventory he was able to keep at the shop was slim, given only one store room and no other storage spaces under Hanley's possession. And cultivating a reliable readership base proved difficult to Hanley too. Only a homicide detective for the 34th precinct in Washington Heights and Ernie and Bernie Papadopolous, teenage twins in Bay Terrace, near Great Kills Park, read comics fanatically.

Hanley tried to no avail to find workarounds; Even after offering up the store's break room as an after hours venue for Dungeons and Dragons games on Friday nights (which quickly morphed into Jim Hanley's Universe being the setting for the Union Square riot squad's low-stakes Poker games), and two celebrations of Free Comic Book Day, an informal, in-store holiday at the start of May Hanley conjured up, where every person who entered the shop was permitted to leave with a free issue, Hanley still could not manage to grow his client base. Little of this actually appears in the *Post* article, as Sciaruto dedicates only a sliver of her article to the story of Hanley's first comic shop, writing about it in a quite homespun, 'salt-of-the-earth' tone. And Sciaruto doesn't even mention that Hanley was three months behind on his rent for the New Dorp storefront, and owed close to \$46,000 in credit card debt (he'd been buying books from Diamond using a Discover Card he'd applied for with a doctored, self-produced credit report since April of 1984) at the time that the incident at the Empire State Building occurred at the start of 1985 that had so changed his luck.

Sciaruto's *Post* article chooses instead to focus on the role the Empire State Building played in Hanley's acquisition of the 33rd Street storefront and his newfound financial success. And this is no surprise to the reader, since the real shock of Jim Hanley's story, and the portion of it that made it such an unusual matter of business was how the Empire State

Building functioned as the lightning rod for Jim Hanley's dreams being realized. This fixture of Jim Hanley's story was the strangest—in fact, it was what made the matter not only newsworthy, but news fit for the front page of the *New York Post*. The brief version of the story, as Sciaruto puts it: on January 1st, 1985, at 11:33am, during the initiating flurry of a blizzard that bombarded New York for six days of the first week of 1985, a sand-lime brick fell from the 82nd floor of the Empire State building, whirling through the snowy air and building momentum, until, just a few yards from the concrete, a passerby interrupted its trajectory. And Jim Hanley, stepping under the building just as the brick fell, was pierced in the head by something sharp, cutting through his white fedora before coming to rest in the front of his skull.

On that first day of 1985, Jim Hanley entered Manhattan briefly by a town car that left him off at 32nd and Park Avenue, and was en route to Penn Station, to catch a train to Poughkeepsie, where he had arranged to have a private viewing of a rather extensive collection of Golden Age issues being auctioned off in an estate sale for a Marcus Carnegie, when he passed under the Empire State Building. His friend Bobby Boskins, a chauffeur, agreed during a New Years party both men attended to drive Jim Hanley into midtown on New Years Day, so that Hanley might avoid any potential holiday-related roadway congestion. Jim Hanley claimed after the fact that, while the car passed through Jersey City and into Newport, and Manhattan's skyline came into sight, he suddenly felt something like an electrical discharge shoot through his body, like he was being struck by lightning, or like he was about to win the lottery; Hanley, not quite a superstitious man, but a somewhat mystical person in his inclinations, had taken the sensation as an indication that he would have good luck at the auction house upstate. (Jim Hanley, whose favorite primary superhero characters, he notes after a somewhat inane prodding by Sciaruto quite a ways into her *Post*

article, “have to be Dr. Strange, and the Martian Manhunter, the Bronze Age version, even more so. I like those kinds of cats because they’re willing to accept that explanations aren’t always obvious, and that, for a hero to *really* do good, he has to be willing to acknowledge the shortcomings of his world and himself, and he has to be able to do the dirty stuff behind the scenes, in the shadows. Wesley Dodd’s another one too that’s got a pass from me. He’s by far my favorite figure in the whole DC Enterprise. He formed the JSA, and that’s why the JSA is my team, absolutely,” did have a bit of a predisposition for appreciating the supernatural). Once they were in the city, Jim Hanley asked Bobby Boskins to drop him by the corner of Park Avenue and 29th street, so he could limber up his legs before the train ride.

While he walked up Park Avenue, being sure to turn, so that he could pass into Korea Town and walk by the storefront on 33rd he’d always eyed as ideal, Hanley claimed the sensation began again, growing in intensity as he turned on 33rd and began to approach Fifth Avenue. As he grew closer to the southeast corner of 33rd and Fifth, and as the Empire State Building grew larger in his periphery, eventually looming over the other buildings near to him, dwarfing the people and dulling the pastel hues of the neon signs in the display windows of the tofu houses, pachinko parlors, and garment warehouses on the street, imposing itself more and more starkly against the grey flurry of snow starting to fall, Jim Hanley claimed the sensation of the discharge started revealing a direction to itself. To Hanley it felt like some rippling current entered his body from his fingertips and the roof of his head, and emanated from these points inwards, towards the space just between his ribs and his collarbone (In a quote that appeared in a *Daily News* article published two days after the *Post* piece, Hanley described the sensation as being “like waves, just pulling back, in and out, over me—like I was being swallowed up by the water or something”).

When he arrived at the crosswalk at 33rd and 5th, the discharge sensation began to centralize, concentrating itself within Hanley's upper chest and pulsating in an undulating rhythm. When he arrived on the other side of the street, the pulsing grew more and more rapid, and with its frequency clicking on faster and faster, it shot from being a secondary concern for Hanley, something occurring in his physical periphery that—though he thought about it in tandem with those other concerns of his for the day (the train he had to catch, the journey up to Poughkeepsie, the appointment he'd made for 5:30 at the auction house, which, even after making good time into the city, he still had some worry he may miss, if the snow grew denser during the train ride and caused delays)—left only a little watermark on his other many points of consideration, to being the chief element on which his mind could focus, overtaking everything else, becoming the only thing about which he could think, the only thing, besides the now massive image of the Empire State Building in his immediate vision and the vast shadow it cast over the southern side of 33rd Street and over the storefront he hoped to pass and wanted to rent so badly someday, that registered to him at all on any level, emotional, sensory, physical, or psychological.

The pulsing grew so frequent, shocking and calming second-by-second in an ever-increasing pace, that, just as he finally became able to make out the signage above the 33rd Street storefront he'd been so mindful to make sure he passed by on his way to Penn Station, which read in faded indigo lettering "Simpson's Central American Bazaar," the thought popped into Jim Hanley's mind that he might be going into cardiac arrest. For what reason Hanley wasn't sure, but when he registered just briefly a large granite sculpture of what looked to be an owl, but with a long tapered head, like a snake, with texturing like scales and ovular, texture-less globes for eyes, and strident legs, bent backwards at the knee like the back limbs of some great jungle cat that imposed itself over the otherwise empty display

window of the storefront on 33rd Street, Jim Hanley felt overcome with a panic, one that he thought made the pulsating quicken even more suddenly, and, without thinking, he rushed across the street, so that he stood next to the Empire State Building, whose shadow now overtook him.

As he cleared the looming building's first side entrance, Jim Hanley felt the pulsating happen so ceaselessly that it felt more like some kind of dormant electrical component secretly hidden within him was now being flicked on and off at an untenable rate. As he grew closer and closer to the second awning, and as his foot jutted out of the shadow of the monolith and out under the light one final time, the pulsing seemed to vanished, happening in such quick intervals and becoming so constant that it couldn't be felt at all, like some kind of background white noise over which the sounds of the street and the sensations of the cold January wind blowing by returned to Jim Hanley. By this point, when he could no longer recognize the sensation as dispersing through him, Jim Hanley stopped, pausing almost as if to adjust to its newfound continuation. Jim Hanley waited, stilled on a cracked segment of sidewalk some eight or nine feet from the second entrance, his body encased in shadow, the black wingtip on his left foot reflecting the little line of light shining onto it, and his white fedora blending with the drifting snow. He stood there for all of 45 seconds, at which point a long, strident shard of glass and a whole burst of fine, slender fragments of sand-limestone rained down on Jim Hanley, the glass shard piercing the top of his white fedora and sinking into the front of his head, causing him to lose his vision momentarily, the slivers of sand-limestone stone shattering against the sidewalk as he collapsed, unconscious.

The lawsuit that Mark Heller filed in New York County Court on January 17th, 1985 against Empire State Building Associates concerned itself explicitly with the brick that fell, and how the building was responsible for the damage it caused to Jim Hanley. Heller made

sure that the sensation Jim Hanley had experienced was not mentioned during the court proceedings. And little is mentioned in Sciaruto's article about the legal proceedings, and even less is said of the extensive findings about the Hanley Brick's fall and what caused it to drop out of one of the windows on the 82nd floor of the building on that New Year's morning. None of the names of those involved in the investigation, conducted by Rod Willis, Head of Security for the building, Francesco Moltisanti, an expert forensic accountant, and Wally Roderick, a particle physicist specializing in solid state theory, appear anywhere in any article written about Jim Hanley's new comic shop. But the revelations that came to light following a comprehensive joint investigation into what exactly transpired on the 82nd story and in the airspace outside the Empire State Building in the minutes before Jim Hanley sustained what, by all accounts, should have been a lethal head wound, offer the most insight into what caused such an unusual occurrence.

Rod Willis, who took up the Hanley matter first, quickly realized that the brick must have fallen from a floor towards the building's upper spire, as the only windows that could be opened in the building appeared on the floors in the first 20 stories and between the 80th and 86th floors. After some brief consultation with other passersby, and a somewhat heated conversation with one of the building's janitors, Willis ascertained that only two windows had been open on the morning of the 1st, one in a conference room on the 6th floor used for a company holiday party, and another towards the building's spire. Willis' first major revelation came when the window out of which the Hanley Brick fell was identified by a supervisor for the 70th-86th floors as being one among the block of offices for Chitty Co., a bulk-buy travel agency, according to the building's logs and a help ad posted regularly in the *Confidentials* section of the *New York Times*. The window belonged to the office of a one Mr. John Blund, the primary Executive for the outfit. After finally locating a secretary, who

occasionally appeared in the concierge console outside the lobby for Chitty Co., Willis was able to ascertain that Blund had been on vacation at the time of Hanley's accident, and therefore could not have been in any way responsible for his office's window being open, or for the Hanley Brick falling. Following a brief investigation by Willis, it became apparent that Blund—or any other employees of Chitty Co.—save for a rather tall, thin man who only came in the summer, and who typically wore a terry cloth playsuit when he stopped into the Empire State Building—had not appeared in the building in over 3 months, and that the office served primarily as a shipping destination for file packages and oversized deliveries from a research facility in Waltham, MA.

Willis then began perusing the tenant agreements in the Empire State archives, housed in a crypt-like vault on the 3rd floor of the building, to verify under what name Chitty Co. had been leased. He found that the lease Chitty Co. held was not for just a segment of the 82nd floor, but for the entire floor, even though that section of the Empire State Building was also home to a suite of offices and a conference room for William Morris Endeavors, and a small P.R. outlet for Philip Morris International. The lease agreement for the floor featured a curious cosigner, a Manticore Enterprises, and the lease agreement listed a Philip Morris and an Alan Smithee as the representatives who had signed on behalf of the companies. Willis contacted the Building's management to inquire about the Chitty Co. lease agreement, and to gain some clarity to Manticore Enterprises, and why they operated out of an office registered as a travel agency. A Vice Director for operations of the building reached out to Willis promptly, telling him to drop the line of inquiry, since it wasn't relevant to the accident, and it had no real relevance to Willis' responsibilities at the building. And, since Willis conducted his work around Empire State Building Associates' interests, and since he was tasked with trying to alleviate the building of any liability in the Hanley case, he took the

command to heart. At the Vice Director's behest, Willis' investigation turned to exploring a break-in to the building that his team had thwarted on the evening of December 31st, 1984, by an unidentified individual suspected of attempting to plaster graffiti to the veranda of and the faces of the floors directly below the building's viewing station.

And while their interrogations of the matter at hand differed quite a bit in trajectory, Francesco Moltisanti, who was retained by Heller's law firm to investigate the Building's finances so it could be ascertained whether the Empire State Building may have cut any corners in its maintenance and operation practices and to determine whether some other entity might be liable as well, picked up on the Manticore Enterprises matter that Willis had unmasked. Following an extensive perusal of the Building's financial documentation, a book of account information he acquired through the assistance of a subpoena issued by New York State Higher Court, and packets of tax returns for the building dating back to 1975, Moltisanti noticed that payments, usually in million-dollar sums, from the Department of Defense, arrived on a bimonthly basis, for what was listed on invoices to the federal agency as being 'housing costs-82.' Moltisanti, who was privy to at least some of Willis' collected notes—although he was not aware of the odd nature of the Chitty Co. lease, or the fact that the offices on the 82nd store were more or less empty—then sent in a request for the leasing agreements for the floor to the Empire State Building, which went unreturned. Moltisanti knew a notary public who worked in the Empire State Building and certified most of the leasing agreements, and managed, through a kind of parlay of debt-for-information (the notary was a notorious mainstay at the New Rochelle Horse Tracks, and didn't have the best luck at picking winners), to get his hands on a carbon copy of the Manticore Enterprises lease agreement.

After noticing the Philip Morris name, Moltisanti reached out to a friend of his, a lawyer in Delaware who mostly handled incorporations, to see if Manticore Enterprises—or Morris, for that matter—had any affiliation with other companies, chiefly Chitty Co. It turned out that the friend actually composed and filed the articles of incorporation for Manticore Enterprises personally, and, while he refused to betray too much information about the company, he did mention that, though Philip Morris was listed as the founder, sole filer, and president of Manticore Enterprises, the man never appeared during any of the meetings between the lawyer and the executives for the company, not even those where the incorporation paperwork was prepared. Moltisanti then made a request for the articles of incorporation for both Manticore Enterprises and Chitty Co., to the state of Delaware, and, upon inspecting what was returned to him, he noticed that not only was Philip Morris listed as the founder of Manticore, but Alan Smithee, too, appeared as the founder of Chitty Co. Both companies filed as purported travel agencies, with Chitty Co. offering mass bundles of airline tickets at discounted rates, and Manticore functioning as a private jet commissioning service. Moltisanti immediately noted the coincidence as being suspicious, since he thought it highly unlikely that two different travel agencies, linked together by two founders who had never been seen and who could not be accounted for anywhere else in the documentation for either enterprise, would be doing enough business to be able to afford a lease in the Empire State Building, and that it made no sense, furthermore, for a travel agency even to need such an office address.

Moltisanti then acquired full payroll documents for both enterprises through a bribe to an IRS official, and, after cross-referencing the routing number listed on the checks submitted to the Empire State Building by the Department of Defense with the numbers associated with paying employees for both Manticore and Chitty Co. and realizing that the

account numbers were the same, confirmed for himself that the two companies were some kind of smokescreen for a government operation. Moltisanti then made note of the primary cash installments coming out of the Department of Defense account associated with Manticore, and, through another bribe, this time to the Vault Manager at the First National Bank-Oklahoma, to which the account numbers for the payments were all linked, determined that the primary payments were made to a James Cliffe, an Executive at Raytheon, and to one Jack Parsons, Jr., the Research and Development head at Boeing.

Moltisanti had a contact in the Department of Defense, an old Navy buddy of his who had largely done engine repairs on the *USS Starling* during their time in Korea. The pal, who now held a post at the D.o.D. with a seat on a development committee, was on vacation in Guam at the time that Moltisanti came on to aid in Hanley's case. Moltisanti still managed to reach him on a satellite phone the admiral kept on his person at all times, through which the two had corresponded previously, in relation to a matter that involved Moltisanti combing through scrubbed payouts a battleship commander made to a brothel in the Philippines. Through speaking to the admiral, Moltisanti learned: First, what information Moltisanti uncovered likely wouldn't be permissible in a courtroom; and second, the 82nd floor of the Empire State Building had long been held under different couched project names by the US Government, probably dating back the 1940s, and that the office space had acted as a kind of revolving door for different military development projects (although what function the office space was meant to serve for such projects the admiral refused to relay). After some pressing, Moltisanti got out of his friend that Chitty Co. was a development project of semi-severe importance, a joint venture between physicists and engineers from Boeing, radio experts and a propulsion systems wizard from Raytheon, and two quantum physicists who had long tenures at Bell Labs prior to joining the project.

And, in fact, Chitty Co. wasn't a dummy company name at all, but a by-design unsuspecting and innocuous acronym; what it meant, actually, was Celestial Hyper-speed and Interstellar Terrestrial Teleportation (Yagi-Oriented) Cooperative Operation. The actual nature of the project Moltisanti never managed to glean, beyond his own thinking about the acronym and what kind of equipment the team must have been attempting to produce. His primary roadblock to discerning Chitty Co.'s full aims, Moltisanti realized, had largely to do with his inability actually to imagine what the practical application of a hyper-speed system would be, or how such a discovery could be linked to teleportation—interspace teleportation in particular—since the two breakthroughs seemed like they wouldn't have much in common. To him, it registered as nothing more than science fiction, something unneeded, since travel was fast enough already, and space already visited. And no matter how he tried, he couldn't discern any clear reason as to why the operation needed an office at the Empire State Building. But Moltisanti wasn't a physicist, no matter how good he may have been with numbers, so his investigation hit an impasse. The matter didn't appear relevant to the Hanley head injury, anyway. Moltisanti ended his call to the admiral by asking about whether John Blund ever came up in discussions of Chitty Co. or Manticore Enterprises. The admiral told him he'd never heard the name, and ended the call.

Much of Moltisanti's findings, especially those related to Chitty Co., were kept out of the courtroom, following a petition filed by attorneys representing the US Government in New York Higher Court, and held little bearing on Hanley receiving a quite generous settlement from the building's owners. But their never reaching Jim Hanley—as he was not particularly involved in the legal battle, besides appearing in court and supplying a testimony to his experience on the start of 1985—rendered impossible his fully uncovering at any point the actual nature of how he'd come to suffer the injury he did (to the surprise of almost

everyone who heard about the story, Jim Hanley suffered no permanent damage, not even irreparable brain damage, from the shard slashing through his skull, besides having one of his optic nerves cleanly cut by the brick, leaving his left eye fully functional, but making whatever it did observe utterly incomprehensible to him), and therefore making it so that at no point in time would he fully understand what it meant for his dreams, all his aspirations, to have become realizable through such a truly unusual—seemingly accidental—calamity.

And then there's the rest of Willis' role in getting closer to understanding what happened to Jim Hanley, what pieces might have been at play when the brick did fall. At around 11:36pm on New Year's Eve of 1985, less than a half-hour before the glittering crystal ball swinging above Times Square would descend and ring in the New Year, Willis and his team got word from a janitor polishing floors on the 2nd story of the Empire State Building about a window-cleaning elevator swinging by the westernmost panel of window panes—the ones facing out towards 33rd street—, rising upwards outside the building, which surprised Willis, since he knew no outdoor cleaning or maintenance was scheduled to commence until late April, and since he figured nobody would attempt to operate such a device at night. And then, just before 11:37pm, something crashed through the outer glass of the building and tripped a window-mounted alarm on the 14th floor (although calling it the 14th floor isn't really true to the facts of the matter).

Willis sent two of his night crew down to check on the disturbance, and headed to the middle monitoring room for the building, housed on the building's 50th floor. He arrived to find the security monitor control man asleep in his chair. After a few failed attempts at waking him, Willis took it upon himself to try and switch the middle six monitor displays in the whole closed-circuit viewing rig to the building's stairwell and switch the side monitors on the rightmost point of the rig to display the feeds from the cameras in the elevators. But,

since Willis himself knew nothing about how to operate the joystick controller for the cameras—indeed, he'd been known to declare himself a technophobe at company parties—he found himself unable to view the progress of his two men as they clambered down towards the lower end of the building. While he fiddled with the joystick, Willis received a panicked radio message from one of his men that they were stuck on the 40th floor, since one of the mechanized breach doors (installed in the 1940s in case of attack to the building) had been hardwired shut, refusing to open. Willis, now irate and somewhat panicked, ran to the elevator control room, across the hall from the monitoring room, and disabled the elevator. He then sprinted out, past offices and waiting rooms, to the 50th floor elevator bay, to see at what floor the elevators had stopped. 72 of the building's 73 elevators had all stopped, most near to the base of the building, but to Willis' alarm, one of the building's service elevators, which, unlike all the other elevators in the building, ran on a non-electric pulley system, still climbed steadily towards the building's spire.

Fearing some kind of attack, Willis sprinted to the upper reaches of the building, calling while he jumped stairs to his men some 12 floors behind him to take up the rear, in case they needed to charge the assailant. As he rounded the corner of the 62nd story landing and began making for the 63rd, Willis' left foot collided with a milk crate filled with Krylon canisters, knocking Willis into midair. Willis' face collided with the concrete stairs, falling Krylon canisters ricocheting off the walls of the stairwells, one hitting one of the men lagging behind in the shoulder, others exploding and letting out huge gusts of spray paint as they fell.

Willis brought himself to his feet immediately, bursting through the 63rd floor's landing door and into one of the service hallways, which played host to a Xerox showroom. Willis sprinted, not even bothering to yell back to his men, hoping only to apprehend

whomever it was that had invaded the building. Willis was quite out-of-breath by the time he reached the end of the first hallway, and, since he was asthmatic, and a smoker, doubled down, his head slung near his knees. As he caught his breath, Willis paid mind to what sounds travelled down the halls of the Xerox showroom. Once he'd ascertained that the floor was more or less silent, save for the whir of an industrial fax machine that had been programmed to run constantly and the panting of his men, Willis began pacing the halls of the floor, ordering his men to do the same. Nobody materialized as they scoured the 63rd floor; Winston Peele, one of the heftier security men employed by the Empire State Building, discovered a half-torn stencil, some 27-inches-by-40-inches, with W.O.N.K. carved out of the cardstock, near the women's restroom. After 3 hours of further searching turned up no sign of the intruder, and after an extensive survey of the exterior of the building from the viewing station just below the spire revealed no indication of there ever having been an outdoor elevator affixed to the building that evening, Willis and his crew gave up, assuming the burglar fled, or that the paint cans and the stencil were purely a coincidence, and that the janitor had been playing some sort of cruel New Year's prank on the bunch.

Some six weeks later, at the Vice Chairmen's request, Willis returned to the control room to review all security footage collected on the evening of the 31st and the early morning of the 1st, to see if there might be any sign as to whether that evening's vandal may have remained in the building, making his or her way to the 82nd story. Nothing of the some 36 hours of CCTV footage that Willis saw pointed to that being the case, although, after some take-home research about the W.O.N.K. tag, he was able to learn that, if there had indeed been a break-in, it was likely committed by a graffiti artist from the South Bronx, an individual who'd come up with Taki 187, and who'd spoken in an anonymous interview with

the *New York Post* from 1973 about one day hoping to get his work on the outside of the Empire State Building.

Wally Roderick's contribution to the matter at hand, which, though brief, proves to be the most striking. During a somewhat terse consultation between Roderick and Mark Heller at Roderick's office in Princeton, Roderick outlined his own tentative proposals for how a shard of glass, presumably from the Sand Lime Brick, came to strike Jim Hanley. And this is important, since Hanley sustained his injury from a *shard* collapsing into him, and not the brick as a whole. Roderick kept reiterating during the meeting, that the explanations he could supply were, statistically speaking, highly improbable. Heller eventually pressed Roderick to give a matter-of-fact, comprehensible explanation for how breakage works (Heller, thinking ahead, wished to verify that, should the need arise, Roderick could be of service to Hanley's suit as an expert in court). Roderick, even-handedly, responded with:

“What's most important to note here is that we're dealing with a brittle solid, a porous solid. That rules quite a few things out as causes right off the bat. Now, let's just say for a short hand for whatever happened that, because something acted on the object, because something exerted a force, the object broke apart. And that has to be the case for the object to have broken, so that we can take as something we know. A force acted on the object. Now, if you knew what a physicist knows—like me—if this was your trade—and if we were dealing with a *perfect* solid—your first expectation would be that the solid would break apart in perfect units, just falling apart on a perfectly symmetrical model, as bonds broke.

But we're not dealing with a perfect solid. The things we know to break apart the way I'm describing are metals—samples made in a lab—and certain kinds of glass. You might take that to mean that those are the only two perfect solids. But keep clear: just

because those are the only things we've seen break the way I'm describing doesn't mean they're the only perfect solids; others may exist. But we only have experience with the two. So, first, this didn't break apart perfectly, so it's not a perfect solid. Obviously, a brick can't be a perfect solid. But what's curious here is the glass shard. We'll return to that matter.

So, from here, we should note—and let's be explicit—that the connection between strength of atomic bonds and shattering in a solid is pretty tenuous. Let's say you're a king and you want to build a palace for yourself. Now, you'd want to make your palace out of something strong, resilient to a siege. Now, sure, you could go with your conventional stone or some kind of metal—maybe even brick, since it's a trustworthy material—but I'd bet, if you were really thinking, *really thinking* hard about what kind of solid you'd trust to stand up to real duress, you'd pick diamond, since it's the hardest natural solid anyone knows of, the most pure. We're talking about using the purest diamond available. And you'd be thinking the way most people would think, the way anyone—even some physicists—would think: 'this palace won't break. Diamond is harder than anything else. It's impossible anything could break this palace, or at least unlikely.' But see what happens when someone throws the first stone—the first brick, at that perfect diamond palace. It'll shatter, and it'll shatter because, no matter what its purity may be, no matter how few flaws it may have, somewhere, somewhere deep, deep beneath the surface, leagues down underneath, there's a flaw. Some flaw.

And nobody ever said there had to be a certain number of flaws for a thing to break. That's another one to remember. There's no minimum for flaws when it comes to things breaking. That's why airplanes still go down, and why sometimes submarines sink. It's why we had Three Mile Island. Even what's of the greatest importance to us, what we make from what we know to be most pure, those things may still break. And what we turn to, then, to

see how likely something is to break, is how effectively it transports electrons. Usually, if a solid can facilitate electron transfer, it can conduct energy. Brittle solids do not conduct electrons effectively; ductile solids do, which is why they bend. Brittle solids break. We can assume, therefore, the brick is a brittle solid. Our brick is made from sand. Unrefined sand has impurities; it's even a defining quality of sand that it does. So our brick can break.

This is just what we need to know from the get-go. But now to the matter of cracking! And I know time is of the essence in this, I'm sure you have places to be—as I know I do—so I'll put it quickly. In a brittle solid, the force that impacts upon it spontaneously increases to the atomic level. In a ductile solid, the force that impacts upon it mutes, and instead reverberates across the solid's surface. Now, this is prove-able, it's been proven in a computer simulation. But what's more important is that cracking occurs on a scale-able level, across solids. What this means, is that cracking happens in the same way on the most minute observable level as it does when something like our brick just breaks apart in the air. And the scale-able model, we have good evidence that it holds up, at least on a mathematical level—again, because of computer evaluations—but one issue, and it is an important one, is that what mathematical model we have for cracks doesn't really match together with how things actually crack. And we've tried solving this issue, but it's been an imperfect process to say the least. But as for a crack, it can form on a particle level just the same as it does on the scale we can observe with the naked eye.

And cracking happens in three stages. Three technical phases of how a crack forms. First, birth: you have a sample, and you apply force to the sample. Little slashes within the substance (because it is brittle) slowly transform into rushing cracks—very small. Some wider cracks begin to form, and rush ahead of the narrower ones, beginning to form chasms within the solid and gaining speed as they move; these stout gashes only form where energy

levels in front of them are high; if the energy density of the material in front of them is up to 10x greater than their own, they accelerate. The exact rate of acceleration for the cracks is unknown, but the gashes start at a significant velocity, a good fraction of the speed of sound, and rapidly accelerate within a microsecond, growing faster and faster every slight miniscule of a moment that goes by. Then comes childhood: Early cracks make measured, efficient strokes across the body of the object, and what they leave behind is smooth, almost glossy—like the face of a long body of water, without any ripples. The velocity at which the crack cuts across calmly increases, steady. If an initial crack is wide enough, the solid splits almost perfectly. And then, finally, there's crisis: Cracks that buck beyond a critical velocity within the solid begin to streak across the substance, like lightning—think of the patterns you'd find on the side of the boulder that first broke off during the rockslide. As they continue to accelerate, they blow apart the solid, blasting through in such a way that what they leave behind is jagged, fractured. Because of this, brittle materials are unable to accelerate up to the high speeds that a conventional computer model would predict. The crack moves at a velocity so fast, at this point, that its frequency undulates back and forth in amplitudes in the hundreds of kilohertz. When the cracks enter crisis, that's when the solid breaks.

Now, this final stage, the crisis, only makes sense because of a key distinguishing quality of cracks compared to things that behave similarly. Cracks are strongly influenced by special relativity, as their velocity does not increase towards the speed of light, as one might expect for most matter traveling through space to do. Cracks head towards the speed of sound, instead. Cracks move, then, when a stress develops close to the crack, and the same stress reverberates out to the solid's edge, and as this becomes uniform, a crack ceases to be straight, and linear, twisting paths, causing more splinters as it goes. More fractures shoot out from the crack, bursting through the object in indeterminable, seemingly random

directions.

Now these are the practical matters related to cracks. And this is what you need to know to understand how something breaks—or to admit that you cannot understand how things break. The science is still quite far away from giving us a clear explanation for how things break apart, and so are we, for that matter. The problem—solving the problem, involves much about matter on its most foundational level that we’re still just too far away from understanding. If this were, I don’t know, maybe 17, 18 years from now, I’d be able to sit in this chair right here and just tell you: this is what happened. This is how this brick broke, this is how your man—what’s his name, Hendley, Herman—Hanley—this is how your man got hit. But I can’t provide that to you now. I can give you guesses, but that’s just that: just a guess.”

Roderick then contended that, if he were just to speculate at what could have occurred, he’d first think that maybe some barometric anomaly on the early afternoon of January 1st, 1985 made the air more conductive, causing lightning rippled through the sky, smashing against the brick and blowing it apart. But Roderick quickly explained how unlikely this was, since lightning is rare during a snowstorm, when the air is denser and less conductive. And, what’s more, he could only see it as being highly improbable that lightning would carry through a brick—especially one made of sand—since bricks are notoriously non-conductive. And nobody reported seeing lightning over the Empire State—or anywhere else in the tri-state area, for that matter—on that morning. So, Roderick admitted, the explanation wasn’t the most prudent; something else found itself at play here. His mind went to the possibility—the unlikely possibility—that something like a bullet struck the brick while it hurdled through the air, moving at a fast enough speed that the cumulative force of its blow throttled through the brick, splitting it apart. But this, too, wasn’t really an

acceptable explanation; none of the passersby with whom Heller spoke before filing Hanley's suit reported hearing anything even vaguely resembling a gunshot—not even a car backfiring—and the loud sounds they did remember came purely from the brick. What's more, a marksman—even the most skilled of marksmen—would have long odds of hitting an object in a state of falling, especially one moving so quickly. And the glass shard made no sense in the bullet scenario. So Roderick moved past this explanation to a third and final:

“Look, something exerted a force on this object. A force acted on the object. And it came from somewhere. Now, sure, we should be thinking of natural scenarios here, cases of the kind you'd find under typical circumstances. And, as you've said, this is by all accounts an accident, so we should only think of what sort of things could naturally occur. But the glass makes me wonder. It's well known that you can convert glass back into sand, but it's a time-consuming process; the same is true for glassmaking. And glass, as I'm sure you know, requires a particularly fine sampling of sand, a sampling of a high overall purity. Now, this brick we've been discussing, it isn't actually even made out of sand. It's made out of sand-limestone, sand condensed to such a degree under pressure, and washed at by seawater and rain for so long that it condensed into a slab of stone. So the purity of this brick, in terms of the sand inside—extremely low. But when the brick broke apart, its fragments carried with them this glass shard. We know this. But this shouldn't be possible. It just simply shouldn't. I've never heard of anything like this occurring in a lab, which—and I guarantee you this—means it hasn't been reported before, or if it has, it was a long, *long* time ago.

But it did happen. This means it's possible. We know this—it struck this poor Hanley, left him half-blind. But he didn't die. And there's that whole business about the penny from the top of the building—if it is just dropped, maybe it kills someone. It doesn't; it's just a story—but the story comes from somewhere—from an intuition. But falling bricks

kill people all the time. So you'd certainly *expect* this brick to do just that. You'd expect it if the brick fell—It fell, and he didn't die, didn't suffer any sort of brain damage. It's miraculous. This is to say, it's dealing with something outside the realm of what we expect from the natural. So we're in uncharted territory. And for this reason, I only have guesses of things that have never occurred in a lab, which we'd never think to test, or which we simply can't test. And because we can't rule out the possibility that this could be some kind of breaking we've never seen before, any computer simulation system we have programmed now would be unable to test an occurrence like this reliably.

So you'd think of things: maybe the brick plummeted from that height, passing some particular floor at some particular point in time at which, suddenly, it vanished from this universe completely, and was replaced by the fragments of the brick and the glass—so quickly, so suddenly as to be imperceptible to anything, mind you—and those new fragments rained down on Hanley, who stood directly at the termination point for the original brick's trajectory. For this to happen, we'd need the fragments to have—likely in some other universe—passed through a black hole and survived. Now, nobody quite knows what happens in a black hole. Based on what we know now, we'd think something along the lines of this: in a black hole, time behaves like space, and space behaves like time. So this could explain the glass. But we have no idea of how matter behaves in a black hole. Now, nobody—absolutely nobody—would expect, if these fragments got squeezed out of a black hole—which we don't even know is possible for any kind of matter, let alone a porous, brittle solid, and certainly shouldn't be possible for some kind of mountain of sand limestone, to put aside a brick—fragments of a brick—for those fragments of brick and a single shard of glass to survive *and then* enter *this* universe at some random point just

above—and this is relative to the size of the universe, mind you—the sidewalk next to the southern entrance of the Empire State Building.

Now, practically all the theories make this look like hogwash. But that's under presumed circumstances, and this—whatever this *is*—such a thing makes quite a quick thing of that—*presumed circumstances*. And these theories, by their definition, are not prove-able; they simply comply with what we think about everything now. So let's just say this is plausible—I'm having fun here; I'll admit it—but I'll mind the time—well, that's one possibility. The brick disappeared by some means we truly don't understand, and right as it vanishing, the fragments appeared.

But if bets are off here, if we're really indulging full-range speculation, we could also say: maybe something happened on a subatomic level, something between the atoms of the particles within the brick, that allowed for a spontaneous chemical reaction of such a magnitude that its force blew the brick apart. This would also explain the glass shard falling. But, if we're going with presumptions around if this kind of scenario were true, if this were *even possible*, you'd expect such a reaction, where an atom split, electrons spewing loose into the subatomic space in such a manner that they managed to bond with a cluster of other stable, well-bonded particles on the subatomic level within the brick, to generate a blast of a magnitude incomparably greater than that of Hiroshima or Nagasaki—although this *isn't* possible. It violates practically everything—*everything*—we know about matter. And we know already that bricks are brittle solids, since they break, so this kind of electron transfer should be truly impossible. But again, this happened, and that seems to beg proposing this possibility.

And then there's that Hanley wasn't killed, which might mean that, at the time that the glass shard collapsed into his skull, its velocity was quite low, not at all what you'd expect

of something dropped from near the top of the Empire State Building. So either its velocity was stopped so abruptly that it slowed significantly before it reached its termination point—which would mean a *real haul* of a force acted on it in such a way as to almost wholly counteract the effects of gravity—and which likely would have sent it back upwards, and even more likely would have done enough to cause the fragments to break even further, most certainly for the glass to shatter—*or* that the fragments were dropped from a much lower floor. But we’ve already had confirmed that only from that window could the fragments have fallen, yes? You said so yourself. So, let’s say this black hole business is true, let’s say that; then we can’t really know from what floor the fragments fell. Let’s just say too—just for speculation, just to close this line out before we make a turn to the next—that the fragments fell from...oh, I don’t know—the 13th floor—and not the 82nd—that would make more sense as to how Hanley found himself so lucky here. So let’s say it fell from there, from the 13th floor.

A force acted on the brick. We know this. And that force must have an origin. Something acted on this brick. We know this too. These are the only things we know—*know*—here. And whatever this force was, it *must* have from somewhere. I’m not throwing all the rules out here. All the other speculation we’ve done—it doesn’t tell us what happened—and the facts won’t either. And the likelihood of some force, somewhere off in everything, to reach across all matter, and be exerted in *this* way on this one brick, streaking through the air? It should be statistically impossible for that to happen. But it did happen. A force was exerted. The brick fell.

A force acted on the brick. Something exerted that force. Something caused that brick to break—And while I know we’re working in the realm of what can’t be known—not an appealing realm for the courtroom—I can’t prove this, sure, but I’d put down my Cadillac

on that act being deliberate. Something had intention. I can only assume that something—someone intended this to happen.”

Heller chose not to request for Roderick to appear as the suit went underway. Heller chose, too, to truncate Roderick’s response so it included only the last few remarks he made during their meeting, as these suggested a responsible party for the accident, and Heller argued convincingly enough in court that the Empire State Building Associates group was clearly culpable for what befell Jim Hanley. The Empire State Building, in part because of Heller’s suggestion that Roderick meant that the building itself *deliberately* caused the injury to Hanley, tossed over to Hanley in their settlement roughly 19.96 Million dollars. And because of the scale of the sum he’d received in the settlement, and because of what it rendered him finally able to do, Hanley chose to view the brick falling from the sky as something miraculous.

It’s curious, though, that Hanley never considered the possibility that what happened to him was deliberate—that something reached out across everything and gave him a little tap on the head.

On that matter, Hanley is quoted close to the end of Sciaruto’s ending as saying:

“Sure, of course I’m happy. I’ve got everything I could want in my life—it all came true because of that brick over there. How it fell, I don’t know, but I always figured the roof had something to do with it. You know—the Empire State Building’s top—they designed it as a sky dock, so airships one day could fly to New York. So I figure, maybe something up there, maybe something from when they built it—maybe that’s why the brick fell. But I’m grateful it did. After everything else, I’m grateful.”

Sciaruto closes her article by mentioning that, when he recovered in the street, some five minutes or so after the shard struck him in the head, Jim Hanley, even with his eyesight

compromised and blood washing down his head, pushed aside the crowd that had gathered around him, scrambling, unthinking, for the pieces of sand lime scattered across the pavement. Those fragments sat now, framed behind the register of the new Jim Hanley's Universe, contained in a vault-sized display case, and arranged meticulously so that they sat, frozen, almost like little specks of dust stilled in the air, paused in time. As for the glass shard, Hanley made sure to inform the surgery team, before they put him under, that they shouldn't dispose of the splinter. After he'd come to, he retrieved it, and called for a jeweler from the old neighborhood to come and obtain it and carve it down into something like a gem. As of the article's publication, Sciaruto notes that Jim Hanley now wore that gem on a titanium ring, almost green in color, and refused to remove it under any circumstances.

Sciaruto ends this closing aside to the reader with a quote from Hanley: "It's remarkable glass. It can't break. Some sort of dream."

This is all to say that a name carries with it a great degree of significance. What follows from here is the story of two men with the same name. But while their names may be the same, and while there may be parts of what lies behind them and of what follows for them that reflect one another, the intersections of their trajectories, so disparate, so momentary, keep the power of their name from shining through. So embrace the shadows, but please do try to see.

For the past 35 years,
motion picture loudspeaker
systems have not changed...

Lucasfilm Ltd. and this theatre
are pleased to introduce a new
motion picture sound system¹

THX

¹ Queue Deep Note

By
Losing to the Sandman
Matteo Waldinger-White

Chapter I

As the Man in the Angels hat walked into the Oncue sometime in the late morning, looking for a copy of the paper, Solomon Patrick O'Grady gazed out through the store's front windows at the gas pumps and thought of what it would be like to have wings. He'd been puzzling at what it would be like to breathe underwater for quite a while, but now the hat made him wonder what it would be like to fly. What would flapping feel like? Would it feel, while in air, like the ground was pulling? Solomon Patrick O'Grady gazed out at the cars passing in and out of the Oncue, wondering what it would be like to fly alongside them, or fly above them. Solomon Patrick wondered if he'd have wings like a bird's, or if he'd glide through the sky on wings like a bat's. He kept wondering about flying, about whether he'd even have wings at all, or if being able to fly meant floating through the air instead, until a ding from the boombox Mr. Dash kept on the countertop, which always played the oldies, things from Solomon's childhood, tugged him back to the Oncue counter. Solomon Patrick O'Grady glanced down at his forearms, folded across a poster lying flat on the counter, for the Oklahoma State Lottery Tickets he sold to customers all the time, moving his gaze to the front edge of the counter, to the trays of lighters and the doo-dads for the dashboard or the backseat, and then turning, first to his right towards see-through storage boxes for the Oklahoma State Lottery Tickets and the TV monitor for all the cameras in the store, and for all the ones by the pump too that sat at two o'clock, right above Solomon Patrick O'Grady's

head, and then turning to his left side, where there was nothing but air and the smoke from Kip's cigarettes.

“Ladies and gentleman, this song's a dedication. From whom it's being sent, now that we're leaving out. But if there's a Dorris out there somewhere by Bethany, somebody just wants you to know that, *'yours* was a love he held tightly. Precious and warm a memory, through the years.' His words, folks.”

The silky voice, coming through the radio briefly, drifted into silence. Then Solomon Patrick O'Grady heard what sounded like angels in white gowns flit from the boombox on the countertop and into the aisles of the Oncue.² Solomon Patrick O'Grady watched as the man in the Angels hat picked up a copy of *The Oklaboman*, choosing one from the papers on the periodicals shelf near the store's front, which Solomon could tell because the man in the Angels hat flipped through the pile of papers before he seemed happy with his selection (Solomon figured it was on account of the big, brown, ugly stain dead in the middle of the front page of the copy at the top of the newspaper pile). When the man with the Angels hat brought the paper up to pay, Solomon Patrick O'Grady could make out from his perch behind the register that the cover read 'Big Red has Big Day at Big D,' but when he went for his reading glasses to see what the article said, he realized he'd misplaced them (when he couldn't remember), so why that headline had been printed would have to remain a mystery to him. For some reason, he could make out the date: April 19, 1995, but still the subject of the article remained a mystery. Who was Red, Solomon thought, and why was his day so big? Questions for another time, questions for another time.

“Will it just be this?” Solomon offered to the man in the Angels hat, after sitting for a moment pondering about Red.

² Queue *Blue Velvet* (Bobby Vinton, 1963)

“A pack of Camel 99s. And two of the Pick 3s, and an All-Star Bonus.”

“You know, we got a deal on...well, I know we have a deal, 25% off, which knocks out the sales tax too. I’m not sure what it is we got on a deal—But if you find something you like, just bring it on up here, let me check...I’ll see if it’s what we got on sale right now, and then you get to save money! How does that sound?”

The man in the Angels hat just stared back at Solomon, his lips unmoving, his irises expanding a little every time Solomon swayed a little bit, which happened more and more frequently as the silence went on.

“Well, see, mister, don’t you want to save some money? I just figured you wanted to save some money.”

Solomon Patrick O’Grady offered this up after a good lick of time passed by—how long, Solomon couldn’t be sure, but it felt long, like ten minutes or so. Maybe it was shorter, but it felt long. The man in the Angels hat didn’t respond, didn’t blink, just kept staring down Solomon Patrick O’Grady. Solomon Patrick O’Grady didn’t quite know what to do. He got the sense that maybe he’d done something wrong, said something Mr. Dash wouldn’t have wanted him to say, or that he’d offended the customer. Maybe 25%, he thought, maybe that was an unlucky number for the man in the Angels hat.

“Well, you know what...I’m sorry about that...you know, why don’t I just make all this stuff discounted 25%, since there is a sale, and since you save a penny that way.”

The man in the Angels hat blinked, his irises contracting a little as his eyelids opened again, and let his face soften a little, so that he was now giving Solomon Patrick O’Grady a friendly stare, and not the other kind from before. Still, he kept staring. Solomon Patrick O’Grady rang up the items, looking away from the man in the Angels hat.

“Oh, so that come’s out flat to a flat \$7.76.”

“You didn’t ask me what numbers I wanted.”

“Oh, gee, I don’t usually ask a customer for phone numbers. Personal policy.”

“What I want on the tickets. Those numbers. Y’all didn’t ask ‘em.”

Solomon Patrick O’Grady puzzled for a moment, wondering how it was he’d forgotten to ask for such a thing. Usually customers just wanted those lottery tickets where the cover of the thing can be scratched off with a quarter or a nickel and the numbers are underneath. But sometimes they did want tickets like the Powerball ticket, Solomon Patrick O’Grady acknowledged to himself. Had he been forgetting to ask for people’s numbers this whole time, and they were just too nice to ask? He wondered this. And he wondered why they wouldn’t bother to ask *him* to change the numbers.

“Well, I sure can take your numbers now, mister. Don’t you worry. We’ll just cancel this sale and then I’ll input them right over there in the lottery ledger!”

Solomon Patrick O’Grady raised one of his big swollen hands and pointed at the a little 3-hole binder next to the register.

“I ain’t paying shit, you don’t. For the All Star, give me...8...93...16...8...13. And the other: 82...96...14. You got that? 8. 93. 16. 8. 13 For the first. 82. 96. 14. For the second.”

“Oh, How I got you, sir. We have the tickets printing now. I’ll give you a receipt, if you want.”

“I look like I’m waiting for a fuckin’ receipt?”

“I don’t know what that looks like, mister. I don’t think I can remember when somebody waited, or what that looked like. I don’t really know how I’d see something like that; it seems unsee-able.”

At this point, the man in the Angels hat finally looked away, pulling away the cap and scratching with ardor at the little patch of his head that sat underneath the hat's embroidered gold halo.

"How much?"

"Well, mister, it was \$7.76. We take cash, we take personal checks. Mastercard. And Visa. We don't have anything set up with American Express yet—"

The man in the Angels hat tore from Solomon Patrick O'Grady's hands the receipts for his Oklahoma State Lottery Tickets, swiped off the counter his pack of cigarettes, and then, more it seemed out of impatience than real anger, tossed in Solomon Patrick O'Grady's direction a ten-dollar bill. As Solomon went to open the Oncue's register, so he could supply change, the man in the Angels hat paced off to the store's entrance, walked out, and got into a Subaru Brat parked by Pump #1. As the teal car pulled out of the gas station and back onto the road, Solomon Patrick O'Grady wondered what he'd done so wrong with this man, and why it was that the man with the Angels hat was so angry that he didn't even bother to ask Solomon for change. Sure, Solomon thought, he could be slow, but he'd never gotten such a response, never had a customer become so irate that he left without waiting for his cash back. Especially on a deal.

The automatic doorbell for the Oncue had a slight delay, on account of some squirrel damage Solomon Patrick O'Grady had noticed during a routine redistribution of his things in the attic (Mr. Dash let him keep some old boxes with files from before he moved to Oklahoma and a few photo albums in the Oncue attic, next to the Pantry Goods boxes; Solomon Patrick O'Grady's apartment was so small already, and he didn't have enough overflow for a storage unit). But Mr. Dash said it wasn't worth fixing, so the bell only rang for the man in the Angels hat some ten seconds after his car had pulled out from the

pumping section, right as Kip came trudging back from his cigarette break by the dumpsters. Solomon Patrick O'Grady swiveled himself over towards the door, waiting for Kip to re-enter and resume his working the second register.

"How ya doin', Kip?"

"Solomon, you still got my vest?"

"Vest."

"Yes, I gave you my vest just before my break started."

"I didn't know you had a vest, Kip!"

"My vest. I gave you my work vest before my smoke. You said you'd watch it!"

"Well, I don't remember no vest, Kip!"

"I gave you my fuckin' vest, Solomon! You said you'd help me, on account of Dale doesn't like when I smell of smoke on the store floor. You said you'd take it when I went out to smoke yesterday, after closing. You've done it fuckin' twice already today, Solomon!"

Solomon sat for a moment and gazed at Kip, who looked quite cross, almost worried. Solomon panned along in his chair as Kip rounded the cashier's counter and folded up the counter bracket that kept customers from the cashier's walkway. While he stared as Kip walked over to the second register and reached his hand into the cubby underneath, Solomon mulled over whether he'd been given Kip's crimson Oncue vest, which Solomon could tell apart from his own because of a big black stain that fully engulfed the Oncue logo on the back of Kip's vest. As Kip dug his hand deeper into the cubby, Solomon shifted his weight about in the chair, trying to see if he could remember anything about Kip's vest, about whether he'd seen it recently or not.

"I don't think you gave me your vest, Kip. I don't remember you having it on today."

Kip jerked his head around to face Solomon, pulling his hand out from under the cubby while he did so; Solomon presumed this was so Kip could stop slouching over the counter and return to his full height, since Solomon got the sense he was about to be berated, and people usually berated him from an upright position. Just as Kip's hand was making it to the edge of the cubby, Solomon heard a loud clang from inside the cubby, and Kip let out a slight cry of discomfort. Kip's hand practically fell out from under the register, spilling blood across the floor. Solomon noticed some kind of ragged gash ran across Kip's left wrist, wearing deep into the skin towards his forearm's edge and becoming shallower along the inside below his palm, ending at a point perpendicular to where his middle finger sprouted out of his hand. Kip turned his face away just as his hand left the cubby, and furrowed his brow so tightly that his eyes looked just like little slits in his otherwise scrunched, pimpled face. After almost a minute, he started to let his forehead calm, his eyes returning to their usual size. Solomon watched as Kip glanced down at his wrist, contemplating how Kip could keep his face so calm at the sight of the wound. But then Kip did a kind of double-take, letting his eyes wander away from the hand naturally and then darting them back towards the wound, his face now stretching apart, his mouth widening as he looked longer and longer at the gash by his wrist.

"Fuckin' Christ!"

"Do you think your hand'll be okay, Kip?"

Kip squeezed his left wrist with his right hand as he glowered at Solomon, the blood now dripping from his arm, leaving little dribbles on his purple track pants, like mist condensing on a poncho or beads of water clinging to tile. The way Kip's eyes looked, Solomon could tell, meant that some rage was about to head his way in one big gust.

“Do you think it’ll be okay? Go call fuckin’ 911! Get the paramedics down here.”

“Call 911.”

“Call 911! Now!”

“But the phone, it’s not here; you know it’s in the back room, Kip. And Mr. Dash, he—“

“You’re gonna talk about Dale right now? Look at my hand, Solomon!”

“Mr. Dash said no more emergency calls after that whole thing with the man from Kansas—“

“It’s a fuckin’ medical emergency! Go call 911, you goddamn nimrod!”

Solomon sat back in shock. He wasn’t sure what to say to the emergency dispatcher if the call connected. As far as he could remember, he hadn’t been tasked with handling a situation like this, at least during his time at the Oncue. When the Kansas man came in with the bullet hole in his pants pocket, Mr. Dash had handled dispatching for the ambulance. And even then, when it wasn’t in Solomon’s hands to handle things, the Kansas man still died before the ambulance arrived, since the bullet he shot into his leg from his pants pocket hit an artery. So Solomon just sat, dumbfounded, in his little office chair, Kip’s wrist still dripping blood all over the track pants and the linoleum of the cashier’s walkway floor.

“Go call an ambulance, Solomon!”

Solomon leapt up from his seat and hulked past Kip, half-stumbling half-sprinting towards the saloon doors to the back office. Once he brushed past the door, just past which was the big turquoise rotary phone Mr. Dash used for the primary line to the Oncue, Solomon turned back around, glancing at Kip, who seemed to be drifting downwards, like he was deflating the way the big tubular dancing guys outside the Chevy dealership Solomon drove by every evening did after their motors had been shut off.

“I’m gonna have to ring Mr. Dash, so he’s in on the emergency men coming—“

“Just fucking call the ambulance, you inbred piece of shit!”

Solomon pulled put the handset to his ear and fumbled for a notch in the phone’s dial. As his first finger fell into one of the little holes towards the bottom of the dial, Solomon realized he couldn’t quite make out the numbers, and that he’d need his reading glasses to make the call comfortably.

“Kip, I can’t see the numbers...”

“Nine’s at the goddamn top. One’s at the bottom, second from the bottom. You only got two fuckin’ numbers to dial, Solomon! Jesus Christ!”

“Three numbers”

“What?!”

“Three numbers. 9. 1. 1.”

Kip snarled at Solomon.

“Dial!”

Solomon followed what Kip said, stubbing his thumb into the top notch on the rotary and pulling his hand down gingerly. Then, he repeated the same gesture with the notch second from the bottom of the rotary, shoving his thumb into the little circular notch on the plastic dial, and pulling down and to the right. Solomon worried, though, that since he couldn’t make out the numbers, maybe he wasn’t calling 911 at all, that he’d made a mistake and that Kip would get hurt because of it. He worried, too, since he’d never really understood how the rotary phone worked, how it figured out what line to make ring when dialed. Solomon heard a dial tone, and some ringing.

“I think I called it.”

Kip let out a little gasp of air escape from his lips, loud enough that Solomon could hear it from the other room. Kip began lumbering towards Solomon's chair by the register. Just before he turned to sit, Kip faced back towards the saloon doors.

"If I die here, it's coming out of your fuckin' pocket, Sol!"

Solomon held the headset tightly to his right ear, making his Oncue hat sit a little askew on his head, and listened as the dial tone ended, and the line began ringing. Just as the second ring went out, Solomon noticed the song on the stereo drifting away, like the angels singing in the background were slowly flitting away back home.

"'And I still can see blue velvet in my tears.' What a line, folks. And with that, well, that's the end of our dedication panel. But we just wanna reach out now, before the program shifts off and you're turned over to Vic Monroe, my friend and your sonic guide for the afternoon, I just want you to know: if you're in need—need of comfort, need of care, hell, maybe you just need a tow into town—just reach out; there's always somebody there with a shoulder for you to rest your head on."

The satin voice from the boombox died just as Solomon heard the emergency dispatcher's line ring a third time. Kip didn't even seem to notice as two big soring bows of strings shot through the speaker system.³ Solomon saw Kip sagged from the chair, his torso limp, bending towards the linoleum, and realized that Kip looked white, like a sheet of printer paper. Since Kip looked so much less like his typical fleshy red self, Solomon became quite worried, mouthing 'help' into the receiver quietly as the third ring gave way into a fourth. Solomon Patrick O'Grady wondered, suddenly, why the emergency dispatcher was taking so long to answer, since he figured that all they had to do all day was wait for somebody to call about an emergency, and then they'd be right there, right on the phone.

³ Queue *Put Your Head on My Shoulder* (Paul Anka, 1963)

Maybe there was some big emergency, Solomon thought to himself, one big crest of a tsunami barreling into the dispatch center that made Kip's hand gash, by contrast, look just like a little ripple across the water.

Finally, the fourth ring gave way abruptly to an even-tempered, throaty voice.

"911, what's your emergency?"

"Uh, yes. This is Solomon Patrick O'Grady. Kip's hand is falling off."

"Sir, What's your location?"

Solomon abruptly closed his mouth, his eyes fixed on a little splotch towards the top of the saloon door's curvature, the quiet hum he made while thinking drifting into the receiver in one relatively constant low tone.

"Sir?"

"Oncue number 101. We're at the Oncue number 101."

"And where is that, sir?"

"Oh, jeez...it's near the 235. Right off the highway."

"Sir, what are the cross-streets?"

Solomon, trying as he was, couldn't remember whether the Oncue sat off from Broadway or was just near Broadway, so he turned away from the phone towards Kip.

"Kip, what are our cross-streets?"

"What?"

"What cross-streets do we have?"

"23rd and Santa Fe. Right off the 235 exit ramp."

"But those streets aren't crosses."

Solomon offered this to himself, not really as any part of the dispatch call or the conversation with Kip.

“Intersections, Solomon!”

Solomon sat and thought about this for a moment.

“Sir?”

The dispatcher’s voice came across the phone speaker and into Solomon’s ear quite harshly, the tininess of her final R sound creating a kind of piercing sensation within the inner ear canal.

“Cross-streets: 23rd and Santa Fe. But they’re not crosses.”

“We just need the streets, sir. Now what’s your emergency again?”

“Kip’s hand is about to fall off.”

“About to fall off?”

“He cut it bad and now there’s a big gash. He’s just letting his hand lie limp like it’s falling right off.”

“What kind of cut was it, sir?”

“It was a rough cut.”

“Alright, sir, an ambulance is on its way. Paramedics should be to your location shortly. In the meantime, make sure your friend—“

“Kip. It’s his hand.”

“Well, make sure he keeps it elevated, and try and stop the bleeding.”

Solomon began to make a little gasping noise, trying to suck in enough air to ask how exactly he should go about stopping the bleeding, but just as he was about to begin making the words, the dispatcher hung up the phone. Just before the call went completely silent, Solomon thought of the dispatch woman’s face—he imagined it to be round, swelled with life, older, but not too wrinkled, and ebullient, warm and kind—and as he heard the clack of the receiver of the 911 line against the phone set, a kind of black haze, like TV static,

set in over her quiet smile, swelling over it all until her face was overtaken by shadow. He wasn't talking to her anymore, and he never really knew what she looked like.

As he wandered back from the rotary phone, brushing open the saloon doors from the back office and slowly lumbering towards his register post and towards Kip's body, slowly wilting in the office chair, Solomon thought of that black static, that shade he'd seen set in over his mind, that was there now. He realized how lonely that static, like some sort of dense cloud that set in out of nowhere, truly was. He saw the darkness in its cold form, like the sensation of being in the deep-end of a backyard pool alone, with the other people and the warmth of their movements through the water gone, just as the last rays of the day's sun recede back over the horizons, just before the darkness overtakes the surface of the water, making it the same with the air, only discernable as separate when light shone on it. And he thought of how the dark haze of what he saw in his mind, just like the pool in dusk, was not empty, and that, while it may seem as if it was, it was not really silent, either. Solomon was too overtaken by this line of consideration, by the image of the phone call's end that he still could not shake free from inside his head, to notice how pale Kip had grown.

"You drive here every day, Sol. Every day. All you had to fuckin' do was call and get care sent here. All you had to do was just remember where you put my vest. And you couldn't even do that."

Sol turned around to face Kip.

"My memory doesn't work too right, Kip."

"Well, it's a problem. It's just one of a heap of your fuckin' problems, retard."

Solomon came to the end of the cashier's walkway, just next to the camera monitor. He looked out of the store's front window, at all the cars cruising by on the pink pavement of the 235-onramp, splitting out of Oklahoma City and onto the highway, towards Kansas.

Solomon stood quietly, watching a big orange PT Cruiser that, in the noon sun, looked to him like a melting Creamsicle flying across the road, and made a quiet moan to himself, the kind so slight he couldn't be aware that it had happened.

“You know, Kip, I wish I could remember better too. I don't like forgetting so much, you know. I wish I coulda helped more. Help people. I wish I could remember. It's hard not being sure.”

Kip let out a soft wheeze, and let his head fall down against his shoulder. Solomon Patrick O'Grady spotted in the distance a bright green minivan with its right turn signal ignited, clicking on and off, making its way up Santa Fe Avenue. He wondered if it might be Mr. Dash finally returning from his errands.

Solomon kept thinking about the screen of dark, subtly flickering static as he rummaged around inside the dumpsters out behind the Oncue for plastic to put in the recycling bins Mr. Dash's brother Harvey took to a recycling center in Iowa every time he had to make truck deliveries out there for Omaha Steaks. Mr. Dash had been back for a few hours, seeing to it that the mess on the linoleum from Kip's wound was cleaned (Solomon wound up having to mop it up, but Mr. Dash was still very helpful). Mr. Dash even took over the front register while Solomon saw to it that the bottles were sorted. Solomon muttered about to himself as he waded through the pool of garbage in the dumpster, being sure to avoid a mound of broken glass and burgundy splatter he'd noticed underneath an old pizza box and a bag of old leaves. Solomon saw the mound looked like a raspberry jam jar, but much bigger and exploded.

As he pulled an empty Crystal Pepsi liter from under some closed garbage bags, Solomon wondered whether that dark static was how his mind went always when he was

alone. He thought for a moment about how, maybe just in that moment where the woman from 911 clicked off the line and disappeared, he became aware of what it was like all the time, that he'd just never gotten a chance to notice it before. Maybe it was just the dark static when he was alone, nothing else. But then Solomon realized that his mind was never really like that—stuff floated through it all the time, always colorful, full of texture. And he wasn't really all that lonely when he was alone, since it felt like somebody, some presence, was with him all the time—not *there*, but somehow present, as if to strike up some kind of conversation, just waiting for a good introduction. Solomon considered how he was most aware of the presence, like the window for that introduction was just opening and the conversation about to begin, while he lay in bed, just before he drifted off into sleep. In bed, he could almost feel the warmth of somebody all around him too, like the little bit of warmth that came from the other body wasn't just on one side of him, but actually engulfed him, lay all around him, waiting to be invited in somehow.

But whenever he woke up, Solomon knew the warmth was no longer there, like it had just vanished and abandoned him in sleep. He felt really lonely then, sure, but this was always when the day was just beginning, not when it ended and the warmth returned. Solomon couldn't even think of a time when it wasn't there, waiting with him for his grogginess to let his eyes slip shut. Solomon wondered about whether the warmth going had something to do with his dreams, and this was a problem, because Solomon could never remember any of his dreams. In truth, he didn't even know if he dreamt. Maybe somebody was trying to speak to him, catch his ear at the right time, but they kept carrying on their conversation with him in a place prone to vanishing, so every night ended like the conversation hadn't even happened, like no record of it existed.

A plastic Sprite bottle nudged between two brimming garbage bags suddenly caught Solomon's eye. Solomon leaned over and reached down to grab the bottle's neck. While he struggled to pull the bottle free, Solomon lost his footing and toppled over into the garbage. Solomon now lay on his belly on top of the trash. So he could push himself back onto his feet, Solomon thrust his hands down into the garbage. And while his left hand connected with the dumpster's metal ground, Solomon felt his right hand submerge into something thick and sticky, and hot. Wiggling his fingers felt to Solomon like tickling a rosebush covered in thorns, and the substance made Solomon's hands get pins and needles. Solomon jerked his arm right arm back instinctively, with such a force that he rolled onto his back, his head crashing against one of the half-full black Hefty bags at the top of the pile beneath him, knocking his Oncue hat loose.

Solomon felt the back of his head clack against something hard in the bag—maybe Mr. Dash's old toaster—and on impulse clutched at his skull with both hands. As he gripped at the back of his skull, Solomon felt the fingers on his right hand brush against the rail-like indentation in the back of his skull leaving behind some gelatinous, warm residue from the burgundy mound at the dumpster's bottom. To his surprise Solomon, then felt tears pooling from his eyes down the side of his face and into the dumpster. Somehow, Solomon always managed to remind himself of the long, narrow dent carved into his skull. How he came by such a scar, now that Solomon still didn't know, couldn't remember. He often wondered whether he'd always had the scar, or whether he acquired it somehow, and he just didn't have the receipt for transaction anymore. But Solomon never managed to forget about the indentation itself.

Then Solomon felt the rosebush-tickling sensation creep down the base of his skull, towards his spine, and he worried that as the feeling spread, it would do something terrible,

irreparable. In a fit of alarm, Solomon Patrick O'Grady sprung to his feet and leapt from the dumpster, racing back towards the entrance of the Oncue, thinking only about how to prevent the horrible sensation from spreading. As he pushed past the double glass doors to the Oncue, marching towards the bathroom, in the corner between the two refrigerator walls, Solomon Patrick O'Grady made out Mr. Dash, bending down near the periodicals at the front of the store.

“Where’s your hat, Solomon?”

Mr. Dash had turned towards Solomon.

“Mr. Dash, I got an emergency. I got all this goop on me, this stuff at the bottom of the dumpster—it didn’t smell too good. But it’s trapped all over now—I gotta go wash my hair. Do you think the hand soap will work for the hair?”

“Nobody’s ever asked me that, Solomon.”

“Well, I gotta have it work. I don’t want none of this gunk all over me. It feels really bad, Mr. Dash.”

“Do what you gotta do. But by tonight, by closing, you need to have all those cans and bottles ready and set for departure. Harvey leaves for Sioux City at dawn, so it’s gotta be set for him tonight.”

“I’ll get it all in the right place, Mr. Dash, don’t you worry!”

“And make it quick, Solomon! I’m down a guy now, and I don’t wanna be behind the register all day. And make sure you got your hat fixed flat on your head when you’re back handling the cash. We gotta keep you presentable.”

Solomon stood in his tracks, staring at Mr. Dash, wondering now, suddenly, where his hat might be. The little ding from the doorbell went off while he kept trying to retrace

things for himself. He didn't remember when it left his head and where it came to rest once it had.

"Aren't you in a rush, Sol?"

Solomon Patrick O'Grady, with that, unstuck himself from the checkered linoleum tiles just in front of the dairy fridge, and turned back towards the restroom. Somehow, between when he entered the store and now, the panic became less pressing, and so Solomon currently felt confused, since the agitation was still there for him about the burgundy goop, but his drive to handle it was diminished. He pulled the bathroom door open, shimmying his way inside, the door grazing against his right elbow as he entered. The door shut behind Solomon, leaving him in darkness.

Solomon fumbled about by the doorframe, brushing his left hand against the wall, groping through the shadows for the bathroom light switch. He finally felt the little switch jut out from the wall, and the room went from blackness to the bright white of the tube lights on the ceiling engulfing the whole space, the shiny mirror above the sink the only thing keeping the room from seeming uniform. Solomon bent over the sink, turning on the faucet and letting a fixed, frigid flow of water pour down onto the back of his head. Once he'd fully dampened his hair, Solomon lifted his head out of the sink and brought it under the soap dispenser just at the mirror's edge. Once he felt his head was good and soaped up, once the whole back of his skull felt like it was covered with foam, Solomon returned his head to the sink, the water running now a little warmer, and scrubbed at the base of his skull and at the back of his head, near the indentation. As he tried to clean away the last of the burgundy residue, Solomon Patrick O'Grady stared down into the sink drain.

Solomon became so enrapt in thinking about the darkness of the drain, about how it looked similar to the dark fog that set over Solomon's mind after the phone line

disconnected, that he let the warm water run over his head well after the soap washed fully from his hair. Once he realized how long he'd let his head stay under the water, Solomon shut off the faucet and stood up, and looked at his own eyes gazing back at him in the mirror. He noticed how blue they were, at first, and that they looked soft, placid. But he found himself quite startled by how deep the wrinkles on their edges had grown, and how the skin between his eyes and the beginning of the bridge of his nose looked saggy now, like it had been pulled at so much as to make the whole thing loose. And he noticed how many lines now ran across his forehead, how worn his whole face seemed, how so many little patches of grey sprung up in the stubble around his mouth. Solomon felt startled, like he couldn't really remember when the features of his face loosened and broadened and sagged. He always thought of his appearance differently: Solomon had in mind that he looked more narrow, more poised, that his hair was darker, and he was more put together somehow. But where he looked like that, and when he did, he wasn't quite sure. He knew, though, that he didn't remember himself looking the way he did now ever before, and he wondered why, then, he couldn't remember it, since he hadn't come to look how he did now just abruptly. He watched his eyes start to gather a little pool of tears, a little drop ballooning and eventually spilling over the lids, down his loose, worn face. Solomon watched his irises, pulling tighter ever so slightly, as the tear cascaded down towards the sink drain, the blues of his eyes like lagoons with black centers.

Solomon Patrick O'Grady left the bathroom after quite some time. He found himself greeted as he reemerged into the Oncue by Mr. Dash and Clarence, who owned the tow shop up Santa Fe and was Mr. Dash's closest friend (at least, Solomon thought he was, since he saw him in the store talking to Mr. Dash almost every day). Clarence was fumbling

around with a dial deep inside one of the beer refrigerators all the way at the end of the refrigerator wall, near one of the windows looking out onto the Oncue ice machines.

Solomon heard a woman's voice, clear and sharp, but softening as it hit higher registers, backed by clarinets and a piano, swaying in from the boombox on the cashier counter.⁴

Solomon Patrick approached the men, making out as he did so that Clarence seemed to be meddling about with some wires dangling out from a clasp behind the dial, while Mr. Dash, his cowboy hat sitting on the edge of the periodicals stand, kept handing Clarence different tools and telling him this or that cable to watch while he fiddled around. Solomon wondered why the two men were playing with cables, since from what he could tell, they didn't offer much in the way of excitement, and he knew they could be a bit dangerous.

"Mr. Dash, why you guys playin' with cables? You know you could get shocked!"

Mr. Dash seemed startled by Solomon's voice, turning abruptly in Solomon's direction, knocking his cowboy hat and the toolbox off the periodicals shelf with his movement. Clarence turned at the clangs of the toolbox against the ground, but didn't really seem so surprised. Solomon wondered why Mr. Dash would be scared, or what caught him so off-guard.

"Oh, Sol, buddy—hey, you get that gunk out your hair?"

"It's all gone, Mr. Dash. But did you get shocked by the cable? You seem awful jumpy."

"Oh, no, not at all! Fridge is on the fritz. Some guy came in while you was takin' care of your hair—had on him this big puffy jacket for Miami, for the Dolphins—he went to get a beer, said it was piss-warm. Clarence here just came to try and help out, see what might be the trouble."

⁴ Queue *Dream a Little Dream of Me* (Doris Day, 1958)

Solomon looked over at Clarence, who met eyes with him and let out a slight smile that didn't suggest any kindness.

“How are you, Sol? Dale tells me you have some business to take care of out by the dumpster.”

“Mr. Harvey, Mr. Dash's brother, he goes to Iowa tomorrow. He's gonna take our trash with him. I have to make sure it's all sorted for him to pull it along, so I gotta go clear out the whole dumpster.”

“Well, then, why don't you get to it? Dale told me you've been in the restroom for quite a while.”

“I'm gonna get to it right now.”

Clarence kept staring at Solomon, making clear he had an expectation for him. Mr. Dash did the same. So Solomon walked out the front doors to the Oncue, and made his way back around the side to the old dumpsters Mr. Dash kept by the side of the building, so that he could finish up handling the recycling. Solomon took tally of the bottles that were left in dumpster, and by his count, only seven plastic and glass bottles remained for Harvey to take with him to Iowa in the morning. He rounded up the bottles quickly, piling them into the free crevices of the milk crates filled with recycling he'd left next to the dumpster. Solomon noticed as he finished with the bottles that his Oncue hat sat atop the heap of garbage bags, its peak pressing the hat up into the air, like some sort of Excalibur. Solomon retrieved the hat, putting it back on his head as he began lugging the recycling crates from next to the dumpster back towards the storage room of the Oncue, which had a little entrance past the dumpsters, at the back of the building.

Solomon walked the crates over to the back entrance of the Oncue, where he usually left them in a little alley between the store floor and the emergency exit, so that Harvey

could come and claim them without any real difficulty. As he pushed open the door to the rear entrance—which was supposed to set off a fire alarm for the building, but which didn't, since Mr. Dash had disabled the alarm nodules some summers previous, while Solomon was tasked with cleaning the gas pump filters—Solomon could make out Clarence's voice, crisp and steady, as he spoke to Mr. Dash. About what, Solomon couldn't quite be clear, although it became more evident as the conversation between the two went on. Solomon stood in the alley, next to a rack filled with old copies of *The Oklahoman*, listening to Clarence say from the storefront:

“Why you keep that boy behind the register? You know he's got some screws loose, some clear screws falling out from there.”

Solomon heard Mr. Dash let out a little grunt, and then a response to Clarence's question.

“Who, Solomon?”

“Yeah, Mr. O'Grady out there.”

“Well, sure, he's thick. But he comes cheaper than most.”

“That's how the state works, makes those thickheaded fucks cheaper than the rest to work.”

“Plus, what retard you ever heard can manage the business expenses, the W-2 forms, all the taxes?”

“He does all that?”

“Oh, he does it well—does it spectacularly.”

“How?”

“You think I got an answer? I only got more questions. But I'll ask you this: what slow-headed fella you know got an MBA from Wharton?”

“I don’t know nobody in a wheelchair who won a marathon neither.”

“I *know* that ain’t true, firsthand.”

“Alright, then, fine. I know one guy—he runs a supply chain for export parts—he got an MBA, I think from UNLV. But he ain’t slow, and I can’t think of anybody else.”

“But you do know somebody, though. ‘Cause Solomon, I don’t know how, he’s got himself a Masters of Business. From an Ivy-League school.”

“Now that, I gotta say...you’re not yanking my chain this time.”

“But he’s got the degree.”

Solomon heard somebody draw in a big gust of air as the conversation lagged briefly, as Clarence let it sink in.

“He does? Fuck. I always figured he can’t tell a handle from a hubcap.”

“He can’t, but he does, definitely, full-on one hundred percent, have a Masters from Penn. How, now that I don’t know. But he does. I checked and everything.”

“So he takes care of all your taxes?”

“He does it better than any CPA I ever had.”

“Huh.”

“Exactly. Fuckin’ huh. I have no idea how he does it. But he does it all the time, perfect. He got something goin’ on up in that head of his—what it is, now that I don’t know—but he got a good number of gears whirrin’.”

“Surprise to you”

“Surprise to everybody. He’s my best-kept secret. I only pay that boy \$4-an hour. Older than me too. I don’t know; I’m a lucky guy, what can I say?”

Solomon listened the whole while, wondering, while he stood there next to the stacked egg crates of recycled bottles and cans, why it was exactly Mr. Dash kept him on the

staff, or what Mr. Dash exactly thought of Solomon. Solomon had always gotten the sense that Mr. Dash believed in him, was quite supportive of him, of his many endeavors outside of the Oncue (Mr. Dash had even funded Solomon's vacation to go look at Manatees in Florida, following one of the fires at the gas pump that occurred a good two years or so into Solomon's working at the gas station). Solomon wondered, too, how exactly it was he had some sort of 'business degree,' as Clarence and Mr. Dash called it, especially from somewhere called Penn, since he could never remember going to school, especially somewhere outside of Oklahoma. He worried for a moment that maybe, when he applied for the job, he lied to Mr. Dash, fibbed a little about his work credentials, and that for some reason he couldn't even remember lying about anything now.

Solomon kept standing by the milk crates, leaning against the wall of the Oncue so that he could listen to the reverberations of Mr. Dash and Clarence's conversation off the walls of the backspace.

"Why he call you Mr. Dash?"

"Now that I really can't tell you. First few months he worked here, all the time I tell him, I say, 'Solomon, don't worry about the formalities. Call me Dale. I don't mind.' But he kept calling me Mr. Dash, and at some point, I got sick of tellin' him otherwise."

Solomon slouched as the end of Mr. Dash's remarks drifted through the rear entrance to him. His calf struck against an old-fashioned glass milk bottle at the top of the heap of recycling, causing the bottle to tumble to the ground, cracking a little bit once it came to a rest. The sound seemed to startle Mr. Dash and Clarence, since Solomon could hear tools drop and the refrigerator door close.

Solomon took the Oncue hat from his head and brushed his hand along the peak of the cap, absent-mindedly trying to dust it off. He pulled it back over his head, making sure to

tighten it with the back clasps, so that it wouldn't fall off. As he turned back around to make his way out of the hallway, he caught a glimpse of himself in the metallic double doors of the indoor ice machine, and noticed a little burgundy stain just towards the top of the Oncue cap's dome. Solomon wondered whether he'd be able to remove the stain, and about what the process for getting rid of such a stain would be. The clarinets quieted through the boombox speakers, and the woman's voice grew softer, closer, more somber, like the listener was meant to know that she was approaching silence. A little flourish of a shift from one octave to another bubbled from the piano, the fingers striking against it slowing, hitting higher and higher notes with each tap.

“Say, Dale, you mind we retune that thing? I feel like we just been bobbin' along to old crooners all day, and it's giving me a headache. Something about those old voices—it always gives me a headache.”

“Sure, what you want instead?”

It was getting to be dusk when Solomon Patrick O'Grady started fidgeting with the tire pressure gauges out in front of the register on the cashier's counter. Mr. Dash left for the day a few hours before, and Solomon spent the majority of his time following Kip's trip to the hospital and following his fall in the dumpster finishing up the Oncue's accounting for the month of April. Usually, when there was a lull in foot traffic after the post-work rush, Solomon would head into the backroom and handle the books, while Kip or Winston—who worked the weekends—would man the registers solo. But all of today had been a lull, and Solomon had been on his own for most of that lull, so, when Mr. Dash told him to snap to it with the accounting, he just left the front of the store unmanned, coming out only when

he saw a car pull up on the second camera monitor Mr. Dash kept under his desk, next to a badly rusting purple metal filing cabinet.

Solomon finished faster than he typically did with the gas expense charts, and so he returned to work after only a few hours, as opposed to having to take the whole evening to account for how much gas they'd bought, how much they'd paid per gallon, and how much they sold, filling-pump-per-filling-pump. Solomon figured that the haste with which he was able to finish off all the books had to do in part with how little he was interrupted; he noticed only three people who came in while he was in the back office, one of them just to use the bathroom. So, Solomon worked away at the numbers, finished quite early, and then returned to the front of the store, to handle the evening crowd, before his shift ended at 10pm. Now, with the sun setting, Solomon wondered when new blood would pour into the station from the highway, when all those people heading north, further into the state, towards Kansas, or south, towards Texas, would get off and refuel at the Oncue. Solomon, flicking about the tire pressure gauge between his fingers, pressing his thumb against the little tube's mouth, looked out at the skyline, the sky heaving off the brightness of the day and slowly shifting over to a calm, quiet kind of blue, with the spaces between the buildings in the distance starting to blur together with the buildings themselves, and the buildings themselves letting off glows of orange and pink, swelling together in the evening air, making everything look rich, full, riddled with life.

Solomon thought, as he watched a pool of spilled gasoline between pumps #1 and #3 shift into a splendor of magenta like it was in bloom, or like it was finally revealing itself, its colorless, water-like appearance for most of the day some sort of camouflage finally receding away into the evening, about how the light would last like this for a moment, how, if he looked down, even for a little, and gazed back up, the colors would be gone, swept

away into the evening and overtaken by shadow. Solomon realized as he gazed out from the Oncue's front windows at everything lit up by the setting sun that in this moment he saw the breadth of all the pieces that made up this place, where he spent every day, and that after a few moments it would all seem uniform, small, with each individual gas pump, each building in the distance, the massive wing of concrete of the onramp swooping up towards the highway, each little yellow line along the divider of that road, all indiscernible from the night sky, except to those with the right vantage or attunement to the darkness. And all that would punctuate the night sky, Solomon figured to himself, were the headlights of the cars on the highway and the streetlamps, spread from one another quarter-mile by quarter-mile, casting only enough light to illuminate that slight strip of road beneath them, leaving everything outside the circular perimeters of their beams still in darkness.

Solomon completed almost a full rotation of weaving the tire pressure gauge between each of his fingers, rotating it over each of his fingers, the one that followed catching it and holding it in place, having it descend down towards his pinky and then return towards the top of his hand, twirling up towards his thumb, when Mrs. Wheeler pushed the front door to the Oncue with her cane. As Mrs. Wheeler waddled into the Oncue, her cane still outstretched so that the front door wouldn't close on her, the boombox on the store counter let out a staccato of beeps, almost like the dial-tone of a switchboard operator connecting a caller to the right line or the many rhythmic beeps of a dial-up connection switching into action, punctuated by empty, slight drum beats, so uniform that they felt more electric than anything else⁵. Usually, Mrs. Wheeler stopped into the store in the early morning, around 9 or so, and got a cheese Danish, the day's copy of the *New York Times* and one of the small cups of coffee. Solomon counted on Mrs. Wheeler's appearances in the

⁵ Queue *One on One* (Darryl Hall and John Oates, 1982)

store as one of the few constants in his day, as Mrs. Wheeler had been coming to the Oncue so often and for so long that Solomon let her visits sink into his memory; they stood as one of the few things he felt he could expect, that he could recall effectively, intractably. So Solomon found himself surprised that morning when Mrs. Wheeler did not appear, and, though he knew people could be unpredictable, and a schedule, sure, could be subject to change, he worried that maybe something had happened to her, that she was in urgent conditions, or that she'd decided she was finished with the Oncue altogether and chose to get her daily coffee, Danish, and paper from somewhere else. And Solomon was even more surprised now to see Mrs. Wheeler, since as far as he could remember, she'd never been in the store in the evening.

“Mrs. Wheeler, you need help with the door?”

“Oh, don't worry about it, sweetie.”

But Solomon could see Mrs. Wheeler was struggling actually to enter the Oncue, since she now seemed forced into the position of either remaining stationary, her cane raised in the air, keeping the door from closing, or of laying her cane back on the ground, so she could take a step inside the store, and letting the door close on her in the process. So Solomon hurried from behind the counter, shuffling past the various food aisles and the automotive aisle to the store entrance. As he arrived at the door, the bell for the entrance finally dinged. Solomon held the door open for Mrs. Wheeler, while she put down her cane, and resumed her hobble. Once she was fully inside the store, Mrs. Wheeler turned towards Solomon.

“Solomon, dear, I need a little favor, if it's not too much to ask.”

“Of course, Mrs. Wheeler. Whatever you need.”

“Well...oh, this never happens to me...my car seems to be having some trouble. It’s been making this horrible hiss ever since this afternoon. I just pulled in here on my way back home, but I was wondering, dear, if I can maybe use the phone to call AAA.”

“Oh. See, the phone’s back there, in the office. Mr. Dash, he says, back there, no customers.”

“Oh, I see. Well, it’s fine, dear, just fine.”

“But of course you can use the phone! You’re Mrs. Wheeler! Just in the backroom, over there.”

Solomon gestured over towards the saloon doors at the edge of the cashier’s counter. Mrs. Wheeler followed his finger with her eyes, and then, once he’d finished his direction she hobbled over towards the counter, sliding past the swinging door to the counter with a little bit of effort, and carried herself over to the office, struggling through the saloon doors as she went. Solomon returned to the counter, so that he was available, should Mrs. Wheeler need any kind of real assistance.

“Solomon, dear, do you know the number for a tow place? I can't seem to find my AAA card.”

“Clarence! You could call Clarence.”

“Who’s that, dear?”

“Oh, he tows up the way. He’s friends with Mr. Dash. You know Mr. Dash.”

“I can’t say I know the name, sweetheart. Do you have a number for this Clarence fella?”

Solomon didn’t, but he figured that it might be written somewhere in the back office.

“I don’t know no number for him, no name for his tows. But Mr. Dash—he’s gotta have himself that number in his papers. There’s a address book—I just remembered—

there's a address book just on that coffee table right beside the phone. He'd be in there, I bet he would be. Clarence."

Solomon heard some fumbling about and the sound of pages flipping from behind the saloon doors, and then the turning of the phone rotary. Mrs. Wheeler spoke for a while, in her soft, low voice, with its little croak, although Solomon couldn't really make out what she said while she was on the phone.

After a few minutes, during which Solomon resumed twirling about the tire pressure gauge and staring out the window at the now-dark sky, Mrs. Wheeler pushed open the saloon doors again and led herself back out onto the store floor.

"Solomon, sweetie, you mind if I wait here while this gentleman comes to get me?"

"No, no, not at all! You need a chair?"

"Oh, that would be very sweet, dear."

Solomon lumbered into the backroom, picking up an old metal folding chair Mr. Dash kept behind a bookshelf at the edge of the office for promotional occasions. Solomon took the chair out to the floor, unfolding it near the edge of the cashier counter, closest to the window, so that Mrs. Wheeler could watch for the tow truck to arrive. Mrs. Wheeler patted Solomon on the shoulder as she went to sit.

"You're a true gentleman, Solomon. They don't make them like you anymore."

Solomon retraced his way back behind the counter and sat down in the office chair behind the register.

"Mrs. Wheeler, how come you weren't in this morning?"

Mrs. Wheeler turned her head towards the window quietly, gazing out, her face fixed in a kind of cool smirk, the kind of look that seemed forced across her lips, to keep from them

assuming a more truthful expression. She let out a few little huffs, and kept gazing outwards. After a while, she let out a loud breath, like a gust, and turned towards Solomon.

“I feel lonely all the time, Solomon. Simply put there just aren’t so many people left in my life now. Do you ever, dear, do you ever find yourself lonesome?”

Solomon thought about this for a brief moment, clicking his tongue back and forth against his teeth as he mulled over the question.

“Well, Mrs. Wheeler, sometimes, when I’m all by myself—when I’m in my apartment or I’m in my car—sometimes it’s when I walk down the street—I get this feeling, this feeling like there’s some kind of warmth all around me, just waiting to be invited in. And I keep feeling like there’s somebody trying to talk to me, trying to tell me a secret, something important.”

“Isn’t that lovely, dear? You’re quite a lucky fellow.”

Mrs. Wheeler offered the comment up absent-mindedly as her gaze returned to the store window. Solomon could make out from where he sat that the edges of her eyes looked almost like they cracked for a moment, pulled together into a great mess of wrinkles and knots, and a little bit of liquid seemed to spill out from between the cracked bits of skin, out down Mrs. Wheeler’s cheek, worn in with lines and showing her age, and welling together under her chin. Solomon took a moment to register fully that Mrs. Wheeler was crying. He pulled out a little rag from his breast pocket, covered in soot stains, and handed it to Mrs. Wheeler

“Here, for your tears”

She glanced at the rag, and then up at Solomon, and let out a little smirk, more to herself than anyone else.

“Oh, dear, I’m too old to dry my eyes. I’ll just let them dry on their own.”

Solomon didn't quite know what she meant, but he pulled the rag back towards himself and folded it up into his coat pocket.

Mrs. Wheeler's eyes suddenly went narrow, and her lips pulled together to make her look like she was watching for land from the bow of a ship. Solomon followed her gaze out the window to a bright red car—almost a pickup truck, but lower to the ground, and more angular—barreling down the road towards the Oncue.

“I wonder what kinda person drives a car like that. I always wonder when I see one of those—oh, what are they called, a Camaretto? My grandson always talks my ear off about them. I always wonder what kinda person could drive a car so crass.”

Once it had reached the turn-in for the Oncue, the red pick-up car's left turn signal ignited and began ticking on and off furiously.

“I guess we're about to find out, Mrs. Wheeler.”

The red pick-up car flared out from the gas pumps, barreling towards the big ice freezers next to the dumpsters and the propane tank refill station. Solomon tried to make out the face of the car's driver as it approached the Oncue, but he couldn't really discern any of the person's features in the darkness. He could make out that the person seemed to be wearing some sort of black hat, but other than that, he could not discern a nose or eyes in a face, and saw whoever the driver was as more of a shadow than anything else. The car drifted out of view of the front windows as it grew closer and closer to the ice freezers, and Solomon quickly lost sight of the driver. He could tell, however, when the headlights of the vehicle shut off. Soon after—maybe a moment later, maybe not even—Solomon heard the engine for the car turn over, and two doors open. Solomon watched as two men, one with a skiing beanie with a little poof at its top fixed on his head and wearing a pair of reflective swimming goggles, and the other wearing a long leather duster, with what looked to be a pair

of panty hose pulled over his head. The first man, with the swimming goggles, had his hands stuffed into the pockets of his windbreaker. Solomon thought, just for a moment, that maybe the men were preparing for a costume party, or that they were completing some sort of swimmer's exercise routine. But Solomon noticed that both men walked at a deliberate pace, and by the time the first of the two men, the man with the goggles, reached the front door for the Oncue, that these clothes weren't simply costumes.

“Hello, welcome to the Oncue. How can we help you this evening?”

Solomon offered this up before the two men were even through the door, and it poured out of him more like a ‘mayday’ broadcast than an employee address to the customer. Mrs. Wheeler sat shaking in her folding chair, her cane jangling about against the stumpy short legs, but still neither of the two men noticed her immediately, and the man who entered the store first—the guy in the panty hose—seemed to be in such a state of shock when he turned his head to meet Solomon's gaze that he walked right into Mrs. Wheeler, knocking her from her chair, her cane shooting out of her hand and striking against some Pringles cans at the front of one of the pantry aisles. He fell too, a metal six-shooter dropping from the pocket of his duster, skipping across the linoleum floor and coming to rest just beside the swinging door to the cashier's walkway. The man in the swim goggles ran into the store and leapt over his friend, landing belly-first on the ground, his hands swinging about, fumbling for the firearm. He eventually retrieved the gun and pulled himself to his feet. He pulled another gun, a black metal pistol more modern in make, from his pocket. He tossed the six-shooter back to his partner, who now sat cross-legged on the ground, next to Mrs. Wheeler, who lay prone across the floor just in front of the entrance. The panty-hose man didn't even notice his partner toss the firearm over to him, and so the gun struck him in the face, ricocheting off into the Pringles cans. But the man in the swimming goggles barely

seemed to pay his partner any mind, returning his right hand to his right pocket and pulling out from it another of the more modern-looking pistols. He shimmied two steps over, so that he stood directly across from Solomon, on the other side of the cashier alley, and trained both of the guns on Solomon, pointing them square at his head.

“The register. Get the cash. Put it in a bag—“

“You want I put it in one of our plastic bags, or would you prefer a paper bag instead?”

The man with the swimming goggles snarled at Solomon, his hands tightening around his guns.

“*Put it in a bag.* And then you go back there...”

The man with the swimming goggles swung one of his guns towards the saloon doors to the backroom.

“And you clear out the safe.”

“We don’t have no safe.”

“Bullshit you don’t. You got a safe. Say you don’t again, bam, lose your head. Go in the back. Open the safe. Take everything—*everything*—out of it, put it in a bag. You bring it here.”

“But we got no safe, mister. I never saw a safe back there, nowhere in the room—and I spend a lot of time in there.”

Even though the man’s eyes were covered, Solomon could see that he was growing more and more angry. Just by the way his lips snarled towards the bottoms, Solomon could tell clearly that this man was having no part of there not being a safe. Solomon glanced briefly towards the other man, the guy with the panty hose, who had retrieved his gun, now in his hand, and had the fire arm nuzzled against the back of Mrs. Wheeler’s head, who now

lay on the ground, almost completely still, her breathing now much quieter, her moans having ceased. Solomon saw the panty hose man move his thumb down over the hammer of his six-shooter and cock it back, as if to say to Solomon, 'enough is enough.'

"You see my man, there. You say any more of this 'no safe' stuff, he's gonna take it to task. So you cut that horseshit, 'cause you say it again, that lady's getting' blown away, and you gotta corpse on your hands, if you make it out of this okay. 'Cause you say it one more time, then you got a bullet comin' for you next."

Solomon took in one big gulp of air at the end of the swimming goggles man's address.

"But, mister, we got no safe."

The man with the panty hose let out a little sigh, his head drifting towards the ground a minute, then swinging back up, so that he faced the ski goggles man.

"Man, you really gonna make me do this?"

"You're in, you do what you gotta. This dumb fuck, he's gotta be made to know this ain't just rough-housing. When we aim, we aim to kill."

Solomon heard the swimming goggles man's voice crack under his last words, like he was straining to push his statement out from his lungs and into the air, and with his last remark, his voice fell to little more than a whisper, a kind of panicked hiss. Solomon turned towards the window for a moment, and made out a teal vehicle, almost like the pick-up car the two men had arrived in, make its way off the highway and approach the gas pumps at the Oncue lot's edge. Solomon wondered who might be driving, and whether they planned to stop into the store. Something about the car seemed familiar, Solomon thought, almost like he'd seen it earlier in the day. He worried that, maybe if whoever drove the car decided to stop in for a snack or to use the bathroom in the Oncue, the swimming goggles man or the

panty hose man might startle and fire at the driver. He worried this person might get hurt, and he tried, just in that moment, to think of some way he could warn the teal vehicle, signal to them ‘don’t come in; we’re being held up.’ And then he thought of Mrs. Wheeler, of how she trusted the Oncue, came here every day, and how now, she might never come back into the store again. Or, he realized, she might not leave it, either. He turned towards Mrs. Wheeler, now completely still, on the ground. He stared at the gun pressed against the back of her head, at the hammer cocked back where the gun ended and the panty hose man’s hand began.

And suddenly, Solomon returned in his mind to the issue of flying. He wondered, if that was the power he was meant to have, whether he could thwart anything horrible from happening now.

“I’mma give you a runnin’ count. Why don’t we say six? Now I’m gonna start counting. If I hit six—if y’all don’t change your tune about a safe by six—it’s bang to the old lady.”

Solomon thought that whatever power he did have, it should have a purpose, one that became evident. And he couldn’t see how flying away, leaving Mrs. Wheeler to the whims of these two men who wanted the safe, would do anyone a real good. He realized, too, that he couldn’t fly out of the Oncue now, unless he could blast through the roof. If he did have a power, this would be the moment it showed. He looked at the hammer on the metal six-shooter, staring at it for a long time.

“One.”

Solomon saw a thumb press against the back of the hammer, to make sure it was fully in place.

“Two.”

Solomon saw the thumb dragging back and forth over the hammer's surface, blotting out a little patch of sheen with each movement.

“Three.”

Solomon let his gaze drag down to the mouth of the gun, practically disappearing into Mrs. Wheeler's white hair.

“Four.”

Solomon wondered, as he stared at the gun's muzzle, where the bullet might sit in the chamber, and whether it moved about before the hammer struck, or if it remained completely still.

“Five.”

Solomon wondered for the first time whether what he could glean he was being told, when he was alone, was actually truthful, or whether it had all been some sort of lie, teased out to him slowly, that he'd taken on faith for being something else. He wondered if he could know, with certainty, if that someone had been honest, or if there was even anyone there at all. He thought, for a moment, that he could see the bullet through the bright silver metal of the gun; that he could make out its shape from within the rotating chamber. And then Solomon stopped wondering at what power he might have, turning his gaze back towards the reflective swim goggles bearing down on him.

“We don't got no safe.”