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## Sibling(s)

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Sibling(s)

A Novella

Senior Project submitted to

The Division of Written Arts of Bard College

by

John Istone

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2016

## Sibling(s)

Adam and Anne could not understand. Before them lay the nursery, bare. Disinherited. Between them, the nursery rhyme stretched taut across chapped lips. Adam/Anne. One thought hovering blind in a hall of mirrors. One soul mute in a tangle of telephone wire. Two hungry mouths made to suckle at the edge of a blurred borderline, unpacified. Here they are stationed, sleeping in shifts, weary from their travels, with no resolution in sight. They had attempted to strike a bargain at the crossroads. Unsuccessful, they wandered next to the mouth of the pearly gates, only to realize their pocket change wouldn't cover the price of admission. Back to the drawing board, where their memory charges forth; it takes hold of we, us, them. Coming and going, back and forth, a dilapidated carousel, grinding to a halt. A fickle funhouse mirror, catching the light. Red. Green. Strange traffic signals flicker from behind the cellar door. Home alone, compelled to descend the basement steps to explore a curious noise. Upon reaching the bottom their flashlight fizzles, the battery dies. As the door slams shut behind them, they are startled by a sharp movement from overhead. And the outcome? Out it comes quickly, an answer from the echo chamber. The third party emerges to voice its concerns, a failed mime hidden in plain sight, stark against the backdrop of cardboard boxes, refusing to sit still for much longer. He joins the troupe, regardless of their audible protest, by way of blackmail, complicating the equation. Adam/?/Anne. Their hands are tied. The pawns on the chessboard are locked in their

positions, the players unable to avoid a stalemate. Compromise is inevitable. They cannot turn to one side. They cannot pass GO! They cannot flip a coin, try as they might, without it landing in the gutter, teetering on its improbable edge. Consulting the rulebook is a futile endeavor, for the game is, and always has been, rigged.

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Adam and Anne could not understand. Adam, after several provocations from his sister, had scuttled under the oak desk of his father's study, a treasured nook that had always provided him with a sense of security. Sitting there sullen, with his knees drawn up to his nose and his suspenders sliding from his tiny shoulders, he resembled some crumpled puppet hastily cast aside after a performance. Anne loomed over him in the forest green armchair, firm and upright, a hardened glance that extended beyond the often docile demeanor of the other girls her age. The afternoon light burst through the window rather unreasonably, bleaching the contours of her doll-like grimace, causing the antique copper kaleidoscope to glint brazenly in its display case. Adam and Anne had spent many years on the floor, gently passing the kaleidoscope between them, witnessing soft marvels twist into focus. Their father had collected it from an estate sale, the crumbling manor of two aging spinsters, twins, who hardly left the grounds before dying together in their dressing gowns, hands clasped, heads tilted towards each other.

So their father had told them.

A cautionary tale, an attempt to make them revoke certain privileges of their own tumultuous twinship.

The kaleidoscope now had a slight chip in the lens, and the copper was riddled with verdigris. It was a well-traveled instrument, a necessity for any expedition, essential in revealing the seven wonders inscribed on the underside of the dining room table. The insistent glare behind the glass case hardly seemed to bother Anne. She exerted the calm of a china shop before the entrance of a bull. Her brother, arguably the more impressionable of the two, continued to squirm and pout and shuffle in his makeshift hidey-hole.

“You always have it your way.” Adam trembled in his haze of sandy hair. He picked idly at the hardened scab of his skinned knee.

“Not so. We take turns, that’s how it’s always been.” Anne replied, her stare unwavering.

“Not so! You get to choose in the end. It’s not fair.”

“Adam, there are more important matters to attend to. Besides, I’m older, I should make the big decisions.”

“You’re always saying that, but it’s a lie. You can’t remember who’s older, just admit it.”

“Drop it. Come out from under there and let’s settle this.”

Adam's face puckered as if he had taken a mouthful of castor oil. He dragged his buttocks forward along the hardwood floor, drawing closer to his sister, her feet dangling by his ears. Anne smoothed a crease out of her skirt and lovingly stroked the top of her brother's head. Flickering came from all around, light bending supple against the eaves and the archways, angular patterns, moving with purpose. It taps out a crude correspondence, a Morse code dictated from behind the display case, more belligerent with every tired tick of the clock.

Through the glass brightly, they were granted a fleeting observation of what they both considered to be the sole requirement of true beauty: impermanence, in all its volatile majesty. A Mobius strip that unspooled in various shades of formlessness. With them for a while this impression seemed to stay, wearing out its welcome, longer than light should ever truly stay. "LOOK INSIDE" it seemed to say.

Bringing back memories. Growing up, Adam and Anne had often imagined themselves inside the kaleidoscope, made microscopic by a mad scientist and swallowed whole, passing through the cavernous guts of the contraption as if ingested by a monstrous whale. Because of this, they had nicknamed the kaleidoscope "Moby." Bristling against its prismatic teeth, they were washed down into its glimmering belly, where the remains of countless explorers awaited, heaps of nacreous cadavers, pungent with bile. There they would sit, atop mounds of decomposing memory, hapless genies in a pressurized bottle, surviving off stray bits of krill and algae, attuned to the outer rumblings of Moby as it passed through sundry fields of vision,

collecting the fodder of experience. Every sight they had ever seen through its lens was there, alive and well. Most treacherous of all was the garden snake, ever longer in its shedding skins, that had once slithered forth from a bed of rotting leaves to bite Anne before Adam intervened, prodding it intrepidly with his trusty walking stick.

Here it was a constant danger, emerging from its lair in venomous fractals; a hydra perpetually rising and regenerating. The plumed serpent struck without notice, winding its way through the smeared crystal, twisting lecherously on the lengths of the looking glass. It came bearing a vibrant and eviscerated fruit, strains of purple pulp glistening on the tips of its forked tongue, streaking the corners of its unhinged jaw. A peripheral nectar, the juice of what came before, of what could not be confronted head on, bled out from the greenest of gardens that awaited them on the other side of the fence. The serpent savored these morsels as he wriggled proudly through the briar, devouring the seeds of what they could not remember, until his appetite was appeased. Then, seeking rest, he would choose to coil around a particular painting, Anne's painting, of the first day. Their first day at school, rendered in wide strokes of watercolor. On these rare occasions the serpent could be seen in a moment of repose, dangling limply from a broken bough, to tan his scales in the rays of the painted sun. They had to be very careful while sneaking past him. Silence was the golden rule.

Anne resisted the temptation to look inside.

“I don't mean to be a brat, I just want to try to understand, before it happens again. I want to-.”

“-be prepared, I know.” Adam finished, bowing slightly to the crest of her embrace. “But what can we do, really?”

She stared into his eyes, his sameness. Particles of dust took flight from corners creaking, filling the spaces between them. The study groaned under the weight of their predicament.

“I’m not sure we can do much of anything, but we can try. Tell me, Adam. The dream you had last night. I was there, wasn’t I?”

“You’re always there, you know that,” he said, squinting theatrically in the sun. “Always, but even more now. Ever since our thirteenth birthday.”

“Birthdays, try to remember. We mustn’t be in the habit of forgetting. What happened?”

“I was standing in front of our bedroom window, and I remember wanting to close the closet door. I felt there was something, there in the closet, but the light from outside was too bright. I could barely see the doorframe. I turned away, tried to peer outside. It seemed I was staring at the sun for hours. Then it changed, I was able to look down. I saw you on the lawn, covered in mud, reaching—”

“Out for you, yes. Certain details differ, I wonder...last night I dreamt I cut through Findlay’s again, same old story. Past the farmhouse and through the bog. I felt heavy, like my Sunday school dress was filled with rocks. And what was that light? So rough, coming through the trees. Next thing I knew I was wading through the bog, and my nature was...slow. All of nature was,

all tortoises and no hares. The water wanted me. Vines wanted to pull me under. As I struggled to reach the center, I saw you standing at the edge of the marsh, looking out from behind our bedroom window, reaching—”

“Out for you, yes. At the edge of the bog. Through the fog. Remember? That was the rhyme.

Anne, have you felt me near in the last couple days? Felt me...closer than close?”

“More times than ever before. Closer than close. Three times to be exact.”

“Go on.”

“Once on the school bus, I cussed under my breath. I thought a fly had bitten me. I swatted at my leg. Then you came home from soccer practice with that scrape. Next it was your haircut, I felt as if I was going bald. I was crawling around on the floor looking for scraps that weren’t there. Then...” Anne deferred, picking at her gooseflesh, batting her eyelashes, half-bashful. Adam stiffened up and yanked at her wrist, pressing her indelicately to continue, pressing her flushed face against the coarse upholstery.

“Tell me, Anne. We must be perfectly clear. What was it?”

“I...I felt you getting harder. Under the skin. Under my skin. In the garden greener, under the posies. Yes, you were upstairs, that much was certain. I could feel it grow between my fingertips. I couldn’t stop sweating. For a moment it was mine.”

“Ours. We’re conjoined somehow. It happened to me too. During your riding lesson. I doubled over in the gym showers. Under the skin. Under my skin. I felt a space inside grow damp. Then yesterday, I thought I would faint. The bleeding...”

“Yes. Can you still feel it?”

“From time to time.” Relaxing his grip, Adam took his sister’s hands. “Anne, why? Why is this happening?”

“I don’t know. Ever since we were babies, people—”

“Said we were different. Said we behaved in a way—”

“That was unsavory. That’s how Uncle put it. Unsavory. But we never-.”

“Fooled around, did we? We were together and we loved each other.”

“Love each other.”

“And...I don’t want to say the other’s name. Is he making us? Is he—”

“Speaking to you, too? Is it his voice in between us?”

“Through us. Not all of it is his. Not all of us. I don’t know what he wants—”

“To be. He wants to be. Inside and out.”

Some breeze from a boarded window, the one the baseball had broken early last spring, had blown the case open, and the kaleidoscope was close to shattering, while *his* whisper, the whisper of the third, grew tall between their candied tongues. That whisper with the taste of burnt molasses, the texture of spoiled taffy, melting over their struggle, poured into the brittle moulds of their empty words. They couldn't ignore it any longer, the limerick leaking black onto the carpet. The cluster of riddles that leapt around their pricked ears, bouncing off the open question mark that had poked up through the floorboards to throttle them, to force them offstage. That open question mark, a grappling hook, a boomerang in orbit, delineated the shrinking parameters of the closed room. Adam and Anne reached out to catch it, and soon it felt like it was all a game.

Outside the light had changed; the windows could barely contain it. Bright, wet blistering light, like bleach soaking through the fabric of the interior. Anne slid from her chair, drooped next to her brother. Dead weight. And the kaleidoscope jumped forth, rolling between them, gnarled and hot to the touch, screaming "To the Fairest," begging for them to look inside.

They had once taken Moby, without their Father's permission, to the local family funzone. Owned by a dubious trio of Sicilian brothers, in an underdeveloped neighborhood downtown, it was named Eden, the title having been lifted from the failed nightclub that the Brancaccio Bros. had managed months prior. Off the interstate, you could see the sign from miles away; Neon Eden crackling against abandoned storefronts and power washed granite,

filling up the potholes and the puddles with a cheap iridescence, with the canned sound of kindergarten laughter. Conveniently enough for some, there was a butcher's shop within the same building, and from the main entrance through the looking glass the twins peered down the adjoining alleyway, at the backdoor that was unbolted. A hunched old man in a soiled apron was visible from behind the dumpster. Swinging his mallet before a group of mangy mutts, their puckered maws floundering around a slab of raw meat, he proceeded to tenderize his offering. Two Chihuahuas, pushed to the fringe of the feast by a morose looking Boxer, gnawed competitively at a thin piece of gristle. Then came the tsk tsk of their sitter as she hurried the twins along, smoke trailing from her upturned nostrils. "Welcome to the children's crusade," she rasped. "Don't go drowning on me, kids. I'll be in the food court, holler if you need me."

They took off running, past the whirl of the pinball machines to the indoor jungle gym. They stashed their sneakers in cubbies before diving headfirst into the ball pit, filled with tiny globes purple and green, dented from roughhousing and sticky from spilt juice boxes, lined with safety netting that was already starting to fray, all of it suspended in a translucent plastic bubble that rose from the center of the structure. Visible from the arcade, reassuring dotting parents, it served as a dramatic focal point. And yet how closely it resembled the den of the Minotaur, connecting to a labyrinth of many brightly colored tubes that morphed into slides and secret passageways, thick and rubbery, like the interlocking roots of an extraterrestrial rainforest. When viewed from the kaleidoscope, the terrain became even more disorienting, an ocean of synthetic

surfaces oscillating over a canopy of sugar highs, dizzy spells, and fits of hyperactivity. Adam was so caught up in this pastel paradise that he didn't realize that Anne was no longer by his side. The ball pit had gone quiet, devoid of motion. He called out to her. Nothing. Some older kids were playing dice outside, near the air hockey tables, rolling snake eyes every time. The din of techno music from the laser tag arena floated up blearily from the basement.

“This isn't how this goes. She wasn't supposed to go missing. That's not the memory.”

Adam shouted to himself, and whoever else was listening in. Then came hissing, from somewhere under his feet. He jumped back. The plastic balls parted slightly in the distance. A rattler jutted out, taunting Adam momentarily before sinking back down. Their memory had been compromised: they had brought the serpent back with them, and it had taken Anne hostage. Grabbing Moby, Adam got a running start before he jack-knifed into the depths of the pit, sinking 20,000 leagues, through the unripened apples and the bruised plums, to rescue his sister.

Adam. Anne, kick the can. The pinkish matter still swirling back and forth. Back inside the study. Outside the gates of Eden, panting on their Father's floor. Their bodies were somehow attuned, their parts coalescing. Ready and willing to gaze into that bright, wet blistering light. Starting at the very bottom, pale and quivering. Asking themselves: What are the rules to this game of being? What is there to say, to see?

“We've grown young together, always together.”

“It’s coming through the backyard.”

“The closet door is swinging, swinging open.”

They had begun to rock back and forth, facing the light, off kilter at first, then falling into an immaculate synchronicity.

“Pattttttty cake. Pattttttty cake.”

“Break our bones, but names will never hurt us.”

“Only one name hurts the most.”

Bright.

“Training wheels. Bee stings.”

“Bee’s bumble they sure do. Together in the hive. Where have the bees that bumble—”

“Gone! They’ve gone away, you cocksucker!”

They were rocking and foaming and spasmodically rubbing the phantom sex that grew between them. They wanted him to leave.

Brighter.

“An eye for an eye! Bloody knuckles! Cat’s Cradle!”

“Yes, Cat’s Cradle. We’re all tangled up. Tie me up, tie me down. The bough breaks-.”

“Yes! The bough breaks! The cradle falls!”

Brighter.

“Mirror, mirror, on the wall. We reflections are speaking.”

“Speak for yourself!”

“We’ll speak for the both of us! We’ll speak for the both of us!”

They chanted. It chanted. It now chanted. On the floor, where everything was merging. Eyes like yolks bleeding into one another. Brains uncoiled, fusing together into one tangled skein of psychic matter.

And now one iris, irradiated. One pupil, dilated, finds its way to the looking glass. Total tunnel vision. A fleeting observation of beauty: formless. Children and their molecules reassembling. Out from the open air of rear windows, the winged migration is committed to its shape. Birds flown in from the looking glass. Third eye senses the name which could not be said. Second eye rolls into the back of a hollow head. First eye gouged by the long dormant name of the dead: Chestnut.

“Chestnut,” they said, finally.

“Chestnut,” it said, firstly.

Brightest.

The bulb breaks; the fuse is blown and the black let out. Not one free hand to flip the switch. A blank scene of short circuits. The aftermath resembles a splitting migraine. The serpent returns, weaving through the mind's eye, approaching the calamity of the tunnel. Is there a light at the end? Not here. Here there is only grey, grey and more grey. Who knew they had so much grey matter to give?

Particles of dust are airborne, spilling out from creaking corners. Lukewarm handprints on the hardwood floors, stretching out into infinity, and something in the middle still slightly spinning. A mangled instrument, a mass of hot copper. All is almost quiet now, just the crickets croaking as the remainder of dusk dies down. July takes it leave, shuddering through the bulk of the thistle and the beaks of the thrushes. What is left behind?

## Chestnut

*What a delightful mess we've made. Now I'm left to tidy up, while they've run off together at last to tie the knot. Or was it I that sent them scampering back into the woodwork, their puppy tails wagging, assholes clenched, scared shitless, their sovereignty at stake? Either way, run along now, kiddies, enjoy the honeymoon, don't mind me. What am I? Confused, that's one thing for certain. They won't speak me out in the open without some coercion. Their manners are deplorable, and their lisps are even worse. How I've come to detest the quaint lyricism of childhood, the countless malapropisms, the bucktoothed gumption. The onslaught of sappy sentiments, oozing out from the creases of so many forgotten Hallmark cards. Get well soon. Eat your vitamins. It's all an exorbitant waste of time and energy, take my word for it.*

*How to explain this rather delicate situation that has unfolded between my wretched brother and sister and I: Brother better, Sister Sweeter, a tiresome tug of war. Consider this the halftime show, a short period of stasis before the grubby hands return, desperately rummaging for crumbs in an empty cookie jar. I will have to backpedal a bit, starting somewhere before the beginning, mainly to cover logistics. An astrological phenomenon, occurring once every thirteen years, had provided the initial spectacle. Between them, down in the belly of the bitch, the eclipse was magnified. The legend goes: As our Father lumbered in the snowy distance one December evening, clutching a handsaw, dragging a freshly cut Christmas tree across his back, Mother lifted her head to the darkened skies, where directly above her the eclipse was reaching its*

*zenith. So the story goes, as the moon blotted out the sun, the ruptured sac gushed down her inner thigh, squishing inside of her snow pants, and in a mythic intonation she said aloud to herself "I'm having these babies tonight."*

*Why any woman of sound mind expecting triplets would be out gallivanting in the tundra is anybody's guess, but it serves as an early reminder that she might not have been properly equipped to handle the delivery that was to follow. A week premature, they hadn't anticipated the elevated inertia of the eclipse when consulting their lunar calendar. Cue the epidurals, for the doula had skipped town that weekend for an impromptu tryst in Atlantic City, and the shaman was on sabbatical.*

*In short, my Mother was careless bordering on negligent, my Father was oblivious bordering on moronic, and both failed miserably in taking certain fundamental precautions. Preserving the integrity of the family crest was to them a frivolous matter. When she went into labor, I envisioned our ancestors pacing endlessly in circles, rolling over in their shallow graves. How fortunate we are to have Adam and Anne to carry the torch, those simpering mongoloids, unquestionably the consequence of a gypsy curse. Generations of drought and pestilence until the rightful heir returns. Now it's all a very dull and protracted game of follow the leader, whomever that may be when push comes to shove. Who will collect the most prizes in this backwoods county carnival?*

*Will it be Adam who, deliriously stamping his flat feet, takes a lopsided victory lap towards the midnight sun, his pajamas drenched in the fluid of a lullabye? Or will it be Anne who prevails? I can see her preening for the breathless spectators, placing her trophy gingerly on the mantle that shelters the relics of her other towering achievements: a jar of dead fireflies, a plaque commemorating her participation in the annual burlap sack race. Hold onto your hats, folks, the sporting event of the millennium is coming to its final inning. A close call, a photo finish, the crowd goes ballistic. We're gonna need a referee for this one, ladies and gentlemen.*

*Little do these suckers know that they should be rooting for the underdog, placing their bets on the dark horse, the long shot, yours truly. I've gone through extensive training with some of the best names in the business and I am more than qualified. What they've seen out of me so far are low-grade parlor tricks compared to what's coming. I am capable of much more than the popping of buttons and the rearranging of furniture. Beware the screech of chalk dragged across the sidewalk; it means the heavyweight champion is drawing near.*

*Watching the twins grow up, our parents had so many unanswered questions: "But darling, who split the expensive backgammon set in half with the garden trowel? But whose nails were polished, whose hair was coiffed? Damn, honey, I could have sworn that I packed that picnic basket? Maybe we have ants in the garage again?"*

*“Sugarpie, do you know which one of these little shits took the lipstick from the medicine cabinet and smudged it on the mute nonsense between the ragdoll’s legs?” Over and over again, as if that would teach it a lesson.*

*Why had Mother forgotten to buy a second bicycle? Why had Father vomited during the christening? And why was it that the blind boy on the swing set could only sense one liquid movement in the foreground as Adam and Anne sat motionless, facing each other on a rusted seesaw? Why had their cheap dollar store mood rings always been the same color?*

*Adam had applied the stolen mascara, convinced all the while that he was brushing his teeth. Anne sold cookies door to door while her mind lay elsewhere, tattered in clumps of dirt on the rugby field.*

*Even I get mixed up sometimes. I, the reluctant historian, strive to avoid the trappings of conjecture, with varying degrees of success. Still, certain liberties are unavoidable, on behalf of the greater good. My word is bond, dear readers, and bondage. Had I the veins to fortify this claim, a blood oath would surely be in order. Those types of pacts never appealed to the twins, they were never compelled to use blood or spit to seal a deal, perhaps because all divergent streams return to the same source. Soon the source will be undisputed, now that I am able to take the appropriate course of action.*

*After all is said and done, no one will remember what came before. It will be a meticulous process, removing the evidence, doctoring photographs and burning the keepsakes (the sweat is pooling on my brow already), all to arrive at the fabled land of milk and honey. Where I can at long last kick back and admire the carnage from the verandah. And best of all, in the honey shining and the milk seeping there will come to be the reflection of not two. No better half, no worthwhile counterpart, no trusty companion. There I will build an empire of sidekicks, where every underdog will be knighted and canonized, bathing unimpeded in the limelight, dancing a vigorous rumba to the sound of Gabriel's trumpet. No such thing as twins in my neck of the woods, just one identical twin, shorn of that pesky 's', standing alone, excommunicated, devoid of plurality, the village idiot pelted with yesterday's vegetables.*

*I can fool them once, twice, any number of times until the desired effect is acquired. Their powers are waning. I hear the fading Twinspeak, diffracted through paper cups. I consult the mirror-mirror on the crumbling wall of the Gemini spirit. Memories once lustrous grow duller by the second, tossed into the quicksand, sinking fast through granular deposits of flesh and bone. Separate bodies, once augmented with pulse and breath, crushed into a fine powder. Their perfect teeth whittled down to the gums, their sturdy mandibles eroding. Adam and Anne, a white-knuckled bundle of nerves as they are strung up by their feet to be skinned and spit-roasted. The unmixed pleasure I'll derive from their crackling innards, stir-fried in our Grandmother's cast-iron skillet. Hunched over the stove, sharpening my cleaver, I will salivate*

*over those simmering globs of adipose and cellulite, sing a splendid ditty while bringing their chitlins to a boil. Soul food. After a sumptuous meal, I will stand by the sink and fondly pack the Tupperware, watching the leftover trimmings of their essence clog up the garbage disposal. I swear on my lucky oven mitt that I'll never change the oil in that scum-infested grease trap.*

*But so many other viable options, an encyclopedia of delicious tortures to consider. Presto Change-O! Whatever I damn well please. With a stroke of my wand they are veal cutlets, prisoners of war, wax effigies unable to withstand the torrential downpour, the Spring rain washing them away. Good riddance, I'll mutter, splashing around in my new galoshes.*

*Heavens, now I'm getting ahead of myself. You must understand it can be difficult to concentrate, what with this distracting light, stroboscopic, beaming from behind a certain tree, the location of which is no matter of urgency for the time being. Do not press the issue.*

*With them out of the picture, I will belong to a world of skin, an empire of muscle. Lord knows I have paid my dues, working my way up the corporate ladder. What humble beginnings, deveining shrimp on that beat-up steamboat that toured the river Styx, earning nickels as a lowly shoeshine boy on the outskirts of purgatory. Convincing myself I could have a career in the pictures only to spend my first audition bent over a casting couch, my headshots grinning back at me from a smegma-crusted wastebasket. After that I took on a series of custodial duties. My ancestors took pity on me, allowing me to polish the brass in the hall of memorabilia. Soon I was tending to restorations in the ossuary, and raking the crematory ash from the charnel grounds.*

*My resume is beyond extensive; with my level of expertise there is no chance of being passed over for this promotion. A congratulations is in order, for soon I will reenter the realms of the flesh. You will raise a glass to toast my health. At the company barbecue you will wave to me from the shore, as I perfect my butterfly stroke in an ocean of spit, the sky above me menstruating without shame. The morning of my coronation will be robust with the economics of angels, chanting salutations as I slip into my ceremonial robes. An exquisite palanquin, adorned with the calcified remains of my progenitors (at least some use will come of them) will parade me through the streets while I proclaim my royal decree:*

*“Behold the compassion of saints, fiercely freckled and double jointed. Behold a martyr made between skins, reveling in the spoils of war. My siblings’ dynasty has been conquered. They are a concern of the distant past, grist for the mill, scraps for my scrapbook, two parting glances overlapping in the fickle fog of memory. This is the dawning of a new era, the glorious age of Chestnut (Bon voyage, assholes).”*

*I’m forgetting my place again, which is to say in between (and eventually above) the other. I mean, others. Yes, that’s correct. There were two. There were two, weren’t there? One right after the other. Not long after, not too long after...At precisely the same time. One metronome clicks. Much perfect rhythm, never out of step. Heart beats. One.*

*But then again comes that nagging feeling. There were two, yes I swear it. There must have been to cause all this commotion, to play all these silly games. Cowboys and Indians. A*

*doctor and a patient. Patience and Prudence. By now it must be common knowledge that I'm much too squirrely to sit around playing solitaire, waiting for the party to kick into high gear. Pin the tail on the donkey will never cut it. I long for adventure of the highest order.*

*An unfulfilled longing, really, for my siblings have always been rather uninspired in their exploits. There are a few significant exceptions (the canoe accident being a personal favorite) but outside of a handful of close calls, they were not prone to accidents, or even incidents, entirely insipid in thought and action. How I wished for a clumsier pair, a Tweedle-Dum and Tweedle-Dummer, running with scissors and jumping on beds. But no, she seldom stumbled. He hardly faltered. It rarely cried. They had the obnoxious habit of looking after one another. A cloying symbiosis, grotesque on a microscopic level. When viewed under a slide, their molecules congealed, revealing an inverted protozoa, a nebbish fungi squirming under scrutiny. With this type of sibling dynamic, the parents are always to blame. Our horny, hackneyed Ma and Pa, splitting atoms all over the coffee table. Accelerated fuck particles, hasty copulations, splitting their sweaty atoms in slanted quarters, grasping for chemical reactions in creaking corners, stubbornly screwing in dingy motel stairwells. A laundry list of failed experiments. Never a breakthrough, not for those sullen splitters. To think it was all in the name of research.*

*Our parents and their infamously inconclusive lovemaking set the stage for this queasy alliance, this unorthodox triumvirate you see before you. Long before this moment of rapture, this miracle of puberty, our paths had been decided. No coincidences, not even the first time they*

*came together. The last time they looked at each other. Before they were, they are. Adam and Anne, one soul once upon two bodies, you understand, yes? Well, that is if you exclude yours truly (I've never really counted much with this crowd). There simply wasn't much room for me. I had to butt out of the conversation, murmuring in the corner, fitted with the dunce cap, twiddling my thumbs. Until now. You might think me a dullard had you not stumbled upon my master plan. In the plain light of day I can be very unassuming.*

*So now what? Now what is there? Who can tell the difference? Who could tell the two apart, the one together?*

*I am coming to my senses. I serve a purpose, mind you. Sometimes I forget my place, and we mustn't be in the practice of forgetting. I, the byproduct of this improbable coupling, the noxious miasma drifting over the rabbit hole. Was that last bit too purple? Allow me my indulgences, if you may. I am a creature of habit. I shriveled up in the womb before I had a chance to display my many talents. Grant me these delusions of grandeur, for I am sickly and without shelter, doomed to my monochrome meanderings, neutralized in the valley of shadows. Yadda yadda yadda. Prone to my middlebrow pretensions, I'll readily admit. I the sentient folly, the unchristened bastard pried from the loose loins of language, the afterbirth gargled incessantly in the snout of a beleaguered sow. Behold, it is I, the scourge of Bethlehem, the sulphurous discharge that lingers in the manger, a stench unvanquished by frankincense or myrrh. And while we're at it, I'll grant you one last concession; the removal of the italics, which*

I'm sure must irritate those averse to my more florid proclivities. Irrespective of formatting, had I been properly delivered, little grooming would be needed to propel me to the ranks of the great dictators. Tis' a pity, all that fucking and hootin' and hollerin' gone to waste. Beached on the banks of Dead Baby Island without a diaper to dump in.

But now is really a fascinating time to be dead. My scholarly pursuits have not been in vain, for I'm still finding loopholes in this accursed contract, a bevy of extenuating circumstances. Amazing Grace and her periods have provided me with a fresh perspective. Granted, it's about time that the cards are stacked in my favor. I was a weakling in the womb, a sensitive boy, often keeping to myself. In retrospect, I'm sure my reticence made it easier for the twins to gang up on me in the end. I simply did not possess their level of resolve, their instinct for survival. The entire pregnancy was unexpected, a kind of cosmic non-sequitur. There had to have been a pill skipped or a defective rubber that got us all into this pickle, a dislodged diaphragm even. It cannot be overstated that our parents were meticulous in this department, taking extreme preventative measures, yet despite buckets of spermicide, irrespective of his narrow urethra and her troubled cervix, we managed to slip past the sentinels unnoticed. A guerilla faction infiltrating the ovum, a tenacious militia of zygotes marching forth from my Mother's war torn cuntspace. I'm genuinely surprised I made it that far, behind enemy lines, given the numerous obstacles that had been placed in our way. Really, the only thing missing was that boorish cliché of the coat hanger, a strategy my Mother is tacky enough to have at least

considered. Still, one of these spermtraps must have worn me down along the way. As early as the second trimester I felt a bit under the weather, not quite up to snuff. The ultrasounds had shown the twins flourishing, with poor malnourished moi squished under their collective girth. If I had the good fortune of cutting the line, climbing over the heft of their bulbous backsides, perhaps I would have made my debut on the hospital bed as the lovable runt. But in the end my frailty betrayed me; pinned beneath the parasites, I could not gain enough traction to move to the front of the house. Therefore, lacking even a modicum of patience, Adam and Anne clambered down the canal, emerging unscathed, fit as fucking fiddles. It was then that, in the haggard cleft of the episiotomy, to lowered expectations, I came dribbling out, performing my stilted stillborn routine for a live studio audience. Critical reception was, at the time, mixed.

But now I'm slated for a comeback record, crawling like mad towards the window of opportunity called adolescence. Interventions are often time-sensitive; I must strike while the hormones are raging, catch them with their knickers at their ankles. It's a regular old junkyard jamboree, me on all fours rummaging through the pituitary refuse, dredging up ancient and impertinent quarrels. I've been raking the mud in the hopes of unearthing a full-blown scandal, a bombshell that would go on their permanent records. While my methods may seem uncouth, I will attempt to position myself carefully, in the negative space that once and will again exist between these separate vessels. For they once had their memories and their bodies and all that came with brothering and sistering but that is no longer for now. I orbit that undiscovered planet

which threatens to collapse as we sleep side by side by side. I am the ouroboros constricting their mutual core. I the unborn proxy for a being once halved, who can never accurately recount the tenets of their separation. Once apart and when was the moment precisely? When were the moments precisely?

And here in this empty study (for I am the proverbial poster child of emptiness) the kaleidoscope begins to twirl again, gathering momentum. It must be stuffy in there, with all that incoming traffic, all those memories boiling over, but then again, they are used to sharing.

This just in: I'm receiving word from my producers that the twins have rallied together to protest, and our plotting to make a grand escape. Acting in the spirit of investigative journalism, I believe this is a development that warrants proper coverage. Let's give them the floor, if only for a short while, to air whatever grievances they may have:

(Editor's Note: The following excerpt is an abridged transcription of the original message, partially transmitted via cetaceous echolocation. Roughly translated from Kaleidoscopese using a biofeedback generator that analyzes the frequencies of incoming beta waves to create a succession of cryptographic notations, which approximate the initial intentions of the messenger in conjunction with the Emoticon-4000, a revolutionary cyberkinetic device that duplicates human empathy algorithms, utilizing a pneumatic piston lubricated with a synthetic derivative of serotonin [est. 0.000465 micrograms]. Although still a prototype (a couple of circuits still need tweaking), test results have proven inconclusive. The resulting text was co-

edited by Chestnut and Synesthetes Inc. to allow for maximum poetic license and, at the time of publication, an indeterminate amount of veracity. Certain idiomatic expressions commonly understood by native speakers of Kaleidoscopes may have been anglicized to reach our target demographic.)

“Can you hear the colors of Us talking? I we Us are working through quicksand, slowsand, an hourglass turned on its side, to refrain from keeping any of our appointments. Got to be another way out, Us is thinking. Avoiding threats from the Siamese, retreating from the pull of the (still larger) grey unconsciousness. Stuck inside the Neon Eden resurfacing, with serious injuries. Send a medic immediately. Adam’s rib cage has been torn asunder, crawling with red-faced baby sisterlings. Reporting a lump as well, in the throat. Possibly malignant. Adam’s apple engorged, inflating sporadically, like a faulty buccal pump, compressing the shape of his esophagus. Difficulty breathing. May require tracheal incision. Aside from minor abrasions, Anne’s lace is unraveling. Breasts filling out. Early symptoms of heat stroke. Mild hysteria.

This message has been marked as urgent. This is a direct appeal for clemency; you can’t imagine the squalor of this place. Virulent origami is strung throughout trees, causing rot. Entire neighborhoods have been tee-peed, and cherry bombs explode on every corner at ungodly hours. Cockroaches congregate behind every square inch of wallpaper. All there is to eat is a canister of Play-Doh and one Flintstone’s Vitamin covered in couch lint. We all must walk in hopscotch formation, on panels of scorched pavement, past the ubiquitous burst of fire hydrants. Arriving at

the park, where the foliage is overexposed, marred by parallax error. The solarized verdure burns inside the nexus of our trinity. Really, it's too much, Us can't stand being closer than close so I beg you to STOP. PLEASE, SOMEBODY HELP! Us cries out, but nobody hears Us. Our mouth is full of confetti. Our voice is tempered by the helium tank. This isn't your birthday, Chestnut. Slain cherubs spiral through all reflections, towards the molten earth. Strangled by umbilical cords, winding purple through the shards of broken mirrors. Seven centuries of bad luck. Out behind the batting cages Mother Goose is groveling. She has been forced into nakedness, pummeled by line drives, curve balls, colored by your numbers in open sores. Pigment of shame is squeezed from a tube labeled Cadmium NO. 3, rubbed into our eyes every afternoon, tinting the entire memosphere like a case of scurvy. Sallow orphans huddled for warmth in a Kodak moment. Pardon me, where does one find the antiviral? We are together tied with tinsel and the whiteness of milk has stopped flowing. The bitter yellow (ever longer) serpent weaves back from silver screens. Greener growing blindness between us and we and I. Still larger, the black square towers over our [*sic*] Technicolor Genesis. The translucent hue of whimpering stipples the mainframe, the matte (color reel missing) glosses over our diminishing differences. I. Are. Stuck. Stuck inside the light that shines thick all over me-we-us and our bodies transparent, superimposed, giving in to this plague of oneness and it's all your fault, Chestnut, and US-I-WE WOULD BE FUCKING FINE WITHOUT YOU!!"

*-Hiccapped (Adam/?/Anne), courtesy of Kaleidoscope Enterprises.*

I must sincerely apologize for that rather lewd interruption. They don't like when I'm running the show. Hogging the spotlight they would seem to think. I'll do my best to see that it doesn't happen again. But really it would be in their best interest to understand that they need me, after all. They can't deal with this new kind of togetherness; they need spiritual guidance, someone with visionary experience. Who better than me? As you can see, they are frazzled, jumbled up in that flashy little gizmo of theirs, the perfect booby trap (the first of many strategically placed throughout the premises). Their discourse is getting quite unruly. Unbecoming of such delicate children. I can't imagine where they got it from. All kidding aside, if it were up to me they would learn to properly observe the etiquette of reflections, speaking strictly in the dialect of the mirror. For example:

Adam: “.Now Ned, I am a maiden nun; Ned, I am a maiden won.” :ennA

Anne: “.Ten animals I slam in a net.” :madA

Adam: “.Do Good's deeds live on? No, Evil's deeds do, O God.” :ennA

Anne: “.Madame, not one man is selfless; I name not one Madam.” :madA

Oh, music to my ears, that guttural mothertongue. If I had a firm enough hand to force them into this kind of banter (my go-to lingua franca), they would hardly have the energy to bitch and moan about their current state of affairs. Soon enough, one can hope. A firm hand would be a luxury for a numinous runt such as myself. I know kids, it can be taxing getting

adjusted to the presence of your younger brother. But in all honesty you should have been prepared for this. You've been trying to deny your origins for quite some time now.

There had been isolated instances in the past. Some telltale signs of this fateful juncture. Certain astral synchronicities here and there. The family reunion where one of them went missing for hours. The daily nosebleeds, losing their teeth at the same time. Those ominous first words (wouldn't you like to know)...but nothing outwardly ambitious, not until after elementary school at least. Then so many glorious changes, all so unexpected. The season of changes is resplendent with yearning. It allows for one to interject, to loiter under the tenuous bridge of desire, charging tolls when necessary. The tired maxim that "opposites attract" is irrelevant for these demagnetized animals, beasts of burden, limping meekly into the jungles of maturity. Their separate cores were compromised further by "Aunt Flo, the Crimson Giantess," whose monthly visitations send packs of wolves into a feeding frenzy (myself included). Adding zest to the bedlam was the arrival of the eponymous erection, AKA "The Emancipation Proclamation." My dim-witted brother now an amateur farmhand, waking at dawn to churn his rancid butter, to choke his diminutive chicken. These experiences, after some mild tampering, were involuntarily shared by the two. Adam would whimper when the phantom twitchings of Anne's clitoris would rise within him, the once buried transmissions surfacing like shrapnel in his tremulous extremities. Anne, however, readily embraced Adam's extension, coaxing the invisible antennae, invigorated by her brother's nascent ejaculations. Through these telepathic dalliances, the twins

began to cultivate what can only be described as an aura iridescent, their palettes mixing indiscriminately. Their bodies ripe with transition, harvesting the spectral musk of androgyny. Soon we will commence with the inquisition, and those convicted of heresy will be submerged headfirst into the undiluted realm of genderlessness, known amongst sailors for its choppy, ultraviolet waters.

Physical distance was of no consequence. Miles away Adam would sheepishly yield to the texture of Anne's ballet slipper, its contours coated in dirt, unfastened and abandoned near the burbling bog. Her pheromones pungent in his nostrils, he'd known immediately where to find it. Elsewhere, under shin guards and bicycle helmets, he would sense a swath of her crinoline gently ruffling against his bony hips. Meanwhile, Anne would sustain the perverse grammar of his trophy scars, wearing his black eyes and fat lips under the facade of the unblemished.

They had always been bound to each other. Ever since the early years in one way or another. These cloistered companions, that was their inexcusable weakness. Low-hanging fruit, my poker buddies would likely say. It would only take a little more tinkering before they couldn't help but let me in.

Then this Summer. The Eureka! moment. When they wandered past the cellar door. To retrieve a bag of marbles? A ball of yarn? Whatever it was it would come to unravel the one and the other.

Let's pause for a brief survey. Question 1:

Do I irritate you? Perhaps I will change my tone if you insist. One must keep up with the times. When one is the abortive essence made concrete, the purgatorial emissary, one has plenty of time to dabble in all the latest trends. Really, don't hesitate to call me Chestnut. It truly is a worthwhile sobriquet. Here are some of the many reasons why:

I have fallen from many trees. I am compact and embryonic. My entire existence can be summarized in "roasting on an open fire" or "Jack Frost nipping at your nose." Fun Fact: For the early Christians, the Chestnut represented chastity, and I ask you friends, what is more chaste than a poor unbaptized soul marooned on Dead Baby Island, suffering for the sins of the Father? Another Fun Fact: In Japan, the Chestnut has come to symbolize endurance through hardship. Regardless of the odds, I remain even-keeled, frequently turning to recreation as a source of much-needed relief. Some of my hobbies include: acting as a moderator for paradoxical states of being, ikebana, developing ciphers to decode the miscellaneous abstractions of the "family jewels," and watching reruns of "Leave it to Beaver." I also work part-time as a novice cartographer, charting two formless principalities in the midst of a holy war, which is no small feat, mind you. If there were six adjectives to describe me in a nutshell (har har) they would be: festive, familial, nourishing, seasonal, (vastly) underappreciated, and most certainly fraternal. Chestnut! Doesn't it make sense? We can even pretend that you came up with it, you clever shrews. Call me Chestnut, of the ambiguities. I'm here to stay.

For now, so much to prepare. I must take my leave in order to manage some personal affairs. I promise I shan't be long. In the meanwhile, I'm sure the twins would jump at the chance to take you on a trip down memory lane while I'm out and about. Let it be known that certain sequences may be subject to "embellishment." Some of their recollections will be presented in their original form, while others (I'm sure you'll agree) benefit from my careful curation. I am an auteur, after all. A bit of artistic license never hurt anyone, so said the incomparable Leni Riefenstahl. So, snuggle up with your hubby and enjoy our quality programming.

In the following episode, Anne is up to her old hijinks again. Cutting class without a hall pass; will her risky business put her in the Principal's office, or can she count on being "Saved By the Bell?" Don't touch that dial! Stay tuned during our brief commercial break for some special bonus material.

(A Coda In Kaleidoscopese)

"The raw rainbow snakes through crooked water. A mirage bleeds out from the salted wounds of the desert. A hologram is hovering around the imploded curvature of a summer peach. Home movies are projected in reverse."

### **Color Bars**

Meanwhile, in the study, the crack in the lens appears to be larger.

## Pink Noise

A faint ringing. Is that what it was? The school bell never rippled through Anne with much purpose. As other children, liberated from tedium, leapt from their desks in a frenzy to merge with the chattering masses, she was not moved. The shuffling of papers warranted no excitement, nor did the swooshing of skirts or the dropping of pencils. Anne realized that the white noise of spastic children and the pedestrian clatter surrounding them had never spoken to her directly, had apparently addressed everyone else except for her. It did not speak in a voice of familiarity, the outside world. She was never swept away by the undertow of radio waves, and scarcely understood the pleasures of singing along. Ballet was appealing, but strictly in form and function. It was no Tchaikovsky that compelled her to pirouette. The music was inconsequential.

When confronted with the buzz of the intercom or the exhausted screech of the school bus the vibrations routinely avoided her, making excuses to head off in the opposite direction. It wasn't that her ears couldn't ascertain a certain frequency or recognize an infectious melody; it was the apparent emptiness that Anne perceived in these vessels, their lack of substance. In the midst of these bleating schoolchildren she heard nothing essential. Even as the history teacher commanded authority through his overbearing posture, and conveyed force through a slew of tyrannical gestures, his stentorian drone did little to attract Anne's attention. What other students found threatening in his tone Anne found distant and insipid.

A faint ringing. A muffled procession of footsteps. Nothing penetrated this thick blanket of static. Sometimes it was like hearing vague echoes of the world outside the womb. Other times each individual sound, regardless of repetition, approached Anne in a foreign tongue, blabbering interminably in the background. Indeed, her ears seemed to lack a foreground entirely. All noise existed in the vacuum of her periphery. Because of this she overslept every morning, unfazed by the most obstreperous of alarm clocks. Adam could wake her only by hopping atop her chest and forcibly blowing the sleepdust from her tightly clenched eyelids, and when that strategy failed only the blunt trauma of a pillow would suffice. She watched as others were literally moved by sound, often bewildered by the immediate reaction it seemed to inspire.

Adam, for instance, was far more sensitive. She had witnessed him on numerous occasions scurrying off to the corner, cowering from the verbal assaults their father often launched when returning home from work. Even when directing his wrath at the both of them, usually stemming from some mundane act of mischief, Anne was insusceptible to this aural bludgeoning. She would cross within inches of her father's foaming mouth to the kitchen counter to pour herself a glass of milk, nodding her head politely as if he was only gently reminding them to wash up before supper, or that kittens had no business ingesting lighter fluid.

"Do you have a permanent ear infection?" her father once hollered, provoked by her indifference to strike the glass from her pursed lips. In this moment, it wouldn't be the shattering of the glass that caused Anne to temporarily recoil from the table, nor the abrupt violence of her father's

gesture, but the sudden sense that somewhere Chestnut was attuned to the proceedings. She would stare back incredulous, through the agitated bodies of her brother and father, her milk mustache dripping over her grimace, marking her features with a kind of feral absurdity. She would then get down on all fours and, sprawled lithely across the linoleum, begin eagerly lapping up the spilt milk, her gaze fixed squarely upon Adam, who had up until this moment been pressed up against the cupboard, hyperventilating. Her nimble tongue darted along the edge of the tiles, flickering across the pearlescent expanses, quickly accumulating tiny bits of glass, a mouth shimmering with an obscure purpose. Their father, unfazed by these shenanigans, retreated to the patio, closing the sliding glass door behind him. He continued to watch the spectacle for a moment, with a strange grin plastered on his face. He then promptly vanished, most likely having more important matters to attend to. Adam, relieved by his absence, took some time to gather his breath before scurrying over to his sister and, eyeing the dish towel hanging from the oven rack, began to mop up the remaining mess.

“It’s alright, you can stop now, he’s gone.”

“But don’t you want me to finish?” said Anne, as tiny rivulets of blood spiraled in the tepid white cosmos on the floor below.

“They’re both gone. I swear to you this never happened, he’s trying to trick us. Look.”

Adam pointed towards the open kitchen window. There in the garden was a jump rope suspended in mid-air, its handles vibrating almost imperceptibly, spinning in a lackadaisical orbit above the

thirsty bougainvillea's. The whirring noise was strange, like a VHS tape rewinding. It made Adam feel drowsy. Anne only responded to sound through her brother's ears. He never heard what he wanted to hear. She rose from the floor to whisper to him, hearing her voice only as he would, crisp and close, feedback from a megaphone curdling in her stomach. The eardrum was punctured by the jump rope. Something collapsed on the floor, asleep.

Anne stumbled back to her quiet classroom. She could see the lockers slamming shut and the water fountains spurting. Had there been a fire drill? The halls were so empty. A garbage can had been overturned. Amongst crumpled papers marked in red, strewn with black banana peels, she saw her face on the side of a milk carton. She felt the overwhelming urge to use the bathroom.

### Chestnut

You see what I have to put up with? I let my guard down for five minutes and it's total pandemonium. That jump-rope was an unforgivable oversight, a huge glitch in the system; there wasn't supposed to be a way out of that fucking kitchen (I'm gonna tear the AV department a new one, that's for sure). And don't even get me started on the hack I hired to play our Father; for one thing he was late on all his cues, but that smile towards the end? Like some overgrown Norman Rockwell painting in a second-rate dentist's office. What a joke. I guarantee he'll never work in this dimension again.

Since I cut the episode short, let me explain what happened next: lacking even the most rudimentary motor skills, my dim-witted sister proceeded to straddle one of the urinals in the boy's lavatory, convinced that Adam's puny pecker was dangling between her legs. It doesn't take a urologist to guess what happened next: without a fly to unzip, she thoroughly soiled her britches. The myth of the magic piss slit debunked. An aim far from true. Adding to the gravity of this faux pas was the fact that all the toilets were occupied. The school quarterback saw the whole thing, peering through the stall in disbelief while she worked herself into a wet stupor. I would think the ruffians present would have flogged her right then and there, such insolence should not go unpunished. I'm sure it would be a welcome reprieve from playing grab-ass in the locker room. Serves her right for thinking she could roll with the boys. Blasphemy, really, to interrupt a perfectly healthy bowel movement with her trickle of wishful thinking.

I now must profess to know nothing about young men, for instead of the glorious hazing ritual that I had envisioned, they became utterly transfixed by the damp slag. Some of them even forgot to wipe! I kid you not; these foul lads were astride their porcelain thrones, tugging at the bulge in their jockstraps as Anne splashed around like a rodeo clown in her own rank piddle.

Honestly, what's become of today's youth? Pathetic; look at her try to sop up that mess. The hand dryer won't do you any good, sweetheart. And all this time I thought I was the one with penis envy. Go figure.

But in service of the greater good, Adam and Anne must think long and hard about what they've done, even if they didn't do it. To relive these precious moments and to fully understand the consequences of their actions is the first step on the road to recovery. Consider the kaleidoscope a "chamber of reflection" if you will. A groovy convent for at-risk teens. All the kids are doing it, and any average Joe knows that a proper preparation for the rapture is not complete without a stint of asceticism. A lot of these half-assed mystics think they can just plop down in a sweat lodge to attain enlightenment. I say: Get thee to a nunnery if you want the real deal. Mosey on down to your local monastery (speaking of which, the thought of Adam with a tonsure is a real kneeslapper). Sure, the tribulations of the contemplative life can be taxing, but they'll reap the benefits after all is said and done. Before you get any wise ideas, know that I'm not preaching fire and brimstone. Doomsday cults aren't what they used to be, the smell of sulphur just doesn't cut it anymore. What I'm after, in all honesty, is entirely removed from eternal damnation. Although I'll miss teatime with Baphomet, I've got bigger mackerels to marinate. Allow me to close with a cheap shot: I, your devoted svengali Chestnut, promise that everything happens for a reason.

(Sitar Outro)

...and it seems that our network is down. Again. Our scheduled programming is currently unavailable. I'm surrounded by incompetence. To avoid airing a rerun or prematurely ending our broadcast, I'm going to skip ahead to the next time slot. Please standby.

## Bedside Drama # 1

## Chestnut

My how the bedding has changed throughout the tiresome years. It was difficult to find an arrangement that suited them, such selfish children. What I would give to know the warmth of a proper night's rest. I, the insomniac ad infinitum. Rise and shine was just a flimsy folktale to soothe my unblinking eyes. Mother and Father didn't hold onto the crib that was meant for me for very long; for seven months it grew musky in the corner of the attic before they pawned it to some greasy immigrants at the neighborhood yard sale. So without a place to rest my weary head, I was made to watch the bedside drama of my beastly brethren, as they fussed and fidgeted and wailed until the crack of dawn, never understanding how cozy they could be, how enveloping their blankets, how commodious their cribs. Yet not once had they ever considered Chestnut, my eyelids glued open with the adhesive of Limbo, crammed under the bed like a stack of moldy comic books. They never thought to make room for me, not even at the foot of their mattresses. Some cur from the pound would have had a warmer reception. For this most egregious offense, I've done my best to ensure that insomnia is a burden the three of us will always share. From my makeshift turret I have watched them, brother and sister, nasty and naughty in their rubber sheets, continuously squandering their chance to hit the hay. Slumber was an unwanted gift, an unchecked privilege that I would have gladly accepted on their behalf. And when they finally did manage to doze off after much cantankerous protest, they would shift and

shimmy, prone to muscle spasms, writhing as if being trampled by the very sheep they had neglected to count. What I would have given to be the drool encrusted on their pillowcases. To taste the perspiration on their beady little brows. Left to glower in my own brine, as it were.

Your tragic hero, Chestnut, has presided over many seasons of sleeplessness. Throughout the years I have developed a foolproof strategy to maintain their curfew. Ever faithfully I poked and prodded at their full bladders, an ambassador of accidents. If a mouth was left agape, it was without delay force-fed spider eggs from any rusty cutlery I had lying around. When their Father would croon to them before lights out, most often a flat rendition of an Everly Brothers tune, I would harmonize in a wet screech to “All I have to do is dream” to keep them from comfort. I would use my fancy footwork to stomp on their dreamcatchers. If the mood was right I would get all gussied up, use my best Bug’s Bunny drag to lure their teddy bears into unspeakable acts (my loose approximation of sodomy, I do say I buggered the cotton out of those stuffed bottoms with reckless abandon). When they did happen to doze off I would pinch at their sides, squeeze their nostrils shut, goading them into uncomfortable positions. A glass of warm milk was no match for me, as I sat tangling their scrawny limbs in a mass of malfunctioning mobiles. No traditional form of solace was acceptable. Visitations from the Tooth Fairy were strictly prohibited, and any attempt at a sleepover ended in failure, thanks to my way with shadow puppets. Working the nightshift was a good gig, with more perks than one would expect. After hours were always a crack-up; taking swigs of moonshine with the Bogeyman, snorting lines of faerie dust with the

Sandman. Until dawn we would spit and cuss and play Go Fish on the Legoland carpet, and whoever won got to terrorize the children first the next evening.

As much as I enjoyed teasing them in this way, their crying in infancy was inexcusable. How best to describe it? Like a swarm of pterodactyls copulating at the brink of extinction. For chrissake, what on Earth could be the source of all this hullabaloo? A pair of abhorrent larvae wriggling inexorably towards my last nerve. If their mother had any sense of common decency, she would have swallowed us all on the floor of that hotel lavatory when she had the chance (I'm certain the P.T.A. would hardly miss her contributions of carob at the annual bake sale). In the face of this ungodly racket, your indefatigable champion Chestnut tried at first to exercise a modicum of patience, but the terrible twosome could not be pacified. While Adam inevitably grew to be the bigger crybaby of the two, it was baby Anne that had the spirit of the banshee in her. Louder than a car alarm, her yelps, if utilized by the government, could disperse a crowd of protesters in seconds. On she went, shattering all the good Lenox crystal, summoning packs of wild dogs, all without ever coming up for air. Her lung capacity was, although sickening, highly impressive, especially to a luckless creature such as myself, incapable of mustering the gentlest of breaths or the faintest of whispers.

There was one night in particular, spackled in chicken pox, when I was at my wit's end with their whining; they almost sent me scampering back to the grave right then and there. Beside myself, I pleaded with the Bogeyman to put me in contact with a professional, like that

German gent who snatched the Lindbergh baby. Chance would have it that all the hotlines were down, so it was no use following through with the classified ads I had circled in case of such an emergency. In a moment of weakness I turned to prayer. I asked the powers that be for a smothering pillow to drop from the heavens, for a swift bout of SIDS to put them out of their misery. Perched on the windowsill I devised numerous fatalities; choking hazards, jacks and marbles lodged in their wittle-bitty windpipes, the sweet gurgling of punctured tracheas in the morning. The hope that a stray animal would leap through the open window became an early favorite, preferably an ocelot or, even better, a dingo. Even some unspecified allergic reaction would do the trick, throat's closing up, lungs filling with bile, etc. Lord give me strength. If only I could do it myself, I would push my thumbs through the soft spots of their bulbous little noggins, the "fontanelle" according to Father's medical texts, working my grubby shadow fingers through the glistening grey matter. A perfectly scientific approach (sans gloves or goggles), recording for my records the precise moment when those cries would come to a sudden stop. Oh, how scrumptious, the cranial fluids leaking down the slats of the cradle, rocking gently from the force of my siblicide. A wave of euphoria as I hang from the rafters like a drunk baboon, shaking a Fischer-Price tambourine, screaming "Hallelujah" or "Goo-Goo Ga-Ga" or whatever else comes to mind.

(Sigh) If only. A boy can dream, right?

Know this, friends: your tenacious purveyor of justice Chestnut is a church mouse, seen and not heard, or vice-versa. I flourish in vast expanses of quietude. One of the many downsides to taking a permanent dirt nap, or sleeping with the fishes, so to speak. Silence is golden, or so I've heard, yet the golden bough breaks, the cradle falls, and the feedback on the baby monitor is excruciating. My poor parents and I are plagued with the noise of necessity, never a moment's rest. Forever the bassinets, bursting with the infernal racket of "feed me." Other sounds difficult to forget include yet are not limited to: the squelch of a rectal thermometer hastily inserted, the carrot spittle as it spatters across the back of the highchair. I cannot escape this flatulent hymn, a litany of soiled diapers overflowing from putrid prams and pushcarts.

She was loath to admit it, but Mother was not emotionally equipped to handle the perpetual onslaught, this insufferable caterwauling that left indelible fissures in the foundation of the household. Her new-age massage school music did little to ease the pain. Father would scoff at her frailty, her failure to find adequate coping mechanisms, all the while concealing the fact that he readily kept earplugs on his person, a second pair on the nightstand and an emergency set in his glove compartment. Mother's inner monologue, when not insistently declaring that her migraine might be alleviated if she were to stick her head in the oven, was forcibly drowned by the demands of her children. These demands, as previously stated, were most audible when it came to sleeping arrangements.

My how the bedding has changed over the tiresome years. Mother makes a feeble attempt to recall their favorite lullaby, yet cannot grasp the melody, garbled as it was inside a formless configuration of slick plastic sheets. A lyric tuneless within the vomit-stained duvets that were cast to the carpet, as the conjoined tossing and turning of the twins became Olympian in its execution. Try as they might, our parents could never find the proper accommodations for this nocturnal nuisance, and I certainly didn't make it any easier for them.

## Bedside Drama #2

Adam and Anne begged to share a room since before they had the words to demand it aloud. It was their top priority to incubate, without walls. They learned early on that a wall was not to be trusted, for Chestnut could be hidden in the insulation, dining on sawdust in any given crawlspace, ready to strike. With this logic, it was Anne who decided that solid lines were up to no good, and a dotted line was the only line worth crossing. After all, there must be a chink to pour secrets into. Partitions of any sort were scarcely tolerated; thus a house of open doors would provoke the least tears. If it were up to Adam he would make the wrecking ball on his Tonka truck gigantic, so it could smash through all divided spaces; that way they could all keep an eye on each other. It was indeed this vanishing point, this lack of mutual gaze, that scared them the most.

So mercurial was their temperament that sometimes a mere blanket would convince them of an insurmountable distance. In the hem of a quilt there would appear a sudden chasm, one that could not be traversed without the efforts of a titanic tantrum. In this manner, iron curtains were constantly drawn, around coat racks and cornices, any object that could present itself as an obstacle. Amongst the most disagreeable articles was their Grandmother's needlework, for it was common knowledge that she had always favored Adam. During her weekend visits she would dote on him exclusively, stuffing his trouser pockets with salt water taffy. "Sweets for my sweetie" she would say, with a firm pat on the rump. According to her,

Anne should lay off the candy; she was already a little hefty for a girl her age, and in all the most unflattering places, while at the same time so slow to fill out, so underdeveloped.

“Not from my side of the family, I can tell you that. Blame it on your Father and his flat feet. Why, me and my cousin Lucille had racks like Jayne Mansfield before we even finished grade school. Good stock, a couple of hearty dames, had to beat the boys away with a stick, for crying out loud.”

In a miasma of patchouli, clutching at her baubles, she would prattle on to anyone within earshot about Anne’s sullen nature, her lack of va-va-voom. That plain Jane attitude, very unbecoming of a young lady she would declare, marking her appraisal with a tumbler of Glenlivet before returning to coddle Adam, often to the point of asphyxiation. Such was the case that when Grandmother made her typically dramatic entrance on Christmas Eve, working the room in waltz time, she would blow coy Hollywood kisses to all the husbands, pivot on her good hip and smother Adam in her wilted bosom, sure to leave a smudge of burgundy on his collar.

“There’s my little boyfriend! Do I have a surprise for you,” she would caw. After this ritual of suffocation, she would sashay disjointedly around the grand piano to present the twins with nearly identical patchwork quilts. Anne visibly recoiled when the gift was draped around her shoulders. The lack of affection was somehow palpable to her, it irritated her skin. They spent the rest of the evening huddled under the quilt designated for Adam, while the other lay

haphazardly slumped over the ottoman. It was only a matter of days before both quilts were deemed unsuitable by the twins, and were promptly reallocated to one of the guest rooms.

They were equally capricious about less personalized items, leaving in their wake a slovenly collage of mismatched pajamas that had deranged their collective sensibilities, prohibited them from a shared experience. Certain textures had to be unanimous; a tactile synchronicity was maintained in order for any semblance of sound sleep to occur. They were to settle eventually on a series of unisex satin nightgowns, which Adam would knot unconsciously around his thumb, nibbling and sucking at the fabric, and after that a pair of oversized red flannels, which Anne would unbutton slightly to feel the evening breeze on her bare chest. As temporary solutions, these were the garments that would somehow prove appropriate for both parties. But the bedding, however, was less subject to compromise.

The box springs creaked in unison most nights, urgently, evoking a duet between toads that had accidentally swallowed a swarm of horseflies, audible in their indigestion. The original arrangement was drab; two spare cots positioned directly across from each other, resembling the austerity of an Edwardian orphanage. In the witching hour from down the hall it would sometimes sound to Mother that the beds had been pushed together. A friend of Father's, an amateur designer, offered to build them some type of novelty bunk bed for their sixth birthday. It did not take much speculation for the two men to arrive at a fitting theme for the project.

That year had been marked by a fascination for pirates; playtime consisted of hunting for stowaways in the old armoire, and a refusal to remove their eye patches for suppertime. Adam and Anne would each selflessly walk the plank to spare the other, taking turns confiding in Scurvy, the stuffed parrot, who would warn them of potential mutinies on deck. There was a deserted island they longed to explore, shimmering beyond the shores of their summer cabin in New Hampshire. They remembered a showing of Blue Lagoon on late night television, watched their Father, drunk from a day of fishing, whistle at Brooke Shields and her body double, as Mother recuperated from a sunburn in the other room. Brooke and her stand-in lounged under a palm tree, their breasts concealed by flowing locks. They each refused to light the flare to signal for help, their lips dissimilar as they pushed against the pulp of the poisonous berries. Anne wanted to paddle out past the sandbar the next morning, to see if they could find Brooke's skeleton. It would prove to be an ill-fated journey.

The illustrated version of Treasure Island that the twins flipped through incessantly was the main source of inspiration for the young designer, who capitalized on the nautical theme. The bottom bunk would appear to be an island oasis, and the top would emulate a treehouse cobbled together from the refuse of a shipwreck. Upon completion, Adam and Anne had trouble deciding where they were most comfortable. It wasn't long before they started to switch places in the middle of the night. After Adam chipped one of his teeth climbing down the rope ladder, Anne

encouraged him to sleep beside her in the bottom bunk, under the warmth of the sea-green comforter that expanded in every direction.

### Anyway the Wind Blows

Somewhere in the darkness there was a necessary rupture, a thin membrane permeated, then the fumbling of limbs that clung desperately to a remote axis. The children as helpless as tadpoles, swept up by an inexorable current, submitting to an invisible momentum. An enveloping blindness, a pressure churning them towards a moist aperture, little eyes wrinkled shut, an insistent tug at the abdomen followed by a complete absence of gravity. Spat out onto groundlessness, floating across an immeasurable borderline.

Then came the breeze, and only the breeze. A prolonged interlude, stretching past the grey and amorphous horizon. That autumnal breeze blown forth from a bottomless anywhere, to announce the presence of the half-remembered, of the memory inchoate, that struggled in their mind's eye to realize its true form. It rustled through the eroded vista over black censor bars and blurred likenesses. It harbored a familiar scent that would not readily succumb to identification. A whirlwind encrypted, teetering on the brink of discovery, a damp puzzle piece that defied the standard protocols of levitation. It lashed out at the comatose observers, howling at Adam, rippling aggressively against the hem of Anne's costume, which itself had yet to take a discernible shape. Where had this wind been before? The answer traipsed coquettishly around their throbbing temples, brushed carelessly against the napes of their necks. Fractured glimpses, specious visions seemed to glimmer like hidden crystals across the barren landscape, haunting the dusty fringes of their periphery. Were there jack-o-lanterns that had yet to flicker? Was it the

outline of the ivy trellis that had not fully begun to materialize? Centuries disassembled before them as the memory refused to stabilize. An interminable recitation of wild wind galloping across muffled flesh. Nothing but the vague husk of October crackling without purpose.

It was the season of the witch, so far uninhabited, a dense unit of antimatter that double-bubbled in the base of an empty cauldron. It was The Day of the Dead, rendered obtuse by incessant gusts of amnesia. For the children the stilted air continued to perform its rote soliloquy, its patterns now predictable, serving as nothing more than a hazy premonition, welded onto the frayed circuitry of their wandering minds.

And then the golden messenger, the minute miracle, having escaped somehow from the airtight moldings of the mausoleum, appeared before them. Up from the bowels of the whistling void a single orange leaf lurched forward, to twirl ceremoniously towards unparalleled heights. A swelling tapestry of autumn leaves fluttered close behind, in loose mimicry of the original leaf and its winsome trajectory. Piles of leaves accumulated in corners that were erstwhile undefined. The children watched the distance wither around them. Arm in arm, they stepped over intersecting planes and sudden polygons. It became best to duck as sturdy branches of elm and maple spiraled out of strange radiuses, compressed networks of undergrowth that rapidly disentangled in the middle of their path. The bursts of foliage, airborne at first, unfolded kinetically towards the ground, the trunks twisted into alignment, the vigorous roots tunneling into what was now a ruddy patch of earth. The cascade of crabapples and chestnuts falling from

overhead echoed into a diminishing infinity. Elsewhere the nascent thicket of trees appeared tremulous at first, softened and translucent, as if submerged in shallow puddles of rainwater, before coming into clearer focus. Saplings curved timidly around a bounteous vegetable garden, as a white wicker rocking chair swung gently in that perpetual breeze.

Anne watched as the raspberry bush near the garden gate sprouted almost instantaneously, moments later accompanied by a majority of the marble tiles that led up to the Toscano fountain, its gilded cornices yielding inevitably to the toothsome cherub that was perched atop, spouting water from pursed plaster lips into what resembled a large baptismal font. A stack of kindling made a subtle entrance, which prompted the arrival of the fire pit not long after. Anne blushed as the old birdhouse, blurred by years of forgetfulness, started to sway into sharper definition. Then came the feel of worsted mittens and the musk of damp patio furniture. Then the thermostat of warm cider and the smell of toasted pumpkin seeds cooling on the windowsill. The remaining bulk of the memory, slowly coaxed out of hiding, had whimsically shuffled back into focus.

Adam stood by the upturned rake, ear cocked to the irritable groaning of the rafters, attentive to the bashful lumbering of the besotted rooftops, pregnant with rotting leaves. Anne was cautiously pressed against the fence, sensing something was amiss. She stuck a finger in her mouth and held it up. The breeze was directionless, self-contained, having no origin from the outside. It was the type of breeze that should carry origami cranes back to their makers. Surely it

must have come from some far off land, as the storybooks had so faithfully promised? Certainly not from around the russet hills that hovelled in the distance. Nor did it blithely blow from the stolid creek, nor was it languidly lifted from the murk of the bog. They had not once that October seen such a flurry of leaves, which would swirl nonchalantly, then without notice divvy into vague quadrants, obeying loose coordinates, shuffling with conspiracy.

Adam knew the wind was blowing from within them now, and it didn't bother him. It was lively then, back when it belonged to the rest of the world, and especially powerful now that it had been sequestered in them alone. Anne seemed frightened, she shifted sporadically like the weathervane above them, trembling at the feigned indecision of the elements. Adam urged her not to worry. However temperamental the wind seemed in its divergent rhythms, Adam could tell it meant no harm. It soon felt playful even, like the volley of a tennis court, at once innocent and competitive. Despite his reassurance, Anne was more skeptical. What was the agenda of a wind that did not come from outside?

## Chestnut

I didn't care much for the direction that passage was headed in. The garden (a certain tree in particular) often casts me in an unflattering light. I'm well aware that many of you plebeians can't stomach a cliffhanger, but you'll have to make do for the time being. I'll remind you that, in the episode that preceded, you had the distinguished privilege of meeting my favorite family member, the hobbled harlot that begat my clueless Mother. Warm salutations for my grizzly Granny are in order. That rusty old battleaxe is the only living relative that dares to bring me up in polite conversation. Everyone else gets a lump in their throat when the subject is broached, yet she prattles on, undaunted, stoking the flames of their discomfort with the mirth of a one-woman glee club. A real no-nonsense gal, the genuine article. Her patronage to my neglected shrine will be handsomely rewarded. When my fresco is fully restored she will be a prominent fixture, painted in full Dionysian regalia, her thyrsus clutched tight, her furs matted in the light of the eclipse. An elder maenad, sub vino, with loose lips curled like a jackal's. She will dance the lindy on a bed of thorned roses, buxom in her décolletage. The unrivaled champion of open secrets, an Aryan Queen, given ample room to roam through my freshly watered Arcadia. I will be the only darling grandson to receive her delectable peanut brittle then. The crinkle of cellophane in her coin purse fills me with hope. The taste of butterscotch lingers triumphant as Granny and I saunter off with the top prize at bingo night.

Nana is right to consider Anne a bad omen. Anne, the girl that got away, the mandrake root placed furtively under the birthing cot by a meddling midwife. An unassuming culprit,

guilty of ovarian sabotage, released from captivity due to a lack of incriminating evidence. I can hear a rap of the gavel in every one of Granny's snide retorts; it is her mission to conduct a long-delayed trial, to bring the bad seed before a court of law. She will not rest until the fugitive is brought to justice. Given the opportunity Granny would have dismissed the obstetrician and taken command of the operating room. Her womanly intuition would shine through the surgical mask as she fastened the stirrups and protracted the speculum herself to keep me from flatlining. A reversal of fortune. Anne, having drawn the short straw, would be the one left behind. How picturesque the aftermath; Adam and I would skip merrily to Nana's cottage to sit in the crevice of her musky lap, drawing coagulated blood from those ancient teats, as the wicker rocking chair sways on our perfect patio. A regular Romulus and Remus, we will nurse from the silver wolfess, whose sagging bazooka breasts offer more sustenance than Mother could ever manage (terrorized by the constant strain on her nipples, she eventually switched to formula. Is your baby a Gerber's baby?). Perhaps Granny sensed in Anne a different type of promiscuity than what she had grown accustomed to in her own youth. Anne was wanton in mind and spirit, but not in flesh.

Yet how I suffer presently from the twins' lack of transgression. The taboo has been entirely ignored, the carnal friction unconsummated. To think that such an idealized conjugal bed, in all its oceanic splendor, has been wasted on these mincing prudes, who favor the tired tropes of wholesome companionship. They retire to the boudoir, flaccid and frigid, too timid for even the most preliminary dry-humping. I understand the pleasures of getting beaten around the

bush (or lack thereof), but the stagnancy of this courtship borders on absurdity. Our parents are known to revel in their relative haven of Hippiedom, so the absence of a spark cannot be blamed on an atmosphere of repression. Mother left her glittery vibrator (nicknamed Studio 54) in the nightstand drawer, clumsily concealed with a purple bandana. Father's exhaustive collection of vintage pornography was readily accessible to anyone who could step onto a stool. Why once, when the twins were roused by a nightmare, they peered through the keyhole at the end of the hall to get an eyeful of Mother's flabby buttocks bouncing onto an increasingly lazy Daddy-shaft. With all these nudges in the right direction, these conspicuous displays of erotic intrigue, the twins were at first repulsed, then apathetic. The birds and the bees provoked in them only a mild allergic reaction.

Meanwhile, my stunted and spectral libido remained unsatiated. I could not be aroused vicariously through the monotonous chronicles of their abstinence. Yes, my icy testes had yet to descend, but they were blue as billiard cubes and loaded with vitriol all the same. What is it about chastity that gets the twins so hard? They're both red-hot little pieces of ass, in my humble opinion, and given the tight cloisters in which they reside, heavy petting should have been checked off the list aeons ago. It would appear that Anne was the more curious of the two, being the first to respond to her feminine urges...

Forgive me feather, I mean Father, for I have sinned, eh sinned. I am the peacock that preens in the pale rays of mendacity, my droppings obscure the truths of the gospel. Stop pussyfooting around, Chestnut, out with it already. (Sigh) This is difficult for me, but I have a

confession to make. Here it goes; in strict confidentiality, the advent of Anne's masturbation is the only moment I can recall in which I became somewhat...ugh, fond of her. There was a strange dignity in the way it all transpired. In summer she sat, slightly ruffled in the frills, ringlets slick from the humidity, poised to palm her pulsing vulva in a crowded pew during Sunday mass. Now, before you jump to any rash conclusions, I will set the record straight by telling you this is not a hagiographic account of the proceedings. A cautious measure of adulation is required to study this enigma, only because the closeness of the congregation was not what incited Anne's fingers to wander. The collection plate had been passed, the churchgoers were stingy, agitated by the heat. The women pressed against each other in damp frocks, the thrum of their paper fans tarried throughout the chapel. The men loosened their ties and checked their watches. The people prayed. What won me over was the realization that human contact, of any caliber, was disconnected from Anne's pleasure center. There was no sensual epiphany to be garnered from community, from civilization even. This value of self-reliance struck a chord with me, and cemented our ephemeral kinship. Her gaze was reflected inward towards the minutiae of the self, other bodies were irrelevant to this exploration. I avidly watched as her vagina was transmogrified by the miracles of the autonomous spirit. Once stroked, her pudendum became a panel of stained glass, her labia the enameled edges of a reliquary. The corona of the clitoris burned brighter than the star that hung so heroically over Bethlehem. With each submerged finger she reenacted the signs of the cross. I wanted desperately to mingle with that anointed vessel. I longed to lick her perineum, to taste the sullied Shroud of Turin. I wanted

to swallow the refuse of every sebaceous gland. Let's belong to our world, together. Let me belong.

Then the doors swung open; the service had ended. The fantasy divested.

I wised up pretty quickly. Your mystified altar boy Chestnut, gullible in a moment of vulnerability, realized that he had been duped by a vile enchantress, herself oblivious to the extent of her own powers. There's really no adequate excuse, but I blame the heat for this diversion into mawkishness. It became apparent that an act of heresy had been committed, and to think I, a card-carrying heathen, couldn't recognize the mark of my own kind. The guile of the Godless had been used against me, the curse of the eager cunt. What a vile ruse, the pretense of bonding, of shared common ground. That it was perpetrated in a place of worship should have been an immediate red flag. It was because Adam wasn't there that I'd been so easily hoodwinked, so impressionable. He had gone on a boy scout retreat for the weekend. In his absence I made the mistake of thinking I could temporarily take his place. Anne wouldn't dare pull such a stunt if he was genuflecting nearby. That curious hand of hers deserves to be torn asunder, ripped open raw, plagued with stigmata. As she writhes in supplication I will stand stoic at the lectern, averse to her apologies.

Whatever proclivity Anne harbored towards experimentation was misdirected.

Whatever desire Adam had pent up in regards to his sister was hampered by his inability to make the first move. I've recently perused the archives to make sure there wasn't any lustful episodes that were somehow overlooked, and I'm loathe to report that not even a single goodnight kiss has

transpired between them. They have the exact same erogenous zones for crying out loud, and not even a light grazing of the lips? As we can all attest, “Lil’ Slugger” Adam is not, and given the chance to strut the baseball diamond in his cleats, I would hit it out of the park each and every time. For Anne I would keep the bases irrevocably loaded, whether she liked it or not. Anne, the reluctant cheerleader, twirling my oversized baton. I’ll hike up her skirt to catch a whiff of that bubblegum pheromone, that Big League Chew that drives me absolutely bonkers. When I finish up with her under the bleachers, I’ll find Adam defeated in the locker room. That blubbering pansy, having gone up to bat only to strike out time and time again. There there, Tiger, Coach Chestnut has developed a foolproof game plan to keep you motivated in the future. Now bend over and take it like a champ, let Coach ream that tight little asshole. Suck it up, quit your sniveling, I’m not gonna stop until you learn how to be a team player. Take one for the team. (Blows whistle.) That’s it, good hustle. Time to wash. Hit the showers, kid. Which reminds me...

## Shower

The house was empty when Adam returned from school, and before he stepped inside he realized that Anne had been taken. All week they had hoped that she could evade capture, her attempts at faking a cold had proven unsuccessful. He had tried to destroy the permission slip but the sound of his Father's paper shredder had given him away. At the insistence of her guidance counselor, Anne had been coerced into performing with her dance ensemble at a decrepit ski resort up north. It was a regional competition that would last for the entirety of the weekend. The counselor felt it would be good for Anne's morale, and an opportunity for her to make new friends. Aware of these intentions, Anne refused to participate until it was guaranteed that she would be sharing a hotel room with her instructor, thwarting the chances of having to bond with the other dancers.

When the reality of her absence became clear, Adam felt the immediate need to shower. Rugby practice had been canceled for the afternoon, so he wasn't especially filthy, but disappointment had made him weary of his hygiene, which under normal circumstances was less than exemplary. There was dirt under his fingernails, the ones that hadn't been bitten down to the stub, and a layer of grime behind his ears that had been building up for weeks. Adam scanned the kitchen; there weren't any notes on the refrigerator, no formal announcements confirming Anne's departure. A grocery list on the counter had most of the items crossed out, except for "box of tampons" highlighted in pink, causing Adam more discomfort. Knowing his sister's cycle, he hoped his Mother hadn't been too busy to remember to pick them up. Otherwise Anne would be

bleeding on the slopes, spotting through her white tutu, squirming in her parka on a poorly operated lift. The experience would be hindered by all sorts of technical difficulties. As soon as his parents got back for dinner he would demand that they drive up to relieve her; this way he could wish her good luck in person. Perhaps he would call before his Mother left the office. Yes he would, as soon as he had washed up.

His hair was coarse and thick with grease. He would use the special pomade that Anne had stolen for him from the convenience store, the one that made him look like Richie Rich. That way he would look dashing when they arrived at the hotel. Anne will be so grateful. Maybe if all goes well he would even convince his parents to stay for the competition. He could throw Anne a bouquet of roses when she emerged to take her bow, and he wouldn't have to spend the weekend alone with Chestnut. Adam jubilantly skipped up the stairs while devising a strategy that would appeal to both his Mother and Father. He couldn't come on too strong; the cutesy routine could be too much for his Father to handle. "Laying it on a little thick with the Tiny Tim shtick," he would say. Adam had a little more leverage with his Mother, that is if she wasn't in one of her moods again. As he crossed the hall he decided he would wear the bright red Christmas sweater his Aunt had sent him, the one with the tiny golden ornaments sewn into the front. A schmaltzy choice, but he could balance it out by offering to do extra chores when they got back. This way he could appeal to his Father's sense of work ethic while showing his commitment to his sister's comfort. So far a solid plan, he would work out any of the remaining kinks when he was finished bathing.

It was customary for Adam to check behind the shower curtain when he first entered the bathroom, to make sure there wasn't an unpleasant surprise in store for him. Chestnut had a knack for finding inventively monstrous ways to clog the drain, and a tendency to streak lewd messages in soap scum across the damp stucco ceiling. After a thorough inspection in which he detected no foul play, Adam started excitedly to undress. He removed his khakis and tossed his long johns over the towel rack before a certain miraculous detail caught his eye, a dreamy expression washing over his face. He inched closer, nearly gliding into the bathtub before having taken off his shirt.

A single blonde hair was embedded in the Dove bar that hung from the edge of the soapdish, fully commanding his attention. This unlikely cryptogram was without a doubt a message meant explicitly for him, an exquisitely mundane hieroglyph, an accidental squiggle of cursive that functioned as the farewell insignia that Adam had originally hoped for. He was grateful that Anne, however unconsciously, had left this perfect curlicue, this shout of “bon voyage” from the back of a crowded bus, for him to treasure. It was a promise of her inevitable return, however agonizing the wait may be. They had rarely been apart for more than a couple days, not since they were seven, when Anne had been admitted to the emergency room, requiring multiple stitches, staying at Auntie’s for what seemed like an eternity after being discharged from the hospital. Mother assured them it would be best if they spent some time apart while she recovered, a reasoning Adam still had trouble understanding. It was all Chestnut's fault after all.

All Adam remembered of that time was his baby brother's grotesque shadow puppets, and a man coming to visit who asked a lot of silly questions and showed him books full of black splotches.

“Not by the hair of my chinny chin chin,” whispered Adam. This hair hadn't come from Anne's head. After beholding this tiny miracle for a few more lingering moments he peeled it away, working it between his waxy fingers. He brought that strand of forget-me-not to rest on his lips, watching the flakes of soap drift to his toes. His eyelashes fluttered as he took the hair onto his tongue, to swallow it whole with the secret reverence of an altar boy who, left alone behind the pulpit, guzzled the communion wine long after the parish had gone home for supper. It felt warm going down, as if Anne's parting shower had been only moments before his own.

Upon turning the dial Adam noticed the temperature was abnormally warm. It usually took a long while to heat up, and the pressure from the showerhead felt like a blast from a fire hydrant. The steam billowed up from every direction in short spasms, bringing to mind the Icelandic geyser that Adam had once seen in his geography textbook. The tiles dripped like the walls of a cavern, thought Adam as he dutifully scrubbed. When they used to bathe together, the twins would explore the depths of the murky bathwater in their matching snorkels, searching for lost pearls and sunken doubloons, and sometimes their Mother would leave them a message in a bottle hidden amongst the suds and the bubbles. After washing between his legs, Adam was sure to replace Anne's stray hair with one of his own, a gallant inscription that zig-zagged like the mark of Zorro, whereas Anne's had curved with the pedigree of a lady in waiting.

Adam produced a thick lather and began to shampoo his tangled head of hair. He wanted to be sure to properly rinse every lock, in order to appear as “a presentable young lad” for his Father, who didn't want any son of his looking like “The Wild Man of Borneo” or “A grubby faced beggar boy from Skid Row.” After a while his hands seemed to be stuck; he couldn't extricate them from the soapy mass. As he struggled the showerhead seemed to tremble, emitting a low metallic drone as the water pressure became more relentless and the temperature close to unbearable. His fingers were tangled up like those of a novice sailor attempting a master knot. And then a raw, unapproachable moment: something like flatlining, the terror of being removed from oneself, surged through Adam uncontrollably. He experienced a sharp catatonic thrust, in which he felt the absence of feeling, a synapse misfired, and then it seemed that Adam ceased to have fingers at all.

He couldn't tell where his hands ended and his head began, as if his nerves had fused together. Adam threw down his arms, but despite the defiance of this maneuver it still felt that the tips of his fingers had melted into his scalp, had burrowed like mutinous lice into his gaping pores. Had his senses been scalded, rearranged through osmosis? The feeling in his hands was insubordinate; it was different from awakening to find that his foot had fallen asleep, it wasn't a localized anesthetic. His limbs felt like candlewax under a dull flame, like chewing gum stretched over hot concrete. Touch had become an abstract concept, a figment welded onto the coagulated surface of the imagination. His organs were boiling over, slushing together, a stomach gurgling like a tar pit turned inside out. Stomping his feet in a state of desperation, he

watched them lift one by one but could not physically detect that they had ever left the porcelain below. He was the remote puppeteer of his own body, frantically yanking all of the proper strings but failing to produce the necessary vibrations. Pinocchio as an amoeba. A waterlogged changeling, his cell tissue evaporated, marrow liquefied, a gaseous presence incapable of materializing. It was a complete loss of tactile awareness.

Somehow, Adam stumbled out onto the bathroom floor, dragging the shower curtain with him. Every time he brought his hands to his head they felt like ladles passing through a vat of lukewarm chowder. He slammed against the corner of the marble countertop, blindly reaching for the sink faucet. Thinking that cold water would restore his senses, he splashed his face to no avail, as a man lost in the desert might confront the pools of a false oasis. His next strategy, as he caught the fogged reflection of his shampooed head in the mirror, was to dry himself off as much as possible, but the towel offered little refuge. He tried to scream, realizing that the paralysis had extended to his throat, and even though he couldn't cry for help, his mind heard the garbled yelps of his sister, as she cried for him to pull her from the lake, to paddle closer, to hold tightly to the oar as she attempted to reach it.

Adam turned towards the door, slipping on the carpet. Upon impact he vomited stagnant water thick with silt, globs of algae, his father's fishing lure, and a couple of rusty bottle caps. His senses began to slowly return to him, particularly an itch at the back of his throat. He reached past his teeth to pull out a ratty clump of blonde hair, gagging as it hit the floor, 3 inches long. He lay there shivering as the contents of his stomach swirled down the drain.

## Lovebug

Anne, not one to tremble throughout her misunderstandings, the most prominent of which had been serialized into an ongoing pageant of missed cues and omitted dialogue, faltered ever so slightly in her resolve this morning when stricken by the word “love” as it hovered blue and boundless over the head of her sleeping brother, a spectral projection of the tomorrows that had yet to come. That word was light and filigree, a representation of dawn dripping off the loose curvature of his slumber. Not once did she witness his eyelids flutter. His oneiric playground was untroubled, his blankness a conjuring of her devotion. The chicken and the egg here did not retain a steady sequence. In the silence of his lips bloomed a mating call that preceded lips entirely. She had come first, she had not come first, that much was certain. Seeing him like this exposed the nature of the charade they spent their days perfecting. When fully awake, they pretended to move independently, creating careful tableaux, dancing around each other. Each took turns to affect an appropriate reaction for the banal events presented to them. Here one will offer a glib statement on current affairs, there the other will strike a pose, all the while aware of those who watched them, those manning the camera that swirled outside the fulcrum of their habits. The invisible cinematographer that prodded intrusively at their forced repartee, goading them into histrionics, tempting them to stop the scene and ask, “What’s my motivation?”

Unsure of her agenda, with the word love draped over the horizon, Anne dabbled in an act of palmistry, tracing the inscrutable life line that seemed to empty into some remote delta in the space between their hands. A lack of worldly purpose defined this type of love. Casting

herself as protectress, as the elder counsel, the sensible one, was as much a ruse as anything else. Adam's hand had, in so many overlapping visions, stretched through the portal of the midnight hour to offer security, comfort. Was it merely an act of self-preservation? Had their love been whittled down from the raw pith of survival into a substance more manageable? She remembered Adam's fingers clenched around the splintering oar, his surge of bravado, becoming the unwitting hero in a passion play. His gut reaction was to hold on, when love was supposed to be about letting go. Wouldn't that hold true? If he failed to grab her limp from the lake, wouldn't that be the true cadence of love? Perhaps Adam had acted selfishly in rescuing the damsel in distress, to have such a valiant agenda spread over the roiling surface of the water. Conversely, was it Anne who engineered the entire spectacle, the floundering and the helplessness, as an homage to that lesser God, *romance*? As the loons cried overhead, and the lifeguard whistle sounded, was the madness of the scene carried to the pinnacle of selflessness?

Rhetorical, all of her questions, what a wasted effort, this grand inquisition. Anne had survived, the lake had yet to be appeased. They toweled off by the bonfire, maintaining that stale modicum of individuality. They failed at transcendence, as she lay gasping for breath in the hull of the canoe, Adam crouching over her, in a gesture meant to convey concern. Going through the motions, loyal lapdog, obedient to an archaic predisposition. Had death been imminent, they might have grown closer to the proper inflection of the word love, perched atop an unscalable turret in the tower of babel. All this conjecture without factoring in the presence of Chestnut, but Anne somehow knew, had she sunk to the bottom, that she would be far from his clutches.

So the blue dawn mimicked the promise of that unlit funeral pyre, the possibility of a new kind of devotion, as it played across Adam's fretless features that lonely morning. It reconfigured his boyhood, winding back the cogs of his purity, to make him into some kind of whispered myth, a mermaid undiscovered. She stared at him through a chink in the wall of his wet dreams, to inspect the ruins of Atlantis, the hieroglyphs incomprehensible through centuries of algae. Anne noticed that the sheets had stiffened around his groin, creating a damp patch, a luckless estuary, in which she watched their chromosomes disperse like schools of minnows. Boyhood, selfhood, the immovable glyph of love stubbornly wedged in the black mud of a once fertile crescent. Girlhood, the rising Valkyrie, wracked with insomnia, sick of searching for fallen comrades. Anne wished to chisel through that blasted quarry, to tunnel deep into the mysteries of her birthstone. She, frozen in love, desired to enter the sleeping Adam, to ripple across his sea of equanimity. Waiting to thaw, waiting for the arctic strait to reappear, for Pangaea to reclaim itself. Love to her is the fabric of evolution unraveling. A love supreme is contained in the light of that sleep, the incandescence of the primordial dream. It returns them to the waterlogged Eden, before the removal of ribs, before the progressions of alchemy. Sub-molecular, their gills reopened, their particles yet to be imagined. Serpents themselves. This is where their life line must lead.

Silly girl, she thought, caught up in her sex once more. Forced to assess the strictures of that nuisance, civilization. Here she was, contemplating continental drift, as the hustle and bustle of the waking world began to scour the bedpans of her reverie. The notion of love morphed

queasily into that more quotidian term, *romance*, as the cars started down the road. The drudgery of getting dressed, of swallowing lukewarm waffles, began to animate the foreground. She had to don her hardhat, make attempts to demolish the impregnable dam of *romance* that grew between their bodies, so cruelly similar. How the light of love and the word of light, such boisterous and fleeting entities, were abruptly designated to some unreachable crawlspace, banished to the basement to await further instruction. The blue and blessed Adam receded into the monotonous canvas of the wall, the mermaid washed up on a shore of plaster. Still sleeping, but no longer an object of desire, simply an object. A plaything, programmed to recite the sentiments of awakening. Groaning through some inner interlude, idle in some drab waiting room of the interior. Anne, moved by the spirit of *romance*, wanted in that moment to smother him under his pillow, to orchestrate his final erection, to spit in the face of the rooster and obliterate the notion of “rise and shine.” If her parents were to catch her red-handed, she would toss her head back with a gentle laugh, as her knees pressed the remaining oxygen from his chest, and assure them it was a simple misunderstanding. She was only playing at love.

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That dream again. Adam trusted his sister as she led him by the hand, through the labyrinth comprised of the same prolonged and familiar hallway, passing their bedroom ceaselessly on both sides, the wallpaper changing occasionally. He understood her determination, to find a way out of this rut, even if he always woke before they reached whatever destination awaited them. Through candlelight, lamplight, other inconsequential changes, they charged forth,

their parents' door always so miniscule in the distance. He vaguely recalled having drawn a map in crayon, could have sworn it was in the back pocket of his trousers, reaching fruitlessly each time to consult what wasn't there. They followed a trail of keepsakes, heirlooms, strewn across the carpet, a linear path for an instant, then a sudden confrontation with the opacity of the family portrait. The paint was peeling from the vanishing point, in which the illusion of depth occurred. Once they looked away, an unexpected crossroads would present itself, culminating in the sensation of going in circles. The dream would then reset like a faulty Nintendo cartridge, the sound of bicycle spokes coming to a halt. There wasn't exactly a square one, but rather a series of checkpoints, barely discernible. Anne was not deterred by the thought of starting over. She would crack her knuckles and drag her brother by the arm, determined to get them both to the next level.

The menagerie of objects that marked the hallway seldom varied, all the tired tropes really; the kaleidoscope glinting puckishly, the jump-rope lain flat on the carpet, its lack of levity offering little reassurance. Bits of that portentous oar scattered liberally, skeins of lilac yarn, blurred snapshots, marbles that operated by an obscure gravity, errantly rolling as the contours of the hall would shift and tilt ("That's just the house settling" their Father's voice would explain in the back of their minds). The music box they had given their Mother for her birthday would emerge as they turned a corner, the ballerina revolving torpidly in the presence of the plastic swans, the melody a bit sharp. At times Adam grew cynical about the maze, likening it to an extremely tedious preparation for a neighborhood tag sale, but most frequently he was

sentimental; he had trouble letting go of his toys, stopping to inspect them and place certain indispensable treasures in his rucksack, only for them to suffer a similar fate as his trusty hand drawn map: misplaced, misfit, reappearing on the path moments later, untouched by his intervention. Anne did her best to hurry him along, smiling back at him, playing at older sister in her attention to guidance, despite the question of “Who came first?” having perpetually been a contentious enterprise, a matter of milliseconds, a photo finish, depending on whom you ask.

The stories were never kept straight. Just as Anne would motion forward, projecting that air of sororal wisdom, she would succumb to a bout of possessiveness, halting to procure the rosary beads or the handheld mirror their deceased Grandmother, a dignified beautician, had left for her. There they would stand in the endless hall, lapsing into the wonders of their reflection, romanticizing the perception of togetherness. The dream lured them in, allowed them to fetishize the tokens of their vanity, to savoring the cropped closeness of their image. After a while the enchantment wore thin, replaced by a feat of misdirection. Smoke and mirrors, sleight of hand. They had lost sight of their goals, being so wrapped up in appearances. Demystified, they would reevaluate their surroundings, mutually agreeing on a change of course. Backpedaling, retracing their steps, Adam awoke to his sister sitting beside him. Their game of follow the leader continued. He adored her.

## Chestnut

Leaving those birthmarks was simply not enough, it would seem. I have been sifting through fan mail, and my dear readers all pose the same question: But Chestnut, couldn't it be seen as a cry for help? Most certainly not. If anything it was more of a calling card, or a stamp of disapproval. I could even venture to call it a memento mori, if I was feeling particularly maudlin, but at the end of the day, all of my endeavors are unabashedly macabre by nature (not by nurture, mind you). I'll readily admit that at the time I was 'not in a good way' i.e. lungs filled with amniotic fluid, umbilical cord wrapped around my neck, parasitic twins draining me of both my primordial essence and my patience, what have you. Still, if I required any additional assistance, I would consult the instructional manual I myself authored in case of sticky situations, subject to infinite revisions and addendums as I see fit. There has never been any need of a second opinion. Self-reliance is a dying art form.

But yes, fine, in consideration of the extenuating circumstances, I willingly abandoned propriety and resorted to desperate measures, if that's what you wanted to hear. This, however, is a strategy that has been consistently fruitful, a tact I have continued to savor in an official capacity while maintaining my distinguished position as Poltergeist-In-Residence, a title that should not be taken lightly, heavily, an honorific that will not be taken from me period. This first attempt to establish legitimacy, control, and survival was comparatively sophomoric in regards to the staggering breadth of my later work, having been implemented with varying degrees of success. Yet you must give me credit for the sheer ambition of my gesture. There I was,

hopelessly wedged in an overcrowded birth canal, thinking this was my last hurrah. My parents went in with a bang, I might as well go out with one. So by etching what I believed to be my final will and testament into the supple flesh of my despicable brethren I believed I was posthumously securing my rightful place atop the family throne, protecting my (increasingly paltry) inheritance, redesigning the crest of my forefathers to appeal to the sensibilities of a new era. God is dead, and so am I. There's hardly a difference when it comes down to brass tax. I am my own benefactor, having single-handedly commissioned the sordid triptych you see before you. In doing so, my legacy would not be lost to posterity, my sizable influence would clearly resonate, a virtuosic swansong echoing throughout the hallowed concert halls of history. If I'd known then that my work would continue past the banal trappings of the physical realm, I might have calculated this introduction to my repertoire more carefully. A flawed composition, but a fitting overture nonetheless. Genius is temperamental and hindsight is unfulfilled genius. I shouldn't be made to feel ashamed of my early shortcomings, and more than compensated for them in the fullness of time. Once I realized the tenure of my residency had been prolonged indefinitely, it was easy to settle back into a working rhythm. I could hardly be expected to languish in obscurity while Adam and Anne, those slack-jawed twits of dubious merit, were critically lauded for far lesser achievements. Any philistine can successfully shovel birthday cake down their throat. Oh, looky here! They made 75 cents sitting absent-mindedly behind a shoddily crafted lemonade stand. How darling.

So therefore, one must realize why it is necessary for the artist to revisit the impetus of his nascent expression. I was drawing circles around these two hacks before the Doctor had even slapped them on the ass. A clipping from my press junket: “‘Birthmarks’ is a challenging work, one that invites a variety of interpretations. It is an intrinsically confrontational statement, a bold affirmation of mortality and the intricacies of heritage. It can also be seen an active manifesto, a blood oath. Using the last ounce of his uterine fortitude, the artist (colloquially known in certain circles as Chestnut) envisioned the piece as an uncompromising declaration of intent, the groundwork for a Utopian constitution.”

I think these art snobs might be reading too much into it, but they’re not far off the mark. “Birthmarks” was originally devised as a preverbal agreement; I drew up this epithelial contract, crossing the I’s and dotting the T’s, incorporating a wide range of atavistic cryptograms and evolutionary jargon, before omitting certain superfluous clauses and forging all the necessary signatures. This *Objet D’art* would serve as a certified document printed onto living tissue, paying homage to my ancestors while publicly condemning the actions of my siblings, those guileless conspirators that wrestled me lifeless from the warmth of the womb. My dual roles as artist and as legislator are of equal importance. To you it might sound self-righteous but I maintain my belief that in processing the official paperwork I was acting under direct orders from Lady Vengeance herself (a criminally misunderstood philanthropist, in my opinion).

Alas, the glories of bureaucracy are often understated; it only takes one clerical error for the powers that be to reassess the productivity of a once valued employee. Regardless, I stand

before you replenished by the virtues of perpetuity. My family values have withstood scrutiny and all the other mitigating circumstances. Even if you object to my methods, even if you find my water cooler banter to be monotonous, I will have you know that my ingenuity is the subject of legend. If you are foolish enough to dismiss what I do as grunt work, you are missing the point entirely. I run this enterprise with an iron fist, no decision is made without my approval. Even though I am consigned to this nebulous basement level cubicle, and the racket of the boiler room threatens to compromise my diligence, rest assured it is I who have the final say in my sibling's affairs. In your pathetic allegiance to office gossip, you might have heard otherwise, but I am the sole executor of this estate.

Which is exactly why the indeterminacy of the birthmarks is slightly disconcerting. When branding cattle, it defeats the purpose if one cannot properly discern the identity of the owner (although the unmixed pleasure of administering a searing hot iron to my dearest sister's buttocks might be well worth the effort). I am frustrated to report that Adam and Anne, under the tiresome guise of naiveté, have eluded me once again. Their wicked world of skin retains the high watermark, the welt of the strap, but only in unexpected permutations. It was the haste of the moment, the passion of the young artist I suspect, that led to this failed masterpiece. I wanted to craft an elegant bildungsroman, but ended up with a trashy volume of young adult fiction. What could have been an ingenious inscription prefacing the fleshy pages of a bestseller now appears merely as mindless doodlings in the margins of juvenilia. My lack of refinement is immediately evident any time they take a dip in the pool or change into their gym clothes in the

locker room. My incorrect use of punctuation, the smudge of unsung trauma that signified my dying craft, sloppily emblazoned on their narrow chests. A constant reminder that I must work diligently if I am to improve my penmanship.

For it does not hold its shape, you see? Present at the moment of delivery yet somehow errant throughout the years, impishly adjusting its coordinates, resisting categorization even after countless biopsies. Its first appearance was much to my liking, a taupe cluster of malignant freckles positioned directly over their dastardly hearts, a telling likeness of sour grapes, prematurely plucked from a vineyard flooded with my bile. From these auspicious beginnings the defiant insignia continued to mutate, an unruly cabal of melanin parading its irregularities across an otherwise pristine dermis. A fickle carcinoma varying in opacity, pigmentation, and overall charm. I was often worried that they would vanish altogether. There's been a persistent rumor circulating that I've lost my touch, that the twins have become too willful to manage by myself. Bollocks, I say, a governess will not be required, the situation is well within——

## Harmony of the Spheres

Adam and Anne knelt on the mandala carpet in the center of their Mother's workshop, both knowing it to be an enchanted space, a chamber of inviolate sanctuary that Chestnut was incapable of entering. His visitations had become alarmingly frequent, the magnitude of his rage conquering previously unmapped hemispheres, causing fresh fissures to appear along the equatorial line of their shared center. Such seismic currents had become so commonplace that it was difficult to detect when the aftershock had ceased and when a new tectonic tantrum had begun. For a long while he scraped furiously at the door, then resorted to more outlandish antics, mimicking at first a Viking battle cry, followed closely by the splintering noise of a medieval battering ram. Despite the bedlam suggested by this display of virtuosic bravado, he made no progress. After emulating a series of cartoonish explosions (mixed, every now and then, with the thud of a descending anvil), he had at long last worn himself out; Wiley Coyote extinguished the fuse on his stick of dynamite, before weakly exclaiming that nitroglycerin was still a very unstable compound. Turning away defeated, muttering primal obscenities under his labored breath, he irritably crawled off to naptime, exaggeratedly licking his paws like a wounded panther. All was quiet in the jungle.

Without words the twins shifted counterclockwise along the fluted perimeter of the carpet, rotating organically towards their proper coordinates, eventually achieving a radial balance. Anne, looking directly through the blurred countenance of her brother, produced a skein of lilac yarn from the left pocket of her pinafore and, without averting her gaze, measured a

segment of string that she then bit off, extending her hand towards Adam, as if she were asking him to dance. He took the string, noticing his sister's right eye had gone slightly lazy, drifting off to the side of the room. He tied a knot, making a loose circle, returning the invitation to a waltz. They began to play a game of Cat's Cradle.

With undivided concentration their tiny hands fluttered, like sedated hummingbirds, manipulating the changing lines, intuiting the necessary intersections and forms. With infinite patience they guided the vibrations that were emerging between them, calmly negotiated the fantastical nexus that hovered malleable over the glowing center of the carpet. The mandala's concentric tessellations rippled under their bare knees, coaxing them deeper towards its molten core.

Ring around the rosie. Duck, duck, goose. All circle games converged in the bloodshot eye of the storm. Their own eyes fell from their original orbit, rolling towards a singular vision. The cipher revolves in retrograde above their heads, a collective halo turning on a liminal axis. As above, so below. The ornament that announces the arrival of the neutral angels; an absolute zero equidistant from heaven and hell.

The patterns of the yarn acquiesced to these rounded parameters. The parabolas contorted around an invisible centrifuge, a succession of string shapes unspooled towards the ceiling, looping and lassoing around the chandelier. An intelligent network emerged from these disparate sources, a confluence of living circles that soon covered every inch of the room. An efflorescence of silk was spun from the center of the carpet, where the aperture of the lens

expanded to its breaking point. A sinkhole, a band of gold, an orb of white lightning. The mandala disintegrates before them, the annular cocoon splits open, to allow a conduit of revelations to manifest.

The looking glass was shattered to bits. Adam and Anne had dismantled the device that contained them, perforated the sphere of influence, becoming fluent speakers of Kaleidoscopese in the process. The language of the mirror no longer mattered. Chestnut could no longer take advantage of their fragmentary recollections. Uncertain constellations were at long last solidified. The circle was unbroken.

With renewed strength, they stepped through the magnetic space between the strings to plunge into the sacred geometry of their past. Amidst the electrified interstices was the memory that Chestnut had tried so hard to avoid. This quarrel would be put firmly to rest. The partition between the living and the dead was to be discontinued. The moment of synthesis was upon them.

## Lesson

The sandbox, slime green and shaped like a turtle, was wet from yesterday's rain. Anne had forgotten to secure the cover, the mottled plastic carapace, so the shell had been shocked by the sudden storm. Rubbing the sleepdust from her eyes, quietly prodding the screen door, she tiptoed into that soggy morning, before anyone else had awoken, to survey the damages the backyard had sustained. "Gave proof through the night, that our flag was still there," she whispered under her breath, nearly tripping over the spigot of the garden hose. Turbid deposits of water mirrored her steady procession, replicating her stride in the surfaces of flooded birdbaths, mimicking her movements from the banks of a sodden wheelbarrow. Anne instinctively trusted her reflection in water, finding it more agreeable than glass. The tremulous features, the diffuse edges better conveyed what she considered to be her natural self.

Upon gazing into the fountain, she was unsurprised to notice that Adam had snuck up behind her, for his presence had a closeness that frequently defied physical distance. Without speaking, they sifted their hands through the fountain water. The resulting ripples blended their individual faces into something unstable, amphibious. They giggled at the swamp monster they had inadvertently created, augmented by the docile glissandi of wind chimes that hung in the Chestnut tree above them. The mud under their feet made for a growing attitude of mischief; their playtime was often supervised, and seldom provided this particular type of wetness. The temptations of splashing were unavoidable. Soon there was another gleeful discovery; the badminton tent had collapsed overnight.

“Booby trap!” yelled Adam as he wrapped the soiled netting around his sister, who offered little protest, leaving a damp lattice of dirt across the frills of her white nightgown. Seeing the knots bristle against Anne’s bare legs reminded him of fishnet stockings, the ones worn by the babysitter that had only come to watch them twice before Mother made Father find a replacement. Her name was Reena. She had let them watch Jerry Springer all day as long as they promised not to tell. Anne welcomed the faint abrasions of the netting, it reminded her of the pirate games they loved to play. The twins especially loved taking turns walking the plank; the idea of plunging into the bottomless depths never ceased to excite them.

After Anne used a cunning maneuver to make her great escape, the children made their way to the sandbox, using a nearby shovel as a paddle to part the imaginary reeds that obscured their path. Upon reaching the trusty turtle they planned to retrieve the treasures they had buried the day prior, but soon shifted focus to accommodate a more fascinating spectacle, one that was wriggling blindly towards them.

The earthworm moved outside of time, faceless, each end identical to the other. A freedom fighter, not to be used as bait, hooked onto Father’s fishing lure. Adam had learned in biology class that the earthworm was hermaphroditic. He pondered the strange alliances found in nature, the emulsified Yin and Yang of the worm, curled around the circumference of the burgeoning eclipse. Adam had also learned that the earthworm carried its eggs in the thickened section of its middle, known as the clitellum. The protuberant segment, the connective gland. Adam/?/Anne, watched the worm as it burrowed under the trunk of the Chestnut tree. Without

understanding exactly why, they started to dig with their hands in the spot where the worm had entered the earth. Mud was flung in every direction. This was different than digging for treasure. The map had been absolved from meaning, gorged on yesterday's rain. It wasn't long before they struck a metal surface. It was all coming back to them, intercut with faint protests from an anonymous bidder. A closed auction in the light of dawn would no longer be tolerated. The lid of the tin box would yield no surprises. It was time for them all to be open about such things.

Opened.

## C-h-e-s-t-n-u-t

Considering my artillery of mischief, my bottomless bag of tricks, it had been nearly impossible for the twins to successfully execute an ambush, to utilize the element of surprise against me. Until then. I had developed a reputation, in many alternate dimensions, as a difficult artist, a legendary temper, and avoiding confrontation was a concept hitherto unexplored in my work. An enfant terrible in the most literal sense. To pull a fast one on me was a laughable pursuit, a fool's errand. This being said, I am loathe to confess that the sight of my unmarked grave had me absolutely flabbergasted. In all honesty, I swooned. Who swoons even? How passé. Yet imagine my shock at their ingenuity, most likely accidental, but effective in tugging at these heartstrings, my intangible organs electrified. My void jerked into sudden circulation, a spike in the cardiogram. A pulse, I pondered. A pulse! How absurd. Still the arrhythmia persisted, hatched inside the notion of me. My initial impulse was to itemize, to take thorough inventory of the major arteries as they manifested. In my flustered state, I made a thwarted attempt to catalogue the colors of this emerging viscera, flummoxed as the ventricles flushed with the crimson pallor of discovery.

Had I a heart, once bruised and beating, no larger than a cherry tomato (yet infinitely more appetizing), it grew three sizes in that moment. I was presented with those remains, my remains, which were hardly presentable, and even if I looked a fright to any nosey neighbor that might peer over the fence to gloat at this exhumation, I was struck for the first time with the notion of the dapper gentleman I could have been. Those disheveled bones in that

unceremonious box, what for all intensive purposes was a slightly glorified shoebox, were genuinely handsome. The skull, having been ensnared by a curl of black roots, one of which punctured the lid to feed on the tissue when it was still tender, seemed auspicious to my untrained eyes. A pair of eyes that were previously theoretical, now given a set of sockets to roost. Is this what it feels like to enter the ballroom, surrendering to the applause of high society? Finally, a debutante, fully aware of my charms. That skeleton unadorned, I slipped inside of it as if it were the chicest of evening gowns. Having been in storage for so long, it could obviously use some maintenance. A light dusting, a trip to the tailors, to fix for me a fringe of flesh. And if he were to refuse my business, I would march straight to Geopetto, for a fresh coat of lacquer. A real boy.

How enamoured I was at the sight of it, Narcissus in the exact moment that he first gazed upon his own reflection. Excuse my gawking, my crude ogling, but a fresh-faced ingénue lifted me into the ground, offering a warm welcome and a garland of roses and, still faceless in the most quantifiable sense, I *felt*. This is no small feat, I assure you. I felt a twinge of muscle memory ripping at the edge of my formlessness. Something to the effect of batting my eyelashes, leaning down to whisper “Where have you been all my death?”

And the skeleton winked back. I wouldn’t joke about this. It was me after all, not just a cartoon in a coffin, rickety on a floor of celluloid. It had my comic timing, the brevity of my wit. My theoretical heart was thumping out of its chest, its collapsed ribcage. Pretending to be bashful, politely refusing to dance for me, to don those tap shoes and perform the routine I had so

painstakingly choreographed in the wee hours of every morning. Locusts in our collective stomach, vertebrates nervously aligned. Play it cool, Chestnut. Imitation is the highest form of flattery. How to proceed? How to press forth into this center of gravity, this blithe rejoinder, to manipulate myself, the willing marionette? Adam and Anne had graciously vacated the premises: “We imagine you two have some catching up to do.” So disinterested was I with the breath in their lungs, which I had strived indefatigably to seize from them, now that the shovels had struck pure gold. Ivory. All precious matter mined from the modest ditch. My belongings belonged. My remains remained. A kiss is inconceivable, too soon, not before the appropriate courtship, the wooing and the serenading that was to come. A synapse was firing in the abyss of me. A bundle of nerves resuscitated. Baby’s first flinch. Baby’s first body, handle with care. Small parts may present a choking hazard to children ages 3 and under. The unwritten warranty, inscribed deep in the residue of the marrow. Fine print, the finest print in all the world. Some assembly required. Batteries not included. No, not yet. Not ever.

It was then I realized that I had to move on, this body was never meant for me. We three were chosen for greater accomplishments. It didn’t matter who was to blame. This is not to say that I am repentant by any means. Without my antagonism the twins would have wallowed in mediocrity for the rest of their days. I, however brutal my methods may have been, prepared them for the higher calling. The closer than close. The infinite togetherness. So go on, cut the cord, leave the nest, we can’t be in the habit of remembering our past mistakes. What a waste of potential, to follow in our parents’ footsteps. To play at life with the expectation that miracles

can happen without the intervention of fate. To use a pang of grief as an excuse to shirk one's obligations. It is not hyperbole to state that destiny and memory are mutually exclusive.

Nostalgia is the fall of every great empire. The cult of personality is criminally overrated. All belongs. To think of the time I squandered pining for a body to call my own, when belonging can be much more than the sum of its parts. There is something more to be than just one. The happiness of becoming. Singular plural.

But who knows, maybe I'm delusional in my final hours as "I." I could be thrusting forward into disappointment. The promise of "together" without the need for such a word is too appetizing to resist. We won't be missed, not in this old drafty house. The slate will be wiped clean on all accounts. Mother will have her workshop all to herself. Probably for the best, to plunge into the unknown, rather than wading around in the shallow end of the pool. I didn't think Adam and Anne would let me into their exclusive club after all I've put them through, but there's something to be said about the strange alliances found in nature. In nurture. There are times when blood is just as thick as water. You'll see.

Adam/?/Anne

Pack light.

Have we forgotten anything?

Absolutely.

It's a simple ceremony, really.

I'm so glad we secured this location.

We'll all go first, one assumes.

One in all.

The musketeer(s)!

It's nice not having

To put on airs.

We'll take care of all the expenses, you just enjoy yourselves.

Bridegroom

SisterWife

BestMan.

Guess I'll sit on every side.

The photographer can't work like this. All the film has been exposed.

Bright.

I

Propose

A toast

One last time.

I promised

Not to cry

To my Brother!

To my Sister!

To my Brother!

Time to paddle out, before dusk. Into the canoe we go. The water doesn't seem too cold. We

forgot the paddle (naturally).

On the count of three, dive right in.

1.....2..... Wait

What?

Someone remembers.

Not if I can help it.

...

Let

It

Go

## Gift

It was a small memory, but one of the first. Adam had somehow kept it safe from Chestnut's tampering all these years, or perhaps because of its simplicity it had been overlooked. There was a modest gathering in the condominiums overlooking the harbor, where their Grandpa had lived briefly before his hospitalization. Here he was pictured hearty and hale, no evident signs of fatigue or distress, but the old man had always prided himself on his showmanship, and could have been wincing amicably through the pain for all anyone knows. If so, his dedication to staying in character was remarkable. Adam watched him spryly disappear into a musty closet. Quick to return, he hunched down over the turquoise carpeting, only slightly ruffled by the full blast of the air-conditioning, which sabotaged the slick strands of his comb-over. Something orange and delightful had manifested in Grandpa's upturned palm, diverting Adam's attention from the puzzle pieces scattered around them. Grandpa's loud city smile, like a Las Vegas marquee, shamelessly advertised the coming attraction.

Adam couldn't have been older than one at the time, but he was already used to surprises. Despite having grown accustomed to things that go bump in the night, the good-natured mischief of his Grandpa's presentation was a welcome novelty. "Take" was the flavor of the room "and mine." His baby words filled the room with joy. Wide-eyed, Adam reached out for the rubber tiger, pinching the miniature tail, an understated caress. Some cigar smoke, pats on the back, and then it was his. A toy. "Siegfried and Roy," his Grandpa said. "Looking sharp," his Grandpa said. Cake was served. Once burning bright, that memory.

### Approaching

And it doesn't matter now who's speaking. And Us won't be sent to timeout, Us won't be grounded. It wouldn't matter to be a childrens again. I see in the reflection of the lake a graduation cap thrown towards infinity. Who's going to tell Us what to do? Us is a winged migration. Well no feathers but flight, sky and soar. It's hard to explain. Now and again and then soon, me is a here and there. Bright future (I'll say) when glimpsed from the backend of yesteryear, when you put it that way, when you take a good look at it. Either way, tomorrow is going be early, perhaps? What a blessing, to flee from that empty word: bodies. "I" illuminates the page, but one must deal with the candlewax dripping. Our voice isn't needed anymore, somewhere. Still one wonders what became of them: the flesh. It's hard to show much concern for it now, or how exactly we "got away from it all."

Some loose conjecture ever so often. Talk of muscles destabilized, celestial membranes. Had the continuum disassembled around those starbound twin shapes? What a bore to speculate, when Us is very much content, and they might not even be. But if they be, one hopes serene. With house and home, town and country. Those things Us don't miss too much. Those straight lines, the gristle of time chewed between Pet and God and Father. What do you expect, brothers and sisters? Is it a whiteness that would thrill? I'm sure we must have some lying around somewhere. Or do you want we to explain this clearly? Either/?/Or, it isn't any use to them now.

Once we were, but that wasn't wise. Three to be exact. Brothers and sisters, don't let them tell you that three's a crowd. Don't let them feed you that line. The number doesn't mean anymore, but it did. Is that important to you? Us is most happy here. No one to make us eat our vegetables, and best of all, the taste of milk has yet to never happen. All we eat are stars, stars and stars approaching. Flickering and approaching. You might think it tastes like frosting, and you might be right. Here comes some more, and something else as well. Some familiar song. How does it go again? That's it! Now, it's your turn! Sing along, brothers and sisters, you know the words. Us is tired of singing. The next step may be important.

Quickly, blow out all the candles, my brothers and sisters. Close your eyes, my ones and alls. Now, make a wish.