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No Explanation Needed

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Bard College

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

by
Niels Blumel

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2021

Acknowledgements

To Nayland Blake, I have always liked your name and when I began writing this story, my main character needed a name and I used Nayland as a placeholder. I ended up keeping it. It's a great name and now you're coming to teach at Bard! My cover has been blown, what are the chances that my main character and the new head of the studio art department would share the same, not particularly common name? I got it from you and if you ever come across my senior project, I hope it is alright that I named my main character Nayland.

To Dinaw Mengestu, I've had a great time sharing my writing with you. You've been encouraging and helpful throughout this whole process, letting me know when something was good enough or when I'd done a disservice to a character. You've also given me incredible reading suggestions. I'm not sure when I would've discovered Bohumil Hrabal if you hadn't told me to read *I Served the King of England*. I'm incredibly grateful for the guidance you've given me over the last 6-7 months. Thank you Dinaw.

I can't submit this without giving a brief acknowledgement to Wyatt Mason. Wyatt is easily the greatest teacher I've ever had. Wyatt changed the way I write, he made me pay closer attention to my sentences, showed me the importance of word placement, he made me a better writer. Thanks, Wyatt.

Finally, I'd like to thank my parents for paying my tuition and letting me go to Bard. I love you both very much.

No Explanation Needed

By Niels Blumel

For Mom and Dad

PART I
THE TRASH MOBILE

Letting the sink faucet run, Nayland sat in his underwear on the bed that used to belong to his mother and father. Through the window facing the street, he could see the reflection of red and white flashing lights. No sound came with the light and due to the lack of blue, he figured it must be an ambulance. Nayland pictured his parents driving together, listening to the weather report, and waiting at a stop-light. As the light turns green, "I can't believe it's going to be 71 on Saturday," his father takes his foot off of the brake without noticing the semi-truck that has just run a red light. The phone call would be awful, a police officer, or whoever handles those types of calls would offer Nayland their condolences and inform him that he was now an orphan. Nayland wondered how they would know to get into contact with him and then remembered that this whole imagined premise was pointless because his father had left his mother to become an actor. They no longer drove together.

Nayland stepped out of the bedroom and looked for a pen. On the back of a Con Edison bill he wrote, "Remember to call Mom." And below that, "Dad too."

The tap water was steaming but Nayland had mismanaged his time and would still have wet hair when he met Margo. He put on deodorant instead.

His date sat across from him, but it was the mirror behind her that held his attention. As Margo described her experience of getting moved up from economy to first class the week before, Nayland was fixated on his hair.

"Have you ever flown first class?" she asked.

Earlier that day Nayland had passed the 9/11 memorial gift shop. His mind drifted away from their forced conversation to a world in which Twin Tower key chains weren't being sold and New York had instead erected an exact replica of the key chain subject. Margo waited for him to respond. She didn't actually care if he had flown first class.

"No, I don't think I have," he said.

The mirror was distracting. The two ate in silence. Nayland began to speak but stopped himself, twirling his hand in a circular, repetitive motion, indicating that he needed a moment to collect himself.

"When you were talking about your flight, I don't know why, but for some reason I had this idea that popped into my head. I think it could be a good detail in a story or a movie. It's a slightly altered version of Manhattan, one where this restaurant would still exist, but instead of the Freedom Tower, they just rebuilt the Twin Towers as they were before."

Ready to ask for the check, Margo drank from her glass of sparkling water that Nayland had insisted they get. It had been hard to track down the waiter all night and seeing that he was nowhere to be found, Margo resorted to a question that had saved conversations in the past.

"Where were you when you found out Michael Jackson died?"

"Michael Jackson? I don't know, I must've been in, what, middle school, early high school when he died. I liked him when I was younger but I don't really remember his death that well. Where were you? Do you know where you were when he died?"

"Well, I kind of found out at two different places. I was at the grocery store with my mom and I remember hearing "Billie Jean" playing on the radio while we were waiting in line to check-out. I remember thinking, why is this song being played right now? Something must have happened. When we got home and were unbagging the groceries, I turned on the television and

sure enough he was dead. It was unbelievable. Although personally, I've always been more of a Prince fan."

Choosing not to interject that he too preferred Prince, the waiter dutifully checked in on his table.

"How is everything?"

Nayland glanced at his half-eaten plate.

"Oh great, the food's been great."

"Excellent," their server replied.

Before the waiter could walk away, Margo scribbled in the air with an invisible pen.

"We don't have to leave yet, I just wanted to get the check so that when we're ready, we can pay for everything."

Nayland picked up the miniature clipboard and squinted at the small text.

"What do you want to do, split it? Actually mine cost a little more. Wow this place is expensive but it's okay, I don't mind. It's good, the food was good."

"Yeah let's just split it," Margo said.

"Oh okay, we can do that. Yeah that'll work."

Nayland's lip twitched as he slid Margo the check.

"I'm sorry about the 9/11 thing," he blurted out.

"What?"

"I'm not sure why I told you that. I mean some time has passed but it can still be a sensitive subject."

"I wasn't offended, don't worry Nayland, you're fine."

"So we should make plans to do this again, maybe next Friday? I won't be in the city."

“I think we should. I’ll tell my friends that I met this really odd but great guy last week and we were supposed to meet up again, but he never showed up. Where are you going?”

“I’m going to Connecticut, by the shoreline.”

“Oh, nice. What’re you gonna do there? Visit family?”

“No, I’m actually moving up there.”

“Moving?”

“Well sort of, I’m renting an apartment for a month and I’m gonna see how I like it.”

“What’re you gonna do? Do you have a job?”

“No, I’m kind of in-between jobs right now. The past couple of years I’ve been trying to get some of my writing published, but that hasn’t really worked out. Now I just want to do something regular, have an ordinary job, outside of the city.”

“What’s an ordinary job?”

“Oh, I don’t know, I could be a house painter or maybe a carpenter. But I’m not any good with my hands. I feel like I could paint houses.”

“Well, I’m sure you’d make a fine house painter. I, too, could probably paint houses. I’d just rather not.”

“No? Well that’s alright. Less competition for me. You know, you can actually make a decent amount of money as a house painter.”

“Oh, you’ve really thought about this.”

“No, not that much. But I’m pretty sure the average salary of a house painter is around forty thousand.”

“That’s not that much.”

“What do you mean, that’s more than I’ve ever made. Anyways, I don’t actually care about money.”

“Yeah, well you’ve probably got your mom’s credit card.”

“No I don’t. Do you?”

“No, but I’m not the one moving somewhere without a job.”

“It’s cheaper out there.”

“Can I see your wallet?”

“What?”

“Come on, let me see it”

“Why?”

“I just wanna see it. Come on, show me.”

Reluctantly, Nayland handed his wallet to Margo. Plucking a thick, black card out of the wallet, Margo began to grin.

“What’s this?”

“I never activated it.”

“Don’t be embarrassed, I’ve got one too.”

“But you said you didn’t.”

“That’s because it’s embarrassing. Don’t worry, we’re not the only people in our twenties who live in New York and rely on our parents.”

“I don’t use it. I only keep it in there in case I ever need it. And if I do need it, I’ll activate it, but so far I haven’t had to.”

Judging by his response, Margo could tell that she’d overstepped her ground and handed the wallet back to Nayland.

“I’m sorry. I got a little carried away. I shouldn’t have done that.”

“Don’t worry about it. Look, how about this, I’ll call Visa or American Express, whatever company it is, I’ll activate the card and pay for everything with it. I would say we should do this again, but I’m gone in a week.”

“Yeah that’s too bad. I wouldn’t mind seeing you again.”

Contemplating whether or not she should ask if he wanted to go back to her place, “What’re you doing tomorrow?” came out instead.

“Tomorrow? Oh man, what am I doing tomorrow? I’m doing something crazy.”

“Crazy?”

“Crazy.”

“Alright, well what’re you doing that’s so, what’s a different word besides crazy? Insane? Oh never mind, crazy’s fine I guess, though I don’t particularly like that word. I hate when people call me crazy.”

“But I didn’t say that.”

“I know, I know. What’s going on tomorrow?”

“I’m moving next week, you know that. And after I leave the city, I’m gonna need a car to get around. Well I’ve already got one, sort of. The problem is I don’t have it at the moment. I lent it to a friend. But I need it back, so I called Charlie, my friend with the car, I called him and let him know that I needed the car back and that I was gonna come up this weekend to pick it up. But he won’t give it back. He told me that I couldn’t have it and that I wasn’t ever going to get it back. And I get it. He uses it to go to work, to go anywhere really, and I wanted to work something out with him. Maybe I could use it for a week, settle into my new place, and then give it back to him for a week or two until he could find a new ride. But I didn’t even get to give him

that option, straight out of the gate, he was nasty, super defensive. He told me I couldn't have it and hung up on me. So tomorrow, tomorrow I'm taking a train upstate and I'm taking the car back myself."

"So what, you can't just try to talk to him?"

"No, because then he might start to suspect something."

"I feel like you could go about this in a better way. I mean it's great, I love that you're arranging this little heist, but can't you get in trouble for stealing the car even if it is yours?"

"Well, I wouldn't say I'm stealing it. What's it called when someone doesn't make payments on their car in time and the car people come and take it from you? You know, when they tow it away? Repurpose? No. Repossess! Yes, I'm not stealing my car, I'm repossessing it. And get this, the car's registered under my name, I had to send Charlie this year's registration, so the car's mine to take back and I have his address. Hey, you wouldn't want to come up with me, would you?"

Nayland's American cheese induced nightmare was interrupted by a phone call from his mother. She wanted to know if he was moving to California. If he was moving to California, she would have to go with him because she couldn't stand to live 3,000 miles away from him. Wishing he'd known that California was an option, he hadn't told her about Connecticut yet, he joked that she must be mistaking him for his father.

"Dad's the one who thinks he's an actor."

"So you aren't moving to California."

"No, I'm not."

"Alright good, because I'm coming into the city on Thursday."

Making tentative lunch plans for the day after his move, Nayland positioned himself for another round of rest, but couldn't stop replaying the image of himself furiously beating the current boyfriend of an ex with a brick. The breakup had been mutual and from the few times he'd met the guy, he'd actually liked him. Must've been the cheese, he thought. American cheese always gave him disturbing dreams.

Pouring himself a third cup of coffee, Nayland tried to get past the headlines of the lone digital newspaper he was subscribed to, but struggled to commit to an article. Besides a general lack of interest in the news, he was hung up on whether or not there was any way that Charlie was onto him. Since a group project in 7th grade when he'd decided to adopt an "I don't care" attitude, Nayland had been consistently laid back. Like his father's instinctual "No," Nayland had inadvertently made it a habit to respond to things with passivity and indifference. They were both working on this, just in different ways.

Nayland for instance, when given the choice between sparkling and tap water the night before, had rejected the part of his brain that told him he didn't care and chose the carbonated option. His father on the other hand, after an out-of-character-but-ultimately profound six hours on psilocybin mushrooms with his buddy Reuben, realized that he had wasted the last two decades of his life saying "no" to everything and needed to figure out some things, which meant leaving his wife of 25 years for their yoga instructor and deciding that his true calling was to be an unpaid actor in student films. "The bigger roles will come after I do these types of movies. First I need a reel!" His father needed a reel and Nayland needed his car back.

Compulsively flicking the lighter he'd used to ignite the gas stovetop, Nayland reached for the car key lying next to his laptop and dug out the lighter's safety lock while he thought back to the time he'd agreed to lend Charlie his car.

“What’re you gonna do with the car?”

“Oh nothing, I’m just leaving it with a family friend for now.”

“Do you think I could borrow it?”

“Yeah sure, why not? I don’t care.”

There was no way Charlie was onto him.

At Union Square, Nayland shot up from his seat so that the pregnant woman who’d just entered the crowded train car could have it. Squeezing between a man resting his eyes and an elderly woman cradling a PC Richards & Son bag between her legs, the soon-to-be mother thanked him. Giving her a half smile and gentle wave, Nayland stabilized himself with his fingertips on the 6 train’s ceiling. When the train stopped in the tunnel for ten minutes, he couldn’t help but glance back at the woman enjoying the seat he’d so eagerly given up. An annoying person might’ve said, “Aren’t you glad I got up? Who knows when this thing’ll move again. It could be hours.” But Nayland wasn’t annoying. He was bitter, because if he hadn’t gotten up, someone else would have.

Outside of the train station bakery, Nayland found himself standing behind an obnoxious group of boys. Thinking that they must’ve just gotten out of school, Nayland remembered that it was the weekend and that they were still at the age where their backpacks went everywhere they went. One of the kids, Jeremy, particularly bothered Nayland. Nayland had learned his name when the shorter, Herschel backpack wearing teen in front of him had said, “That’s ode Jeremy” in response to the sexual and probably made up story Jeremy was telling his friends.

“When I’m on a talk show, I’m gonna tell that story.”

Disgusted by Jeremy's arrogance, Nayland thought of what he would talk about if he ever ended up on a late-night show.

"So, let me get this right, you're from New York City originally?"

"That's correct."

"That's fantastic, fantastic, really, you know we get all of these actors and celebrities who're from the sticks, the absolute middle of nowhere. They don't want to talk about their past, before the fame. Now, because you're not here to promote anything, how about you tell us a cool, wild New York City story. How about that folks? Do you want to hear a real New York story?"

The crowd cheers, it's Beatlemania, and what has Nayland even done besides be himself?

"Alright, alright. Calm down, I've got something I think you all might like."

Shirts are off now, people are pulling their hair out. The crowd can't contain their excitement because they know Nayland's got something good for them.

"There was this one time, I was taking the subway back home from a friend's house, and it was hot. Nearly 100 degrees, a real scorcher of a day. I've got my headphones on and I'm just enjoying the train's air conditioning. I decide to close my eyes, get a little bit of rest before I have to go back out into the heat, then all of a sudden, mind you I've only been on the train for a few minutes, I look out the window and everyone's on the platform. There's nobody on the train except me. I'm a little shocked, you'd think somebody could've taken a moment to let me know that we were getting off the train. But obviously nobody did. That's New York hospitality for you. So I get up to look for the conductor, I slide open the subway door and walk between the cars but the other door won't open. So I start to panic. What if I get stuck on this train and it goes into the yard?"

The host nods in approval. Nayland's killing it.

“So I'm pacing back and forth, people are staring at me, I can't think rationally because I've become totally overwhelmed by the situation. Instead of waiting for someone to find me, I pull a Popeye Doyle, and climb out the side. Now, climbing out of a subway, it's really not that hard. First, you've gotta stand on the metal gate, right next to where you walk between the cars. Then there are these rusty, slinky-like tubes a couple feet away from the first barrier, you know, the metal gate. Getting my footing on the gate was easy because it was sturdy, but when I went to put my foot on one of the tubes, it moved away from me and I had to grab it so that it would stop moving. Once I was standing on the tube, swaying back and forth a little bit and looking down at the tracks below me, it finally hit me that what I was doing was kind of dangerous, but I just had to go with it, so I got a little bit of momentum and jumped onto the platform. A couple people came up and told me I shouldn't have done that, that I could've really hurt myself, but for the most part, it seemed like people either hadn't noticed or didn't really care. A couple minutes later, the conductor walked through the car I'd been in, and then the train started moving in the same direction we came from. That's my story, that's my New York City story.”

The slightly less enthused crowd stands up and cheers. They're happy because it was Nayland who told it, but most thought that the ending could've been stronger. Somewhere in the back, it sounds like someone is saying, “next.”

“Next.”

Nayland hurried over to the bakery counter and ordered a scone. He looked back to see what Jeremy and his friends had gotten, but they were already gone. Wishing he'd seen Jeremy order one of the colorful, frosted cupcakes on display and a coffee with lots of milk and sugar,

Nayland paid for his pastry and went off to find out which track his train was on and meet up with Margo.

The two had shown up to the train station in all black bandit-like costumes. Amongst the crowd of tourists, commuters, and locals, they didn't stand out in any particular way like the M-4 rifle toting counter-terrorism officers did. Sans the black-knitted cap, Nayland was wearing essentially the same thing he had worn the night before, but when they would reach their destination, Nayland and Margo would look suspect.

On the train, Nayland left the window seat empty. If for some reason Margo were to miss the train and the trip as a whole, Nayland would slide over to the window, but because of his height, the aisle seat worked best for him. Just as he had done minutes before, Nayland ruffled through his pant pockets to make sure that the spare car key and his drivers license were still with him. Sure enough, he had them both, but there was still no sign of Margo.

The train was filling up, strangers were beginning to sit with strangers, and his digital watch told him that it was nearly 8:37. A plump, runny-nosed man made his way down the aisle, eyeing the empty seat next to Nayland. He signaled for Nayland to move so that he could take the seat.

“Sorry I’m saving it for someone,” Nayland said.

“Just move over buddy,” the man responded, wiping snot away with his suit sleeve.

“Come on, there’re plenty of other seats. My friend will be here any minute.”

“Train leaves in a minute, are you really saving that seat?”

The man was blocking the aisle and nobody could get past him. Somehow the worst person on the train was intent on sitting next to Nayland.

“Hey can you move?” a woman behind him asked.

“This kid won’t let me have the seat. Says he’s saving it for someone.”

The train doors closed.

“He probably is, just find a different one,” the woman responded.

“Oh hey, there she is,” Nayland said, pointing towards Margo as she made her way down the aisle, waving to him. Grunting with annoyance, the man coughed into his hand and pushed his way past Margo. Nayland moved out of the way so that Margo could sit next to him.

“We both had the same idea, all black,” she said, commenting on their matching outfits.

“Did you bring your ski mask?” Nayland asked.

“No, I left it at home. What was all of that about?”

“Oh, just some guy who really wanted your seat.”

Margo and Nayland chatted throughout the train ride. He laid out his plan, she brought up the many ways it could go wrong. By the time they got off the train, the two believed that their mission would go smoothly. Waiting for Margo to use the restroom, Nayland found a taxi that would take them to Charlie’s house. He didn’t give the driver Charlie’s exact address. Instead, he picked a house number that was 20 numbers off from Charlie’s. Nearby, a couple waiting for their bus to arrive argued, while their neglected small dog marked the luggage of the unsuspecting woman next to them with its urine. Nayland watched and said nothing.

In the taxi, Nayland wore his seatbelt. Margo did not. The driver spoke loudly into his bluetooth headset, shouting over contemporary pop songs Nayland had never heard before.

When he was younger, Nayland had always been embarrassed when the radio was on, because he never knew the words to songs everyone else his age seemed to love. Now that he was an adult

and had his own taste in music, he almost took pride in not knowing what was popular on the radio. That music wasn't meant for him.

Tapping his earpiece, the driver looked away from the road and directly at his two passengers.

"So what brings you two up here?" he said.

"Visiting friends," Nayland quickly responded.

"Visiting friends. You don't live up here?"

"No, we're from the city."

"Ah yes, New York City. You two look like you're from there. My cousin, he lives down there. Big Wall Street guy, makes a lot of money."

"Oh nice."

"So you're visiting your friends, but you have nothing with you. No bags? What's that about?"

"Oh, uh," Nayland trailed off.

"We're just staying for the night. It's our friend's birthday tonight, we'll be going back in the morning," Margo interjected.

"Friend's birthday, maybe I'll stop by."

The car swerved as the driver looked back at Margo and Nayland and then broke out into laughter.

"I'm just playing, you should've seen the look on your faces. Especially you, sweetheart. The taxi driver wants to come, oh no, how do we tell him he can't! A birthday party, that should be, hold on, one sec, I've gotta take this."

Margo and Nayland looked at each other as the driver jumped onto another phone call. Hysterically laughing, “you should’ve seen their faces,” he ran the next stop sign.

Just when he thought he’d found the right video, the girl had a Russian accent. Returning to the home page, Charlie scrolled through the various popular clips of the day, glancing at each with the hopes that one of the videos would have a compelling premise. Recognizing an actress he liked, he readied himself as an ad played, only to realize that he’d seen that one before. What a waste of a night, he thought. Shutting his laptop, Charlie began to think of a girl he’d made out with once, back in high school. As he tried to imagine what she would look like seven or eight years after their drunken kiss, his stomach growled, and his mind shifted to cookies. Nutter Butters, Nutters Butters, oh Nutter Butters, he thought. Scrambling for the time, he got up from his bed and waddled over to his desk. It was 11:08 and the gas station closed at 11:30. If he left immediately, he could get to Speedway right before they closed. Pulling his pants back up, Charlie rushed out of his room and ran down the stairs. Next to the front door was the living room, where his roommate and a friend sat watching cartoons.

“I’m going to the gas station. You guys need anything?” Charlie said.

“No, I’m good. Wait, actually, could you pick me up a tall can?”

“Yeah sure, what kind?”

“Oh it doesn’t matter, just get me anything. Hey I think I’m blocking you in. You wanna take my car?”

“Yeah could I?”

“Here.”

Charlie's roommate dug into his pockets and threw his key chain in Charlie's general direction.

"Thanks," Charlie said as he bolted out the door.

The rustling behind the car was too loud to be a skunk, but what could it be? A dog? Maybe a raccoon? Making his way to the other side of the car, Charlie noticed a dark, hooded figure watching him from behind a telephone pole. Spooked by whatever it was that was behind his roommate's car and the mysterious character looming in the distance, Charlie hopped into the beat up Nissan and sped away down the street, blasting Ween at an unneighborly volume. The woman from across the street with a big green peace sign on her barn, "Hi, peace barn here, about last night," would come knocking in the morning.

If he'd had any second thoughts about taking the car, Charlie had just cleared all of them up. Charlie might as well have handed Nayland the key to the Corolla. It was a lot to take in, finding the car blocked in, Charlie's slamming of the door, Charlie's weight gain. And that beard! Sitting down where Charlie had just been, Nayland turned around and grinned at a mortified Margo. Unsure what to do with herself or why she had come up with Nayland, Margo shook her head at Nayland as he waved at her to come join her on the driveway. Showing a more performative side of himself, Nayland snuck towards his car, posting up against the house, looking back and forth before darting over to the drivers side of his car. When he opened the door, the interior lit up, but only for a moment before Nayland quickly and quietly shut it closed. The light didn't need to be on for Nayland to see that the car was a dump. Crumpled up tissues, empty cigarette cartons, candy wrappers, deflated chip bags, and soda cans were all littered around the front of the car. The car stank. Something was under that front passenger seat. Nayland didn't even want to look in the back. The disrespect Charlie had shown to the car and to

himself by driving it in this state made Nayland feel like what he was doing was even more justifiable than it had been moments before. I bet he's been buying cheap gas, Nayland thought, even though he had often filled up the car with cheap gas. This felt like something he should be mad about. Nayland was nervous to turn the car on. Once the engine was running, there was a chance somebody in the house would hear it. Should he turn on the headlights or back out of the driveway with them off? How fast should he go? Tapping the steering wheel with his left hand, Nayland pushed in the key. Great, he thought, the check engine light's on.

The cashier smoked a Black N' Mild in front of the Speedway convenience store. This was a bad sign for Charlie's Nutter Butter fix, as the dollar cigar was more of an after work treat.

"Hey are you guys still open?" Charlie asked, stepping out of the car.

"Nope," the cashier replied, with his teeth planted on the wooden tip.

"But it's 11:23. Don't you close at 11:30?"

"Sorry. We're closed."

"But I just wanna get one thing. Don't you think you could just ring me up quickly?"

"Nope. Closed. You could try Mobil, I think they're usually open until twelve."

"Okay. Thanks, you have a good night. I'll try Mobil," Charlie said, defeatedly getting back into the car.

Silently, the cashier watched Charlie get back on the road, while he blew wine-flavored smoke into the cool air.

"Oh my god," Margo said, "It's disgusting in here."

"I know. Come on, we've gotta go," Nayland said in a hushed tone.

Margo climbed onto a mound of trash, grimacing at the state of her seat. Margo wasn't usually the squeamish type. She had a pretty high tolerance for clutter and uncleanliness, but the interior of the Corolla was truly disgusting.

"Was it like this when you, oh no, what is that smell? Open the windows," Margo said, gagging at the stench that was wafting up from under her seat.

Anxiously laughing, Nayland pressed down on all four window buttons at once. There was nothing flattering about their getaway. Nayland couldn't help but think about how much cooler it would've been if they were speeding away in a convertible, or even just a clean car. Margo's feet on the dashboard, the wind blowing in her hair as she gazed at him in awe.

"Baby you're so brave, they'll never know what hit em."

"That's right baby girl, but I couldn't have done it without you."

"You really mean that?"

"Oh yes I do. You did great back there, and now, now it's just you and me. We can go anywhere, do anything we want. I love you, baby girl."

"No, I love you."

Unfortunately that wasn't how it went down. Nayland was piloting the trash mobile.

"When we get a little further, far enough that we can't run into Charlie, I'll stop at a gas station or a rest stop and we can clean out the car," Nayland said, glancing apologetically at Margo.

"But first I need you to do something for me."

"Oh yeah," Margo said.

"Yeah I need you to go into my phone and block Charlie's number."

“Block it? But what about when he comes back and finds the car missing. You don’t think he’s gonna call you and let you know that your car is missing?”

“To him, this is his car. I don’t think he’ll say anything.”

“He saw me. And I think he heard you. He’s gonna call the cops.”

“He can do that. And if he does and we for some reason get pulled over, the registration is in my name. Here,” Nayland said, handing Margo his phone.

Nayland glanced at himself in the rearview mirror. The draft coming through the open window had made his hair look insane. He tried to fix it without making it look like he was fixing anything, which only made it worse, before rustling his hair around and hoping that worked.

Mobil was open. This was a victory for Charlie. Strutting into the convenience store, he greeted cashier number two of the night cheerfully and went straight to the cookie aisle. Come on, Nutter Butters, Nutter Butters, where are they? Oh there they are, he thought. Grabbing two single servings of the peanut butter sandwich cookies, Charlie ignored the refrigerators full of beer and walked over to the cashier.

“Anything else?” The cashier asked, scanning the same wrapper twice.

“Actually, yeah. Could I also get a Black N’ Mild?”

Nobody pulled them over. At a rest stop, they’d dumped most of the trash into a garbage bin. The smell had turned out to be coming from an old container of rice and beans under the front passenger seat. Besides a few CDs and a sweater in the backseat, Charlie hadn’t left many personal belongings in the car. This came as a surprise to Nayland and Margo, because of

everything else he'd left behind. In the trunk, there were two 80-pound bags of concrete mix. Margo asked that Nayland leave them in the trunk, "I could use them for a sculpture." Because of how late it was, there hadn't been much traffic on the way back to the city. Once they did make it down to Lower Manhattan, finding a parking spot was a nightmare. It seemed like every other street was blocked off because of construction. When there was an open space, it was accompanied by a fire hydrant or a no parking sign. Block after block, but no luck. Margo suggested that they venture further east. Finally, after nearly an hour of searching, they found a six-hour metered parking spot that wasn't in effect on Sundays.

Nayland had been worried about taking the car but now he was faced with his biggest challenge of the night, parallel parking. The space was tight, but not that tight, any seasoned parker would've already been out of the car. Nayland couldn't do it. Margo stepped out to help guide him, combing the air and then holding her hand out. His face was flushed, Margo walked up to his window.

"You want me to give it a try?" she asked.

"Can you?"

"Yeah I can do it, let me get in."

Nayland switched places with Margo and got ready to direct her. Nayland copied her motions but quickly stopped. She was in the spot.

"Easy, you've gotta work on that," she said

"I know, I haven't had to do it in a while," Nayland said, taking the key back from Margo. "So, do you wanna come back to my place?"

"Yeah, there's no way I'm going to mine. It's too late, I'm staying with you tonight."

As they walked across Houston, the distant sound of the East Village nightlife was tempting, though neither proposed the idea of going to a bar. Mulberry Street was quiet. Right before they got to Nayland's building, he pointed out the yellow brick tenement building to Margo.

"It's cute," she said. "How'd you ever get an apartment down here?"

"I grew up here. The rent's stabilized, so I barely pay anything," Nayland said, unlocking the building's door.

"I would never give this up. Can I move in here when you leave?" Margo jokingly asked.

This wasn't the first time someone had brought up living in his apartment, with or without him.

"Wait until you see how small it is. There's a shower in the kitchen."

Nayland wasn't exaggerating when he said the apartment was small. It was the smallest apartment Margo had ever seen in New York City. There were pictures of Nayland from his childhood all over the refrigerator. Photos Nayland usually took down when he knew someone was coming over, but would put back up when he was alone again. They reminded him of living in the apartment with his parents.

By the time they'd gotten into bed, both agreed that they were too tired for sex. Facing the bedroom window, Margo slept on her side, with her back to Nayland. Unsure of how to share the bed, Nayland tried draping his arm around her. Painfully aware of the stillness and silence between them, he lifted his arm and turned around, only to feel a tapping on his shoulder and have his arm brought back across her chest.

PART II
THE SHRIKE

Nayland stood in front of the movie theater box office for two hours. No, you go-ing one person after another, Nayland embarrassed himself when he told the acrylic-nailed classical guitarist to “enjoy the picture.” Look at me, he thought, calling this a picture. Movies, he thought, I’ve gotta call them movies or they’ll think I’m a snob.

Granada Arts Cinemas only ran two movies at a time and once both films were being shown, Nayland moved onto town hall, stepping over a fake red nail on his way. To no surprise, town hall was not as popular as the movie theater. Few people came in and out of the repurposed white church, and the only one who acknowledged Nayland was the town clerk, who came out to ask why he was standing outside of the building.

“I’m here to see the mayor,” Nayland said.

“The mayor, what do you want with her?” she asked.

“Oh nothing, I just had a couple questions, that’s all.”

“Well if you have any questions you can bring them up with me, that’s what people normally do. They come inside, and I answer their questions. They don’t stand outside waiting for the mayor, because we don’t have a mayor. We have a first selectman.”

“Okay. Sorry.”

“You said you had a question. What is it, what do you want to know?”

“Oh don’t worry about it. It’s nothing, really.”

“Frank, the guy who just left, had to get a new parking pass, Frank told me that he saw you standing outside of the movie theater. He said he drove by you twice, and that you were standing around, just like what you’re doing now. What’s your problem? Are you a creep?”

“What, oh no, I’m just, I’m new. I just moved here yesterday, from the city, I wanted to get an idea of what the people are like here. I didn’t mean, I’m sorry, I don’t want to make anyone uncomfortable or give anybody the wrong impression. I can leave. Sorry.”

As Nayland walked away, yelling at himself internally, the town clerk called out to him.

“Go somewhere, go to the coffee shop, introduce yourself to somebody. Don’t just stand around, it’s weird.”

Nayland did his best to fake a smile and nodded back to the clerk. He was mortified. Why had he said that thing about the mayor? I’m here to see the mayor. What’s wrong with me, he thought.

Back in New York, Nayland had lived in the same building his whole life, but over the years he’d only gotten to know a few of his neighbors personally. Because of his building’s mostly destabilized rent, new tenants were constantly coming and going, finding that \$2,500 was too much to spend on a 350 square foot apartment. The few people who did have stabilized rent stayed. Forever. These were the people Nayland knew in the building, though he had a different relationship with each of them. Rhonda, who lived a floor up from Nayland, smoked cigarettes in the hallway and worked at a cannoli shop down the street. She had a son Nayland’s age and an older dog named after the Harry Potter anti-hero, Snape. When they’d gotten the dog, the series was still ongoing and Snape had yet to have his redemption arc. Nayland had always thought Snape was a terrible name for a pet. Nayland and Rhonda would sometimes open the front door

for one another or say hello in the hallway, but that was the extent to their neighborly relationship. Nayland had never spoken to her son. Her son was shy.

Neighbor Bill, who lived next to Rhonda, had always been nice to Nayland. When Nayland was younger, Neighbor Bill would occasionally come down to have a glass of wine with his parents and talk about what was going on with his girlfriend's Chinese gift shop or the farm that he was planning on moving to upstate. Neighbor Bill had given Nayland several odd jobs throughout the years, selling t-shirts at the gift shop, cat sitting, packing the bed of Neighbor Bill's pickup truck with wooden planks, and clearing out the gift shop's basement when it eventually went out of business. Neighbor Bill's name was still on apartment eight's mailbox, but he didn't live at Mulberry Street anymore. He spent most of his time upstate, on "the farm" and would come into the city once a month to make an appearance for the newly installed security cameras in the hallways. Sometimes Neighbor Bill would leave green and blue eggs outside of Nayland's door, other times he would send mass building-wide emails complaining about the \$35 rent increase that still made his rent not even a quarter of what others were paying. Nayland didn't know Neighbor Bill's last name. His parents had always called him Neighbor Bill in private. To Nayland, Neighbor was his first name and Bill was his last. Then there were Tom and Catherine, Nayland's downstairs neighbors who he liked the best. Tom and Catherine had lived in the building longer than anybody, outlasting the overturn of several landlords and Gemma, Nayland's former downstairs neighbor who had lived in the same apartment from birth to death. A plaque on the front of the building with her and her husband's picture on it said that she was born in 1916, four years after the building was constructed. Gemma's diabetic one-legged son took over her lease briefly, but only for a few months before he too passed away.

Tom and Catherine seemed to know nearly every tenant in the building, new and old, and their door was always open. Like Rhonda, Tom and Catherine filled the hallways with smoke, along with scents of potent fish and meats. They cooked with their door open and because of this, there weren't gross lingering cooking smells in their apartment.

Between Rhonda, Tom, Catherine, and the kitchen fumes from the restaurant below, the hallways constantly reeked.

Everything there was to know about the people inside and outside of the building, Tom knew. Tony the Italian Bear stood outside of Umberto's Clam House in his big fur coat seven days a week, belting "New York, New York" while he tried to get people to come into the restaurant, because he had a gambling problem. Carlo the barber still paid for protection once a month to whoever one pays for such a service, and the wannabe gangsters who watched over Little Italy and smoked cigars every morning on the corner of Mulberry and Hester weren't connected to any organized crime group, they were just retired. Nayland would've never known any of this if it wasn't for Tom. It had never crossed his mind to look into any of their backgrounds. Even if it had, Nayland wouldn't have known how to find out anything about them. Nayland was actually fond of the lack of community and the ambiguity that came with living in his neighborhood. Most of the people walking down his street were tourists, and it was nice to be able to leave or come back to his home without recognizing anyone. Nayland never had to worry about what his community thought of him, because to him there was no sense of community in Little Italy anymore and after hearing what the town clerk had said, all he wanted to do was flee back to his tiny anonymous apartment. If Frank had seen him standing outside of both the movie theater and town hall, others had probably noticed him as well. This had been Nayland's plan, to put himself out there, let the people of Granada know that there was a new face in town.

Unfortunately, he hadn't considered that the way he'd gone about presenting himself could be seen as suspicious or off-putting. Damage control would have to be done.

Nayland made his way across the town green. A group of middle aged women sat at a picnic table eating lunch and chatting about the next PTA meeting. Nayland didn't see his mother in any of them, she'd never been obsessive about school. There was a gaunt older man standing by the bronze statue who waited patiently while his dog rested its chin on his shoe. The man gazed at the schnauzer in the same tender way Nayland's parents had once looked at each other. A daughter and her father passed Nayland near the edge of the green, they both wore bright yellow puffer jackets. The jackets were bold, very distinct. Nayland couldn't believe that she'd allowed her father to match with her. At her age, he would've never put himself in such a compromising situation. There had to be something wrong with her, that was the only explanation Nayland could come up with. Nayland was careful not to stare at anyone for too long, he wanted to get back to the apartment he was subletting without attracting anymore attention. He'd become increasingly aware of his movement, so much so that his natural gait felt very wrong. His shoulders were slouched, his arms, too stiff. One foot was hitting the pavement heel first, the other step began with his sole. Narrowly avoiding the pole in front of him, Nayland looked up and saw what must've been the coffee shop the town clerk had told him about. Peering through the window, Nayland felt looks of scorn and distrust burning into his back. The nagging itch that had been developing on his chest had finally taken over and Nayland began clawing at himself, unable to find the source of whatever it was that was attacking his skin. Looking for something to focus on, Nayland glanced at the various flyers and posters taped to the coffee shop window. One stood out to him in particular.

Eureka Cafe

OPEN MIC

Every Friday of the month

\$5 at the door

Sign up at 8:00 pm

Show starts at 9:00 pm

Nayland and a friend, a friend who he only saw at parties or smaller social gatherings, would tell each other every time they got together that one day they would go to a bar, deep in Brooklyn where nobody would know them and try doing stand-up comedy. Of course they'd never gotten around to doing this but Nayland had always liked the idea of taking the train down to Bay Ridge and anonymously signing up for an open mic show.

Still scratching at his neck, and then his left calf, Nayland stopped worrying about his body's movement and began to walk normally again. On his way home, Nayland performed for the town. Frank, the town clerk, the mothers, yellow twins, and the old man and his furry friend were all there, staring at him and laughing at his jokes. The dog heckled Nayland, he howled over his setups, howled over his punchlines. All of Nayland's jokes were landing, but he was new to performing and didn't know how to deal with the constant interruptions, so Nayland invited the hound up to the stage. Expecting something dog related, the dog told a joke that Nayland's grandfather used to tell him. What's the difference between men and women, the dog said. The men stick together and the women stick apart. The old man laughed and the youngest twin pretended to understand. Everyone else stared blankly at the dog. Why do they stick apart, one of the mothers asked. Ask him, the dog said, redirecting the question to Nayland. But Nayland didn't know the answer, he'd never understood how or why the women stick apart.

It didn't look like the man Nayland was subletting from had ever intended on living in his apartment. The space was fully furnished. There was a couch, table, bed, and chairs, but everything felt like it had been thrown together out of necessity. Besides the white Barcelona chair, all of the furniture was cheap and used. Nayland had been instructed on the note he found under the doormat next to the key, that he was not to sit on, eat, or drink near the knockoff luxury chair. The wall art was abysmal. The centerpiece of the living room was a grey wooden canvas with teal colored flowers. It hung right above the lopsided pull-out couch Nayland was sleeping on. In the bathroom, there was an oil painting of a marsh next to the toilet. Nayland couldn't figure out why the apartment owner had hidden it there.

The bedroom had no windows. Afraid that he would succumb to a period of depression in the dark room and sleep through his month in Connecticut, Nayland had slept on the couch his first night in Granada, where the sunlight woke him and his back hurt. There was no desk, just the kitchen table. Digging into his backpack, Nayland found his notebook and a pen and sat at the kitchen table, titling the first empty page he came across, "Jokes".

The last time Nayland had written in his notebook was when he'd attempted to write children's fiction. His grandmother had always asked to read his writing, but between the profanity, violence, and sexual references, he'd never felt comfortable sharing his short stories with her. Before she passed away, Nayland decided that he wanted to start writing stories that anyone from his 92-year-old grandmother to a 6-year-old could read and enjoy. Animals were usually the subjects of these stories, Beatrix Potter-esque animals who were in conflict with comically evil adversaries that represented adult or parental figures. The problem was, Nayland would lose control of his bad guys and they'd eventually become so twisted that his protagonists would have no choice but to kill themselves.

Nayland would try to rework these stories so that the squirrel and his pedophile uncle could have a different relationship, one in which the uncle's intentions were only for his nephew to make the varsity baseball team, or for the chipmunk and hawk to learn how to get along, but Nayland would inevitably give up on revisions and start over, hoping that next time he wouldn't forget about his intended demographic.

After his grandmother died and left him a substantial inheritance, Nayland stopped writing children's stories and soon became a writer who didn't write. A writer who didn't work. Writer became the title he used to mask the fact that he didn't do much of anything and when people asked what it was that he did, he was still working on children's fiction.

Earlier in the day, Nayland had picked up a copy of the local newspaper to help himself get an idea of what was going on in Granada and its surrounding towns. Its new purpose was to be a source for material. Funny material. One of the big stories of the day was that Granada's high school, Granada High School, had chosen a new mascot for its sports teams. According to the article, over the last year there had been an increase in complaints about the school's nickname. After a three month process of narrowing down 250 potential names to four final candidates, the Thunderhawks had beaten out the Warhawks, the Seahawks, and the Nighthawks to replace the team name Granada student athletes had worn on their jerseys for nearly eighty years, The Indians. Curiously, there was no current student perspective on the name change. Instead, a Facebook post written by former Granada football player Gary Somers was quoted in the article, "It doesn't matter if you wanted to keep or change the team's name. We have to support the decision the students made and we must rally behind our new mascot. I wore the Granada Indians jersey for four years and I am proud to have graduated from Granada High School. Do I think that there needed to be a name change, no not really. Would I have preferred

one of the other names, yes I would've. But I think it is important that as adults and as parents that we stand behind the students' decision to change their mascots name. Go Thunderhawks!"

To Nayland, the beginning of November seemed like an odd time to make this announcement. Would the Granada student athletes still be The Indians until the end of their semester or had they already abandoned the name and played against other schools with no team name? Nayland also wondered what a Thunderhawk would look like. The article hadn't shown a picture of the old team logo or given a description, but it wasn't hard for Nayland to imagine what The Indians logo had been. Looking into the previous representation of Granada's sports teams, Nayland came across a petition with the words, "INDIANS ARE PEOPLE NOT MASCOTS" written above and below the depiction of a Native American man wearing a headdress who had been given the no smoking treatment. There's a joke in there somewhere, Nayland thought, but decided it would be better to leave the subject alone for his first routine. Nayland had never understood the purpose of having one name for all of a school's sports teams. Why not leave it up to the team to choose what they want to be called? At his high school, there had been two names for the sports teams. The boys were the Rams and the girls were the Lady Rams. Collectively they weren't sheep, they were teenagers.

Under the floorboards of a two story cottage, the Shrike and his apprentice prepared for their opening act. Admiring his dark hooded cloak in the reflection of an electric water kettle, the Shrike wondered if the feathered collar was menacing or kitsch. Never mind, the Shrike thought, he liked the synthetic raven feathers. Across the basement, next to the furnace, The Shrike's apprentice sat cross-legged, practicing his e's on a cardboard box. His e's were silly, the Shrike had told him. "Your t's are haunting but the e's look juvenile." A manifesto was in the works, so

the Shrike had said, but for now they would paint the words, “YOURS TRULY THE SHRIKE” below their victims in red.

“Why don’t I have a name?” the lackey asked.

“You do, we are the Shrike,” the Shrike said.

“So I’m a Shrike?”

“No, you are not a Shrike. I am the Shrike.”

“Then what am I? I think I need a name.”

“After tonight, the public will think that the Shrike works alone, they must think this. Keep working on your e’s.”

The apprentice bought blue latex gloves. The Shrike had asked for black. Assuming black had been out of stock, the Shrike pushed his hands into the gloves. The glove stopped right at the bump on his wrist. Picking up the silver wire, the garrote he’d put together days before, the Shrike began to tighten the metal thread just below his glove as the helper spoke up again.

“The High School just changed their mascot's name. You hear about that? You probably did, they let us choose the name you know. First we all got to submit our own names, then the school had us vote on them. Then they cut out all of the names that were offensive or didn’t make any sense and let us vote again. All of the choices sucked. Seahawks, Blackhawks, Warhawks, Nighthawks. Thunderhawks won, can you believe that? What’s a Thunderhawk? You know what I submitted? I put in the Shrike.”

Plunging across the room, the Shrike was ready for his apprentice to be the first casualty of the night.

“You did what,” he said, gripping the teenager by the neck.

Writhing with shock, the apprentice's brush struck the goth long hooded robe. The Shrike felt the crimson mark and thrust his assistant onto the concrete floor.

"You fool! You've ruined us, wrecked our chances before we could even begin. Maybe I was the fool for putting so much trust into you. The Shrike is finished, you've killed him. There can be no Shrike now, now that they can trace him back to your asinine submission."

With muted steps, the Shrike made his way over to the workbench, scanning over the tools he'd gathered for later that night. The apprentice massaged his throat, watching the Shrike grip the hammer he'd stolen from home the week before.

"Hey there, boss, I, I was just kidding about,"

"Call me the Shrike," the Shrike said, cutting his assistant off.

"Sorry. Shrike, listen, I could probably pull up the ballot, the one that we filled out months ago. Shrike look at me, listen to me, I didn't actually do that. I haven't told anybody about us, about the Shrike. My parents think I'm still working back at the store, they think I'm sleeping over at Steven's tonight. Please, Shrike, put it down, you need me, you can't do all this on your own."

Pulling down his hood, the Shrike faced the pathetic, teary eyed child he'd erroneously taken under his wing. His apprentice was right, the Shrike did need him. The pulley system he'd designed required another two hands, if only the Shrike had four.

"We're not ready. Go home, tonight isn't right. You've caused me great disappointment. On Saturday, at 8:00, I expect you to be exactly where you are right now. The e's will be frightening, I will accept nothing less. Yes, tonight will not do, and I hope, for your sake, that you are ready on Saturday. We will see. We will see."

Nayland had never been one to pay much attention to his identity or appearance, or so he told himself. When he walked past storefronts, his focus was on the mannequins, his reflection just happened to be there as well. On his way up to Granada, Nayland had frequently checked in on the traffic behind him, leaning towards the passenger seat just to get a better view. Brushing his teeth took up to 10 minutes, he was very particular about his oral hygiene. He flossed, he brushed, and then stared at himself. Nayland loved to look at himself in the mirror, there were few things that gave him as much satisfaction as looking at his reflection. Nayland would never admit this to anyone, he was not vain, he had very few pictures of himself on his phone. Nayland counted his calories, he'd always been thin. The day before he'd eaten 1500, somehow he'd forgotten to eat breakfast the next morning. Nayland would never buy a scale for himself. He didn't need one, though he did weigh himself whenever the opportunity came up. Nayland had been the same weight since he was 16, and it was something he took pride in. The clothes he'd worn nearly ten years earlier still fit him, yet he wore none of them. For years, Nayland's clothes had gotten increasingly baggy and loose. Short-sleeved shirts that had once felt normal on his upper arm could no longer be worn, they made him feel exposed. None of this mattered, because in Granada, Nayland had become a suit guy. The brown tweed suit, which was boxy around his shoulders made its debut outside of the cafe. He'd picked it up over the summer for \$20 at a thrift store but had been too embarrassed to wear it around his friends. The suit had become his loungewear, occasionally he even wore it to the drugstore around the corner to pick up toilet paper.

Nayland was cold standing outside of the cafe. All he'd worn was the suit because he hadn't thought he would be spending much time outside, but everyone seemed to be waiting in front of Eureka before the show started. Nayland wished he smoked. He didn't want to be the

first person inside and without a cigarette in hand, what reason did he have to be outside? One of the guys standing near him had noticed Nayland staring at his cigarette and came up to him.

“You want one,” he asked, reaching into his coat pocket.

“No I’m alright,” Nayland said. Yes he wanted one, he really wanted one.

“I’ve never seen you before, what’s up?”

“Oh yeah I’m not really from here, my name’s Nayland.”

“I’m Wolf. So you here to watch, or you gonna go up and do something?”

“Yeah I’m gonna watch, I was also thinking about going up.”

“Oh shit what do you do?”

“I don’t actually, I’ve never done this before, but I was gonna try doing stand-up.”

“Oh you’re a funny guy, I could see it, you being the humorous type.”

“Are you performing or doing anything tonight?”

“Yeah but it’s a surprise, you know, like I come in here once a month and switch it up on everyone.”

“What do you do?”

“What do I do? Oh I’m an artist, you know, the creative type. I do a little bit of this, a little bit of that you know, like I make movies, like movie movies. I write, I try to write, photography, bro like, I just love photography because photography is a lie, you know you feel me. Like you could be taking these flicks of a park, or a monument and it’s just a lie, I love it. I’m also a sculptor, yo like it’s crazy, I’ve been doing these social sculptures, you know like throwing parties, big ass parties, organizing concerts, haunted houses, galleries, with like art, all of these different artists, I’m bringing them together and they’re showing their art all in one space, it’s crazy. I don’t like to work for people. You got a problem, bring it to me I’ll fix it, I

could fix it. In ten years, I'm gonna be my own boss, like I got my degree in chemistry and I'm doing all these different things but what I really care about, my passion, my love is restoration, like I really wanna restore art for real. Cause I really do know about all the chemicals that you need to restore these paintings with, and you know I could move to Milan, New York, Paris, any of those cities that have art, and I have literally done everything you need to do, I've worked for the museums, I've interned for the firms, but I realized that I need to be independently employed, so I'm just kind of doing it all right now and in ten years I'm gonna start my own firm you feel me. Hey my bad, I'm sorry, what'd you say your name was?"

"Nayland. It's Nayland."

"Nayland. Nayland, like wow I've never heard that name before. You know what that probably means, it's like horse country, land of the horses, your ancestors probably came from a farm or some shit. You German? That sounds like it could be German. My father, he's from Austria, and when he was little, before he moved over here, everyone used to pick on him, they used to make fun of his hair, they used to make fun of his name. So when he moved to America, I don't even wanna say his old name cause that's his dead name you know, when he moved over here, he was talking to these Italian people and he was like I wanna change my name, and so they were like you're pulcino, your name is Pulcino, because in Italian that means baby bird and they were saying, like, that he wasn't ready to leave the nest yet, like he wasn't ready to fly. So my dad, he kinda took that and changed it a little and made his own name you know, he started telling people his name was Puli and ever since then his names been Puli. Like it's crazy, he'll be getting letters from the IRS, and they're addressed to Puli but he's like who's that? There's no Puli that's not a real name, Puli doesn't exist, it's wild he's really out here just not paying his taxes. Oh shit hey what's good? I've gotta go, but it was great getting to know you Nayland, you

know like I just love that name, like it's tight, like I might just have to steal it and put it in something."

"Okay, you can do that," Nayland said.

The wholehearted cheers coming from Wolf's bum chic friends told Nayland enough. Maybe these aren't my people, Nayland thought as he let himself into the cafe. Wolf's name was nowhere to be found on the sign up sheet. Assuming that Wolf was well enough liked at the Friday night Granada open mic to be guaranteed a performance slot, Nayland soon found out that the pretentiously ignorant doer of this and that was absent from the list because he was the host. The kid does it all, Nayland thought, even though Nayland couldn't figure out if Wolf was younger or older than him. One after another, Nayland ignored impassioned poems and acoustic covers while he ran through his set in his head. When Wolf did finally call his name, Nayland felt bad for having judged the MC throughout the night. Wolf seemed to be genuinely excited to hear what Nayland had to say, although if Nayland had been paying attention he might have noticed that everyone's presence at the cafe had enthused Wolf. Taking the microphone from Wolf, Nayland paced around the cleared-out performance area and began to speak.

"Hey there, how're you all doing tonight? Everyone's good, that's good. I'm good. My name's Nayland, Nayland Luft. Hey so, it's the beginning of November, Halloween just happened. I didn't do anything this year, I stayed home. I stayed home, that's one of the things I really like about Halloween now, that I can stay home and nobody cares. Last Halloween, night of, I went out with a buddy of mine to pick up a costume pretty last minute. I didn't end up getting anything but he got a sumo wrestler suit, one of those cheap plastic inflatable sumo wrestler costumes. When we got back to his place, he took it out of the box, the little hair hat that points up, you know, it's supposed to be a bun or something and the deflated body, with the

nipples and the belly button drawn on it. While he was blowing it up, I told him, I said, they forgot the tape.”

Wolf laughed, Nayland knew he didn't understand, others moved their chairs and cleared their throats. No one groaned, Nayland was thankful for that.

“He didn't get it either, I guess that's good, you're all better off that way. Any of you dress up this year? Anybody? Yeah you, you did, I bet you did. Where're you from?” Nayland asked, pointing at the boy in the front who had reluctantly raised his hand.

“Here.”

“Here, Granada, nice, very cool. And what'd you dress up as?”

“A Pirate.”

“A Pirate, a Pirate, hmm, that's, very cool. Very cool. I've got nothing. Let's move on to you,” Nayland said, signaling to the girl next to him.

“And what about you, where're you from?”

“Same as him, I'm also from here. I didn't dress up.”

“Great, very cool, also from Granada. Anybody not from Granada?”

“You,” a voice said from the back.

“What?”

“You're clearly not from Granada. Where are you from?” the same voice asked, who Nayland was finally able to identify as one of Wolf's friends from outside.

“Oh yeah, you're right. How'd you know?”

Wolf's friend began to respond, but Nayland quickly cut him off.

“No I get it, I'm not actually trying to have a conversation with you right now. Never mind, let's move on. I uh, the elections are coming up. I'm not from here, that's been established

already, thank you for that, so I don't know any of the candidates up here. But it's an off year, you know, no President this year. Still important, still important to vote though. The first time I ever voted, it was a year like this, no big names, no president to vote for. And the night before, election eve, I realized that I didn't know who any of the people were that I'd be voting for, so I decided to do some research. The first thing that came up was an advertisement for one of the district attorney candidates. He was this older guy, glasses, who had a big, sweet looking golden retriever with him for the whole video. In the ad, he said that the dog went everywhere he went and once a week he would meet with victims and survivors of sexual assault. He'd listen to them and bring the dog along for emotional support. So when I saw that, I thought, this guy seems alright, I'll vote for him. And that was that. So the next day, when I showed up to my designated polling station, they gave me my ballot and I went and started filling in all of the bubbles that were next to the Democrats, and when I got to the district attorney, I noticed that my guy wasn't the Democratic candidate. There was a different name there, he was further down as the Republican and Independent candidate. They didn't say anything about this in the ad, no mention of what party he was in. So as a left leaning, a liberal minded person, I thought to myself, do I vote exclusively Democrat or do I make an exception, just this one time? Later that night, I ended up at the bar by my house where they were announcing the local election results. The district attorney race was a close one. 40 votes. The nice older gentleman who brings his dog everywhere he goes, I don't remember his name, something like Bill, let's call him Bill. Bill won by 40 votes. 40 votes, now that's awfully close, that means that my vote really helped push him over the edge. So I looked into this guy again, and what do you know, the dog is nowhere to be found. I can't find that campaign video anywhere and there isn't a single picture of him with the dog. And on top of that, it turns out that I helped Bill win his 10th term in a row and that this was

the first time in 20 years that a Democrat almost beat him. He got me. Whoever made that campaign video knew that some idiot would come across it and vote for the dog. Now I'm not giving myself a pass on this, I felt bad about voting for a dog, I still do, but I couldn't have been the only person who got tricked into voting for Bill because of the dog. There had to be at least 39 other fools who had the same thought process as me while they were voting. When I sent in my absentee ballot this year, I didn't do any research. I have no idea who any of the people I voted for are, I'm never making that mistake again. If I voted for the woman with a therapy pig, that was purely coincidental."

Though he'd gotten laughs with that, Nayland was visibly shaking. He'd managed to get through the story without stumbling over his words, something he occasionally did in regular conversation, but now he felt dizzy. Nayland rested his arm on the microphone stand.

"I've got one last thing for you all. One last thing. Has anybody ever done this?"
Looking to Wolf for support, Nayland swallowed a laugh and began to sing.

"O Gran-a-da! Our home and nay-tive land. True Pay-tree-yot, in all of us command. With glowing hearts, we see thee rise, the True North strong and Free! From far and wide, O Gran-a-da, we stand on guard for thee. God keep our land glor-ious and free! O Gran-a-da, we stand on guard for thee. O Gran-a-da, we stand on guard for thee. Alright thanks, you all have a good night. I know what you're gonna be thinking," Nayland said pointing to Wolf's friend in the back, "thank god he Luft. Luft, he Luft, that's my last name. Okay goodnight, bye."

It shouldn't be a woman. Maybe the second or third, but to start off with a woman would be cliché, the Shrike thought to himself. It has to be a man. Peering around the corner of an alleyway, the Shrike heard footsteps. The genderless steps made his heart race, until he realized that they were coming from behind him.

"Silence. Stop that," the Shrike whispered to his companion.

"Sorry Shrike, I can't help it," his apprentice responded. "It's my mom, she keeps on calling, the Mattson's told her I'm not staying at their house."

"Bitch," the Shrike muttered to himself.

If only she would come walking down the street, only for his apprentice's mother would he bend the rules.

"Turn it off," said the Shrike.

"I'm picking up, I'm sorry I've gotta answer this, she said she's going to phone the police if I don't pick up. We wouldn't want that, right Shrike?"

"Dismissed. You are dismissed."

"What?"

"This will not do. I can not have your mother getting in the way of things, not now, not tonight. Leave the bag, I can do this on my own."

"But Shrike, this is a two man operation, you need me."

"I see one man between the two of us. You are a boy, with a mother who calls. Now leave or be quiet, I think I may hear something.

Drunkenly, an unsuspecting Granadian stumbled down the sidewalk. The Shrike and his assistant froze. The man passed the alleyway, unaware of the two dubious figures lurking next to

him. Crawling out from the shadows, the Shrike trailed the man briefly. As the Shrike subdued the man, tightening the garrote around his neck, a woman screamed.

“Stop it!” she yelled, running towards the two.

“This does not involve you, back away, or I will have no choice but to put you to death,” the Shrike yelled back.

The woman moved closer, reaching into her purse. Windows were beginning to light up, the apprentice hid behind a dumpster, staring at his phone screen which read, “Mom”.

“Put him down. You let him down or I’ll shoot,” she said, pointing a fashionable handgun at the Shrike and his prey.

The Shrike was stunned. People didn’t carry guns in Granada or so he’d thought. Personally he’d always been against them. During the weekly peace vigil, held at the town green on Saturday mornings from 10:00 to 11:00, of which he attended, the Shrike regularly held a sign in protest of gun violence.

“I’m counting down to five. If you don’t let go of him, I’ll shoot,” she shouted.

After three, the Shrike began to loosen his grip, but the woman did not stay true to her word and a sharp pop rang through the air before she reached one. The man in his arms groaned as the Shrike dropped him and ran into the alley. His apprentice was gone, he’d taken the duffle bag with him. Slinking through the dark, the Shrike heard sirens in the distance. When he reached the back entrance to the business he owned, the Shrike realized that he’d forgotten to introduce himself. To the public, the Shrike remained nameless.

Nayland sat on the second floor of Granada's public library with two stacks of CDs next to him. Ejecting Astor Piazzolla's "Tango: Zero Hour," Nayland reached for the next CD to burn, the "Tron: Legacy" soundtrack. He used to do this when he was younger, go to the library and come out with eight or nine new CDs. Nayland had stopped copying library CDs when he learned about online piracy and how easy it was to download music illegally. Burning library discs brought Nayland immense comfort. It reminded him of simpler times. Do people take out cd's just to listen, Nayland wondered. Only the fools, Nayland thought, as he reached for the copy of *The Power Broker* he was borrowing from the library. At this point, looking for a job in Granada seemed useless, he'd be moving back to the city at the end of the month. Granada wasn't for him, too small, too gray. Maybe he'd move out west next. Nayland had never felt dry, desert heat before. New York was the only place he knew. Nayland's plan for the rest of his time in Granada was to finish *The Power Broker*. "Tron: Legacy" still had seven tracks to go, and putting the 1,300 page book back down, Nayland decided to check his email for the first time since he'd gotten to Granada. At the top of his inbox, Nayland saw a message from his mother. The email read, "If my death is ever publicized, here are the five pictures I want you to have. The third is my favorite, but it's also important to me that you have options. You never showed up for lunch." Nayland forgot about their lunch. The lunch he'd meant to cancel, the one that overlapped with his arrival to Granada. Why hadn't she called?

Since the separation, Nayland's mother, Cynthia Ackerman, had been living at the Ancram country house Nayland and his parents had spent their weekends and summers at during his childhood. Nayland had only been up to visit her a couple of times after she became a full-time upstate resident. Cynthia drove to the city fairly often for various appointments, meetings, and social get-togethers. Usually she came to him. Lately, there had been an unspoken

but mutual understanding that Nayland was too reliant on his mother. They no longer spoke daily.

The email wasn't out of character, after a couple glasses of wine, Cynthia would often tell Nayland to not be sad if she died suddenly. "Don't let it get to you, I've lived a good life. You'll be okay," she would say. Nayland checked how far Ancram was from Granada and ejected "Tron: Legacy". He'd never even seen the movie, two hours wasn't that bad of drive.

Once again, Nayland had forgone a warmer jacket and sat on the front porch, waiting for his mother to come home. It hadn't crossed his mind that she could be out. When he'd lived in a house during college, his door was rarely locked and when it was, there were always the windows to climb through. His mother locked her windows. Nayland wanted to surprise her, though part of him expected her to say she had already known he was coming. Mother's intuition. His mother had recently leased a new car, so every car that passed the firehouse across the street could be her. After the twelfth, he'd counted, it finally was.

"Nayland," Cynthia exclaimed, stepping out of a blue Jetta, "what're you doing here?"

"Hi mom," Nayland said, "just thought I'd stop by, surprise you with a visit."

"Look at you. What is this?" she asked, tugging at Nayland's suit jacket.

"What?"

"This thing. It's awful."

"Awful? What do you mean, I like it."

"But it doesn't fit you. Look at the arms, they're too long. Guess you could get it hemmed, but look at your shoulders, they're all boxy. How much did you spend on this?"

"About twenty."

"Twenty! Can't you get some nice clothes, new clothes that fit you?"

“It fits well enough, you’re the first person who’s said anything about it.”

“Your father see you in it?”

“No?”

“Bet he’d like it”

“Maybe.”

“He likes everything now, doesn’t he?”

“I’m trying it out, the suit. I like wearing one, maybe I’ll get another, one that fits me a little better.”

“You know your size?”

“No.”

“Your father’s a size 40, but your shoulders are broader than his, don’t know how that happened.”

“Never seen Dad wear a suit.”

“Oh sure you have.”

“Maybe, but I can’t remember him ever wearing one.”

“He wore one to your graduation.”

“Did he?”

“Yeah I’ve got a picture of us all, inside somewhere, come on let’s go inside.”

Cynthia scanned the living room for Nayland’s graduation photo while Nayland poured himself a glass of water. Nayland didn’t recognize most of the glasses in the cabinet, his mother must’ve bought new ones. Nayland opened another cabinet, new plates as well.

“Here look,” Cynthia said, handing Nayland the framed photograph.

“He’s only got a shirt on.”

“It was hot, he must’ve taken the jacket off before the picture,” she said, taking the black frame back. “You still seeing Harper?”

“No, I already told you we broke up.”

“But you two were always getting back together.”

“Yeah but now we’re not.”

“No?”

“Yeah.”

“Well that’s probably for the better isn’t it. Seeing anyone else.”

“Not really.”

“I’m seeing someone.”

“Are you?”

“You remember Ezra?”

“Ezra who?”

“Ezra Freeman.”

“Sounds familiar, I don’t think I ever met him.”

“Oh sure you did, when you were younger, we all got together a couple times, me, you, your father, Ezra, and Nancy.”

“I don’t remember him.”

“You were little, I guess that makes sense. He remembers you.”

“Sure, I was little, he was big.”

“Skinnier than your father.”

“Who’s Nancy?”

“The ex wife.”

“I got that, I mean what’s her deal? She run off with the spin instructor?”

“No, they also took yoga. I don’t know, their marriage just didn’t work out. It isn’t messy. I went to school with Ezra and Nancy. Nancy got her PhD in child development but she never ended up having any kids of her own. When’re you gonna give me a grandchild?”

“I can’t have a kid.”

“Why not?”

“I’m not ready for that, I don’t have anybody to have a kid with.”

“Alright but soon? Thirty? I had you late, you don’t need to wait as long as I did, don’t wait until your forties. I could’ve had more if I hadn’t waited so long.”

“I’m not enough?”

“Yes, you are, but I like babies.”

“Who doesn’t?”

“Don’t wait too long. And when you do have one, don’t move across the country. Grandparents are important, I could be a big help.”

“Don’t worry, I’m not going anywhere.”

“You’re not? Then why do you have the car?”

“Oh, well, I’m staying in Connecticut right now.”

“Connecticut?”

“Yeah, I’m staying in this small town on the shoreline, Granada, it’s nice.”

“A girl.”

“What?”

“Did you follow her there, it’s okay you don’t need to tell me her name. I don’t know why you’re so secretive about these things.”

“What’re you talking about? I’m not staying with anyone, I rented a place for a month.”

“Oh so you’re finally writing again. That’s good, you know you could’ve come up here to write, I wouldn’t get in the way. It could be like a little writing retreat.”

“I guess I’m writing, yeah I have been writing, but that’s not why I went. I just felt like I had to get away from the city for a bit. Sneak out without telling anyone and be alone. Dad doesn’t know either, you don’t need to ask.”

“I wasn’t going to ask.”

“Alright.”

“I don’t expect you to choose between me and him. Don’t do that. I’m alright Nayland, I like living up here, Ezra’s been good for me.”

“That’s good, I want to meet him.”

“Oh you will, he really wants to meet you. Older you, he’s already met you before.”

“Can’t wait.”

“Are you still having Thanksgiving with your father and Cynthia?”

“Yeah. You don’t mind right?”

“No, what’d I just say? Ezra and I are doing something, we’re going over to a friend’s house. But you’re coming here for Christmas.”

“Yeah I was planning on it.”

“Say you’re coming for Christmas. And staying at least a week.”

“I’m coming here for Christmas. I might stay a week.”

“Good. So what’s in, what’s the name of the town?”

“Granada. Like Canada, but with a g. And an r.”

“Okay, or Granada,” she said, rolling the r, “But why Granada?”

“I don’t know, in one of our last sessions, Ernie and I, we were talking about towns that are named after other places but are pronounced differently than the original city.”

“Like Milan.”

“Yeah, or New Berlin.”

“Lima Ohio.”

“That ones funny. Delhi.”

“What’s another good one?”

“Lima’s probably the best. We were talking about these towns, and he brought up Granada, said it was really nice, that he lived there at one point.”

“Ernie, I still wish I’d gotten to meet him.”

“You weren’t supposed to. He was my therapist. He always had nice things to say about you.”

“Even though we never met?”

“Yeah based off of what I told him about you.”

“Well that’s good to hear.”

“Mom why’d you send me those pictures?”

“Had to get your attention somehow. You took the third one.”

“Was that the one you liked the most.”

“Yes, you have a good eye.”

“Okay but there isn’t something you want to tell me, right?”

“Like what, that I’m dying? No those pictures are for freak accidents, they’re for the news. I don’t know if I’d want any of those in my obituary, they’re a little informal wouldn’t you say?”

“I didn’t really look at them too closely.”

“Well they’re not what I want in my obituary. I’ve got headshots back from when I did some modeling, I should send those to you.”

“But wont people think you died young if you use one of them?”

“Why shouldn’t they? People will come across my portrait and be sad that a beautiful young woman died and they’ll want to find out who she was. They’ll feel less bad when they find out I’m old. You’ll write my obituary.”

“That goes without saying.”

“Are you hungry?”

“Yeah I could eat.”

“I was going to fix myself a salad but now I’m not sure if that’ll be enough for the two of us.”

Cynthia and Nayland got takeout. Mixed vegetables, chicken lo mein, steamed pork dumplings, and scallion pancakes. Their order fed three, Nayland had placed it out of habit.

“Maybe it’s time to try something new,” Cynthia said as they ate.

Nayland loved his mother, but it was no longer possible to just pop in for a quick visit. When he visited his father, Nayland could stop by to watch a Knicks game or have dinner and then take the train back from Astoria to Mulberry Street. They lived in the same city, there was never any expectation that Nayland would be staying the night. Nayland didn’t want to sleep in Ancram that night.

“Mom, I think I’m gonna head out soon, if that’s alright,” he said, scrubbing the back of a plate.

“Nayland you have a room here, why don’t you stay tonight?”

“I know, I know, but I forgot my medication and I’ll feel terrible in the morning if I don’t have it,” he lied.

“What’re you taking?”

“Huh? Oh, Lexipro.”

“Lexapro? How’d you get that, I thought Ernie was against antidepressants.”

“He wasn’t against them, he just didn’t think they were necessary for me.”

“So he changed his mind?”

“No, I went to a psychiatrist a few months ago.”

“Are they working?”

“I think so.”

“Christmas. I’ll remind you. You better bring them. You’re staying at least a week.”

“Yeah, actually I was thinking about stopping by again when my sublet is up at the end of the month. Maybe I could leave the car here?”

“Sure, you can do that. What happened with your friend, what’s his name?”

“Charlie.”

“Oh yes, Charlie. He doesn’t need the car anymore?”

“He finally bought his own.”

“Oh good for him. He’s doing alright then?”

“Yeah, he’s fine.”

Even though he’d just eaten, Nayland exited the doorless men’s restroom and walked over towards the rest area McDonald’s. Waiting in line, Nayland thought of a girl he’d known back in high school who had told him once at their lunch table that her father would smell her

index and middle fingers when she got home to make sure that she wasn't smoking cigarettes. Nayland had always found this story to be intrusive and unsettling, sure it was a step above reading a diary or sending your child to a wilderness rehabilitation program but it still seemed like the type of action that would instill a lack of trust between the parent and child. And it was creepy. As a larger man grabbed the paper bag that held his order, Nayland thought about the finger-smelling story and imagined a scenario where the second and third fingers were still being smelled but instead of smoke, a parent or significant other was policing the lingering scent of french fries. The culprit would reluctantly be on a diet, most likely suggested by a doctor and enforced by the finger inspector. Even after getting caught, the pommes frite enthusiast would continue to frequent the drive-through window, but instead of sitting in the car like he would've normally done, he'd eat the fries outside of the vehicle. Licking his fingers wouldn't be enough, he'd have to go inside and scrub his hands, bringing his finger back and forth between his nose and the sink. He'd chew gum even though they no longer kissed. The gum would be sugarless. She'd never know. Nayland got an order of small fries and took them back to his car. His fingers smelled like grease.

A large shoe-like SUV with Massachusetts plates sat right where Nayland liked to park. They'd taken his usual spot. Of course they're from out-of-state, he thought, as he brought his New York plated car back onto Milner Street. Circling around town, Nayland found a parking spot by the town green. The park was sparsely lit. If Nayland had been back in the city he would've walked around but this wasn't New York City, Nayland was in Granada. Nayland's legs hurt, his back was stiff from a long day of driving. When he got home, he'd read along to the unabridged audio version of *The Power Broker* he'd torrented and call it a night. Midway

through the park Nayland saw the outline of a person coming towards him. Another late night stroller, Nayland would greet him in passing and they would both continue going their separate ways.

“Hey mister,” a voice called out.

Nayland picked up his pace, he wasn't in the mood to talk.

“Hey, wait a sec,” the same voice said, louder this time.

The teenager ran up to Nayland and stopped, resting his hand on Nayland's shoulder as if the two had met before.

“Hi, my car, you see the one over there, it ran out of gas. You think you could help me give it a push? All I need is for it to get rolling and then I can make it to the gas station.”

“Oh I don't know, I've gotta get home,” Nayland said, twisting his body away from the teenager.

“Come on, please, it'll be quick. Nobody's out at this hour, if you don't help I could be waiting around all night.”

“Alright, I guess, fine. I can help you out.”

Nayland and the teenager walked towards the street. Just as they reached the end of the path, the teenager stopped again.

“Hey you think I could make a call real quick?”

“Before we push the car?”

“No I mean with your phone. Mine's dead, that's part of the reason I'm stuck. I've gotta call my parents, let them know why I'm not home yet.”

The simple request made Nayland feel uneasy. What would he want next? Money? The boy probably wouldn't run off with his phone, his car was stuck on the road.

“I mean, yeah, sure, I guess so,” Nayland said, reaching into his pocket.

“Oh great, thanks man, you’re the best.”

The blue gloves came out of nowhere. Nayland gasped for air, flailing his arms and legs while the unknown body behind him straddled him towards the street. The sleeved forearms around his neck and chest tightened the further they went. Nayland’s body began to go limp, he watched helplessly as the teenager taped his mouth shut. No words were shared between his abductors. All business. They tied his wrists with rope, they tied his legs. The tape was sweet, they shoved him in head first. Inside of the trunk, little pockets of orange came and went until there was no light at all. Nayland had never felt anything like this, the fear was nauseating. His eyes had nothing to adjust to, he rocked over to his side. He thought about his mother. He thought about what she had said earlier, about having a grandchild. Nayland had never planned on settling down anytime soon, but if he got out of this, whatever this was, he was going to get his life together. He’d reach out to Margo, even though they hadn’t spoken much since he’d gone up to Granada, and maybe they’d start seeing each other. They’d have a child, he’d get a job, he didn’t care if it was a boy or a girl, she could choose the name. He’d give his mother a grandchild, she might not be around in his forties, his mother deserved one. Margo was great, she was a keeper, Nayland barely even knew her, but she was the one. Nayland’s head hit the top of the trunk when the car went over a bump. He thought of their height difference. Margo was short, much shorter than Nayland. He’d noticed this when they’d been together. He didn’t care. So what if she was short? His back might hurt after years of bending down to hug her, he might develop lower back problems, but there are ways to work around that. He’d start stretching, take Pilates classes, he’d make the necessary lifestyle changes to be with Margo.

The ground was loud, it sounded like gravel. The car slowed down and Nayland began to think of all of the people he'd slept next to. Friends, lovers, the few people in-between, they'd all seen what he would look like in the moments to come. When he was dead, for the first hour at least if they didn't touch his face, he'd look the same as he had when he'd slept next to them. He hoped Margo wouldn't make this connection, he'd woken up after her.

The rope around his legs had been replaced with a cloth covering over his eyes. It was the teenager now who guided Nayland down the gravel path. The hand on his back was much gentler than the hands that had grabbed him in the park. The second abductor trailed closely.

Nobody spoke, the ground below them crunched, and Nayland had to piss. He wished he'd gone in the trunk as a form of protest. As his right leg warmed up, the hand on his back pulled away and he was thrust onto the ground.

"This'll do. Unblind him," the mysterious voice said.

"He pissed himself, it's all over my shoes," the teenager responded.

"Silence. Do as I say."

"What about the tape?"

"That can go as well."

Nayland caught his breath as the fabric was lifted from his eyes. Above him stood a menacing hooded figure.

"Who are you?" Nayland asked the man in front of him.

"I am the Shrike," the Shrike responded proudly.

"Does he have a name?"

"That is my servant. He does as I bid."

The servant shuttered with discomfort at the Shrike's remark.

“The sun will be up before we know it. Go fetch the drill, we must get to work at once.”

“Yes my lord,” the servant sneered.

The Shrike chose to ignore his servant’s tone. Practicing mindfulness had allowed him to know when to let something go. Now was not the time to make a scene, there was too much at stake.

The Shrike paced towards Nayland slowly, extracting his dagger from its leather sheath. In the background, Nayland could just barely make out the teenager ruffling through a big bag. Next to him stood a ladder, could this all be an elaborate performance piece? Maybe the Shrike and his servant would turn out to be song and dance men, the shrouded villain’s footwork was precise, it looked almost choreographed.

The Shrike bent down to match Nayland’s height, raising his blade to Nayland’s throat.

“Nobody will hear you scream,” he whispered to Nayland.

The drill bit spun and the Shrike broke out into song. His body convulsed while the teenager stood behind him, keeping the rhythm until the Shrike sang his final note. Nayland looked down at the warm heap of feathers and then back up. With the drill still in hand, the bloodied teenager moved onto Nayland.

“So does this make you the Shrike now?” Nayland asked, trying to break the tension between them.

“No, that was his thing. I don’t want the name, he can keep it,” the teenager responded, setting the drill down next to Nayland. “I know it might be hard,” he said, loosening the rope around Nayland’s wrists, “but could you keep this to yourself, just for the night. I’ve got a lot of work to do, this is going to be a whole process, I’d appreciate it if you just went home.”

Nayland ran between the walls of reeds and onto the old red trolley bridge that overlooked the Sound. Beyond the marsh, scattered throughout the water, there were islands with houses on them. He wondered how much one of those would've gone for during their offseason. They probably didn't rent. Nayland slowed down to catch his breath, maintaining a slight jog. The wind sounded like the drill. Every shadow looked like the Shrike.

PART III
THE JUDGE

Harold Luft ran through his lines in the bedroom.

“I am the law, I am justice. I don’t make the rules, the rules have already been made. I enforce the rules. I am an enforcer of rules, of law, of justice. I am the judge and judge you I shall.”

Harold had a shoot the next day, a courtroom scene that was being shot in the basement of a high school. The school had a lifelike courtroom in their building, Harold had seen a picture of it. It was impressive. Molly and Reuben had just joined Paul, Deborah, and Sadie in the living room, leaving his son as the only missing guest. Harold was on coat duty. He’d take any excuse he could to run over his lines.

“Harry, what's taking you so long back there? I need you in here,” Cynthia yelled from the kitchen.

“Coming,” Harold yelled back, dropping his script on the nightstand.

Harold hurried past their guests and into the narrow kitchen where his girlfriend stood over the garbage can peeling potatoes.

“I need you to take over. Sadie forgot her reading glasses upstairs, she wants me to go look for them.”

“What’s she going to read?”

“She’s old Harry. She needs them to eat.”

“We’re old.”

“Yeah, well, she’s 85. Watch the green beans, the turkey’s got at least another 20 minutes until it’s done.”

Sadie was Cynthia's upstairs neighbor, his new neighbor. She came down for Thanksgiving and Christmas every year. This was Harold’s first Thanksgiving with Cynthia. “I am the judge and judge you I shall.” In the past, he’d gone over to his ex-brother-in-law’s apartment on West 83rd with Cynthia and Nayland. Harold hadn’t cooked on Thanksgiving in over 20 years. What was taking Nayland so long?

Cynthia’s sister, Deborah, sat on the couch next to Sadie and her boyfriend, Paul. Paul was a nice guy. Years before he got together with Deborah, he was convicted of vehicular manslaughter. “That was a long time ago,” Cynthia had told him. Harold looked into the living room and noticed Paul was empty handed. Harold offered him a drink.

“Can I get you something to drink, Paul? Glass of wine, a beer, anything?” Harold asked.

“I’d take a Coke if you’ve got one. If not, that’s alright, I can get myself a glass of water,” Paul responded.

“We don’t have any soda, but I could call up my son and ask him to pick some up. He’s still on his way, I’m gonna call him.”

“No you don’t need to do that, water’s fine for me.”

“It’s easy, he can stop at the deli around the corner.”

Cynthia came in through the front door.

“Sadie, you said they’re red frames? I couldn’t find them, they’re not on the table. Harry, what’re you doing?”

“Just seeing if Paul wants something to drink.”

“I’m fine,” Paul said.

“Alright, well I need you in there. Are the green beans ready?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Cynthia, if you need anything I’d love to help,” Reuben chimed in.

“No, no, you sit, you’re our guest. Harry and I’ve got everything under control. Sadie, do you want me to go up and look again?”

Sadie pulled a pair of big, red oval glasses from the pouch in her cardigan sweater.

“I thought I brought them. Sorry Cynthia, they were in my pocket.”

“That’s alright sweetie,” Cynthia said as she walked back into the kitchen, waving for Harold to follow her.

“I’ll call him. He’ll be over soon. I’ll grab you a glass of water,” Harold said to Paul.

“Harold, should I put this out on the terrace?” Molly asked, pointing to the bottle of wine in her hand.

“Oh no, I’ll take that. I’ll put it in the bedroom. I swear the coldest part of this house is in the closet. I can’t explain it, it must be because it’s near the window,” Harold said, taking the bottle from Molly.

“Today we are here to get down to the bottom of an event that I still can’t quite wrap my head around. I am bewildered, perplexed. To put it frankly, I’m shocked by the documents and evidence that sit in front of me.”

“Harry,” Cynthia called out.

Harold put down his script and rushed back to the kitchen.

“You calling Nayland?” Cynthia asked.

“Yeah, I want to see if he can pick up a Coke for Paul. Maybe two. You know what, I’ll just tell him to get a liter.”

“He said he was fine back there.”

“When you were upstairs, he said he wanted a Coke, if we had one.”

“Why’re you looking at me like that.”

“Like what? How am I looking at you?”

“Well you’re not anymore, when you said he wanted a Coke.”

Harold grinned at Cynthia.

“Oh Harry you’re terrible. I knew I shouldn’t have told you about that.”

“He doesn’t drink.”

“Plenty of people don’t drink. Harry, you didn’t say anything, right?”

“No, of course not, I’m not that bad. Nayland isn’t picking up.”

“He might be in a tunnel.”

“Maybe. Cynthia, do you remember what time I told Nayland to come?”

Sometimes Harold would call his girlfriend by his ex-wife’s name, it usually happened when he was talking about his son. Luckily, she never knew.

“Did you tell him three? That’s what we told everyone else.”

“Why can’t he call like a normal person to say that he’s running late? What if he’s not coming?”

“You know Nayland, he's always late.”

“Well today’s different. We’ve got guests. I don’t want Reuben and Molly to think that there’s any sort of rift between us, between me and Nayland. They haven’t seen him since the separation. I should call him again.”

“Don’t call. He’s on his way Harry, I talked with him this morning. He said he’d pick up a pie.”

“You two talk?”

“We text sometimes. You can go out and keep everyone company, you’re not really helping in here.”

Harold popped his head into the living room. Reuben and Molly were sitting on the couch with Sadie. For a moment, Harold thought that Paul and Deborah were gone, but then saw them standing outside on the terrace. When he’d left Cynthia for Cynthia, he’d been afraid that his son would resent him for it and give his new girlfriend a hard time, but Nayland had always been understanding, even when he was little. Hearing that they spoke with each other privately was a welcome surprise. Harold slipped back into the bedroom to look at his lines.

“Guilty! Guilty! Guilty! You are Guilty! What does the jury think? Unanimous guilt! You are guilty! Now what is to be done about this? What do we do with you, Gilbert Fairbank? We will send you away, to an island where you cannot escape, yes that is what we will do. Mark my words, you will never visit the zoo again. Now, begone!”

“So that’s why you keep sneaking back here,” Reuben said, stepping into the bedroom.

“Oh, yeah, I’ve got a shoot tomorrow. It’s this student thing. The script makes no sense, but I’ve got to build up my reel if I ever want to get a SAG card. But I’m done. I’ll memorize the lines later. After everyone’s gone.”

“Why don’t you bring it out, run through it with us? You got any characters for me to read?”

“It’s pretty much just a monologue, I’ll work on it later. Is Nayland out there?”

“No, but Sadie was just telling us about the time she slept with Tom Seaver.”

“Tom Seaver?”

“Right after the ‘69 series.”

“No way.”

“That’s what she said. They met at a bar, got a hotel room. Both of them were married. Molly has no idea who Tom Seaver is.”

“You think it’s true?”

“Sure, why wouldn’t it be? Sadie’s great, I can tell Molly loves her.”

From the other room, Harold could hear chair legs scrape the floor. Cynthia was setting up the table, a task Harold had claimed earlier in the day. The three outdoor chairs from the terrace had joined the four regulars. There were supposed to be eight.

“Cynthia,” Harold said, walking into the kitchen, “it smells wonderful in here but there are only seven chairs. Where is Nayland going to sit?”

“I didn’t know if Paul was coming or not. We don’t have enough seats. Be creative Harry, find a box or a crate for him. Maybe Sadie would let us borrow a chair from upstairs.”

What kind of a father would he be, making his son sit on a box, he thought. Nayland always sat on the chair closest to the door when he came over for dinner. In Harold’s mind, that was Nayland’s chair, though really everything in the apartment belonged to Cynthia.

In the closet, next to the bathroom, Harold found a step ladder. He brought it out and put it next to Nayland’s chair. He’d sit on the ladder, right next to his son. The Cynthia sitting across from him wouldn’t be his mother, but Reuben and Molly would be at the table. Cynthia had cooked a good meal. His son would have a good time. Harold was going to have a good time. Everything would be fine.

Harold sat with an empty plate in front of him, while the others ate. “Guilty!” Harold was afraid that Nayland wasn’t coming. The empty plate was more telling of Nayland’s absence than

the empty chair. “Guilty! Guilty! Guilty!” Harold wondered if it was too soon for a gathering at Cynthia’s. Maybe Nayland did truly resent him for leaving his mother.

“Harry, are you sure you don’t want to eat anything?” Cynthia asked.

“No, I’ll eat when Nayland comes. I don’t want him to eat alone.”

Plates were being cleared and Harold didn’t want to hear about Deborah’s allergy shots.

He wanted to eat with his son.

The intercom buzzed and Harold shot up from the ladder.

“Hello,” he said, desperately.

All eyes were on Harold. He beamed back at them.

“He’s here,” Harold said.

Harold clung to the doorknob. He listened as the echoing footsteps got closer and opened the door for his son, who was late. No explanation needed.