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By Order of the Author

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By Order of the Author

A Senior Project
Submitted to the Division
of Language and Literature
at Bard College

By
Mason Segall

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2017

I would like to thank my family, friends, and professors who supported and assisted me through not only this project but my entire colligate and academic career. I honestly don't believe I could have gotten to this point without you. Thank you.

The story 'Remember' is dedicated to Sheldon Sorokoff.

“Everywhere I go, I’m asked if I think the university stifles writers. My opinion is that they don’t stifle enough of them. There’s many a best-seller that could have been prevented by a good teacher.”

-Flannery O’Connor

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Remember

The Rosenbloom Retirement Home was a sterile place, both medically and aesthetically. This suited Estebán very much. The off-white walls and green patterned tile floor made his black pinstripe suit pop out more. He took momentary pleasure in seeing the faces of the nurses and orderlies warp into scowls of envy. The pure Italian silk of his sport coat let the antiseptic air breathe against his fine white dress shirt. It felt like every step he took brought a fresh wave of clean wind to his broad chest. It was a wonder to him that his slick, white hair didn't flicker in the wind whenever he moved.

The Home was not quiet. Withered patients moaned, attendants coddled, medical equipment squeaked, and a television was playing at low volume in the lounge. But no sound could drown out the rhythm of Estebán's footsteps. His footfalls were made emphatic by his staunch, secret purpose and handcrafted suede loafers.

Estebán was familiar enough with the Home to find the one room that mattered to him and reached it quickly. As much as he liked to show off, he was there for other reasons. The door was unlocked. It always was. Charlie was in his usual spot, sitting motionless in his wheelchair, facing the open window. A breeze flowed through the room, like a creek streaming over the walls.

“Hello Charlie,” said Estebán, closing the door behind him. Charlie made no response, and Estebán realized he was sleeping. The wisp of wind Estebán had felt came not from the window, but from the loose lips of Charlie’s mouth.

Quietly, Estebán inspected the small apartment. It was one large room with a kitchenette in a corner, a ruffled bed in another. A third corner held a pair of armchairs facing a flat-screened television against the wall. A bookcase stood next to one of the chairs and Estebán went over to see it. Charlie would occasionally take books out from the Home’s library and forget to return them. The library never charged late fees, but Charlie would have felt ashamed if he returned anything even a day late. Estebán’s eyes scanned the titles, looking for a tell-tale strip of yellow tape used to mark library books. Finding none, he looked over the books again.

Understanding Alzheimer’s was next to *A History of Super-Powered Individuals*. Charlie was never very good at organizing. Atop the bookcase were three framed pictures. The first was an old, yellowed photo of Charlie as a boy, drifting proudly over his grinning parents. The second showed him as a young man in costume. The photo wasn’t colored, but Estebán could fill in the gray and red colors of Charlie’s old outfit in his mind. He was surrounded by other smiling individuals in equally outrageous attire, arranged neatly in three rows.

The third photo was of Charlie in his fifties, several decades ago. He had the grey and red uniform slung over his arm with a swaddled baby in the other. Behind him stood a grinning woman, perhaps half his age and sharing his nose, hair, and eyes. Charlie himself was staring at the baby in amazement, as if after all the insane and unbelievable things he had seen in his career, this baby was the strangest and most incredible of all. Estebán scoffed at the picture’s cheesiness and Charlie squirmed in his chair.

“Is someone there?”

“Yes,” said Estebán. “It’s me, Charlie.”

Charlie turned his chair around and narrowed his eyes at Estebán. “Do I know you?” Estebán cringed at the man’s voice. It was more of a rattle, a shaking of the ribs in an attempt to coerce the lungs into working properly.

“Yes.”

“Oh. I see. I’m sorry, I must have forgotten.”

“It’s alright Charlie, I’ve just come to see how you are.”

“Oh. I’m well.”

“I see,” said Estebán softly. For a moment, the two men simply looked at each other. A bird chirped outside, a finch, perhaps a robin. The noise captured Charlie’s attention and he turned his chair back to the window.

“The sky is lovely today,” he said, perhaps to himself. His body began to drift out of his chair, lifted as if by some invisible, otherworldly force. He had only gotten a few inches away when Estebán quickly walked over to him and grabbed him by the shoulders.

“No, no,” he said, “Charlie, you know that’s not a good idea. The doctors told you not to anymore.”

Under the pressure of Estebán’s aged but muscular hands, Charlie reluctantly slumped back down to his chair. “Why?”

“Because they’re afraid that you’ll be up in the sky and forget how you got there. You could get lost, or hurt yourself.”

“Hmm,” Charlie grunted. He looked over Estebán once again. “That’s a nice suit. You some sort of business man?”

“Yes,” said Estebán with a shrewd smile, “Surprisingly, business turned out to be more lucrative than bank robbing and global domination ever could have been.”

Charlie lurched in his seat. “Bank robbing?” he gasped. His eyes widened and spun around the room. “Is there a bank robbery?”

Estebán silently kicked himself for his loose tongue. “None that need your attention, Charlie,” he said.

“How do you know my name?”

“We’re old friends.”

“We are?”

“In a manner of speaking, yes.”

Charlie regarded him suspiciously for a few terse seconds before he groaned and leaned back in his wheelchair. “This is no fun,” he mumbled.

Estebán stood behind Charlie’s wheelchair. “

Would you like to watch some television?”

“Yeah, why not.”

Estebán wheeled Charlie over to the corner and positioned him between the armchairs before settling into one himself.

“This is a nice chair,” the suited man remarked, tracing his fingers over the leather weavings. “Where did you get it?”

“Oh, I don’t remember.” The phrase made Estebán quiet and he reached for the remote. The television blinked on. It opened on a news channel. An attractive young reporter stood in front of a smoking crater in what appeared to be a train station. They weren’t visible, but a crowd of applauding onlookers were heard cheering behind the camera. From the crater emerged a man in a jagged yellow and blue jumpsuit, dragging on the ground behind him an unconscious man who appeared to be in regular, civilian clothes. The young woman was apparently in mid-report.

“-Where the hero Megabolt has captured the famed art thief Masterstroke as he was attempting to leave the country. It is suspected at this time that Masterstroke was heading to Canada to sell his latest heist on the black market. Megabolt, of course, is the lightning-generating member of the United Hero Federation. We’re going to try and get a word with him. Excuse me, Megabolt?”

Estebán muted the television as the hero spoke with the reporter. “Megabolt,” he spat, “Why do heroes today feel the need to have such stupid names? Granted your name wasn’t all that inspired.”

Charlie frowned. “My name. My name? It was Pilot, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, Pilot,” Estebán said, a smile gracing his face. The years he’d spent cursing that name, sputtering it through clenched teeth and set jaw, it all seemed more or less pointless in hindsight. Onscreen, Megabolt hoisted up his catch like a fish. Masterstroke looked understandably bewildered from the ionically-charged beating he’d just received. Estebán motioned to the thief. “You know who he is, Charlie?”

“No, can’t say I do.”

“He’s Susan’s son. You remember Susan, the Ink Blot?”

Charlie leaned forwards slightly, his thick jowls shaking. “Susan,” he mused, “Yes, I remember now. Didn’t I go to her wedding?”

“Yes,” chuckled Estebán. “She married Nathan, White Leopard. They had the wedding in prison. She was serving for grand theft auto that time, I think.”

“How did they ever fall in love?”

“Nathan joked about it at the reception. He said they’d been fighting each other so long it felt like they’d been married for years anyway.” Charlie barked a laugh, but it sounded more like a strained wheeze. Estebán watch him shake in his chair. “It was one of the few times we got to be at peace with each other back then.”

“A hero and a villain,” Charlie chortled. “And this kid is their son, you say?”

“No, just Susan’s. Nathan left her eventually and she married a civilian a few years afterwards.”

“And she had a son?”

“Yes.”

“And brought him up to be like her?”

“Yes.”

“Does he have her powers?”

Estebán paused. Charlie's line of questioning had taken on an unsettling, interrogative tone. Charlie was staring intently at the television where Masterstroke's limp body was being cuffed. "I don't know," Estebán finally replied. "I fell out of touch with Susan when he was just a boy."

"A boy," murmured Charlie, scratching his cheek. "A boy, a boy."

"Does Evelyn come to visit often?" Estebán asked, eager to change the subject.

"Evelyn?"

"Your daughter, yes."

Charlie frowned for several moments. Estebán clutched the arm of his chair in worry. "Oh!" Charlie snapped forwards, levitating an inch or so out of seat before he calmed down, "Evelyn! Yes! Evelyn. She comes by now and again." Charlie rubbed his leg and lowered his head. "I couldn't remember her for a moment." He gave a soft chuckle. "That's a bit scary, huh? I couldn't remember my own daughter. I couldn't remember I had a daughter." The birds outside chirped loudly and one landed on the windowsill. Estebán looked past Charlie as the tiny creature twitched its head left and right to observe the strange place it now found itself in. After a moment, the bird hopped inside and flapped onto the bed.

"Bother." Estebán rose from his chair.

"Don't," Charlie said without raising his head. "I like it when they come in. It reminds me of being up there."

"They're dirty, Charlie," said Estebán gently. "You can't keep wild birds in your room." Charlie scowled but said nothing. He kicked a leg out of his chair. Estebán clapped his hands and

the sound frightened the bird back towards the window. It smacked into one of the closed glass panels first before spinning out through the open one.

“Silly things,” said Estebán, sitting back down.

“I don’t want to watch T.V. anymore.”

Estebán turned it off. The reporter had already given the air back to the anchors and they were going off about some business in the Argentine supreme court when they were abruptly abandoned to a black screen. “Would you like to eat something?” asked Estebán. “I know you’re not supposed to eat outside of meals, but they gave a you a kitchen. Might as well use it.”

“I’m not hungry,” Charlie leaned back in his chair and fixed Estebán with a peculiar expression. “I’m sorry, what’s your name again?”

“Estebán, Charlie. I’m Estebán.”

“Estebán,” muttered Charlie. Esteban could hear the venom in the way Charlie said his name, something just out of his memory’s reach, an unknown animosity. “I’m starting to remember. You come by often, don’t you?”

“I try.”

“Why?” Estebán’s mouth opened, but he slowly closed it, gazing sadly over at the man in the wheelchair. After a few moments of silence, Charlie looked over to the window and frowned. “How’d that get open?” He wheeled himself over to the window. When he reached it, he made to close it by cranking the small winch on the sill, but stopped and sat there, in his usual spot with the window still half-open.

Estebán stood and brushed off his suit. “Charlie? Do you remember what you used to be? Who you used to be?”

“I was...,” Charlie stopped for a moment and rubbed his temple. The spotted and grizzled skin didn’t move under his own touch. “I was a hero,” he remembered slowly. “I could fly.”

“Yes, you could,” said Estebán, standing behind Charlie. He tried to look where Charlie was looking, hoping to see whatever hidden mystery the old hero saw. “It was glorious, wasn’t it? Soaring above everyone else so easily. It was so beautiful to watch, I can only imagine how it felt to just let go of gravity.”

Charlie breathed deeply and the room seemed to the same. “It was fun,” he said eventually, “but it was lonely up there.”

“Fun but lonely,” repeated Estebán. “Do you remember who you fought? Both with and against?”

“The heroes and villains you mean?” Charlie sighed. His entire body relaxed into the folds of the wheelchair. “Yes, I remember them. There was Grant, Freddie, Old Lady Joanna, Silvia.” He paused for a moment and played with the neckline of his sweater for a moment. From beneath it, he produced a small, seashell-shaped locket. He struggled to open its tiny clasp, his hands wavering and shaking too hard to properly grasp it. The chain jumped around his neck. Estebán leaned down and gently took the locket. It opened in his slender fingers. Inside was an old picture of a pretty woman with long, wavy hair that was the same sandy color of a beach. It was held back from her face by a band of seaweed. Her sun-kissed skin was wet and pruned. “Silvia,” Charlie said again.

“Yes, I remember her.”

“Me too, always will.”

“You already forgot your daughter.”

“I did? That’s scary.” Charlie hid the locket without closing it, perhaps thinking ahead to when Estebán wouldn’t be around to open it for him, perhaps forgetting it was open altogether.

“What about the villains?” asked Estebán. “Do you remember them?”

Charlie laced his hands together on his lap. “Vaguely, I think. Some of them just blend together. A lot of two-bit hoods and the like, just guys with ski masks who needed a buck.”

“What about the major ones though? The ones who made you work for your victories.”

Charlie’s eyes narrowed. “Yes, I remember a few. There were more, I’m sure.”

Estebán silently gulped down the moisture that had accumulated in his throat. “Which ones?”

“Well, Ink Blot for one. She stole rare art and artifacts. I think she could cover herself in paint to camouflage herself or some such nonsense. She was a slippery one. Turned out she was just a high school art teacher named Susan.”

“Yes, yes,” said Estebán impatiently. He crouched down by the side of the wheelchair, staring intently at Charlie’s profile. Charlie did not turn to face him. “Anyone else?” Charlie appeared to be struggling. Estebán grabbed the arm of his wheelchair. “Dammit, Charlie, who else do you remember? There were dozens of us. Maybe hundreds. And we all got our licks from you and tried to give back as good as we got.” He leaned forwards and put his forehead against Charlie’s withered arm. “But one of us got you more than the others. One of us was smart and fast and strong enough to keep tagging you, Charlie. I need to know if you remember.” Estebán

grabbed Charlie's hand. Probably too tightly, but he didn't care. "Dammit, Charlie! Remember! Did I do this to you? Was I the one?"

Charlie blinked as a fresh breeze blew through the room. Slowly, he turned his head to look down at the man kneeling beside him. "Estebán," he said carefully, "You're Estebán, aren't you?"

Estebán closed his eyes. "Yes, Charlie. Very good. I'm Estebán."

Charlie broke into a confident, toothy grin. "Estebán," he said with a nod. Estebán raised his head and glared into Charlie's eyes, those steely grey things. It could have been the palpable contempt with which Estebán stared at him. Maybe it was simply the right synapse firing at the right time, but a flash of recognition spread across Charlie's face. He leaned away from Estebán in his chair and started to hover out of it. Estebán grabbed his leg. With a grunt, he roughly pulled the hero back into his chair. "Who're you really?" Charlie demanded.

Estebán sighed, a deep, cathartic moan of frustration, and reached into his breast pocket. He pulled out a black cloth. Estebán flourished it over his face and the synthetic fabric molded to his face, giving him an artificial and horrifying visage. Charlie gasped, what little blood was left in his face escaping to his stomach. "Darkman!" he cried out, scrambling around in his chair, "What're you doing here?"

"I...", Estebán stared at the old man and abruptly realized just how tired he was. He wanted to hate Charlie, but it was just too much work and not worth it. Decades of a feud so long and hard-fought that neither side could remember just how it started had boiled away. All he could muster was a vague sense of frustration.

Estebán took off the cloth and folded it back into his pocket. “You are a senile, disgusting old man,” he told Charlie plainly. There was no contempt in his voice, he couldn’t summon it. Charlie began to hyperventilate in his chair.

Estebán adjusted and brushed off his suit. “Whatever you’re planning, you won’t succeed!” gasped Charlie. Estebán walked towards the door. “I’ll defeat you!”

“You already have,” said Estebán, not turning back as he shut the door behind him.

Comedy is Dead

“I tried to sell my soul to the devil last week,” I said into the microphone, my words carrying through the dark comedy club thanks to both the sound system and my naturally loud voice. “I was hoping for a lifetime of happiness and success, but he told me all my soul was worth was half a happy meal.” That got a smattering of light, uncomfortable laughter. The crowd never likes to hear about depressing shit unless it’s realistic, but I was feeling down and frankly didn’t care that particular evening. On nights like this, stand-up was more about the catharsis of being paid attention to than about the occupation. “Of course he could have been lying,” I continued, “he was the fucking devil after all. But I’ll be damned if that wasn’t the best fucking half a happy meal I have ever had.” That got a bit of a louder laugh, but it was more from my matter-of-fact delivery than the context of the joke. “Course I’m damned anyway,” I finished, “so I guess it doesn’t matter if it’s diabetes or a heart attack that does me in.”

“Boo!” shouted a dude in the crowd, “You suck!” I smirked and glanced in his direction.

“I can’t tell if you’re drunk or if you’re right,” I said. “Not that the two are mutually exclusive.” Not even a giggle, and the heckler’s bros were patting him on the back in agreement. Fortunately, I saw the bartender check his watch and give me the signal that my time was up. “Well that’s my time, you’ve been a wonderful audience, thanks for listening,” I said, accepting the lamest applause I’d ever heard. “Try the veal and tip your waitresses.”

I left the mic on the stand and shuffled out of the spotlight, past where other comics were waiting their turn. The next guy sneered at me as he hopped up on stage, giving the audience a smile as bright as his flashcard. However, most everyone else in line gave me sympathetic shoulder squeezes as I passed. They knew what it was like to have a shitty night.

Backstage, I took a path through the kitchen to the alley outside. I wanted to cry or shout or hit myself, preferably all three at the same time. But all I could allow myself to do was sigh in defeat and lean against the wall. I felt something sticky on my back and I tried not to lose my shit when I looked over my shoulder and saw some gum had stuck to my one good shirt.

The door beside me opened and a hairy Hispanic man tossed a heavy bag of trash into the dumpster. “Hey,” he muttered gruffly, nodding to me.

“Hey, Cisco,” I said, “How’re you-” But he had already shut the door and disappeared back into the kitchen to cook the veal I’d lazily plugged. With a groan, I pushed myself up and tried to pull the stuff off my back. It stuck to my fingers instead. I rubbed it against the wall before I headed back inside.

The manager’s office was converted from a bathroom of the kitchen. I knocked lightly and Robbie stuck his head out. “Yo,” he said, taking the half-smoked cigarette out of his blackened mouth, “Jimmy, can we talk?” I winced at the thick rasp in his voice.

“Yeah, I know,” I sighed, “Can we do this another time? I need to get home, relieve my babysitter.”

Robbie stared at me sadly for a few moments before his shoulders slumped and he handed me an envelope with my check. “Work on some new material,” he called as I walked out of the club. I quickly checked my paystub and tried not to sigh as I saw how little I’d made from my embarrassment and humiliation. And because God has a sadistic sense of humor, a large, wet

raindrop landed on my check, right on the ‘pay to the order of’ line. I shoved the stained paper in my pocket and glared up at the sky as it began to rain in earnest. Apparently God has a better sense of comic timing than I do.

I loved New York in the rain. The rain had to come down in visible sheets between the taller buildings and celebrated its power over the smaller ones. The people, who normally prided themselves on their strength and perseverance, were sent scuttling to overhangs and doorsteps by drops from heaven. I always considered myself weaker than most New Yorkers, but rain and my tolerance to it gave me a sense of mild confidence. I walked to Canal Street and took the N Line to the Barclay Center. The protective arms of the Metropolitan Transit Authority felt like the stress of four years of college compressed into thirty minutes. By the time I staggered to my apartment in Crown Heights, I felt just about ready to murder someone for a cigarette. I didn’t want to smoke inside with a baby though, so my almost instinctive urge to spark up was left unfulfilled. My compulsive appetite’s lack of gratification made me literally stomp my feet as I entered the foyer of my building.

I lived on the second floor. The silence that met me as I ascended was reassuring. It meant Gabe was asleep and therefore not screaming. Diane was a good sitter, great with kids. My keys jangled and the lock turned. “Well it’s about time!” said Ginny.

I stared at her for a moment. Ginny was leaning back in one of my plastic kitchen chairs, her feet stamped possessively on the table. A couple empty beer bottles were strewn about her on the floor and a plate of half-eaten microwave meal was cold in her lap. Slowly, I closed the door behind me and took off my coat. “What’re you doing here?”

“Hi to you too, bro.”

“Hi. What’re you doing here?”

“Isaac kicked me out.”

“Isaac kicked you out? You guys break up or something?”

She shrugged. “I guess.” I looked around my apartment. It hadn’t changed much from when I left so she couldn’t have been here long. The door to Gabe’s room was shut, my futon was still folded up, and the place was still relatively clean. I tried to keep my space tidy if for no other reason than I relied on Diane for most of my late-night child-care needs and despite being the best babysitter in Brooklyn, she was also a judgmental little bitch, albeit a passive aggressive one.

Speaking of which. “Where’s Diane?”

“Is that the college girl? I told her she was too young for you and sent her home.”

“Ginny, she’s a babysitter. Did you pay her?”

“If I had money do you think I’d be coming to you?” I groaned and rubbed my temples. I’d be lucky to get Diane back if she left without payment.

“If you don’t have money, how’d you get here all the way from Jersey?”

Ginny rolled her eyes like I’d just asked her why the sky was blue. “I have *some* money, idiot. I hitchhiked to Atlantic City and caught a Greyhound to Penn Station then took the train here.”

“So you have enough money for a Greyhound but not enough to pay my babysitter?”

“I don’t see why I should’ve paid her.”

“Because you sent her home.”

“She’s your babysitter.” If I wasn’t so used to her miserly bullshit, I might have been more than frustrated. She may have moved out of state, but she was a penny-pinching New Yorker at heart.

“Did she at least say how Gabe was?”

Ginny shrugged again and reached down for one of her beers. She watched as a final gulp of alcohol swirled at the bottom of the bottle when she swished it around. “Dunno. But he hasn’t made a peep since I got here so he must be fine.” Just to be sure, I crept over to Gabe’s room and peeked in a bit. He was lying on his back in the crib, the mobile gently spinning about him with the silent whirl of the motor acting as an infantile white noise machine. I stood on my tippy-toes and stepped into the room. When I turned off the mobile, I saw he was wearing my old Sesame Street onesie. He hated that fucking onesie. He freaked out every time he looked down to see Big Bird staring back at him. Diane must have worked her magic to get him to wear it. Goddamn it, I was going to have to get her back.

“So, what now?” I asked when I returned.

Ginny was putting her beer bottles in the trash because she knew it would piss me off not to recycle them for the nickels. “I don’t know. My plan was to see you so now I’m just going to bask in my own accomplishment for the night.”

“For the night? You didn’t get a hotel?”

Ginny gave me her signature ‘why are you such an idiot when clearly I’m the idiot’ look. Patent pending. “Who needs a hotel when you’ve got a brother with an apartment?”

“Exactly. you don’t have an apartment, I do. And the lease says I have to give a week’s notice if I’m going to have long-term guests.”

“Oh please. One night won’t get you evicted.” She yawned loudly, stretching her mouth to its widest limits.

“Ginny,” I said, heaving a deep sigh, “do you have your meds on you?”

“Yeah, of course.”

“Okay, good, good. Alright, you can stay for a few days. But tomorrow we’ll be talking about what you’re doing next.”

“Sure thing, Jimmy.”

“And you’re sleeping in the tub.”

“Fine, that’s fair. Do I get a blanket?”

“We don’t have a spare, use a towel.” Ginny glared at me for a moment and I was briefly scared she would challenge me about the blanket. I honestly didn’t have a spare, but it wouldn’t be the first time her paranoia got the better of her and Lord knows it wouldn’t be the last. To my eternal relief, she just shrugged, the universal sign for lack of shit-giving. She went into the bathroom and I collapsed on my futon, more than ready for the day to end.

. . .

Gabe woke me up a few times that night. Each time, it took me to the very limits of my will power to rise and go to him. I love Gabe, but having a baby is by far the worst experience a person can go through. I hadn’t changed out of my clothes and he spit up over my shoulder a whole bunch. My second-best shirt was officially my new best shirt. After screaming in my ear for a few hours at a time, he’d eventually cry himself to sleep and I would vainly try to get some REM in before the whole cycle started up again. Ginny seemed immune to his cries, or at least indifferent to them because she didn’t come out of the bathroom the whole night.

Waking up the next day was like coming out of a fever dream only to find that reality was way weirder. The first thing I noticed before I even opened my eyes was the smell of smoke. My brain had barely registered the idea of smoke and connected it to the concepts of fire and in

apartment and bad when I heard Ginny swearing like a proper city girl. I snapped out of bed and brushed the thin, black smoke away from my face. “What the fuck are you doing?”

“Well I was trying to make bacon,” complained Ginny, “But I can’t work with an electric stove!” She was trying to cook on a baking sheet, not a griddle or even a pan. The metal was starting to glow red where it touched the electric coils of the stove. How and why she thought this was a good idea, I’ll never know. I pushed her away from the stove and turned everything off. The sheet wasn’t designed for stove cooking so the bacon strips were just sitting there smoking.

“Just be grateful you didn’t set off the alarm,” I told her, “Gabe fucking hates that thing. He won’t stop crying for hours even after it goes off.” The alarm went off and Ginny and I had a moment to glance nervously at each other before Gabe began the morning scream session. “Just clean up.” I collected Gabe and tried to shush him as best I could, but it was like he was in a contest with the fire alarm. It still astounded me that his tiny lungs were capable of such volume with less than a year’s worth of life under his belt. My kid could’ve played Carnegie unplugged with those vocals. Trying my best to ignore the ringing in my ears, I got him dressed. Then I fed him some Gerber’s in the kitchen. Ginny had opened the two windows of the apartment and put my desk fan next to the stove. The wisps of smoke were quickly drifting out of the room and I turned the alarm off. Not that it mattered to Gabe. “How about you let me do the cooking from now on, huh?” I told Ginny over the sound of Gabe’s cries.

“Just trying to help,” she muttered.

“You don’t have a great history of that,” I had to remind her, “Have you taken your meds?”

It was a genuine question, to reassure me if nothing else. But because she didn't understand how people work, she took it as an insult. "Yeah, of course. I'm not stupid," she said, pursing her lips, desperately and wisely trying to withhold whatever retort she no doubt had on standby. To her very little credit, she almost succeeded. "Speaking of history, where's Sharon?"

I rolled my eyes. It was always hard to deal with her when she got vindictive. And she got vindictive whenever she felt even remotely slighted. "She left before she even stopped lactating. Which you know because, if I recall correctly, I left you a couple drunk voicemails that night explaining the whole situation and asking for help. Which you never responded to."

"Oh. If I see you left me more than two messages, I just delete whatever you send me," said Ginny with a shrug, "I figure it saves your dignity." Now it was my turn to refrain from a biting remark. Fortunately, I was much better at self-restraint than her and our fight ceased there and then, to be continued.

"Alright, there's a daycare center in Forest Hills. I'm gonna drop of Gabe and when I come back we'll look for a place for you to stay."

Ginny gave me a look that said she had conveniently forgotten our agreement from the night before. "A place for me to stay?"

"I can't take care of two kids at once, Ginny. I'm still sort of getting used to the one."

"I told you I don't have money for a place right now."

"Get roommates. We'll look on Craigslist, send a few emails, and then look at some shelters if it doesn't work out."

I started scrubbing the burn marks on my stove with a sponge and some baking soda mostly to avoid meeting Ginny's accusing glare. "You really are a shit comedian," she said.

"Ginny," I sighed.

“You would kick me out? Send me to a fucking homeless shelter? You’re such an asshole!”

“Fine!” I snapped, “Stay here for now then. At least let’s look for a job for you. Let me talk to my landlady about you staying here for a bit, but I can’t promise anything.”

. . .

“No.”

“Ginny, please.”

“No, Jimmy!” She folded her arms, a sign that meant whatever argument we were about to devolve into was already over. I turned away in the vain hope that a passerby was seeing what was happening and offer some small measure of sympathy for my plight. “I’m not working at a fucking CVS.”

“Jesus fuck, Ginny, there are worst places to work.”

“Yeah and I’m not working at those places either.”

“You need money.”

“So let’s look for a job that actually pays! Even a ground-level position at a fucking start up would be better than goddamn retail work.”

Deciding to take a higher road, I lowered my voice and rubbed my temples. Since dropping off Gabe, I had grit my teeth so much at her antics that I could already feel the tension headache building up. “This does pay,” I pleaded with her, “Please, just ask for an application.” She looked away and took a deep breath. I could almost feel the late summer air leaving the space around me, vacuumed into her flaring nostrils as a personal slight to me. The doors to the

store dinged and slid open. A woman in a pencil skirt and white blouse stepped out and Ginny and I briefly broke apart to let her pass between us. The air abruptly smelled like fresh watermelon and my eyes were drawn for the briefest of moments to the woman's back. Her blouse was tight. I could see the individual hooks of her bra strap through the fabric.

I had barely looked back at Ginny when she pounced. "Really?"

"Oh give me a break."

"Sharon's been gone what, three months? And you're already checking out girls." She was smirking. She was joking. But she had to throw in Sharon just to fuck with me.

"Six months, actually," I said, hoping my sneer was more intimidating than it felt. Her raised eyebrow told me it wasn't. "And don't change the subject. Just get an application and we'll keep looking. If you find another job you like, you can just rip it up."

"Oh for fuck's sake, fine," she sighed. She went through the doors and I finally got to lean against the side of the building. I knew she'd never get a job there. First off, she was wearing a low-cut t-shirt and jeans, not exactly a great first impression. Secondly, Ginny didn't have the temperament for retail work. If she got bored at the register, she'd inevitably start breaking things in an attempt to keep herself entertained. If they had her in the stockroom, she'd try to re-organize everything to her weird particulars. And God help them if they tried to have her interact with customers on the floor. Truthfully, I had only insisted she go in because I saw the help wanted sign and needed a five-minute break from her ramblings.

"Hey, their application is online."

"Oh fucking hell."

. . .

Later, I made mac'n'cheese for dinner. Gabe loved anything sticky in his mouth, Ginny had never been particular about what she ate, and I needed to make sure my stove still worked. Fortunately, it did and my food tasted as good as it ever had, like it was made by a balding, thirty-something, single-father comedian. After dinner, Ginny was kind enough to do the dishes while I had a few moments with Gabe. I showed him a picture book from our collection. He went to bed sweetly giggling at the antics of a rhinoceros and a rabbit.

“Alright, I’m heading out,” I said, putting on my coat.

Ginny looked up from the sink in confusion. “Where are you going?”

I stopped to stare at her incredulously for a second. “I’m going to work.”

“Where do you work?”

“I’m a fucking comedian, Ginny. I work in comedy clubs.”

Her eyes lit up like roman candles. “Oh cool,” she said, trying to remain casual, “Let me get dressed up.”

“You’re not coming.”

“And why not?”

“Because I need you to babysit Gabe.”

“He’s asleep.”

“Yes, and in two hours he won’t be and he’ll need someone to take care of him.” Ginny tapped her fingers on the table. My eyes followed each individual knuckle as they rose and fell like miniature waves on the plastic surface. It was nearly hypnotic and meant that she was a brief and rare moment of contemplation.

“Fine,” she said eventually, snapping me out of my small trance, “Go to work.”

I subdued my relieved sigh and thanked her, closing the door behind me as the words left my lips.

. . .

My usual routine took me through four different clubs, two in Manhattan, one in Queens, and Robbie's place in Brooklyn. Robbie's was what I was most known for, so I liked to show up relatively early in the night so I could gauge the crowd. The first rule of comedy was to know one's audience. People were typically drunk enough to sort of enjoy my jokes but not too drunk to forget who was telling them. I did my usual set, but sprinkled in a few extra jokes about my sister. "When I was growing up, my sister had two different modes," I said into the mic, "There was 'holy shit the world is going to implode' mode and, my personal favorite, 'Jimmy is a cunt' mode." That got a bit of a laugh, from the shock value most likely. "'Jimmy is a cunt' mode was what she used to do when there were no adults within earshot and she would just turn to me out of the blue and repeatedly call me a cunt. No reason, no real purpose, she just did it." They laughed. It wasn't their fault, they assumed I was making it up for the laughs. "By the way, if you have a problem with me saying cunt, you should. But just know that I taught my sister fuck, shit, ass, cock, dick, crap, motherfucker, and any variation thereof, but when she was ten she taught me the word cunt. I'm not saying either of us were right, but the scales were balanced. I did my damage, she did hers, and we parted ways as equals." That got a laugh, not as big of one as I'd hoped, but I was satisfied with what I got. Robbie was speaking to Cisco at the bar when I stepped offstage to a smattering of applause, but he offered me an approving nod. People would drink a little more than usual tonight and I played a small part in that.

I left Robbie's club and headed to one of my usual haunts in Manhattan. I was feeling fairly confident. That last set had been one of my best in the last few months. The club I went to first was the Giggle House. It was an open mic place so I wouldn't be paid, but open mics were a great way to keep tabs on the comedy circuit, to see who was up-and-coming, who was falling on hard times, and who was drunk enough to try their hand at stand up for the first time. I watched a few jokers do their bits. A few weren't even half bad, but nobody of note had taken the mic yet. Finally, I was up and I have to admit, it felt good to take the stage with a bit of swagger behind me.

"Hey guys," I said in response to the polite applause I got when I stepped into the light, "So I tried to sell my soul to the devil the other night. Turns out it was only worth about the price of a happy meal." I paused for a beat, giving them time to guess the punchline themselves only so I could reverse it on them. "But I'll be damned if it wasn't the best happy meal of my life."

Maybe it was my confident delivery or maybe I was just looking for something that wasn't there, but the audience seemed to laugh a little bit louder at that one than usual. But I know I didn't imagine the heckler. "Wow! You suck!" It was a woman near the bar. I couldn't quite see her through the lights, but she seemed to be shaking her fist at me for some reason.

"And I'm guessing so will you before the end of the night," I replied wryly. The crowd around the bar rained down 'oohs!' on the heckler and I returned to my set. "I'm a single dad, right now," I said, "And if there's anything I've learned from the experience, it's that the sexiest sound in the whole goddamn world is just the sound of everyone within earshot of me shutting the fuck up simultaneously." It was one of my weaker jokes and it showed in the crowd reaction. It was also a prime target for my heckler to come back.

“I’ve heard assholes tell better jokes! And they only talk shit!” That got a few laughs and nobody seemed to disagree with her, at least not in her immediate vicinity.

“Yeah well yours does,” I tried to counter, “I’m hearing it right now.” A few chuckles scattered about the room, that was all I got. It wasn’t my most proficient comeback, to be sure. “My sister-”

“Boo! You suck!” chanted the heckling girl, “Boo! You suck! Boo! You Suck!” The drunkards in the room quickly joined her, grateful for something to latch onto in their inebriation. Then their dates and friends followed suit because it seemed like fun, then others just so they wouldn’t be left out. Within fifteen seconds, the entire place was chanting at me. I’d been onstage less than a minute and I was already getting booted off. Whatever good will and pride I’d accumulated vanished and as I walked offstage with a light wave, I felt a heavy weight grow in my chest with each step.

I pushed my way through the crowd. They’d already forgotten who I was, that I’d literally just been onstage. With a hand outstretched in front of me, I wove my way to the bar. I saw her hair before I saw her and immediately my heart skipped a beat. Only one kind of girl would wear her long brown hair in four different loose braids. I grabbed her roughly by the shoulder and pulled her back.

“Hey! Hands off!” Ginny snarled, grabbing my wrist, “Oh, it’s you.”

“Where’s Gabe?” I demanded.

“Back at the apartment, what do you think?”

“And you left him there alone, didn’t you.”

“He was asleep!”

I snatched the drink out of her hand and slammed it down on the bar. Somewhere in the back of my head, I knew I wasn't thinking straight when I dragged her out. I should have settled her tab at the very least, but my brain was completely occupied with two thoughts: how fucking pissed I was at Ginny, and how fucking worried I was for Gabe.

. . .

The subway wasn't fast enough for my liking and the pout that never left Ginny's face didn't help to calm me. When I finally got back to my building, I could hear Gabe's wails from the foyer. I ran as fast as possible up the stairs, accumulating dirty looks from my neighbors who poked their heads out of their rooms to glare at me, accusing me of disrupting their sleep.

I skidded to a halt outside my door. My hands were already in my pocket and digging around for my keys. "Oh for fuck's sake," groaned Ginny, turning the knob and pushing it open for me.

My eyes bugged out at her. "You didn't even lock the door?"

She turned back to me from the kitchen and plopped herself down in a chair. "You don't have anything worth stealing." I slapped her. I barely even felt myself do it. One moment she was looking at me, challenging me with her unblinking glare, the next she had stumbled away, her mouth opened in a surprised 'O' with her eyes wide.

"I have a fucking kid!" I bellowed at her, proving once and for all that Gabe hadn't got his voice from his mother. I slammed the door behind me, locked it, and raced to Gabe's room. He was still on his back, thank God, his little mouth as wide as he could manage it. His tiny face was scrunched up like a stress ball that hadn't fully expanded. When I picked him up, I could

feel he'd wet himself even through his diaper. Whether or not that was what he was crying about was anybody's guess. I changed him and rocked him around for a while. My eyes closed a few times as I danced him, reminding me of how exhausted Ginny made me. Finally, with the help of his favorite bib (the one with the monkey on it) and his second favorite stuffed animal (the velveteen rabbit that came with the book), Gabe managed to shut up long enough to fall asleep. When I put him back in his crib, I wept tears of sweet relief. But then I remembered I had to deal with Ginny and my relief disappeared into my bloodstream.

When I closed Gabe's door behind me, Ginny cleared her throat beyond the door to the apartment itself. "The dude from downstairs came up to see if anything was wrong. I told him you'd locked me out." I glared at the door, semi-hoping it and anything beyond it would burst into flame. "Jimmy?" Hesitantly and quietly, I turned away from the door and approached the bathroom. "Hey, Jimmy? What're you doing?" I opened the bathroom door. It creaked. I took a mental note about greasing the hinges. Maybe I could put in a work order. "Hey!" She'd set up my towel in the bathtub and a small travel bag under the sink. I spent about a minute shuffling around the room, rooting through her bag and my cabinet. It was as I expected.

I came out of the bathroom and walked over to door. "You don't even have your pills with you." I felt like I was announcing it, like even she hadn't realized it.

Ginny was silent for a few seconds. I was about to check if she was still there when she spoke. "I ran out a couple days ago. I was going to get a refill but then Isaac broke up with me and kicked me out."

I pressed my head against the door. "How long have you been off them?"

"A week. Maybe a little longer."

“Goddammit,” I breathed, “Ginny, you know you don’t think right without them.” She mumbled something I couldn’t hear, probably an excuse or something about a side-effect.

“Ginny, you put my fucking kid in danger. My fucking kid, alright? You need those pills because without them you do stupid stuff like this.”

“I know,” I heard her sigh, “Look, I’m sorry, alright? But nothing happened! No harm, no foul!”

“No, Ginny!” I gasped, once again baffled by her almost aggressive stubbornness in refusing to see the reality and consequences of her actions. “Harm! Lots of harm! You put my son at risk! And I’m just now realizing that without a competent babysitter, I’ll need to stay home and I’ll lose my pay at two other clubs I was supposed to hit tonight!”

She was quiet for a minute after that and I groaned to myself. I let myself slide down to my knees, my forehead streaking along the door on my way down. “Jimmy?” asked Ginny, “Please let me in.” There was a spasm in her voice, a sharp pang of sudden and real fear. With a grunt, I pushed myself away from the door and stood up. A deep breath stabilized me. I opened the door and she visibly relaxed the second I came into her view. “Thanks.” She took a step forwards but I held up a hand.

It was hard to look into her eyes. Partially because she’d inherited a pair of biting blue irises from our mom that could stop a runaway train or our dad, partially because, unless she was absolutely furious with you, she hated making eye contact with anyone and would occasionally crane her neck to avoid it. This time, fortunately, I managed to hold her gaze. “Do not ever, and I mean ever, put my son in danger again,” I said. I didn’t want to threaten her, so I left it at that, a command for her to obey. I backed off and Ginny came in, breaking our visual connection as soon as she could and rushing for the bathroom.

My shoulders fell and I took off my shirt. With a groan, I fell onto my futon. In that moment, I was more tired than I'd felt in a good long while, and that was saying something. It was entirely possible that my son had just been scarred for life because I had knowingly left him with the most irresponsible person I knew. Fuck me sideways with a cactus dildo. Sleep was a blessing that didn't come easily, but fortunately was an inevitability.

. . .

Gabe woke me a few more times that night. After the first time, I was just about ready to smother him. Eventually, I stopped trying to get him to stop and just made sure he hadn't rolled onto his stomach or hurt himself. Then I'd go back to bed, using ear plugs to semi-successfully ignore his cries. Neighbors be damned.

I woke up for the final time in the morning and was blessed not to smell my appliances burning. Rolling over, I cracked my eyes open and winced at the sudden intrusion of the light. Ginny was sitting in the kitchen chewing on a spoonful of cereal. "Decided to give cooking a break," she told me when she saw I was awake, "You're welcome."

I groaned and rolled onto my pillow. "I hate you so goddamn much."

"Yup."

"What even were you doing last night?"

"I wanted to see your show. I hit up a few comedy clubs around town but I couldn't find you. But then I ran into this girl I knew in high school and she took me to that place in Manhattan where you were. I tried to wave at you and joke around but then you were mean to me so I had to ruin your act."

I raised my head off the pillow only so I could slam it back down repeatedly. It wasn't exactly banging my head against the wall in frustration, but I was too groggy to do that and I thought my point was made. "If you fucking heckle me onstage, I'll heckle you back!" I groaned between pillow headbutts, "That's how stand up works!"

"Okay, whatever. Lesson learned," Ginny replied, slurping more cereal. I shuddered to repress the vitriolic responses her remark warranted.

Gabe was awake when I entered his room, gurgling absentmindedly in his crib. Once he was dressed, I took a moment to hold him on my knee. He only had a brushing of hair atop his fragile head, but it was already similar to his mom's wavy blonde locks that seemed to perpetually fall into place with nothing more than the laziest of efforts. He had my eyes though, wide, brown things that were like tiny black holes in his face, sucking the skin around them into their vortices.

I brought him into the kitchen for food and he bubbled at the sight of Ginny. "Aww," she said with a grin as he reached out for her with his sausage arms. With a reluctant moan, I handed Gabe to her and she cuddled him over to the sink. I watched her carefully. She took his hand and ran it under cold sink water. Gabe laughed like only a baby could and flailed his wet hands.

"What are you doing today?" I asked. "I can get you some papers and we can look through the classifieds. Maybe try Craigslist?"

"Actually, first things first, can I get some money for the pills?"

I winced. It was important, I told myself, she needs them. But they were so very expensive. "Yeah, alright," I sighed, my hand flexing protectively around my wallet. After a moment, I pulled it out and handed her forty dollars. "That should cover it, right?"

“Yeah. I’ll head out now. I’m also meeting with the friend I ran into last night for lunch,” Ginny said, as if we had some sort of routine that she was breaking. Gabe smacked her hard on the chest and she yelped while he laughed. “Ugh, get him off me!”

. . .

Ginny had left by the time I got back from dropping Gabe off at the daycare. I took the time to do some things for myself. I took a dump, masturbated, wrote some new jokes, not necessarily in that order. Once I’d had some much needed me time, I went to work. The first thing I did was call up Diane.

“Listen, sorry for the other night,” I tried to explain, “I was hoping I could tempt you back to watch Gabe tonight?”

“I don’t work pro-bono, Mr. Gibb,” she said over the phone. Her voice was as numbing and high-pitched as it was in person. “It makes it seem like I’ll work cheaper for certain parents. It’s just bad for business.”

“I can pay you double for tonight for your trouble,” I offered, immediately mourning the loss of all my lunches for the next week.

Her sigh was a burst of harsh static in my ear. “Yeah, fine, I can watch Gabe tonight. Same time as usual?”

“Yup.”

“Double pay?”

“Yes.”

“Okay then.”

My next phone calls were the managers of the two clubs I hadn't been able to hit last night. Comedians no-show events all the time and there are always some fresh-faced young talents waiting in the wings for a has-been such as myself to slip up. I needed to make sure I still had my slots at both clubs. Fortunately, I was nothing if not loyal and club owners respect that. Once they were assured I'd be back that night, they handed me back my time.

It felt good to get my affairs in order again, even just a few days with Ginny was enough to completely drain me. I'd never feel guilty about being happy when she moved to Jersey to be with Isaac. It'd meant I then had a distance and didn't have to keep checking in on her. But now she was back and when she hadn't returned to the apartment by the time I had to pick up Gabe, I started to worry. I called her cell, but it went directly to voicemail. She had a bad habit of letting her battery die before she recharged it. It was more efficient, she always said. It's inconvenient, I'd always reply. I made Gabe dinner and Diane showed up right on time. Gabe seemed slightly unsettled to see her, but he was a goddamn baby and I was probably looking too deep into it.

I got to Robbie's and sidled over to the bar for a quick drink before my set. I was a little bit early and the guy before me was killing it. Each joke landed like a sniper's bullet and got a rousing laugh. It would be tough for me to follow. Suddenly the drink seemed a lot more crucial. Cisco handed me my Manhattan. "Hey Cisco."

"Jimmy."

"Good night?"

"Seen worse. Seen a lot better ones too."

"Ah, one of those, eh?"

"You know what it is." I nodded and the guy onstage finished up. I quickly gulped down my drink. "Oh, Robbie wanted to talk to you about something."

“He better make it quick. Where is he?”

“Dunno.”

The MC took the mic. “This next comedian coming to the stage,” he announced, “Is new to the club.” I had started to stand, but stopped. I had been a regular at Robbie’s for years, what was going on? “She shows a lot of promise though! Ladies and gentlemen, please give a warm welcome to Genevieve Gibb!”

The following thirty seconds were lost on me. I’d barely drunk enough to get buzzed, let alone black out, but still my mind refused to fire any unnecessary synapses for a few moments. Ginny stepped onstage with a wide grin and graciously accepted the mic. “’Sup guys?” she said. Her voice echoed through my ears, amplified many times over by the microphone. “So you may have heard this in the news recently but it turns out our president is an asshole.” Somehow my mind managed to put together that she was using an easy target, a repulsive conservative being ridiculed in a famously liberal city. It was cheap, but a good way to start off. “I do like his idea of a wall though. I think if we’re afraid or threatened by people, we should build a wall around them.” The audience was confused now, unsure of where she was going with her sudden reversal of opinion. “Now all we need is for the president to stand still long enough.” The nervous anticipation broke into a wave of laughter and I felt a stinging pain in my chest.

“Jimmy.” Robbie was at the bar, looking at me expectantly.

“W-what?”

“Sorry, I meant to call you. This lady came in early and did a quick set for me. She’s good Jimmy, said you taught her. Good work, man. I put her in before you, sort of a student opens for a mentor type deal.” My fists clenched. “I had to push you back seven minutes. Hope

that's okay." I heard Robbie, but distantly. It was hard to recognize his voice over the roar of the crowd.

They loved her. I hadn't even been paying attention to her jokes but they loved her. They'd loved the guy before her and were laughing even harder for her. My vision started to tunnel. Not even Dave Chappelle could harness what little energy would be left after her set and make it something memorable. The bar seemed to be getting further away. Robbie started looking more and more concerned. "Jimmy? You good?" I realized I was walking backwards. Cisco raised an eyebrow at me. He was wondering what everyone else must have been wondering: why was I still there when my replacement had already been set?

I turned and ran. I made it halfway back to the apartment before the anger fully set in. My vision literally began to darken and I felt lightheaded. The last few blocks forced me to slow down a bit, I was more out of shape than I was willing to admit. Everything was spinning for a bit but I got to my building. Diane was pissed when I got home earlier than expected, her double pay was now essentially worthless after working less than an hour. But she quickly handed over Gabe when he started fussing, took her pay and left. Once she was gone, I locked the door, gave Gabe a quick bath before bed, and grabbed a beer from the fridge. With a sense of furious purpose, I slammed a chair down in front of the door.

The wait was excruciating. A series of possible scenarios ran through my head, each had me telling off Ginny with a chorus of well-deserved swears and insults. About two hours and three beers later, the door knob shook a little. "Shit," I heard her mutter outside, "Jimmy are you there?" I didn't reply at first, trying to decide which of the numerous openers I'd thought of would be most hurtful and therefore appropriate. "Jimmy, let me in. Are you okay, Jimmy? The club owner guy said you left really weird during my set. Jimmy?" She started banging on my

door and I felt a rush of satisfaction as panic entered her voice. There was a twinge of guilt in my contentment, but I stifled it. Her hits against my door got harder. “Goddammit Jimmy I know you’re in there! Let me in!”

“Why!” I finally snapped, “So you can steal more of my life? So you can put my son in danger while you go out and steal my fucking job?”

“It’s not my fault I’m funnier than you!” shrieked Ginny, kicking the door now, “For fuck’s sake, Jimmy! Just let me in!”

“You think I’m going to let you live with me after all you’ve done?” I demanded.

“You fucking better!”

“Fuck no!”

“Then where am I supposed to fucking go, dick hole?”

“Try a fucking homeless shelter, you broke bitch!”

“Not broke anymore!” I heard something crumpling beyond the door, “Hear that? That’s a brand new check, you dick. I was gonna pay you a little bit for letting me stay but fuck that.”

“Hey!” shouted a new voice. It sounded like the college kid who lived downstairs. “Do I have to call the fucking cops?”

There was a long pause. I stood up with my arms folded. Ginny cleared her throat. “No, no.” she said. “We’re fine here. Sorry for disturbing you.” My door creaked as she leaned against it and slid down. After a few moments of silence, she sighed and spoke again. “Do you remember that joke dad used to tell? The one about the prisoners?” I didn’t say anything and she took that as a no. “A man goes to prison,” she said, “and on his first day in the lunch room, he sees another prisoner shout out ‘thirty-four’ and everybody laughs. Another inmate jumps on a table and shouts ‘eighty-two’ and everybody laughs again. The new guy asks another prisoner

what's going on and the prisoner says 'well, we've all been in here so long that we all know each other's jokes. So instead of wasting time telling them over and over again, we assign each joke a number and just shout the number. Everybody remembers the joke and has a good time.'" Ginny took a deep, shuddering breath. I shivered, imagining I could feel the door vibrate under my fingers. "The new guy loves this idea and devotes himself to learning every joke and every number. Finally, after a few weeks, he feels he's finally ready and at lunch he jumps up on a table and says 'forty!' but nobody laughs. He figures it's a fluke and tries again. 'Seventeen!' still nobody laughs. He decides to tell an absolute guaranteed knee-buster and shouts 'ninety-nine!' Nobody laughs and he sits down next to his friend and says, 'what happened? Why didn't anybody laugh?' And his friend says--"

"Well, some people can tell a joke and some people can't," I finished. "Yeah, I remember. He used to tell you that joke every time he took you to therapy because you always had some stupid comment about how the joke reminded you of yourself or whatever."

"Oh yeah," said Ginny softly, "I'd forgotten about that. He was a funny guy, wasn't he?"

"No, he had a problem," I snarled, "And so do you. You need help, Ginny. Go get some."

"Only someone like him would name his kids Jimmy and Ginny," she murmured as if she hadn't heard me, "Do you think if you ever have a girl you'd name her Gabriella? You know, so you could have a Gabe and a Gab?"

I put my head against the door and sighed. "Ginny..."

"Just please let me in, Jimmy. Please." I backed away from the door. I had to call the other club owners and renege on my promise to come in that night.

Coke and Sex

Lana grimaced at herself in the mirror. It was a nice mirror; it belonged to her great-grandmother. A simple, wooden frame and glass stained from age. As Lana applied her thick makeup, she did her best to ignore the scathing guilt she felt for using it as a professional tool. Her grandmother had been a devout Catholic and doubtlessly would have taken issue with her granddaughter whoring. The mirror had been one of the few things she brought with her to the New World.

Lana stood up and let her bathrobe drop off her body. She'd just taken a shower, but her apartment was roasting hot. The water mixed with sweat under her breasts and arms and she wiped them away with her blanket. Her most successful outfit, a plunging blue cocktail dress that rode up near the curve of her ass, waited patiently for her in the closet. It wasn't her most comfortable dress, but paired with the right pair of heels and a sensual smirk it was guaranteed to draw in at least \$500 a night.

The accessories she had in mind were a fake designer bag and a thin, silk scarf. The bag made her look classy and expensive, but the scarf was warm and inviting. She was important, but approachable, costly, worth it. Lana checked herself one last time in the mirror before reaching into the vanity drawer and pulling out a second, smaller mirror. She laid it carefully on the desk, so as not to disturb the small pouch of white powder already on it. Lana separated a line with her

nail and scooped out a small bump. She had to resist the urge to take a larger hit. As soon as the burning sensation in her nostril set in and the drip hit the back of her throat, Lana stepped outside.

The city was, as usual, awake and arrogant. From her apartment, Lana had to walk three blocks to get to a busy enough street where she could hail a cab. The driver didn't smile as she clambered into his car. She didn't know him and wouldn't remember him. He did his job and she paid him, the classic setup of exchanging money for goods and services, no different than what she did. "Murray Hill," she said.

Her corner was on a street with a few bars and clubs. She waited there for a few minutes in mild frustration. Her handler usually met her there to discuss any prominent jobs and security, but he was late. It didn't matter at that point, all her prospective customers were in the bars, slowly getting drunk enough to find the courage to ask her how much a night cost. She didn't have anything to do for the time being.

Finally, Eric pulled up to the curb in his silver Buick. "What took you?" demanded Lana, leaning down as he opened his passenger side window.

"Sorry," said Eric. "Mom called. I had to get her groceries. How you feeling?"

"Fine, mamma's boy. Anything special tonight?"

"Nope. I had a guy asking for something in particular, but I thought Carly would be better suited."

Lana didn't even blink. "He's a sub? I could've taken a sub."

"No, he was a dom."

"Oh," Lana nodded, "Okay, yeah. Carly can take that one." She was not unaware of the delicate balance of trust and finances required to take on the more emotionally involved clients,

everyone in the business had to be acquainted with such fragile work. As much money as she could've gotten from a job like that, it wouldn't have been worth it if she couldn't keep the client stable.

Eric checked his watch. "Hey, I got a new girl tonight. You think you can handle yourself?"

"I'm good," Lana assured him, "go break her in."

Eric nodded and drove away just as the first round of drunks started to leak out of the bars. Lana immediately adopted her practiced aloof look. She had found out years before that guys always wanted what they couldn't have. If she acted above them or more mature than them, not exactly a high bar to jump, then they'd want to spend more time with her.

She got a few intrigued looks, but nobody approached her. That was okay, she usually didn't get a taker this early in the night. Time ticked on and she watched as a few more men passed her by. A few sparked a conversation with her, but quickly shuffled away when they learned she wasn't talking to them for free. A taxi flew by and Lana caught the advertisement on top. It was for a new camera. Lana had often considered getting a camera and posing for her own advertisements. But not only would the camera and film be costly, but she'd also have to pay for fliers, take time out to distribute them. Plus, it would cut into her coke money significantly. And there was always the high risk of being discovered by the cops. They were known to be less than friendly to prostitutes. Unless they were customers.

"Yo." Lana had felt the man approach her but did not let on that she hadn't anticipated how close he had gotten.

"Hey," she said. "How you doing?"

The man took a long pull on a dying cigarette. He was just shy of six feet with a stomach so flat it was practically concave. “Been worse, I guess,” he answered, letting the smoke drift lazily in the air, “Yourself?”

Lana smirked. “Been worse, too. Bum a smoke?” The young man flipped a cigarette pack out of his pocket and, with one hand, knocked a loose cig from the package. His fingers were so slender, they were almost skeletal. Lana took the offered cigarette and let him light it in her mouth. She had a good feeling about this one. He didn’t seem dangerous. And if he was, it was very clear that Lana could easily take him in a fight, even without using the mace can in her bag. “Thanks.”

“Not a problem,” the man took another drag, “I like your bag. But if you want it to pass for Gucci, you might want to make sure it’s covered in Gs, not Cs.”

Lana chuckled. “Not many people notice. Around here, they’re usually too drunk to tell the difference.”

“Mmm,” hummed the man, “Wish I was among them. I could go for a solid drink right now.”

“Plenty of bars to pick from,” Lana pointed out.

“Yeah, but I did a few lines of K an hour ago.”

“Ah,” Lana nodded. She was familiar with ketamine and, more importantly, knew how dangerous it was when mixed with alcohol.

“Not that it’s going to matter though,” said the young man casually, tossing his dead cig onto the ground and stomping it out, “I’m going to kill myself in the morning anyway.”

“That’s a bold claim,” said Lana calmly. “What’s on your mind?”

The young man shrugged. “Everything. Nothing. Too much, too little, and never the right things.”

Lana shrugged. “Well that sucks, I guess.” She was used to this type of client, the pretentiously damaged. They were obnoxious and sometimes difficult to work with, but their money was green.

The young man abruptly smiled. It was a curved and wicked grin that cleaved his face like an inverted horizon. Lana almost stepped back at its sudden appearance. “That sucks,” the man repeated, “I’ve seen more therapists than my parents could afford and nobody’s put it as...succinctly as that.”

At the mention of parents, a chill went through Lana’s spine. “How old are you?” she asked.

“Twenty.”

“You’re a college boy?”

“N.Y.U.”

“Cool,” Lana took a bracing drag on her cigarette. “Look, I’ll cut the crap, okay? It sounds like you could use some company tonight.” She stepped close to him and gently ran a finger along his sternum. For a brief moment, Lana felt the sudden acceleration of his heart rate and the palpable excitement that only the inexperienced could feel. For someone who planned to kill himself, he seemed plenty alive.

“That works,” said the young man, “What’s your name, by the way?”

“Charlotte,” said Lana.

“Garret,” he introduced himself, “How much?”

“For the night? Four-fifty.”

“Do you do hourly?”

“Yeah, sixty-five an hour.”

Garret nodded thoughtfully. “Let me hit up an A.T.M.,” he said. “Do you have a place?”

Lana flicked away her cigarette. “Yeah, I got a place.”

“Cool.” Lana followed Garret to a pharmacy a few blocks away where he used a twenty-four hour A.T.M. He took out eighty dollars while Lana lit up a fresh cigarette. When he was ready, Lana led him in silence a few blocks to a hotel.

She’d made friends with a maid there who could sneak her and her clients into an empty room free of charge. Within fifteen minutes, she and Garret were walking through the door of a small room on the third floor with a single, queen-sized bed.

Garret turned on the television and leaned back on the bed, lacing his hands behind his head. Lana smiled slightly and leaned against the wall. “Your first time, huh?”

Garret glanced at her. “That obvious?”

“You’re shaking,” Lana pointed out. “Also, you have to pay up front.”

“Oh, right.” Garrett scrambled with his wallet. His hands were practically vibrating.

“On the dresser.”

“Right, right. Like in the movies.” He showed her the money with an anxious smirk before laying it out on the dresser next to the television. “Keep the change.”

As soon as his back was turned, Lana rolled her eyes and collected the four Jacksons. “So, a virgin, huh?”

“It doesn’t matter,” said Garret with a shrug, clambering back into the bed. “It’s just sex.”

“Yeah, that’s what all virgins think,” said Lana, lying next to him, “But it’s more than just sticking your dick in me, man. It’s about, I don’t know, experiencing someone else.”

Garret shrugged again. "It doesn't matter." He reached into his pocket and withdrew a small bag of white. "Want some blow?"

Lana cocked her head to the side. "I'll take some, but you shouldn't. Don't want to get coke dick on your first time."

"I feel like I should have some."

"Suit yourself. It's your coke." He shook out some powder onto the dresser.

"Um, can I borrow one of the twenties I just gave you?"

Lana bit the inside of her lip. "You don't have any other bills?"

"No." After a few moments of hesitation, Lana reached back into her bag and took out a bill. Garrett made the lines with a complimentary pen from the hotel. He took a line to the head and groaned as the stinging chemicals took their course. Lana took the bill from him. Her own line was more painful than she was used to. He must have gotten it from a better dealer, it was a purer, more powerful high, not cut with much else.

Lana moaned when the euphoria took hold of her. She let her bag and scarf slide off the bed and slowly reached for the straps of her dress. He tried not to show it, but Garret's eyes were following her every move.

Lana remembered what he said earlier as she slowly revealed her breasts to him, unsure if it was her nipples or the coke that made his eyes so wide. "Why do you want to kill yourself?" she asked again.

"Because I hate myself," said Garret simply, "I hate the people around me and the world I'm in. It's nothing new. I've been thinking about doing it since I was eight."

“That’s a bit early, don’t you think?” Lana took Garret’s hand and gently lay it across her bare chest. He experimentally played with her nipples and she resisted the urge to laugh at his clumsiness.

“It doesn’t matter,” Garret repeated, “Please don’t try to talk me out of it.”

“That’s not what you’re paying me for,” said Lana, swinging herself over him. She could feel his want, but also his caution. He wasn’t here to vent or just to have fun like most of her other customers. He just wanted to know how it felt before he died.

So she obliged him. Her dress wound up under the bed along with the rest of his clothes. He tried to be polite and not oppressively grope her body, but she honestly would have preferred it if he had. She wasn’t particularly into rough play, but he was so tentative and hesitant, almost to the point of reluctance, that she was almost begging for him to make a more dramatic move. After almost a half-hour of experimental foreplay where their mouths, fingers, and genitals mixed in various ways, Lana retrieved a condom from her purse and he slipped it on.

Lana felt a chill when he entered her. She put on her best fake moans for him, but she was nearly crying. She was being fucked by a dead man. He didn’t last long at first, the excitement and drugs that made him hard in the first place also dulling his sensitivity to the point of softening inside her. He had to withdraw and take a minute or two to himself.

“Sorry.”

“Told you. Coke dick.”

“Sorry, I...sorry.” It took a good while for him to be ready again, a mix of coke and nerves restraining. But soon Garrett was hard, so he reinserted himself.

Inside of two minutes, he was done. He crawled off of her and collapsed onto the bed besides her. He pulled off the condom and tossed it in the nearby trashcan. “Huh,” he muttered, grabbing his cigarettes from the bedside table.

“Huh,” she agreed, accepting one from his hands. It tasted bitter and she choked on the smoke.

“You okay?”

“Yeah,” she said, “fine.” The television was on, playing *The Odd Couple*. Lana wasn’t a fan of most episodes she’d seen, but this one was funny enough. She and Garret shared some awkward laughs.

“That’s good,” he murmured after one of their chuckles, “Someone once told me that sex without laughter is bad sex.”

“Someone’s smart,” said Lana. Next to the television was a digital clock. “Time’s up,” said Lana, putting out her cigarette on the desk. She swung her legs out from the bed and stood up. She quickly got dressed and Garret followed suit. “Out of curiosity, how’re you going to kill yourself?”

“I’m going to jump off the Brooklyn Bridge.” His response was too immediate not to be premeditated. “Just before dawn, before the pedestrians and tourists get there. I don’t really want anyone to be there, they might try to stop me.”

“And you’ve made up your mind about it?”

“Yeah.” He flashed her a quick, soft smile, and left. Lana stood in the room alone for a bit. She lit herself a fresh cigarette. For some reason, she was rattled. She needed the thick, sticky smoke to fill her lungs so she could find her sense of balance. Nevertheless, she collapsed on the bed. A precious hour passed with Lana just chain-smoking, her eyes never leaving the television.

The Odd Couple gave way to a late-night variety show without her even noticing. Only when the closing song played and the final, pleasant pangs of the coke died down did she snap out of her stupor and leave.

By the time she got back to her corner, it was very late. The drunken college boys and unhappy husbands had already evacuated to their respective homes, all that was left for her to sell to were the truckers and night-laborers. Lana checked her watch. Eric hadn't been with her that night, and being a reasonable man he likely wouldn't charge her for his services. At least not until next week. Lana was more concerned with how taking the night off would affect her coke money.

She went home. Truckers were generally difficult to handle, especially when they were coked up, and she just wasn't in the mood. She took another cab with another cabbie who she would never even consider again. During the drive back to her apartment, she contemplated the phenomenon of others. How many people did she pass on the street every day, every night? How many cabbies had she met, interacted with, exchanged money with, who had never made an impression on her? Lana leaned her head against the window. They came to a red light and a man passed in front of the cab before the light changed and they peeled off once more.

Back at her apartment, she took a small bump and a shower, cursing herself that she hadn't thought to do it at the hotel. She scrubbed her crotch and lifted her leg to a wall to try and clean herself out. The warm water felt cold to her when it ran between her thighs. Shivering, she re-emerged in front of her grandmother's vanity. Laying her head down on the counter in front of the mirror, she stared deep into her own eyes. What did people mean by eyes being the windows to the soul, she wondered. They were eyes, used to see and communicate vision to the brain, what they saw or did served no indication as to their user's morality or desires.

She turned on the television and searched for the channel from the hotel room. When she found it, it was playing a rerun of a sitcom her parents used to watch with her. Lana made herself some tea and sat naked on her bed, watching T.V. and sipping on it. When she grew bored of the show, she turned it off and looked for something to read or do. She briefly considered sleep, she was tired, but the coke in her system made any such endeavor impossible.

Around five in the morning, she realized it was just distractions. It was all just distractions. An existential gambit to try and forget Garrett. And ultimately, it wasn't working. With a resigned sigh, Lana dressed herself. This time, she slipped into jeans and a sports bra, both covered with an over-sized hoodie she'd stolen from an ex-boyfriend. She didn't wear makeup, it didn't seem necessary. She hesitated at the door and glanced back to the drawer where she still had a line of blow.

Lana checked her watch when she was outside. She figured she still had about an hour and a half until sunrise. Lana decided to walk. It was only a few blocks from her apartment to the East River, so she merely followed it south. It was cold, but not intolerable. She picked up her pace when she saw the eastern sky start to lighten. The earliest hours of the morning was the only time when New York seemed to take a breath. Only the construction workers and cooks were out, and they were too busy with their own purposes to pay attention to any wandering pedestrians. For a few hours between when the drunkest of the drunk finally went home and the sunrise, the smog and lingering smell of cigarettes lifted so that the air above the streets might recharge for another day of abuse.

When she got to the Brooklyn Bridge, her eyes raked across it, looking for any sign of a figure standing on the ledge as she expected Garrett would be. To her surprise, she found him on the corner of the bridge's walkway, huddled under a thick, down jacket.

“Oh, hey,” he said warily when he saw her. “What’re you doing here?”

Lana shoved her hands in the middle pocket of her hoodie almost aggressively. “Not sure,” her answer was truthful, “guess I just wanted to make sure you were okay.”

“Well, I’m going to kill myself, so...no.”

Now she felt stupid. Lana leaned over the side of the bridge. “It’s a long drop. I’d never really considered how tall this thing is.”

“It’s taller if you consider how deep into the river it goes.” Lana nodded and leaned against the railing next to Garrett. He tucked his legs closer together, shifting away from her. “Do I make you uncomfortable?” she asked.

“No.” Yes, she did. It was a common conundrum.

“I’m a person too, you know?”

“Yeah, I know.”

Lana looked to the east. The sky, what she could see of it between the buildings, was turning a peachy shade of pink as the sun drew closer and closer to penetrating the horizons.

“Hey,” she said, “if I asked you to go home and not kill yourself, would you?”

Garrett was quiet for a moment and Lana glanced down at him. He was looking away from her, to Manhattan in the west. “Probably not,” he said eventually. “I’ve really made up my mind about this.”

“Yeah, but you shouldn’t. At least keep an open mind.”

“Why do you care?” Garrett fixed her with an odd glare. “Aren’t I just another john to you?”

“See, that’s why you need to live at least a little longer. You just lost your virginity, like, a few hours ago and you think you know enough that you can kill yourself without missing

anything.” Lana tried not to meet his gaze, it felt too intimate and his stare was too fierce.

“You’ve got so much to learn and experience. It doesn’t make sense to die now.”

“Life doesn’t make sense.”

“No, but that doesn’t mean we should all just kill ourselves,” said Lana. She tried not to raise her voice and turned her eyes upriver. “Nothing makes sense, Garrett. That’s why we do drugs and fuck, because we don’t really have much else to do. There aren’t any tricks or loopholes, we just keep fucking around, pretending we know what we’re doing. For fuck’s sake, we all have weird, fucked up lives where we get to experience weird, fucked up shit and are expected to be thankful for the weird, fucked up privilege.”

“Exactly.”

“But isn’t the best revenge in that case to smile and genuinely enjoy the weird, fucked up stuff? The ultimate revenge against existence is the appreciate it unironically. With coke and sex if we have to.” The wind blew and Lana pulled up her hood to keep her hair from whipping around her face. Garrett shivered but made no move to cover himself further. Below them, the cold water splashed almost lazily against the legs of the bridge. “Want to get some breakfast?”

Garrett hung his head between his knees.

Sparks

Alvin hated therapy. It wasn't that he did not like talking about himself; it was that he had to pay someone to let him. It made him feel undervalued, as if he were buying a temporary friend, renting someone's time. It did not matter though; he knew he needed it. Without therapy, he would not have anyone to talk to and it made his mother worry.

"Alvin," greeted the receptionist as she always did. God, what was her name? They had met a few months ago and she had even shaken his hand when he introduced himself. Alvin made a polite smile for her. She had no spark in her eyes.

"Hi, I have a 5 o'clock with Carol?"

"Yup, do you have co-pay?" Alvin handed her a twenty-dollar bill and took a seat. The waiting room was fairly standard, white-washed walls with a few uncomfortable chairs arranged in rows for the patients. Alvin was tempted to throw a chair into the wall just to liven up the place, but it was a passing urge at best, not one he would take seriously or vocalize to anyone. It took only a few minutes before Carol rounded the corner and smiled at him. Alvin stood up and returned her smile, but he had a feeling her expression was as real as his. He took a moment and met her eyes. There was no spark in them, as always.

They exchanged the usual pleasantries on the way to Carol's office. Alvin hated pleasantries, but society dictated that he be nice and polite and Alvin prided himself on being a

good person despite his persistent pessimism, or, as he called it, his objective view of reality. He refrained from commenting on her hair, which was just beginning its slow journey from natural blonde to shining silver. Alvin imagined her already experienced and worn face growing more crows' feet and laugh lines. He aged her further in his mind, watching as her skin became thin, gaunt, stretching over her skull like a taut canvas over a frame.

“So, Alvin,” said Carol as she took her place in the swivel chair in her office. “What do you want to talk about this week?”

Alvin sighed. It was going to be one of these types of sessions, one where Carol would let him talk ad nauseam through the entire hour without giving input until the end. It made him feel like a test subject and not a patient. But he and his insurance paid for an hour and he was not going to just throw away money.

He slowly climbed onto the little couch Carol had and straightened out his clothes to adjust to his new, horizontal position. Inside of him, the organs that forced life to continue deflated, settling and relaxing into their new places with almost a sigh. “Have I told you about the sparks?” he asked.

“No, Alvin,” said Carol patiently, “I do not think you have.”

Alvin took a deep breath and fixated his gaze on the foam tile ceiling above him. “When you first meet someone, a spark appears in their eyes, a spark that asks; who is this? What do they have to say to me? What experiences can they share? It lasts only so long as you stay interesting though. When they get bored of you, the spark fades.”

Carol leaned forward in her chair, resting her elbows on the edge of her desk. “Alvin, do you actually see these sparks, or are they just feelings you get?” Alvin was willing to give credit where it was due: Carol was very good at her job. She kept her voice level and tone professional

even as her patient was suggesting symptoms of psychosis. It was a loaded question, one he knew how to handle.

He turned his head slightly so he could look Carol in the eyes. “They’re just feelings,” he lied. “I’m just, uh, gauging how long people are interested in me when I first meet them.” He would not make the mistake of trying to demonstrate the sparks to someone, not again. He would not go back on the Aripiprazole. Just the thought of it made him weak. The headaches alone were reason enough for him to lie, but the narcolepsy was what had crippled him. And it had not worked, of course. He was not crazy. Alvin turned his head back to the ceiling.

“When I was in college, I tried to play a game with the sparks,” he continued, being sure to emphasize the word ‘sparks’ to insinuate its metaphorical significance rather than its physical presence. “When at parties or whenever I had nothing better to do I would introduce myself to random people and see how long I could keep the spark alive in their eyes. Eventually, I found out that it took an average of two minutes and thirteen seconds for someone to completely lose interest in me.”

Carol leaned back in her chair. “And why do you think that is?” Alvin almost rolled his eyes. It was a generic question that made him wonder if he was spending his money right.

“I suppose it was because I wasn’t very interesting,” he answered, “But it always annoyed me to see that little spark fade. I would try to make it last by making myself do stupid things; things that would make me seem more interesting. I did what I had to do to make the spark stick around longer.”

Carol hummed lightly. “Why were you so fixated on this spark? What made you so desperate to make people interested in you?”

“I wanted to be interesting,” said Alvin simply. “Doesn’t everybody want to be interesting? So people will pay attention to them?”

“So you want attention?” She made him sound like a child, desperately tugging at mommy’s skirt to get her to look at him.

“Everyone likes to be paid attention to, right?”

“But not everyone needs it,” Carol countered, “You don’t have a girlfriend, right?”

Alvin made a shrewd grin. “Are you asking me out?”

The following laugh was polite, expected, and still somewhat uncomfortable. “No, no. I’m asking if you have anybody that can pay attention to you and it feels like you don’t need anyone else to pay attention to you.”

“I have my mom, of course,” said Alvin, “She takes care of me. She pays attention to me.”

“If you have her, why are you so concerned that other people’s, ah, sparks fade?”

Alvin paused and considered his response for a moment. “My mother has to pay attention to me,” he reasoned, “It’s expected of her to be a mom. I guess I want attention that I’ve earned, not what’s owed to me.”

“That is very reasonable,” said Carol, nodding her head ever so slightly. She only ever took her eyes off Alvin to wet them and her soft smile had not wavered. “Let me ask you this, Alvin: was there ever a moment where you felt angry or violent towards the sparks?”

“Oh, of course,” said Alvin immediately, “College. I was depressed and stressed out and alone. The sparks never shone very long for me. But I saw other people look at others, people in relationships.”

“You saw sparks in their eyes?”

“No,” Alvin said slowly. He reached into his pocket. “I saw fires.”

“So you wanted a fire for yourself. You wanted someone to be interested in you enough to love you.” Alvin made no sound and laced his fingers over his stomach, removing his hand from his pocket. “There’s nothing wrong with wanting someone to love you, Alvin,” Carol reassured him, “It’s one of the most human traits we have. But we cannot approach love while also looking to hate.”

Alvin breathed deeply. “I know about love,” he said, trying to not sound as stiff as he felt, “But even when I did find someone to love me, there wasn’t a fire, and the spark would disappear just as fast as anyone else’s. I’ve had relationships that lasted years, but the spark would last minutes.”

Carol nodded slowly. “So the spark wasn’t love?”

“No, maybe, I’m not entirely sure myself,” admitted Alvin. Acknowledging his confusion left a bad taste in his mouth and he swallowed, clearing his chops of the stale, excess spit that had accumulated there. He shifted before continuing. “But I brought this up for a reason. The other day, I was in a coffee shop and I, ah, spoke with the girl behind the counter. I didn’t know her, but I don’t know most people, so that doesn’t matter. But what made her stand out to me,” he paused and closed his eyes for a moment before continuing. “She had no spark,” he kept his voice level in tone and volume, “None at all. Everyone I’ve ever met had a spark for at least a few seconds. But she didn’t have any interest in me at all. She didn’t think I could teach her anything, show her new experiences. I don’t even know if she saw me as a human, she just saw me as a...a shadow, I guess.”

“Different people have different perspectives,” supplied Carol, but Alvin was not paying attention to her anymore.

“I’m almost thirty,” he said as if it were just now dawning on him. “Have I lost touch? Is that what growing old is? To the point where nobody will look at me with a spark anymore?” It did seem to make sense to him, when he had considered it earlier. There were no experiences that had not already been had, barring new evolutionary or massive technological advances, humanity was stagnant, and he was treading water along with the rest of his species. He had nothing to share that was not more easily accessible through others who were capable of stronger emotional connections than himself. All his stories, real or fake, were blasé now, his jokes unfunny. “The world’s moved on without me,” he murmured.

“So catch up,” said Carol calmly, “That seems like a relatively easy thing to deduce about yourself. Perhaps we need to work on your self-reflection skills.”

Alvin considered that for a moment. It had become clear in the few months that he had been seeing Carol that her contributions to his life were minimal at best. He would sometimes wonder how long the spark had lasted in his own eyes after he had met her. Not very long, he suspected. Alvin took a sharp intake of breath. “Yes,” he said, “maybe.”

“I would like to do an exercise with you, Alvin,” said Carol. She reached into her desk and pulled out a spiral-bound notebook and a pen. “I want you to write something you know about yourself and then I will do the same.”

Alvin accepted the notebook and flipped it open. It had never been used. The blank first page felt like an unmoved chess board, reeking with challenge. He clicked the pen. ‘I want to see sparks,’ he wrote.

Carol took the journal. Alvin watched the tip of the pen wiggle for a few moments while she wrote below his words. When she was done, she turned the notebook around and handed it back to him. ‘You can see sparks by being a kind, interesting person.’

Repressing a scoff, Alvin wrote again. ‘People don’t want to have sparks for me.’

When he handed it back, Carol gave a soft hum and tapped the paper. Her reply read ‘You adapt a defeatist attitude when things don’t go your way.’

Alvin gripped the pen tightly. Carol had made the leap from presumptuousness to insulting. He was tempted to throw down the pen and storm out of the session, but he was loath to prove her right. ‘I’m the only person who can see the sparks,’ he wrote.

Carol read that and paused for a moment. “Our time is just about up,” she said, her eyes flicking to the clock on the wall. “But I want to give you some homework before you leave.” She closed the notebook and handed it back to Alvin. The pen stayed on her desk. “I want you to continue to make observations about yourself and keep the ones I wrote down in mind. If you get into a situation where you feel the need to give up, try forcing yourself to continue and let me know what changes, if anything.”

Alvin wanted to ask her what she had meant about his ‘defeatist attitude,’ but knew it would not help him to receive her answer. He walked back to the waiting room and gave a curt nod to the receptionist. Stepping out of the suite, he entered the hall of the larger building it was housed in. The elevator was across from the door and Alvin stared at it for a long time before he finally sighed and pressed the button to summon the lift.

A young man in business attire ran up to him as he stepped in. “Going down?” he asked with a slight pant. Alvin stared at the man and their eyes met. The man gave him a queer look.

“You okay, man?”

“Fine, fine,” sighed Alvin. “You have no sparks in your eyes.”

“What?”

“Nothing, never mind.” For a moment, Alvin considered going up. The building was six stories, tall enough for his purpose. But that was what a defeatist would do, and Alvin would be good and damned before he proved that woman right. “Yes, going down.”

I Can Take Who's Next

Sandra pushed open the electric doors of Homegoods and waved a limp hand at her coworkers already suffering behind their registers. With a light swing in her arms, she made her way to the rear break room and retrieved her filthy red apron from her locker. As she walked back to the front, the doors opened again and the first wave of customers rushed in. “Hey honey, wanna hop on 6?” said her supervisor, a stick of a woman with a thick Boston accent and personality.

Sandra nodded and made her way to register 6. She started to get set up and faked a smile for customers as they passed, already in their late-morning drive for retail-priced unnecessary designer products. Sandra almost felt sorry for them, those aging consumers with their short-sightedness and poor impulse control. But then she remembered how much she hated them and her fleeting pity vanished. She stepped behind the counter and nodded to a man in a matching apron as he passed her, a pair of rolled-up rugs balanced on his shoulders. His glum face and drooping jowls were comical, but she was too sympathetic to his misery to laugh. Sandra settled for a humored grunt and established her presence at the register.

“I can take who's next,” she said robotically with an actor's grin as her first customer stepped up to bat. She hadn't even waited for Sandra to call her to push her overloaded cart to the counter. She was a short, round, old white lady, the chain's main demographic. Sandra greeted

her with a few practiced phrases and received the generic responses before the old lady lugged her three comforters and two queen sheet sets on the counter. As she scanned them, Sandra wondered just what a woman who looked a stone's throw away from the reaper's doorstep needed with three comforters at \$49.99 apiece and two queen sheet sets at \$79.99 each. She couldn't think of any reason, but she did not ask. It was none of her business. The lady paid with credit.

"I can take who's next."

Her next customer was a new mother with another on the way. Her toddler sat impatiently in the carriage as she pulled out the expensive oils and spices from the kitchen section. Sandra spared a glance at her round stomach, but knew that if she stared too long she'd be dragged into a conversation. Personal talks with customers were best avoided because they could take too much of her time and form a line. Then she'd have to deal with irritated customers.

"I can take who's next."

Another wave of customers entered the store and the girl on the register next to Sandra groaned. Sandra shared her sentiments, but kept her lips tight. She, like every other menial laborer, hated customers. She didn't know who they were or what they had been through. They could be a war veteran who saved twenty lives, they could be a grandmother who had raised outstanding members of the community. Sandra didn't care. All she knew was that their mere presence was an inconvenience for her and her coworkers.

"I hate this job," sighed the girl next to her when they had a moment free from the customers.

"You're not here to like it," said Sandra, "You're here to make money."

“Words to live by,” muttered the man with the rugs as he stormed by. Now, he had a set of bar stools tucked under his wide arms. “Carry out for a lady in red,” he let the girls know as he set down the stools behind an empty register. “She’s taking one home and keeping the rest here as a paid hold. Then, she’s returning a couple chairs she bought yesterday.”

Sandra frowned. “She should do the return first.”

He shrugged. “I guess she wants to do the loading and unloading in one trip. The customer is always right.”

“No, they’re not,” said the other girl, folding her arms.

“No,” agreed the man, “but if they knew that, they wouldn’t spend money.”

“Aaron!” called their manager from a few aisles away. “Lady in rugs!” The boy sighed and shuffled off, leaving Sandra and the other girl to take care of a fresh volley of customers. The other girl made gossip when they had a few free moments, about Justin Bieber’s latest fling or Taylor Swift’s feud with her newest ex or whatever. Sandra only half paid attention. She should be an actor, she thought to herself, she was so good at feigning interest.

“I can take who’s next.”

Her fingers began to ache after an hour and her knees locked ten minutes after she felt the first pang of her carpal tunnel acting up. Her smile never faltered, but by the time her shift was half-over, she was sure the customers could feel the heat of her hatred. Despite her mechanical movements, her job required enough mental fortitude that her mind was not allowed to wander and let the time pass that way. When she had a few seconds between customers, she bent her knees and let herself grimace in pain before calling out.

“I can take who’s next.”

Finally, her state-mandated 30-minute lunch break arrived and she left register 6. She'd left her wallet and phone in her locker, so she headed for the break room.

"Hey!" said Aaron as she passed him in an aisle, "can I get a hand with this real quick? It's not heavy, just awkward."

With a curt nod, Sandra stepped to the other side of the bureau. Together, they tipped it on its back and gently lay it down on the flatbed hand truck. He'd said it wasn't heavy, but Sandra begged to differ. Her arms were thin and scarred and did not match Aaron's. He was not muscular, but his wide hands and beefy forearms made him an ideal manual laborer. It annoyed her that she had tried not to show how she was struggling with it and failed. "Thanks," said the boy when the bureau was down. "You good?"

"Yeah," Sandra flicked her hands to try and get blood circulating in her fingers again. She continued to walk back towards the break room, but only got a few aisles before a fragile looking housewife stopped her.

"Excuse me," she said, "Can you tell me how much this is?" She held out a woolly rug and Sandra tried not to make a fist. It was clear that the hanging tag had been ripped off the rug. Probably by the housewife herself, done so that she could trick an unassuming, teenage worker into marking it down a few dollars. Sandra was twenty and, despite what the aging woman might think, not a fool. But she didn't care enough to get one of her managers. She quickly made up a ticket for probably half of what the rug was worth and gave it to the woman with a hotel smile.

She got her wallet and walked across the parking lot to the Papa Gino's. The boy behind the counter there gazed at her with dull eyes as she ordered. She wondered, briefly, if she was considering the person taking her order as a human being. Not favoring the answer, she quickly

paid and hurried away. She took a seat at an empty both and checked her phone while her food was made.

The pizza was fresh out of the oven and it burned the roof of her mouth, but she had to eat fast to get back to work on time. She tried to ignore the pain in her mouth while letting her legs rest. She was overcome by a sudden fit of giggles. If it wasn't her fingers that hurt, it was her legs. If it wasn't her legs that hurt, it was her mouth. If it wasn't her mouth that hurt? Well she was expecting her period in a few days so there was that.

Sandra stood and threw out her plate. She started to leave, but felt a burning sensation in her thighs as she walked. Her legs were chaffed and each step felt made her cringe. The skin on her thigh was being rubbed off as painfully as possible, one layer of skin cells at a time. She managed to make it back to the store without crying, a miracle in and of itself, and returned to her register.

“I can take who's next.”

Her next customer was a middle-aged woman with a silver ponytail and matching silk shawl. “Hello,” she said cheerily, “I need to make a return.” She put an opened box of Turkish Delights on the counter.

Sandra stared at the opened box for a moment. “I'm sorry, ma'am, but you opened it.”

“Yes,” said the woman with a confident nod. “I bought them to share with my neighbor. She's Armenian. But when we ate them, they tasted bad and she said they were expired.”

Hesitantly, Sandra turned the box over. The expiration date was stamped in a small font under the bar code. It was still fresh for another year and a half. “Ma'am, these aren't expired.”

“Yes, they are,” the woman insisted, “My neighbor said so.”

“Ma'am, see here? They're not expired. We can't take these back.”

“But they’re expired. You can’t sell me expired food in the first place.” A touch of poisoned concern slipped through in the woman’s voice.

“But ma’am, they’re not expired. You just didn’t like them.”

“No, my neighbor told me they were expired. She’s Armenian.”

Sandra rubbed the bridge of her nose and made the brief and spontaneous decision that she wasn’t going to tolerate an old lady’s lunacy for minimum wage. “Ma’am, if you went to a supermarket and bought an apple, then brought it home and took a bite out of it, then decided you didn’t like the taste and tried to return it, would they take it back?”

“Well no, but that’s an apple. These are expired Turkish Delights.”

“Ma’am!” Sandra said firmly, jabbing her finger on the expiration date, “These are not expired! You just don’t like them, which is fine. But you can’t return them.”

“Why not?”

“Because you opened them! Ma’am, we can’t resell these now! You purchased them from us at a certain price,” Sandra checked quickly. “\$5.99. You bought these from Homegoods for \$5.99. Then you took them home and opened them, that made them essentially worthless to us. Now you’re asking us to give you back the money for something that isn’t worth what you purchased it for.”

The woman scowled. “You’re being very rude, young lady.”

“And you’re trying to steal money, *ma’am*.”

“I want to speak to a manager.”

“Gladly,” Sandra sneered through gritted teeth. Her supervisor was closing a register at the far end of the long counter and Sandra enjoyed every step it took to get there. “Hey. Mary?”

she said quietly so as not to alert the customers, “There’s a lady trying to return an open food thing and she’s getting belligerent.” Mary sighed and followed Sandra back to the register.

“What can I do for you?” she asked the silver-haired lady.

“I just want to return these candies,” the lady insisted, pushing the open box across the counter for Mary’s inspection. “I bought them as a present for my neighbor. She’s Armenian. But she said they tasted expired so I brought them back, but this lady here won’t let me return them.”

Mary looked at the customer, then at the box of Turkish Delights, then back at the customer. Her face split in a grin so shit-eating, flies would have been jealous of it. “I’m so sorry, ma’am,” she said. “Do you have your receipt?”

Sandra’s face fell as the customer triumphantly produced her bill of sale and slapped it on the counter. Mary scanned it. The register blinked. The lady offered Sandra a smug smile as Mary handed her the money. “Why?” asked Sandra when the customer left. “She already opened it, we can’t resell this!”

“Sandra,” sighed Mary, “It’s six bucks. I don’t give a shit, the company doesn’t give a shit, and you shouldn’t give a shit. You’re on soft home tonight, why don’t you get started.”

Sandra repressed a deep moan. Soft home consisted of towels, hand towels, and bath and throw rugs, all sections of the store where customers felt totally justified in tossing around the merchandise, throwing the product on the floor to “see how it looked.” She went back to the throw rug aisle and her worst fears were confirmed. It was a disaster zone. If she left it alone just another hour, she could call up FEMA and get some goddamn relief money.

She fell to her knees, mildly grateful for the temporary break for her aching limbs, but it was short-lived as she started on the bottom shelf. All the rugs had to be folded with the fold facing

outwards. And she just had to do that several thousand times over the course of four full aisles. It was mindless work and it made her fingers crack. At a certain point, a group of three women joined her in the aisle. As Sandra watched in dismay, they began to squeal and jitter over a certain rug. Like beasts, they tore through the rugs and to get to the one they liked, throwing them all over the floor. They quickly decided that the rug didn't actually appeal to them. Sandra watched them with a cold glare, waiting for them to notice her.

"Oh!" said one of them after seeing her on her knees beside the rugs they'd dislodged, "I'm so sorry!" The sincerity in her voice was nonexistent. She didn't care that she had made Sandra's work more difficult just so she could take a closer look at a rug that she wasn't going to buy anyway. She wouldn't know about how exasperated Sandra felt, how she saw her work being ripped down.

"No problem," said Sandra, "It's why I'm here." She started cleaning up the mess the women left and bit her tongue. An announcement let her know that there were thirty minutes until the store closed and Sandra fought the urge to cheer. Unlike some of her previous jobs, the managers at Homegoods liked to get everyone out as quick as possible, so she would be allowed to leave only fifteen or so minutes after closing hours.

A few minutes later, the loudspeaker sparked on again. "Sandra to the office please, Sandra to the office. Thank you." Sandra stood and grimaced when she heard her knees crack from the sudden strain. The office was a small room, barely bigger than a janitor's closet, located behind the registers. It was always locked from the inside, so Sandra had to knock to be let in.

Mary opened the door for her. "Hey," she said, offering Sandra the room's only chair, "That lady from earlier filed an official complaint against you. She says you swore at her."

"Of course I didn't."

“Oh, I don’t care. I’m just letting you know. I have to send the complaint up to the regional manager.”

Sandra’s heart skipped a beat. “Why?”

“Just protocol. Trust me, nothing’s gonna happen.”

“Yeah, but doesn’t that make me ineligible for a raise for the next year?”

“No, only for the next quarter. Relax, Sandra. The lady was a bitch and everyone knows it. She pulls crap like that all the time. We’re all just doing our jobs.”

“If she does it all the time, shouldn’t we just stop her? Can we ban her from the store or something?”

“I guess.”

“Then why don’t we?”

“Because we don’t care, Sandra,” said Mary. “The only people who care in this store are the customers and they only care about themselves. The only people that care in corporate are the execs and they only care about their money.”

“Well duh!” Sandra felt lost, grasping at thin branches hanging off a steep cliff. “But there has to be something, right? Some kind of understanding where we sell them crap and they buy it? But one where we both hold each other to a standard? Like, if they get to treat us like crap and think they can rip us off, we should be able to call them on it!”

Mary looked at her for several seconds and Sandra wondered if the older woman was considering firing her then and there. Eventually, Mary waved her hand and turned her chair back to the computer. “Doesn’t matter, I just had to let you know. Go do a store check, we’re about to close.”

Sandra walked through the store, straightening out the shelves as she moved until her manager made the five-minute announcement. Unsurprisingly, the customers that were left ignored the announcement and continued perusing. Sandra hated them the most. All she wanted was to go home, to soak in a bath and have a hot meal. But these stupid, selfish people, they believed their spending was more important than her hard-won comfort.

“Excuse me,” she said as she approached an old lady and her clearly disinterested husband, “But we’re closing up. Please take your purchases to the front so we can ring you out.”

“Yes, yes,” said the woman, not taking her eyes off of the shelf, “I’ll be up in a minute.” Sandra was no longer in the mood to entertain the lady. “I’m sorry,” she said, “but we’re closing. If you don’t head up to the front now, we won’t be able to ring you out.”

“I’ll just be a minute. I just need to find a table runner.” Sandra said nothing, but she had never hated any singular person as much as she hated this woman. She wanted to grab the woman by the shoulders and shake her until she understood how she was making Sandra feel. She wanted to tip over the woman’s cart; she wanted to throw the woman’s husband through a window for nodding along with his wife, like she was completely in the right. She wanted to grab the woman’s face, look into her soul, and pour out all the hatred and pain she’d accumulated over the course of the day into the woman, let her have a taste of the constant stagnant existence Sandra was forced to experience every damn day. But she couldn’t do that. She’d be fired, and she needed the money.

Sandra walked to the front where some of the other employees were gathered. She squeezed past them to register 6 and waited for the old couple to finally, at long last, make it to the ring-out line.

“I can take who’s next,” sighed Sandra.

Waiting for the Pop

“You good?” The stage manager was one of the best I’ve ever worked with. He’d allowed me and the others to improvise as we saw fit and rehearse what we needed to pin down. But even the best stage managers feel panic on the night of the show, prompting them to ask annoyingly distracting questions like that one.

“Yeah,” I said as I stood up from the bench and tossed my towel into the locker behind me.

He nodded, his thick tuft of black hair bobbing. “You’re on in two.” My heart skipped a few too many beats for me to be comfortable with. I swung my arms around, stretching as he backed out of the locker room and my pacing session began. I let deep, stabilizing breaths fill my lungs.

Derek had been looking at his feet for the last ten minutes, getting into his zone. As I paced back and forth in front of him, his arm shot up and he grabbed my wrist. His grip was tight and calmed me down a bit. It wasn’t just a show of strength or intimidation; it was a promise that he was strong enough to catch me should I need him to. Slowly and without letting go, he stood up, his beady blue eyes a half-foot above mine. “You gonna get some?” he growled, bouncing lightly on the balls of his feet.

“I’m gonna get some,” I responded.

“I’m gonna bring it,” he replied, patting my chest. There was a knock on the door and Derek let go of my arm as I hustled out into the hallway. A black sheet at the end separated me from the mumbling of the crowd. I stood before it, looking straight into the cloth as I flexed each one of my muscles individually, preparing to use them all. When I was done, I bowed my head and closed my eyes so I could listen to the crowd. They were unhappy but excited, the last match must have been a good one, a tough act to follow. It was hard to get a lock on any particular voice, but the general tone let me know that, while the action had been tight, the villainous heel characters had won most, if not all of the matches that night. I’d been booked as a heel for my last few matches but I was going to lose.

Derek and I had only had to talk about it for a few minutes. We were two matches away from the main event, where some old pro who was a low-card, c-list player in the seventies was going to put over a local babyface, a generic good guy. There needed to be a few more face wins tonight and it made sense for me to lose to Derek. The crowd needed a good balance of satisfaction and disappointment. My only request was that it look tough and Derek agreed.

My music hit and I started rocking a bit. I’d chosen ‘I’m Ready’ by Aerosmith. If this was televised I would’ve had to pay royalties, but in a localized house show I was free to use any music I liked. The song began with an eerie harmonica segment that fit my hardass gimmick before erupting into a blues guitar riff. Just as the key changed, I stepped through the black cloth. The crowd around me screamed when I appeared and the lights hit my face. “Coming to the ring,” said the announcer, a girl I hadn’t met but sounded like she smoked more than a few packs a day, “Standing at 5’11”, weighing in at 210 pounds, from Montreal, Canada, Tristan ‘Grizzly’ Jones!”

Before me was a thin path made by cheap, wooden police barricades. There weren't many people, about three dozen, at most the audience was fifty strong, but they were loud and participated. The independent circuit has some devoted fans and they must have spread word that I was a bad guy because everyone was loudly booing and jeering. I made my walk down the aisle slow and deliberate, mostly ignoring the crowd to let them know I was better than them, stronger. When I got to the ring and slid in under the bottom rope, I punched the stage to test the suspension. It had a nice bounce to it, perfect for high-flying but tricky for big bombs. With an obnoxious smirk, I stepped close to the ropes and felt how taut they were.

Any jitters I had were completely gone. The crowd was reacting to me, validating my presence there. I had a purpose, a role. I was the bad guy whose very existence was an insult to the innocent audience.

My eyes scanned the crowd and I picked out a teenager with a ponytail who was giving me the middle finger. "Hey!" I snapped at him. "If you stick that finger up your ass, I'll give you a haircut! Make you look like a real man!" The crowd roared at my insult and I backed away from the ropes with a smug grin. The attack on his manhood with implied hyper-masculinity made the kid look like an innocent victim and me look like an utter asshole. For as much as I loved what I did, I would be the first to admit there was a fair amount of misogyny and toxic sexism baked into the industry's core fanbase. I growled for the crowd and they screamed obscenities back, a perfect dynamic for a heel.

My music cut out and I retreated into the far corner of the ring as Derek's music started up. It was 'Know Your Enemy' by Green Day. The loud snare drums and rhythmic guitars do well to get the crowd popping. Again, it must have trickled down the grapevine that he was the babyface because they erupted for him. He burst out of the black cloth as the announcer cleared

her throat. “Making his way to the ring,” she called into her microphone, “Standing at 6’5”, weighing in at 235 pounds, the Wingman!” My smirk became genuine. He was a big guy, but he just cleared six feet and weighed about as much as I did. But nobody was going to come to the ring with a measuring tape so for all intents and purposes the goody-goody Wingman was six-and-a-half feet tall and had an extra 20 pounds of muscle.

Derek had streamers on his arms and they flickered in the air as he ran down to the ring. His arms were outstretched both to imitate a plane and to high five the crowd. When he got to the ring, he slid under the bottom rope and tore off the streamers as he lifted his giant, muscled arms for the audience. They roared in approval and I pretended to snarl with derision. He stood at the ring posts and posed as the referee slipped in next to me.

“No blading,” he reminded me.

“Got it.”

Derek lowered his arms and sat in his corner glaring at me from across the relatively small ring. “The following contest is scheduled for one fall,” said the announcer.

“One fall!” shouted the crowd.

“Both contestants know the rules of this promotion.” Derek walked coolly halfway across the ring and tossed his streamers in my face. They streaked to the floor as I stood up and stood face-to-face with him. He was taller, but I made sure the ugly snarl on my face exuded my savagery. We stood with our foreheads nearly touching as the crowd responded to the sudden tension.

“Begin with a thirty-count grapple,” I muttered. My lips barely moved but Derek clearly got the message.

“Follow with a shove to the ropes and a clothesline?” he offered. I gave the slightest of nods and backed into my corner. Derek did the same and the announcer left the ring. The ref motioned to the timekeeper in the light booth while I kept my head up, waiting for the sharp ding of the bell. The sound hit my ears like a dagger and I lunged forwards, locking arms with Derek as we grappled. The crowd cackled and yelped as we pushed back and forth.

“Clothesline into a spear,” I said through grit teeth, “I’ll showboat and turn in a five-count.” In my mind, I was counting down the seconds. We had twenty seconds left in our hold, but the crowd response was already beginning to die down. If we kept up the grapple for the full thirty seconds, they’d start to get bored and we’d lose our momentum. I glanced into Derek’s eyes and he grunted. We had both been in similar situations and knew how to handle a restless crowd. I gave ten quick squeezes to his left hand, signaling to cut the grapple short by ten seconds, giving us only ten more seconds to plan out the next few beats.

“Spear into ground pounders,” said Derek.

“Counter into Nelson lock,” I agreed. Our time was up and Derek shoved me backwards into the tight ropes, I leaned back on them for a moment before using their elasticity to launch myself forwards. Derek stepped up to grab me and I held out my arm, catching him in the upper chest as I ran past. Derek fell flat on his back as I stumbled to the other side of the ring. To the crowd, I suddenly had the upper hand in our bout and they booed me relentlessly. I shrugged at them because there’s nothing worse than a bad guy who doesn’t get why people hate him. I counted to five, blew them a kiss, and turned around to catch Derek’s broad shoulder in my gut

as he delivered a flying tackle. The spear took us both into the mat which groaned and creaked as we hit it hard. The air rushed out of me but I made the pain appear more physical than internal. Derek quickly got to his knees to the delight of the crowd before he began raining down soft punches onto my head.

I brought up my hands to pretend to block his fists and waited for him to give me an opening. Within ten seconds, he rose slightly and raised his fist a little higher than before. Without missing a beat, I swung my body up and caught his arm in mine as I spun around his back, trapping his wrist painfully under his shoulder in the Nelson lock. "Tight!" he hissed in annoyance and I dropped his arm a few centimeters. He tried to reach for the ropes which, according to the rules, would force me to let him go within a five count. I pulled him away and into the center of the ring with a sadistic laugh.

The crowd was jeering me, but as the hold continued and I forced Derek to his knees, they began to cheer his perseverance. His face twisted in fake agony while I smirked and gnashed my teeth in victory. "Counter into a roll-up," Derek said as he lowered his head, "Kick out at one. Corner post for a body slam." I squeezed his wrist to let him know I was ready and he grabbed my ankle. My body fell back allowing him to roll over on top of me, covering my torso while my shoulders were down. The ref slid next to us and slapped his hand on the mat once before I pushed Derek off of me and spun off the mat.

"Four minutes," whispered the ref. I glared at him in annoyance and disbelief. We had four minutes to finish the match? How were we supposed to put on a real fight in four minutes? If I lost that quickly it would make me look weak and any potential scouts would disregard me for not being able to put on a longer show. I stayed down until I felt Derek's hand on the back of

my head and I stood up into a crouch. He threw me in the direction of the furthest ring post, giving me enough time to turn and face him before my head rammed into the steel pole.

His body slammed into me and forced me up against the padded posts. My back arched badly and I felt my spine crack a bit. “Four minutes?” murmured Derek as he backed away and hit me again to the crowd’s delight.

“I know,” I said, my mind searching for any possible solution. With such a short time, limit, we had to put on a more breakneck match, faster paced and with more big spots. Otherwise we’d both look like lazy, rank amateurs. Derek hit me with the body slam again and I grimaced. “Okay. Jump to the post, you hit and recover. I go for a swanton bomb; you counter into power bomb.” He frowned and subtly tapped the mat before hitting me with yet another body slam, reminding me of the makeup of the ring. “It can take it,” I assured him.

He backed up to deliver his fourth body slam, but I leapt up at the last second, bouncing on the third rope as he pretended to hit his head against the ring post. He looked dazed for a moment and stumbled back. The crowd started to call for my head. I balanced myself on the ropes and prepared to jump at Derek with the swanton bomb. I took aim and distinctly heard a young boy’s voice call “Don’t do it!” before I threw myself forwards, head first.

I did a full front flip through the air before Derek caught me like a pro, my legs going straight on either side of his head while he grabbed me by the lower back. I delivered a fake punch to his head, but he simply spun away from the post. He glanced up to make sure my chin was tucked before lifting me off his shoulders and crashing me into the mat. My back and shoulders hit first and I immediately felt the reverberating shock from the drop. The mat was thin and lightly padded, not thick enough to absorb the full force of the move. I could already feel the

bruise forming when Derek fell on my body. The ref slapped the mat twice and I once again rolled out of the pin. Derek glared at me in false annoyance.

“Pull up into a figure 4,” I said, “Rope break.” Derek’s false annoyance became real vexation but he didn’t have time to let the momentum die out. The crowd was loving this too much to let it go. He grabbed me by the hair and pulled me to my feet, but I quickly tripped him up and wrapped my legs around his, twisting his inner thighs and calves. With our legs good and mingled, I simply crossed my legs and locked in the figure 4 submission maneuver. He cried out and arched his back in excruciating pain. “Tap!” I shouted at him with a snarl, “Tap!” His hand shakily hovered over the mat as he writhed and the ref watched the hand closely. The crowd screamed for him, urging him not to submit and to endure for them. At just the right moment, he ripped his hand away from the mat and the audience erupted while he struggled to scoot towards the edge of the ring. Finally, he grabbed the rope and the ref tapped my hand, ordering me to release the hold. I kept my legs locked and pretended to glare at Derek sadistically. The viewers booed with some hot heel heat, my dirty antics making them hate me all the more. The ref tapped me again and I released the hold, not wanting the match to end with a disqualification. Derek dragged himself up the ropes and I backed to the other side of the ring.

“Three minutes,” grunted the ref.

Without any beats to go off of, we would have to improvise, gauging the crowd for good reactions. Derek rose, charging at me with a spear. I took the hit and fell back on the mat once more and steeled myself for his repeated stomps. He jumped lightly to shake the mat and make his strikes look stronger. I cringed with each hit and quickly rolled out of the ring under the bottom rope. The ref started counting me out slow as molasses. Derek sneered down on me from the ring and I looked back up at him apprehension, giving off the impression that I’d left out of

cowardice. The people loved it when I met Derek's eyes. We had three minutes left and I was carefully plotting exactly how to use it.

I backed up a bit and took a running leap at the ring. I slid in under the bottom rope and managed to get to my feet before Derek set upon me, forcing me into the corner for more body slams. "Camel clutch," he breathed into my ear, "Tap?"

"No," I said, "Lift up into a side slam. Pin for a two-count."

"Moonsault," said Derek, quickly catching on, "Pin?" He slammed back into me and the crowd cheered, but less this time. They wanted something new.

"Jackhammer."

Derek blinked as he hit me again. "You good for it?" He pulled back slightly to grin at the crowd, letting their cheers spurn him on.

"You bet. Make it hurt."

"Alright then." He dragged me out of the corner and threw me face-first into the mat. Before I could get up, he sat on the base of my spine, pulling my torso up between his knees and yanking my neck back with his arm. I winced as my spine bent at an unnatural angle, further hurting my upper back. The execution of the hold was applauded and the crowd demanded I tap to the move. Despite their cries, I withstood the pain and clenched my fists to show that I would not tap.

The hold continued and the ref slowly circled us. "Two minutes," he said. Derek grunted and reaffirmed his grip on me. He got off of my back, but kept his hold on my torso, lifting me into the air with his sheer strength. When I got high enough, I wrapped my hands behind his neck

and supported myself, taking a bit of the weight off his hands. Still, he didn't last long and quickly dropped me into the mat with another loud snap. Even when he was struggling, he managed to do the move perfectly and I landed on my mid back, keeping my fresh welts and bruises from hitting the ground too hard. Derek fell on me, hooking my leg into the air in a fluid motion. The ref counted to two and I managed to just barely push out, much to the crowd's disappointment. Still, they were excited. The side slam had been just what was needed to put them on edge. The Wingman wasn't going to make the Grizzly tap out, but he could still pin me.

With me on the ground, Derek picked me up and tucked my head against his shoulder. I snaked my arm around his neck, ready to lift myself and stabilize my body. He wrapped his hands around my waist and pulled my body up to his, causing me to rest vertically against his deltoids. We worked in tandem to lift me up to his shoulder. I had to keep my legs straight and my core tight to make it work, but it looked great and the roars from the crowd were surprisingly deafening. Had more people come in while we were fighting? Derek locked in the move and stomped around the ring to show off the jackhammer. It looked like he was holding me vertically above his body with nothing but absolutely inhuman strength. He called it 'the wingspan' to fit with his gimmick. It was a relatively standard two-person move, but it was far from easy. My abs quickly began to ache and my blood wasn't flowing to my legs properly. "Wait for the pop," I said, "Wait for the pop." As he continued to hold me, the crowd began to go crazy. How could he lift me for so long? Wasn't I over 200 pounds? He was straight up bench-pressing a 200-pound man only so he could slam him back into the ground! The pitch of their cheers began to peak and I tapped Derek's back to let him know it was time.

Derek paced to the center of the ring and roared with triumph into the crowd. He fell backwards and my body came tumbling down, slamming into the mat with the combined forces of his strength and the height he'd held me at. I took the fall hard.

There's a brief moment that veterans of wrestling like to talk about with newcomers. My trainers had each spoken to me about it at length. It's a moment when you land wrong or are hit badly and something snaps in you. The moment is your mind, they like to say, doing a quick body check-up and realizing that something went wrong. I'd never experienced it before, but immediately knew it when it happened. It felt like a leash being suddenly yanked on my mind, a rush of endorphins and other shock-suppressors. The pain that overloaded my nerves for a moment made selling the blow very easy. I tried to take a deep breath, but for some reason, my lungs wouldn't fully inflate. There was a dull but consistent throb in my shoulder. I tried to roll it back and my blood chilled in my veins when it stubbornly refused to move. The only results of my effort were a few twitchy arm flops against the mat. Remaining motionless, I took short, shallow breaths as Derek finally covered me and grabbed my leg. "Oh!" I whimpered when he leaned on my chest.

The ref hit the mat three times and I heard that blessed bell ring to signal the contest was over. Derek got off me to address the exalting crowd. After a moment, I slowly began crawling towards the edge of the ring. A spasm of piercing pain ran through my right side every time I moved and I could only drag myself with my left arm, but I needed to get out of the ring, give Derek his moment of victory. Clutching my side, I managed to roll out onto my feet and shot him a dirty look before I made my way back down the path. The crowd largely ignored me as they cheered Derek, but a few people took notice and made sure to let me know exactly what they felt about me.

My dad was waiting for me. He was in the crowd near the curtain. He must have just arrived, I hadn't seen him there when I'd come out. As I approached, he offered me a curt nod, more out of politeness than pride, which was pretty much what I expected. I didn't return it. I had to respect kayfabe, the universal and unspoken law of wrestling to sell the deception no matter the cause. I watched as his eyes descended to the hand still clutching my side and they grew wide with concern. Aww, I knew he cared.

As soon as I got behind the curtain, the stage manager was on top of me. "I saw how you landed, Jesus Christ kid, that was a helluva botch," he told me.

"Tell me about it," I grunted as he tested my arm's limpness.

"Ambulance is on its way." He pressed a cold ice pack into my ribs. I winced at the sudden chill and resisted the urge to back away. The roar of the crowd was still there. I was huddled away from the curtain and back to the locker room. The promotion's nurse was waiting for me there with a bag of rudimentary medical tools. He helped me lie down on a bench and gently felt my ribs. It felt like my entire side was bruised, but when he ran his hands over the center of my right ribcage, I was stunned with agony and writhed slightly.

"Broken ribs," he declared, "You'll need an x-ray to be sure."

"I can't breathe good," I rasped, trying not to expend the air in my half-collapsed lungs.

"Well," corrected the nurse. "You can't breathe well." Apparently the asshole was also an English teacher.

"And my arm?" He winced in sympathy as he gently felt around my right shoulder. It didn't hurt much, but it felt incredibly uncomfortable, my body knew something was wrong.

“Might be dislocated,” the nurse answered. I groaned. Dislocated shoulders were a common injury for wrestlers, but they occasionally masked more insidious conditions. Even if it was just dislocated, it would be a literal pain to pop it back into place. The locker room door burst open and I smelled the oil on my father’s jeans before he appeared above me.

“That looked like it hurt,” he said, concern and accusation mixing in equal parts in his tone. “Are you okay?”

“Broken ribs and a potentially dislocated shoulder,” said the nurse, “Ambulance is on its way.”

“Jesus Christ. How much is that going to cost?”

“Depends on your insurance. Not much they can do about the broken ribs except some painkillers. The shoulder is probably what’ll cost you.”

There was a knock on the door and I heard the stage manager’s voice. “Ambulance is here. They’re bringing in a gurney.”

“Yo!” I didn’t need to see Derek’s face to know his fear. He pushed past the nurse and leaned over me. “Are you okay man?”

I gave him a thumbs up. “Just took the fall wrong. Fell on my side. Broken ribs. Can’t breathe well. They’re saying maybe a dislocated shoulder.”

“Oh my God, man, I’m so sorry! I-I didn’t mean to-”

My hand stopped him. “It’s good, man, shit happens.” Injuries were just a part of wrestling, as was the profuse apology, no matter how sincere it might be. It was a matter of respect and responsibility, of comradery. “You did good out there.”

He cringed and I realized I'd put him in a bit of a bind. Protocol called for him to thank me for letting me win. But thanking a man for breaking his own ribs for you had a certain negative connotation and disrespect he wanted to avoid. "Nah man, it was all you."

"I think we had, like, a minute fifteen we could have filled."

"Assholes didn't tell us, the last match must have gone long. But you handled it great, I've never seen anyone read a crowd like that." He handled it well, like a pro. I almost laughed when I saw my dad glaring daggers at Derek behind his back. He wasn't a wrestler, of course he wouldn't understand the culture of respect that surrounded the industry, even to the most amateur of promotions.

The paramedics rolled in a gurney and Derek helped me onto it. My back was grateful for the relief from the bench. Fortunately, the show wasn't over and nobody was outside to see me rolled into the ambulance. That would have broken my character faster than any loss inside the ring. Dad got into the ambulance with me and clasped his hands together with mild worry as we drove off. I was strapped down, but every bump in the road reminded me of how awkward my shoulder felt. It was hard not to think about the unnatural sensation.

"When are you gonna quit this thing?" Dad asked with a sigh, "It's costing so much, you're getting hurt. Did you even get paid?"

I cursed. "I forgot to get my check. Do me a favor, call Derek and ask him to bring my stuff and my check when he comes to the hospital."

"What makes you think he'll come?"

“He’ll be there. It’s how it goes, dad.” Wrestling etiquette: you put a man in the hospital, you visit him, no matter how short or long his stay. Dad groaned and shook his head but took my phone and made the call while the EMTs looked me over.

Finally we arrived and I was wheeled in through the emergency entrance. I tried to tell them I wasn’t an emergency case, but apparently it was protocol so I let it go. The air of the hospital was crisp and clean, like a fresh apple that smelled like chlorine. It was a high contrast to the rank and fetid gym.

They left me alone on a table in a dark room and gave a me a quick x-ray. The doctor I saw was already positive that it was broken ribs, but wanted to make sure I hadn’t pierced my lung or anything. The lead vest was light on my chest and I bounced it off my pecs a bit during the scan. The results came in, the doctor seemed satisfied that apart from a few crushed ribs everything was fine. It also showed my empty arm socket. As weird as it felt having a dislocated arm, it was freakier still to see it.

The doctor determined I was well enough to stand on my own so I was able to walk to one of the general practice rooms. They’d given me a gown to wear after the x-ray, but I was still wearing my leg pads and boots which fetched more than a few odd glances. I made sure to try and catch anyone who was looking in the eye and give them a threatening growl. Kayfabe; had to keep up appearances. Dad walked behind me but I could sense his shaking head. When we got to the room, he helped me sit on the paper-covered cot. It was hard to lift myself with only one working arm. “So, you’re a wrestler?” said the doctor when he came in. “That must be fun.”

“Yeah, when stuff like this doesn’t happen.”

“Well, are you ready for this?”

I took a few deep breaths and cracked my neck. In my good hand, I clutched my thumb between my fingers. “Yeah. Let’s do this.” He had me lie down and stretched out my bad arm.

“What’s the phrase?” said my dad with a small smirk. “You go out on your back?”

“Not helping,” I told him. The doctor maneuvered my arm a bit. Whenever my bones reconnected, the uncomfortable sensations twisted into an ugly, deep pain. I took big, gulping breaths and tried to remember ever pain-dispersal technique I’d ever been taught.

“On three,” said the doctor, holding my arm almost perpendicular to my body. “One.” Without warning, he jammed my arm forward with enough force to abruptly slot it back into place. I both heard and felt a pop. To say the agony was indescribable would be an understatement. My vision briefly went white. I cried out but didn’t hear my own voice for a moment.

“Damn,” said my dad with a low whistle. The pain started to ebb away, but I still felt like I’d been stabbed. The doctor had me rotate my shoulder a bit. It was sore and I could feel a massive bruise forming just below the skin, but I sighed in relief to see I had control over my arm again. Satisfied, the doctor wrote me a prescription for pain killers that I was fortunately lucid enough to insist he give to my dad. Pill addiction was rampant in the wrestling industry and I wanted to make sure I didn’t get hooked. I was still dizzy from the mind-shattering pain spike, but I needed to think long-term.

Dad and I were getting ready to leave when Derek arrived with my gear and check. “Everything work out okay?” he asked nervously.

I felt his fear. There was no greater shame than potentially ending another wrestler's career. "I'll be good," I told him. "Doc says a few weeks on the bench though. I'll have to call up Jimmy and, you know, tell him."

"Jimmy's fair," said Derek with a confident nod, "He won't bump you."

"He better not."

"I'll put in a good word for you, man."

"Thanks, I appreciate it." We embraced and he handed me my check. I tried not to grimace at the number I saw on the byline.

Dad and I went to the car. He got in the driver seat and I sat next to him in shotgun. "Well, I hope it was worth it," he sighed.

"Definitely," I said. "I got hurt but muscled through it. Stuff like that's what gets you noticed."

Dad started the car and we drove in silence until we got to the freeway. "Sarah made spaghetti," he finally said, "But we have some steak in the fridge. I hear that's supposed to be good for bruises." I tried not to roll my eyes. My step-mother was a professional chef and only cooked at home when she had a bad day, meaning it was almost guaranteed that there was a fight waiting for me back at the house.

"I'm fine."

"No, you're not."

"Not tonight, Dad. Please."

The car slowed as we got near the exit ramp. “I don’t like it,” said Dad, “I don’t know if you realize this but it’s hard to watch that.”

“Wrestling’s fake dad, you told me that a million times.”

“But you’re not fake and neither is that mat.” I almost argued, but decided to pick my battles. I thought briefly of calling up Mom, but she was two states away and would give me the same lecture as Dad.

“Weren’t any scouts tonight,” I said, knowing he probably didn’t care.

“Yeah? I saw a girl with a clipboard.” I sat up slightly. Random audience members typically didn’t carry around clipboards and the ones that did were probably in the wrong place.

“Really?” I murmured to myself. We passed through the middle of a small town. On the green stood a stone statue of a soldier on horseback. The cavalryman had his sword stretched out before him, daring whatever unseen force waited for him. Watching him from a moving car window, even for just a few, brief moments, I couldn’t help but understand how he felt.

Confession

The ancient mahogany of the confessional booth always seemed fresher or somehow more vibrant in the spring. Just as Winter's numb world began to evaporate, the wood, carved with an ardent devotion and passion that could only come from unshakable faith in a higher existence, compressed ever so slightly to give it a warm, snug feel within. For a few brief weeks in late February and early March, just as Lent began and their guilt began to assuage them for already violating their vows of restraint, the parishioners were entreated to a confession that felt simultaneously comforting and punishing, a perfect combination to the average, semi-devoted Catholic. The tightness of the walls and stern voice of the priest behind the mesh window made for a makeshift squeeze machine to wring out the sins that had settled too deep for regular confession to excavate and to make such revelations all the more viscerally satisfying.

That is not to say that the booth was a standard confessional during the remainder of the year. It had been constructed in a woodshop in Rome at the turn of the 19th century, made from trees imported from Brazil, and had been paid for by a wealthy Vatican church. How it had managed to find its way to Ballyiffin in north-western Ireland was anybody's guess but the late Father Eion, who had bought it in 1971. Though whatever had possessed him to spend so much on a mere confessional was truly between him and the Lord. Eion had passed in the 80s' and it

was his longtime student and friend Father Partick Shay who now took confession in the confessional booth.

And take confessions he did, with a gusto and zeal that was commended by his clerical superiors and silently feared by the sinners who sat under his steeple every Sunday, sweating in anticipation through his mass. Shay was practically born to be a priest, his piety had never been questioned, but if there was ever a facet of his faith that he took some mild pleasure in extorting, it was the sacrament of confession. Despite having long since sworn off gossip, for it was the unleashed seed of envy, he was giddy to hear his congregation's secrets and sins. Particularly in those special weeks of Lent when temptation was all the more excruciating and the booth seemed as much a comfortable interrogation room as a place of private reflection. This was aided by the banal type of confession that came his way. For the most part, he accepted the admissions of the elderly who begged the Lord's forgiveness for infractions such as yelling at their nurses or thinking negatively of those who had already passed into God's embrace. But he was also fortunate enough to receive word from the town's mothers and the odd teenager who were at once eager and reluctant to relieve themselves of guilty burdens. If young McCormack stole a candy bar without permission, Shay would know about it come the Sabbath. When the married Smythe spent a late night working with his secretary and their labor became filled with sweaty gasps and moans, Shay was the first and only to know of it. By far the most scandalous thing to run through Shay's confessional was when Mr. Murphy ran over the Burke's dog and refused to admit to it.

Shay worked in the church all week, though he only gave sermons on the Sabbath. Still, he made it clear to anyone who listened to his sermons that his office, and therefore the office of the Lord, were always open to those in need. On a dreary Wednesday afternoon during the first

week of Lent, Shay was shining the silver crucifix, chalices, and candlesticks that had been passed down through the generations of the church.

“Father,” spoke a deep and solemn voice behind him, “I’ve come to confess.”

“Yes, alright,” sighed Shay, standing up and cracking his back a bit. He turned around and managed to catch a glimpse of a man in a grey sweatshirt stepping into the confession booth. His hoodie was up and Shay couldn’t see his face.

Shay settled comfortably into his side of the confession booth and cleared his throat. Almost subconsciously, he crossed himself. “You have something to confess?”

“Yes,” said the voice through the thick mesh wires, “It’s been a long time since I confessed. Years, actually.”

Shay frowned. “You’re not from around here, are you sonny.”

“The accent betrays me yet again,” the stranger sighed. “Yes, I’m American.”

“And what, may I ask, is an American doing in Ballyiffin? We’re not exactly suited for tourists.”

There was a brief pause wherein Shay could hear the stranger’s shallow, nasal breathing. “I needed to get far away,” he said, “Somewhere I knew nobody could recognize me and where nobody would ever see me again. So I hopped on a plane to Dublin, took a bus as far north as I could, and then just looked for the nearest church. And here I am.”

“Uh, very well.” Shay heard the stranger shift in his seat. The trepidation in the priest’s voice must have made the man uncomfortable. Shay silently chided himself for his weakness and took a deep breath. “What exactly do you have to confess?”

“Before we begin,” started the stranger, “I should warn you, this will take some time. It’s a bit of a story.”

“The Lord has time for all of us,” said Shay sagely, “and we must strive to mimic his patience.”

The stranger scoffed. He attempted to hide it, but Shay had the ears of a disciplined school teacher, capable of picking up even the most minor of infractions. He chose not to scold the stranger for his doubts, such penance would come later. “Very well. The last time I confessed was when I was eighteen, I think. It was before I went off to college, I figured I should get one last one out before I left. I think I confessed to masturbating and sneaking a beer.” The stranger paused in retrospective. “I have masturbated a lot since then so I guess that would be a good place to start. I’ve also lied, been envious, proud at times, most of the deadly sins. I don’t know if you’re hard on those things around her but where I grew up they were kind of a big deal.”

Shay folded his arms in front of him. “Lad,” he said gently, “you don’t go to a different country to confess to wanking.”

“You’re right,” said the stranger immediately, “That’s not what I need forgiveness for. I stopped confessing in college. There wasn’t a convenient way to do it and I just didn’t have the time or patience anymore. But it didn’t matter that much because I was a good kid. I drank occasionally, smoked weed now and again, but never went overboard and made sure I was never the drunkest person at a party. I was a, ah, political science major.” The stranger coughed. “Sorry. Um, so during my junior year, I decided to take a semester abroad. I think I wanted to get some real world experience, you know, pad out my resume a bit. I certainly didn’t want to travel the globe or anything like that. If it were up to me, I’d never leave the States. But for a semester,

I went to India. It wasn't my first choice, not by a long shot. My college didn't have association with any university there, but I had a professor who could get me an internship at the New Delhi local government. I would be working directly with and for public officials in the capitol city of one of the most important countries in the world. I couldn't pass up the opportunity."

The wood of the confessional creaked as Shay leaned back in his chair. He had never been to India. "So I packed my bags and headed over," the stranger continued, "I got all the proper paperwork, got all the shots, exchanged my money. I got myself a tiny apartment for cheap. The internship didn't pay though, so I knew my money wouldn't last. But for a little while, that was okay. The work I was doing in the city hall was great, really invigorating. It reminded me why I wanted to get into politics. For a while anyway. After the first month, I was friendless, nearly broke, on the verge of getting evicted, and had no time to get even a part-time job. Even if I had the time, there aren't a lot of jobs available in Delhi."

The stranger sighed and Shay could hear the distinct scratching sound of a fingernail across skin. He knew it well. "So that's the context," said the stranger, "I was looking for money. Literally, I would sometimes wander the streets during my free time and see if someone had dropped some change. And one day I was doing that and a guy came up to me, just a regular Indian man. He came up to me and handed me a letter, an envelope I should say. He told me if I delivered it to a certain address, he'd pay me my next month's rent. At the time, I liked to think of myself as, I don't know, incorruptible. But I figured if I didn't know what was in the envelope or what it was for, I couldn't be accused of anything. And I really, really needed the money. So I did it. I found the address, handed the envelope to the guy who answered the door. He thanked me and told me I'd be paid outside. I went out and there was the guy who'd given it to me,

waiting with the money in his hand. He was fanning himself with it, I think it was a hot day, even by India standards. He gave me the money, smiled, and left.”

Shay grunted. “We are not so much slaves to temptation as we are slaves to necessity. If you needed the money to be safe and secure, then the Lord can easily forgive you.”

“I’m not finished,” said the stranger. “Not even close.”

The air seemed to cool for a moment and Shay shivered. “Then continue, lad.”

“I didn’t see the man for another few days,” said the stranger. The concurrence of his response was almost alarming. “I went about my work, made sure not to think too hard about where I’d gotten the cash, and tried to just live my life. But about three or four days later, I saw the man I had given the envelope to. He was a security guard at the city hall. I was following an administrator into a court room that he was standing outside of. We made eye contact, he nodded at me, and then it was over. I didn’t think it mattered at the time, just a weird coincidence, but now I think he may have been, you know, scoping me out or something. Making sure I was up to code. After work, the man who had come up to me originally was waiting outside the hall. He took me to dinner, said his name was Sai. While we ate, he asked me about myself. I told him about growing up, going to school, that sort of thing. He seemed to like what he heard because after dinner he took me back to his apartment.”

“If I may,” Shay interrupted, “You just went with him?”

“I didn’t want to be rude. He was very friendly. Sai had this talent, this way of speaking to people, he could make them do just about anything. He was a liar, sure, but he was a good one. So yeah, I went back to his apartment. I met his girlfriend, Diya, lovely girl. I remember he had a hookah and we smoked a bit from it. We had to exhale the smoke out the window because

his landlord had a strict policy or something. We talked, just had a good time overall. Then he sent me home and I went to bed happy. The next day, he showed up at my work. He took me to lunch and listened to me complain about budgetary restrictions or some bullshit like that.”

“Language, lad!” chided Shay.

“Sorry. Anyway, after he’d listened to my problems, he offered to help me with a few of my problems, but I had to do something for him first. Nothing big, he said, just help delivering some things. I figured maybe he was moving. Didn’t matter to me at the time, I didn’t know the rabbit hole I was entering. After work he gave me a few envelopes. They were all marked with different addresses. He told me to just send them out in the mail within the next week. The addresses were to everywhere, there was one for China, one for England, the US, South Africa, everywhere. One was for just down the street from me, but Sai insisted it go through the mail. I had my suspicions, obviously, but they were already stamped, so the next morning I delivered them. The day after that was my day off, and Sai showed up at my apartment. He thanked me for the delivery and we spent the whole day together, just lounging around. He introduced me to Indian cartoons, I showed him Family Guy, we had a good time. At the end of the day, before I went home, I got up the courage to ask him what had been in the envelopes. He just smiled at me and stuck out his tongue. He had a tab on it, I could only assume it was LSD. I hadn’t even seen him take it. I got scared when I saw it. I’d delivered drugs for someone I barely knew in a foreign country where I knew firsthand how corrupt the legal system was. At that point, I decided just to go along with whatever Sai said because I was convinced that if I backed out, he could get me thrown in prison or killed. For the next few weeks, Sai would wait outside town hall for me and give me envelopes to mail. He said his mail was being watched so he couldn’t send them out himself, but he may have just been giving me work to keep me involved. Or maybe I’m just

being paranoid.” The stranger rattled off a deep sigh. Shay watched anxiously through the mesh as the dark shadow of his arm raised and touched his brow. “Occasionally, he would just show up at my place with money or drugs and we’d spend the day together, just hanging out.”

Abruptly, the stranger chuckled and tapped his knee. “What is it?” asked Shay.

“I just realized something. I never knew how he got my address. He just showed up and I never questioned it. For whatever reason, it must have seemed natural to me. Anyway, things continued for a few weeks and I had pretty much fallen in love with the way I was living. Sai was paying me pretty well just to use my mailbox and he always seemed to have weed on him. He was good to smoke with because he could just sit back and watch a stupid TV show or have deep philosophical discussions while stoned. It got to a point where we were pretty much smoking together daily and I was starting to shirk my internship duties. At one point he convinced me to trip with him and it was one of the most, ah, interesting experiences of my life. Not long after that, I was let go from my internship. I don’t remember why, maybe because I came into work smelling like California kush. But to me that just meant there was more time to spend with Sai. He introduced me to some of his friends, and we’d party with them pretty much constantly. I’d wake up in the mid-afternoon, deliver some drugs, and then meet up with the squad to smoke and chill until mid-morning when I’d go home. We went to see shows sometimes, peruse Delhi’s red light district, stuff like that. When the semester was up, I decided to stay in India for the summer as well. I was making good money, after all, and I didn’t want to leave my friends, I didn’t want to leave Sai. One day, he took me along on house calls with him. We loaded up a bag with all the drugs we could find in his apartment and then went out to all his usual buyers and sold them. I was nervous, walking around with an entire pharmacy on my back, but Sai seemed calm so I tried to keep calm too. After that, I guess he thought I was ready for

bigger things. A few days afterwards, he brought me on a second walk-along, this time to meet some cops in a park. I panicked when I saw their uniforms and thought we'd be jailed for sure, but they just shook Sai's hand and he discreetly gave them some money rolls. He introduced them to me as 'Officer 1' and 'Officer 2.' They kept their badges covered the whole time we were there. We were bribing police officers like we had them on retainer, like it was no big deal. And as soon as I learned we were safe from them, I went right along with it."

Shay started patting himself down as the stranger spoke, looking for a piece of paper or something to write with. He had a pen in his robe pocket and, failing to find anything to write on, began scribbling on the side of the confessional. Drug dealing, he wrote, sloth, greed, lust, bribery, excess. "We took care of a few more cops that day, just paid them off and were on our way. At one point, Sai told me to stay back, that he needed to deal with a particular cop himself. It didn't matter to me at the time, I was drunk off of not getting arrested and also from a few beers I'd had earlier. We went home and did what we usually did for the rest of the night. But the next day, Sai texted me, telling me to stay away for a bit, to stay home and not talk to anyone. The weed had only made me more paranoid, so I completely freaked out. I hammered my door shut and locked my windows and spent the whole day wrapped in a blanket thinking of doomsday scenarios. It was horrible. At times, I thought I had mistakenly taken acid and started hallucinating. I decided to pop a Xanax and go to bed early. Later, Sai broke into my apartment. He stuck a saw in the frame and cut through the wood. He woke me up and, after he calmed me down, he told me what was going on. Apparently, there was a new policeman from out of Delhi. He'd moved his entire family to the city to take the job. Sai had tried to pay him off on his third day, but that had been a mistake. The officer was still idealistic, incorruptible. He needed to be taught a lesson, Sai said. We smoked and drank a bit and then Sai got a text. He got us moving,

got us out of the apartment. He took me to a part of the city I'd never been to before. It was dirtier than the rest, all the buildings were low to the ground and spaced apart. As we walked, Sai smoked me up and told me what a fun night I was going to have. We walked for what felt like forever. I remember my feet hurt so much. Sai might have been walking in circles, trying to confuse me, but eventually we got there." The stranger stopped speaking for a moment and took a deep, shaky breath. The reverberation around the confessional made Shay intimately aware of the stranger's rattling vocal cords. "He took me into an alley. Our friends were there, all hunched over something I couldn't see. Then one of them, ah, stood back and I saw her. It was a girl, maybe seventeen or possibly younger."

Shay's hand stopped writing on the confessional. The pen's tip wavered slightly in his fingers, although his knuckles remained firm and unmoving. Perhaps it was the enclosed wood of the booth, but the priest could swear that he could hear his own heartbeat, or maybe that of the stranger. Shay gulped and closed his eyes, withdrawing his hand back into his lap. "They'd already beat her," continued the stranger, "I wasn't a part of that. They'd done her up good though. She was all bloody and torn up, it looked like they'd taken a knife to her face or something. I think her legs might have been broken because she wasn't able to move much. Sai took me forwards a bit so we could see her better. It was still dizzy from the Xanax and the weed, but I could see that she was naked and recently fucked." Shay's mouth was too dry to remind the stranger to watch his language. "Sai took off his pants and fucked her, right in front of me and everyone. I was sort of in shock and just watched. I don't even know if the girl was still conscious after the beating she took. I sort of hope she was. When he was done, Sai got off her and told me it was my turn." The stranger stopped and Shay silently prayed he was done, begging and pleading with the highest of high that the stranger would just shut up and leave. "I

did what he told me. I got my dick out and got as hard as I needed to and got down there and got inside her. I tried not to look at her face but it was so horrible I couldn't really look anywhere else, like a car crash, you know? Eventually, she opened her eyes and looked at me. I didn't know if she had woken up or if her eyes had just been closed the entire time. She didn't say anything, she may have been concussed or had a broken jaw for all I know, but she just looked at me, trying to blink blood out of her eyes. Everyone around us was laughing and cheering. My heart was beating so fast, I was convinced I was going to have a heart attack. I raped her for a few minutes and then faked that I was done and got up. Apparently, I was the last one because once I had my pants up, Sai started to lead everyone out. As we were leaving though, I was at the back of the group and I heard something behind me. It was a cough, just a cough, but it was a sign of life. The girl was alive. She was alive and knew my face. I was still high and not thinking right, but I knew I didn't want to go to jail. So I turned around, nobody noticed that I'd broken off from the group. I turned around and went back to her and I-

Shay wheezed slightly. The stranger stopped speaking and Shay's heart skipped several beats as he felt the man's head turn to look at the wood dividing them, the sole barrier separating a man of deep faith from what could only loosely be called a man. "Should I stop?" asked the stranger, "I have more to confess." Shay desperately tried to speak, to yell at this creature, this nightmare who had brought these sins to his confession. But his mouth was dry, all he could muster was a weak gurgle that sounded more like a burp. The stranger rocked back and forth on the chair, making the wood give off a natural creak. He took Shay's silence as a cue to continue.

"I strangled her. She couldn't live and give us up to the police. I sat on her chest, I'd read somewhere that it would make it harder for her to breathe. Then I wrapped my hands around her neck and just squeezed. It's funny, in the movies choking people out takes, like, thirty seconds

tops. In real life, she held out for quite a while. I even squeezed the sides of her neck, you know, the jugulars, to cut off the blood to her brain. She tried to struggle a bit, but she was too weak and tired to stop me. It took almost five minutes, I think. Time works differently when you're high. But eventually, she stopped breathing. I got off her and wiped her blood off my hands. As I was leaving the alley, I ran smack dab into Sai. The group had realized I was gone and he'd come back to find me. I think I was in shock at the time, but I was touched he'd been so considerate. We went to a bar a few blocks away, a place I hadn't been before, but I memorized every step I took from that alley until I found a beer in my hand. Once I had a few sips and calmed my nerves, I asked who she was. Sai laughed and told me she was the daughter of the policeman, the incorruptible one who needed to be taught a lesson. We spent the rest of the night in denial, or at least I did. We drank and then went back to my apartment and smoked there. Before I knew what was really going on, he'd left and I was alone. I was all set to go to bed and never think about the girl for the rest of my life, but then I realized I'd left her body in the alley. It was full of evidence, DNA that could tie all of us to the scene. And since she was a daughter of someone on the force, I assumed our bribery wouldn't cover her investigation. I started to freak out again, thinking of what I would do if I went to prison. That's when I saw the saw, the one Sai had used to break into my apartment. He must have left it there when he'd come to get me. I grabbed the saw and some trash bags and ran through the street like a crazy person. I ran to the home of one of Sai's friends and woke him up to ask him where the alley was. I had been too high coming home to remember the street layout. He was annoyed at being waken up, but he told me where to go. When I left, he gave me a funny look, a look that threatened me. I think he sort of saw me as a liability. Anyway, I ran back to the alley and the girl's body was still there. I'd sobered up a bit at this point, all the running had burned some of the chemicals out of my system,

so I threw up when I saw the body. I was lucky to have all those trashcans with me, otherwise I would have left more evidence at the scene. Once I was done, I took a deep breath and just got to work. I splayed out her limbs and started with her arms. The saw cut through her muscles like a hot knife through butter, but I had the really work to get through the bones.” Shay braced himself against the far side of the confessional. He covered his ears, but could still hear the stranger through his hands. “Her legs were tougher, more meat, I guess, but the whole thing took me all of twenty minutes. Her head was hard to cut. I knew it’d be easier to carry, but I guess I didn’t really think of her as dead yet. In my mind she was still a person, not a corpse. But removing her head kind of made it real for me. I had to stop and cry a few times, but I got it done. When she was in pieces, I put each limb in a different bag. I got a rickshaw cab, they never ask any questions, and had it take me to the Yamuna River. When I got there, I tied the bags to cinderblocks and dropped them in at different places along the docks. I don’t know where in that process I decided to leave India, but when I got back to my apartment, I started packing. I changed my clothes and burned the ones I’d worn to kill that girl in my bathroom while I finished up. I took all the money I’d gotten from the drugs and got on the next, cheapest plane to the States. I threw out my phone at the airport.”

Shay had his entire face pressed against the wood in a vain attempt to block out all noise and reality. At the moment, the stranger seemed either oblivious or unconcerned with the priest’s disquiet. “I’ll never forget coming home. My parents were so surprised and happy to see me. But when they hugged me all I could think about was that girl and how she’ll never hug her policeman father again. After that, my life went back to normal. I re-enrolled in college and graduated. I got a job, moved up in the world, did things. Never went back to Asia, though. And I never want to be in contact with Sai ever again. But sometimes I still think about what I’ve

done and I decided that somebody needed to know. So I came here, as far from my life as I can.” The stranger stopped. Shay was hyperventilating and sweat fell off him, fully saturating his stole. “Tell me, father,” said the stranger softly, “Can the Lord forgive me for my sins?”

Shay had been dreading this, the moment of forgiveness. It was a sacrament of his faith, a literal sacred duty to spread the love and forgiveness of God to as many people as would ask for it. “I...” He had to, he had no real choice. To deny a sinner forgiveness was to spit in the face of Jesus and ignore all his teachings. “The Lord...” His heart, it hurt, it was beating too fast and yet not pumping enough blood. The edges of Shay’s vision darkened and he braced himself against the confessional. Its wood held firm under his weight and grip, though he could have sworn he felt it splintering into his skin. “To forgive...” Bile rose in his throat and he swallowed it back down by instinct.

The stranger bent his head, the shadow casting across the mesh and Shay quieted in trembling apprehension. “My God,” prayed the stranger, “I am sorry for my sins with all my heart. In choosing to do wrong and failing to do good, I have sinned against You, whom I should love above all things. I firmly intend, with the help of Your grace, to sin no more and to avoid whatever leads me to sin. Our Savior, Jesus Christ, suffered and died for us. In His name, my God, have mercy.” The pray of contrition, the plea of millions of Catholics to their local vicar to keep their irresponsibility from staining their eternal souls. In the stranger’s mouth, it sounded monotone and repugnant. But it was official. By practice of the church, there was only one way for Shay to reply.

In a sense, the restrictive order of his duty helped him wet his mouth. He had order, a formula to follow and fulfill. “God the Father of mercies,” Shay managed stammered, “through the death and resurrection of His Son, has reconciled the world to Himself and sent the Holy

Spirit among us for the forgiveness of sins. Through the ministry of the Church, may God-" he paused. Shay's hands were shaking like he had old man Murphey's Parkinson. "Give you pardon and peace. I-" he had to stop again. He panted hard, reaching around blindly because for some reason he thought there might be a paper bag he could breathe into. "Absolve," he managed to choke out, "I absolve you from your sins, in the name of the Father...the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy...the Holy Spirit." Shay practically spat out the last few words, sputtering and gasping as the divine words of clemency did their part to wash the impurity from the stranger's spirit. The prayer of absolution was completed.

The stranger sighed in what Shay assumed was some manner of relief. "Amen," said the stranger.

Typically, Shay would mimic the words, but his throat failed him. He was also supposed to instruct the now-cleansed sinner to 'go in peace,' but he merely flailed his arm in some imitation of a dismissive wave. Regardless of its feeble intention, the stranger stood up, adjusted his hoodie, and stepped out of the confessional. Shay immediately pressed his ear against the door to the booth, listening intently for the distinctive smack of the stranger's trainers on the tile floor of the church. The footsteps lessened as the stranger reached the carpeted aisle, but Shay closed his eyes and took shallow breaths to hear better. When he lost track of the stranger, he simply waited for a minute. Then he waited five more just to be certain. Then he waited another five minutes because he didn't feel prepared to leave the booth yet. For the moment, the stained wood that separated him from the outside world contained all of his sin. Under such strange circumstances, Shay knew what it felt like to be trapped in Pandora's box. Unfortunately, there was no way to keep the box locked forever, and Shay hesitantly pushed open the door to the booth. Stepping out, he was relieved to feel the cold floor, solid and affirming beneath him. It

only occurred to him when he softly closed the confessional behind him that he had forgotten to assign the stranger a number of prayers to say. It was no matter, he figured, there were no amount of Hail Marys that could atone for such sin.

And where did that put him? Shay doubted the confessional oath of secrecy had ever been so tested. Shay took his time walking to the center aisle of his humble church. He had spent decades caring for it and its congregation, keeping the crucifix gleaming, the pews dusted. And now it felt as though all those years of work had culminated in some manner of test, one which he had failed. Turning dutifully, Shay faced the cross atop the altar and fell hard on his knees. The metal figurine of Christ had his head on his shoulder, staring somberly into the distance, as if too abhorred to offer Shay his gaze. "Lord," whispered Shay, throwing himself on the ground and surrendering his body to the earth, "Forgive me."