

Nesting Dolls

by
Hunter Watkins

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Degree of Master of Fine Arts in the Department of Literary Arts at Brown University

Providence RI

May 2026

This thesis by Hunter Watkins is accepted in its present form
by the Department of Literary Arts as satisfying the
thesis requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts

Date _____

Laird Hunt, Advisor

Approved by the Graduate Council

Date _____

David Lindstrom, Dean of the Graduate School

Acknowledgments

After Laird Hunt, my cohort, my dear friends at Brown, and the city of Rochester NY, this manuscript owes a debt to many books, some of which include: *The Recognitions* by William Gaddis, *Infinite Jest* by David Foster Wallace, *Cassandra at the Wedding* by Dorothy Baker, *A Brief History of Seven Killings* by Marlon James, and *Gravity's Rainbow* by Thomas Pynchon.

“[History] . . . does not refer merely, or even principally, to the past.”
- James Baldwin

“ . . . but I’m the closest thing I have to a voice of reason.”
- Gil Scott Heron

”If that's the way she feels about it, why doesn't she just end it all?’
Oh, no. Not me
I'm not ready for that final disappointment.”
- Peggy Lee

“‘Scream,’ I calmly ordered myself.”
- Clarice Lispector

“You’re dead,
but look who’s talking.”
- Franz Wright

Everything has already happened. It sits there like a present, waiting to be unwrapped.

When the night opens, step inside.

For some people, hearing a language they don't know is like running an empty blender: just a noise. Like the grinding teeth sound of a car over gravel. Pleasant as birdsong. Or merely another aural hiccup melding into the soundscape: wind on trees, mic feedback, footsteps on pavement, a shallow voice at opera lessons.

But for me there's a sadness, quiet like most sadnesses are. I feel it spreading, reaching toward all my inside spaces, invading with liquid inevitability: a spilled drink on a table, intent on the edge, the closest towel rooms away.

So many methods of communication I do not have. I speak, and you hear running water. I'm just here, bathed in limitations. Although, I'm not adept at heading off or resolving miscommunication in languages I do speak. Wouldn't it be easier to exchange thoughts? But I guess if we do that shouldn't we just exchange feelings? Shake hands with our thoughts? If I gesture enough, draw with a stick in the sand, paint you a picture, make mating spiders of our hands, cook dinner together, fetch water together, set a glass just right so the sunset is captured inside, unearth vegetables from the purest soil, shake spears at each other, throw them down, interpret each other with any sort of charity at all. We could develop our own language over time. 6,000 languages or something on earth. 6,000 known. Right now. Current. Those are just the ones counted.

My approximation of your own approximation of your own approximation. Maybe I misread you or you misread yourself. Nevermind the exponents involved with my reply.

But this is what we have. Limits of language. All interpretations are misinterpretations, the best only ever getting close, the least accurate translation being the one between thought and

speech. If only I could read you. If only the deeper parts were as plain as the pages on your face; if only there was a trapdoor we could take to bring us to the end. Ignore my face, my hands, my posture. Here, this is what I'm trying to say:

You have a god's-eye view. Perhaps Hermes. In all cases, a fool.

Picture New York.

See, I can tell you're thinking of New York City. We're going to exchange that indelible skyline for one with more shapes. Head upstate. Not Yonkers, and no, not White Plains. North. North. Over and beyond the eldritch allure of the Catskills. Over abandoned psychotropic government testing facilities. Over religious cults old and new. Centuries of history acknowledged only by the names of small towns. You are a specter, high above glaciated terrain, listing NW toward Toronto.

. . .

You're really getting the hang of it now; it's hard to not make those whooshing sounds.

Binghamton,

Ithaca,

Geneva.

Your vector descends around Fairport, just before Rochester. There's a lot of air traffic since we're right by the airpor—

No!

Look, you can't just panic like that. You're going too fast and I can't help you . . . But it's not your fault, that 15-ft-tall top hat in Abraham Lincoln Park is easy to miss.

That's alright. Keep swimming past the largest collection of swans you've ever seen, just beyond Irondequoit Bay and into Lake Ontario proper . . . make a right. Wave hello to Cass over there on the wall of rocks. Head over to the dock with the unfaded rainbow flag, the one with the driftwood groundhog. Wring yourself out; you're too soaked to hover, nevermind fly. Leave your

grievances about my letting you trip over Abe right there, flop them right on the dock. If you want them back, the Toronto Waterfront is just that way.

Alright, now shimmy on up to that west-facing window. See that woman idly trying to twirl her hair even though it's not long enough anymore? Yeah, that's M. She's talking to her audience, don't worry. Trust me, it's live, there are people watching right now, just from another direction. What do you mean, it doesn't feel right? It's a performance, we're not dropping eaves, honest. I'll see you around. Stay for the sunset if you can.

7 April 2023

“Dream to me. Lend me your ghostwords. Ladle some mind into my lead cup. Rewatch the nativity of your soul. A fine pointilist from a detached realm reaches out, and we are all mere scenery. But right now, I am that bitch.”

That's how it always starts: a voice on rails, flat and inevitable. Flat, yet glittering—the sound that's absent as you travel through space. There have been several attempts to amputate or alter that last line in the decade M has been what could technically be referred to as a professional poet. Much of M's early stuff has a comedy/empowerment angle absently influenced by *Brain Funerals*, a tv show co-created by M's older and only sibling, E. And sure, some of the early stuff is juvenile as an attempt at broad appeal; well, broad in the demographic of her projected viewership. The first poem M ever spoke into the hearth of the monitor started:

Philately: the collection of stamps

Fellately: the collection of blowjobs

The webcam was given consent from the chin down that first time, and has never—excluding special very-high-dollar donations—had access to anything above the tapered

ends of M's accidental smile; laughing at your own jokes seems permissible when you're paid for both the joke and the laughter.

Eight years on, M is still faceless to almost all watchers.

If and only if asked, M usually tells people she works as an accountant (no one had even bothered to ask where at yet); poet often brings the question: "How can I read your stuff?" And there actually are plenty of places to watch or read M's work—even some legitimate publishing-house-approved writing. People all over the world fall asleep nightly, as an example, to a spliced edit of M's epic poem, *The Gaeaiad*, that took up over two years of airtime and runs just over thirteen hours.

Much of the content from the early days, now scrubbed from the internet, is topless. Cass pointed out that it was nothing to be ashamed of, and that, after all, how many pornstars have successfully transitioned into public and fully-clothed careers? Even then, the nascent footage is mostly snippets of a headless Emily Dickinson as filmed by Mapplethorpe . . . and the penetration is cerebral rather than orificial . . .

So, why faceless?

Her intro has become a signature, a tone-setter, a way to dim the lights in acknowledgment of showtime. It is, most unfortunately, a bow to a self's previous version, the will of her fans, and, worst, E's influence. Alas, the patrons have spoken, so no changes to the opening were ever kept. And although her viewers are not necessarily Medicis, they serve the same function.

Requests for purchasable items over the last decade range from jars of flatulence and bathwater to focused degradation to somatic detritus—nail clippings and hair—to used clothing to simple topic solicitations. M could make a lot more money with an investment in mason jars

and dominatrix training, but it's not worth the contemplation of the buyer's state of mind, and it would rather shatter the self-image of her profession.

Mostly then, M sticks to subject suggestions for little poems and stories, and tries, with great difficulty, to not think too much about the inner-life of what she presumes to be her predominantly-male audience. One of the things in the fine print of the active imagination is that empathy is largely non-consensual.

At the end of every standard workweek, M holds a topic auction where the rights to next week's story subject are sold; and buyer beware, your winning theme can be vetoed without reason, leaving your bid to be resigned to a donation.

This week's crying was won by and awarded to a subscriber whose name is probably on the cave wall of the first online chat room, an ancient variation of a family moniker, inescapable since anonymity began courting the internet: poopballoon. But, for \$523, M doesn't mind seeing and saying the name briefly, which in the worst case will elicit an eye-roll from the remaining subscribers and whoever else ends up hearing it without M's permission. There was a lone word attached to the bid: time. So, M hefted the Sailor-Mercury-guarded (a figure sent to M's P.O. box by a fan (M checked, it's not bugged)) stack of miscellany from off her desk, and began sorting twelve years of her brain chronologically.

Longtime viewers had watched the collection grow from the seeds of board game score sheets into the four-foot mound it was last week. Cafe napkins and loose yellow-pad pages gave the pile a deckled edge. It was fun trying to decipher the work of people she had been. Cass would walk by M cataloging and hear things like "woah, easy there, Thesaurus-Rex," and "I really took a sleeping bag and crawled up my own ass here," a sign Cass interpreted as artistic improvement. The exercise was best when M couldn't remember the genesis of a thought. Then

she could be her own archaeologist, excavating herself, discovering lost artifacts, digging up a forgotten lineage.

On a whim of gentle mania, M nailed the brain journal to the walls of what Cassandra called the coffin apartment, long since abandoned as a guest room due to its bed-frame-sized dimensions. ‘It’s like walking around my mind,’ M said. Cass noticed that all of the notes were unfolded or loose or could use some ironing, but thought better of any quips about it. She loved seeing M shimmer with enthusiasm or self-discovery or whatever it was, and had been careful to not derail the mood.

Cass and M have a cup of tea every night, sitting in the same big chair, sipping the same chai black tea—a ritual, their friends assured them, performed mostly by those in the later stages of life. They unwind together, M and Cass, no matter how murderous the feelings they have toward each other from the rest of the day, and gradually remember how soothing they are to each other. After, Cass usually goes to sleep so she can wake up at typical workplace hours and M toils away in whatever is normal for, Cass supposes, a South Korean time zone.

Sometime between the last and penultimate sip of her tea that night, Cass was distracted by the four painted nails on M’s left hand as it absently scrawled exponents of exponents from the inside of her thigh to her knee. Each nail a tiny universe, filled with darkness and sparkles. Cass took a moment to stargaze, identifying constellations no one else on-world had seen. It felt special. And then it didn’t. “The totality . . .” Cass said without intention. M’s smile was so genuine and unplanned then that Cass could feel the room’s temperature shift, but the smile itself was a question.

“Total solar eclipse. And we will be in the perfect middle of it. Next year we are swallowed. Plunged into complete darkness.”

“That’s good, I’m bored of flirting with it.”

“I have the perfect spot, we won’t even have to trample any tourists.”

“Shame, I just got us that brontosaurus costume.”

Cass rawred softly and kissed M three times in a line from the third eye to the lips. “Time to sleep. Come to bed at some point.” M made a gesture that was like *well, duh*. “We know how you get. I love you. Night.” Cass was happy to be sleepy, to be out of that tomb, surrounded on all sides by M’s mind heap, enclosed by the shed skin of an epistolary serpent, pure asylum wallpaper.

The raindrops on the window lend a convexity that makes the sunset look painted in watercolor. It’s camera-worthy, but the show, and M, must go on.

“Also, just as a reminder—since I’ve received some chirping recently—if I use a word you don’t know it doesn’t mean that you’re stupid or that I’m pretentious. Let’s not allow our insecurities to drive. Just because I know what prestidigitation means doesn’t also mean that I’m a magician. This is all theater. And I care for my OED the way some people care for their well-pedigreed dogs. You always have the liberty to consult your local search engine. As in the past, I will provide definitions. Or maybe not. Depends on incentive¹.”

The green screen she performs in front of has been around since an inflection point eight years ago, purchased on recommendation from an industrious fan as a way to further monetize M’s efforts. The background, unlike the weekly theme, is a daily stimulus her fans can bid on;

¹ Hey, hi. E again. I shut up there for a while, but the wankery was just sort of interminable. Still finding ways to entertain myself. My mother, while she lived, was always asking—empathetically I think—why it was so hard for me to just not talk. We’d always have this duet of voices rising in response to each other, building a sonic pyramid. At its tip, we’d pop, lose our straight faces, and laugh together as she hugged me. I’m omniscient now, so I’m not getting less talkative. Since you’re not going to be able to provide much incentive for M, I’ll give you everything gratis. A lot of people when they encounter M’s work reach for the word pretentious. But it’s mostly because of the—as my 4th grade English teacher called them—ten dollar words. Prestidigitation is like stage magic. To get ahead, a sinecure is just a plush job that doesn’t require much work and osculate means kiss. The rest is either figureoutable or doesn’t matter much. Here’s a reminder though that you have a will.

today's winner is Caravaggio. M was thinking about how no one can be trusted in Caravaggio's work when a follow-up message came in: "It doesn't matter which painting you pick, you're in all of them." Her donators tend to express themselves in rather serial-killery riddlespeak.

M employs a number of meaningful pauses throughout the production where a viewer is meant to reflect. M likes to imagine her subscribers lighting up, taking a long drag, and saying "Damn, that's deep," not quite able to stop themselves from an exhalation of smoke. The reality is probably closer to alt-tabbing to whatever social media they're currently addicted to, and with one hand available. But the fantasy is cheap; it doesn't matter what the viewer does so long as M has a minute to suck on mints and take a few sips of mysteriously-infused water to combat the cottonmouth.

The Caravaggio slideshow shuffles to a painting of a boy holding a head he (presumably) severed. The boy holds the head by its hair like a trick-or-treat bucket.

M sees Cass in the doorway and smiles *hey*. Sand from the folds of Cassandra's pants provide a little breadcrumb trail to the side of M's desk where there's a spot marked off with an X of tape so Cass can get as close as possible while still being off-camera. Cass places a hagstone and a note on the edge of M's table and, now walking backward, signs "for my favorite witch." M pretends to cast a spell and Cassandra is gone.

M reads the note aloud to the fans: "And the magi are cunning to conceal their frauds . . . This week's material was salvaged off the wall from as many years and mindsets as possible. Lines were plundered, in one case, from between a note on Gene Tierney's sunglasses and an invective of those men who, in some priapistic cry for help, post underwear pictures on social media where they are very clearly trying to fool us into thinking they are not at the very least semi-erect. Obviously, some new work needed to be used to glue the rest together, but, even so,

the result may be a little nonsensical given the method of production. Further, tonight's reading is probably going to run longer than usual . . . and I might not be able to post next week, contingent on the number of familial deaths." All of this is said with an abnormal grin in M's voice, many of the subscribers note.

"The Tower of Babble is now broadcasting. I-self and every other jockey out there transmitting to you pseudonymously, though I believe most of us are addicted to being someone else.

"And I can't write fiction anymore because I feel like an intruder in the life of all the characters. I wear just the skull of a dearly departed name and wonder why it's still tight on my brain. My blood itches. Some inferior iteration of me is in here, zombie-crawling around my veins. Splashing around. Its eyes, those of a crocodile, hovering just above the water, stalking my mistakes.

"I'll allow myself the sinecure of my mind. When I reach deep into my hand, what materializes could be a dream, but turns out to be a memory. Here comes my dad, finally home from work, an imminent victim of the Freudian banana peel—well, Freudian skydive really—as he asks my mom: "Were you reproductive today?"

"Keep in mind that fan is short for fanatic. I am not your friend. I'm not even your imaginary friend. You have a photogenic memory, but history's too long for a happy ending. Take a moment to osculate oblivion before you resume your nostalgia..."

It goes on and on like that for a while. Sometimes it makes sense, and sometimes it's even poetry. The tempo quickens the longer M speaks. Faster and faster—a boulder that's loosed by the foreshock of an avalanche, descending down the mountain, rolling rolling faster fasterfaster.

M can't quite keep the anticipation of an earlier call from her tone. It was a summons. An invitation to watch E die².

² Goes without saying, the invitation extends to you.

Erie Canal Draining, 2005

The insectile skittering of cars two bridges up the canal, the nearest bridge for some reason inactive this morning.

Leaves like yellow teardrops all around, spinning like flipped coins in the new day sun onto the picnic table.

The wind at a hush.

Parts of the water, unshielded by the bank's trees, wrinkle forward. Other quilt squares of the canal are glossy, reflecting the fall's foliage, making the canal seem aflame.

Actual insects, their instruments inconstant from the brush lining the canal pathway. Wasps in their sharp suits black yellow black yellow, maybe not even an inch above the ground at all times, foraging for sweet things. Robins quick-stepping over the path against the flow of traffic, dawn-runners sending them into the brush.

Dr. Decora's topless coffee no longer asteam, the picnic table no longer in the shade.

Squares of concrete with yellow and blue metal knobs, unused for tying off for decades.

Then these four people, Mons, Ty, Terès, Dr. Decora, stand up from the mildly sodden picnic table with opaque lichen spider webs here and there. All four of them love each other, but only one of them has voiced such an expression to each.

Too many colors to name, a palette of fall.

Sycamores, prematurely nude, in shapes of pain.

Cars on the two visible bridges passing over, synchronized.

The sound of falling water between a crack in the lock and the canal below.

Weeds in the shelving of the lock with crazy hair. The color of the lock itself: black, the surrounding apparatus, yellow, blue, textured gray, steel, red, rust, dried mud.

The grates of the parapet walkway: white.

A flag's shadow billowing on the concrete.

A sign commanding you to STAY BEHIND FENCE.

A felled tree that drifted into a kind of cul de sac by the boat launch, growing weeds.

Chestnuts like miniature tennis balls, parts green, parts rotting, bobbing in the canal. In the shallows close to shore, a school of minnows, more flicked coins, these silver, flashing their sides in the honey sunlight.

STAIRS AHEAD.

Dr. Decora's hand on the yellow railing. Sets of children's feet down the long smooth ramp beside the stairs.

Three men fishing, in for a surprise.

Ladders inscribed into the concrete berm of the canal, one two three four.

Chugging plumes of water off the tongue of the berm. Graffiti under the bridge.

A strange terror when the cars drive on the metalwork above.

They hold hands as the gates open. Tradition.

It sometimes takes forever

for the future to come

empty its pockets.

Well, there is a boy. An angry boy. A boy whose best and only friend is a snot-covered stuffed animal, a tiger, almost now orangeless save where the snot preserved color.

Emil likes the corner. He gets sent there a lot, the corner. At first he tried to let it be a punishment, because it felt like lying and cheating when he enjoyed it. At first, he would sit in the corner, in the hard plastic yellow chair, like a punished boy, a sad boy. But he realized *what was the point of being sad?*, which was the question they didn't want him to ask. What was the point of crying and sniffing and getting facewaste all over his corduroys?, these forest green. And what was the point of feeling guilty about it? People were always saying to enjoy life, so why get down just because he's supposed to? Will he be scolded because he doesn't feel bad? They'll never find out anyway, because the trick Emil learned is that you can make a face and be thinking about something that doesn't at all match what the face is supposed to be saying—a discovery which opened up all sorts of little powers to him: knowing when someone was lying, making himself a more convincing liar, and future-telling, real-deal-no-deja-vu-type future-telling: miniscule windows, unfogged, into the just beyond. It's this future-telling that has landed him in the corner again, which is okay.

Emil doesn't mean to be a bully, but probably is by most definitions. He scares other kids sometimes because he predicts what they're about to say, and always wins at games where other children are deceived (though, his Achilles' heel on the playground, it's well known, is hide-and-seek). Normally the future-telling stuff is just a step or two away, timewise. These are unexciting things, usually: if Mom will drink milk or orange juice, which instrument Dad will

grab, when—especially if falsely accused—Emil will be sent to the corner. This time the future is different though; he sees familiar people in unfamiliar shapes, older shapes.

A siren, streets away, makes him prick up his ears. They're always coming. They're always coming for him. Even in his visions. These visions were different than the more fun ones like where he is a potato bug rolly-pollying around the house in his hard gray plating, no, these visions were filled with light, ecstatic light, brilliance that he was inside, and warmth, warmth that filled his face and burrowed to his gut and shined through his belly button. In these flaming sword glimpses into the future, there is always fire; sometimes he is in the fire, sometimes he is watching it. There are other times, too, where he seems to be the fire itself. Combatting the fire is a brown bottle with a red turkey on it and his father talking about what he calls *time's accordion*, his own theory of time . . . the way seconds themselves rise and fall, flatten and bloom; the way it weaves from past and present, beyond and within. Not that everything happens all at once, but that the now and the past simply follow very-close-but-far-away from the future, but never disconnected because it began from the same thing, the same substance, the same *apparatus* his father would say. So it's possible Emil is: watching the fire, inside the fire, the fire itself. For a moment the fire turns into the smolder of his grandfather's cigar, then the song his grandfather would sing every time he lit one up:

Kal-a-mazoo
 Kal
 Uh muh zoo
 Kal-am-a
 zoo zoo zoo
 Bought my first stogie in Kalamazoo
 oh
 Kalamazoo
 play it all day the KUH
 zoo
 zoo
 zoo

Oh that's wherrrrrrrrre
I wanna beeeeeeeeee

But this is not what the fire is here for today.

No one ever believes his visions anyway. No one ever seems to believe anything he says, no matter how true; for instance, his morning cereal tasting like sponge because the current sponge needed to be switched out for a newer one. He was called difficult and picky and even finicky. And when he wouldn't eat his lunch like the other kids because his knockoff Tupperware smelled of Dawn and a mixture of smells that formed "the sponge" stench, he would get yelled at or head-shaked at or get told to go to the corner.

Why he's in the corner now is a bit different. He really deserved it this time. The temper, it comes and goes. But Emil does not like being touched, even if someone is playing *I'm-not-touching-you, I'm-not-touching-you*. They get too close, grazing him in predictable ways with a little french fry or a finger poking his side or his chest or his face. He couldn't stand it. And when he couldn't stand it he took the hard plastic triceratops by the tail and really freaking whacked the kid in the face. Emil doesn't understand why this received the same punishment as not eating his lunch. This was future-telling because he saw himself do it and couldn't resist; he even seemed to know that one of the horns would go into the kid's eye. He couldn't stop himself. He couldn't choose to not do it. He saw it happen, and so it must happen, and so it did. How is it his fault if he didn't have a choice?

The fire seems to be trying to tell him something today. Something important. Something necessary. Speak fire. Emil is listening. Speak. Spea—

The daycare manager smacks him in the ear. "Emil. Emil. Come on. Go back—" through gritted teeth "and apologize. And if you—if you do something like that again then so help me—"

26 March 2023

Brenda Renetti sits there, looking, if not being, calm. She's on her butt with bent knees, trying to look contemplative. People stare, some of whom look disappointed—she sort of revels in it though. If she's just out here swinging for hours someone's bound to get skeptical. Hardly anyone knows that Brenda is the orangutan at the Freddie Sue Zoo. FSZ's owner, one of these real hands-on types, attributes the deception's success to the quality of the suit, but Brenda likes to think it's due to her performance. She shaves her head for the mask even though her hair blends in with the suit just fine. Still does most of her own choreography too, same as she did as a gymnast.

They have her in her own enclosure, away from the other apes who tend to be a little more discerning than humans, at least in ape identification; orangutans are generally solitary creatures anyway, so no raised red flag there.

Her routine allows only thirty minutes of dazzling the audience each day, which honestly is on the high end. What started as a strict five minutes of dazzling has greedily risen to ten, to twenty, thirty.

The orangutan adopts the posture and demeanor of a zen adept, a far cry from their chimp relatives, who always seem to be having a bad reaction to amphetamines.

She counts the crowd's discrete faces. When it comes time to renew her contract, she'll have solid data to leverage. According to her research of the annual reports, last year the zoo had 380k—not necessarily distinct—visitors. When she started, her dazzle time was prompt and word spread as time and entertainment value remained constant or better, leading to substantial accounted-for growth. Brenda's got a presentation ready and everything.

Only thing going poorly lately is these little zaps that feel like licking batteries all up and down her spine . . . aside from that, she's good. In a way it has charged her up, provided her with the power to do almost anything she chooses to during her routine. It's just her and her skill, one bundle, not of nerves, but, *finally—hopefully*, of talent. A complete package.

Inside the glass and the suit she's almost invisible. Reminds her of all the times she'd listen behind the thin doors and thinner walls of motel rooms. Sometimes there weren't even walls. She'd always get up the next morning, wind herself up, and attack the mat, the beam, the bar, the day, whatever, until the wind-up mechanism inside died down and she lay on a new motel bed, in a different city, listening. Orangutans stay with their mom for seven years, but Brenda had to stay with hers for much longer.

A girl in her parent's arms is yelling something like *bad wipey bad wipey* with some urgency, using her tiny arms to demonstrate the problem. A man in a hot dog costume barks about his cart of roasted almonds. There's a kid who—Brenda can read their lips—is saying *So sad* and pointing at her, looking up to her parents. Brenda'd like to tell the kid that, hey, this is just her resting expression, orangutans are loners who don't talk much with their face; they're actually pretty vocal. Brenda's not great with the sounds though, and management has mostly forbidden her from trying to practice in realtime. She's particularly bad at chuffing, which was stopped after a visiting primatologist got suspicious.

All these ugly faces look to Brenda for change, awaiting her performance. She raises her middle finger to the crowd. Brenda makes sure they all see. Go fuck yourselves, she says with the orangutan glove, and she receives a roar of praise.

Cheering blooms after she flips them off with both hands. Most people in the crowd think she's smiling, and she is, but they don't know it's an orangutan face meant to threaten. Another

inside joke. Fans can even buy a shirt with her smile at the sales annex next to the enclosure; she has a shirt herself. It's like Bruce Wayne wearing a Batman t-shirt.

A careless child presses his face against the glass along with his soft serve twist with rainbow sprinkles. He doesn't mean to make such a mess, he's just excited. His older brother comes in from behind and thiefts the ice cream, holds it up at a presumably phallic angle, and moves his hips back, then into the glass, back, into the glass, back, into the glass. A friend records. The ice cream squishes into the exhibit's glass on rhythm and bleeds down where clots of sprinkles form along colorful streaks. The little brother laughs—he knows he's supposed to. And there's not a parent in sight—oh never mind, there they both are, recording, laughing. Yet another exploitation of labor. What a clever son they have.

It's not always so carnivalesque. The rowdiness of this crowd is likely explained by today's free admission, either for youth in trouble or for troubled youths or something, which wouldn't explain why the parents . . .

. . . there's a lot of this waiting for the main event, a lot of mental gymnastics on the wait for the physical . . . it tingles her brain to turn an excuse into a back handspring . . .

Dazzle Time is scheduled for 4:30, around the time the new restaurant's divine yet unidentifiable scent breaks free of the kitchen. Big Boss thinks it helps lure the sore-footed and hurt-tummied into surge-priced meals. Originally, The Mad Cow Steakhouse was set to occupy the restaurant, but, after much (for some reason unanticipated) protesting, Arbor Eat 'Em, the vegan eatery, took its place.

4:25 and she's getting antsy. The bathing suit she's in under the orangutan one is getting gross; the wrong parts are damp and she's worried about getting another rash.

Monday's a day off so, she figures, fuck it, put on a show, an extra five minutes, and she'll have all day tomorrow to recover.

As a gymnast, she would chalk up her hands and blow them off in an arc to her teammates like it was pixie dust. At the zoo, she slaps her hands down and rubs them in the dirt. Returning patrons know what time it is.

Either the suit is growing or her arms are shrinking because when she slaps the dirt again the orangutan hands fall limp with loose material.

Her routine here is all rather standard at first, basic swings between the fake green vines that dangle from high fake branches on fake trees, kipping when she needs to, hollow, arch, hollow, arch. Her vinework is all momentum, businesslike, a good unhurried coast.

Brenda thief vaults from a branch to the beam atop the monkey bars where she lands on her ass. She stands, now about twenty feet up, and gives a panoramic middle finger; she usually gets in three or four of these—at five there's diminishing returns of applause. Then she's off, performing transposed gymnastic routines to this artificial forest, falling through the monkey bars from the top and swinging on through with ease.

To make it look real requires a ton of footwork, for balance, for momentum, for rhythm. Brenda's long toes are basically prehensile and she can pick up almost anything with her feet that she can pick up with her hands. Orangutans pretty much have four hands, though, and two of them are feet, so it's not much of a replication. It doesn't need to be. She just has to keep the crowd's eyes on the birdie, it's why she's making all these faces. There's still one sound she's allowed to make: raspberries. Brenda's mask has a built-in mouthguard; helps keep the mask on in the worst of circumstances. They let her balloon out her cheeks and pop them with her hands, too. Why are the only sounds she can make flatulent?

This whole performance thing is done under the pretense that she's trying to get the food plate left out for her at the top of the enclosure: an assortment of ripe and spiky fruits, lychee, durian, various relatives of the mango family, all on a bed of young leaves. It's set up so that it can be accessed only by jumping or falling onto an island against a high glass wall. The only way to do it is leap onto this young pliable tree, rock it, and build up enough momentum that it flings her over to a lower see-through plastic island that's refracting rainbows. Then she's able to access the steps that lead to the monkeybars that go all the way around the enclosure's roof, where she hangs about twenty-five feet above the ground swinging bar to bar. Then the scary part: the ledge with the fruit spread sits below and she'll have to swing over. She giant leaps off the bar and grabs the handle beyond the ledge that the audience can't see, and then it Breaks off.

She reaches out just in time by what must look like the orangutan's wrist and grabs the ledge with her other hand, concealing the handle in her clenched orangutan glove, and pulls herself up to the fruit. Not a great dismount, but these judges aren't that hard to please.

She holds up her middle finger to the audience again for the fourth time

#

Brenda has daily resisted the urge to shave her arms since adolescence. She's cross-legged on the wooden bench above the black-veined white tile, her costume undone in the front, following with a finger the trail below her belly button to her bikini bottoms. The girls, her *teammates*, used to laugh at what they called her happy trail. And Brenda had that type of wispy peachfuzzish stuff that ran down her cheeks along her jaw that can be seen only under particular lighting. But a lot of it. This one older girl would come up, hook her pointer finger and pet Brenda's jaw. "Nice

kitty,” she’d say. But it wasn’t anything a few slipped laxatives couldn’t fix. Okay, *she was young*, is how Brenda rationalizes it. And they all were there meangirling her pretty hard for a while, so. The older girl, whose warm-up routine involved dabbing her face with sparkles, went to do a triple back handspring and, on the second handspring’s arc, the combination of the laxative and the elder teammate’s own gastro-related anxiety forced out what was likely the loudest fart ever recorded as she completed the arc. And all that in front of quite a few grandparents, boyfriends, and college recruiters. No one plans to be that successful; Brenda didn’t even laugh, but everyone else did. You can still watch the video, though Brenda’s glad you can’t really see the bully’s face in it. She’s a big deal real estate agent now in Tucson, where the sun’s shine is almost as bright as her teeth.

Even now Brenda can tense up and hammer punch her stomach and not feel a thing. For motivation. It’s not hurting herself because, well, it doesn’t hurt.

Dear Wiley Corover,

I am a great admirer of your show, and, since you're from my beloved home of Rochester, I researched you a bit. This will sound mysterious, but I have something of great importance to tell you. Please respond to the address listed on this letter's envelope.

Sincerely,

Mons Wright-Ulven

December 2015

Spillsbury Parkway is one of those neighborhoods you can find yourself involuntarily speaking with a mock Victorian-era British accent. But it's hard to do an accent in a whisper, "You'd think people like this could buy better security," Tj says, between a hedge and a drainpipe by the backdoor.

The roads off Spillsbury are called things like Parliament Street, Barrister Place, or end in -ham or -shire. In the worst case, there's something called Buckland-upon-Finemere Court. These are estates. Houses with grounds. A real top hat and monocle ambience—you can almost hear the metronomic hooffalls of a horse-drawn vehicle. These are the sort of residences to employ a butler, maid, fastidious ghost, whatever, so long as it minds its place over in the servants' quarters. This particular palatial home is outlined by what look like baby pine trees in straightjackets, wrapped tight to fight off the winter. If Tj looked up he'd notice a pretty spectacular swath of sky left open by the night's clouds, dark save for a pocketful of discarded stars.

Jay's pretty much Tj's only friend, and Tj is pretty much Jay's only friend. This closeness set about all kinds of dangerous inclinations, starting with petty theft as children, more recently culminating in burglary. Tj in particular has boundary issues, and needs very little peer pressure to succumb to Jay's whims.

They're out there in what's just below fridge weather. Tj, Reynaud's-afflicted and essentially bloodless at the ends of all appendages, is trying to look not-conspicuous while playing his lookout role but, since he's about a head taller than the tree he and Jay are hiding behind, well known feelings of exposure and restlessness start to spill out from somewhere in his stomach. Tj suspects that his lumbering, if they were caught and he tried to bolt, someone,

especially in this neighborhood, would hurriedly call the police to report a zoo's escaped infant giraffe. Jay ain't all that great when rushed either, and Tj needs what's stashed inside the house more than his fingers right now, so he tries to hush his mouth and body to let Jay work.

After picking off some less-ambitious homes in lower-class neighborhoods, Tj and Jay cased the area last week looking for houses that boasted protection from ONAN Safety Systems (the owner of the company had wanted to call it CONAN but was worried about various infringements). The company, after discovering several slogans were fortified by trademark, settled on "Your bird in the hand." Jay had just finished his first week of training and was idling in the break room considering a plate of stale cookies when he heard his boss's boss scream from the other end of the office. For what surely could not have been the first time, judging by the cautious enunciations into the phone, his grand-boss said they needed, in all haste, a "TECH NEL E PHONE HAIR MESS EN GER," followed by "AAAGHH." All the McGruff Crime Dogs on the wallpaper looked rather judgy at this. With the logic that the company was in a state of deterioration roughly similar to the owner's mind, Jay decided to make a career change.

"This shit is like 19th century, 1700s or some shit, I swear. Could probably just ask the alarm to switch off real nice," Jay says.

"Then what's taking so long?"

"Someone's eager to go to jail. I'm not about to try and explain this to you again. Just stand there til you're useful. Go for a record and stop talking for ten seconds. Goddamn it. I can't see shit in this mask. You really couldn't find anything better than this banana face?"

Tj figures Jay's right, he should shut up since you can see his breath every time he talks. He makes himself useful walking along the perimeter of the house; for some reason this upscale home has a quarry of fake rock hide-a-keys on the premises. Why not just leave the door

unlocked? Maybe it's just that kind of neighborhood. Tj brings his stack of rocks over to Jay who's finishing up.

The security system at last disarmed, Tj starts trying keys from the cairn of hideaway rocks he's cradling. One key, two keys, and just like that, the castle is breached. By the time they get inside the moon has pried open the rest of the sky. It's a spotlight that looks tilted and poured down into the center of the room from the foyer's skylight, giving so much visibility that Tj doesn't even need to risk turning on the lights.

The house looks bigger from the inside. Tj walks into the foyer and the word is a bludgeon in his mind: expanse expanse expanse. "Is this all marble?"

"Ya, it's easier to clean," Jay says.

"What do you even do in a room like this? You could have the Super Bowl in here."

"It's not a room, it's a foyer. Or like a ballroom maybe."

"Well then," Tj says with a bow, his left leg and arm sweeping the ground with parodic formality, "shall we dance?"

"I'd take the Super Bowl."

Tj heads back to the museum pedestal by the entrance where you're meant to remove your shoes. There's a cluster of what Jay called Fabandgay eggs—at which Tj had to muffle a laugh with his fist, not quite sure whether Jay was joking or just being unworldly—creating a moat around a crystal that looks laid by a glass dinosaur. Tj wonders if a secret room will reveal itself when he picks it up.

Nothing happens.

Tj passes the crystalline egg from hand to hand in the fluid motion of a slinky. "Go long," he tells Jay. Jay protests out of sheer burglar intuition; he has a plan, and all of it involves quiet

and focus. This place is going to take forever to sort through and the whole posh little family will be home soon. But why deny the opportunity to have such a fun story, *that time we played football in a mansion?* Jay wipes his soggy hands, lifts his chin slightly and says *hut, hut*. Tj says *hike* and Jay jogs out for a pass. Jay's twenty feet out when the crystal is nearly at the apex of its flight; the moon is fleetingly trapped inside the egg, which looks about to hatch. Jay continues. Twenty more feet will place him near enough the end of the crystal's arc to catch it, caress it, and perform a celebratory dance.

But—

The strike of a battering ram on thin steel.

Screams from somewhere below.

And again.

The first strike paralyzes; by the second, Jay's hips are pivoting to sprint toward Tj and anywhere but the epicenter of the crystal egg's terminus.

The third strike on metal from below coincides with the egg's own, splashing diamonds in the room with a shatter just past the foyer.

The ascent from downstairs is a stampede, more like falling down stairs than sprinting up them. Machine gun steps. A door erupts. Tj sees it:

The Face:

a beaten rectangle of burlap ballooning over shoulders. Leaking trenchwater eyes. Blood streaks and coal wiped from a conjurer's hand.

The Face wails; its weapon gleams deep-red off the moonlight.

The Face fires itself at Tj.

Tj drops. Kicks at knees. Screaming. Kick. Find Jay. Grab egg. Door.

“YOU’RE DEAD. YOU’RE DEAD. YOU’RE DEAD. YOU’REDEAD YOU’REDEAD
 YOU’REDEADYOU’REDEADYOU’REDEADYOU’REDEADYOU’REDEADYOU’REDEA
 DYOU’REDEAD.

YOU’REDEAD”

Car. Lights. Siren. Bushes. Bushes? BUSHES.

Down.

Hide.

They’re both in a runner’s stance now, just behind a hedge of untrimmed bushes and trees clipped square, the beginning of a maze.

“Silent alarm?”

“Don’t think so. ONAN doesn’t do that,” Jay says.

“Did you see The Face? What, you think that guy called the cops? How’s he gonna do that? There was blood all over that thing he was about to bash my head in with. He just turnin himself in?”

“What thing?”

“A hammer. I dunno, the judge smacking thing. The cavil.”

“Gavel.”

“That’s what I said. Did you see The Fa—”

The Face is at the door with the cop when it points. Right at them.

The Face doesn’t have a mouth but the sings of something branded into one. It’s screaming. The cop takes the direction from The Face’s hand, snapping his head toward Jay and Tj like an assassin’s silent kill. And there it is again: the cop also wears The Face.

Tj launches himself from his stance; his head is about to rise over the hedges when

Jay tackles him and pins him to the ground. “He don’t know where we are, just where we went. Look, look! no one’s coming for you.” The Face goes back to its business inside the house; the other Face drives past them to the end of the street, siren and lights off, a low rumble to falling snow.

The moon last night looked sliced by a precision instrument. It followed Tj all the way home. Ever since he got back from the job last night he’s been in bed like a dropped anchor, still in his thief clothes, looking out the bars of his bedroom’s window. He and the moon have been locked in a staring contest the entire time. It just sort of stayed there perfectly fixed, craters and all, the only object in the sky.

Last night the bars felt like security, but not so much this morning.

Tj tells the moon to stop looking at him, but there’s no reply.

Being ignored dislodges him from the lacuna of space between last night and this morning, and time finally makes its intentions clear. Tj pulls out his phone and starts thumbing through distractions. The blog he’s a devotee of has a new post: “I am writing to you from inside the corpse of the world. I am somewhere at the bottom of the oubliette of its throat. I get my pen out whenever the mouth opens (why it opens at all I have no idea) since that is the only time there’s any light.”

No, not this.

He remembers the unfinished argument from last night—and the cop—and the Face—and looks up the meanings of cavil and gavel, audibly claims he was right after reading each definition.

Tired of being buried alive in his bed, Tj sheathes his phone and locks two of the three locks before leaving. He doesn't mind the lessened security because he's taking everything of value with him.

It's cold and the day is slush-gray but his burglar mask is still in his pocket, and if he rolls it from the bottom up it just looks like a beanie with a paunchy ring, so it's not too hard to avoid suspicion.

Tj is unusual for someone in this part of the city due to his minor self-preservational senses; i.e., he actually looks before he crosses the street. People on Lake Ave move across the road like they're in the middle of a herd, insulated from predators on all sides—especially when they're alone. But there's no one in the road that Tj has to fireman carry to the mobile hospital today, so praise all involved. Tj's march is all peripheral, still shy to look face-on at fellow pedestrians and people at the wheel.

All the buildings on the street are in decay, no matter how new it seems, hideous white-painted brick smeared with gray and black. Tj turns at the Dollar Market just off the road in pure animal instinct toward a strange pocket of inner suburbs where Jay's family used to live. The UFO, a former rotating restaurant above the First Federal Plaza in the skyline, disappears as Tj walks into the tunneled area of trees he spent so much time in when he was younger.

Something painful about how the trees look smaller than when he was a kid; their emaciated fingers reach closer to him now; a soft wind takes their hands southward, and Tj follows their suggested course.

He sleepwalks down the street of houses, all with peeling skin and half-assed holiday decorations until he opens his eyes to a massacre. They're all dead. An entire battalion of seasonal favorites static and pressed into slowly melting snow, lifeless after a failed uprising

against the homeowners. Dozens of reindeer, snowpeople, various characters from popular culture, all deflated and relegated from lawn ornaments to makeshift tarpaulins. Only the Grinch's line smirk still looks inflated as Tj shuffles away.

For several hours Tj is windblown, taking directional cues from paths of least resistance. He spends most of his time around Downtown Rochester, sleepless, slinging himself around the streets like a recently-escaped marionette just learning to walk. Eventually he grinds the points of his shoes on the slight incline of East Broad Street. At his back is a twelve-thousand pound angel atop the Times Square Building.

He stops, awakened, one supposes, by reminiscence. He's standing on the bridge just above the abandoned subway: the Graffiti Palace, high above a wide stretch of the Genesee River. The Downtown Library outlines the river on the other side and water drains from what Jay and Tj used to call the catacombs, transfusing the river from openings all along the library's lowest section. You can even climb down there.

Matter of fact, Sam Patch, an early 20th century daredevil, leapt to his death just a quarter mile down the river flow. Patch had a foolproof test to determine if he'd survive a jump: push his "pet" bear off the ledge. The drop at High Falls is about 100 feet, but Patch had already conquered Niagara, so what was this in comparison? His first show at High Falls received a pitiable attendance. The second show, Patch raised the stakes—about twenty feet. The bear lived that push, too, and so Sam was ready to jump. His audience had swelled considerably for the second jump, but onlookers from the first show could tell something was wrong mid-drop. Patch's body was a flipbook of disfigurements as he flailed attempting to gain control of his descent while his jump devolved to a fall. There was an undeniably inelegant smash as Sam

Patch met the water. He wasn't found until the following spring, half-thawed, missing most of his identifiable features.

"Mysteries abound," Tj's mom would say. "None of us would be here without that river. And one of these days it's coming to collect."

Of course, petulant adrenaline junkies haven't been the only ones found floating along this length of the Genesee.

Tj's mom had worked at the Downtown library sweeping floors. Jay and Tj would come over to the Graffiti Palace, where both the art and the cast of characters were in constant flux. When you hopped down from the platform to the track it was still and noiseless except for the crackle of a culvert fire sheltered in some corner from the drafts that howl in off the river. When they weren't in the subway, Tj and Jay spent after school hours racing in the tunnel under South Ave that connects both library buildings or looking for ghosts and secret passages of urban legend hidden deep within. At some point all the riddles were answered, which is when Tj started swiping his mom's keys. She hadn't been firm enough with them about the constant thievery, so breaking into offices was just another afterschool activity for them, sometime in 2005, during wilder days of the internet. Jay was indiscriminately clicking hypertext on a computer in some higher-up's office when he found what he was looking for, something like "TOPLESS FEMALE CELEBRITY XXX." By that point, Tj would only have been interested in "BOTTOMLESS MALE CELEBRITY XXX"—but Jay didn't need to know that. Despite what they were doing together, Jay would still have submitted some casual slurs to Tj, those epithets that seemed to oxygenate all casual middle-school-boy conversation at the time.

They could count the pixels on the screen as the video started. It began on what they thought was a stage. Jay guessed the promised celebrity might pop up and pop out through a

trapdoor from below. Instead, a man's head was shoved into a little hole, his arms flapping. The worst part of it—the thing that differentiated it from movies—was the quiet. There was no triumphant or plangent music; no rebel applause; no collective cry of relief. The people in the audience were placid, bored. The video showed the man flapping, but Tj had realized what was happening before he saw the blade land, just in time to make a mask of his hands. That first thud is like a fallaway elevator in his memory. The second added another layer of sound, as did the next—almost like different notes. The head rolled its way to the steps and played do re mi down the wooden planks, idle fingers on piano keys. Jay watched it twice.

By the time the recollection stops playing, Tj is all the way down at the MLK Jr. Memorial Park at Manhattan Square where there's a water-fountain cum art installation thing that he sometimes sees people scoop change and other dreams from.

The billboard across the street is of a local lawyer smiling next to the words: CAR CRASH?

Tj's shoulders slacken when he realizes that he's on his way to his mom's—well, parents'—house, to the homespun comfort of Saturday mac and cheese.

The windowless door has two things taped to it. One is a sign with a smiley face accompanied by the words, "Smile, you're on camera." The other is a note that is pretty clearly in his dad's handwriting, laminated and plastered with tape, that warns "No solitations [sic]." Tj doesn't even need to knock on the door. "Ohhhh, I was hoping you could smell it," his mom says, opening the door and her arms. "Not proud of a trap, but I'll take a visit from my baby any how or way I can," she tells him from the side of her face, holding him, trying not to crick her neck looking up.

Tj smiles inward when he sees the couch is minus his dad. When Tj was younger, and held there by threat of abandonment, his dad was always ranting about how when his great-grandfather—no doubt with a single many-eyed spud as his sole memento of home—came over he wasn't even considered white; how the ancestor went from farming to digging to gunfighting, and how all that was left of him was a single family heirloom, now secure in its plush case beneath the floorboards. Tj's dad would sometimes remove the revolver from its sunken safety, spin the chamber, and recall some gory Old West tall tale from the family mythos. "He showed them all," his dad would say.

Tj has no idea how that man successfully paired with his mom.

He, Tj's dad, had been the last person Tj had come out to—no one else really needed coming-out to. He's not sure if it's a good or bad memory, but when Tj told his dad he was (still is) gay, the response was "Tj, no you're not, you don't even have a gay accent." Nevertheless, whenever Tj brought a boyfriend to the house to meet his mom, there was always a kind of double-barrel-shotgun Russian roulette, in which his dad would either try to steal (befriend, hopefully) his boyfriend, or give a flaccid "hello" and stomp away with high drama. Seven—maybe eight—boyfriend intros now and Tj still doesn't know his dad's type. But for today's visit, Tj is alone and on a sedulous hunt for mac and cheese.

Satisfied at last, he denies a fifth bowl and his mom packs the remainder for him to take home. His mom makes everything easy. The kitchen feels full; it always does, but it's usually because it's so small. And sitting there, awash in his mom's kindness, Tj's body forgets to feel compressed; his posture does everything to convey relaxation short of putting his feet on his moms' fine cherry table.

"Where's Dad?"

“I’m sure he’s somewhere.”

“Chop him up and he’d be all over.”

“Stop that, we all have differences.”

“I know, I shouldn’t sa—”

“You know you shouldn’t say it. You don’t know why, but you know you shouldn’t.

That’s intuition talking. It’s smarter than you. Hear it, is all I’ll say. Now, do you got plans for later, or do I get you for dinner too?”

“Probably gotta meet up with Jay later.”

“Noooo. Not again. Still? How many times I need to say it? You treat him like he’s a brother. He’s never shown you love like that. What’s it gonna take for you to see who he is?”

“Well, I mean he’s like my br—”

“I’m just saying. More and more lately. People been revealing themselves left and right. Family and friends just dropping like dead insects. Sometimes the mask is the face is all.”

“It’s been weeks since anyone’s revealed themselves to me. I could use it.”

“And there ya go again. You should find a way to put that wit to use someday. How do you even afford your apartment when you don’t have a job? Don’t think I don’t know.”

“Mom, I do—”

“Just don’t think I don’t know.”

“Alright.” Tj is looking down at his phone, checking if Jay has gotten back to him.

The door opens.

He looks up.

The Face is kissing his mom; cinders spill down her shoulder.

Tj collapses. His chair rockets into the fridge. There’s nowhere to go.

“What, Tj, what?—no, no one is coming for you. Baby, calm down,” she says, using hushed tones in an attempt to soothe.

“MOM, IT’S HERE.”

“Baby, what are you saying?”

The Face lunges.

Using the wall to brace himself, Tj coordinates a full-force kick with both legs, ejecting The Face from the kitchen. The Face shrieks, expelling ashes from the burn marks where its mouth should be. Tj runs over to stomp The Face, but hears his mom yelling, “STOP. STOP STOP. STOP.” Tj grabs his mom’s hand. Run. RUN. She shrugs him off and kneels towards The Face. She doesn’t know. She doesn’t know.

She won’t come—The Face has fooled her.

Run.

He ruptures the exit. The doorknob crushes the siding of the house. Tj envisions himself leaving scorch marks as he sprints toward home, all the way to the other side of town and into the Maplewood Historic District, the city alight with his survivor’s trail.

Tj’s mind catches up to his feet about a quarter mile from home. He stops to catch his breath in the night shadow of a tree with a broken swing, its seat jagged and hanging from only one of two ropes. Its inertia trapped at the end of the rope’s knot, the seat spins as if just broken.

The moon is dim and flickering like it needs a new bulb.

As Tj starts the last stretch to his apartment he notices he’s by Jay’s old house again and, comfortable in his knowledge of the escape routes, slows his pace. An ethereal glow radiates from a house around the corner. Turning onto the street nearly sears his eyes. There’s some

celebration of lights from an exuberant household, apparently eager to donate light to the neighbors so they can save on their holiday electric bill. Down the street, just beyond the light's radius, the entire menagerie of holiday inflatables is alive, willed back by a local necromancer. There's no kind of illumination from the house, and the minor militia looks vaguely sinister, perhaps gearing up to stage another attack on the homeowners.

Back at his apartment, behind a triple-locked door and conveniently barred windows, Tj stands at the gas stove warming his hands over the combustion while he soaks his feet in near-boiling water. Jay should be coming over any minute now to appraise the Fabergé egg they grabbed last night. Trust has become a compulsion between him and Jay over the years, so, even though he can barely stand, canceling now feels a bit like betrayal—and not just of Jay.

Tj can almost feel the temperature of his footbath dropping over time, adding a wrinkle to his feet with every degree lost. Creases begin to appear as Tj thinks about his and Jay's conversation on the way home last night. Jay said he never saw The Face. Only now does it occur to Tj to report what happened last night—there might still be someone in The Face's basement. He then remembers the cop who was so prompt on the scene . . . but that was a town over, so it would be a different department and jurisdic—

Knock. Knock.

Tj splashes the floor pulling his feet from the bucket of tepid water. Without bothering to lift a fold of his blackout curtain or check the peephole, he unlocks both deadbolts and opens the door to the full width of the chain lock.

Slam.

Lock. Lock.

The Face has found him again.

Tj stands there inert as The Face thrashes at the door.

He has no stairs, no window to jump from. The Face pummels the door outside, spraying splinters on every beat.

Tj drifts to the one private place in the apartment, closing the door behind. He's fetal in the embrace of the bathtub, filling it with his eyes.

There's nowhere left to go.

He rocks himself as he says it, begging: No one's coming for me. No one's coming for me. No one's coming for me. No one's coming for me.

From the MoonFace Archives: Consultations: D_Sp: LP

I asked him not to do it. Over and over I asked him. He was already beautiful. I really just don't understand.

I can hear myself telling him, Smile, smile, don't forget to smile; the key to any injury lawyer's success is the smile. If it doesn't shine, neither will your billboard. But I didn't mean to get the damn surgery. I didn't mean for him to mutilate his face. It's his body, he can do with it whatever he wants. Of course. But when I see him at home I don't recognize him. Early on I kept screaming, thinking someone had broken in. He's just not the same. Maybe he's the same inside, but the outside affects the in—. He was beautiful, he really was. Cake-topper pretty.

When he tries to kiss me now I pull away. I don't mean to. But it's like if a random guy on the bus tries to kiss you. Makes me sick like my stomach's doing origami. It happened when we were over to a friend's for dinner and he wanted one of those secret kisses, one of those while-they're-in-the-other-room kisses. He came in from the side and just by instinct I shifted my body. But it wasn't a secret. My friend saw. Later she pulled me to the side and asked if I was scared, was he beating me? She said she doesn't notice a difference in his face, nor his smile. Yeah, well, she hadn't seen every face he had; she didn't know the cute little tremor of his face in orgasm . . . but now it's a different face with a different twitch. That first time we had sex after his surgery I told him I had to go clean up. But, as quietly as I could, I was throwing up paper cranes. I told him over and over. And now he's someone else. He sees himself differently, and so sees everything else differently. He never had any kind of vanity before, never any insecurity, never checked my phone or checked-up on me. But when I left today there was a hollowness in his voice. He knows what the face is doing . . .

I did tell him, didn't I? To not do it. I told him. He knows what he did. So what can I do? He is in there somewhere but it's getting to the point I'll have to tie him up and stick my arm down his throat to pull him out. I didn't fall in love with this person. I just told him to smile. I didn't love the person who would do this. I wouldn't have to get elbow deep to find him again. He'd just be there, the way I knew him, when we were together, living in just a little dollop of a building on the hill.

7 April 2023

- Hey Johnson, are we doing anything about that substance floating around over in Rochester?

- What the fuck's there to stop in Minnesota? You wanna put a dome over the place to stop the snow? Make it Midwestern Florida? Make Prince's old house an historical site? Maybe that Greek Freak. That Giannis Antetokounmpo. Ooooooweeeeee that man can play.

- New York. Rochester, New York. Susan B Anthony, Frederick Douglass, Alphabet Killer, Moon Face, Hammer conspiracies, Black Hand Society, Garbage plates—

- Yeah yeah I know. What Walker, you got phalluses for eyes? You ever take your pants out of your hand long enough to read a memo? They're doing us a favor over there.

- It's the first place they found T, and I just feel it'd be worth looking into. Poke around a bit.

- T. Now that's an original name for a psychohallucogenic drug. Surely one of the many benefits of deadening yourself to the wider world is, uh, creativity?

- Well, it's just for the Truth, or rather the capital-T Truth that is. And recently cultural vicissitudes have conspired to add another meaning it happens to work with, i.e. the Tea, the gossip, the spilling of.

- Those clever clever addicts.

Sometime somewhere in LA

Brawny Mondo, fresh off the release of “Your Booty is Your Duty Vol. 7,” is this week’s highly and hotly anticipated guest instructor. He has very little on in the way of clothes, his speedoish attire revealing a horizontal strip of untanned space where abs meet groin.

There are a lot of butts in the room. Many superlative posteriors, the one facet of the anatomy E still finds immensely, compellingly, attractive—male, female, centaur, whatever.

“Alright, alright, this next one is called Drive the Bus,” Brawny Mondo says, “So I need you to shoot on up, zombie pose, yes, zombie pose, relax, anndddddd feet just about shoulder-width apart. Ahhhh. Now relax your knees, relax your knees Jaden, relax your knees, don’t knock your knees, don’t lock your knees. Relaxxxxx. Nice and loose. Did you know you can turn yourself just by flexing your butt? So, now, when you’re driving the butts—sorry, the bus. Now when you’re driving the bus you do not do it frantically, frenetically, or in a panic in any way. No no, we drive the bus very luxuriously, very leisurely. One hand on the wheel. Like you’re a cool guy in the 1950s. And the cool guy drives with one hand. Always . . . Alright so we have right turn, right turn, squeeze the muscles in the left gluteus, left turn, left turn squeeze that right butt. Yes, yes, when you squeeze your right gluteus, you make a left turn. And, yes, very good Monique! Everyone squeeze the proper gluteus and take a look at Monique’s technique here. That’s the way you do it! After a while it’s like your whole body is in the water and your butt is the motor. Sail those high seas! Be the captain of your butt! EHHH EHHH left turn! Left turn! Right turn! C’mon Danny flex that gluteus. EHHHH EHHHHHH left turn! Right Turn! I’m not selling, I’m giving! Giving you: (LEFT TURN) peace of mind, (RIGHT TURN) tranquility of thought, (LEFT TURN) agency over your life’s desires. See, you’re not doing any of this with

anything but that butt! RIGHT TURN . . . LEFT TURN . . . Simply, gluteally, flex. That's all you do."

August 1991

Gran Gran had tried to switch from her typewriter to the computer Dad got her from work, but it just didn't click right, and the Webster Biweekly wasn't going to run without her column. Her real name was Hazel, which didn't match her eyes. Wiley started calling her Gran Gran after he figured out her name had two grans in it: Grandma Granville. She kept her name from before she married Grumpa, who was a Foster. A lot of names had changed that year. Grandpa was Grumpa. Wiley's new sister was Emmaline for the time being; she used to be Emily, and before that Ember, before that Emer. Wiley suggested they name her Woodrow Walleye Corover, but no one ever listened. And he heard Mom use Foster on the phone last night.

Wiley wrote his name in the dust on the computer; it came out in mismatched shapes, some chubby from his eight-year-old knuckle, some sliced thin by his less old fingernail. The keyboard's long cord dangled off the table, disconnected. Standing between the desk and chair, he swooshed back his pretend suit's tails and held his hands over the keyboard, "Mom, look, I'm Mozart."

Kfnsj jdr8fdk,sakgov ,ljnhyemjskfjfmvckl';]';

"Exquisite. How about some Beethoven? Ode to Joy?" She sat on the side of the couch without a lamp, closest to the kitchen. Her hair was short and choppy like the hair on her punk records.

Ode to Joy, Ode to Joy. Beethoven. Angel sounds. "Yes."

Asklskalqwiojqiojkkflkdsdklseiwqwoppoqwalskfdjkrieureui

"Even better," Mom said.

"Do you think we can get a real piano soon?"

The phone on the kitchen wall rang; on its second ring, Mom removed her round white earring; on the third, Mom put the phone to her ear and turned away. She never dressed that nice, with her elegant pantsuit, slightly loose and forest green; it paired great with Wiley's hair. He played Ode to Joy with higher and higher spirit as the call went on. At the piece's loudest, Mom turned around, "Emil, please, stop—" He heard a sound like a big balloon deflating. Mom put the phone to her chest, "Sorry, sorry. Wiley. Please stop smashing on the keyboard." It was good to see her on the phone and not look sad, and he did promise her he wouldn't get mad about the name thing, so he said nothing, just played the music in his head where it could be as loud as he wanted. The phone's cord was loose and bouncy and beige; she untangled herself from it and put the phone back on the wall. "C'mon, we have to go, she can get you in early."

"I want to play Mephisto."

"It's like ten minutes long."

"Not when I play it."

"Go say goodbye, c'mon."

"Hey, do you know what the saddest thing you can do with a piano is?"

"Not play it?"

"Drop it on someone from the top of a building." Mom didn't laugh. She usually did, though. "Is Dad still in California?"

"Yep," but she said it snappy like *yip*.

"Is he coming?"

"So he says. Next week."

“Are we going to all live together again?” Stuck on the stairs, his snack-gathering interrupted, Wiley heard her answer the same question from Gran Gran last night: *I’ll probably just end up giving in again, but we’ll see what happens.* Maybe she changed her mind.

“We have to go, so let’s go, c’mon.”

In the backyard, his grandparents were sitting at the table in white metal chairs beneath an enormous red sun umbrella, fringed yellow. Grumpa’s feet were up on an empty chair, his hat over his eyes like a napping cowboy, rocking Emmaline beside him, who was asleep in Gran Gran’s homemade bassinet. Gran Gran herself was looking into the bassinet from across the table, pencil in hand. Wiley came out the sliding door and Gran Gran hugged him with her eyes before he was in arm’s reach, then again when he was under the shade of the umbrella for real.

“Gran Gran, what do you say when the pizza doctor tells you to open wide?”

“Well if it’s me, I slap his face. He should be working on the pizza, not my mouth.”

“No, you say peetz ahhhhhhhh. Peetz ahhhhhh.” He freed himself from the hug and Gran Gran sat back down. “Do we have room for Dad here?”

“Well sure, but what about—” Still by the sliding door, Mom made a face that cut Gran Gran off.

Grumpa rocked Emmaline, “That man’s a goose with a bad sense of direction,” he wagged his finger side to side, “East, west, east, west.”

“No he’s not, he never even needs a map.” Wiley walked over to the bassinet. “He always knows where he is.”

“So do we,” Grumpa said, but not really to Wiley. “You know how in Bewitched, the later seasons, they just started re-shooting old episodes? Same thing here.” Wiley thought he heard Gran Gran laugh, but it was nowhere on her face when he checked.

“Is that the one with Henry Wrinkler?”

“We’re going. She can fit us in early,” Mom said, arms crossed, still at the sliding door.

Grumpa gave the bassinet a push so it’d rock itself then held out his hand, face still under his hat, “Good luck then there, Demon.” Wiley stepped around his swaying sister and shook the dinner plate of a hand. Grumpa went back to metronoming Emmaline. Gran Gran got up, her tea still steaming on the see-through table, and hugged him from behind.

Wiley reached into the rocking cave his sister made funny noises from, grabbed her foot with three fingers, and gave it a shake, “May you grow tall, my tiny friend.”

“We have to go.”

#

Flowers, forests, elephants, oryx. The sky wasn’t ugly, just boring, no shapes, no rain. Mom gripped the steering wheel low, with both hands, the same hold used on monkey bars. Dad only ever drove with one hand and sometimes his knees. Wiley, in the back seat, rubbed at the witch stone he found that day at the beach after Emmaline was born; definitely a personal record for rock-keeping.

Since there were no clouds, he named animals aloud to himself: squirrel, Andean cock-of-the-rock, poison dart frog, koala, zebra, wallaby. Koala goes into wallaby really well: koalaby. But wallaby didn’t really go into koala: woala? Wallaboala? He seated his backpack in his lap and took out a clicky pen from inside a pouch labeled “Scooby Snacks.” He clicked the pen about fifty times, then removed one of its relatives from the same pouch. “Mom. Mom. Mom. Look.” He took both pens and brought them chest-high, holding them out and clicking them down but not all the way. “Mom, look. Jetpack.” He made rocket sounds: ffffffffffffffff. He jetpacked as Mom weaved through highway traffic: ffffffff ffff fff ff ffffffff.

A hole opened in the blanket of clouds, letting in the sun on the town over. The hole was ragged and the sunbeams were weak. “Mom, does the road weigh more when there’s sun on it?” She shook her head and dug her nail into the steering wheel, denting it, making the spot pale until she let go and it bubbled back flat. He wasn’t sure if she meant no or she didn’t know.

They got off the highway and onto a road he’d never been on. The hole in the witch stone was so big it could fit—one at a time—his pinky, his pointer, the one whose name he couldn’t remember, his miiiiiiiiiddle—not quite—and definitely not his thumb.

Mom rolled way over the line at a stoplight, where a woman in the other lane sang with the radio. Wiley cracked the window; he could hear the car’s music but not the woman singing. Too into the song, she never saw the Halloween faces he made at her. The chorus came on and the woman’s volume turned up louder than the radio.

“Roll that up.”

“I like it. And the light’s green, anyway.”

“I can’t stand the sound when we drive, the wind through the window. It’s choppy. Thumpy. Makes it feel like half my head is flapping off.”

Wiley rolled up the window and waited for her to talk again, but she didn’t, just kept pulsing her nails into the steering wheel. He bobbed in his seat until he couldn’t take it anymore.

“Why do I have to go to another school anyway?”

“Well, we’ve been talking about it and we think maybe this one is better suited to—”

“I don’t wanna wear a suit!”

“All I mean is that it will provide an experience that’s better tailored to—”

“Tailored means suits!”

“No, it just means that it will be a better fit—oh god, never mind.”

“I know what you meant.”

“Then can you just let things work please? Just, let’s have an easy day together, okay? I don’t need the circus in town right now.”

“I was just trying to make you laugh. And you still didn’t tell me.”

“You don’t need to know everything, okay? I’m sorry I can’t explain it right.”

Wiley rubbed the witch stone, “Dad could probably tell me.”

Mom dug into the steering wheel real hard. She said something he couldn’t hear, then something he could, “Do you just not care? When’s it enough? Constantly I’m punished for it. If you get in I’ll have to get another job. And you don’t—you don’t even appreciate it. Any of the things I do for us. For you.”

He might have been a garden statue, buckled up for safety there in the backseat, if not for the bottom of the window fogging and defogging in front of his mouth.

“No. No. Come on. I’m sorry. What did I even say?” Her eyes, sort of sideways in the rearview mirror, said *sorry*, too.

“You told me to stop lying. So I won’t. I know what appreciate means. Why would you say that? Why do you want me to be mad at you? You said I’m a punishment. I know what that means.”

Mom pulled into a parking lot. There was a woman standing tall on the concrete stairs. “Demon, I didn’t—and we really don’t have time to—” but he had already got out and slammed the door with both hands. Mom turned the car off and slipped out fast, thinking she’d need to catch him, but he stood still there by the door. Mom held out a hand Wiley didn’t take; she turned to the woman on the stairs, shrugged, and held up a hand in apology, her corralling hand still out for Wiley.

When Mom swiveled back, Wiley looked right into the smile she put on to greet the woman. “I don’t feel very close to you today,” he said, walking past her towards the rounded stairs and the middle handrail the woman leaned against.

Sometimes brick buildings are beautiful and alive, filled with Arizona desert colors; this was one of the ones that was pale and sick, the many colors of old deli meat. The building looked like it was made in a cake tin, no imagination except for the ivy that crawled over its face. The woman’s smile on the stair was big and he almost believed it. She said hi, told him her name was Nina, and held out her hand with a “Nice to meet you.” He took both the hand and the greeting and returned them. Unlike Mom’s coarse, ugly hair, Nina’s was a pile of curls that looked soft enough to fall into. Mom didn’t introduce herself to Nina.

The building was better on the inside, a lot more colors and there were no trophy cases like at his last school. All the footsteps were loud and echoey. The floor was speckled and had a path of light blue squares all down the hall, which he jumped to like polished rocks in a creek, his untied shoes squeaking as he landed. Mom’s white flats slapped in the reflection of the shiny floor as she and Nina walked close together. They didn’t talk until way down the hallway when Mom whispered something to Nina, who turned around, looked Wiley in the eyes with great seriousness, and took off her hair in a single motion like it was a winter hat.

A whole minute went by before he stopped laughing. “But what happened? Mom’s older than you and she has most of her hair.”

Nina put it back on, “Well, we can’t all have such lovely red hair like you.”

“My hair’s not red, it’s copper,” he said, stomping away, knees high and hammering.

There was a soft laugh behind him. “We’re in here, Demon.”

Wiley stamped in after them and sat next to Mom's pointed shoes; her chair's feet had rubber socks that looked like human feet. He put his backpack on the comfy gray seat between him and Mom. On Nina's desk sat a doll next to a lot of papers he hoped weren't all about him. Behind and to the right of Nina, near the center of the office, hung a painting behind a glass frame. Behind that, the wall was the toxic color of chemical sludge and some insects.

"That painting's pretty. It makes me happy. But really sad, too, at the same time. I'm pretty sure I think I've seen it before."

Mom's wall was a yellow-orange-red all mixed up. "You have. This one's a reproduction," she said, her smile weak.

"It's still nice," Wiley said.

"Well, thank you." Nina looked down at the rainbow papers in front of her. "So, Emil—"

He scrunched up his face, "It's Wiley." Mom made *I'm sorry* mouthshapes. "Don't say sorry for me."

Mom sawed at her left eye with the edge of her left hand.

"And," Nina looked up from a note she just took and faced Mom, "Mrs. Corover?"

Mom shrugged, still sawing.

"Can you be bald again?"

"I'm actually always bald. It makes it easier to try on all different kinds of hair."

"That's awesome."

Mom laughed and reached over to hold his hand. He made a show of pushing it away, so she'd know.

"Wiley, your mom told me you practiced for this before you came in?"

"Yeah. I pretended to be you and I pretended to be me."

“You pretended to be yourself? Do you do that a lot?”

“Sometimes. But being other people helps, too.”

“What does it help with?”

“Everything. Sometimes I feel like a lot of different people stuffed into the same body. And I’m smushed.” He made a serious face in the quiet of the room. “Or sometimes I feel like I’ve been turned into a bouncy ball and I threw myself really hard inside myself, and I bounce all around the walls inside.” Nina made another note. “What are you saying about me?”

“I’m just writing about how unique you are.”

“Thank you.” Mom laughed like it was an accident. “Stop laughing at me. Why do you always laugh at me?” She made her *I’m sorry* face.

Nina put on the same expression she had before she took her wig off, “Wiley, do you ever feel like this at all?” but, this time, she grabbed the doll’s head on her desk and spun it around to look at him. The eyes were surprisingly not creepy, even though they didn’t blink.

He tried to laugh but couldn’t. “Yes.” He stood and made the doll’s head stare at Mom.

“Wiley, is something wrong today?”

“No. I’m always okay. Why do you keep saying my name like that? Is it because you feel bad about saying it wrong before? Mom does that.”

“No one is okay all the time.”

“You said I’m unique.” Wiley didn’t know where to look; he wished the office had a window. His hands felt like they had been dipped in sweat, so he wiped them on his maroon corduroys. Remembering the witch stone, he took it from his pocket and rubbed at it. The wall on his right that needed a window was the color of a seashell’s inside, a soft pink getting darker toward the middle.

Nina searched for something on the top sheet of her papers, couldn't find it, brought the page to the back, tried again, again. Her eyes got speedy and she brought her face back up to the room, making her dangly earrings swing. Wiley could see tiny versions of himself sitting on the bench inside the earrings' teardrop openings, his feet swinging with the beads. "What do you want to be when you grow up," Nina asked.

He didn't even have to think about it. "I want to teach birds to migrate. Sometimes both of their parents die and they don't know how to get anywhere." He pretended to scratch his beard on the right side of his chin like Grumpa. "I think I would be okay though." The web of squishy skin between Mom's left thumb and pointer was scratched pale by her right pointer; Nina's desk doll kept staring.

"Wiley, your mom tells me you've had a hard time with friends?"

"She says a lot of things. Sometimes I have to tease my buttohole before it will poop. She told me to do it because she says it always works for her. Is that okay?" He wanted to see Mom's face, but it was looking into her wall's sunshine.

"We can deal with that another time. Do you have trouble with friends?"

"My mom killed my imaginary friend. She told me to choke him until he died. Until his tongue was loose and floppy. She told me I couldn't put Nesquik on my vanilla ice cream if I didn't choke him." He slid all the way over on the seat towards the door; his right arm dangled over the chair's.

Nina's face was tense. Mom tried to talk but Nina gave her a look. "How about friends who are not imaginary?"

"No, I don't think so. Sometimes the imaginary ones are mean, but only sometimes." He paused and had a lightbulb moment, then looked over his backpack, "And Mom used to be my

friend.” He said it just to see the face he knew she would make, but then she made it. He could feel the bouncy ball he was smushed into inside pick up speed, bouncing around the walls of his body, faster faster faster. He rubbed at the witch stone. Faster. When he looked back up, Mom was still wearing the face.

“Wiley, these imaginary friends, they—”

“Everyone thinks I’m so stupid. That’s why she brought me here. I’m not stupid; no one ever believes me.” He closed his eyes real hard until he saw constellations and rubbed them away with the witch stone in hand. “I’M NOT STUPID. I KNOW THEY’RE NOT REAL FRIENDS. THAT’S WHY THEY’RE IMAGINARY.” He squeezed the witch stone, stood up, and threw it hard into the painting behind Nina.

Glass rained behind him as he ran out into the hall. Mom and Nina yelled—not as loud as the glass smashing but louder than the rock hitting the squiggly-lined carpet.

It was stupid to punch a wall again, so he didn’t. There was nothing in the hallway to break, and he promised Mom he wouldn’t hit himself anymore. As he rubbed the tears out of his eyes he found his face framed blue in a square on the floor and stomped on it. With each word a new stomp, and with each stomp the sound of breaking all over again: You stupid stupid stupid stupid stupid stupid stupid stupid stupid . . . He did it again with the other foot until it hurt:

STUPID STUPID STUPID STUPID STUPID STUPID STUPID . . .

Wiley turned around; Mom and Nina were there, very close, both of them crying, Nina lightly, Mom harder. He stood on the square and looked into Mom’s *I’m sorry* eyes, “I couldn’t help it. I didn’t want you to have to get another job.” He pulled on his hair, but not too hard because Mom said that counted as hitting. “I didn’t want to be mad at you anymore.”

Email Transcript from e.corover@brainfunerals.com to [ultra@Brain Funerals.com](mailto:ultra@BrainFunerals.com); 22 May 2022:

Hey, just wondering if you'd have any use for this given everything that's going on right now. I didn't want to script it just to have you reject it like last time. I know we haven't done skits like this in years, but it feels appropriate. Maybe this fruit's too low-hanging though.

BackstabbersConsortiumColloquium.pdf

At the Biannual Backstabber's Consortium Colloquium

A glass room in a convention hall. Check the gathering's banner; the pedestal surrounded by a giant crescent table; the other tables and the place cards with no one behind them. See the man looking for permission to stand on the pedestal, then the three members in attendance: Benedict Arnold, sipping tea in the leftmost seat; Brutus, assessing the sharpness of nearly two dozen knives in front of him; and Judas, who shuffles administrative papers and straightens them neatly in a bundle. Judas drops the papers vertically on the table for attention, then again for affirmation.

Judas: Hello all and welcome back to the biannual Backstabbers Consortium Colloquium.

Brutus: Biannual? I haven't been to 4000 of these. No, at bi-annual I'd be at 1000 or so.

Judas: Oh, wait, biannual? Diannual? Whatever. Not a great turnout this year. No Mir Jafar, no Vidkun, no Ephialtes. Qin Hui is delightfully busy as usual. Tut, tut. But what can you expect from this bunch?

A moment.

Judas clears his throat and cocks his head in an admonishing teacher's tilt.

Judas: Item the first. You are one U.S. Senator [NAME REDACTED], allegedl—

THE SENATOR: Trip. Sometimes, The Triple. I am the once, twice, thrice, [NAME REDACTED].

Judas: Oooooook. Allegedly of the [REDACTED] party, who, after applying for candidacy, has since been accepted as a candidate and is now applying for membership. Further says here that you are now stonewalling certain guaranteed rights for . . . well that seems a little tasteless for our modest little group but perhaps we're lacking those same sociopathic qualities that allow you to stand here today. Let's call that ideological diversity.

THE SENATOR endorses this latter suggestion with both thumbs and a shrug like *hard work pays off*.

Judas: You are also the annual recipient of half a million dollars in brib—um, hush money—er compensation for services rendered (I don't know, it says here we shouldn't say bribe)—from a [REDACTED STAPLE OF REGION] in your home state of [DIRECTION REDACTED] [STATE REDACTED] to deter political activism over the climate crisis. Wait a second. You can do that in America? Mr. Arnold, why exactly did you defect?

Benedict Arnold: Mayhaps progress has been made.

Judas: Anyway, should you be accepted into this exclusive fraternity you shall be knighted with the very knife I stabbed Jesus Christ himself with.

Brutus: Oh come now, you'd never get your hands dirty!

Judas: Well, I would have gutted him eventually, I swear. You lot just beat me to it.

Brutus: Ah huh. While I have the floor—and this has been bugging me for some time—I can't help but think the title of our group is a slight to me.

Benedict Arnold: Slight? It's in your honor if anything. And Judas, why are you affecting those weird Britishisms?

Judas: Haven't the foggiest.

Brutus: Let me tell you, there were TWENTY-THREE stab wounds in Julius and I certainly didn't put them all there.

THE SENATOR: Only 23? And only in one man? I have usurped my responsibility and the hopes of at least 200 million Americans yearly for decades now. Nay, monthly! Nay, weekly!

Judas: Daily.

Brutus: Minutely.

Benedict Arnold: Secondly.

THE SENATOR seems to nod in multiple directions at once.

THE SENATOR: I am the wolf's lamb alright.

Benedict Arnold: I'd say more like a doorknob masquerading as a coat rack. Due emphasis on knob. And hold on now. Over 200 million? Well that's quite impressive. But if we do it by percentage, by percentage I betrayed all of America. That's exactly 100% all of them.

THE SENATOR: Hey, I'd personally stab each one of them in the back but a lot of them are pretty difficult to betray.

Judas: Oh who cares about America. I betrayed all of Christianity and the followers of its subsequent denominations for over two millennia.

Brutus: That doesn't count. A lot of them are your followers now anyway.

Judas: Slanderer! Murderer!

Brutus: Traitor! Usurper!

Benedict Arnold: I've no one to yell at!

Fake outrage is all part of initiation. Benedict Arnold, Brutus, and Judas all take a freshly sharpened knife from Brutus's array and descend upon THE SENATOR, who petulantly whips out a [DIRECTION REDACTED]-[STATE REDACTED] an assault rifle, its automatic capability achieved through home modification to the strictest legal letter.

THE SENATOR: I doubt if any of you foreign-types have ever tasted its sweet coal-dust-free air before, but we have a saying in good ole [COLLOQUIALISM OF DIRECTION REDACTED].

Benedict Arnold: Where were you hiding such a thing? And what's a [REDACTED]?

Brutus: Judging by what comes out of his mouth, it's not too hard to guess.

THE SENATOR shoots Brutus a slow 23 times. Benedict Arnold only gets it once, and then, perhaps the greater insult, the rest of the now lukewarm tea on his face. THE SENATOR leans down to kiss Judas on the cheek, a perfect bookend to his notoriety.

Judas: It was a joke. Trick...knives.

THE SENATOR: I know.

Leaving a parallel trail to the one he made upon entry, THE SENATOR tracks blood through the room as he exits, his mission not yet completed . . .

Walking by a local legend

Well, anyway, here he is. An oracle. Vitiligo-afflicted and hand up. It's always up. Seems like it always has been. Some of the more athletically confident jump to high five it; those who fail slap his wrist but he doesn't feel it. Matter of fact, you could slowly saw the same wrist off and he'd only feel his body sway. He doesn't recognize me anymore, not the me he knew when I was a kid, but he can always see through my disguises to identify who I am, if not who I was. Today I'm in a beard, but last week he even recognized me in a different disguise. Yet he's never recognized the face he saw so often when I was young. He tells me I should be happy to keep losing things, that the last layer to shed is yourself. You never know when he will pop up. Taking a swim in a pocket of unfrozen winter water. Leading a charge at a Red Wings game, hovering cross-legged in Highland Park below the canopy of the kitsuragi tree. He's in the tunnels a lot, too. He's always there in the strange and dark places, his arm raised like the statue of liberty to shine whatever light you require, be it for visibility, morality, future. You'll know him when the light is nonexistent and the water trickles and the rats squeak; you'll know him on the freddie sue bridge before you jump and he'll tell you you better be prepared to drown, because that fall ain't killin no one less you hop off the devonian bridge head first onto the plateaus of rock. You'll

know him after a death in the family, where his raised arm is like a lighthouse to someone on turbulent water. You'll know him when you pick up the gun and he'll give you something to aim at that's not yourself. He'll be there when you pull the trigger, his arm like a silhouette of gallows against the streetlights. You'll know him when you need him, that is, if he's not somewhere else and the rumors turn out to be false. I hope you don't need him, because in all likelihood you'll end up knowing me too.

The Webster house, 1999

She holds my hand so tight. Tighter when she screams. Looser when she tries to run inside.

It is snowing, the flakes flit along with the ash. And really that's all there is to a fire.

Blue. Red. Blue. Red.

Moments of purple.

Blue.

Red.

Police lights paint the scene.

I hold M's hand as our house burns.

My father never made it out. It's likely he died before the fire really even started. There's no reason to do an autopsy, even if the town could afford it. It's clearly an accident. And a tragedy. I help sell the story. I pump M's tear-stained hand with my own when I can feel anyone looking. I accept maybe every third concerned glance with a weak keeping-it-together look. I'm being strong for M, they must think. It's supposed to show a depth of sadness and unwillingness, but also how I'm world-wearily embracing my new history.

I know now I should have been affecting shock, the way M wasn't—affecting it, I mean. But it's easy to make mistakes. These are complicated emotions. But I have to feel them. I have to make it true. And not just the outcome, my involvement. I did the right thing.

The letter burned with the rest of our past, first into my mind, then with the rest of the house.

My father wasn't really there anyway.

I don't know if I should regret it yet. I don't so far. The fire is just a cover. I had to do it. The things the letter said . . .

I find it unsettling that I am no kind of suspect. To me, it's so obvious. People keep looking at me as if I died instead of my dad.

7 April 2023, late

M had no idea E had been in Rochester for so long. There's no great journey to make, no time to prep physical and psychological composure. Just a fifteen minute shot down connecting highways using the blandest of American transportation. The argument with Cass wasn't pleasant, but she didn't understand. M wasn't being hypocritical, this situation was nothing like Cass's return to her parents, whose replacement child is openly bi (and they just loooooove her). Seriously, what the fuck happened there, after fourteen years of radio silence did they just call Cass and be like, "Well, our new favorite daughter's kind of, uh, like you. We categorically still do think you're going to hell, but we could talk sometimes again, we guess." M knows full well that it was Cass who had reached out to them, but that fact is incompatible with their love and understanding of her. Point is, M chose to leave, Cass walked the plank.

M's heart feels like it's colliding with their chest. It's all percussion. Bom. Bom. Cymbal crash. Bom. Bom. They expect that at any moment it will hit the panic button and eject out of their body into, and maybe through, the windshield, landing with a moist thump, like a soapy sponge at a scout troop car wash. Can't crank the wipers on that.

A dragon's spine of bridge over the highway

There's that thought that occurs—well, recurs—in her mind, all throughout the drive. How to complain about something without using the scene, mood, people, whatever. Everything's content, was the unmistakable recurring thought. The neighborhood had a certain indefinable Old World charm, indefinable except for the ivy scribbled on the side of the homes, the canopy of wise trees hanging over the narrow streets, mountains of brick suggesting comfort and safety, houses upheld with columns: doric, ionic, corinthian; or, DIC, the mnemonic

M gave Cass to remember. Style scales with age. Of course, M wouldn't use Old World in a broadcast, too pregnant a phrase for the audience. Too suggesting of—

“There's a fucking highway between the street?”

So she's on the wrong side of the highway. She redirects herself in front of E's apartment building on the corner of S. Washington, across the street from Nathaniel Rochester's now historical home.

It's cold but not freezing.

Should she go in? She has to, doesn't she? To come all this way . . . not, of course, geographically, but this entire path to this moment, ten years in a brutal influx of memory good and bad, regression and resolve.

Fuck this, she's going home.

Her phone vibrates:

From E: [Coming in?]

M looks up to see E waving from a window on the third floor.

She texts back: [be right up]

Late Summer 2003.

“Can I be 10,” Rez asks.

“Fine with me. If you can do it, you are allowed,” says her father, Dr. Decora.

“I just asked if I can. So I’m 10 now?”

“Are you?”

“I don’t think so, but you said I could be?!”

“But you can’t?”

“No.”

“Interesting.” Dr. Decora pulls into a tree-shrouded parking lot of Ellison Park.

The floodplain is a dance floor. Mons was re-reading Lord of the Rings before today, and imagines the gargantuan sycamores coming to life all ent-like. This section of the park is almost an island, sycamores guarding all edges by creek.

Mons paces in front of a whiteboard so big it needs to be rolled. He has practiced this interaction all week. Showmanship is so much more difficult than math. But the practice has paid off, and if not perfect, there’s no one around to tell him otherwise, and it’s not so bad for the 10 y.o. autodidact.

“Ty. Think of a number from 100 to 999. I’m going to produce two of them, side by side..”

“Wizard,” Ty replies. Ty and Mons have been saying this all week and only the two of them at the camp have any notion of what it means.

“Do you have it?”

“Uhhhhhhhh. Ok.”

“Locked in?”

“Yes. No.” The numbers pop out in his mind: 349. “Yes.”

“Now,” Mons says, massaging his temple. “Multiply it by 11.”

Ty crumples up his face. He hasn’t exactly picked the easiest number for lightning mental calculation, but he gets there with the trick Mons taught him earlier: multiply 349 by 10. Easy. Multiply it by 1. Now add. Or he can go left to right: we have 11 of 300, 11 of 40, and 11 of 9. “Oook. Wizard,” Ty says.

“Now then,” Mons taking a slight risk with scenery chewing, two fingers on each temple, looking as if he’s reading the ether, says “Now, multiply that by 13.”

A calculator and whiteboard lies there seductively by the picnic table. Ty tries not to look, as if even glancing over at it would fry his eyeballs. Ok. 3839...times ten...times three...add...

“Do you want to come up to the board and —”

“No. Wizard.”

Mons looks Ty right in the face. Squinting. Discerning. Little finger pistols holding up his chin. He smirks, like he just figured out all the world’s secrets, displaying an arrogance he doesn’t own. “Take that number. Multiply it by 7.”

This computation takes slightly longer for Ty than the other two. The numbers are big, but the left to right trick Mons taught him helps. So. 49,907 x 7...Start from the left. 7x4. So 28. 28 ten thousands...63 thousands...plus 63 hundreds...plus 49...349,349. ”No...” It’s possible Mons’ eyes are brighter than Ty’s. “Gotta tell me. Gotta tell me,” Ty begs.

“A magician never reveals...” Mons says with mystical hamminess. “But, I will tell you if you figure it out.”

“But then I don’t need you to tell me.”

Mons smiles sagely and points at the whiteboard, handing him a marker. Ty goes to work, doing all the math again on the board. After a week at the Math and Science camp Mons put on, Ty knows a little how Mons thinks and acts, and starts to suspect that Mons may have been putting on an act, given the digit-conditionals and histrionics. He gives Mons a grin and writes 100 on the board. He finishes the calculation quickly: $100 \times 11 \times 13 \times 7 = 100,100$. Ty looks back with one last dagger, then writes $7 \times 11 \times 13 = 1001$. “So we got a thousand 100s, and then a single 100. So a three digit number will always show up twice when we do the math.”

Mons awkwardly bows, the practiced part of his performance long passed the edge of practiced material. Concedes defeat. Mons and Ty shake hands with mock formality. Ty’s dad had pulled up a little while ago and walked over to the pavilion with Rez. They both sit back at the farthest table with the shriveled camp counselor (who only got the job through the guy fucking Mons’ mother).

Ty’s dad and sister are seated at a picnic table that looks like it goes through a carwash on a regular basis. The camp counselor swoops in to spoil the camaraderie. Holding the marker and eraser in his right hand, he pushes the white board, over the grass and to the parking lot. As he makes his way to the car, his legs and arms swing in a way that makes it look like he’s slow dancing with the whiteboard. The three Decoras and Mons are under the pavilion, where Ty makes introductions.

“This is Myfather.” Ty says “Myfather” as if it’s one word. And there’s a jaunty bit of emphasis on Father.

Mons reaches out to shake hands. “Nice to meet you, Mr³. Decora.”

³ Dr.

Just before the greeting is returned, Ty's sister, "DOCTOR DECORA⁴."

"You don't have to call me that, young man."

Under her breath, "Yes he does."

"And that's Tourette's," Ty says.

"Terès," says Terès. "TUH REZ."

"That's what I said."

"NO NO IT'S NOT."

"Enough," says Dr. Decora. His voice is loud without effort. It's a sound that enters the body and rattles around, an echo without a cave. The three children are rapt and temporarily motionless.

Mons can't tell if it's Ty's jaw or his eyes that make him look clever. Ty isn't sure if Mons is taller than him. Dr. Decora lets all the kids sniff each other, so to speak. Teres can't figure out what's so annoying about mons, but she's starting to think it's just that he looks aglow.

"Wow," Mons says, "You sound exactly like Darth Vader."

Ty's laugh is summoned from nowhere. "Yaya. Exactly. My. Father. Mons," doing wheezy deep-voiced impressions of James Earl Jones, "He is my father."

"Your voice could stop a train."

"Take heed, Mr. Mons. Take heed," Dr. Decora says with fake severity, his eyes making the joke obvious. He turns to his son and says, "It's not about your sister. It's your usage. I've told you before. And it's the perpetuation, the perpetuation."

"I'm not sure what the words you said mean, but I think I know what not to do again," Ty says, which seems to satisfy his father.

⁴ See?

“Mons, who was that young man helping out all week? How’d you find him?” Dr. Decora asks.

“Oh, I found him through Donald Anka; the camp counselor is one of his relatives.”

“Donald Anka? How do you know him?”

“My mom.” Mons turns to Rez and Ty in the backseat. He’s like Rochester’s Scrooge McDuck.

“Also white,” Teres says.

“I don’t think Scrooge is white, those are just his feathers,” Mons says.

“Yaya you’d have to pluck him.” Ty chimes in.

And then tar him. And then feather him with his own feathers, Dr. Decora thinks but does not say.

“Dr. Decora, want to play a game? I bet you’d be good at it.”

“In here? Sure, if you have one.”

“You play with license plates. The first three letters. Like the one in front of us is TJY 1215 — huh, that’s the year of the Magna Carta!”

“Trajectory!” Ty says, still fresh in his memory from their frisbee physics day at Ellison.

“Ya, really good. The letters just have to be in order of the word you use. But they can’t be next to each other.”

Dr. Decora tries to make it fair. “Sounds fun. Teres, you’re on my team.”

“I want to be on my own team,” Teres says.

“Then you got it.”

Mons, rather eagerly, “I’ll be on your team, Dr. Decora.”

“I might need all the help I can get, Mons, but I don’t think you do.”

“ANGER,” Teres says at the license plate AGR 8416.

“Nice. That’s actually a perfect one. There’s a letter between all the license plate letters, so you get extra points.”

“I miss when all the cars had the Statue of Liberty on them.”

“Yeah, you can’t even see the skyline with these new one.”

The summer and fall are now close enough to shake hands. One can feel a sense of change in the air, the smell of a late summer heat. All of them pack up what’s left from the camp. Ty, Mons, and Dr. Decora all schlepping two bags each. Five were placed in the trunk. Mons carried the last on his lap, coveted supplies. Teres runs over to sit behind the driver’s seat. Ty sits behind Mons, face in the gap behind the stick shift the entire ride.

“Dr. Decora, this is a really nice car.” Mons says.

“Why do you sound surprised?” Ty asks, cutting in before his father’s reply, resting his arms on his hand and his elbow on the thing in the middle between the passenger and console.

“I’m not surprised just...”

“Just what,” chirps Teres.

“I wanted to do the math and science camp because—this is from a book—the de facto segregation of Rochester has created a fissure that breaks out from the middle, and fractures into neighboring municipalities, leaving the inner-city an island, broken off from that patentedly American desire for suburban comfort and safety. More more more more more etc.’ we—”

“You remember all that?”

“I remember a lot of things,” Mons says, eyes not connecting around the seat. “My mom brought me to a memory competition once.”

Teres wants to ask why anyone would go to something like that. And if it's knowing the ABCs, or a times table, or the pledge of allegiance. But there's something about Mons that makes her chew the inside of her cheeks. Something annoying. He looks squeaky. Like clean. His clothes seem brighter. Not just clean. New. Not just new. Enhanced. The darks are darker. The whites more brilliant. He looks shiny. He looks like he just took a shower and put on brand new clothes. He has the sheen of someone who grew up with a silver spoon jutting out of every orifice.

Dr. Decora has a lot to say. His voice sounds like he's reading from stone tablets. But he remains quiet, observing the dynamics occurring between his children and this new boy.

"But," Mons continues, "We only had three people come, including you. Whose parents all drove cars like this. I really did try. I have some ideas for next year that I think will help."

"So do I," Dr. Decora says after a while.

"Really?" Teres crosses her arms petulantly.

"Absolutely. There'll be a hundred kids there. I'll assist you myself. We'll set up a bus or two or three. You're doing good work."

"Waste no more time arguing what a good man should be. Be one." Mons says "That's Marcus Aurelius."

"I'm familiar."

"Is that what you're a professor of? Philosophy?"

"How'd you know he's not a doctor doctor?" Ty asks.

"He is a doctor doctor, idiot. Just not an M.D.," Teres says.

Ty smiles. Dr. Decora, patient as a gargoyle, is curious how Mons knew as well, but allows his children to end their bickering organically.

“You’re right,” Dr. Decora says, “How’d you guess?”

“Your eyes aren’t going anywhere. Aren’t running away. The medical doctors I met were always going somewhere else with their eyes.”

You can take the route that cuts under the highway or you can shoot over to exit 3 and make a U-turn. Dr. Decora opts for the u-turn, where Ty makes speed racer revving gestures sounds. Teres looks annoyed in a way that’s obviously crafted—coy and obviously so. Being eight is hard, especially when confronted with random unexplained hatred toward someone.

Dr. Decora drives down the highway. Ritzy health club. Jesus sign. Billboards. Under the bridge that gets a lot of panhandling action at the light just before Roclin’s. Takes a smooth left on exit 19 by the library, passes the movie theater with the world’s stickiest synthetic flooring and onto a street just blocks from Highland Park, home of the Lilac festival.

Sycamores preside over the streets, especially down Crawford, almost one in front of every house, which Dr. Decora always takes a detour to enjoy. At last they pull up to the sizable Decora home, a colonial near yet another hospital at the intersection of Mt. Vernon and Rockingham.

“Alright. You all get changed and washed-up and get ready to help with dinner.” Dr. Decora says.

“I didn’t bring any clothes.”

“Not to worry Mr. Mons, not to worry. Our oldest, Delon, was about as lanky as you at one point, so I think we’ll manage.”

“I’m almost as tall as Mons!” Ty says, not to be left out.

Dr. Decora does not respond, which makes a smile bloom over Teres’ face.

Ty and Teres race upstairs past their mother, Renee, but Mons stays behind to chat.

“Very glad to finally meet you Mrs. Decora,” the young man says. “Thank you for letting Ty come to my camp. He said you almost didn’t let him. But I think he’s my best friend now, so thank you very much.”

She wears a purple sweater. “Well it’s nothing, Mons,” she says. Mons holds out a hand for her to shake, but instead she gives him a hug. “My boy hasn’t stopped talking about you all week. How’d he do at the camp?”

Mons puts a histrionic hand to his face, an old old scholar, craggy and weary. “I’ve taught so so many kids. But Ty is really smart. When I first started I was,” here he stands in place doing a zombie walk, hunched backward at an oblique angle, “slow slow slow. But Ty is,” his posture snaps up and fights the air with fast accented cobra strikes “fast fast fast. He is my greatest student.”

“That’s what I like to hear. Now why don’t you go upstairs and Ty will find you something clean to wear for dinner.”

And you should see how fast this kid gets up the carpeted stairs.

Much to the chagrin of Teres, Taco Tuesday had been moved to Friday after Ty suggested Mons come over for dinner after camp since Mons had literally never had a taco before. In the Decora home, they do an assembly line for tacos: shell, cheese, meat, lettuce, cheese, pico, sour cream, hot sauce/taco sauce. After assembly they sit around the dark wooden table, under gorgeous amber light coming in from the kitchen windows, and thank each other for helping make this mountain of tacos. “And thank you for being a guest in our home, Mons,” Renee says.

“Thank you for having me,” Mons gives a smile to everyone at the table.

“Oh my god, let’s EAT,” Teres says.

There's a CRUNCH from Ty's seat, making everyone laugh.

Mons, suited in an old "Roelins the Roc" t-shirt, doesn't eat with the vigor of his friend or Teres as he's finding out he has that unfortunate thing where cilantro tastes like soap to him. And while he does not devour the taco, he eats with evident gusto, as to show his appreciation for being allowed in the Decora home.

Ty pauses somewhere on his third taco to ask, "Mons, did you win that memory thing you were talking about in the car?"

"Oh . . . I did. It doesn't have much to do with me. I just remember. I don't have to try. It doesn't feel fair."

Renee smiles and says, "Don't be hard on yourself. Be proud of your qualities, Mons."

"The man who presented the award called me a genius. That made me feel terrible. If I was a genius, I think things would be easier."

"His dad died last year," Ty informs. Even Teres gasps and looks sad.

Dr. Decora puts his hand on Mons' shoulder, "I'm sorry for your loss, Mons."

"Me too," Renee says.

"Me too," says Teres.

"It's okay. It's hard. But it's okay. It's okay."

"Thank you so much for your hospitality, Mrs. Decora."

"Don't you mind that, Mons. You're welcome here any time. Thank you for coming," she says, hugging him.

"Really?"

"Really, really," Renee says, which makes Mons hug her again.

Renee is the only one who does not pile into the car, and Ty and Teres know guests sit up front, plus Mons is the tallest.

About five minutes into the drive to the palatial homes of Spillsbury Parkway, Dr. Decora interrupts Mons and Ty talking about the overstabity of a dinner plate if you try to throw it like a disc to say, “MALFEASANCE. MALFEASANCE. Right there. MFC 3946. Right there. Put me on the board!”

“That’s big points Dr. Decora!”

Teres’s eyes bulge driving into Spillsbury Parkway, she had no idea houses got this big or this nice around here. These places even have hedges, tall and rectangular, something out of *Alice in Wonderland*. Older women powerwalk under the ending light of the day, passing others who walk expensive-looking dogs with bows in their hair. Something about it makes her regret how zealously she consumed her tacos.

“Just this one on the left, Dr. Decora!” Mons says.

“That’s the biggest one yet,” Ty says. “Can we come in?”

Mons is glad his face is in shadow. He looks to his feet. “I don’t think my mom would allow it. She doesn’t prefer it. She doesn’t like people in the house. I’m sorry.”

“That’s alright, Mr. Mons. Let me walk you in,” Dr. Decora says, opening the car door.

Mons and Ty commence a complicated handshake that ends with them chuffing like horses. “I’ll see you soon! Promise,” Mons says.

“You better!”

Mons holds out his hand to Teres, “And it was great meeting you.”

She shakes it. “Nice to meet you.”

Dr. Decora opens Mons' door "Who let horses into my car," he says. They walk on the stone pathway to the front door together. Hand on Mons' shoulder, he asks, "Do you have a key?"

"Mom won't let me. I have to knock on the door and wait. I know where the keys are though, if I needed them. She wouldn't be happy I know though." Mons knocks.

They wait a minute. Knock.

Two minutes. Ty and Teres make faces at them from the car.

Dr. Decora knocks now, and sounds a bit like muffled thunder. This seems to have done the trick, as a light turns on just behind the door.

"Eh, you're late," the woman, hard-faced, drink in hand, says.

"Sorry mom."

"I'm sure it's not your fault for once," she says. "Get in and go to bed."

Mons waves to Teres and Ty. "And thank you Dr. Decora. Good night!" Mons runs into the house and up the stairs.

"Wonderful son you have there, Ms. Wright-Ulv—"

"It's just Miss Wright, thanks. Poor Miss Wright never found a Mr. Right, as it'd be incestuous."

"That's good. Never heard that before. Say, Miss Wright, what are you drinking tonight?"

"Never you mind what I'm drinking, *Dr.*"

"Alright then. I was hoping we could exchange contact information. Phone numbers, and I have your address now. But it looks like our boys are going to be friends so—"

"Friends? With my son? We'll see about that. Surprised he didn't give it you already. Kid loves to just spout numbers in his sleep, always reciting these needless facts and things. Yeah, I

suppose, but don't get your hopes up. My son is hard to like, I'm finding. No friends yet. We'll see I guess."

"Like I said, he's a wonderful boy."

"Yeah, yeah. Sure. Well what'd you think of my little boy's charity work. Such a little do-gooder, this one."

"It looked like he needed a little help with the project."

"Needs a little help in a lot of ways."

"And I'd call what he's doing community work, not charity work."

"Same thing, *Dr.*, same thing."

"Well, it's natural to have a difference of opinion."

"Is it?" Miss Wright says, swirling her glass with half-melted ice.

"Anyway, nice to meet you. And you have a good night now."

"Yeah, sure. You too."

The light behind the door turns off by the time Dr. Decora is back in the car, where he maintains a gaze on the door. "Ty, if Mons tells you anything about his mother that he asks you to keep a secret, don't; you tell me immediately. Better yet, you have him tell me."

26 March 2026

All this young man sees walking up the steps is the peeled skin of an orangutan and a human arm using an orangutan arm to scratch a hard-to-reach spot on its back, which is why the young man makes a sound like AHHHHHHHHHHH and reaches for a wall he starts to clutch along with his chest.

Brenda whips the mask off, drops the orangutan arm, turns around, and pats the air above her with one human hand and one orangutan hand, “It’s okay, it’s okay, I’m human.”

He hunches over, hands on knees, panting and laughing at the same time. “Holy shit, I had no—sorry. Wow. Are you—you’re the orangutan?”

“In the flesh, kinda.” They both laugh, one of them in relief. “Yetta is just the name on the cage. The suit is suffocating and super uncomfortable, but it’s not as bad as some of the shit I used to have to wear. Uhhh, are you okay? Can you breathe? You need a—”

The guy is still recovering, understandably, his back against the wall. He coughs and holds up his finger in apology. “Had no idea.”

“Yeah, no one comes in here.”

“I just went where the schedule said, damn.” He looks like a werewolf who’s between phases. His eyebrows are so thick they have flyaways and he has hanging from his face a densely-thicketed beard.

“I’m Brenda. Um, since you can’t talk, I’ll do an icebreaker. Interesting fact about me: I won several gold medals in Junior Olympics. In gymnastics.”

. . .

. . .

“Sorry, I’m Talbot, or at least that’s my nickname. Interesting fact—pretty hard not to notice with me though—I have this weird condition where my facial hair crawls like vines up to my eyes; when I bother to shave them, to give myself a *natural look*, I get a 5 o’clock shadow that looks like I’m crying eraser shavings into the beard. Still—” Talbot gasps “—reeling here. I caught the end of your show. You ever worried about falling?”

“Nope.”

“Not even a little bit?”

“Not even a little bit.”

Talbot scrunches up his face, preparing to ask an obvious question. “So yeah,” he says, “How the hell did you end up . . . uh, doing this?”

There’s a lot of near-success in gymnastics. Everyone seems to know an Olympic athlete, someone working the entertainment circuit for a high rate, a trainer of the talentless children of wealthy parents, and Brenda even knows someone who’s a regular in Cirque du Soleil. And for each one of those talented few, substantially more who are just like Brenda. She spends—unfortunately? fortunately?—no moments dwelling on What Could Have Been. She suffered no injuries and endured no freak accidents; there was no mystic force molding her life to conform with Greek tragedy, there was just a list her name wasn’t on. So at least she was spared unrealized potential. She wasn’t good enough. And once it became a fact, it was easier to accept.

“Basically, being a human is hard. We’ve all strayed so far from our original purpose. So I went up to the owner and told him to devolve me, and, here ya go, that’s what he did.”

“And you picked an orangutan?”

“No, not really, it just suited—”

“So, if you could pick anything to devolve into, what would you pick?”

“I’m only an orangutan because—”

“I’m thinking, kangaroo. Smaller brain, but a small target is good. Tougher kicks too,” he leans back, standing, and bounces on his knees, “and they’ve got that tailstyle strength.”

Brenda scratches her face with the orangutan hand. “You wouldn’t get to choose.”

“You mean like it’d be assigned at random or?”

“I mean you would go revert to the order or class or whatever that preceded this one.”

“So you mean like, Blastoise couldn’t devolve into Charmeleon?”

“Right.”

“But could devolve into Warturtle.”

“In this scenario, yeah.”

“So all I’d have to do is catch and find the evolution of a kangaroo and then I could devolve into a kangaroo?”

Brenda hasn’t had a lot of silly conversations lately. It’s been a lot of deep-breathing, spreadsheets, and treating her body like a machine.

Talbot, converting to a more business face, “But really, this is wild in a couple ways. Is it a secret? Can I tell people?”

“I’m under contractual obligation to not even acknowledge the question you might have asked. What question? I’m sure I don’t know.”

“I get it. I get it.”

“But my mom likes to tell her friends I was a near-Olympian gymnast, so feel free to tell people that.”

Talbot seems to be struggling with the desire to ask a question along the lines of, “Wouldn’t a near-Olympian have something like endless opportunities to coach or teach or

something like that?” But politeness compels him to veer toward more acceptable first-meet etiquette. The question he asks is immaterial, pabulum, automatic, so let’s turn the wheel and answer what he actually wanted to ask: Why yes Talbot, a near-Olympian would, but consider this interaction from her last tutorial gig:

A girl about the height of a potted plant had been dropped off by her mother, Vera, an old—let’s say—competitor/acquaintance, who called the girl Clay. Brenda was asked to call her Claire, the little girl. And that day Claire, blueberries tying up her hair, was supposed to be on the beam, a task, to her, much like standing above the Grand Canyon on a line of dental floss; it was something to fall from, not jump on, and definitely not to jump on to perform marvelous tricks.

Claire stood on the beam, four feet from the mat, and every time her body slapped down there was a thunderclap in her head when it smacked the blue safety mat, made out of that material that so well retains the scent of sweat. Claire was always surprised to find that she hadn’t disintegrated, and was only mildly relieved when she stood up to climb back on the beam as Brenda ordered.

“I can’t do it. I can’t do it,” Claire said from the beam.

But it really wasn’t all that hard. They were just warmups. If you can’t cartwheel on the beam you might as well just save your chalk for the lines of the softball field. “I could do it when I was your age. Actually, I was a lot younger, and I could still do it even after I whacked my head on the beam five times in one session. So you don’t have an excuse.”

Poor Claire froze there on the beam, as still as the silhouette figures painted on the gym walls. Poor Claire on the beam, static, and for some reason wearing a tutu. Poor Claire, up there, alone in most senses of the word, unresponsive to inch-away clapping, snapping, WAKE UP.

Vera showed up after a half hour, already peeved Brenda hadn't delivered Claire curbside, and the girl was still on the beam, not blinking, not making any sound at all. Brenda's hand was waving over Claire's face as Vera walked in already calling for Claire the way you do a dog, "Clay, Clay, come on, Clay, time to go." And when Claire didn't dutifully turn around and sprint to her, she asked Brenda, "What in the sweet fuck did you do to my kid?"

"I have no idea, she just . . . stopped." She was this close to saying *like an unplugged vacuum*, but was able to restrain herself.

"This is what I get for being nice. I hear you're struggling, and I'm kind enough to throw you some charity and, fuck-up that you are, you fucked up my kid."

"She's just not very good. I hate to say it but, ya know, she thinks too much."

The mother looked at her as if she just burped the words in Morse code. "Yeah, I can see how that'd be a problem for you."

"Oh, god. Remember when we were doing bar? She has no air sense. And when she was doing trampoline, she doesn't see the foam pit as foam, just a pit, just death below. Her brain is just uncooperative, I don't know."

"And you're supposed to be coaching her on how to get over it. But I suppose that the uncoachable student will also suck as a coach."

"You fuck up, you fuck up, and you keep fucking it up until you get it right. That's how I got it right. It's not this big classified secret."

"And at which stage would you say you're in now?"

"Come on, she's a little fucking headcase, how's that my fault?"

"Oh, Brenda, if anyone is going to talk about being a headcase—"

“Holy shit, I’m sorry your career was a blip, but this girl is going to be an entomologist or something, so you’ll have to try again and have another kid if you want to live your dreams through one.”

The mother of course then backhanded Brenda, all four rings on the hand sporting gems. And poor Claire was still there in the background, stuck.

As you can imagine, the incident didn’t provide a strong reference in the community, and though Claire was fine, as confirmed by the paramedics, she and her mother found a new coach.

Brenda guesses, now that she’s thinking about it again, it was a bit harsh-sounding. But, well, see, she’s not exactly Amy Boorman or the great Pat Summitt. All of this is too complicated to relate now, so instead of answering Talbot’s question, Brenda says, “Anyone ever tell you that your head is upside down? The hair is supposed to grow on the top of your head, not the bottom.”

He checks a watch that isn’t there, “Gotta get back to work, real animals to attend to.”

“Yeah this is going to sound insane—” Brenda starts, noticing Talbot’s smirk at her orangutan hand, “—but I have to go to a party tomorrow for my only friend out here, and I can’t really take her to her own party, so do you want to platonically go with me?”

“We can go Socratically if you want.”

“I don’t think that makes sense.”

“I don’t know either, but sure, I try to do something new every day, and going to a party with an orangutan is pretty new. She’s probably the level-headed one in your relationship, right?”

“Fucker. Do you have a suit? Jacket? Maybe some rain and an umbrella?”

“For what?”

“It’s just the occasion. Sort of like a funeral.”

“How like a funeral?”

“Not all the way but, like, not none of the way.”

“What? You burying her imaginary friend or something?”

She shrugs and tells Talbot not to worry about it. They trade necessary information and he leaves, which finally gives her time to take a shower, change into her zookeeper uniform, and walk to her car holding a bucket labeled `Hazardous Waste` that she brings her lunch and uniform in every day.

BRAIN FUNERALS: Episode 1, skit 1

A twinkling sound as the show begins. Flowers forests elephants oryx. Dissolve onto a woman in a white dress, on a fine spring day, presumably in her backyard, digging a hole in the ground. A person-shaped package lies tightly-wrapped next to her.

The theme begins:

Wellllllllllllllllll

If I knew you were comin

I'dda digged a grave

Digged a grave

Digged a grave

If I knew you were comin I'dda digged a grave

And shoved you into that hollllle!

The woman digs as the theme plays, but, as it loops, she becomes more animated, singing, dancing. The body wrapped beside her also begins to dance, or, rather, flail.

Rounding out the theme song, there is clapping to the beat as the woman kicks the body into the hole. Finally, in silence, a close-up of the woman slicing open her head with a scalpel, lifting her brain carefully, cutting the stem, and tossing it into the hole. She fills in the hole as the opening credits fade.

The show begins with two Lovecraftian horrors seated on a blue chintz sofa, a tentacle of each horror snaking into their own Mulder brand beers.

One Lovecraftian horror's fixation on the TV is interrupted when their stomach gurgles with fury. It looks down, looks to its friend, "Like many great artists, I'm starving man, let's get something to eat."

"Yeah yeah. I could go for something myself."

"You feeling anything in particular?"

"Uh, we had Italian last night but let's stay on the Mediterranean. How about Greek?"

Lovecraftian horror #2 says, "Coming right up," and walks over to the kitchen, grabbing a stool and placing it in front of the sink. It opens the ochre cabinet to reveal the planet earth, maybe about Lovecraftian horror beachball size. When the earth spins to the Mediterranean Sea, Lh#2 reaches into Greece and pulls out, amidst chipmunk screaming, two human beings, roughly the size of a cheeseburger each. It walks back into the living room, and tosses the larger of the people to the ruminating horror. Together, the horrors hold up their food and do a cheers in the voice of their species and custom. Lovecraftian horror #1 makes a face and spits out a backpack in disgust and says, "Eugh, tourist."

14 September 2013

After the introduction, M says, even flatter than usual, “I dunno. I’m just shitty today. I’ve been meaning to do this one for a while...I did it in some class I don’t remember. It’d be nice if I were capable of something like more uplifting every now and then. Not a poem. It’s short. Whatever.” M switches vocal stylings, going from sulky to a hopeless version of the voice people use to talk at pets.

Chulem’s over there on the Always Rock. It feels bad to leave such a cunning and brave raccoon on the side of it. He was always the first one to figure out the new locks on the cans the humans put their food in. And now, I guess, he’ll have to be put in one; or the coyotes will sneak over and carefully drag him back, looking both left and right as they slink back under the bar that guards the Always Rock. I hope the coyotes get to him first. We’re not supposed to bring back any of us who die on it. The elders always tell us we leave them as a warning, but I know it’s because we can’t lose any more of us.

Hul is what we call milk, and Chulem is what we called my brother because of the white spot on his back paw. Like he stepped over a spill carefully with his front paws and got his tail all wet with carelessness. It was a family joke to pile on him with the other kits and try to gnaw the spot off.

That’s how I know it’s my brother I’m looking at.

He told me he was going to scout out a new home. He said he knew the patterns of the things on the Always Rock, but I never noticed anything like that really. Except for when the metal carriers go slow and stop on the side and humans come out with water on their faces. Maybe they ride it, like how Chulem used to climb on my back when he was a little kit. He’d sit on me and I’d

prance around like the humans do with horses. I guess they leave the carriers on the Always Rock too.

No one seems to know where it ends. There's just that grassless distance about three grown trees long from our wood to the wood on the other side. There are more humans on our side every day. That means more food in the cans for us, but it always means less of us, eventually. That's why Chulem wanted to get across. He said there aren't humans over there.

I'm not like Chulem, I don't see a pattern. And the carriers go too fast, even if I did see one. During the light, I've seen the carriers change course to hit other creatures who try to cross. They try to keep us from the other side, so there must be something there. The carriers come from both sides. But there's an island in the middle with another guard that the carriers can't go through—I've seen them try. Carriers also come from the other direction on the island's other side. Have to remember that. Sometimes deer get across, but I never see them again to ask about the other side. Sometimes they never get there; in the middle of crossing, it seems as if a new light itself comes from the dark, totally off schedule. I think it's the confusion that gets them. And they just fall there.

Like Chulem.

But sometimes even that part of them never makes it to the side and the carriers leave pawprints in them. It's hard to know when the carriers run without the false light, so I wait for the dark.

The first time I try I become very scared, but I look over at Chulem for courage. I will do this for him. We need somewhere safe. I wait until the decoy light, a human light, can't be seen from many trees away. The dark is quiet. I take all of Chulem's speed with me as my paws slap slap

slap across the Always Rock onto the island. I'm halfway to crossing. I wait. The brightest false light I've ever seen almost tricks me into thinking I'm home, and I get so close to scurrying over to meet it. But I hold my tail until it's time to cross, the same trick I always use to remember my plans. I look back over to Chulem. I want to clean him, he is so dirty now—he always found a way to be dirty, and I always clean him. It's not time. Now is the time TO CROSS! My paws sound like fast water as they slap against the Always Rock, and it sounds like running still when I'm on the other side.

It's not safe to wander in the dark in new places. I sniff around and find a creatureless tree to rest in, far away from the Always Rock and Chulem. The sounds of the carriers—giant squeaky bird noises and tall trees falling over—feel so close.

I wake up with the true light. This wood is the same as home, except it goes up and up a hill. I hold my tail, thinking. I will go to the tallest tree at the very top of the wood. I will find a new home.

The light is always busy at home, the webut the light in this wood is very quiet. No birds say hello or ask me why I'm out in the light like they normally do. No skittish groundhogs jiggle with hurry into their hole and flash their big silly teeth at me. They can live anywhere it seems, even with humans.

At the top of the hill I stand up and sniff, not wanting to climb up the wrong tree. The one I climb up is crunchy and very thick, like the home tree me and Chulem used to live in. I climb and climb—not wanting to look up, not wanting to look out—to the very top until there's no more room for paws. I don't want to disappoint Chulem, but it's very hard for me to look. My

eyes find the bottom of the valley and I'm glad none of my family is around to hear the sound I make.

The humans are here, too. My brother was wrong.

. . .

M says nothing after the last sentence, just directs the camera to point outside her dorm room to the trees, where helicopter seeds and night fall. Someone has transcribed the story and posted it in chat. Ten minutes after people stop typing "RIP Chulem," and "fucking stupid people," and "CHULEM YOOU FOOL," M ends the stream, the silence at last melding into her own.

I'M FIRED UP, YOU FIRED UP?

HOO

I'M FIRED UP, YOU FIRED UP?

HOO

Ralph J. Ruggerio bats cleanup, pitches, and plays shortstop for his little league's All-star team. He has overheard his coach call him the best player in the county.

Ralph's teammates cheer and chant as he walks up to the plate, his eyes on the opposing team's pitcher, who has been throwing serious gas for a twelve-year-old. The pitcher's birth certificate, called into question due to his size, cleared no problem. Not that Ralph would care. Ralph is happy to take on and beat everyone. He's hitting something like .775 this summer, which is absolutely kooky bananas according to his coach, who gives him a ride to all practices and games.

I'M FIRED UP, YOU FIRED UP?

HOO

I'M FIRED UP, YOU FIRED UP?

HOO

I'M FIRED UP, YOU FIRED UP?

I CAN'T HEAR YOUUUU.

Ralph's reputation has preceded him, and has drawn the opposing team's coach to the mound for a chat about tactics with the nearly six-foot pitcher. This excites Ralph rather than makes him nervous. Ralph is one of those kids who loves a challenge and will not fold to pressure. Ralph is un-self-conscious the way great players are. He has a short memory

failure-wise, and almost nothing can shake him when he digs into the box and does exactly one smooth perfect warm-up swing.

The chant begins to shorten.

I FIED UP, YOU FIED UP?

HOO

I FIED UP, YOU FIED UP?

HOO

Overinvested parents in the stands feel a bit of calm, a bit of excitement with Ralph at the plate. He's the best chance that their six hour roundtrip drive won't be wasted with a loss.

I FIED UP, YOU FIED UP?

I FIED UP, YOU FIED UP?

I FIED UP, YOU FIED UP?

The first pitch is a ball outside.

NICE EYES, KID, a teammate says. YEAH NICE CORNEAS, KID, another says.

I FIED UP, YOU FIED UP?

HOO

Ralph fouls off the second pitch way down the right field line. Late. Yep, the kid on the mound throws pure gasoline.

GOT A PIECE GOT A PIECE KID

Ralph is also not the type of player who is so stubborn or proud he will not choke up on the bat to give him a faster swing. He digs his back foot as far back into the box as he can, chokes up on the bat.

YOU GOT EM NOW RALPH

I FIED UP, YOU FIED UP?

HOO

Third pitch is a ball.

OH HE'S SCARED OF YOU NOW RALPH. HE CAN'T HANG

I FIED UP, YOU FIED UP?

Ralph fouls another one off, this one an absolute missile off the aluminum bat, a home-run by distance, but the ball falls into the parking lot, causing an opposing team's parent to run out and check their car wasn't dinged.

YOU GOT HIM DOWNLOADED RALPH

YEAH RALPH FINISH THIS KID OFF

Ralph calls time, steps out of the box, to let the words set in for the pitcher. Ralph does have him downloaded. He can see the ball leave the pitcher's hand, see every spin of the ball, the pitcher is his.

I FIED UP, YOU FIED UP?

Ralph locks into the box.

The pitcher winds up.

"Oh hey, Katherine!" he hears from the bleachers behind him.

Katherine? His mom never comes to his games, no matter how close. He looks behind him for a split second to see her frown and her flaming left hand, looks back to the plate and

RALPH DOWN

But the ball has already hit Ralph perfectly in the left eye. It has knocked him out and his helmet off. Knocked him out in front of his mom, who is not among the adults who call for the ambulance team mandated to be at the game for safety. Ralph is unconscious on the ground, not

knowing his baseball career is over, not knowing that he will lose the sight in his left eye, not knowing that his mother will leave the field before the ambulance takes him away.

7 April 2023

Weary and worn, the mat outside E's apartment door looks like W E _ _ _ _ E. Like you just know you're gonna have a good time: WEEEEEEEEEE. M is thinking about how to knock. There's the shave and a haircut she could use, or the cop knock, or the rather neutral knock knock knock. Her decision doesn't matter, the door opens.

"Don't mind the cats," E says.

"Oh my gosh who are these beautiieeeeess?!" M says, sliding through the small space of the open door while E nudges the cats gently with their cane.

"The slightly chunkier and darker one is Alyosha. His brother here is Mario."

"Oh my gosh you're so cute, you're so cute, why do it, why why are you so cute!"

E smiles. "They can't help it. Don't forget to squeeze their chubby cheeks. And be hard when you pet them, they like it rough."

"They've just been fed, so they're reasonably docile. But be careful, they're vicious, bloodthirsty beasts." E hobbles away down the hall, "Do you want tea?"

"Sure, whatever you're having!" She hates to acknowledge E's general historical good taste when it comes to tea.

"You still do two sugars!?" E says from down the hall.

"Only if you have the little cubes." An old joke of their mother's. M mentally kicks herself for being drawn in so close this quickly. Already reminiscing a minute in.

"It's the only one that tastes right!" E laughs. "Well, come on in through the kitchen and I'll show you your room."

M hadn't said anything about staying, but she did bring a rather huge bag. She scratches Mario and Alyosha behind the ears, grabs her stuff, and walks into a softly lit hallway with

blonde wood floors. Massive ducts hang from the fourteen foot ceiling, high above the lights, which are expertly distributed to provide what Hemingway called a clean, well-lighted place. Every inch of E's wall is covered in framed pictures, even some of those lovely ones where they're looking at a much older woman and laughing together, the kind of picture that makes her feel warm despite not knowing the woman in it.

It feels different than she thought it would. It's been ten years since she's seen E, ten years since she accused E of murdering her father—their father, though over the years she began to exclude E as a sibling altogether. And yet the jokes, the warmth, the cats, the tea, all of it is pleasant.

M pats the part of Mario's back just before the tail and, without looking up, asks, "So how long are we just not going to talk about it?"

"I planned to wait for you to bring it up."

"Course you did."

"I didn't think you'd get to it quite so soon, maybe after tea."

"Did you kill him?" Her voice raises, "Did you kill him?"

"I—"

"I know you have an answer, I know you've thought about what you're going to say. Are you going to tell me the truth or are you going to fucking lie?"

"M. Look at me." She does. "I killed him."

"You fucking piece shit I fucking knew it you piece of fucking shit." She continues to swear like this through tears while pulling out her phone, about to dial the police."

"Don't you want to know why?"

“WHAT THE FUCK DOES THAT MATTER? I don’t care what he did. I don’t care what anyone did, you killed my fucking dad you—”

“I did kill him. Because he killed our mother.”

She stops fumbling with her phone to look at E, “You hideous fucking lying fuck.”

“I have a copy of it, the letter she hid in your room before she disappeared. You remember how dad couldn’t find it? How pissed he was he turned all the way around from Ithaca to look for it? How panicked and terrified he was?”

“What the fuck do you mean, a copy of it?”

“It burned when the house did.”

“You fucking burned our father alive. What the fuck is wrong with you.” She grabs her luggage and makes her way to the door.

“I remember every word.”

“Sure you do. Surely no bullshit added at all.”

“I want you to read it.”

“Just more lies, Wiley, just more fucking lies.”

“I’m done lying to you. I just told you I killed our father. What else can I hide?”

She drops her luggage. “I don’t know. I don’t know. I don’t know. I don’t know. I just can’t believe anything you say. You do it compulsively. You just lie all the time. You always fucking did. No one ever believed anything you said.” E’s illness seems to arrive at full force with these comments, the skeletal gauntness, the pale blue hue around their face, the weight on the cane. M’s never seen him so pathetic. His aura, his downcast eyes, all new to her, all the more reason to hate them. “Wiley, it’s—”

E smiles. “No one calls me that. I miss it.”

“Then I won’t say it anymore.”

“Do you want to see the letter?”

She does. She absolutely does. Even if it’s fake. Even if it’s 100% complete and utter bullshit. Of course she does. If nothing else then on the off chance she might connect somehow with her mother, even if it’s only through delusion. “Is it bullshit, like everything else you say?”

“This letter changed my life. Not just in one way, in every way. I gave up knowing three people the moment I finished reading it.” E says this looking into the lamp in the shape of a person, its limbs loosenable and movable into various slapstick positions. “It’s the most important thing in the world to me, apart from you.” M shudders and does not try to hide it. “I told you. I’m done lying. At least, I’m done lying to you.”

“Give me the fucking thing, then⁵.”

⁵ E here. Makes one wonder if now is the time to share the letter. I’ve been mulling the prospect . . . I think maybe it is too early, or, rather, too easy to give it here. We’ve only just started. It was only world-shattering to me. To you, another contrivance, another convenience. My life fell around me in tiny puzzle pieces, and I’ve never been able to put it back together. But to you, to you they are just words.

27 March 2023

Brenda's chin catches the steam of her breakfast tea, the tea now at such an agreeable temperature she has to resist the urge to chug. Between sips Brenda hoovers up the seeds off her fingers from her morning half bagel. Her freezer is full of the bottom halves of everything bagels. They're just not as good, the bottoms. Not as many seeds to suck up. Out the foggy window of her kitchen nook, there's a squirrel caught in a bit of a conundrum. She can see the squirrel working out how it's going to descend the neighboring rooftop. Brenda finds the line pretty quickly and watches to see what the squirrel comes up with. The squirrel, though, is either calculating or in total paralysis. Brenda stands up and calls out through the crack of the window, "Crawl down to the other side and there is a tree just off the bottom floor's roof that you can jump to." The squirrel does exactly that, though not as if it heard her. If she could be any animal, it'd be a squirrel, a habitually under-selected choice in favorite animal discussions.

Pierre, the body-building gardener with the pageboy haircut, is over at the house too. It's funny to see his mammoth hand try to not squish a raspberry or lift a thread-thin weed out of tight soil. He waves to her with a hand that looks like a stop sign even from over here. Cupping his hand to his mouth, not that he needs to, "DID HE GET DOWN?"

"YEP."

"GOOD, WE'RE RIPPING THAT TREE OUT TODAY."

Brenda endorses the situation with her thumb, but not her heart. It's a beautiful tree in bloom and—

It's her mother, calling on a Monday. Brenda taps the phone's panel to speaker so she can stand and watch any squirrel activity out the window in the morning light. "Hi, Ma."

"So what are you doing?"

“What?”

“What are you doing?”

“What? You called me. What do you want?”

“Well then, well then. So hasty. I just want to know when you’re coming home.”

“Ma, I’m home right now.”

“Oh ha ha. Well, I was wondering, the cement sidewalk in front of the house has had a little earthquake apparently. It’s all shattered and dusty. And I was hoping you would do your mother a favor and call over there and complain. I want you to say that you’re a Mrs. Dubrowsky.”

“It’s concrete, Ma. Cement is the Nesquik powder, concrete is the chocolate milk.”

“Well then, look at you. You start working for the encyclopedia? Or was this a revelation received during your quarter-life crisis?” Brenda puts her face in the tea’s steam. “That’s what you called it right, your quarter-life crisis.”

As the end of her career transformed from a mirage to a statue, at 23, she was sort of manically collecting random skills and certificates. Hence her being a notary, an amusement park ride inspector, a certified phlebotomist, hence her bowling a 300, hence her additional certifications in ceramics, professional friendship, happiness coaching, advanced ceramics, hence her ability to solve a Rubik’s cube in 38 seconds, et cetera. But still, this conversation is going better than the last when her mom said that quite a lot of her brain was missing. She must have meant her mind, though. No one went in there and dug out pieces of her brain. The stroke might have shocked part of it, but really it was pieces of her mind that were, like, deleted. “Yeah, I think I called it a quarter-life crisis.”

“Well,” her mother says, “You can lead a horse to water, but, like, if it starts to drown, I mean, do you know how hard it is to save a drowning horse?”

“Are you drunk already? What is it this morning, bottle of red? bottle of white?”

“How could you say that? You know I’ve—”

“Sorry, sorry, yes. Probably just that brain-eating tapeworm or somethin—.”

“Your own mother.”

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry.”

“Something gives me the feeling that you’re not. But I’d rather you accuse me of the tapeworm.” Pierre waves over a goodbye from the garden, his bear claw clutching weeds. “So, yeah, so, Brenda’s husband—that’s my cousin Brenda, not you—”

“Yeah, I know not my husband.”

“Well, of course not, with your body—”

“Yes, Ma, only pedophiles could find me attractive.”

“You’ve heard that before?”

“Only from you, Ma.”

“Huh, I guess I used to be a smart lady, then. “

“What? I *was* married.”

“Well, you can’t really count that one can you?”

. . . “You know what, Ma, you’re right.”

“Well, that ain’t news.”

During the silence, a spider’s web in the corner of the window billows like a sail. You wouldn’t think they’d be able to withstand wind like this, but there it is, not a strand out of place, rising and falling, almost breathing. Brenda gets tired of interpreting the static. “Ma?”

“Oh sorry, forgot you were there.”

“Thanks.”

“Well, we’ll catch up soon . . . Oh! And the number for the road people should be five-eight-five—wait, that’s yours—”

“Ma, that’s probably on you to fix.”

“Excuse me?”

“I’m pretty sure your municipality gives you, the homeowner, the responsibility to fix stuff like that.”

“Oh fine. I’ll look into it. I should call over. Okay, bye.”

“Bye.”

“Just one more thing. At minute 17:25 of the movie *Bridesmaids*, as Kristen Wiig’s getting out of this shitbox car she drove over, and she’s handing the keys to the valet, you can hear a Lesser Goldfinch, in what is supposedly Milwaukee, which, just let me say, is like seeing a damn Flamingo in Antarctica, or having a herd of reindeer block traffic in Arizona, my daughter win Olympic gold.”

Brenda and her mother once planned to get matching tattoos, a rough mother-daughter equivalent of a couple who decide to have a kid to save the marriage. “Forever Entwined,” it was going to say. As the artist finished up the second dancing shadow figure on Brenda’s back, they held up the cloth dabbed with her blood like an inkblot and asked her what she saw. Before Brenda could answer *mask*, her mother did something your ideal mother just doesn’t do: she bolted. She couldn’t, she couldn’t, she couldn’t, she really couldn’t. Brenda doesn’t remember an apology anywhere in there; after that, Brenda had pretty much given up, but here she is, communicating, and pleasantly enough.

“Brenda?”

“Yeah. I’m here. Just have nothing to say about birds.”

“Well, of course not. You never wanted to learn. Even though your mother has a Mockingbird imitating a jackhammer all hours. But I’m not going to say nothing about it. Alright, well bye then.”

“Great. Bye.”

“It’s just a poor mother’s hope that her daughter will try to enjoy her life. It’s bad, but I—I was just so proud, and I couldn’t help it—but I snuck a peek of your diary after your win in Junior’s—”

“You what?”

“I know, I know, it’s marginal at best, but I’m your mother you know, and I needed to know more about you to be a better one.”

“Ma, you can’t just—”

“We were all so proud and happy and it should have been the best day of your life, I mean, that’s a medal on the international stage isn’t it, and but the only entry from that day said, and I remember because I just, the expectations, they weren’t let’s say aligned with what I found. Your only entry from that beautiful day was, ‘Am I the answer to myself?’ “It was hard on both of us. I just thought you should know. Anyway, I’ll let you go.”

“Thanks. Best of luck with your sidewalk. Alright, bye.”

“Fine. Fine. Bye. Then.”

“You said it first.”

“No I didn’t. But wait a second, actually, one second, so hasty today you are. How’s my lovely Adriana? Her birthday’s tomorrow, in case you forgot. She give you any big news?”

“Age is good. And no news I know of.”

“Oh hmmm well, okay.”

“Oh hmmm what? You know something?”

“What do I know? OH! I actually did have a reason to call. I’m setting up a little venture and I want to know what you think of the name. It’s a holistic business and we’re going to call it, Rodriga and I, Whole Wellness. Now, what do you think of that? You want to book an appointment already, don’t you? I have just the spot two Tuesdays from now, 5 sharp.”

“Ma . . . at Whole Wellness, are you going to be selling creams?”

“Obviously we’ll be selling creams.”

“Very surprised Rodriga didn’t catch this.”

“Oh who has ever known what Rodriga’s thinking?”

“Hopefully the woman she’s going into business with.”

“That’s me isn’t it?”

“That’s what I was told. Anyway so, you’re going to have creams . . . creams for your holes . . .”

“Well, yes, of course we’ll be selling creams for your ho—oh—OH. You’re heinous, people aren’t going to have that association.”

“I’m people.”

“So you say.”

#

Things have gotten better with her mom though. Things have just gotten better really. Brenda’s stable with a stable job, the breathing exercises are working, and, yes, despite her historical

friend retention rate being notoriously low, she's still making friends. Asking for more would be greedy.

Preferring to match her fingers' nail polish with her socks, her bare feet today call for no polish. The best way to remove it really would be to rip the nails off—useless, vestigial things—but she goes for the cotton ball method instead.

Brenda could give a geology lesson with her laundry basket: hasn't washed anything in the bottom layer for over five years. When she moved, she just tossed the thing on the truck, preserving the sedimentation. During these last years she's been able to coast on what was left of the money she made when she was projected to be a very noticeable star on the gymnastics horizon. She reached her peak around what she has to admit now was like twelve or thirteen. Relative to her age, though, she really was a wild prodigy and talent, and, at twelve, was dubbed the Tiny Tonya Harding of gymnastics and could be seen smiling on the cover of no fewer than five magazines: two sports, two teen, and, standing in the back, uncredited, Horse Illustrated. Given the fact that Harding was the kind of woman to go around breaking the kneecaps of her should-be teammates, the comparison didn't seem all that flattering. But, fuck all that, it's Monday, so, it's time to ramble.

#

Brenda's car is customized only with a bumper sticker: Ask me about my lobotomy :)

All the best car rides begin with sour fruity mints. She shakes the can and it makes a dismaying jangle. She opens the lid labeled MANY—two mints left. Tries to toss the mints from the can to her mouth but they keep getting stuck around the rim, and she's not going to pick them up, her hands are disgusting and heavy with nail polish remover. Even though she's failed

twice—three times—she will get these—four times—mints—five times—in her mouth. Knew you could do it, Brenda. So proud.

First, she drives two towns over to the liquor store and tapes bright blue AA pamphlets on all the carts in the store's corral. Anyone receiving it in error, if they're having a party or something, will understand the gesture. Brenda has these little urges and sometimes she has to suffocate certain parts of herself. She'll be walking around a winery with a wine slushie or something and the hum of the electric fence will beckon her over and she'll think, Yeah, I can take the voltage. On her way over to the fence, she'll throw a plastic bag on that part's head and kill it, usually in time. Here, though, her pamphleteering urges win out.

By the canal, the sun has nothing much to do but stare at her. The Erie Canal is pungent this afternoon, carp are in spear range, and people are feeding birds things they're not supposed to eat. Her snack, fat-free pudding, tastes like it has clinical depression, and she notes to not buy it again. That unpleasant metal tang from the cheap spoon she eats with doesn't help much either.

Brenda strolls up the canal walkway to the library, where she yields to the compulsion to make that subtle Jedi wave in front of the automatic door to open it. Libraries have about three possible smells: musty, old, warm. This library's warmth is why she comes here.

Going upstairs, a couple of tweens do a double take, and whisper, but not very successfully, "*Omg I thought that was Brayden,*" Just ignore it.

"*OMG, omg, I thought that was my mom.*" Just ignore it.

Brenda puts a gap in a bookshelf's smile, taking out her favorite book. It starts: *There are these tiny little creatures that walk all over my face. They're everywhere. They haven't been around long but, as a species, they behave as if they were present from the beginning.*

Brenda doesn't get any further because the person at the table behind her is breathing over the sound of their own headphones; and the kids in front of her are whiSSSSpering so loud and at such irregular intervals she can't concentrate.

Knifed into the table she's at are the words: *You're not going to make it*. It's refreshing. Most furniture marginalia is positive, and overly so. Delusional, stupid, the "You are loved," kind of stuff that's easy to say to the faceless.

She grabs a QUIET AREA sign, slaps it onto the kids' table and spins it like a red pinwheel. The kids are too surprised to do anything. Brenda reshelves her book next to *Ethics of Contentment*, and heads to the bathroom.

Geese gaggle overhead, must be a hundred of them to be this loud. Through the window Brenda sees them land soft as snow in the canal.

Every time, seriously every time, there's—no joke—someone shitting in the bathroom here, and quite loudly. But instead, this time, someone cracks what has to be a beer—what else can you drink only in the public library bathroom? She decides to not cop-knock on the stall and scare the shit out of them, though it would be the best place for it, and instead takes a remaindered AA pamphlet out of her bag and tapes it to the mirror.

Brenda again takes her favorite book off the shelf and sits at the table with the quiet sign, recently vacated. Flipping to a random page: "When do you become yourself? Has it happened yet?"

Over by the Aa-Be shelf, a boy comes out of a rentable room he's being tutored in, and tells a girl slightly older than him (eight, nine) that he's going to the bathroom. The girl, feet swinging, is in deep focus with her sparkly pencil and makes no reply. The boy shuffles closer, gets on tiptoes, and says, "You know I can't go by myself, right?"

The girl rolls her eyes all the way to the squiggly-lined carpet, then toward the boy, “Do you want me to go with you?”

“Boys or girls room?” he squeaks. Brenda wants to warn them to not use the Ladies’, but that’d be weird, and the sound would carry through the entire floor, probably even into the bathroom. Both of them, the boy a bit shorter, come up to the bookcases’ third shelf, out of eight.

The girl’s a shepherd bringing home a sheep when she relays the boy’s hand from hers to the boy’s tutor. In a tone unmistakably *ugh, kids* the girl reports that she had to go *in the boy’s room*, then sits right back down after the hand-off, resuming total focus. Brenda’d like to recruit her. It’s rare to be so psychologically solid, she knows plenty of adults who can’t even—And why do certain people choose to bring their salad into the quiet section of the library? All that crunching. A thunderstorm of crunching. Then there’s the post-mastication clean-up where the tongue flicks off the teeth, off the mouth, making a sound like a stalactite dripping into the pool of a cave. Stalactite right? . . . Stalac-might trip over them . . . Hang stalactight . . . yeah. And then they finish munching and just . . . leave. So it was the only reason they were even over here, they were just over to fucking crunch. And they leave their salad bowl with, she guesses, three spinach leaves and the dressing around the bowl like abstract art.

She needs to eat again.

She gets a little itchy when she’s on an off day. In a life without off days, which perhaps contributed to her early exit from gymnastics proper, it’s difficult for the non-routine to become one’s life.

In line at Hungry’s now, a little box restaurant half-wallpapered with literal dollar bills. This old guy who has little to do but pick the skin tags off his eyelids for the rest of his life is

suddenly in a hurry, “I’m next,” he says, cutting her in line. The cashier makes eye contact with Brenda and covertly grins. When Brenda’s up she buys a small fry with panther sauce. The machine tells her to *Insert or Swipe Card Quickly*, so she inserts her card and quickly removes it, resulting in a canceled attempt to pay. Eventually, Brenda’s fries are handed over and, as she turns to the door, the little cup of sauce on top flies off and its brains spill all over the floor. The cashier behind the counter says no worries, handing her another sauce, and puts down a wet floor sign, whose bottom looks like the peeled end of a banana. She follows a pair of curdled-looking legs out the store and down to the canal where she has to tiptoe over to a backless bench through a canalway polka-dotted with the many fecal incidents of the area’s waterfowl, many of which do not look like they originated from healthy specimens.

The wood and metal picnic table she sits at by the water has been harboring a discarded orange for about six weeks—apparently the water birds here aren’t too concerned about scurvy. She’s not great at birds, but the way this duck is looking at her, unsubtly side-eyeing her french fries. Like, c’mon, you know better. You’re not supposed to be eating fries. Another duck is basically vertical in the canal. The sun does what it does, up up up, down down down down.

And what about all those geese on the other side? Can they tell each other apart? She sure can’t. And why are all these water birds segregated? Ducks over here, geese over there. Does that mean she is siding with the ducks? What if they are the perpetrators? Should she spend some time over on the other side to get in with the geese? She really doesn’t know. What if the ducks see her over there and think she’s a traitor? Then she won’t be in with the ducks. But the way these geese behave . . . there’s no way they’re the Good Ones right, with all that hissing and aggression? Surely they were the perpetrators of this West Side Story our-side-your-side bullshit

right? These geese are extremely intimidating. She thought only snakes and popped tires hissed. Are they some hybrid? Some snakebird? Birdsnake?

Toy dogs march a bit of a goosetep on the other side of the canal with all the low-rise restaurants. For a Monday, there are way too many people here. This is the kind of person who wears things like high-heel Crocs and thanks you when you say their dog is beautiful, and it's not altogether clear if they're doing it on behalf of the dog or themselves. Although, what's the dog gonna say?

Brenda issues a warning to a buzzing mosquito. She doesn't want to kill it, but it starts sucking the blood out of her forearm anyway. Someone should really teach these things about consent. SPLAT slaps the shit out of it, then gives it a burial at sea, or, rather, at canal. She wishes she had a match and a little bow to give the creature a proper sendoff, but you can't expect much from an impromptu burial.

Out of the rich August light, the kind that just drowns you, there's this luscious voice behind her, one of these entrancing voices that, in decades past, would grace radio; the voice says, "Good girl," and Brenda is hit with an acute pang of arousal. Turns out the voice was talking to a dog. Fucking Brenda. What the fuck, Brenda?

16 October 2010

At this point in their life, E had the affectation of flicking a lighter on and off. And on. And off. The sun had been smashing off buildings all day, but, as it now wilts, the flame casts the only light in the room. E rocks in Dr. Decora's favorite rocking chair by the window, looking down. Kindel sits on the bed with Dr. Decora. They talk and laugh as if it's any other day. Maybe it is. E flicks on the lamp behind the rocking chair, making a kind of 2d halo behind them you see in old paintings, warm, gold. Kindel comes over to the window and closes the blind on the setting green and gray of outside's sycamores. E does not remove their eyes from Dr. Decora, who is still laughing at Kindel's last joke, looking at the ceiling. E flicks the lighter. On. Off.

"Wiley, what are you doing over there? Never known you to not be the center of attention," Dr. Decora says. E gets up and peeks out the window, where the Decora's front door light has come on just below, then sits on the bedside opposite Kindel, so that all three of them make a bit of a division sign. "You're acting like you're the one dying, kid."

"You don't have to do this. You don't have to do this right now at least for sure, they might—"

"I'm dead, Wiley. I'm dead. Part of me knows it's not right. Nearly broke down last night when the kids all left. Renee knows of course and, if I'm honest, has the harder task of us, pretending she doesn't know, waiting for it to happen far away."

"You already said goodbye? So that's it. That's fucking it?!"

"Wiley!" Kindel admonishes.

But Dr. Decora is as cool as ever, smiles, "That's it."

"I set the IV up and everything already. All you need to do is press the button," her expression not acknowledging the gravity of the action at all.

“Jesus christ. I’ve changed my mind, I’m not doing this. I’m not just going to sit here and kill you, I refuse.” But all this is said from the bed, with no hint of E moving. “What about your kids, Dr. Decora. And the basically adopted one. What the hell am I supposed to say to Delon or any of them. How can I act like I don’t know.”

“Wiley, I’m already dead. I have a choice. To burn to death in pain for a few more days or a week, or to go like a leaf falling on a slow-moving stream. Which one sounds like me?”

“Please don’t boil this down to practicality.” E goes to the window and looks out. It’s funny how sometimes the city’s lighting will suit an occasion, like it knows, as if they were all on the set of a movie. There’s nothing like it, when the light is tinted fall, everything shaded yellow and red.

There is something strange about Dr. Decora going so gently into death. As long as E has known him, he never failed to seize an opportunity to give a lesson. One of the more obscure times, E was talking about the abyss of depression, how easy it is to forget that the descended darkness does in fact one day ascend, eventually, how some people think depression is getting really sad, playing that melancholy Charlie Brown Christmas music: deh nuh nah neh neh, deh nuh nah neh neh, deh nuh nuh na nuh nuh nuh, de nuh nuh nuh nuh nuh. For some reason Dr. Decora let E hum a few bars before he went on to say, “I suppose some depressions are better than others. The Great depression, like the great war, was given its title because it was believed to be the final one, the war to end all wars. Well they were wrong about the wars and they were wrong about the depressions. These near-sighted mistakes are easily forgiven, it wasn’t necessarily their being naive. There’s a gravity of history conveyed there that is hard to communicate in other ways. It is less a lack of foresight and more about the horror of it being legitimately unimaginable to them, something that needs to be experienced to be understood.”

And that was the end of the conversation, and they proceeded to walk back to the University of Rochester, up the Genesee River Path, then, too, under some spectacular fall light, birds asquawk, asqueak, aflutter, bikers passing, runners passing, college kids smoking weed, leaves falling and being caught without breaking stride, in all this they walked mute until Dr. Decora said goodbye to E back at Kindel's office, beside his own, where E sat down to get started on some papers he was behind schedule to grade in his duty as Kindel's teaching assistant.

Reverie breaks here with Kindel's hand on E's shoulder. "C'mon she says," walking them both over to the bed, it doesn't have to be right now. We have all night to say goodbye."

8 April 2023

“Cass, I can’t even make eye contact with people on TV,” M had said. “I have like a social hangover. Stomach’s all nodose⁶. Being with so many of your friends is expensive—bodily, mentally . . . monetarily. I just need a little recovery time.”

Fine, Cass thought. Take it, I support you, *I love you* . . . But M left as soon as the call came anyway, making hypocrites of them both. She’d resurrect Laozi, have a seance for Gwendolyn Brooks, dig up Susan B over at Mt. Hope, what-fucking-ever, so long as M took the advice to not go.

And now there’s no one here. No one else. Cass lies in bed like a pushed-over statue, contending with the leftovers from last night’s dream. Her shoulders turn into anchors when she tries to get up, keeping her under waves of crumpled blankets. Cass reaches over to M’s nightstand to get the mirror from the drawer; sometimes Cass will find M lying in bed, peering at herself as if confirming existence. Cass holds up her face in a caricature of seriousness and points at the mirror. “Get up. GET. UP,” she admonishes, but it sounds like she’s talking to a dog. Oh well. She’s still way ahead of schedule for today’s plans.

An argument or disagreement usually requires at least two parties, so Cass wasn’t calling it either. It had been more like trying to convince a train to stop moving by being really polite. “Good evening, Ms.?, Mr.?, Miss?, Mx.? Train, would you kindly mind desisting momentarily please so we can hash this out?” By the time you finish your list of possible honorifics, the train has already lurched away.

⁶ This is an M-word. Slips it into conversation whenever possible, much to the irritation of the rest of the room. It means knotty. So, a difficult problem, upset stomach, hair’s consequences after swimming in salt water, anything that makes sense. Luckily, for the rest of us, M suffers from intermittent agoraphobia, or so she says.

So Cass left last night too. She didn't want to siphon any energy from her friends over at the Boa and Arrow; didn't want to sit there in all those memories either. But Cass had spent years finding safe places around the city, so it wasn't too hard to find somewhere to go. Scrolling through an email she sent herself a few years back, she decided to head over to Indulge—first on her list. Indulge had the same name but different ownership, and, judging by all the shirtless men in sailor hats and hemmed trousers, its new spirit probably would have been more comfortable with a name like The Bulge instead. Well, onward.

Cypress Street.

Even though some have been intimidated by the “Queers Only. Straights Will Be Seduced On Sight” sign, Lud's Wig is very welcoming. The bar's owners, thinking they were terribly clever, had already built the place, affixed the outside light, and put up grand opening signs around town informing people of its target client base, when they finally got to the joke of the bar's name: the furniture. The idea was to make chairs with the likeness of every famous Ludwig they could think of and adorn them with a carousel of wigs. They got to two,⁷ two Ludwigs. With the money they saved on lumber and horsehair, the owners instead elected to make renovations, delaying the grand opening. But necessity is the mother of invention and all that.

Now, you can call for drinks from the southwest corner of the building by honking the horn of a '67 Volkswagen Bus, which plays a royalty-free version of Moonlight Sonata. The bus is called—you guessed it—Ludwig's Van.

Regrettably, they couldn't make a pun of Wittgenstein they could also build, so they settled for a giant glass fly bottle, which gets real trippy when you sit in it on Light Night.

When Cass used to go to Lud's, she could be found sitting barside in the one smug Beethoven chair the owners built.

⁷ Go ahead, see how many you get. A lot of the notables were arrested for war crimes.

Last night she was in the library nook, the third corner space, letting Wittgenstein hold the remains of her whiskey sour. Cass brings and “forgets” a copy of either *Little Four Paws* or *The Gaeaiad* wherever she goes—a little guerilla marketing for M.

Not quite upset enough to fail the habit, Cass skimmed through the copy she brought of *Little Four Paws*. She was on the poem that started:

There was a rumor of a glory hole in the confessional.

M’s poems never rhyme, but Cass always finished that line with her own joke:

So that’s why he’s such a professional,

but this time she was interrupted. She saw that a copy was already on the bookshelf, smirking purple around a potted plant. *LFP* is thin but coral reef vibrant, so it’s noticeable almost everywhere.

Feeling thwarted, Cass decided to bid both Ludwigs adieu.

On the way out, Cass visited the community corkboard, to look for something to distract her the following day.

Amidst the clutter of expired promotion and unimpeachable glitter, there was a flyer that advertised a day of mundane scenes from life and its labors, promising normality in a world that is long past the point of believable parody. Attendees, the document informed, are encouraged to interact with the hired actors, to embrace a forced opportunity to treat someone else with kindness.

It was also at Artisanworks, which Cass takes any excuse to go to. M would never want to join in on something like that, so why not use the occasion to treat herself to some anonymous extraversion?

Finally crowbarred out of bed by biological necessity, Cass resolves to stay up, wash her face, and head downstairs for some Moo Moo Muesli, which is inexplicably vegan.

As Cass's stares out the window, her bowl almost vertical eating the last wonderful bites of muesli, she swears she can see the lighthouse in the offing crumble into the lake.

Not wanting that vision to be a premonition, she decides to throw on another layer of clothes and grab up her grippiest boots.

It's a trash-and-sea-glass kind of morning.

Cass likes to maintain a clean space, and when she finishes inside she's compelled to widen her purview's radius.

Nothing has washed up on her and M's trivial bit of shoreline, but there are plenty of public spaces she can poke her garbage stick into. There are also the beaches of the empty houses, where people with names like Giles Dadusky-Fellhelm IV *summer*. It's still too early for those people to send even their caretakers.

The waves are violent today, hurling themselves into the retaining wall, like liquid punk music at a dead sprint.

The airflow is crisp and constant.

She inhales when the tide exhales. The wind on her closed eyes feels like a cleansing. It's really a superlative day for some sand sifting.

Too cold for anyone but her to enjoy, she thinks and rejects immediately.

But it's true; no one else is out here for now. No neighbors or tourists will be out there in the anger today.

Her eyes take her way out where the lake bends over the horizon when a word slithers up the bumpy road of her spinal column. It whispers from the base of her skull, travels around her head, tracing its fingers on the furrowed floor of her brain, and coils up around the brain stem:

eternity

When the moment is done with her, Cass is standing in accumulation. The bulk of it is driftwood, but garbage is an unhealthy part of the composition. Here and there she finds a subjective treasure, a triceratops mold for sand figures or the hagstone she gave M last night, but it's mostly garbage. She could strap a dumpster to her back and still, functionally, get nothing of real importance done.

The bucket she uses overflows, like on every trip.

The trash is to be disposed of, the sea glass is for her. She has a little sea glass side hustle (or inside hustle, unknown to both the IRS and her mystery employer at CENE) where she crafts and frames scenes and portraits in all possible colors of smashed and lakeworn sea glass. She has even started to take requests, which can be solicited and picked up right at the counter.

Her scavenging missions tend to terminate where M took her to the first night Cass stayed over—about half a mile of lakeside to the west of the house.

Cass never would have stood on it if she had seen it from the side. It juts far out like a backwards 7 over Lake Ontario, in one of those natural physical feats you don't believe even when you see it.

It was August, remarkably devoid of mosquitos, and the sky, of course, was on fire. “I always feel vague out here,” M said, “like if I waded in I’d dissolve at the knees. Like my kneecaps are these big alka seltzer tablets.”

One of the things that endeared Cass to M early on was that she actually considered what the fuck M was trying to say.

“I think I know what you mean. Like do you ever wonder where we are?”

“I have an idea.”

“No, I mean—I mean, in the universe. People on earth probably feel they’re in the exact center you know?”

“You’re not on earth?”

“What I mean is we’re not at the center! There is no center. There is no center of the universe.”

“If you weren’t so cheerful that might be deeply depressing.”

Cass’s brain now feels like it’s in rotation. It always happens when M is gone—the monologue, the memories; swimming from remembrance to remembrance in her mind, clinging to them like buoys, until the next day comes.

Her memory’s security is unfortunately rather porous; there’s only one bad thought before her brain’s personal bouncer kicks it out of her mind. It’s short, but it’s enough to affect her mood. Just a single phrase, one always said by her parents with grave warning,

“Cassandra, instincts are Satan’s whispers. You listen to me.”

M, knowing what Cass’s father looks like, and not being able to take it as seriously as someone who has been under his thumb, had tried to suppress a laugh when Cass had told her,

but it came through at the corners of her eyes anyway. As cute as Cass thought it was, it hadn't been very effective.

Cass is in the shower now, standing next to the shelf holding a little cream and pastel woodland of body and hair wash products. It's the stuff you find in all stand-up showers; well, at least the ones in her and M's situation.

Everything but the bat.

The bat and the life-lessonish advice that people can't be trusted—particularly man people—is all she still has from that day they kicked her out.

The shower always feels so far away from it all. The bat, in the back, is the tallest tree on the shelf. It's one of those miniature commemorative bats from Cooperstown, celebrating pre-scandal Mark McGwire. But damn, that dense little bat has to have been dipped in the River Styx, because it has exactly no mold spores or wear, and it's lacquered so well no smell has seeped into it even after nearly two decades—and four of those years in this erratic climate.

It represents a memory that's more disappointing than anything else.

You get to Cooperstown and the Baseball Hall of Fame and you expect the walls to murmur with history. You think you'll hear a detonation of ear-splitting applause from the sport's best games; the crack of the bat when Maris broke Babe Ruth's HR record; the camaraderie of the ladies from the Women's League established during WWII; Jackie Robinson giving Yogi Berra a dust bath as he steals home.

But when you get there it's kinda just stuff on a wall. The plaques and portraits don't pulse or talk. No life, no breath.

Cass feels herself falling behind the day. She's resorting to a trick reserved for those times a hot shower seduces her into staying way longer than she's complicit. She pretends she's

on a NASA launchpad counting down: 10...9...8...8...8...7...7...6...6...6...6... and so on. Its length is always subject to her mood, but it always works, eventually.

After remembering to not sit on her phone again, Cass starts the Prius and Courtney Barnett lets her know that if she “tells her she’s exceptional she promises to exploit” her.

Her mind wanders, her body pilots the car.

Row, row, row your boat gently down the stream of consciousness, she can hear M saying to her audience.

An incantation.

This time it conjures a touchstone memory, long ago rubbed smooth. That time M had told Cass that she was way too smart to be working at the Boa and Arrow.

Somehow it didn’t even sound condescending. It was a moment that Cass took very seriously. M had prefaced the comment with “I know compliments mean a lot less coming from someone who loves you, but...” And that was the first time M had said it, accidentally but on purpose, Cass suspects, but that’s pretty much just how M sounds.

Shortly after, she was approached by a managerial-type person and was offered the job to run CENE, which was still being built and apparently had the same owner as the B&A.

But that wasn’t what M had meant to encourage either.

Even so, the CENE job’s the best she’s had, but it’s not forever.

M had convinced her to get a GED practically the day they met.

And, finally, Cass will be taking classes at the community college next semester.

Eventually, she’ll be the learn’d astronomer, she likes to think.

It’s not a long trip down 590 and then 490 into the city, but Cass is fitting in a lot of thoughts.

She passes Exit 21 and makes unwanted eye contact with Darren Speri⁸. He smolders down at her from his billboard by the East Ave Roclins. His general outward projection is one that makes you instinctively cover whatever you're drinking.

Quarter smile, potato pancake face, eyes that look poked-in by a third grader's recently-sharpened pencil. He's the guy you call after driving your company Audi into a sporting goods store with the Economy bourbon seatbelted in the passenger seat. The man who will get you back behind the wheel and on the road with the rest of us and our kids ASAP.

M described him as a man *who just hasn't been caught yet*. When Cass asked what he'd done, M replied, "I'm sure we'll find out."

Cass makes her way over the FreddieSue bridge over the river, gets off at Exit 14, and almost crashes into the side of a building that's way too close to the road.

Alright, yes, this is the address M gave her for where she's staying. But it's not like Cass is trying to stalk M. She has some time to kill. She doesn't trust E. It makes her feel better.

Moving on...

Everything in Rochester is named for one of like six or seven people. Frederick Douglass, Susan B. Anthony, Bausch and Lomb (who aren't usually sold separately), Henry Strong,

⁸ Here's a partial transcript from the time he consulted Kindel. I imagine a different fate for the man if I had been working instead of her. He just looks like he has a fetish for unconscious people. Anyway:

"So how'd I get into this speciality? Ya oh ya ya. Well yuh know I noticed a lot of my fraternity brethren, inebriari irrumabo canino and so forth, kept getting DWIs. Well, that's not fair. These are good people. Family people. Fathers. How can they get their kids to school and practice if they can't drive dru—I mean if they can't drive from getting a DWI. These are good guys and I wouldn't be the successful lawyer I am today without them.

...

"Sure, yeah, I am CALLED the DWI guy. And ya sure you can find me on my website at DWIDARREN. However, that doesn't mean that I am known for and frequently am involved with DWIs as a personal civilian driver no. See a lot of people are confused about that. I merely represent those who were so unpleasantly unfortunate enough to receive DWIs. See, what I do is try to get allegend [sic] drunk drivers back on the road that very night, or even afternoon in some cases. I do it. I do it well. I do it often. See, allegiant [sic] drunk drivers have rights too. And they have just as much right to be on the road as the rest of you. Mrm, the rest of us!"

Nathaniel Rochester, and George Eastman. Kodak, for the most part, just means Eastman. Cass drives away from M and the building Cass almost put a drive-thru in.

KODAK

This historical signage is underlined by the bridge she looks over; it glows red through fog, high and tight, a fog extending the city at that altitude. The Kodak HQ is something like the ninth tallest building in the state⁹.

She definitely went the long way around, but Cass doesn't miss much of the event, just the presenter talking about our segmented lives.

How, "In America, we aren't living in over 330 million distinct realities, we're living in five or six, curated by circumstance and loveless agencies who are paradoxically more lucrative the more they fragment our souls.

"It's hard to shake hands across realities, isn't it? The only thing we see anymore are outliers. That's our only media.

"Today, we hope to offer a reminder that we're all more similar than we think or know or want or hope to be.

"Although we have many excellent actors here today, we won't tell you who they are, so you'll have to be polite to everyone—you might even find it's intuitive.

"Today is community. Enjoy."

No one ever sees the presenter again—well, at least at the event.

Cass is here to be social, but isn't ready to be. So, she uses a ploy she learned from M: earbuds in, music off. She's not snooping, she just wants to be ignored for a while, which never happens, but the flyer promised kindness, didn't it?

⁹ Yes, outside of NYC, you're right.

The room is lined with a bunch of pillboxes the size of railroad cars, fully open and laid horizontal. Basically an art show where the actors are the exhibit.

Cass was expecting to walk into something like an enormous Norman Rockwell calendar, and some of that is present for sure—people cooking a meal, fighting through the mild sadism of a red onion; someone in an office, clacking away at a spreadsheet, reading from what must be a financial dictionary and shouting things like Roth IRA and Qualified Terminable Interest Property Trust, and chasing it with nervous laughter; but then you also have the chambers of psycho horror from Norman's goth twin: not-so-safe injection sites, an emergency room whose analog clock is set to the witching hour—cells of squalor and dim light; grim rooms of potential recollection shunted into these little doll house compartments.

Cass makes her way around the event, treating herself to soundbites of conversation. By the emergency room, she hears someone reporting that the eye socket really does vacuum up the eyeball when you shove it in like that, so the scene is horrifyingly accurate.

The man who shattered the dinner illusion a couple of minutes back by pretending he was starring in his own cooking show giggles to his friend, "Someone keeps putting 'for rectal use only' stickers on the pumps at my gas station."

From a voice in a tent clipped and suspended on a craggy mountainside, "Why is it called a dick pic instead of a dickture?"

She takes out her earbuds when an ancient man on the other side of the event turns away from the painted window and yells at his grandchild. It's amusing to see someone pushing 50 called a chucklehead in a tone that's meant to not just signify but inject embarrassment.

The grandfather saw Cass smile at the scolding and motions for her to come over, his grizzled paw a target for all the world's taxi drivers.

Who knows what a fountain of antediluvian wisdom this man could be, why not.

As Cass approaches, the man's coughing sounds like he's having a conversation with himself. There's one tone that sounds as if it's scraping the sides of his throat, then another in reply from deeper down.

Cass doesn't even reel back with covid trauma because the cough sounds more hollow than mucoidal, and so it sounds like death rather than sickness.

"I came here for what I thought was to be a wholesome event. Whole damn world runnin around like a chicken with its head on fire. My son was telling me that two booths down there are people pretending to be furniture. Now, you're a young lady, please help me understand such a thing."

"I don't know any better than you do. My partner could probably explain better."

"Partner? Ya'll detectives?"

The son looks to be in considerable pain as his eyes do a full revolution. He apologizes like he said it, feeling someone should, but Cass has heard it before.

"My partner beat you to that one. We've done Halloween as both detectives and business associates."

"Shame you're alone then. This place is giving me the creeps if I'm honest. More people every second comin in. Hell, actors are not even people at all. They're just pretending to be. They act. It's what they do."

"Wait, you're not a—"

"Good gracious God, no. Anyway, we'll be gettin a move on. Like I always say, Jonas Sulk wouldn't have cured polio."

Cass goes under cover of earbuds again. It's comforting in a way, walking with all these people just living their lives or performing approximations of them.

Thoughts of life as performance floss between her ears.

Someone who has a tattoo of a perforated edge around their throat. Totally unwillingly, Cass thinks of when her and Jayla were young, holding their thumbs just under the yellow head of a dandelion and singing, "Momma had a baby and her head POPPED off," beheading the dandelion with a snap on *popped's* first PUH. There was always the sign of struggle on her fingers after the execution. Jayla, morbidly but predictably for an eight-year-old, called it dandelion blood. Cass tries to ignore the visual analog with the tattooed person. And also the idea of a giant pair of scissors.

Three cells down, a couple paddling through the crowd, "I'm telling you, it's like how in those old hetero sitcoms the dude will be like, 'Oh my dearest darling Patricia, you are as beautiful as the day we met.' So, when Gandalf tells Bilbo, 'You haven't aged a day,' it's a confession. Same damn thing."

There are some legitimately impressive technical feats around the room, Cass notes to tell M. There's the library that looks like it has infinite floors from certain angles, a treehouse, a rice paddy, the waterfall, a cranberry bog being harvested, a glass-box-contained hurricane that people are now milling around the aftermath of—all of which have an optical illusion of vast extension beyond the venue's walls.

Someone's going around hugging everyone.

Passing a dioramic diner that looks lit by Edward Hopper, Cass enters a back alley, shined on interstitially by a faulty streetlight.

Even here it's ominous.

There seems to be only one person visiting, rocking back and forth like a just-opened jack-in-the-box, plugged into their phone and propped up against a garbage can with no lid. It looks to Cass like they're laughing. Maybe it's an attempt to be respectfully quiet, but they're not successful, breathing loudly and signaling surprise at irregular intervals like those videos of chimpanzees reacting to Buster Keaton highlights. What they're doing sounds like the preview of a sneeze that always fails at the climactic moment. Ahchhhh ahchhh. Sobbing without tears. The sound of impending aneurysm. Cass backs out of the alley, hoping she's still invisible.

The next scene is less haunting and veiled with bluish gauzy curtains. It's a backyard with a locust tree and a perpetually damaged wooden fence. The room is at dusk. There's a tent and parental figures huddled around a child. Cass notices Orion's Belt in the wrong part of the sky (and night, for that matter), but it's pleasant all the same. The seams between the parents and the kid widen just enough for Cass to see the brass telescope¹⁰. Cass makes a sound like she's just risen to the surface after swallowing a throatful of water. Her eyes leak gently. Trying to calm herself, she scrambles to find her noise punk playlist and starts looking for another memory, shaking her mind like a magic eight ball until she gets at least a non-committal response. She dives into the adjacent room, where the vending machines look like bodyguards. She's coaching herself: stop the spiral, thumbnails in the middle index; one...two...three, exhale.

She finally rolls, "Cannot predict now," in her memory bank . . .

"Hey Cassa, what actually is inside a black hole?"

Cass does a professorial downward glance and nudges pretend glasses, her face looking ruminative as her pointer finger goes from the bridge of her nose to the bottom of her lip, looking like she's about to blow out a small fire at the tip of her fingernail.

¹⁰ Trauma is real shit to play hide and seek with.

“Well, a singularity. Catastrophic collapse. A compression point so dense that all notions and laws are non-existent: space, time—”

“Even influencers accidentally suiciding over a waterfall?”

“Possibly. Who and what and wher—”

“All interrogatives omitted from the universe. A place of complete indifference.”

“You can’t even say it’s indifferent really. It’s not that it doesn’t care, it can’t care. It’s not an it. There’s just Nothing. But not even nothing.” . . .

Someone has been attracted by Cass’s loud tears. She doesn’t see their face, but can tell they’re wearing a bespoke suit, its tweed pattern so dense with crisscrosses that it creates a number of squares just shy of a small countable infinity.

“Crying in the break room, been there,” they say. “Hey Morgan, come here, best acting I’ve seen yet.”

Morgan’s eyes are somehow pointing in opposing directions, looking rather insectile with the bifocals. “You are marvelous. I’ve always wanted to be able to do that. Do you give lessons?” Morgan asks.

Cass doesn’t bother to deny it, and tells Morgan that she’s always looking for students. 382-5968¹¹, is the number to get in touch. Morgan, eager to show off such useful knowledge, comments that Cass must be from out of town since they’ve never seen those exchange numbers before. Cass, always polite, confirms the suspicion. Mopping up her face with her coat’s sleeve, Cass decides to go home, having had about enough art for the day.

¹¹ FUC-KY—Oh, I get it now.

Mike, the chiropractor. I always call him that. I think it's hilarious. Whenever new people come into the family I rush over to introduce him. This is Mike, the chiropractor. The chiropractor, Mike. And that's forever how they know him. Mikus Chiropractus. I called him that at Easter. I make sure to always include a little admiration when I say it, so it's sarcastic enough that it makes him question it, but not so sarcastic that he needs to bring it up and invite potentially frivolous confrontation where he'll definitely be blamed. *Oh hey Helen, have you met the chiropractor, Mike?* Oh yeah, great guy, wonderful guy. Mike, the chiropractor. I laugh every time.

Recording of M's livestream, circa 2018

[Hi. This is E nosing in from the footnotes. This next part is kinda graphic: explicit language, body horror, murder. The gist is that M writes a rather hateful letter to their—now ex—girlfriend. It's gratuitously disgusting: a definite skip for the squeamish.]

Even when her voice falters there's poison and conviction. She types the words with care as she says them from the bottom corner of the stream.

Dear K,

I can't stand you or your rank cunt stank. You hurt me and it feels like blood is leaking into my perforated stomach. I fucking hate you. I fucking hate you. I want to put you under a steam roller. I want to peel you off the road and pack you into a ball and run you over again. Your name is a personal synonym for putrefaction. I want you to deepthroat a scalpel. I hope your brakes fail on a mountain road with lots of turns. I hope you're in a situation where the only way to save your life is to eat a bowl of surgically-removed cysts. I hope you're the only victim of a collapsed bridge. I hope trees become suicidal when you're around. I hope you've been getting abducted by aliens and don't know it. I hope you lose your rock collection. I hope you have a delicious bowl of noodles with hot steamy broth and when you go back to the kitchen to compliment the chef they tell you that it was actually a bowl of parasites. I hope someone sews your eye open just to fart on your eyeball. I hope your cat never snuggles with you again. I want you to die. I want you to die over and over again. I want to set up all your stiff dead bodies like dominos up and down the stairs of a 131 story building and headbutt your bulbous fucking nose while i'm wearing my juggernaut helmet. I hate you like a narcissist hates watching other people's home videos. I hate you like a hair in my soup. I hate you like a nail clipped too deep. I hate you like I hate you. You are right about all the things you hate about yourself. I want to use

your face as a dartboard and your stubby limbs as bowling pins and jam my fingers into your eyes and toss your head down a bowling alley I made of your flayed skin. Why would you do this? What is your point? What is the point of you? Why would you make me so afraid? You are a parachute that fails to open. An oven that doesn't get hot. A popped balloon. You are an Amish electrician. You are Santa Claus hunting the Easter Bunny. You are a happy trip to the grave of my parents. You are a city of dust, a three-legged unicorn, a mallard duck with a straight dick, a sasquatch beekeeper, a dog that doesn't make me sneeze, the date of our wedding. You do not exist. I want to "accidentally" pitch boiling spaghetti water on your face. How's that for using your noodle? I fucking hate that phrase like I hate you like I hated you when you would say it. You could be in a tiny room with unbagged garbage, layers of roadkill, and the recent biological waste of a coprophiliac, and your personality would still be the worst smell. I could hate you as a fulltime job and I'd take half pay for the overtime. You are a pile of flaws stacked in a jagged skin suit approximation of a person. I want to peck your eyes out like a vulture while the sun slowly turns you into a french fry on the side of the road from when you were flung out of your car because the seatbelt snapped and your face was worked on the road like wood at a belt sander. I hate you. It compounds secondly. You hurt me in the same way. I could do all these things to you and still hate myself less than I hate you. I don't wish you death, I wish you torture. I could light up the world with how I hate you, and blind anyone who opens their eyes and cremate small flowers. I'd rather live the rest of my life off a diet of garbage disposal gunk and the orange film that grows on the moulding of the shower than talk to you again. I have nothing positive to say about you until you die. I want you to drown in a vat of bile and coughed-up blood that never makes its way to white napkins. All this and I still can't say it right. All this and the completeness of my hate is still unexpressed. In the word's most honest sense, I hate you.

The chat cheers wildly. SEND IT SEND IT, they say. M holds a finger up like a wand and with the same conviction she spoke the letter, presses the Backspace key. Holds it down. Her chat goes nuts. NO NO NO NO SEND IT NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO. But the words are deleted, one letter at a time, as the chat laments, until M is all that's left.

The Account of Bernard Oddie

All day long it had been there. And it hadn't even the courtesy to hide. It stood there, quite in the open, not bothering with introductions, not bothering to hand the man a butter knife for his morning toast, which he liked burnt. It had been there just after his pleasant dream, one which he awoke from with a hope that had long eluded him. It was there, cross-legged on the bus, there at the office where it stretched out like a cat and laid across his desk. And all the while there was a black hole in his stomach, collapsing his body to a single point. It wasn't until lunchtime when it was impatiently clicking the vending machine for a diet soda that the man confided in a co-worker that he knew he was going to die today. The co-worker was taken aback by the conviction in his voice, for the only thing he had said with such assurance of late was the increased interest on his mortgage rate. He didn't expect her to see it, even though it was between their conversation, and he had to speak through it, and he could tell it wasn't there for her, as he could see his reflection in her eyes. "I'm going to die today," he said, and she believed him. When she asked him when it would happen he told her it wasn't like he had an appointment for it, or that he was sick, just that he knew it, and knew he would be dead by the day's end. He died over there on W. Broad St, explaining to a tourist that some fisherman tie rope around a cormorant's neck and use it to fish.

I sliced Bernard Oddie's brain in 528 pieces. I was instructed to look for extrasensory activity. I have discovered something in this 528th piece. After years of testing, I'm ready to splice his shard of brain into my own, so that I might find a way out of this mess. Wish me luck.

“I am in love, and it is excruciating. Sew-your-own-eyes-shut excruciating.”

“What’s your real name, Mr. Mondo?”

“Ralph.”

“Ralph. Ralph. Really?”

“Well what the fuck’s your name, then?”

“You don’t get to know.”

“Of course. Codespeak and secret passages. Of course I don’t get to know, of cour—”

“Is it short for anything?”

“Is what?”

“Ralph.”

“You’re asking me if ‘Ralph’ is short for anything.”

“Yeah. Ralphiccio or Rudolph or something?”

“You think Ralph is short for Rudolph? Really?”

“Good point. Wrong animal, actually.”

“What?”

“Wrong animal. Rudolph is a reindeer, Ralph means wolf.”

“If you know what it means what are you asking for?”

“Why don’t you tell me about how it started?”

“Jesus, you were going on about Ralph being short for—”

“No, I mean this excruciating love you’re in.”

“I don’t want to talk about how it started.”

“C’mon, it’s the best stuff.”

“Exactly, I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Talk about it. That’s why you’re here.”

“I want to start at now. Today.”

“No. No. *Let’s start at the very beginning, a very good place to start.*”

“Please don’t sing. What kind of therapist are you?”

“I hope you don’t think this is therapy.”

“Then what is it?”

“I don’t know. I won’t know until we talk about how it started.”

“I don’t want to talk about how it started.”

“Talk.”

“No.”

“Talk.”

How it started

It was almost too much. The way she’d roll her ankles, the way her ankles would crack. She laughed a lot, almost needlessly at points, which was fine because she probably had the world’s greatest smile . . . she probably didn’t actually but, you know how it goes, to him she did. Strange how it happened so quickly. She cracked her ankles, and that was it, he was cooked, and, if not in love, on the way to it . . . maybe the ankle-cracking wasn’t what caused it, but it was

what made him realize the feelings. Something about the sound. And there was also the way butterflies would begin migration in his stomach when she entered a room, making him feel capable of levitation. And she was so kind, and smart, and funny, and so pretty, stunning really, which seemed almost beside the point. And there was the feeling like someone was squeezing the pit of his stomach like a stress ball. And the shoes she was wearing that day, the jeans, the glasses, the smudge on those glasses, the coat. He could remember it all, how there was a sparrow just outside in the bushes, how there was a bit of carpet going against the grain, how the table held a 1986 quarter under one of its legs, how the light surged through the window and collected all around her. And something about it, when the butterflies caused him to float, made him both sick and ecstatic. And she laughed. And she smiled. And she played with her hair. And she rolled her ankles, and then her ankles cracked.

BLOG POST of Like Blood From A Roc; 4 May 2011.

Moon Face is probably the most popular local urban legend that I have not yet covered. For those who don't know of the tales of the creature/person/extraterrestrial lifeform, I will give a quick recap. Rumors start around the original run of Twin Peaks

Suffice it to say, I made an appointment with Moon Face through channels I neither recommend nor approve of. (Words omitted or changed by Ty on a beta read: lunate, cthonic, specular, petrichor.)

It was raining. Of course it was raining. There's always rain in these memories and these stories. If not, it feels as though it is always about to rain, and it's held off by sheer optimism. Those times where it's cold yet humid, and you can almost drink the air through a straw.

I now lament both him and my chosen father.

Earlier that day, the sky seemed to suggest my father. Clouds made a portrait of his face. The cold hinted at his eyes. I parked by the Downtown Library, just over a site we have touched on several times before—the graffiti palace. The sky by that time was febrile and pouty. The raindrops on the Genesee looked like thousands of tiny little pin pricks happening pseudo-simultaneously *or, the current is so strong the rain makes no impression on its surface, no tiny little pin pricks)

Thousands of pinprick splashes all up and down the river.

The Wings of the Times Square building, dubbed the Wings of Progress, peaked through the fog like the summit of a mountain through a cloud. Construction began in 1929. Art deco. Lights up at night. 260 feet. Architects: Voorhees, Gmelin, and Walker. The cornerstone of the bank laid on October 29, 1929—black tuesday—the crash.

This is around dusk. The building has 14 floors. But the failed bank only had 12. I'm guessing the blank button in the elevator I was instructed to press took me somewhere between.

In movies, there is always music. If not music, sound design. The hallway's light was narrow, the number line of the room's light taking up the middle 50%. Like the many cars of a high speed train, bulleting through the night.

The hallway, mathematically speaking, was nonsensical. A good pace, at which I was power walking, around 8mph (convert to metric, it's a quirk). And I walked for over twenty minutes in the claustrophobic hallway before I heard my next instruction.

"STOP." (but what kind of voice was it.), the office said. Then a door to my right opened vertically. The scent of river and damp soil. I walked similarly to the way I did in the hall. But this time to the sound of a waterfall. Minute after minute, until I arrived at a door the color of cold ocean. As I approached the [the second time he meets Moon Face, it is actually E, who ejects him into the river. This is why his blogpost is late. AND why Ty has to wait.] door, my foot fell on a tile that lowered several centimeters, opening the circular door.

The room was entirely glass, except for the dark corner. It was a room that used High Falls as a flowing cape. Looking down, I can see the route that led to Sam Patch's demise. The room tucked itself in under the constancy of the waterfall. I entered from the Blue Cross Arena side of the river. A patch of smog on the library side. It is my opinion that the waterfall was used as a way to distort the sound, leading to a quick dismissal of the evidence in any potential court case.

"Hello, young man," the voice called from the patch of darkness. A chair rose from the floor. "Why not take a seat?" I believe under different circumstances the chair might have been

comfortable. The entire time I was seated in it, though, I felt that at any moment the chair would reach around my chest and bear hug me, and I would be submerged. I made no reply for at least a minute. The voice then offered me a chair you see at any kitchen table. Wood, without a hint of animation, or potential to be animated. “I sense you are not here for the usual reasons, Mons.” I do not know how the voice knew my name.

“I’m here for research,” I said.

“A noble cause.” There was a whisper of relief in the voice.

“You are a local myth. I’ve wanted to meet you for a while now.”

“How can I be a myth if you’ve found me?” A moon appeared amidst the smog then, a crescent moon in a starless sky. It then rotated to form a mouth. Then a smile.

“Can I take notes?”

“I know you don’t need to.” The smile turned different shades of moon as it spoke. “So why ask?”

“Do you know that people think you are a murderer?”

“Psychotic internet rambling does not the truth make.”

“I publish a blog. May I ask you a few questions?”

“Do you know what a psychopomp is?”

“I asked to ask questions.”

“A psychopomp is—”

“I know what it means¹².”

“Well, that’s exactly what I do. That should answer your questions. This is a hectic section of the year for me. So many things ending. Some beginning. Not to be rude, but I prefer,

¹² Well that’s a bit underhanded. What’s a psychopomp?

especially since you're here by illegal means and—let's face it, your subterfuge— that maybe we should rush this along.”

“Has someone ever come to the end of their life as a direct action of something you have done?”

“Rather labored wording. I will answer no questions about that.”

“Yet you've come all this way? For what?”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“Because I didn't want to bother anyone. Ty—”

“I am no one?”

“That seems what you want our relationship to be.”

“Just so. Now, how do I get you to leave?”

“You've got to let me knowwww. Should I stay or should I go.”

It would be wonderful if that's why you were here.

I will answer no questions about the ____

Pardon me, but I have to say, you are not an excellent interview subject.

I can't

Without history, what's the point of ghosts?

(Kindel, says the opposite when E meets her. Without ghosts, what's the point of history?

And the thing about psychopomps

Darkness cinching up its coat.

The fog vanishes. The voice tells Mons to follow. It will take him out by the library.

“No one else could be admitted here. This door was made just for you.

The door slammed with the weight of a dwarf planet. I rushed back. To the Times square building, under the wings. Across the floor that sounded like a migraine in the echo of my steps. To the elevator. The unlabelled button was not there.

Later that night I had a dream. I was standing in front of an enormous egg. And I work it like a sculptor with a chisel and hammer. Through the shell, through the membrane. I find myself. Which is creepus extremus, as a friend says.

Next week, I will reveal how this trick was achieved.

27 March 2023

Above the air conditioner, through the window, Talbot's mother finishes up with his tie and bends to kiss his forehead from her stool. She hops down off the stool and, Talbot, in turn, bends to kiss her forehead. Then he's out the door, dressed in his funereal best.

Now about a mile away from Talbot's parents' house, she can break the dam of her face and let it burst into laughter, "I can't believe you actually wore a suit."

Talbot laughs too. "You said it was a funeral."

"It's not that serious. Do you want me to take you back so you can change?"

"I'm good."

"Sure?"

"Look good, feel good."

"It will give me a chance to go to the bathroom. You didn't tell me you lived all the way out here."

"How'd you pick me up, then?"

"Okay. Point." Brenda's four years sober from biting her nails, so she settles for nibbling on the flyaway skin around them. "It's going to be a while, so let me ask you a question, same one I ask all my friends. So, alright, say you own a restaurant and you're on the floor gladhanding or whatever, and a diner, eating alone, has a heart attack or chokes on two ravioli melded together or something, and dies. Is it okay to go through the diner's purse or pockets or something to recover the payment for their meal?"

Talbot's picking lint off his suit, "Probably wouldn't think about it until the ambulance is gone. But probably not. Once they're dead they don't owe you anything."

“Alright, so let’s say they’re still alive by the time the ambulance comes along, you rummage a bit, right?”

“Oh yeah, I rummage.”

“You ever work at a restaurant?”

“No. Last job I was a window washer. Then they said I couldn’t do anything the rain couldn’t and fired me. It’s alright. I was still going to school for zoology. Which I got into after I took a class on primate archaeology when I was going for anthro—”

“I’ve always wondered, do you catch a lot of people masturbating, looking in the windows when you wash?”

“Too many. And of course the other shit. I watched the mysteries of the world unfold on that job. That’s what the guy I washed with used to say.”

“Come on, then, like what.”

“Like a woman penalty-kicking an already-lodged-in dildo into a guy’s ass.” She even had a whistle.

Brenda almost has to pull over she’s laughing so hard.

Brenda’s laugh is contagious. “Let me ask you something, since we’re on the topic, why didn’t you like join the circus or something instead?” Talbot asks. “There’s got to be easier work.”

“I was going to try modeling but my mom told me that just because I was skinny didn’t mean I was pretty. She had a lot of great advice. I tried a bunch of things, though I guess I’m difficult to work with, but I think we know whose fault that is.”

“Is it yours?”

The road is filled with drivers who do not signal. Brenda taps the brake when a motorist from three lanes over cuts in front of her. Traffic never bothers Brenda. “I tried to kill her actually, when I was kid.”

“What?”

“She always had me make her scrambled eggs and toast. Insisted that I put milk in the eggs. You don’t need to do that. I was slipping these very small chips of eggshell into her food, my mom. So, it was attempted murder, but along the lines of shooting someone with a finger gun. Anyway, things are better now. I thought maybe you’re born from an egg, so maybe you can die from an egg. Plus they’re kind of jagged and sharp. Some kids think chocolate milk comes from brown cows, but I believed that instead. Of course it didn’t do anything, but it wasn’t my intention.”

“Why would you tell me that?”

“I don’t think the FBI will be all that interested, if you’re thinking about ratting me out.”

“No, I mean—I just met you and that seems like something you unload with your last breaths on your deathbed.”

“Maybe what made me think of it was that my mom had breast cancer.”

“Oh yeah, of course. That’s probably it.” Very sarcastic, Talbot.

“Fucker. She told me she kept nightdreaming about cutting them out and cooking them up on the grill like chicken breasts. She kept talking about ‘the lovely grill marks.’”

“Nightdreaming? You mean daydreaming?”

“No—”

“So she was sleeping? Or—”

“She’d be taking a nap at night or something. That’s what she called it. Her phrase, not mine. Anyway, this one time someone told her she looked great, very thin, and my mom said, ‘Couldn’t have done it without the chemo, hell of a weight loss regimen.’ I don’t know, I thought it was funny. Eggs, chicken breasts, you see the connection. And like, that advice with putting milk in the eggs, you don’t need to do that. She resists every attempt I’ve ever made to make her life easier. Some people just don’t want to be helped. Like last week I was cleaning my fridge, and the thing wouldn’t shut up, the alarm kept going on and on and I’m there scrubbing my elbow off. Like, I’m trying to help you. Some people just don’t care.”

“Fridge. Person.” Talbot holds one in each hand, weighing them.

“Please don’t distract me while I’m driving.” The clouds are an opaque string of blown bubbles. There’s no radio, only sounds of the road, and the pressure building that portends urination. “So you’re all suited up, how do I look?”

“Someone asks me a question like that, I decide to be honest. It’s not that I’m rude, but, you asked so, the truth . . . well, you kinda look like a rat mom.”

Brenda reaches into the console for a bottle and takes a hit of antacids. “Really I prefer squirrels.”

“Oh shit,” Talbot just remembering something, “You know Randy, uh, I think it’s Blevins, Bludeau, something?”

“Body kinda oblong. Puffed-up blowfish hair, spiky and extra firm from about half a liter of blue gel that makes him have to wash his hands two or three times before he properly begins his day.”

“ . . . shit. Yeah. How do you—never mind. Nice guy but—”

“He’s not nice,” Brenda says, “he’s just too afraid to be himself. And he’s something like an eighth of an inch away from having a Hitler mustache.”

“Damnnn. I didn’t know you were such a bully.”

“I got bullied.”

“It’s a vicious cycle, no doubt.”

Brenda takes her hands off the wheel and claps, donning a non-specific Upper Crust accent when she says, “Bravo. Oh, brahhvo, what a cunning jape, dear Talbot. Brahhhhhv—”

“Alright, alright, noted, hands on the wheel please, hands on the WHEEL.” Talbot attempts to grab the wheel and pull the car a little farther from the guardrail. Brenda deflects with her right arm and pulls the car back on the road with the other.

“Go on, go on. What about Randy?” Brenda asks.

“What? Who? Oh. Randall. At lunch he was dipping his pizza in mayo and—”

“Did you ask for a taste?” Brenda shifts in her seat, water levels in the bladder starting to rise to dangerous levels.

Talbot’s laughing but clearly disgusted, “The guy squeezed out a nice big pile of mayo like three separate times because he was dipping so much.”

“Sounds like you’re writing an erotic novel.”

“A mayo mystery. So, tell me about Adriana. I like to make a good impression, especially as a guest.”

“Give me a second. Um . . . alright. You know the salad kits you can get at Roclins or Trader Joe’s or whatever?”

“Sure.”

“Well, Adriana, is the kind of person who tries to eke out every little package, the cheese, the dressing, the salad, the crunchy stuff for texture, all spaced out perfectly bowl to bowl so that all bags empty at the same time for the last meal. I bet you’re like that too.”

“Nah, I actually use up all the dressing in one shot.”

“Why do you need that much dressing? Nobody needs that much dressing. Should just get soup.”

“I take it you just use everything up at once?”

. . .

“Brenda?”

Hawks are perched on lampposts along the highway . . . “Red-tailed hawks.”

“What?”

“The hawks. Red-tailed. Red-tailed hawks. Sorry, I didn’t know I was talking.”

“What?”

“Nothing.” Brenda wants to take a cloud out of the sky, make a mask of it, and let the cloud plunge in her face. Her legs start to shake.

Even Talbot notices, “I know you’re not okay, but like, right now are you okay?”

“Ffffffffuck no, if you reached in and squeezed my bladder you could get me declared a national park. Oh my god oh my god ohmygodohmygod.”

Talbot’s respectfully trying not to laugh. “Yeah, but we’re almost there, yeah?”

“Five minutes.” She takes a mammoth breath . . . Brenda’s legs tense up; she rocks, a feeble attempt to dissuade her body from its natural process. “Okay, now I’m just going to babble here a bit until um um um okay, so last night I was really excited about buying this course so I could get—” she imagines subtitles coming out her mouth as she says it because she can’t even

understand what she's saying with how fast it's all coming out and also she's giving each word a kind of UP-AND-down cadence "—scuba certified and I literally had the thought like, 'Wow I better buy it now, because when I'm a little less excited about it tomorrow I won't get it.' And somehow this is perfectly sane to me, and sometimes I don't even question it. I know I don't actually want it and the desire will fade ultrafast. But I do it anyway? The fuck is that. I am so easily seduced by the thought? Um oh god oh god. Um sometimes I dream I'm swinging from tree to tree, trying to escape a forest fire. And I keep having the feeling that not just people, but nature, too, is trying to kill me down to zero. I'm sorry, I love that song, down to the ground, down to the ground. Joan Armatrading is a goddess of some kind for sure. Uhhh I had another dream where I was a pile of cocaine and tried to snort myself, without much success. But my real dream was, and is, uhhh—unlike most people—is to open a combination cafe, bike shop, and small rodent rescue and call it ummmmmm Hamsterdam. Ahhhhhhh—If we're taking about ambition I think the highest achievement really I can think of would be to become an expert in amphibians and find a toad species that from above looks exactly like a potato, and name it *Bufo Solanum*, the Potatoad. Ahhhh—what are you doing?"

What Talbot's doing is trying not to laugh, "I'm pretending the world is a better place."

"How?"

"Pretending you're not in it."

"Oh god please don't make me laugh, I'm—oh god, shit there's nowhere to park. Um, okay, you please find somewhere to park and uh, just come in the house I run into. Um. There'll probably be a trail. Oh gah—" Brenda parks in the middle of the street and sort of hunch-runs into the house where a guy she doesn't know yells at her back that Adriana needs to see her as she sprint-hobbles into the bathroom.

She finally gets to the toilet and lets go and has this little vision of herself shooting ceilingward and kind of hovering there like she's wearing a jetpack until the stream loses tension and she falls, the vision ending right before her head smacks the toilet, an image lingering like a paused television, leaving then just the sound of sweet relief.

The banner reads: R.I.P. ADRIANA('s 20s). And everyone's dressed up. Ambience here is more macabre than maudlin. Tables around the house are dressed as coffins, sharp angles and such. They're stuffed with snacks and drinks and dishes to pass, none of which Brenda's contributing tonight. By the punch, where someone's dropping in black food coloring, there's a one-sided conversation, "The moon AND the sun are both in Libra AND it's a new moon. I am very powerful right now." Brenda sips a Bloody Mary, its celery sword gone rather limp. Fifteen people is enough to make the space cozy, but anymore people will make it cramped. There are people with lace gloves that end at their elbows, others with skull cane toppers, and here's Adriana herself, on her Death Day, donning a sheer black veil, walking towards Brenda, sorrowful, and in character.

"Fucking finally," Adriana says, grabbing Brenda's wrist and whisking her up the red-carpeted stairs into her room, where there's a wedding dress on the bed.

Brenda makes a finger-splayed veil of her hand, heel to forehead, "Can you take that thing off? When I see you, I'd like to, you know, see you."

"Can't. I finally have it just right."

"Fine. Did you see my friend? I wanted to introduce you, but I didn't see him down there. Didn't see Casey down there either, actually."

"Don't think so, I wasn't sure you'd even come."

“Well, you asked, so . . . What’s with the wedding dress? You’re not giving it to me, are you?”

“Why would I give it to you? No. I knew you wouldn’t bring a gift or food or anything, so I was hoping you’d do me a favor, maybe two favors?”

Of course she wants to say no, but, “I guess.”

“Okay, well, the gown I need you to drop off at the post office, it’s going to one of those services where they take your dress and make it into clothing for stillborns and dead babies.”

“Jesus christ.”

“Yeah.”

“Sure, okay. Yeah. And what’s the other favor?”

“You know how during your birthday lunch I was telling you I had written item 51 on my list of things I was going to buy if Casey and I weren’t together anymore? A bagel slicer finally? And I told you that I couldn’t divorce Casey because they love me. And you said that’s exactly why we should get divorced? Well, we’re getting divorced. Casey. And me too. So, I need you

to

notarize the papers.”

Sometime somewhere in LA

Morning light, once calm as infinity, struggles through the room's dark curtain, nevertheless falling onto the un-Bronzered chest of the newly insomniated workout guru Brawny Mondo. Maybe guru is the wrong word, or maybe guru used to be the word, but no longer is. Guru implies some brand of contentment, doesn't it. Well, Mr. Brawny Mondo here is anything but content—he's pissed he has to work today, pissed he has no idea who he's working for (some tv guy was the rumored origin of the anonymous and unturndownable *donation*), pissed he has to goose up and put on both his personality and trademark speedo again for the four-thousandth time, and restless, and restless, so so tediously mercilessly restless inside his body it feels as though there is another body inside his trying to get out the way a chick does an egg: pecking wrenching writhing wriggling thrashing flailing relentless fucking kicking jerking jolting fuckedy fuck fucking punching itself out because its life depends on it, born in a cage, carnage, life or death kind of restlessness that Brawny Mondo will surely be a victim of if he does not make a victim of it, less spiritual ennui than thanatophobia, less thanatophobia than the fear of simply not having a chance to live, not having a chance to shed this husk of a man to reveal a truer self, a self that luxuriates—not inside the body but the body itself, not floating in, not treading on, but the water itself, for the mind to be indistinguishable from the body, for the body to be indistinguishable from the soul, for the soul to rise and descend with each breath, and GODDAMNIT he's tired of having to put on this quote reusable penis unquote over his real penis to goose his aforementioned speedo to give him a prouder bulge, the idea of which must be credited to his former agent, former due to their mysterious death mind you, which didn't help Brawny Mondo's psyche at all, not at all, nor does it aid his stark apparitional makeupless face, which he can count the ghosts in, one for each hour he failed to sleep, and one for each time he

will be forced to pretend to make a slip of speech and say *Drive the Butts* instead of *Drive the Bus* today, one for every time he anticipates telling strangers of all shapes and sizes to be their own butt captain, for each time he signs his autograph in sharpie on a DVD of *Your Booty is Your Duty Vol. 7*, for each time his students honk as they *Drive the Bus*, alternately flexing the sides of their ass to drive all over the city of their imagination, all over this de-spirited wasteland, all over the ruin of his life . . . but let's not get maudlin dear Mr. Mondo, let's just kick back and have a little capital T Truth, a cuppa T, let's just get the kit from the special locked drawer and tie off and sit down in the fine leather chair you imported from Italy, let the warmth of Truth wash over your constructed body, then through your veins until the world at last feels hopeful again, joyful again, until the ocean feels to be between your head, until, at last, Brawny Mondo, sleep overwhelms you, until, less than a moment later, your 5:45 alarm starts to wail.

2000

On Sunday of a three day weekend, Downtown Rochester is a ghost town. Well, let's not say that, it implies that ghosts bothered to be there. The streets are empty, the buildings are empty, E is empty. But it's not so bad. It's not the kind of emptiness that veers toward the existential, but the kind that allows one to be open to the world as it unfolds, a pleasant numb state rather than depressive hollowness. There's a certain pleasure, walking around one's city, especially alone, when you can revel in solitude, tune in to the city itself without worrying about getting hit by a car, without having to worry about anyone, an apocalypse without the death and destruction.

E shakes yet another Frederick Douglass statue's hand by the Hochstein music school and heads down Church Street when they see someone out on their balcony, a dozen or more floors up, beyond the river and streets away, only a stick figure from this distance. Though the loneliness is disturbed, E wishes it were them, enjoying a cup of coffee and the view, looking if not looming over the city, a steady breeze in the already crisp air, bring a kind of clarity that—

No.

No.

NO

NO

DON'T

DON'T

NO!

But they jump anyway.

CALL 911!

It takes so long for them to fall.

CALL 911!

But not long enough.

CALL 911!

E swears they can feel the thud, not even yet across the bridge.

CALL 911!

Though they sprint beyond theirself, they are too late. Always too late.

With the unidentifiable face in their lap, E begins to scream.

PLEASE

PLEASE

CALL 911!

HELP

HELP

HELP HER

HELP HER

PLEASE

PLEASE

PLEASE

It'll probably happen like this: I'll schlep myself up the stairs to our apartment, slightly weary from the day and work but it won't be so bad. I'll take off my cocoon of work clothes and I'll hear him clomp up the stairs and struggle with the lock. He might say hi, but then he'll ask me what's for dinner, even though I'll have barely put my purse down, so I'll say I dunno, whatcha making? And he'll say okay okay jesus christ I was just asking. And he'll brood in his favorite corner briefly and I'll say something not worth repeating, that I'm not even interested in, like Brenda was censured at work again and he'll say what and when a stream of air comes out of my mouth like a popped tire he again will say what; of course I'll say nothing, not that I won't talk, I'll literally say *nothing*, as if I can't remember what I wanted to say and he'll look at me like I'm prey and ask if this is about the fucking spoons again, how it meant I didn't love him—how many times did he need to explain that thing with the spoons; and I'll deny it but he won't believe it; I'll get annoyed at being misunderstood, misperceived, since it compounds the loneliness I've been feeling around him lately when we find ourselves communicating from separate realities; I should have known this was coming: every time I compliment our relationship we end up fighting. You know how you'll hear a guy say that a woman is pretty but not hot or something? Well, he's handsome but not cute. So when he starts to pout he looks like a mooney statue, and I can't feel bad because I can't pity him because he doesn't look pitiable, he looks *pathetic*. He'll then talk about how he actively employs the method of positive visualization. Employ he'll say. Not use, employ. So, I'll ignore that and I'll have this urge to just stop the argument, stop everything, say I was wrong, about what I won't remember, and I'll have an impulse to tell him I love him. But he'll sulk and sulk and slouch in the corner and I'll have to avoid his eyes. Instead of saying anything he'll give me what he once called a *bitchslap with the eyes*. That's exactly what he does when we argue, but he does it with his entire face. He'll be

making those bitchslap eyes at me, and you don't tell a man with bitchslap eyes that you love him, so instead I'll remind him about how the day before he texted me during what was a day off and said *I'm having a wonderful day, can you not come home for a bit longer?* He said this. I was expected to not be mad about this. And I won't be able to stop myself from saying it. I'll walk right into it. He'll say I didn't give him enough time. And I know I'll walk right into it. Give you enough time? It's not a fucking test. Which will be a huge mistake because it will allow him to feel righteous and clever when he says Well, apparently it is! And I won't be worried he'll hit me or anything, he'll just sort of threateningly take off his engagement ring, because he always does. And it's not like much had changed since we engaged, but since it happened there's been one pseudo-significant thing. That promise of marriage added a thin porous layer, one that forced me to put up with just a liiiittle bit more. A snarkier than usual comment, chores delayed more than usual, maybe being called a bitch wouldn't end the relationship the way it would have when we were dating. I had to be careful to not take advantage of these things, to not push boundaries simply because it feels good to do so in the moment, to resist the urge to *get away with it*. I've done immense work in this area, but it doesn't seem like he resists at all. So okay, so okay, I'll bring up how he was accused of fucking a bellhop in an elevator last month. And I know nothing happened because I bribed the security guard to see the footage, so I know there was never any fornicatory situation with the bellhop. But then he'll fucking say, I know it, he'll say that this isn't about a bellhop, or his brooding (brooding he'll say, as if he were goddamn batman), it's about the fuCKiNG SPOONS, AGAIN IT'S ABOUT THE FUCKING SPOONS. So okay the thing with the spoons, the thing with the spoons is I was scooping ice cream for us for a movie, and he thought he had such a cute lovey dovey question to ask, so he said Babe, if there were only two spoons left in the drawer, one of the good spoons and one of the shitty spoons, which

spoon would you give me? And you know what, he should have known better, because I'm an honest person, I told him yeah, I'd give him the shitty spoon after I did scoop his fucking ice cream. If he wants the good spoon, he should scoop himself. And we'll rehash this entire spoon thing for the ten-thousandth time and I'll have developed a headache and lost it and gained a migraine during yet another neverending argument and we'll be hours in and I'll be at the point I can't do it anymore, when my body will feel wrung out and strained and I'll just want it to be over, at this point I'll want to just say, I love you, because it's true, and the conversation is just going to keep following itself like a mobius strip, and I know I'm not going to end things, but he'll be wearing those bitchslap eyes still, and you don't tell a man with bitchslap eyes that you love him.

27 March 2023

Brenda's gait is neither apelike nor burdened with the urgent need to urinate as she makes her way to Talbot who's still trying to park in the wet brick street. He gets out of the car without turning it off, "How does this woman have so many friends?"

"Admirers. She has admirers."

"Streetfuls of admirers. I guess that's one way to bring people together."

Brenda tells him to go inside, she'll park the car, Adriana is the one with the veil. Talbot says, "Great, I didn't eat," and heads inside, like it's mundane to enter into someone's home in a suit with a coral pocket square knowing nothing about the people inside except that one of them is veiled, and the rest are there to admire her. Brenda tosses the boxed-up dress and notarized documents in the trunk. It's not that Adriana isn't admirable, just that she had the benefit of being a second draft. Coach made all the mistakes with Brenda, so Adriana's presence has always been that of the effortless younger sibling—more information to work with, a kind of refinement of the mold pressed from Brenda. You could almost hear the liquor sloshing around in Coach's barrel belly when he would hug her for a first-place finish, but not for Adriana. Wonderful wonderful Adriana. She's starting to think that her subconscious is like the younger sibling who's smarter, more talented, and better-looking. Effortless. Something whose current relation to the world would not exist without her, whose entire course of development was modeled on, improved upon, ship righted against, so on. But when their respective careers came to an end, their places in the siblingish hierarchy of their lives were exchanged, slowly, through yet more development, forging new paths no longer modeled on Brenda. Somehow, as the roles reversed, Brenda still hasn't been endowed with that effortless grace of the younger sibling, her

subconscious hasn't gotten any faster, and she felt no benefit from observing Adriana's own path from afar.

So, Adriana was putting her on an ice floe. But, that's what you're taught: thin the herd. And, if Brenda really wanted to get better, shouldn't she be relying only on herself anyway? It's not like it's purely mechanistic coping. Her thinking was, well, if all her problems came from herself, she just needed to fix them to be ok with herself. As long as she was working on things, eventually she'd be happy with being alone and wouldn't need anyone. Wasn't that the goal? To insulate yourself against all situations, to be okay no matter what?

#

Brenda's pretending to take candid party photos; a woman with a footlong cigarette holder yells across the room to please send her the picture—the lighting is perfect, she says, like crushed up stars falling in the window. Brenda just assumes everyone here is high to various degrees, they'd have to be to not notice she's using her phone as a mirror. Almost everyone is holding a paper plate, and each paper plate is bent or bowed at a different angle. Instead of mingling, she wrangles Talbot, “Do not leave me alone here please. You are a buoy; I am a drowner. That's our relationship here.”

“I've just been talking to Adriana. She said she'll give me that fine green rocking chair by the fireplace if I come and get it when she moves. Don't think I wanna wait though . . . Can we see if we can just get it in the car now? Oh, and you're doing a eulogy?! I would have come just to see that.”

“She's moving?”

“She said she was. To Vegas—got a gig. Are you ready? For the eulogy?”

“Yeah, obviously.” But Brenda hasn’t prepared anything. Just thinking about it has opened a black hole in her stomach. Talking in front of people . . . if she wanted to talk, she’d be an auctioneer, a therapist, a seller of used cars. Did he say that Adriana was moving?

Talbot, rather impatiently, “So, can we see if we can stuff the chair in?”

“Yeah, when we leave. Let’s head over to the trough.”

“Gross.”

Someone in the kitchen yells out to the house if it’s okay to compost peeled-off skin. “Yep, do it all the time. Just behind the pull-out garbage . . . nope . . . yup, that one,” Brenda says.

Brenda leads Talbot over to the food table by the wall. She grabs a plate and puts everything appetizing on it she can find, which isn’t much—the potato pancake tombstones are soggy, the stuffed-pepper skulls are undercooked so they’d retain shape, too many carrots were used for the bones of the skeleton crudité.

The subtitle for what the guy across the room is doing would be [munches aggressively].

What does the face of someone searching up “*fun funeral-themed foods*” look like?

In front of her in the buffet line, there’s a private conversation going on at a rather public volume, “We’ve been trying to get pregnant for a while, so you know, I’m about to make a, uh, contribution, and it’s all pretty perfunctory at this point, so, you know, a little levity, I lean in close to the seashell part of her ear and say, ‘If I were a spice, I’d be cumin, because I’m about to cum in you.’” . . . “Now, you’re not going to get me on record saying this is a hall of fame joke or anything. I know it’s a bit forced, but I’m not so sure either that I deserved the ass end of the bedside lamp in the face.”

Brenda finds a pizza with cheese ghosts and kalamata olive spiders. She's biting into half a ghost and three legs of a spider when a woman behind her makes a hacking sound which stops Brenda's mastication. The woman holds something very unpleasant and chewed-looking; she gives the nauseous pile a look of deep concentration and turns to Brenda, "Have you ever eaten something, and you feel it in your nose. And you go to blow your nose and you can taste it again?"

"Never had that esteemed pleasure," Brenda says.

"And a pleasure it is," Talbot laughs. "Me and Ecaterina were just talking about you. She's a fan. I just realized. It's interesting, translations never change names. They'll change the name of a city, but not the name of a person. No one's changing Ecaterina to Catherine."

Ecaterina is one of these machine gun sneezers; one, two, . . . five sneezes.

Every time she has to talk to a nostalgic friend like Ecaterina, who she doesn't know very well anymore, she says "Oh!" before saying what she wants to say, like "Oh! Ecaterina, Adriana was telling me you had to bring your kid to the vet—" as if having an epiphany every time. Ecaterina gives us sneezes six through ten. "Sorry," Brenda says, "'We,'" indicating her and Talbot, "work at a zoo and it was just the natural—I didn't mean—the vet, I—" More sneezing: eleven, twelve, thirteen.

Ecaterina, waving her hand, "Oh, don't worry about it, I actually think it'd be a good place to bring him, should see this kid with a flagpole, the dancing, climbing, and you were my hero for that summer I saw you at Juniors."

Talbot puts his arm around Brenda, "She's still my hero though."

"Also, when I saw you for Friendsgiving it looked like you'd been living off local snakes for the last couple months. So I give you that leeway."

“How lovely.”

“And Brenda, I love your hair, or the lack of it. Doesn’t surprise me at all you did that. It’s always been fun to see your phases. Your artist phase, your girly-girl phase, now I guess your punk phase, your shaved-head phase.” Ecaterina smiles, her teeth tinged black from the punch. “Oh, Adriana’s calling me over, the zombie queen beckons. Wonderful catching up!” Final sneeze count: 18—oh, well, here’s another rapid-fire fit as she walks away—19, 20, 21, 22, 23.

Brenda’s face is still working its way back to resting. “Sarcasm’s a great way to lose your free ride,” she leans in to Talbot to say.

“I already paid for the ride by coming.”

“Let’s just eat. Last week I lost a pound. If I keep that up I’ll vanish in under two years.”

Yet another conversation as she moves with her plate across the party:

“How many times. Hooooow maaaaany times, oh my god. It’s a crossbody bag, not a fanny pack.”

“You mean a fanny pack you wear across your body.”

“No, it’s just named after what it does. It’s a bag that crosses your body. Thus, **THUS**, a crossbody bag.”

“Okay, here’s my point. What’s this called?”

“Purse.”

“Great. Now, observe as I bring it uhhhh and oooooover my head so that the strap rests on my left shoulder, and the bag sits on my right hip. See? Now, what would you call this object?”

“A crossbody bag.”

Teeming is the word. The place is teeming. Teeming with talk. Swarming with smells. Just overflowing with effluence. And the idiot who carved the spider out of the olive she just popped in her mouth left the pit in. Ow. Fucking ow. Ow.

Let's roam around a bit while Brenda recovers.

"Sure, and you're right, cloning is globally banned. But you just know that some creepy skulky genius somewhere has an entire clone family he keeps in a basement. Like that Frankensheep guy in Montana? Tip of the iceberg."

"—and stop asking me. I cannot use it like that, it's not a bouncy—it doesn't bounce . . . no, and stop, it's glass. It's glass. My eye is glass. It does NOT bounce."

"We just go from incontinence to incontinence with like . . . forty years in between."
"Forty?"

"Essentially what I've invented—you know how at a wine tasting there's these neutral palate cleansers, um, water, crackers, stuff like that, but what I'm doing, it's just like with the wine, but this is for your nose, for, like, maybe you were just at the gas station and you can't handle the smell for long—public bathrooms, candle competitions, I mean the possibilities are endless."

"He was like, *Nature is too strong for virtue*, and I was like, *Did you just call me a slut?*"

"In the end, our relationship was one of those things that seemed convenient, but wasn't really, like a sink you can wash your hands at while still sitting on the toilet. Though, to be totally honest, I have found it makes me feel better about the whole thing because I can put my phone down and actually wash my hands before I clean up, which is nice."

"I can't stop smelling piss."

"You mean, like, you have an addiction?"

"No, I mean everywhere in this house smells like piss."

"Haven't noticed."

"Let's say—let's say—what if the autopsy—fuck—not the autopsy, um . . . ultrasound! The ultrasound. Let's say the ultrasound reveals that you have triplets. And you can really only afford the one kid . . . can you like . . ."

"No, I—it's sad, you know, like how maybe you watch an old movie or something and there's a dog in the movie, like Air Bud or something, and you think, yeah, that dog is dead now, all the dogs they used for that movie are dead now, it's, you know, it's sad like that."

"My closet is now 100% aspirational. I don't fit into anything."

“—it had been weeks, I’m serious. I hadn’t, uh, you know, uh, I can’t think of a good euphemism sadly, um, well, I hadn’t done it in weeks. And when it finally happened, after like less time than it takes to shake up your chocolate milk, it felt like—it felt like—you know those long sticky arms we would get out of the vending machine? It felt exactly like having one of those pulled out of my—”

“Doofnard. Doofnard. He kept calling me doofnard. He couldn’t stop. I mean he was saying it was like it was his fucking life force or something. Doofnard.”

“I did not kick your cat. I took little Wafer, cradled him with my foot, and slid him across the floor. Like in curling. Yeah. I curled your cat. There was absolutely no kicking involved.”

“—they have those. It’s just coffee beans. You shake the can and get a humongous waft of coffee—”

“Don’t dealers, like of drugs, use it to cover up the smell of—”

“Yeah, but they just put the coffee beans in a little container—like a little shaker they have at pizza places for oregano and parm and hot flakes—”

“So, it’s just beans, and they cleanse the nose palate?”

“Just coffee beans.”

“I don’t know why that’s so disappointing to me.”

“No idea—should be good news on your end.”

“Suppose you are suddenly cast into the collective unconscious of another species. You’d probably go insane right? You probably wouldn’t assimilate, you’d just go direct to insanity, right? Does this wine taste like salad dressing to you?”

“So we’re having a wedding for my cats tomorrow. They shan’t be living in sin any longer.”

“N-no. No. I wasn’t picking my nose. If anything I was plucking my nose. You don’t see anyone get that—right there! That tiny pinched face of disgust. No one gets that when someone tweezes their eyebrows. I wasn’t picking, I was plucking. Plucking the hair out of my nose. Demonstrably not picking. Plucking. PLUCK-ING.”

“Anyway, best of luck with your presidency—sorry, your pregnancy, sorry, good luck.”

A strange number of arguments here. A number of strange arguments. A strange number of strange arguments . . . Feels like she broke her fucking tooth.

#

Ecaterina is the first eulogist, holding this little skull just below her mouth. Brenda doesn’t hear a word since she’s so focused on Ecaterina’s teeth, still black from the punch.

Gabby's next, and she lives up to her name.

Olivia up now and she starts off her speech talking about how Adriana's always one to meet and shake the hand of unmeetable expectations.

Brenda pokes Talbot and whispers, "I feel like I'm going to puke."

"Sometimes you just have to reach in and get it over with."

Brenda heads to the upstairs bathroom, but not for emetic reasons, she doesn't do that anymore; if she had to submit a number, she'd probably say it has been 3,394 days since she has thrown up at all. Adriana's bathroom is violently scrubbed, but the scrapes and bruises that should be there twinkle instead. The sheen of the bathroom surfaces doesn't long distract from the wallpaper of a circus bear rolling on and falling off a red-white striped ball over and over. Adriana's shower is so complicated she's got a little laminated packet of instructions on the sink, diagrams and everything, a joking-not-joking legal addendum reporting how quickly the shower gets to scalding, absolving Adriana of responsibility. Brenda's nose recoils at the room, though the smell is of disinfectant, which indeed is better than the alternative in a house where there are so many people eating, but there's nevertheless something false about it. Adriana has always been fastidious, but picturing her obligingly scrubbing the floor for this party . . . hard to do.

As soon as Brenda sits on the toilet someone's banging on the door.

"Alright, let me in."

"Why didn't you tell me you were fucking moving?"

"Because I was afraid you were gonna go and lock yourself in a bathroom."

Brenda lets her in. “I made it through two eulogies. Fuck. Cannot fucking believe you’re doing this to me again.”

“They only wanted me because they couldn’t get you.”

“What?”

“If you remember any one of the times I asked you what your job was, I had something in mind, but you kept telling me you had everything figured out and you loved your job but you wouldn’t tell me what it was—I just figured you were like a sex worker and you didn’t want to tell me.”

“What?”

“You know, I get that, you can demand what you’re worth. Hopefully fewer injuries, but that’s not to say it’s necessarily safe—”

“Are you fuc—”

“Unless, is chlamydia technically an injury? . . . But ya, they couldn’t get in touch with you, so they got in touch with me and I got the job.” Brenda’s grip strength is now so powerful that, when she holds a stone, she feels as if she can turn it into a fine powder by simply closing her fist. Really wants to prove it to herself by grabbing Adriana’s skull, but not this time. This time, her body shuts down; when it starts back up, Adriana’s still going. “And I was mad at you for not taking the job, but then again that’s like jumping off a cliff and being mad at gravity for falling.”

. . .

“Are you mad?”

“I dunno, probably. I’m not going to ruin your party over it though.” Brenda sits on the fuzzy pink toilet seat. “Aren’t you missing a eulogy?”

“They sent it to me to approve beforehand. No surprises there. I’m just glad you weren’t in here throwing up. It was Shauna, right? Rayla? I don’t know, all our names ended in ‘a’.”

There, too, was another girl who was actually factually named Gala, really kind of forcing the pattern. “She had gotten so good at it she didn’t need her fingers. Just on command.”

“Good at it?”

“You’d call it something else? You know Brenda, you’ve got a fear of success. If you just let yourself be good, you would be.”

“Fear of success is just, like, the scenic route on the way to fear of failure. Which I’m not afraid of.”

“You are rather into self-sabotage.”

“What happened to the veil?”

“Everyone’s seen it already.”

In the quiet, Adriana pulls out a pair of expensive tweezers and starts plucking her eyebrows.

“Won’t that leave marks?”

“Not if you can take a little more pain. If you pull the follicle real slow, instead of ripping it out, you can get it less splotchy.” Adriana plucks away. “I’ve been thinking.” Looks in the mirror to reassure herself. “It’s a lot worse to feel ugly than to be ugly, I think.”

Brenda’s eyes roll so hard she almost falls off the toilet. “How many magazine covers were you on?”

“Just the two. And exactly the point. Obviously it’s worse to be ugly and feel ugly, but if I had to choose one, I’d do anything to not feel ugly. I think I feel ugly about 97% of the time.

Not an accident. This's going to sound, okay, a little vain, but someone as hot as me shouldn't be feeling that ugly that often."

"If you were any more humble it'd sound condescending. But you're right, not an accident."

"Not an accident."

"What was it that Tyra would always say? Swize? Smime?"

"Smize. Smile with your eyes."

"Smize. Yeah, when did Ecaterina start doing it with her voice." Brenda asks.

"Smiling, with her voice. Smoice."

"Smoice, yeah, exactly. She's so bubbly now."

"I know. She doesn't say, 'You left the toaster oven plugged in,' she'll say, 'Youhuhhoos left the toaaaaster ovEN plugged in.'"

"If I did that I'd never talk to myself again."

"What?"

"I just, just I don't get it. The magazine thing. We're all trapped in our bodies here. And somehow we're all so judgemental, like I have a choice to be in this fucking thing, like we all don't know. We all know. So why are we all so hostile and empathyless. On and on it's all you hear about, people complaining how we're all so disconnected. So how about fucking connecting."

"Ya. Well, you know, someone downstairs called me ravishing earlier. You think he wants to connect? You think he wants to ravish me?"

"That is kinda racy isn't it? Jesus. Let's look up the . . . Oh, oh yeah. First result: 'Seize and carry off by force,' and 'fill (someone) with intense delight.'"

“So yes. He wants to. Right? Exactly under what circumstance would you call someone ravishing you wouldn't want to ravish?”

“Maybe it's an observation. Like if that guy downstairs were to ravish you, and maybe his mother walks in the room and observes, ‘Oh, would you look at that, my son is at this very moment ravishing.’ We can probably assume his mother doesn't want to ravish him.”

“I don't know about that, going by the popularity of incest porn.”

“I don't know how people watch porn. Every time I try there's this cat or something in the video trying to get out of the room. And I can't focus on anything else. There was this one I watched, the two of them, they were getting at it and you hear this buzzing all over the place. It's loud as hell because it's one of those amateur videos. It's buzzing and buzzing and it's the only thing you can hear really, despite how vigorous it all is, except maybe for someone dropping their recycling in the alley behind the window they're doing it in front of. And it goes on for about a minute and then the fly just lands right on one of their faces. And the buzzing just stops. And the two of them are still going at it. Didn't even try to swat the fucking fly. It just stayed there the whole video. Hardest I've ever laughed.”

“That reminds me. Does this look on purpose?”

“Does what?”

“This little strand of hair here? Does it look natural or does it look like I pulled my hair back tight and on purpose snaked this sexy little strand out?”

“You know, I think the real problem is that the occupancy in this house is over capacity.”

“Not worried about it.”

“You say that now, but when ten or fifteen of your admirers die in a cave-in—”

“Did you just say admirers?”

“No, I said guests. Ten or fifteen guests.”

“Nooooooo you didn—.”

“Okay, I said admirers.”

From the MoonFace Archives: Last Moments: Good Wrinkles

I have a nice face but an otherwise appalling body; this revelation rose with the steam in the shower, if I am allowed to set the mood. That shower, my third of the day, was in preparation for a celebration in my honor at the home of a new colleague. I took great pleasure in going to a stranger's house, some party, snooping around the drawers, underthings—apologies, underdrawers—oh, that is not quite an improvement, is it? I loved to swipe a lens wipe, clean my glasses, then go out and have a free meal in my honor; I was once quite celebrated. During my heyday, I kept the lens wipe wrappers in my pocket; a small joy that was only and barely mine. I got up to thirteen. Thirteen lens wipes are the measure of my celebrity in that circle. There were more dinners of course, fifteen, sixteen dinners, but academia is heavy with glasses-wearers. Strangely, all these bespectacled people used the same brand of lens wipes from one of those egregiously lazy companies who could not be bothered to separate their lens wipe packets; the quality control was abysmal; in a pack of 100 individually-wrapped pre-moistened wipes, perhaps only 60 were singles, while 40 others clung to a partner they had to be ripped away from; maddening. Anyway, as all things wont, my celebrity, after thirteen stolen lens wipes, ended.

That night, my fingers raw behind the years of clawing back from the corporate world, my renown was to be renewed.

My outfit was my sole confidence that night; I was in “spanking new duds,” as Baudelaire was once translated: emerald and black herringbone tweed suit, black turtleneck (which nicely cinched my stomach), and a black pocket square, folded as a crown with emerald tips. It was an outfit so becoming it did not even need a splash of color (though, I planned to add

one anyway). This was garb I expected painters to beg me to wear as they captured my fierce likeness in portraiture. I could be anyone's Mona Lisa in that suit.

My eighty-hour candle, scented a medley of red berries, drifted together with *Dance in the Village Inn*'s dull roar. Well, I have not mentioned the wine. There, the wine. (I am not hard to please above eighty-five dollars or so). A ritual of fine-tuned perfection.

I have referenced this house of flesh and its lack of upkeep only to evidence how I value honesty. Honesty, that is not to say the truth, mind you, is number one and two on top of my list of values. The third, because I know I have you wondering, is, somewhat obligingly, a refined palette.

The steam, the shower, the candles . . . it was in this heat I was scrawling a note on my showerpad, one of the great inventions of any age. *No more great ideas down the drain*, the blue pencil advertised. I was thunderstruck by—hmm, as this is situated in the shower, perhaps thunderstruck is not the aptest word, but I do not use a word like revelation lightly. In all cases, I had what I believed to be a slash of genius at the end of that pencil in the sobbing shower. I reached out to record this bit of brilliance on the showerpad, when I was

interrupted

by a noise,

something you might call a clatter.

The fiend was so brazen it did not quiet its coming. Clattering. Breaking. Clumsy footsteps. Closer in the hall. Chopped its feet; a butcher at the block.

The sound of footfalls shifted from the hallway's hardwood to the bathroom tile.

I had very little to defend myself with in this position. My fingers were swollen in the steam, so they were useless to help disassemble my razor. I considered using my shampoo to

squeeze into the fiend's eyes, but it was almost empty, and I had not yet welcomed its replacement into the shower. As great inventions do, however, the showerpad came in to conquer the day; specifically, the pencil. *No bad ideas*, indeed. I adjusted the water temperature—who knew how long our standoff might last; I did not want to be shriveled and cold if I had to defend myself.

The fiend would not move; I believe I could feel it thinking. As the moments ticked, my grip on the pencil got tighter . . . as the moments ticked, the beads of scalding water burned down my back, steam rose and disappeared . . . as the moments ticked, the steam rose, disappeared, rose—

I LET OUT A BATTLE CRY, and plunged pencilfirst toward the fiend through the shower curtain.

. . . through the shower curtain . . .

[continues]

- . . . through the shower curtain . . . Clarence! Through the shower curtain.

- Jeeeeesus christ Ricky, I thought you'd never stop talking.

- Richard, Clarence. Richard. Just once before I die do me the favor of saying my name correctly.

- Ah I'm sorry Richie, but how many times do I need to say it? Sometimes love renames you.

Where were we again?

- I am on the floor; unconscious.

- Ricky, I know this isn't the kingliest room you've ever been in, but we damn sure have been in hospitals with worse beds. Hell, you think your bed is so bad, take the couch.

- The story, Clarence.

- Oh, of course. And I just wanted to mention something. You had me thinking about being unclothed, so I have to ask our dear interviewer if this is going to be transcribed?

- I think you mean transcribed, Clarence.

- Ya ya. Is it going to be? I was just thinking that, if it's written, it'd look about the same as unclothed, but Ricky said un-cloth-ed, as in, he was minus a loincloth. Lacking a loincloth old Ricky was.

- So much charm my Clarence has.

- You say it's not charm, but you know better.

- I think we should get back to the story.

- Alright, alright, I know where I have to take over. But by the way there Ricky, how many times are you going to call me a fiend now?

- Will not be many more.

- Ah, stop that. I'm sure this machine will keep you alive until we're done with the interview here at least.

- Fine, fine. Continue. Nothing left to do.

- Ah Ricky.

- It's fine, honey, honestly, go ahead.

- Alright, well, alright, I suppose I should give you a bit of framery here. Ricky's been so honest I figure I ought to be, too. Well, I was there to ro—uh, wait a second here, uh, Ricky, what's the statute of limitations on all this again?

- I tell you every time, honey, you can say it.

- Okay, I was there to rob the place. And now that the statute of limitations is over, he overlooks the robbery, and I overlook his manners.

- I am perfectly mannered, thank you.

- It's true. Still got your bib on there, Ricky.

- Alas, the cost of manners. And Clarence, do remember, it's burglary I overlook, not robbery.

They are distinct for a reason.

- True. And wouldn't you know all about that?

- Oh, not again, Clar—

- As you heard, Ricky was into a touch of petty thievery his own self, extracurricular to those lens wipes even. I told him smoking was a great way to, well, divert other unsavory urges. I suppose it worked. But, well—

- Well, let's get back to the story.

- Okay, Ricky, okay . . . So, I was in his apartment. Not like I was there through particularly dishonest means. I was just going along and trying doors, hoping to get out of the cold a spell. Ricky's building wasn't locked, apartment neither, so I wandered in.

- Clarence is rather gentle; that surprised me, too.

- Ah go on, now. I changed my habits is all I did; then, well, my habits changed me. Alright, right, we were at the part where Ricky comes whooping out of the shower . . . Scared the hell out of me, tell the truth. The man hadn't gone a step before he slipped and conked his coconut on the bathroom linoleum; had these lilac branches making squares all over it. I'm trying to help the guy up because my instinct is to get him to sit, but he's wetter than a whale fart and everythin— . . .—would you—. . .—would you stop? Sorry about Ricky here, he can't help himself at that part. Always laughs . . . So, the man didn't have a pad or rug or towel or something for stepping out of the shower. On a linoleum floor, you believe that? He says he was washing it, but let me tell you, I made sure there wasn't any good clothes with any good loose money in the

washerdryer, so on no green earth would I miss a bath mat. I found myself standing there outside the shower mostly because I didn't know what to do. Deer in the headlights. Part of me, I think, just wanted to let him know I was there so I wouldn't scare him, but I'm there staring at this beastly presence, and it's huffing and puffing and chuffing, splashing slapping water everywhere. Then it springs out like an ambush jaguar or something. Jumped through my bones when he came out. And he goes and scares hell out of me again, bashing his head on the floor. So I'm trying to pick him up, but there he goes again back down, ass over teakettle, and wetter than a whale fart— . . . —alright now, Ricky . . . —stop your laughing there, I'm not going to be the man responsible for your death . . . But as we're here discussing whales by the way, I have this—well I guess you'd call it a bit of a conspiracy about whales—

- Clarence, I must ask, are you inebriated?

- Have a right to be, love of my life on his deathbed and all.

- Well, you have me there.

- Not for long.

- Clarence. Clarence, I love you. And I'm here. Keep going with the story. You have never shared your whale conspiracy with me, so I was surprised. That is all. Please keep going.

- Ahhhhhhhh. So alright he kind of keeps flopping out of my hands on account of the wetness, and again and again he's licking linoleum. And this is the stage of mind I don't well perform on. Course I'm reluctant to call the cops. Natural instinct. Couple of priors in there too . . . little ticky-tack stuff. So I'm what I'd call understandably hesitant to ring up the . . . the constabool—

- The constabulary?

- Ding ding.

- Why not just say ambulance?

- Not any easier than constaboolary is it?

- Oh, Clarence—

- Ain't nothing oh Clarence.

- Yes yes, I will simply sit here and die; if not peacefully, then quietly.

- Ricky, you know I wouldn'—

- I know, Clarence, I know . . . well, you were frozen. In the story. Frozen.

- Yeah, should be pretty clear we've had to discuss this. But I'm not saying I took all that long to figure it out. Two seconds. Tops. Which you know Ricky damn well accepted, or these last 30 years wouldn't've happened. Got to say though that your timing with this interview here is on the terrestrial side of stellar. If you get my meaning. Flippin Ricky said that to me once . . .

Tourettestrial I thought he was saying—. . .—Well, how am I supposed to know how to spell it?

It isn't a damn word now is it, Ricky?

- If you are interested, I would spell it t-o-u-r—

- Ricky . . .

- You are right. You are. So, you were making this big decision.

- Damn right I was. And even through all your mumblery I took about two honest seconds—

- You mean mummery?

- I mean I took the two damn seconds to decipher what it is you were saying, you damn mumblery. Who knows what you were on about down there . . . you were just fish flopping on the floor and . . . and, well, anyway, I saw the bleeding down Richard's chin there, and well, that was damn near convincing.

- But not entirely.

- No, not entirely. What really got me was that cute butt.

- Oh how the story evolves. Clarence positively wept the first time we were called for one of these interviews.

- I dunno; it was something about the trajectory of my life that day. I just have this beautiful man in my arms and his life was up to me at that point. I thought about it. I admit it. It was a decision.

- It was. People ask me all the time what made me love Clarence. Which very much surprised me. It's one of the most popular questions. To me it's obvious; I love Clarence because he made the impossible choice to save my life instead of his freedom. If he stays and treats me, who is to say he will not be charged with attempted murder? If he calls and leaves—and there weren't cameras surveilling every centimeter of sidewalk then—he gives me a chance to live, but he has almost no time to escape. Clarence chose to stay . . . he made the beautiful choice, the hopeful choice, the correct choice . . . he saved my life instead of saving his skin. I do not know what kind of reward my time and love is, but that is what I gave him.

- . . . I . . . and . . . are we still on the floor? . . . in the story?

- Don't cry, Clarence.

- Again, name me a better time? Hey, you want to hear a joke?

- Say whatever, say anything, I need to close my eyes.

- Sorry for the color of the joke here, but I'm sure you can chop it out. Isn't my joke anyway. I got it from Joanie the other day.

- Joanie?

- Enough of that, Ricky. Ricky's scared as hell that as soon as he goes I'll partner up with Joanie for bridge—we play bridge with Joanie—this bitty dachshund of a lady? I'll tell you what, that Joanie is one cunning lady, for instance—

- And a truly wonderful woman.

- Even brought in a pie for old Ricky the other day.
- You told me you made it.
- Course I did. It was damn good.
- Damn good pie . . . well, let's hear her joke, Clarence.
- Alright so Joanie told me this while we sat and ate that divine pie. She has what you'd call a public-facing job, so she's talking with all sorts. Ups and downs as anything; she has her favorites, her shit list clients. It was one of her hated clients taking the chair. Got the sour puss and everything like that. That tough old lady scowl. Wiry neck. Kind of old lady that has a couple of million plus in the bank collecting interest but doesn't ever turn the heat on in winter kind of mean old lady. Have to respect that.

And she comes in, ascowl of course, and she noticed that Joanie's a little spooked by her just being there, so she says, she says,

"Alright now, Joan, you had that same look when I last left . . . getting a little tired of you looking at me a way, don't know what I did to make y'all give me that horrorshow face the moment I darken your door. I have a joke for you then, funny story, anecdote—now I don't know what you call it, but I have it. Alright, well, it's about what, fifty, sixty years prior maybe, and I was being courted, wooed, by this beau—" Joanie made sure to highlight that one, her *beau*, "—and we weren't all hopping into bed immediately with each other then like my grandkids do, or so they say they do. Well so the courting's going well and smooth and I figure, what the hell, let's get liberated. And I got tired of waiting on his good manners because he's from one of these well-to-do families with the hat and coat and carriage still from last generation's horses. All gentlemanlike he drops me off after a fine night of dancing, and I don't know about you, but if I wasn't ready to seduce him my own self, I would have been ready by the time we were done

dancing. So I invited him in. At first he's all excited but that face darkened when I turned on the porchlight. He came in anyway. He was dancing too, you understand. But now he gets serious and asks me to sit down. I do. And his face has the look it's about to tell me we're long-lost siblings or something. And he says to me, he says, 'I must confess, you're the sweetest young lady in three counties, a girl like you gets bit by a queen bee and sure enough she'd call you too sweet.' Which was nice and all but it's not the kind of talk I'm interested in after the heat of dancing. But he keeps on, 'I don't know how to say a thing like this. So I guess I just say it . . . alright, I say it . . . ah hell . . . I was hoping you'd notice when we were dancing but, ah hell, okay, okay . . . ah hell, fine, I HAVE TWO PENISES . . . I have two pensises. And I named them both . . . There's the one I know you for sure felt when we were waltzing, when I grazed a little close there, alright, that penis I named José.'

"So of course I ask the only question left, right? Well, what's the other one's name?"

"And the gentleman says, 'Hose B.'"

. . .

. . .

[Richard continues to laugh]

. . .

- Stop laughing Ricky, I told you I wouldn't be the man to kill you. Oh hell, now you're probably thinking Joanie's trying to murder you.

- Let me laugh, Clarence . . . can you get me another box of tissues? . . . thank you, honey.

- Ricky, that's a lot of blood. Are you sure I can't—

- Clarence. I am on the floor. In the story. Just finish the story, Clarence.

- . . . That's right, Ricky, you've been on the floor longer now than you were then. Back to it I guess, slippery Rick. Well, it just gave me the turning point moment sort of feeling, didn't it? I could let this beautiful man you see before you . . . minus thirty years and probably two hundred thousand cigarettes . . . just let him—just let him die in my arms, or maybe I could make sure he lived. At least maybe tell him sorry. I've never been a great guy but, like I say, I thought about it. I was making a decision. If I don't make that call to the ambulance, I might as well have just got a pillow from his bed and suffocated him myself. No. Not me, no sir. No ma'am. I sit him up in the shower and turn on the cold water because, I dunno, wasn't anything scientific about it, cold blood doesn't pump as fast—hell that was half the reason I even found myself at Ricky's . . . anyway, I got him in the shower and let him shrivel in the cold, and, Ricky wasn't a first adopter of the cell phone, so I have to find a landline or something, but now I'm all wet, and who was gonna call the ambulance if I go bleeding out, so I use Ricky's ratty towel to dry my feet, could hardly touch the damn thing even then, and my standards at this time sure weren't high, so you know I'm not lying. But as I'm dabbing at my wet parts and such, I notice something weird about old Ricky's face. Don't think deformity's the word, but Ricky's got this face thing where the hair on the left side of it grows about twice as fast as the right. That was one of the first things I liked about him. Cute as hell . . . Anyway, I ran over to the landline and noticed the outfit Ricky laid out on the bed . . . and there wasn't any underwear—

- I thought we agreed to elide this section?

- Come on now, Ricky, who gets hurt? Plus I have a little spin on it now.

-Well, now you have me excited.

- Ought to be.

- I—

- Alright so I see Ricky's going nakey under his pants and I never understood not wearing underwear . . . of course that's before I tried it—but ain't that the way?—only two or three, uh, snafus, over the decades—you understand, it wasn't me, it was the plumbing—which, I say again, works the majority of days, the major majority of days. I love going commando. Just reaching for the Tupperware above the sink makes me feel sexy. Plus it gives old Ricky here easy access—. . .—Ah now look at that. I love it when Ricky blushes. The most handsome man blushing he is. So back to the story. Ricky's bleeding out and I ran over to the landline, which turned out to be a damn rotary, which I hadn't ever used, and I have these sausage fingers you see, but I saw a lady use a pencil once to get the rotary phone to spin, and Ricky always has plenty of those around—pencils I meant to say there, not ladies. And, well, that's how we met. Brought him right here. Right to this same hospital. Let's hope it isn't the same bed though.
- No, I was not brought here. This was in another state. And at a much faster pace than Clarence retells it.
- Ah, I'm just having fun. It's a good wrinkle to the story.
- Have to agree.
- Welp.
- Yes. So, there you are, that is how we met.
- Now we're here.
- Now we're here. For the most part it has been a rather cordial disease.
- Hasn't it?
- For the most part. Found out on our 20th. What a gift.
- But Ricky-Tikki-Tavi here never let it get him down. Ricky has himself a cast iron resolve is what my mother said . . . ahhh hey now Rick . . . popped out of my mind there . . . Bill

Willard—who for some reason Ricky’s always calling Will Dillard—well, he brought us a pack of Spirits.

- Oh, how nice of him. Sweet man.

- The black ones.

- Even nicer.

- Say Ricky, we ever smoke two at the same time?

- Seems unnecessary. I savor it. One at a time. With all five senses.

- Two point five decades of fire breathing and you never smoked two at once. Seems like a good time for it.

- In here?

- Baby, that cigarette is liable to outlive you. And at that point, I’m the only one the nurses might be kicking out, while you’ll be doing an altogether different kind of kicking.

- . . . Clarence . . . Clarence. I—Clarence, I—I just—

- Go ahead Ricky, say whatever you need, baby. Where am I gonna go?

- Clarence. The peace has not come. I do not feel peaceful at all. Where is all this peace and blankets of light and the long end of the tunnel. Where is it?

- Ah Ric—

- WHERE IS IT?

- Ah Richard, honey. I’m here.

- Don’t call me that. It’s Ricky. Always Ricky with you.

- Don’t worry, Ricky. If you scooch just a bit here I might be able to—yeah there we go. Bit of a snuggle. Go ahead, put your head there.

- *Uuhk* it’s like a grenade discharged in my right testicle.

[Richard is taken by a violent fit of coughing, the hacking scraping full-body kind]

- . . . Goddamnit he's coughing up blood—Ay turn that—turn that damn thing out—turn that out and go get a nurse or doctor or something, gogogogogo GO!

[The interviewer leaves the room; the camera is still rolling]

- Well, we're alone for a minute, Ricky. You okay?

- Oh Clarence. Just—just hold me.

- I am baby, I am.

- Tighter, Clarence. Tight as you can.

- I'm on you like a boa after a juice cleanse here Ricky. Squeeze you any tighter you'll pop.

- So it is happening.

- Hell, Ricky, we talked about this.

- I don't think I can be without you.

- I'll be along, don't you worry. When have I ever left you in peace?

- I think I will need you to be my momma bird. I can't do it myself . . . Clarence . . . Clarence, how can I do this with you crying? Clarence, I need you for this. I need you to tell me it's okay. It hurts too much, but I'm here for you. And I am hanging on until you stop crying.

- Fuck else I'm gonna do, Ricky? I love you.

- Fine. Then I will never go. I will leave claw marks on—

- No . . . no Ricky. Just—just let me hold you here a minute, baby.

- Clarence, I hope you know how much I love you.

- I do, Ricky. You know I do . . . goddamn, I hope you know I love you.

- You know I do, Clarence.

- Damn interviewer taking his sweet time. Stupid kid.

- Not now, Clarence. Just hold me. Just hold me. Just hold me, Clarence.

- I'm holding you Ricky. I'm holding you.

. . .

. . .

Bye bye, little birdling, time to push you out of the nest.

- Oh Clarence, I was just getting comfortable.

The Webster House, 1999

He is through and through a Xerox man. Jim Beam, too. These are the things that now define his life: Xerox, Jim Beam, a wife who disappeared, two children (one completely lost), Xerox, and Jim Beam. And another shot. And him. He supposes he is a piece too. But he is a copy of a previous self, a previous second. And we don't need copies anymore, everything is upgraded before it can be copied, so why make a copy? Copy my life copy myself into two children one child clearly mine the other child clearly a copy of a copy of her grandmother herself a copy of a copy until they copy themselves with someone else who is a copy of a copy of a grand grand grand copy who is themselves a copy. Who needs a copy of anything. Just appreciate one of something. How many times are we going to ignore the problems? Everything upgrades but the copy and yet you are a copy of a copy who is a copy of a copy. None of us ever broken into and forcibly improved. Copy copy slish slosh sloppy copy copies of copies so many they fold up into a u-shape and accorded out like all of you are holding hands, copying the life but not the soul, copying the death but not the life. A strand of handshaking sameness copied out. Been like that since god started karate-chopping cracks in asses. History doesn't repeat itself, it happens once, all at the same time, a copy of a copy of a copy stamped out and drawn and each of us envious of some other copy. There aren't six billion people, there are six. Six billion copies. Where are the originals? We only have the original copies I'm afraid. Warm copies on the face. Copies make it all better. Do you mind a quick trip to the copy room? Print me a lifetime while you're in there. I can't wait to copy this one, forgetting to copy the fact that I'm a copy, only to learn too late. To copy the improvements, but then I'd be an upgrade as opposed to a copy. The mold is there for the copy, be a shame to waste it. Wouldn't want to waste time making anything but a copy. Take me out back and make a copy of me. I'm going to make a copy of myself and jump off a

building. Blow my brains up into a fine large blanket-sized copy. Copy myself in the ocean.

Copy myself into pictures. Copy myself into my children. Copy after copy after copy after copy after copy after copy after copy . . . is that smoke?

27-28 March 2023

In an attempt to impress a crush in adolescence, Brenda caught a baby chipmunk with her bare hands. The poor thing was about to explode like a grenade in her hand, its heart beating too large for its body. It's a lot like that, with all these people staring, now party-bored, the exit signs above all the doors starting to light in the mind's eye of every guest. A strange number of people in front of her are wearing wilting flowers. And funeralwear. She's extremely conscious of the nipples poking through her "Stop and smell the lilacs" shirt. Her nipples. Can people see her sweat stains? Oh god. The only way to do it is to do it, so, "Dear 20s Adriana, I'm watching you be yourself . . . It's excruciating." Talbot and Adriana laugh, but that's it. "I've been wondering lately why it's so easy to break promises to myself . . . But I at least want you all to know I would never break one to Adriana. Somehow she went from being my little sister to my big sister, and I'm trying to better for her so, so here I am embarrassing myself. Um."

. . .

"My nickname for Adriana is 'Age.' Which, I don't know how it is for her, but I find it more depressing all the time. . . . There's this Emily Dickinson poem . . . the first words are, 'I felt a funeral in my brain.' Uh, I guess Age is feeling it right now, for this party. In the year before I turned 30 I kept having this dream I was hiding under the couch in the Statue of Liberty's living room. And I know no one wants to hear about anyone else's dreams, but I have the mic, or the skull here, so, cope however. I'm hiding under the couch and she's on all fours, with four thong sandals on, none of which are touching the floor. She's on her knees, a sandal on each hand, trying to stomp on me when I peek out from under the couch, where there are these mouseholes and candy and condom wrappers and confidential documents and cat toys and lingerie—I always thought she was going commando under there. And every time I poke my

head out from under the couch she KRSHHH! tries to squash me. ‘YOU’RE KILLING THIS COUNTRY,’ she says. ‘WHY DON’T YOU OWN YOUR OWN HOME? You’re waiting for your mom to die so you can finally afford a home?’ KRRSH! ‘And look at the kids! There *aren’t* any kids.’ KRSH. ‘WHY AREN’T YOU HAVING KIDS?’ KRSH KRSH KRSH. And I have this chitinous plating on, but I know it won’t protect me because it’s vulnerable to the kind of squishing that will um squash me if I’m hit with one of the SoL’s thong-sanded hands. ‘If you’re so noble and brainy why haven’t you ended poverty?’ KRSH! ‘For-profit prisons?’ KRSH ‘Systemic racism?’ KRSH ‘AND WHY AREN’T YOU MARRIED.’ KRSH KRSH KRRRRRSH. And when she’s about to finally squish and twist on my krshed body that’s when I wake up.”

. . .

Twelve different expressions in her direction, and thirteen in the room. Do some expressions take longer to make than others? What’s the most efficient expression? It’s probably the line face isn’t it? That cordial keep-it-together look . . . “Did someone dose the punch? Oh god. Do my teeth look as bad as Catherine’s did—I mean Ecaterina’s did? . . . This crowd is colder than Ted Williams’s head . . . It was neuroseparated and cryogenically frozen. He was also one of the best baseball players of all time. Ace pilot. Fly fishing hall of fame. Whatever. . . . You know, even though this is going, uh, well, you know how it’s going . . . but even though it’s going like this it’s still better than my last funeral. The last funeral I went to, I mean. After like a roller coaster line of people, I get to the first mourner and I say—and this had been after one of those first-day-of-summer roller coaster lines— just totally mind blind, I say, ‘Congratulations.’ And they just gave me this understandably pissed-off look, and I say, ‘Oh, I’m so sorry, wrong

party.’ And before I can even apologize for it they’re all ‘PARTY? PARTY? GET OUT GET OUT GET OUT GET THE FUCK OUT.’”

. . .

“That was a pause for laughter. . . . You know, I laughed at the right times for all you . . . I probably won’t make her real funeral, maybe none of us will, so I’m honored to give my eulogy now.” For the first time in her life she wishes she was wearing dress shields. “It’s hard to take ownership of yourself. And I really do hate that I’m the kind of person to admit it, but I actually kind of like myself a lot.” Finally a laugh in the crowd. “And even though I’m not sure what this party is really for or about . . . Maybe it’s loneliness, failure. It’s just, I get older every second, and there’s less and less of me all the time. I see someone accomplish something great and I secretly am exhilarated when I find out they’re older than me. So little of all this feels the way you think it will. Like when you’re a kid maybe you think that clouds are soft and fluffy and then you fly for the first time ever to Chicago so you can drive with your mom to Park Ridge and you finally fly through a cloud and it’s dark and hard and bumpy and not soft and fluffy at all. I don’t know how many kinds of loneliness there are, eleven, fifteen—but it feels like we keep adding to them . . . Wow, this punch, I mean . . . Even in this room there must be more. Maybe the party’s just like this belated death-of-childhood thing, Age taking ownership of herself in some way finally. Beginning to define herself outside of the space she’s always known. Probably why she’s leaving again.”

Adriana waves her hand in the back, “Absolutely wonderful. And just to remind everyone, my nickname for her is ‘Duh.’” Too many laughs. “Brenda, why don’t you—”

“Like my mom says, you can’t cry over all the dead animals on the road, you’ll never be able to drive.” A collective scrunching of faces. “I’m almost done. Sorry. I’m surprised I can

even talk up here. . . . Whenever I go to a family reunion I find myself counting all the funerals I'll be obligated to go to. Uncle Phil's for sure, Aunt Bo's for sure, my mom's, Uncle Leon, probably not Aunt Vitra, we're not that close, my cousin Bryce, my cousin Kaylyn. Fucking Kaylyn . . . When I was small I didn't envision my wedding; I was one of the kids that fantasized about my funeral. And even though I was way more into the wicked queen than the prince, I pictured I would be in Snow White's glass casket. And I wanted to give it a test run. So I tried it when my goldfish Jilly Bowl died, and that seems to be the only thing they do, goldfish, all they do is die. But I wanted her to be preserved I guess, so what I did, I got—my mom and Coach both drank brown at that point, so I couldn't steal a bottle from them. Cannot believe I haven't mentioned Coach yet. Adriana's talents were so undeniable, and so understandable, easier to cultivate than mine I guess, more inside I guess the code of points—her talent was so eye-opening that it made Coach stop drinking. I was given the tough love, the stick and the stick and the stick, for being unstudyable, sporadic, veering off . . . but Adriana, she got the carrot, for her Dad got—for her Coach got sober . . .

. . .

“Back to the story I guess, so, I got one of the girls with a fake who had aged out and stuck around to coach to buy me a cheap bottle of vodka, Skol—which means “cheers” in Norway, my Aunt Vitra's kid told me—which I squeezed Jilly Bowl's carcass into. Behind the motel we were staying at there was a huge old neon sign abandoned in the hillside's trees. The sign, when it was standing, had a woman diving down the sign in her green one piece into a little squiggle line of water, one pink-lit silhouette at a time. I buried Jilly Bowl under it. I at least expected the glass coffin to preserve the body, but, a year later, there Jilly was, a skeleton,

rattling around the bottle when I shook it. Air got in I guess. Air got in the glass. Air gets into everything . . . ”

. . .

They clap her off, some of the applause genuine, some of it not so much.

#

It's almost tomorrow as they drive home. With the moon's brightness turned all the way up, Brenda can see all of the imperfections on its face. These get-togethers with former friends and rivals are always draining, but this time was different. It felt like Brenda was wearing the orangutan suit in front of everyone. Humiliation. Embarrassment. Betrayal. It's more like she attended her own funeral, and no one had anything to eulogize.

“Well, that was an experience,” Talbot says.

“Everything is.”

“And also, can you stop driving like a maniac?”

Brenda points with her thumb to a FOR SALE sign in the left backseat window. “I’m advertising.”

“There’s no number on the sign.”

“Alright, so if they’re interested they’ll have to follow me home or whatever.”

Talbot lets that one go.

They couldn’t fit Adriana’s remaindered furniture in the car, but Talbot gave this little smirk like he was happy he had the chance to go back. He’s playing with his pocket square in his lap. “I don’t know if I’m a good fit, but, with Adriana moving away . . . my professional opinion here is that you could use a friend.”

“I can. I have.”

“You have what?” Talbot asks.

“Used a friend.”

“Alright, no more stories tonight.”

“I’d like to hear yours. With the moon like this, so bright and round and full, aren’t you a little worried about, you know, transforming?”

“Excuse me?”

“What, you’ve never heard this before? You make me want to get out the silver bullets.”

“I should be shot because the chair didn’t fit?”

“You’re a lycan, a tortured creature of the night. Talking about that hedge on your face, Mr. Werewolf.”

“Tortured creature of the night. Exactly how I’m feeling right now.”

Lucky for them both that they arrive at Talbot’s parents’ house. Brenda has pegged Talbot as the kind of guy who has an almost pathological need to diffuse tension; she was right, “Hey, you ever use the orangutan thing as an excuse to throw poop at people?”

Brenda’s mind and face are dull in the street-lightless street, shined on only by dashboard lights. Instead of goading him for his discomfort, she says, “You know, I’d have to like, you know, shit in my own hand to do that.”

Something about the naivete in Talbot’s laugh soothes her, and she’s glad that, when she drops him off, he turns around at the house door with a wave, still smiling.

All the way home Brenda tenses her body in response to the pulses of her electric spine; she’s like the pole that holds up the current-filled wires by the road. And she remembers where her meds are . . .

Just there, under the bed.

She rationalized the hiding of the bottle as, okay, if she forced it out of her mind then of course that's more effective than throwing it away. She was training herself. Because if she just doesn't need the pills, if she can do it all herself, both the physical and psychic work, the physical and psychic motivation, then why wouldn't her glowing spine lose current, why wouldn't the sensation of licked batteries dissipate entirely from her mouth.

Reddish carpet is rough on her face, reaching under the bed, but she can't quite reach, so she has to submerge her head under the bed too, which makes a spot on her neck go stiff and dead. Her wince sends her upward, head smacking the above framework under the bed. She yelps aloud, youuuuuuu farrrrrrming farmer. It probably doesn't seem like it but she has been trying to cut down the swearing. But fuck that hurt. Brenda takes her bonked head and dead-spotted neck out from under the bed, taking it as a sign, an unconscious rejection of her will to fail. But a few seconds later she's on the other side of the bed, carpet lint and bottle in hand. As she shakes the bottle like a maraca she notices that the lint in her hand is a different color than the carpet she's standing on. She dances and shakes the bottle across the room, feet bare on the carpet, ch chuh chuh ch chuh chuh chuh ch . . .

The end table she puts the bottle on might be rosewood; the grain of the board reminds her of veins, cords, and wonders what it would be like to be plugged into a tree; she decides she's too tired to even realize how ridiculous it sounds, and gets ready for bed, the bottle on the table that might be rosewood still unopened.

It's typical of Brenda to give her tea bags two or three lives; in the kitchen for a refill of scalding water, she hears rustling outside. Hand on the door's curtain, she recoils as if it's a hot knob leading to a room on fire. Tonight, she doesn't want to know what's out there; tonight, she wants to preserve her mood, so she doesn't open the curtain to check outside, to give her any

reason to alter how she feels. Injured runaway? don't look. Ditched loot from a recent bank heist? don't look. Just walk away from the curtain. Don't give yourself more to deal with.

#

One of those dreams she knows is a dream. She can do nothing about it, so she trundles around the mind's equivalent of mist, the same fog she imagines surrounded Arthur when he wrested the sword from the stone.

#

Those dreadful days when she'd be with all her friends and listen to the applause for each one and compare. No matter how often she won her events, Brenda was almost never first in applause from *the circle, the friends*. It was just done a touch more perfunctorily for her. Torture to think about why . . . was it because it had become standard, expected, that'd she win? was it envy? or were they all calling her a bitch at get-togethers and, later, parties, dates and so on? or were their hands sore from so much clapping by the time they got to Brenda, beaming from the top of the podium? or do they all like her just a tiny bit less than everyone else? really thinking about it, there were a few distinct calls that didn't really exist in the soundscape for her applauses—the woop woops, the wolf whistles, WOOOOOOOOOOOs—rather, they were there, but not as densely as for the rest of her friends.

It was probably the peeled-apple wallpaper above the portal and the aged, curled paint clinging that looked like apple skin shavings, revealing the flesh of the wall, that made the house so uncomfortable. Maybe it was how one of the doorways had two sides painted brown, the other bare, and how, beyond to the next portal, all three sides of the molding were painted cherry red with multiple coats. Could have been that the uneasiness was from the window at the end of the house, boarded up except for a bare strip that was used for a peephole or a slot for transactional business.

“I want to kill this stupid asshole.” Tj Wearen says to the room. “And no, not actually, Barry, don’t get excited, I don’t need you or your blazing guns up in here today, I do not condone violence against this man.” Barry is the NSA agent assigned to Tj’s area, and it’s a good thing that Barry cannot, as far as Tj knows, hear his thoughts, because he was straight up lying just then. He wishes harm upon the man in the absolute worst way. Barry has taken a particular interest in Tj, maybe due to the fact that Tj has gotten by lately by just the skin of his ass selling T. But Tj is small time, there are bigger horses to fry out there, and Barry will know by now that Tj is no snitch, so what’s Barry doing out there in his panel van. Why is he listening in to all of Tj’s conversations, noting his and his customers comings and goings? Tj’s been quiet since The Face appeared in his life.

Through the window he slouches next to, there is a hole in the brick building through which he can see a cathedral. A face emerges from an ethereal figuring sitting atop the cathedral. Not The Face, but a face. Just taking in the city, not a big deal. A face of some kind emerges from every cloud, every misty swirl in the shower tile, each draft of rising steam, rolling fog. Sometimes though there is something following him, but they have this movable furnace for a

head, its door always ajar. Inside it is well-stoked, flames wild, heat like a beam you can feel across the street. The furnace face is not Barry the NSA agent as far as Tj knows.

Every so often Tj prints out pictures of people he really despises and executes them. It started by just taking scissors and cutting across their throat. Slow. Jagged. Stuttering. There was relief in it somehow. Maybe this is why Barry continues to monitor him, because his torture of these paper figures has ramped up. Barry must surely be going through the garbage and finding the remains of these figures, and it's so like a three-letter agent to worry, get paranoid, get frustrated with their monotonous post and move in to their target before there's a legitimate reason to.

Tj still sees The Face, but no longer runs from it. He can't. There's no room in the house. Sometimes the face will stroll in, and what Tj does now instead of actually running is imagine his entire self running down a road at night, but the road leads inside him, sunless, barren, well into the dark, the lightbulb in the moon providing almost no light. Just run Tj, just run. And he does, but never through himself, just deeper into himself, deeper into the constant night of his soul, deeper. He has never found an end to the road or another road to turn down. A road without potholes or lines, a dirt road, a road that, despite his clattering feet, is never shrouded in dust. It is a road with trees that point at him, and barbed wire surrounding private property. It is a road Tj has never strayed from, but stray now he does, for he realizes he is not being chased or even tailed, so he slips over to the ditch in the road, hops over the barbed wire, and into the woods.

Maybe it's a shade naughty, but merely a shade. She likes the sound of the glass breaking, she likes acting surprised and somewhat offended that a mess was made in her presence. And she really likes to stand there near the epicenter of the saucy tremor, waiting for someone else to clean it up.

How it usually goes is, after she has nudged a bottle of vodka blush sauce over and off the shelf, she'll stand there shaking in the crystal minefield and flag down a college-aged worker with a mustache that looks detachable. She'll say something like, "Oh, hi sorry, the darn thing just leapt to its doom. I heard it loudly pondering about how it wanted to end its shelf life." She'll do this little pause that extends as long as the studentish worker takes to wince and flee for a supervisor.

There's always a heightened tension when the worker leaves. Oh wouldn't it be such a delicate little scandal to nudge another jar of sauce, Nona's Recipe perhaps, in the small of the back, just encouraging it forward ever so slightly. Just a bit more. Jussssssst. Almost over the edge and . . . oh no. Oh no. Oh no no no. Too naughty, too much of a good thing. No need to get greedy.

When the kid with the mustache comes back, sometimes with a broom and bucket, sometimes a flat shovel, sometimes a rolling yellow mop cart, she'll say "Oh! So sorry, I'm happy to pay, happy to pay." But she keeps the smile in her head. They never make you pay. They're not *allowed* to make you pay. But the performance of it . . . Then it's probably, "Would you make a path for me there, hun? I don't feel very safe trying to step around it," laughs, "Wouldn't want this to turn into a lawsuit."

She likes to change it up. Last time—same store, different branch—she made a jar of pickle spears walk the plank; they just lay there, not flopping at all. She savored the way the

mop's white hair went witch green, loved the way it was squeeeeezeed out with the wring and handle, its wig forever pickle-tinted. And it's not as if she didn't suffer some comeuppance for it; the little escapade cost her her most comfortable white tennis shoes, now in some landfill speckled with brine. We all make sacrifices.

Today, though, she's set on a certain display of glass-bottled beer that will require only a tap of her cart's padded edge to send tumbling. Roclins is packed with car commercial families and freaks everywhere. Like this guy gliding down the home dentistry aisle, wearing the expression of something that doesn't know it's alive. His coat is long, open, and fills like a sail as he pushes the narrow shopping cart, making wings on either side. Both he and the strapped-in baby he's pushing favor the same hairstyle.

A few rows down, she overhears a conversation in the next aisle and follows parallel to the chatters.

"Ok, so Halloween is coming up."

"Yep."

"And I'm having twins, right?"

"Yep."

"So my idea was that I'd paint my stomach as a pumpkin, but just above the top arch here I'd write: Bump-kin. You get it? Bump. Kin. You get it? You get it, right?"

"Yep."

And that's the end of that.

The workers in the fresh-cut flower section are always leaning over and whiffing deep like they'll get high if they keep at it. She and the workers are embroiled in a silly little feud; but a simple accusation does not a conviction make. No one could definitively prove it was the snout

of her cart that knocked the aproned worker into the dried cinnamon pine cone display. And, alas, as justice would have it, her innocence couldn't be proven either due to the camera's blind spot. Everyone in the department still scowls at her anyway, unaided by evidence. She has to hand it to them though, the hydrangea medleys are beautiful today, though oddly infragrant.

She tries every free sample of cheese—the 27-month cave-aged sharp cheddar twice. The worker above the rolling fog of the cheese coolers wears two pairs of gloves: one for warmth, the other for hygiene.

As she throws away her sampling toothpicks, she smacks the garbage's swinging gate; disgusted, she digs the hand sanitizer out of her purse. A family cart approaches with a kid laying on the bottom metal grate where you put boxed soda. From his back, the boy looks up at her as the cart goes by and yells, "I'm a battering ram, I'm a battering ram!" The mom pushing the kid gives her a *thank you* smile, presumably for not commandeering the cart and proving the kid right.

She's now in a traffic jam she didn't cause. But it's useful; she's using it to fine-tune her new idea for the Sunday paper's puzzle section, to pretend to check off a grocery list she didn't make, and to go over the plan. She'll make a show of struggling through the maze in the alcoholic beverage section—for the cameras and plausible deniability. She'll go to the Whistle Pig hard cider, with purpose, focus, like it's the one item she's there for—after all, it's the season for it. She'll spot something interesting on display, some seasonal IPA thing like last year's All Agourd, the label emblazoned with a pumpkin the size and shape of a sailboat, its captain welcoming you aboard with a jaunty-angled peaked cap, also made of gourd. And then . . .

Her new puzzles are all something like: A type of beverage that shares a name with a person who can't stop drinking it: Alcoholic.

When she would remind her dad about his dedication to sobriety, he used to put on his own father's weighty accent and inform her that, "Beer ain't drinkin'." Roclins seems to agree. Can't buy beer on a Sunday morning, but on any unblessed weekday you can pick up a case and pound it on the toilet of your work bathroom, stacking the empties on the tank until the cans come clanging down and roll into the shoes of the boss's pet, who's making all kinds of concerning sounds in the stall over.

But she's not *that* bad. She's made plenty of progress herself, enduring all the hallmark nagging. All the please please pleasing about how she "needed to posthaste terminate her alcoholic spiral." So she now extends the life of a Stoli bottle from one day to two. And a 50% decrease is nothing to scoff at when it comes to the accounting. But that can't be right. It wouldn't be a 50% decrease. Because if she took three days instead to drink the bottle, that would mean it's a 100% improvement, but it can't be because that would mean she stopped drinking entirely. Doesn't quite make sense, does it.

The hospital has too many of what she's running out of: Patients.

Even so, she doesn't move as the clot of traffic clears. Customers navigate around, referring to her subvocally as an inconsiderate monkfish, an unuseful idiot who doesn't rinse their rice or salt their pasta water, a dunce who thinks Fig Newtons were discovered when a fig fell on Isaac Newton's head. These are, indeed, all euphemisms, but you'll not catch her using the kind of language those petulant customers do.

Here she goes down the middle of a main aisle in her bucket hat with the banded strip of ocean. The store has two cart sizes and she always opts for the big one; the other kind looks like it has a massive underbite, its bottom section jutting out way past its top. She steers straight

down, her cart a ship parting sea, one tile at a time, annoying customers, casting them to her sides, sending them to crash like waves into end displays of cereal boxes and salad dressings.

She hangs a left down the frozen vegetables. In the morgue-like cold, she tosses into the cart mixed mushrooms, pearl onions, and—no idea why it's in this aisle—a chocolate banana.

A toy train choo-choos above and around an island of sour cream and its various relations, going nowhere.

But then comes the milk section, and you pretty much have to arrive there threatening a blunt weapon or else risk inaccess because there's always someone shoulder-deep in there checking expiration dates, and two or three other monkfish behind antsy to do the same. Wielding the frozen banana, she drives one-handed to the milk fridge; all she has say to these other customers piling up is look the heck ou—

But there it is.

She drops the banana.

Three desert pyramids of bottles rise up through surrounding bricks of beer and shelves stocked with candy-colored boxes. Smiley line sashes of the pyramids connect to say ALES OF THE CRYPT. So much better than last year. So much higher. It's enough to make her shiver, though not outwardly, minding the many eyes in the sky. She navigates over to the Whistle Pig and plops it in the cart; maybe it drops a little hard, but it's nothing suspicious.

Light from an expansive nearby fridge conspires to give the pyramids an amber glow. And who wouldn't get distracted by all this beauty, with all these crypt-kept ales pillaged and put on for show? There's almost no way at all for her to get around these awe-striking installations without just bumping the pallet of beers and—OH oh there it goes, the pyramid falls into the next, the next, and they all avalanche into the fridge's fluorescent domain. There's a sort of

smash and pop and smashy poppin smash and pop poppinsmash and pop as the bottles shatter and form a bedrock for the river of ale to flow over, little amber islands here and there.

“Ma’am, are you okay?” The late 20s kid has a side lip piercing that looks like drool.

She lets a wave of relief visibly wash over her. Slight tremor. Hand on heart. The kind of nervous laugh that comforts when fear subsides. “Oh,” she laughs, “Oh I think so.” She laughs again. “I can’t believe they stack those so high. I’m lucky we’re here talking at all. Do you mind maybe flagging down someone to help me wipe this up and—oh dear, I don’t know—helicopter me out of here?” Another relieved *oh my goodness* chuckle before the fooled samaritan goes for help.

Oh they might need two or three or four or five people for this. She’ll stay and watch like it’s an obligation, like she feels so so bad. When the bucket boys come, she’ll maybe say, “I can’t even believe it, the darn cart’s so big and the display’s so wide, well, you know, really it was a recipe for disaster and you’re lucky a more litigious person hadn’t strolled along and—”

But what’s that . . . what’s that whirring? Is it a robot? It’s a robot. It’s a robot, it’s a fucking robot. A mechanical dog sent under the table to lap up spilled dinner. A fucking robot. It has an unimaginative voice, but an exemplary and calm demeanor. *Mind the glass, mind the glass. Pardon me, mind the glass. Thank you for shopping at Roclins. Mind the glass.* It keeps assaulting her feet, which management, if not her lawyer, will be hearing about. Just as she lifts her leg to skewer the robot with her stiletto, there’s a sound like an immense cloud of disgruntled bees: an entire fleet of autovacuumers.

The cleaning robots swarm her; their polite reminders to *mind the glass* and *pardon me* and *thank you for shopping at Roclins* overlap and repeat, overlap and repeat, *mind the pardon glass thank you for shopping at me mind the Roclins thank you.* The robots collide into her and

the cart, set on the spilled beer and glass. She grips the cart's handle so hard it feels like her hands are bleeding. Her eyes go slotted, focused on the end display of aisle 2B; she charges on tiptoes through the pool of beer, scattering robots as she breaks free into the pasta sauce aisle proper.

She takes her oversized cart and railroads it into the shelves of pasta sauce once, twice, three times with the cart's big square head. But the battery-powered cleaners buzz hot on her trail, not taking the bait, so she sprints on with her cart, her only weapon. *Thank you for the glass at Roclins the shopping thank you glass pardon the mind—*

Shoppers dive into adjacent aisles with their children as she runs like the unleashed Cerberus toward the cereal aisle. The Roclins Head of Asset Protection manifests from a place unknown and waves their arms like high-setting windshield wipers, jolting her into a panic that causes her stiletto to slip, sending her airborne.

She lands flat on her back. A dusty wheeze ejects from her mouth as if a mine collapsed inside. Her captainless cart rolls to the aisle's end.

The robots catch up and are at her like a pack of hyenas on a week-old carcass, all of them unwitting participants of an asynchronous choir. *Mind the Roclins glass shopping thank glass pardon . . .* Rogue robocleaners swarm and feast on her hair and clothes. She lets them. She'll give it about two minutes before she awakens from her flopped position, gasps like it's her first breath, and calls both her lawyer and the hospital. Asset Protection will try to detain her, stuff her with apologies like quarters in a parking meter, buy time until retained legal reps can mosey on down, drawn out from their caverns and squash games. But by then she'll be gone, and quite pissed. After a medical examination done by a friend, she'll limp or wheel out of the

hospital, whichever her counsel deems most sympathetic, then go home to the one thing she cannot break.

“You said there was a poem.”

“Yeah. I’d never written a poem before. Wouldn’t ever have written a love poem.”

“Let’s hear it.”

“Not again.”

“Again, we must.”

“... alright, maybe it will help me just move past it. I don’t know. Maybe.”

“Great. What’s it called?”

“Heavy as light.

Heavy as light
Falling from her eyes
Like worlds

Light as shadow
In the cradle of space

Light as a century
On the tip of her
tongue

A heaviness
Of rabid butterflies
Trapped in the stomach

These footsteps of a ghost
Tread in winter sun
Light as the violent pink off the river
Sent dearly from the sky

So snowy

So snowy all float down

Float down the river

In a stillness
So mute
You can hear the water catch
The snow

As fireflies blink here here here
 here here here here

And the worlds tumble from her eyes
Collecting in her hands
Light as her reach across the infinite
A storm is set upon her
though her cheek is night on the rain

Let us dismiss the sun
And pick the petals off the dark
Before it wilts
Place them in a mouth that melts
The way morning melts the night

Goofing around, 8 April 2023

I eat a particularly good lemon and poppyseed muffin.

I eat good.

I eat good muffin.

I particularly lemon.

I muffin.

I eat a particularly good poppyseed.

I pop in.

part lemon puffin.

eagle muffin.

I eat a lyle.

pray god moppy.

pray god moppy muffin.

moppy muffin.

moppy

moppy muffin.

yup

moppy muffin.

yup

moppy

moppy muffin.

I pry god lemony duffin.

Eat a pin.

Carly lippy puffin.

Ape on a poppy.

Try gin.

purloin.

I tap a good lemon.

Tag pop in.

large mad muffin

nuffin

rage mad puffin

Summer 1989

“No no nononono don’t put that in your mouth.” But it was too late, the penny already started its trip to Emil’s stomach. “Why do you always have to do this?” Mom said.

“I don’t have to. It makes my hair shiny,” Emil said.

“Who told you that?”

“Crayonbox. The copper one is the same as my hair.”

“Don’t do it again. They’ve been in the dirtiest places.”

“I like those places.”

“If it hurts coming out, you know who to blame.”

Emil thought for a second, “Abraham Lincoln?”

Mom kind of smiled and kind of didn’t. “Head out the backyard then, Grandpa said he left you something in the garden.” Emil’s footsteps were short and loud running for the back door. “And don’t eat *anything*,” Mom said. Emil struggled with the tricky knob, “Especially not that onion again, I don’t want you to be oniony or garlicky when you try to kiss me later.”

“No more kisses,” he said, finally opening the door.

“You love it.”

“You love it!” He tried really hard to not smile, which made Mom smile, which made Emil smile even bigger, like it always did. Their staring contests always ended that way. “Come with me?”

“Just a minute. Go fight Ringneck. I’ll be out by the time you lose.”

“I never lose.” But he always did. Ringneck was rather talented for a scarecrow; that season, it was a master swordsman. Emil pushed up his sleeves and headed outside, but he

needed to check, so he turned and saw her back heading towards the stairs. “Mom, are you okay?”

“Of course. I’m with you.” It would have felt great, but there was a face. Everyone had a fake face like that. Mom used it with people she didn’t know, Grandpa used it when he went to church. “I’ll be out, go ahead.” Her voice was real enough, though, so he didn’t worry.

Out in the backyard, Emil bolted to the hutch where Grandpa always left a surprise, just under the tall fake tree; Grandma had made the hutch, but Grandpa was the one who kept it supplied. One time the surprise was a birthday card with a five leaf clover pressed inside. This time, he found a robin, its nest, and three eggs; they had gotten in from the side’s big hole. Emil wouldn’t have called the eggs light blue or cyan or aqua or cornflower. He looked around for his grandpa’s gift. Sunflowers in the garden bowed, cheering, awaiting the duel, two of them connected at the head, though facing slightly different directions.

The surprise was a radish on the upside down pot that Ringneck used as a shield; the historical Ringneck, actually named Ringeck, would never use something like that—it was very important to understand, Grandpa told him. Grandpa knew a lot of those kinds of things because he owned a store called PRINTS VALIANT. The radish was left there as a challenge. Emil was pretty sure a radish wasn’t garlic or onion. Ringneck stared down at Emil with its teapot head, nose too high to punch.

Over by the shed, near the wooden hutch and the fake tree taller than the house, Emil had amassed an impressive collection of swords. Each stick had its strength, but only one was still pointy enough to hurl toward Ringneck, “THAT’S A WARNING.”

Ringneck said nothing.

Emil found a low-hanging limb of the tree that guarded his collection and shook it, thanking it for its constant guard these many years.

He picked up his weapon and made a grave march to Ringneck. This was it. This one would be for what Grandma called *all the marbles*. Emil bowed, then curtsied; couldn't remember which one it was for a fight. He never saw anyone bow or curtsy anymore.

Emil's first thrust missed completely, causing him to bonk his head on the shield, making the sound of a struck gong. He paused the duel to drum on the side with broken sticks.

"Where's your honor?!?" Ringneck lashed out. Emil kept drumming.

When he resumed the fight, it was to take his sword, hold it like a baseball bat, and whack Ringneck's shield over and over and over and over. The radish fell, but Emil did not claim victory, for his opponent still stood.

He made lunging stabs at Ringneck, missing each time, even when he stopped being fancy and used two hands. "Maybe you'd get me if I was a haystack," Ringneck wondered aloud.

He regrouped two steps back where Ringneck couldn't follow, his back towards the enemy, a mistake Grandpa would be ashamed to see. But Grandpa, too, would have been surprised when Emil turned around fast and whacked Ringneck's stick arm to the ground. "You've been elimbinated," Emil laughed hard—it was Grandma's joke.

"Oh!" He ran to the shed, calling back to Ringneck, "I'm not running away, but you should." Stoic Ringneck did not move. Emil took the longest sword from his collection.

Ringneck had nowhere to run. Emil savored the moment, his victory close at hand. "I'm not sorry Ringneck. You were never sorry for me."

“MERCY BRAVE WARRIOR MERCY,” Ringneck finally shouted. Emil simply shook his head and shoved the sword up Ringneck’s teapot nose and lifted it off the top of the post. The head fell to the ground.

Holding the head with both hands, he bashed it against the ground over and over, making gut punch sounds as he slammed it, and it never became less of a teapot.

Emil was taught to respect his opponents, but he wanted Grandpa to know that he had defeated the great swordsman, so he stabbed his sword’s tip into the soft soil of the garden and placed Ringneck’s head on it.

He walked back to the rest of Ringneck’s body; he bowed, then curtsied. The radish was battle stained so he wiped it on his sleeve and took a big victorious bite. His face went small. Grandpa’s laugh rang in his ears. Never had anything tasted so bad in Emil’s many living years. He went inside to get the disgusting taste out of his mouth and reward himself for his bravery.

#

Too tired and too much coffee. Kara forgot to wash her hands.

That’s wonderful, Thomas, more work. Ever so wonderful. Don’t worry about her Thomas, oh don’t worry. It’s not like she was drowning. Everything was fineeeee. Just fine. Just so so fine.

Above the toilet, cross-stitched rather thematically by both her parents, the words: Marriage: may there be a oneness such that when one of you cries the other tastes salt.

The toilet paper roll was run through with what looked like a big lincoln log that rested on two others jutting from the sink cabinet. The remaining toilet paper, in a bizarre kind of purgatory, bided its time, skewered on the vertical wooden pole in the alley between the toilet

and sink. As the roll beside her spun bare, she gave a new roll an elevator ride and exchanged it with the empty one. The flush didn't roar, but gurgled.

An elfin hand reached out from the bathroom's countertop, offering her the bar soap from its porcelain palm. How courteous. The bar was pinkish with a not-so-thin layer of white powder stain. Losing herself in the mirror, Kara was given a gentle reminder that the water always got hot fast at her parents' house. Emil's face was her face. She was the aging attic painting; Emil was Dorian Gray walking around fresh-faced and cute. No, no, not the self-pitying bullshit again, Kara.

The lightswitch was unflicked; the toilet lid she sat on was filled with seashells. Cool air came in from the window, the only one unshuttered, so she could keep an eye and ear on Emil. The moon was early to the sky. She never remembered: is it waning or waxing, and crescent or gibbous? The glossy tile of the bathroom was swirled with trapped gray-black smoke and cold on her feet even through socks—she didn't want Emil to notice that she painted over his attempt to do her toenails. But you can't just put every shade in Grandma's paint box on in different orders for each toe. At what point do you tell him no? The second toe? When do you deny exploration? What is even going on in that little circus brain? She made a microphone of the now-naked toilet roll and asked into it, "So, Thomas, what do you think?" She put the microphone in her other hand, slumped her posture, and calibrated her deepest dumbest voice, "Well firstly, Kara, I don't think, I compute. Secondly, Kara, I don't know who you're talking about when you say 'Grandma,' for I interpret your meaning to be not my grandma, but Emil's. Thirdly, Kara, if you didn't have those toenails we wouldn't have to waste the money on paint and polish. And, fourthly and finally, Kara, what Emil is so clumsily exhibiting could hardly be classified as genuine creativity; it's tantamount to a chicken picking at rocks, hoping they're corn."

But seriously, what the hell did Thomas care where they were? She was alone with Emil at home, she was alone with him here. What's the difference?

Emil was banging on the metal scarecrow. If that goddamn Janine Haverschmidt called again to complain, she was so serious, she was just going to tell her to go fuck herself; and, probably seriously, that she would dye all of Janine's wigs orange if she tried to stop her little Demon again. Yeah, he's probably the most annoying sound in the neighborhood, but if Kara can take it nonstop, then so could goddamn Janine for an evening.

Kara made a telescope of the toilet paper roll and scanned the backyard for Emil, who was shaking hands with a tree. He did it seriously, as if the tree was a personage of great wisdom or wealth and he was schmoozing the tree into donating to his nonprofit. Kara had just gotten to the point where she couldn't force herself to gladhand, to act contrary to her feelings, to put on the bullshit interview face and unsarcastically tell some professionally-smiling HR rep or an old man with that weird hair in his ears that she couldn't wait to put her ding in his company's universe, that, oh yes, as far back as she can remember she wanted to be a managerial accountant. Through her toilet paper roll telescope, Emil banged on the metal scarecrow and unleashed rather cute warcries.

As always in that bathroom, her focus was shaky. The standing shower's glass faced her, its stare ominous. It had been twelve years, but the way the glass exploded that time sounded like a wraith being ripped from this world into another. A sound that never went away, just crawled up through where a glass shard cut her foot and echoed throughout her body. The echo of the wailing wraith goes dormant, but when things go real quiet . . .

Kara checked through the telescope; Emil was tall on tip toes jamming a long stick up the scarecrow's nose. The entire left side of the scarecrow's face was singed from her dad's habit of putting the pot too far back on the burner.

Kara got up from the seashell toilet seat, plugged the sink basin and let the water run so she could wash her face. Sink filling, she imagined herself tiny and drowning inside; she watched, waiting to see what either of them would do.

There was still a lot to do. So much life left. But it'd be easier to split apart. Leave some of herself here with Emil, and let the rest wander. Maybe to start she'd go back to the grave she found that shared her name and have a picnic there like she used to, the ground soft and rife with groundhogs. But what was she going to do, leave Emil with fucking Tom?

Cold water from the overflowing basin met her hand and she turned the faucet off. She pulled the plug on the cold water and listened while it drained, envisioning the journey of the miniature body she let drown. Empty, she plugged it and turned on the hot water.

Kara went to the end of the counter where the easy-to-read Colorstick was cantilevered over the edge.

Blue.

Pregnant again.

Emil was a false negative, so you never know. They say you show sooner on your second. She turned the hot water off. Was pre-partum depression a thing? Kara couldn't hear Emil and couldn't find him through the window, so she left the empty roll on the counter and went downstairs to find him, leaving the sink plugged.

#

Emil hopped himself up into the chair to grab the coffee Grandpa forgot to put away. And the sugar, can't forget the sugar. He figured Grandpa owed it to him anyway after making him eat the radish. People were crazy about sugar for kids Emil's age, but it never made him any more hyper than normal.

Which cup, which cup. He stood on the chair and took out a mug from the cabinet that said Xerox, where his dad worked, mostly in California. He missed his dad and didn't miss him. Both.

Emil liked to make a little mountain of sugar in his mug and melt it with hot coffee. Was coffee stronger than sugar? Or was sugar stronger because it sort of went inside the coffee? He blew on the peak of the sugar mountain in his mug like a birthday candle, scattering the sugar all around the bottom until it was a deep, flat layer of itself. He took out the mug his mom always used and poured the luke coffee in, got out a chair for the microwave above the stove, and stuffed it in. He pressed a bunch of numbers and then the start button. It sounded like a spaceship taking off.

Stairs creaked and his mom called out *Deeeemon!*, trying to summon him. But he didn't have time to run over and also hide the evidence of his coffee, so he expertly put everything back as it was, put his sugar-filled mug back into the cabinet, put the sugar back by the Brew Crew coffee maker, moved the chair back. And he smiled at Mom when she walked in the kitchen. Very cool. Very unsuspecting. But the problem with looking unsuspecting is you don't necessarily look like you were just sitting at the table playing dinosaurs, especially when you left them all at home.

He had been so clever. So quick. But the microwave hummed—a Benedict Arnold Grandma would say—alerting Mom and thwarting his plans. She ran over to the microwave and

hit END three times. “DemonDemonDemonDemon, you can’t put things in the microwave for that long, you’ll burn Grandpa’s house down.”

“Grandma’s too.”

“Of course, Grandma’s too. But please, don’t.” The wall facing the street was a great plane of glass. “Why don’t we open the drapes and see how many colors are in the sunset today?”

Emil picked up the step stool. Mom seemed to really need some, so he asked, “Snacks? Popcorn?”

“Popcorn.”

“Coffee?”

“None for me, thanks.” Which meant . . . “Oh and none for you either.” Dang. “Actually,” Oh? “Sure, but only a little bit.”

Emil took the hot coffee and poured it into the mug with the sugar. He cheated, but not much, pouring a little bit more than a little bit.

Mom opened the drapes, “Always makes me feel like I’m inside a terrarium.”

“Is that like where you put pterodactyls?”

“What are terrordactyls?”

“You can’t trick me. I know you know what they are.” He put on his angry face and dropped it when Mom laughed.

“You’re too smart for me, Demon.”

“Then why are you in charge?”

They looked out the window, all four feet kicking softly. So many sky shades. Like a dark blue brushstroke starting at the top of a sky that got lighter and thinned towards the curve where

there was a blue so pale it was almost white. “I can’t believe we get to look at this all the time.”

He faced Mom, who was wiping the side of her face he couldn't see, “Mom, are you really okay?”

Oh, Emil. A deep loneliness sets in when you can’t confide in your most loved and closest person. A quietude that creeps under your toenails. But what was she going to say? I want to leave? I don’t want another child? I’m in great pain and there’s nothing any of them can do about it? I want to leave to try not to die? Just eat your popcorn and drink your coffee and stop asking so many questions. But, obviously, she couldn’t say any of that. Maybe she was going to say something like, ‘No, but I think I will be,’ but Emil had already moved on. She didn’t take it personally.

“Where does the sky start?” Emil lifted his finger over his head, “Is this the sky? Is my finger in the sky? Mom? Where does the sky start?” Her face was sleepy. “It probably starts really high up right? I am probably not in the sky now cuz that means I should have some clouds on me.”

“There aren’t always clouds in the sky, Emil.”

“I don’t like that name. I like Demon.”

“Why’s that?”

“It’s a person name. I am more like an ice cream cone than people. I like to do what I want. I asked Dad why he doesn’t wear a dress ever, and he just gave me *his look*. You know?”

“Oh yes, I know.”

“I want to do what I want to do. Like you do.”

She made another face he didn't understand, and took a long time to say anything back.

"I like Demon, too." And then he recognized her face again. "I saw you fighting Ringneck. Did you win?"

"You saw me? How?"

"I was watching from the bathroom upstairs."

"You watched me while you went to the bathroom? Like peeing? That's gross."

"No, I wasn't—don't worry about it. Did you win?"

"Oh! That reminds me. There was a robin nest in the surprise hutch. What kind of blue is a robin egg?"

"That's just—"

"It's not cornflower or teal or navy right?"

Mom nodded, "It's just called robin egg blue."

"You just call it what it is? That's dumb."

Mom's silence confirmed it.

"Are you a foster child?"

"No. What brought that up?"

"Grandpa's last name. You were Kara Foster."

She laughed, "I guess so, then." Her face had the same sharp shapes as his math book.

They watched the colors change in the sky. Sounds of popcorn munching and the slurping of hot coffee that turned into the gulping of luke coffee. The sweet of the coffee paired great with the salt of the popcorn. Mom's eyes went back and forth like she was reading a book, watching the low clouds flow across the sky. Her eyes stayed there while Emil pulled his chair over to the fridge, sick of popcorn, got out the Bugles, and went back. He made witch fingers with the

Bugles and gave a sound like *ayyuhhhhhhauh*, getting on his knees in the chair and waving his Bugley fingers in her face. She smiled big and went back to the sky. And he had to ask, “Are living and dying the same thing?”

“What?”

“Like, I’m dying right now.”

“You’re not dying.”

“Dad said I was dying. He said everyone’s dying.”

“You’re not dying.”

“Are Grandma and Grandpa dying? They’re old.”

“Not old enough to be dying.”

“Dad’s dad died. He wasn’t as old as Grandpa. Why is Grandpa not dying? I thought about dying all day. I don’t think I want to. I buried a bird once in the garden that was so dying it was almost dead. Crows do a little hop when they land. It’s funny. It’s cute. But it wasn’t a crow that died. It was a different bird. Are birds dying?”

She made her patient face. “Everyone lives until they die. Everyone is living. No one is dying.”

“Oh. Ok. I want to live until I die. I don’t want to die until I die.”

“I know exactly what you mean, Demon.”

“Mom. Are there better ways to talk than just words?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean. Like, when Dad gets really quiet and won’t talk to me. Is he trying to talk to me that way? I don’t know why he won’t talk to me. I talk to you all the time, and it always works.”

“There are all sorts of languages that don’t use words like that. Some of the most important things we talk about aren’t said with words. Like when I hug you. Sometimes even hugs can feel different. You know what I mean?”

“Maybe. But sometimes it feels better when you say nice things than when you hug me. Does Dad love me when he’s quiet?”

“I don’t know, Demon. But he does.” She reached out for his hand. “Did you say you’ve been thinking about dying all day?”

#

Don’t say kidnapped. Don’t say kidnapped. Don’t say kidnapped.

Thomas’s plane was rerouted to goddamn Ithaca of all places. Just lucky he had a friend who had stayed there to teach. Couldn’t get out of the town without a caveat though, in this case his ID. Of course. So he had to take the long way around to dodge any cops wolfing around so close to the month’s end.

All the wineries were on the other side of the lake, their hills facing east.

He had hoped his firing—no, no, can’t say that—*realignment* from the California office would have destroyed even the word mantra and the rest of the Californiaisms. But they were still there when the plane landed. This *realignment* wasn’t his fault; he told them way back, five, six years ago, maybe as soon as 1980, and it felt late even then: personal computing was the future. Instead they literally put him out to pasture here, the scapegoat they were using to mow their Webster fields. Just down the street from a goddamn church and shooting range combo. Goddamn. It was bad enough that Emil and Kara were sharing a brain, but now Kara’s goddamn goddamn usage infiltrated him too. Goddamn goddamn goddamn.

He had absolutely 100% made that office though. The department was once so cutting edge that the president himself had personally thanked him—well, not just him, his department, but still. He had gotten everyone in the office a handshake from the president, and what did it get him? A barren field with a lovely gooseshit filled park he could, he supposed, roll around and frolic in. Presidential handshake for a goddamn gooseshit suit. Boy howdy damn golly gosh, just thank you so goddamn much. He tried to take a good deep breath, but it reminded him of California.

He passed a sign with removable letters outside a small business that said Grammar: the difference between feeling you are nuts and feeling your nuts. Just forty-five minutes of corn and purple wildflowers, sometimes entire fields denuded save for errant cowlicks of stalks missed by the harvester.

The road was probably filled with the ghosts of roadkill children. Oh christ, don't say that. Jesus, Tom . . . But there was no shoulder and the speed limit was 45 and it was just houses and trees and goddamn fields. He was blasting down the road in a borrowed, unfinished project: no hood, no front paneling.

But she just had to take Emil didn't she. Just couldn't fucking stay and believe in him while he worked everything out. His reassignment wasn't for another month. Nope, just get on a plane, take his own fucking son, just rip him right from every damn school that even hinted that maybe he was a little bit off, leaving the poor pathetic kid friendless. But, sorry, okay, the kid is a little off. Love is love, but a little fucked up is still a little fucked up. Six years old and still obsessed with crayons. At six, Tom was adding and dividing fractions. How could his own damn son be that damn bad at math.

The gas station coffee tasted like they took the charred scrapings off a grill and ran luke water through them. Just don't say kidnapped, Tom, that's your only goal. Just don't. He allowed himself one big California breath.

Unlike some pseudo-absent fathers, Tom was not given the benefit of closeness with Emil even when they were together. Kara and Emil for some time now had been inching toward their own vicious hive mind. This essentially terminated all of Tom's ingresses into the discussion of divorce. Everyone knew who Emil would choose.

From above, he bet it looked like he was traveling on graph paper, each field a cell. He could see the red line tracing the route. Field field field then another lake, this one in an apple county. The Apples of Wrath. Not quite Steinbeck territory—but no, he was wrong again, drive fifty minutes from Kara's parents and you're in the grape pie capital of the world. Not a horrific back-up plan.

And there he was, driving through another hour of fields. When it was not field, it was lake. When did quaint become a euphemism: quaint, like, how about he went and built his own house and dug his own well and churned his own damn butter out in a field behin—one more big California breath.

Under just a fingernail clipping of moon, above a hillside golden with dying soybeans, dark sherbet colors melted behind an island of cumulus and the trees were hardly more than silhouettes against the darkening sky. God how he hated it here. Just had to get married here, Emil just had to be born here, he just had to be exiled here.

The place was not just in decay, it had never even bothered to fully form in the first place. Life all over but no sign of it, the industry here too slow and hidden, the grass growing through and over it like a disclaimed field tractor, nighttime concealing it further, hidden by the slow

maturity of seasons on the barren outskirts of a city whose projections fell well short, a Busttown whose contributions were long behind, compounding failure on a quarterly basis. Kara's dad of course blamed Red Auerbach who, "through sheer swindlry," in the 1956 NBA draft lured Bill Russell away to Boston from the Rochester Royals, of course now defunct. GODDAMN RED AUERBACH, he'd say. He'd hear about the crime rate downtown and say, "Goddamn Red Auerbach." The canal didn't drain on schedule, "Goddamn Red Auerbach." The Alphabet Killer struck again, "Goddamn Red Auerbach." He'd stub his toe, yes, "Goddamn Red Auerbach." After decades which ended in mastery, her father's expertise allowed him to form a patch word that sounded like "GDRERBAH." Sometimes he blamed the failed subway project. Either way, everyone seemed to just watch the city hang from the ledge, fingers getting tired. And soon he was going to be just another spectator, watching from a field.

Finally outside the grid of farmland, he made the turn to Kara's parents' house: a narrow street made narrower by the garbage cans out front. He parallel parked between two wheeled, lilac garbage cans that were distributed by—no kidding—Youngblood Disposal. The engine sighed then died.

#

You can't hide surprise. "Oh f—sh—ugh, Is that your father," Mom asked, pointing out the big aquarium window.

"Dad? I think so. Yeah, he's got the racquetball." Dad was always squeezing the racquetball. Left hand. Green. He said stress balls were too weak.

"What, he's just going to sit out there pouting?"

"I can go talk to him right?"

"Yeah, just don't bring him in here."

“Why?”

Mom ran her fingers like pencil erasers all over her forehead. “Just go ahead and go talk to him. I can see you from here.”

Emil stood up on the chair and kissed Mom’s forehead without even a whiff of garlic or onion. He hopped down and walked out the door and over the front lawn with bare feet, the grass not yet dewy. Do you get dew at night, or is it called something else like night dew; do bugs drink night dew?

Dad held up his racquetball hand, “Hey bud,” he said, but he didn’t get out of the car to hug him. Dad smiled a lot, but it was mostly to himself, at least that’s what Grandma said last night with Mom. Dad’s car didn’t have a face, like a skull. “Grandma and Grandpa home?”

“No, they went to see Aunt Scar.”

“Good old Scarlett the harlot, clutch as ever.”

“What’s a harlot?”

“What do you think?”

“A nice person that picks out good snacks?”

“That’s a great use of context clues, bud.”

Emil put his hands on the car door above the rolled-down window. “Can I give you a riddle? Grandma told me.”

“Always.”

“What question will a field of sunflowers always answer right?”

“Is it windy?”

“Oh.” Of course Dad would know. Emil, pretty extinguished, looked at his toenails—they needed to be cut. “Yeah. You’re right.”

“Also, ‘where does the sun rise’ works, too.”

“Oh.”

“I’m sorry, Emil.” Dad made his fingers touch through the racquetball, squeezing hard.

“Hey bud, don’t be like that. You think Jonas Sulk would have cured polio? Don’t mope.” Dad made that joke a lot.

“Why’s your car have no face?”

“Old project.”

“Like me? You told Mom I was a project.”

“I don’t think so, buddy.”

But he had, it was only a couple days ago. Dad didn’t usually forget anything.

Emil decided to bring up good news. “I killed Ringneck today!”

“Why must you constantly destroy everything?” The racquetball went flat in Dad’s hand.

“Sorry, bud.” Emil stopped counting sorrys last year. Dad looked at Emil’s feet. “And why are you unshod? Even horses wear shoes.” Corny was another word Grandma called him last night.

“The road is just warm, not hot. It’s nice.”

“I’m really happy to see you, you know.”

“Yeah. Dad, how did Grandma and Grandpa get such big fake trees?”

“Where? Oh, the tree where you got all your sticks?”

“Yeah, they feel fake. How do you plant something that big?”

“They’re not fake, they’re cedars. Northern White Cedars.”

“They feel fake.”

“They’re not fake, bud.” Emil looked back to the house just in time to see the light come on in the kitchen. There weren’t any street lights on the road. Dad squeezed the racquetball and

Emil waited for him to talk. “Wanna get in?” Mom sat below the hanging light over the kitchen’s island; the light looked like a crown about to be placed on her head. Emil gave her his *I’m ok* look, even though she probably couldn’t see it. He got in the car and was disappointed that the only thing missing from it was its face.

Bugs too far away to name tornadoed around a hanging lantern on Mrs. Haverschmidt’s porch. Dad was talking a lot that night. “I’ve invited you in, why don’t you invite me into Grandpa’s house? Your mom will let me come in right?”

Mrs. Haverschmidt, a lady almost as warm as the terrific cookies she made, peeked out her window. Emil waved. Neither his father nor Mrs. Haverschmidt could see. “That’s why I came out,” Emil said.

“So, she wants me to come in?”

“Maybe. Yeah. I think so. Do you have anything you want me to tell her first?”

Dad’s right shoe was untied. He made a sound like he was about to get mad, inhaled long, exhaled long, then put his hand on Emil’s head, a hand so big it could probably pick him up just like that, like the claw game. “Tell her I want to talk to her out here, so neither of us are comfortable. No home field advantage. Neutral territory.”

Emil bounced in the seat, making the car rock gently, “This car is pretty good.”

He felt Dad’s hand on his shoulder. “Emil, look at me.” A serious voice, a lower voice, a business voice, a voice that meant there would be yelling soon. “You need to tell her we have to talk.” Crying didn’t work on Dad; it mostly just made him angrier. Dad hadn’t said anything yet that would make him cry, but that voice meant it was close. Emil opened the car door without saying anything and started back to the house. “Why don’t you do me a favor and put some feet on before you come out again.” Feet was shoes. Emil nodded back into the dark.

Everything was so big, except for the things that were small. Even the radish was bigger than his fist when he bit into it. Everything was so big before night came in, then everything was so small, like it wasn't coming back, or maybe was never really there anyway.

In the kitchen, Mom was erasing her forehead again with her fingers. "What does he want?" She still hadn't eaten any of her popcorn.

"He wants to talk. I think he'd like to come in and talk. He really misses you." Mom started to make a face, but she covered it with her loose sweater sleeves before she finished making it. "He does. He misses you. And me. And he wants to talk."

Her voice was quiet through her sweater, "Did he apologize?"

"Probably. I think that's what it was."

"Demon, tell him to leave," she spoke extra loud so it came through the sleeves her face was buried in.

"But he can't go. He's here."

Still not looking at him, "Demon, he can't be here. Please just tell him to leave."

"But what if—"

"EMIL." Yelling.

He still couldn't see her face; he almost told her that he didn't feel very close to her today, but that meant he would need to admit it. Before Emil went back out into the street he made two little kicks into his walrus sandals. Right foot, left foot. "I'll be right back."

His dad sat in the dark of the car until Emil opened the car door, making the overhead light come on and fade real slow, though the lights by the steering wheel and radio were still on. Emil looked through the windshield into the sky. "Dad, why is, like if there are so many, why don't the stars make it really hot at night? You know, from the starshine?"

“They’re always there. And they’re too far away for us to feel their heat.” All the lights by the steering wheel and radio turned off. “She can’t kidna—can’t just take you like that. You know that right?”

“Aren’t we coming here anyway?”

Dad took a long breath. “What did she say?”

“She wants you to come in. She said it might be hard, but you—you two—you can fix it.”

“She said that?” Dad was wearing his boat shoes with three different colors on them; he always wore them at the beach; one of them was untied. “I think she needs to come out and say it herself.”

“I think she said that she really wants you to come in.”

“Well, she knows where to find me.”

“No wait, just wait. I can ask. I’ll ask. I’ll do it.”

“Alright, bud. I’ll give you two minutes. Then I’m going. I’m sorry.”

Emil ran out of the car without closing the door. The night had arrived properly, and the light from the kitchen was brighter than ever. For a moment, the aquarium glass went missing, so did Mom, and for that space of time, his stomach. The panic stopped when he blinked and the glass returned, then Mom after the glass.

By the time he was back in the kitchen, Mom had removed her head from the gray lake of her sleeves and shelved her head up on the bridge of fingers she made with her hands. Her eyes looked out the glass onto the street, one of those faraway stares when you’re really watching something else inside your head. Emil stood between her and the huge wall of glass. He nudged her, and she didn’t move or change her eyes. “Go ahead, Demon,” she said.

“He said he loves you and he’s sorry and he knows he has trouble saying it and he said he’s sorry for that too. And that he really misses us and wants to come in. He loves us. He loves you. And he’d really like to come in.” Maybe it would have been easier if he was crying, but why would he be crying if things were going well?

Mom went through a bunch of faces, more he hadn’t seen before. She raked down her face with her fingernails, leaving marks that faded by the time she sent her hands into the room before her, flat, but quick, casting a spell. “Alright, Demon, go ahead.”

Outside, the car door Emil left opened slammed, then the car started. Mom walked into the living room, muttering words Emil wasn’t supposed to say.

“Thank you. I mean, great. I’ll—we’ll be right back.”

“If he loves me you better ask him why he’s starting the car.”

The lie came so easy. “Because he was going to park in the driveway.”

“Oh, so he just assumed he could come in?”

“No, please. No. He—Mom, I’ll be right back.” Emil ran out the door and into the road waving his arms at the night, as if flagging down a plane from a deserted island. The lights from the faceless car stopped on him.

“Emil, what are you—”

“You can come in. You can come in. You have to come in. You have to park in the driveway. She said she loves you and you can work it out. I don’t know what it is but she said you can work it out. You can go in. You can go in with me.”

Emil could not see Dad staring at him through the lights so bright, but Emil knew he was there, mashing the racquetball. Dad backed the car into the driveway, rolled up the windows and turned the car off.

Emil ran over to the car, "I'll get your bag."

"Didn't bring one," Dad said, "Watch out." The door slammed loud. Both of Dad's shoes were tied again. He took Emil by the shoulder and shepherded him to the front door. "Should we ring the bell?"

#

In the morning, the windows damp except for the light frozen cold coming through the top of each window, Emil ran from the bathroom to Mom's room, his hands still wet with toilet water. "IT CAME OUT, IT CAME OUT." When he opened her door, Dad's arm was draped over Mom, Mom's arm over the side of the bed. "Look, look, it came back out. It's the same year I was born!" He held up the penny and brought it mouthward.

"No no no no no don't eat that," but it was too late.

Recording of M's livestream, circa 2018

[Hi. This is E nosing in from the footnotes. This next part is kinda graphic: explicit language, body horror, murder. The gist is that M writes a rather hateful letter to their—now ex—girlfriend. It's gratuitously disgusting: a definite skip for the squeamish.]

Even when her voice falters there's poison and conviction. She types the words with care as she says them from the bottom corner of the stream.

Dear K,

I can't stand you or your rank cunt stank. You hurt me and it feels like blood is leaking into my perforated stomach. I fucking hate you. I fucking hate you. I want to put you under a steam roller. I want to peel you off the road and pack you into a ball and run you over again. Your name is a personal synonym for putrefaction. I want you to deepthroat a scalpel. I hope your brakes fail on a mountain road with lots of turns. I hope you're in a situation where the only way to save your life is to eat a bowl of surgically-removed cysts. I hope you're the only victim of a collapsed bridge. I hope trees become suicidal when you're around. I hope you've been getting abducted by aliens and don't know it. I hope you lose your rock collection. I hope you have a delicious bowl of noodles with hot steamy broth and when you go back to the kitchen to compliment the chef they tell you that it was actually a bowl of parasites. I hope someone sews your eye open just to fart on your eyeball. I hope your cat never snuggles with you again. I want you to die. I want you to die over and over again. I want to set up all your stiff dead bodies like dominos up and down the stairs of a 131 story building and headbutt your bulbous fucking nose while i'm wearing my juggernaut helmet. I hate you like a narcissist hates watching other people's home videos. I hate you like a hair in my soup. I hate you like a nail clipped too deep. I hate you like I hate you. You are right about all the things you hate about yourself. I want to use

your face as a dartboard and your stubby limbs as bowling pins and jam my fingers into your eyes and toss your head down a bowling alley I made of your flayed skin. Why would you do this? What is your point? What is the point of you? Why would you make me so afraid? You are a parachute that fails to open. An oven that doesn't get hot. A popped balloon. You are an Amish electrician. You are Santa Claus hunting the Easter Bunny. You are a happy trip to the grave of my parents. You are a city of dust, a three-legged unicorn, a mallard duck with a straight dick, a sasquatch beekeeper, a dog that doesn't make me sneeze, the date of our wedding. You do not exist. I want to "accidentally" pitch boiling spaghetti water on your face. How's that for using your noodle? I fucking hate that phrase like I hate you like I hated you when you would say it. You could be in a tiny room with unbagged garbage, layers of roadkill, and the recent biological waste of a coprophiliac, and your personality would still be the worst smell. I could hate you as a fulltime job and I'd take half pay for the overtime. You are a pile of flaws stacked in a jagged skin suit approximation of a person. I want to peck your eyes out like a vulture while the sun slowly turns you into a french fry on the side of the road from when you were flung out of your car because the seatbelt snapped and your face was worked on the road like wood at a belt sander. I hate you. It compounds secondly. You hurt me in the same way. I could do all these things to you and still hate myself less than I hate you. I don't wish you death, I wish you torture. I could light up the world with how I hate you, and blind anyone who opens their eyes and cremate small flowers. I'd rather live the rest of my life off a diet of garbage disposal gunk and the orange film that grows on the moulding of the shower than talk to you again. I have nothing positive to say about you until you die. I want you to drown in a vat of bile and coughed-up blood that never makes its way to white napkins. All this and I still can't say it right. All this and the completeness of my hate is still unexpressed. In the word's most honest sense, I hate you.

The chat cheers wildly. SEND IT SEND IT, they say. M holds a finger up like a wand and with the same conviction she spoke the letter, presses the Backspace key. Holds it down. Her chat goes nuts. NO NO NO NO SEND IT NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO. But the words are deleted, one letter at a time, as the chat laments, until M is all that's left.

Kara caught Wiley talking to himself again, which would be fine with someone else's kids; she'd call it normal, no big deal. But he was having full-blown conversations these days. Hour-long back-and-forths, listening intently, responding intently. And it wasn't discussions about favorite dinosaurs; these were discussions about dying, what he saw when he thought about dying, the collapsing tunnel . . . He'd talk to himself in the closet sometimes. She's been wondering if she's been hypocritical about all this, since most days now she goes to a grave marked Kara Foster to talk to herself. She can't keep doing this. And it's not because Wiley won't stop talking to himself, but the visions she has when she notices. She kept having these urges. She'd be dicing tomatoes for pico or something and, clear blue, want to take her knife and shove it in her son's head. Overwhelming. HOW MANY TIMES DID I ASK YOU TO NOT DO THIS? TO NOT DO THIS? HOW MANY TIMES. She can't keep doing this. Taking the iron to his forehead, leaving the marks. Locking him in the oven, though he'd probably talk to himself in there too. She'd have these thoughts, and sometimes Wiley would look at her, watching a movie of those thoughts above her head, and he'd develop this look, as if he could feel each stab, each burn, and he'd look about to cry. And she'd run over to him. She'd apologize. She'd love him, hold him, sorry, sorry, I'm sorry I'm sorry Wiley I'm so sorry I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you I'm sorry. But he seemed to know what she was thinking because he never hugged back, even when she bearhugged him so tight. He was watching her thoughts above her, fork in the eye, arm in the garbage disposal. She's been saying these things to the Kara Foster grave most days. Who else would listen? Who wouldn't call CPS after hearing these things? Fingers slammed in the car door. Pushing him down the escalator. Death follows her, close as footsteps. The gravespeak was helping and not helping. It made her feel slightly insane. It made her open up, to have someone to talk to, someone who would keep her secrets, someone

who wasn't Thomas who would lock her in the bathroom again. *YOU JUST SAID YOU WANT TO STAB MY SON IN THE HEAD.* And he locked her in the bathroom. While Thomas called her parents to come collect the kids, she ran a bath . . . and she found it was quite easy, when she finally got the nerve to do it, when her body was warm in the tub, when her veins were running hot, when it took but simple seconds of bravery to run the tub red. *YOU WANT TO STAB MY SON IN THE HEAD?* It wasn't her fault, she'd tell the grave. She didn't want to do these things. Smother him in his sleep. Sew his mouth shut. She would *never* do these things. She'd never stab her son in the head. And the grave believed every word, despite whatever lingered in her voice to dampen the conviction. Start smoking again and burn him with the unfiltered cigarettes. She would never. She would never. But if she just waited for the rest of the blood to leave her body, if she just—*STAB MY SON IN THE HEAD?*—just let the blood pump, pump, and bloom in the water, let Thomas take his time to come talk to her, when he believed it safe, when the kids were in the car with her mother heading to kinder vistas. Her reflection in Thomas' straight razor. *Accidentally* cutting off his tiny finger when he reaches for a carrot. Pump. pump. *YOU WANT TO STAB MY SON IN THE HEAD?* Pump. pump. Just let it flow. It's almost over now. Then the door is open and *KARA KARA WHAT THE FUCK ARE YOU DOING KARA NO DON'T DO THIS KARA.*

It's a niche market, and the Painter works only at night.

"I still just feel mostly like a first draft of a person," the Client says. "Like, I'm close. Almost whole. But that almost part has sort of become the whole thing I guess, of me, is what I mean." The Client isn't crying, a certain resolve damming up the tears, but there's a frailty to the voice, a kind of prelude. He digs at his neck. The doctor, who had a pen that had a heart you click on top, suggested it was a neuropathic itch. She, the doctor, said it as she wrote it in her notes, but only when asked. *Yes, neuropathic itch.* Was a big relief to find out *it* had a name, that it wasn't so new it might end up with his. Neuropathic itch. There's a tingling like an infestation of insects crawling inside, but the tingling has a shape, rectangular, like something you lift to access a control panel, just to the left of where you take your pulse below the jaw. It itches like a mosquito bite but it's worse because there's no bump, just an untouched plane of skin blending with the rest. What if he clicks the secret button beneath his skin where the mosquito bite should be and a panel of wires is exposed along with a big red button and he just presses it and turns himself off?

The smoke from the Painter's cigarette makes the cramped space even smaller. For a moment the Painter's head is wreathed in smoke, and what sits in the chair with crossed legs is a mannequin, short sleeves rolled up like the fifties, depression-era golf pants. In total there's eleven feet on the floor, the three-legged stool wearing shoes, four feet bare, the other four in sneakers, one of those jackhammering.

"I don't know what to say."

"What do you want to say?"

Part of the job's ordinance is to keep the client talking to see if they'll figure it out on their own, figure out a different end, or figure on no end at all. Sometimes after they've squeezed

all the words out of themselves and they're throttling a dry sponge, they realize they've made a mistake even being here, that every moment is a success, that they can make it through their current moment and the next and the next . . .

"What do you mean? I don't know. There's probably a lot I don't remember. Okay, one time I wanted to go up to a cop I saw stuffing a pulled pork sandwich into his face and ask 'Isn't that cannibalism?' But I didn't."

"You can say whatever you want. There's no judgment, even if that's what you want. My face will just look like this," the Painter gestures to their stone face, "Just like this. Say whatever you need."

Despite his hesitation, the Client has an answer primed. "Do you think you've ever died? Like, do you think this is your first self? Or does it feel like you've been someone else?" The Painter relaxes their shoulders and goes deeper into the chair; after a breath or so they roll their hand holding the cigarette, showing its palm. "I just need to get out of this," the Client says. "Out of myself. Anywhere else. I don't think I've ever died. I think this is all a first try." The Painter clacks their nails on the metal of the chair. "I can't get this image, this feeling, out of my head. Like I'm biting the curb. I can smell the sewer and the burning of a bad engine. Like I'm biting the curb and someone's dragging me along it, my teeth still on the curb. And then like my lips are gone and someone is scrubbing the curb with my face. I don't know. It's a sound. A grating sound and feeling."

The light above them looks like it's in the middle of a heart attack, flickering. Flickering. It wins and keeps shining. Neither the Client nor the Painter look up. "You're not bothering me. We're here for you. Go ahead."

"It's really long. "

“The door is still there. Otherwise we’re here until you’re done.”

The Client gets up and makes sure the door is locked. “If that’s what you want . . . And most of this stuff—I remember it happening, but I don’t remember it happening to me, if you follow.” They stop their jittery leg and their feet go flat on the pale wood floor. “When I misbehaved, my mom would force me to lay myself on the sidewalk with my ear to the ground. I would tell her how scared it made me, how it gave me the feeling that I was about to be driven over.

“She never hit me or spoke an unkind word to me. But sometimes she’d have me do it even in the winter, my ear sometimes on the ice, sometimes against the broom lines etched into the cold concrete, trying to breathe toward my ear so it wouldn’t freeze. She kept my hair short all year so that I had to put my bare ear directly on the sidewalk. I’d have to ask to switch sides of my face. *Mom, can I switch sides? It’s really starting to hurt.* She’d tell me that if so much as my shadow moved, I’d get another fifteen. Those fifteen minutes were sometimes an hour. No matter how much time I earned she’d always wait until the snowplow came through.

“When your ear is on concrete, footsteps are loud. When I was in somebody’s way she’d tell them to just walk around, walk around. It was the worst in the dark, when the footsteps were almost as bad as the trucks. Sometimes the feet of two people, three. Like I was being chased. Like I was being cornered. I’d always close my eyes, and, when I opened them, my mom would be sitting there on the stoop with a flaming left hand, looking disappointed.

“It was the worst that summer when they were doing road work on our street and they temporarily graveled the road in front of the house. And when the truck drivers who were savvy enough to use our road as a shortcut rolled over that part of the road, my ear to the sidewalk, it felt like all my teeth were breaking, and by the time the last tires finished I could feel myself

being ran over. And the longer the truck was, the longer it felt like the bones inside me were shattering, splintering throughout my body and through my skin until I looked like a roadkill hedgehog. And sometimes my mother would flag down another one and it'd happen again. I still don't know what the lesson was . . . I think she was the one who was spreading the secret about the shortcut."

Black walls all around look like they suffered through only a single coat of paint. Scars all over suggest that someone tried to scrape the paint off with rocks. The Painter recrosses their legs. "You have more to say."

A car stuck at a light is blaring Broadway favorites. "IT'S SO EASSYYYY TO LEAAAVEEEEEE MEEEEEEEEEE."

"You know, I'd leave the rest of that song bleeding in the street without calling an ambulance, but I love that part." The Client stands up and vicegrips their cheeks. "Sometimes I wonder about the things I've accidentally killed. How many bugs I've stepped on. Things I've murdered without even knowing it. That'd be a great way to go, honestly. Just some gargantuan foot coming down from the sky, crushing me out like a sidewalk cigarette." The Client squishes the floor with their foot. The Painter coughs and holds out a hand, asking to be excused. "I don't know what you want. I just don't feel safe inside me. I don't know what to say. I don't know how to say it. I shouldn't have to convince you. Just let me out. Let me out."

"How about some tea?" The Painter gets up and pushes the left half of the wall and the wall rotates around the middle. It's just a big open space, no more walls than necessary, no rooms cluttering the place up. The only window is stained-glass, ceiling to floor, and backlit by what must be the alley light. "I have some gilded rooibos. I like to pick the peppercorns out for steak au poivre," the Painter says, their voice fainter as they walk to the kitchen in the far right corner.

It's quiet as an abandoned palace. Finished portraits hang on every centimeter of the walls and ceiling. "Doesn't look like much space left for me?" The Client snuffles, pulls at their coat, snuffles. "And so now what."

"Tea?"

"No."

"Alright. I'm putting a pot on. Go ahead and sit," the Painter points over to a chair by the canvas. The Client nods and walks to the far end of the studio and sits. Water from the faucet runs cold, getting colder, as the Painter drowns their cigarette and places the teapot under the spout. Waiting for it to fill, the Painter gathers two mugs and stuffs two bags with loose leaf tea.

Eyes everywhere. The Client breaks eye contact with a portrait by the window, only to connect with another set on the ceiling. The room inhales the stained beams of light hanging on the air, retaining their shape even as the Painter walks through them and pulls a chair to the side of the canvas so they can talk. "Why don't you keep going?"

Hunched over, head in hands, the Client speaks to the floor, exhales loudly, "Sometimes I'll look at the calendar to find something to look forward to. At some point I found one of those infinite calendars and I went all the way to the 2030s when something about the dates all seemed made up; 2035 looked science-fictional. Then by 2040 I couldn't look anymore, as if 2040 would never happen, could never happen."

Lost in the variegated light off the stained glass, the Client is mired in reverie; the Painter uses the moment to study the Client's eyes. On the stove, the teapot squats above the blue flame, though too far back on the burner, scorching the curve of its face.

Pulled away from the window's vortex, the Client looks back to the painter. "When I was a kid I used to have this thought that there were people inside the VHS tapes we watched. That

miniature versions of the cast were in there, waiting, practicing, whatever. Like Gandalf and company were just sitting around inside, puffing smoke rings, in a space all black except for the cast, props, and smoke. Now I'm wondering if that's what I do. Like nothing interesting in my life happens until someone else presses play. I'm at someone's else's command or something." They can feel their nasal laugh on their hand. "I don't know what you want me to say. What are you looking for? Regrets? Unsolved mysteries? What? . . . Okay, first thing that comes to mind. I was at dinner the other day with I guess friends but also people I work with. One of them stabbed around the community salad for a solid minute and there was still nothing on his fork. I picked up a tomato and skewered it onto the fork's tines. Tomato juice and seeds squirted everywhere since the tomato was so tight. I had to brush a dried seed off a coworkers coat, real spylike, when we left. I don't think they'll invite me again." There's a sound from the stove like the teapot's about to scream. "I have a good story actually. Actually a funny one maybe." The teapot, ungagged, screams and the Painter strolls over cool as you like and calms it.

The Painter holds up a mug, "How do you take it?"

"Black. Green. Clear. Whatever it is, I'll take it neat." The Painter takes the cubes of sugar they reserved for the Client and puts them into their own mug before they pour the water in. "Actually, no. I said I didn't want any. Stop doing that."

"Sorry, habit." Sitting back down, the Painter makes a table of their legs and places the slate coaster on their thigh and the tea on top of it. Back on the kitchen counter, the Client's tea steams. "You said you had a story?"

"I wish I didn't call it that. But, if that's what you need." The Client adjusts in his seat. It was senior skip day and the sky was already dark and threatening, so I packed an umbrella. And you know, being prepared isn't cool as a teenager, teenagers don't believe in umbrellas. They

were all making fun of me for it, but, one by one, I laughed and said, ‘When it starts to piss rain, who do you think’s going to be the most popular?’ We were all having a good time, barbecuing by the lake, chicken fighting and pretending to drown each other. Well, not me, I can’t swim, but they were having fun. The whole time we’re under an overcast sky. But then everyone dried off and changed and we were ready to eat. The rain came out of nowhere, thick drops falling fast. I knew it. I knew it. And I get out my umbrella and turned a big smile on so they’d know too. I had that look like I was fighting to say I told you so, just too modest, because now everyone was going to know I was right. I thought I was going to have to rent out the space under the umbrella, all those bodies sprinting over like a fire sale. But when I snapped out of my self-satisfaction, everyone around me was having these like cinematic just-realized-love kisses in the rain. They were all really going at it. And I stood there, in the center of everyone, dry.”

The Painter cools their tea with a breath.

“Well I thought it was funny.”

“It is.”

“Why are we still talking?”

“Normally this is a palliative service. Terminal cases and—”

“In what way am I not a terminal case? I am here for one reason. You got the money and—”

“A lot of the payment is simply risk management, to cover the service’s footprints.”

“Oh, I see. So you just like doing it. That’s really sick.”

“You’re not going to make me mad. I am here for you, but it’s my time. And I need to get to know you before we start.”

“Start?”

“Yeah. Keep going.” The Painter sips the tea, doesn’t slurp it.

“But okay, okay, keep going. Keep going. I have another story, a school one, not a funny one. I was really bad at math but I learned about the power of exponents when, at my sixth grade graduation, Denny Martok pantsed me in front of the whole school; one person’s laugh turned to the laugh of a crowd. It was the one day in my life I wasn’t wearing underwear. There weren’t many people there, but afterward the whole school, then the town, then my extended family, then, later, when we were older, the internet knew. Well into high school, in gym, I used to have guys ask if I needed a cup and they’d throw pistachio shells at me, because ha ha ha yeah my dick can fit in a pistachio shell. Then we moved eventually and I had that Costanzick episode with the umbrella.”

The Client’s mother would have referred to the Painter as someone who lounges inside themselves. The Painter doesn’t smile, just sits there with tea, calm and waiting.

“Keep going, keep going. Okay.” The Client makes a claw of his hand and squeezes at his temples with middle finger and thumb. “Okay, I think almost everyone in the country is at least high-functioningly depressed. We all wake up in a cave, do the life stuff, come back home, sit around, do nothing, retreat back into the cave. I used to be better, more creative, I painted, sculpted, made every day something more than it is. But it’s the kind of like waterboarding depression that’s not even a muse. I come out of the cave and sit in a chair I reupholstered myself when I was better, its seat a blue you want to swim in, and I stare at these undone projects, these canvases blank except for the primer, one page journals, towers of hardened clay.” The Painter switches legs. “It’s like. Like you’re strapped to a concrete chair inside a slowly collapsing tunnel. But inside your head forever there’s a movie that plays over and over of the instant collapse of a tunnel, this same tunnel. And the only place you can see it happening is inside your

head, and clearer when you close your eyes. The collapse in your mind plays for so long it starts to look slow. The terror never fades to boredom and you beg to die, and you have so long to wait while the tunnel closes.” . . . The Client balls up a fist and slowly punches their chest, then lifts up their shirt. “I have this severely inverted sternum. I can get closer to my heart than probably anyone else on earth. I can feel it thumping on the left side of the cave wall here. I can feel it thump on my fingers. I feel it, I feel everything.” The Client is slow to remove his hand from the cave. “I was talking about stuff like that with a friend, depression, and at some point he brought up how his mom’s coworker’s son or something just killed himself. And he’s usually always so supportive but he said ‘People who do that are so selfish. Think about how I’d feel if you did that to me.’ And I couldn’t stop laughing and he didn’t get it. I just stood there laughing until he told me to get out.” By the time the Client winds down it’s time again for tea. The Painter stands and asks if the Client wants a cup; he doesn’t. But the Painter keeps getting away from it, so the Client follows. “Let me just come with you so we can stop prolonging this. Something I noticed on the way here. And really don’t tell anyone this because I don’t know what it means and I don’t think I’d even tell my therapist. So I want to cross the street whenever I see someone on the same side. I have like this itch or twinge. And I’ll always want to cross. But I only allow myself to do it if they’re the same race.” A moment. “No, no, I don’t even want to know what it means. I just wanted to tell someone.” The Client’s leg starts jackhammering again, leaning against the counter with both hands, as he waits for the painter’s tea. “I’ve been walking around all day, waiting for this. I think I walked over every bridge in the city, both waterfalls. And I’m on the one by Devonian’s around noonish and the sun’s like a spotlight and there’s this mother like holding her kid up and over the bridge, dangling her above the river like three stories down. The kid was kicking her feet and yelling about how she wanted her mom to let go so she could

play with the seagulls down there. And then the mom says something like, ‘Oh no, that’s dead body water. Can’t you smell?’ I’m just thinking to myself the whole time like what are you doing? what the hell are you doing? This baby is one jagged move from falling off a bridge and I did nothing.”

The Painter seems to have spilled the tea and its cup off the counter. “One second while I clean this up.” The Painter walks over to a seemingly arbitrary section of the wall and presses on what turns out to be the right side of a door; inside are cleaning supplies. The Client claws his neck, itchier now. Looking over the shattered glass and the broom handle, the Painter asks, “You ever get one of those spam letters that look like they’re written by hand but they’re actually typed out?” The Client says no and waits for a follow-up question, but instead the Painter’s busy sweeping up glass, which sounds like it’s breaking all over again. The Client pours the Painter another cup. After the Painter disposes of the shattered cup and dries the wood floor that the drink seems to have already soaked into, they dump out the new cup’s tea and stacks a pyramid of sugar cubes inside. “I like a natural stir,” then they pour the tea inside.

“Noted for when I’m a regular.” His voice shakes, though not as bad as his leg. “What else do you want?”

“Why don’t we find a spot for your portrait; you want to sit by the window or do you want it the way it’s set up?”

“I thought the portrait was a joke.” Both his hands hold the back of his head and he shakes it. “The window then.”

“Grab the chair and bring it over. Find a comfortable position, we’ll be here a while.”

“It’s not—that’s not what I thought this was.”

“Well then, if my service isn’t needed, I’ll finally be able to get more than three hours of sleep. Good night.”

“No. No.” The Client walks over the large expanse of floor and takes the chair from the corner and puts it on the side closest to the stained glass so he won’t have to walk through its beams. “So just keep talking then?”

“Just keep right on talking then.”

“More family stuff I guess. My second step-father used to say a horse with a knife sticking out of its head ain’t a unicorn. All the adults in my life used to say things I didn’t understand. Still do. But, you know. Another thing he used to say, when he was assailed by the landlord for due rent, he’d say ‘I got nothin but family, and you can’t eat family.’ He was alright, better than the first and third. I used to have this fantasy where I would keep accumulating grandparents by a process where my mom would remarry, and then she’d die and I’d live with her husband, who would remarry, who would then die and I would live with my stepmom, who herself would remarry. If you follow me. Almost actually happened once.” The windows’ diluted rainbow beams toward the floor, where it’s whole again, stamped on the wood. “My mother was in the hospital for a tumor in her throat that nearly prevented her from swallowing. The nursing staff gave her a whiteboard and black marker, and when she held it up there was the word: MIRACLE. It was underlined. I don’t know why I said it—I didn’t really choose to say it, you know what I mean. I told her you can’t pray for a miracle when you’re hooked up to machines. If you’re at home and unplugged and dying in your dingy red room and you pray and live despite your dying, that’s a miracle. When your breathing is machine-assisted and nurses and doctors and assistants swarm you like ants on ice cream whenever necessary, what happens from there is not a miracle. What happens from there is your work and the work from the people around you.

Miracles do not need assistance. What you need is this hospital. Then she whipped the whiteboard at me, packed up her stuff, hobbled down the hall in her gown, and checked herself out of the hospital against the stern suggestions of the nurse who followed her to the exit and nearly into my mother's car. My mother died two days later in that same dingy red room I mentioned, in a chair covered in dust."

"I forgot to prime the canvas."

The Client doesn't hear. "I used to . . . I used to think that if it ever got bad enough, I always had an out. That I could always end this if it ever got too bad. But then I got a family. I made promises. I promised I wouldn't do it. So now I don't even have that. I have no way out. I have no way out. There's this kind of internal tide that washes in sometimes. And I put so much energy into shoveling the water off its beach. I'm obligated to not let it take me for some reason. I don't want to do it anymore. I don't want to have to try so hard. The bad thoughts come in and I need to tell them no, but it's half-hearted. I don't want to fight it. I just want to let it win."

"I'm sorry, I forgot to prime the canvas, and we can't do this without it."

"What? How long does it take?"

"Doesn't matter. You'll have to come back tomorrow. "

"No. I can't wait that long. You don't understand. I can't wait that long."

"You don't have to come back."

"You don't understand." The Painter influences The Client into the room with black walls again, pushing him toward the exit.

"Tomorrow, a day after an hour from now."

"You don't understand."

After an hour of impassioned knocking the Painter couldn't hear, the Client retreats home to wait.

Without even needing to knock, the Client is corralled by the Painter through the door of the scratched black room and through the trick door in the wall. The portraits seem to the Client to be making different expressions today. Similar, but not the same. Even the Painter's face is different. The canvas is covered with a white sheet. Everything else is the same as yesterday, even the light through the stained-glass. "You can go where you were yesterday," the Painter says, and removes the sheet without flourish. Already on the canvas is a portrait of the Client done in pencil, everything but the eyes. "Still a lot to do," the Painter says.

The Client sits and slumps back on the diamond-seated stool, its arrow tip shooting into the wall. "This stool. The back leg here is shorter than the rest. Do you have anything else I can use?"

"No."

"Can I stand?"

"No."

"So same as yesterday? Just keep on talking?"

The trick door closed, the Painter makes the first brushstroke, no tea in sight. They work in solemn quiet, all business.

. . .

“Fine. I know no one likes to hear about dreams, but I have to keep talking, you need me to keep talking for some reason. I don’t remember a single other dream. But in this one there’s a gray creeping bug that crawls under my toenail. Somehow I resist the urge to throw up. Don’t panic. Then I just go to work, I take a hammer and start whacking my toe. There’s no pain or blood or bruises. But the whacking doesn’t work, so I take a crowbar and pry off the nail at the cuticle end of the toe, and I pop it slightly open like when you pop a car’s hood. But the bug’s not there. So I get the saw and go to work splitting up the toe horizontally in sections. Still no bug. And I continue to disassemble myself, finding nothing, until I only have a head, which my arms are still attached to. After that I have to saw off one of my arms, but, finally, I find just one of the bug’s shiny legs in my arm, and I know I’m close. I still have an arm left, but can’t use the saw, so I gnaw it off. And I dig through that arm and there’s no bug. So all that’s left is my head. Then what? A big hole in the floor opens in the carpet and my head starts to roll over to it and that’s when I wake up.

“What do you think was in the hole?”

“I don’t know, spikes or something, maybe another person who will check if the bug’s in my head. I don’t know. Maybe the head falls into a picnic basket and someone takes me to lunch, I have no idea.” The Painter mixes colors. The longer the silence goes, the more the Client needs to say. “I still haven’t really talked about her yet. Maybe I resent her for making me promise. I don’t think I can get out if I don’t talk about her though.” He digs at his neck. “I have to. I’ve never had to make a promise to anyone else.” The Client dons this session’s first non-sarcastic smile. “The first time we dated we were in high school. I fell in love with her when we were having sex; she was faced toward a shirtless man on a poster. And I was worried that she was looking at him while we were doing it, but then I started to think that maybe I was looking too.

And I had to have been because I just somehow said the man's name all short and breathy on a rather forceful thrust, and there was this moment when *everything* felt better when she laughed. And somehow I wasn't embarrassed at all, and laughed too." The Client cries what are hopefully happy tears. "Do you have tissues or anything?" The Painter's silence says no and the Client resorts to squeegeeing his face with his thumbs. "Yes, I made a promise. I did. I promised. But really what does she think we're going to do, synchronize our deaths? take each other by the hand and skip together as ghosts into the afterlife? After all, it is me in here, me in this body, isn't it? I don't think she even knows what she's asking me to do."

A wrist's ticking watch.

All over the room unseen things crawl.

"I used to have this plan where I will abandon her so she didn't have to deal with the fallout when I kill myself—that would destroy her. But a breakup isn't so bad. I will force a break up for a petty reason And I will say cruel things so they hate me, things I have written down over the years we've been together and loved each other. But it's the only way. And then I will move, and wait a year or two. Or maybe wait until she finds someone else. And then I'll do it. I can't have her find me hanging from the ceiling like a chandelier. I don't ever want her to know. I want her to see me as a volatile and toxic ex, I want her to complain to her friends about it, and I want her to forget me. And then I'll kill myself. That's what I used to think."

Fingernails have turned the Client's panel of neck a concerning shade. When he stops scratching, The Client continues, "It was over that one long weekend she was gone that I tried to write the first letter and just couldn't get it right. I had so much to say to her and I kept crinkling failed attempts and throwing them away like in the movies. The pad was yellow. When she came

home the whole weekend had gone, and I had to hide what I was writing. This was before the promise . . .

“There’s a kind of internal tide that washes in sometimes. And I put so much energy into shoveling the water off the beach. But I’m obligated to not just let it take me for some reason. I don’t want to do it anymore. I don’t want to have to try so hard. The bad thoughts come in and I need to tell them no, but it’s half-hearted. I don’t want to fight it. I just want to let it win. When I’m with her it’s different. But it’s like when you drive under a bridge in a rainstorm. It’s pouring rain, then all goes quiet for just a breath, then it’s pouring rain.” He starts itching with both hands. “And why are you so all business all of a sudden, where’s my tea?”

“Oh, just remembered, we’ve refunded your money, and thrown in a little extra for the inconvenience. It should show up quickly and discreetly tomorrow or so, well, I guess Tuesday because of the extended weekend.”

“Excuse me?”

“We’ve returned your money, and a little extra because the canvas wasn’t primed yesterday.”

“Why would you do that?” There’s no response. The Client tilts back on the stool and puts his hand into the many-colored fog from the light forced through the stained-glass. He makes a fist in the fog and then rubs his face with an open hand. “I just feel like I’m loitering here. You know how people always say that this is a permanent solution to a temporary problem? But what if it’s really a temporary solution to a permanent problem? What if it gets worse? Or it doesn’t change anything at all? And if it isn’t a solution, I’m just going to be biting this curb until I’m dead? I can’t do it. I don’t want to inflict this on her.

“But you want me to?”

“I’m not doing anything.”

“Doesn’t it amount to the same thing, if I do it? It’s still your decision. Though, in this state, I’m not sure you can—”

“No, you said you’ll make it look like an accident. A messy robbery or something.”

“I will. Or at least I can. But you’re still breaking the promise.”

“But I’ll be the only one to know.”

“And me.”

“Yeah, but who are you? I can see right through you, right into your trick door and the faces on the wall. You’re a ghost. Maybe worse.”

“That’s not the way this goes. I’m not going to get mad. It’s your choice. I’m just not going to let you lie to yourself, or to me.”

“I can’t do it myself. I know I’ll botch it. I know I’ll botch it up. I’ll end up drooling into a bib while an underpaid nurse dabs at my mouth, not quite getting all the drool, its trail still shiny and wet. And I’ll still feel it and not be able to wipe it off.”

“Do you think she’d rather have a promise or her—”

“Just shut up.”

“You’re still doing it, I’d just be the instrument.”

“Nobody ever understands. It’s not a choice.” The Client stares into his hands as if holding a crystal ball. His face is rounder than usual from crying. Flecks of paint from the Painter’s shoes look like shrapnel from the exploded light of the stained-glass window. The Client digs at his neck. “Why are you doing this to me?”

The Painter walks over and inspects the Client, his puffy eyes, his neck like a wall rats have tried to chew through. "Look at me." The Client leans forward onto the stool's three legs. There's no flight in his eyes.

As the Painter continues to work behind the canvas, the Client rocks back and forth on the stool, looking into the web made by his knitted hands. Dust particles in the stained-glass beam roil in a constant stream upward and to the left, drifting out of the watercolor light.

Eventually the Client has no tears left, his face so soggy he could ring it out. He leans against the portrait behind him in an exhausted calm, not even needing to remember to breathe, his body working without him. The ceiling is high and covered with faces. Everywhere he looks a different face. Some expressions are marboreal or stagnant as still water, others are faces you might capture at moments of enlightenment, others look like a face in the floor, some are screaming, some abandoned, some simply missing entire sections of face, but they are none of them a mask. A big breath as the Client leans forward. "I'm so ashamed that I don't have any reason to feel like this. Like by every conceivable metric I've lived a fine life, a good life. A decade of therapy with someone I respect. Years of drugs I didn't even want to take. All the fighting. The promise. All it did was bring me here. To you, to whatever this place is." The Client scratches his neck but pulls back when he feels a wetness to find his fingernails coated with a thin layer of blood. He wipes it on his pants. "All this nonstop talking and I still can't explain. I picked up my head the last two days and dumped it all out. I've sifted through everything that would come out. All of this and it's not right. It's not enough. The real me is inside here somewhere pounding on the door. He has all the answers, all the reasons. He'd be able to tell you. And me. And her. He could go to her and keep the promise. Love her and not even need the promise. It's like I'm a pinata that won't break. There's something in here I know

it. The bat keeps swinging. And I still won't break. What if beating a dead horse just means the horse feels it in its life after this. I just need to be let out. I'm not just tired, I'm done."

The Painter takes a canvas from the easel, but another remains. The back of the front canvas, reinforced with pale wood, approaches with the Painter's steps until it's in the Client's hands and the Painter's feet recede. "I'll be in the other room," the Painter says, "Why don't you say good bye."

The trick door swings around its middle and closes. He lets the quiet creep in before he turns the canvas over to see her. A new internal reservoir is tapped for tears, tears that stain the canvas and spread to the size of a train-flattened coin. Drip . . . drip . . . drip . . . The Client wipes the tears off her painted face, but the dried blood has mixed with tears, and so, while trying to clear her face, puts a bloody slash across her. He quickly wipes it off with his shirt then holds it up into the light coming in the stained-glass window. "I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm so sorry. I'll be better. I can be better. I promise. You'll see. I'm so sorry I'm so so sorry. This one is defective. I love you. I love you and I'm sorry and I—"

But the surprise of it wears off and, well, he's not talking to her; despite its skill, it's just a picture; despite the captured cherished expression she wears in the painting, she will never reply. If she were here the response would be trickier. No, maybe not. She was kind, so warm, so close. She would probably forgive him right there. I understand, she'd say, I finally actually understand, there's a piercing shrieking fire alarm constant through your body, you are infested with subcutaneous insects, you are a jack-o-lantern scooped-out and carved and the only light behind its broken smile, your blood itches, there's a canyon inside you and you're always falling, your stomach feels like it's vomiting into itself, you feel as if you've walked inside of the wall and the pressure is going to flatten you, you're inside a collapsing tunnel, dying will make you

whole, you can't have a passive hand in your life anymore, and when I asked you to promise me I had not even a tangential notion of what it meant for you, I only wanted you to promise to yourself, to live for yourself because I want you to find a way to see the person I see, to know the person I know, and to love him the way I love him; and you want to live for me because you love me down to your atoms and deeper, but you just can't do it anymore, your self's true version is right there banging on the door, let it out, I love you, let it out let it out let it out, let you out. And she'd say it like that. Just like that. Without crying.

Dust particles swarm the Client in the stained-glass mist, circling him on their way up. He stands that way until his face is dry, then props up the portrait against the stool and the wall. He walks over the path made on the floor by the window light to the easel and the standing canvas. It is of him, absent of eyes. The trick door swings open and the Painter comes in from the opposite side they left; they glide to the canvas and toss it to the floor with both hands.

"Lie on the canvas," the Painter says.

"What?"

"Down on the canvas."

"It's wet."

The Painter pauses. "Does it matter?"

The Client's cheek is cold against the paint; he digs at his neck, more blood. He wipes his hand on the canvas. He digs at his neck, painting over the panel and its bleeding.

The Client doesn't whimper as the Painter unveils the gun.

Fetal on the canvas, the Client exhales hard, making the thick paint shudder. When he looks up at the Painter with his paint-smeared face to the gun between his forehead and temple, he is asked to turn away. When his head comes to rest the Painter asks if he's ready.

The Client says yes.

There is a click.

But it is hollow and toylike, and the Client is not dead.

“Look at me.”

The Client’s head rolls up.

“This is it, however you decide.” The Painter loads the chamber of the gun. “Now.” The Client’s head rolls forward. “Do you wan—”

“YES YES END IT YE

The mirror is flecked with dried and drying bits of blood and spit.

"I fucking hate you. I fucking hate you."

Wiley, now 17, an orphan, is in the bathroom of Bath's mortuary.

"I fucking hate you. 'I fucking hate you.'"

"I FUCKING HATE YOU."

Another funeral. His Aunt Scarlet died on Wednesday, and his tie is too tight so when he screams he feels a bit strangled, and, in so many words, enjoys it some. This breaks the spell a bit, the enjoyment of being throttled. The hideous irony of having a serious moment with yourself, then something silly happens and the tension is diffused. But you're not quite finished, your libidinous anger goes limp. Wiley today is the sole speaker on the list at this funeral. M

wouldn't/couldn't/can't/(is too shy to) do it. Five funerals, five years, and all of them in January.

Maybe M's just tired of it. But her and Aunt Scarlet aka Aunt Scar aka A.S. were close, two bananas in a peel, if you excuse the image.

"I FUCKING HATE YOU."

At least his voice is back. At least he's spared the hoarseness. At least some of the fury is sustained. Watchable fury too. There's nothing more embarrassing than screaming bloody murder in a mirror and seeing someone pathetic rather than someone consumed.

"I fucking hate you."

His people are running out.

"I fucking hate you."

Something Inside

Turns out there was a human trafficking ring running out of his building's basement. He was on the fifth floor, how could he know? He should have known. Should he have known? They had been sneaking people through every Saturday, disguising them as cleaners who really did clean. He should have known. Where was the aura of debilitating soullessness he was promised to spot from media? Why were they neither rude nor friendly nor dejected, but all business? They were never the same people, not that he can remember their faces, but he had registered a change at least each time. But he couldn't have seen the change every Saturday. Must have been instances where he was vegetating or dating or seeing a friend or just busy. Saw the cleaners maybe once a month, now that he's thinking about it. Why should it be suspicious that a cleaning service has a large staff? And he was five floors up. He probably only saw one person representing this fake service a week, but the reports say there were often three at once in the building. He should have known. He could have contacted the building manager, yes? *Hi Mariann, I was just wondering, what would you estimate the staff of the cleaning service you employ to be?; it's just I never see the same person twice and, I must say, I am getting suspicious.* Should he have known? Of course he should have known. But there *are* people who lived with literal serial killers for decades and were never more than suspicious. He could have stopped it, if only he had followed his instinct. But he did follow his instinct, he realizes, running out under the near-blinding sun to the car, a car he sits in with rolled-up windows and no a/c, stifling himself in this denser heat that's heading straight for his blood to make his forearm bubble from within. He should've known. There were signs everywhere . . . it was so obvious. He had been living there five years. At least five years. 52 weeks in a year. At least 260 people in that time. Upwards of 780 souls. Five floors down. He should have known:.....his blood rushes like damwater noticing

a crack, testing for weakness:.....simmering:.....almost:..... boiling:.....hot:.....
 :hot:.....burning it's burning:.....he heads for water:.....burning:.....
 :...for water:.....burning:.....from the promontory of stone, he looks out onto
 the water mirroring his mind's weather, breeze crisp, the brief wind hand of cleansing over him,
 hardening the sheen around his eyes. He inhales when the wind breathes through him, for
 another CPR session, to feel ice inside his bones, but he's as powerless as the bending cattails
 behind him. He needs to cool his blood. A gray tide beckons. Blood too hot to touch; it bubbles
 his skin, surging toward escape. Hopping down onto the rocks, eyes no longer on the calling
 horizon, he is greeted by a wooden chest washed ashore. Knock knock on the chest. No reply,
 but it's not hollow. His blood cools slightly. Knock knock. No one. The weighty rusted lock is
 solved by a rock. He slides off the chains like the straps of the dress he was too self-conscious to
 wear in public; the one time he had resolved to wear it out, he saw one of the cleaners at work
 through the peephole and lost his conviction. He should have known. Lifting the lid of the
 waterlogged chest reveals an identical chest, chains and all. He removes the lock and chains,
 opens the lid, and here's another chest, the same chest. Another. Another. The horizon closes in
 on his feet, chest after chest. All the same. He opens a new chest inside the rest, and crawls in;
 it's a snug but comfortable space. Another chest awaits:.....In that chest is another
 chest:.....In that chest another:.....

28 March 2023

Brenda awakens with her bald head off a pillow made tall against the wall by her restless sleep-squirming. She's trained herself to get out of bed immediately, so she doesn't linger there pointlessly, where the bad feelings intensify with every moment. Up, up. Into the shower she goes, the one place she's happy to be alone.

By the window with her tea, she stares at the hole where her neighbor's tree once was; it's very much like a pulled-out tooth. Brenda can't remember the Aesop fable about the squirrel. She has read that Aesop was probably a slave at some point, but has long been comforted by the fact he probably never existed at all. Why can things we know aren't real be so sad?

She's out the back door and has to hop over a Saturnalian affair of banana slugs, engorged by the rain and slug-lust or whatever you want to call it. It's a somber day, her favorite kind.

Cracks the window on the way to work just so she can hear the hiss of the car cutting through the wet road; sticks her head out the window at a red light, breathes in the morning of a day only going to get warmer. She doesn't have to be in until later, around noonish, but sometimes she can pick up a few tasks she's minimally compensated for. And she likes the animals. Any rage she felt toward Adriana has softened the way it always does: quickly, like a lit match dropped into the lake, the breeze snuffing it out before it ever even hits the water.

As usual, the woman painting the snow leopard is here before Brenda, some friend of the owner given special treatment. No word yet on when she'll finish there. Brenda can swear sometimes she's not painting at all, but planning. Planning what, Brenda couldn't say, but there's time today to sit on the bench and be attentive to the seated woman watching the snow leopard.

For an hour the woman is idle, except for her head, which moves as if on tripod, recording every leaden step, paw to paw to paw to paw.

Talbot comes up, says hi, and asks how it was she knows Randall Blevins again, because it seemed like she knew him awfully well.

“I don’t know anyone,” Brenda says.

“If we’re going to get deep,” he says, sipping from a styrofoam cup with bite marks on the rim, “we’re going to have to wait until lunch.”

“Alright, meet you at 11 by the elephants.” And Brenda walks away, Talbot expressing some kind of issue with her suggested time. She doesn’t turn back to catch what his difficulty is.

#

It stopped raining a while ago. Our sun’s bald head pokes over the trees beyond the giraffe exhibit; the snow leopard woman brings out a canvas, small and square. She applies a thin layer of black; waiting for it to dry, she walks with the snow leopard along the cage, hands clasped behind her back—they might be partners in a scheme without the bars. Brenda hops off the bench, HAZARDOUS WASTE bin in hand, and approaches the painter, who’s sitting back down. “It’s called stereotypy, the back-and-forth thing they do, the sauntering.”

“Mm. I wouldn’t call it a saunter. Meander, maybe. Sulking, better. Moping probably best and most correct.” The painter starts applying another layer of black on the canvas. “What took you so long?” she asks.

“Took what?”

“You watched me for a while earlier, with the young man, you went away, you came back to watch. What made you come over here finally?”

“Um—”

“It’s interesting. You thought you were watching me watch the cat here, but I was watching you watch me watch the cat as well. So many levels. So many more levels, too.”

“More?”

“Of course. The cameras, the trees, and then there’s also the leopard here, watching you.” And she’s right. The leopard has stopped lapping its cage to stare at them with swamp water eyes. “What do you think it’s watching for?”

“Maybe it wants to see how you’re doing, or how the painting’s coming out.”

“Its life was denied in some way. Wasn’t it?”

“So you’re saying it’d like to do the same to me?”

The painter laughs and turns towards Brenda, about to ask her name before she sees it embroidered on her shirt, “So, Brenda, what’s your function here?”

“Is that chair rosewood?”

“Do you know of the Rabbi Zus—” she squints “—no of course not, however, Rabbi Zusya believed that, in a succeeding world, he would not be asked why he was not Moses, but why he was not Zusya.”

“Hey, how do you get a rabbi to hop around a lot?”

“Go ahead, go ahead.”

“You give him t.”

“Brenda, love, look at me.” She does. “What made you come over here finally?”

Brenda’s eyes engage with the snow leopard’s through the bars, but there’s been a reversion, she can’t say, maybe she doesn’t know, maybe—

“Well, when you figure it out,” the painter says, “come and find me. I’d love to hear why, and more about you.” The painter checks a watch with a tiny face and slim band. “You should see these creatures tackle a ram off a cliff and just . . . fall. And then get up, after plummeting a thousand feet onto a cliff as if it had been a playfight, and then there’s a meal delivered at its feet.” She checks her watch again. “Now, I believe you’re late for your lunch, yes?”

Brenda pulls out her phone and checks the time: 11:02. “How’d you know about that?”

As the woman opens her mouth to respond, the leopard unleashes a yowl that seems to trip over itself, a spike of terror that recedes like thunder. And Brenda doesn’t have it in her to ask again, so she turns to go, just as the woman begins to paint the leopard’s eyes.

Brenda turns around, “What’s your name?”

The woman responds at a volume Brenda can’t hear.

“Nice to meet you, finally,” Brenda says.

#

At the Freddie Sue Zoo you have to go to the Arctic before you get to Africa, starting with those little penguins and polar bears, beyond the snakes, primates and monkeys, over by the rhinos, where Talbot sits across from the elephants, wolfing down his lunch. He catches Brenda’s admonishing glance and, mouth full, indicates her lateness by tapping an imaginary watch, then his hunger by patting his stomach. Brenda doesn’t really care though, she wasn’t going to eat anyway. She sits beside Talbot on the bench, waiting for him to clear his mouth. The elephant looks like it’s been on earth since the beginning of time; it sucks up water from a muddy pool and sprays itself; elephants prefer a shower to a bath. Talbot’s having some serious trouble finishing his sandwich, so Brenda seizes the opportunity to say nothing, to dwell on the elephant, cement-colored, its tail flicking at flies buzzing around its behind. Aside from herself, the

elephant is her favorite animal in here. Something primordial about elephants. It's a shame they weren't chosen by evolution over humans. They're trustworthy, reassuring, you can see it in their eyes. And they're polite. Now, if an elephant can be polite, why can't everything else. The elephant walks away, whipping its tail. Talbot's finished and is soliloquizing about something she doesn't hear, too spacy, too mired in her thoughts of elephants stomping around the earth throughout its history, suing for peace here, there, everywhere, things starting to get difficult after Pangea begins to go its separate ways.

“—so I don't know why I said it. But I was telling her about how snakes will elongate, straighten up, side by side with whatever they're trying to swallow to see if it will fit inside them, which I think is this incredibly interesting fact. And she's like, ‘*Uhhhh*, you didn't know that?’ And I'm just sitting there agape like, how in the hell could I tell you if I didn't know already?” An elephant with a penis benefits greatly from that penis's prehensility; together with the trunk, there's no part of the elephant's undercarriage that suffers long from scratchiness. Luckily done with lunch, Talbot notices the elephant scratching its stomach. “Speaking of snakes.”

Brenda snaps out of the daydream. “Have you ever ridden one?”

“Excuse me? Ridden what?”

“OH!” She takes a moment to snort laugh. “Sorry, an elephant.”

“Nah, think I'd feel weird. Like using it. And also I've seen people pull themselves up by like the elephant's ear, plus I always get this vision of the ear ripping off as the person uses it to pull themselves up, like there's a perforated edge there.”

Conversation dulls between them for the first time. Brenda takes the top off her bucket and reaches in to pull out a book.

“Hey, you have like what, a book suppository in there?” Talbot asks.

“Depository. Book depository.”

“What’d I say?”

“Suppository, which would be if you delivered medicine rectally.”

“Oh, yeah, I had to do that once.”

“Ooooooh. For what?”

“No, don’t get excited,” Talbot shaking his head, “not for me, for an elephant actually. Internship.”

“Alright, so, you think it’s presumptuous to ride an elephant but not, uh—” Brenda makes a circle with her left hand and shoves her right arm through it up to her armpit.

“Well, one’s for pleasure, one’s a necessity.”

Brenda makes a face and holds up her hands, “Not even going to ask which is which.” The elephant starts scratching again. “Damn, that thing could strangle a marmot.”

“You’re gross, you know that?”

A mom/son set strolls over and leans against the elephant's wooden fence, which itself surrounds another fence that makes up the cage.

“A lot of like animal-based mugs, the whale or the elephant, use the long parts of the animal for the handle. The whale ones use the tail, the elephant ones use the trunk, but apparently they could use something else if they really wanted. That’s actually not a bad ship to send into the bachelorette-party space.”

“I’d invest.” Talbot dunks his lunch trash into the garbage and hands Brenda a dollar bill. She takes it. They walk over to the elephant fence, into what is supposed to be an educational conversation.

“Mom, is a bear more like a dog or a cat?” The little boy’s insect-bordered name tag says Isaac.

She hides her confusion well. “That’s an elephant, sweetie.”

”I know. But elephants don’t eat meat. So they’re not a dog. But I don’t know what a bear is. I think humans are closer to dogs than cats. Humans are—”

“Primates, very good,” she says, head bobbling.

“Primates are not my favorite animals though.”

“Animal, sweetie, animal.”

“That’s what I said.”

“Right, it’s animal—AN-I-MAL. But other than that, I think people are closer to elephants than dogs,” she gives a long exhale, “more noble.”

Brenda’s been waiting for an opportunity to butt in, “Humans are even closer to rats!”

Mom’s a bit miffed. “That’s disgusting. That’s not true, honey.”

“But it is. Rabbits and rats. And you’re closer to a fungus than a fungus is to plants.”

“Don’t listen to her sweetie. She may be fungus, but you’re a wolf. A lion.”

“And yet still closer to a rat.” Brenda makes a rat face and the fhuh fhuh fhuh sound, giving Isaac the giggles. “And to answer your question, bears are more closely related to—”

“You’re a real asshole, you know.” Miffed indeed the mom is. “Don’t talk to my kid. You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Now it’s Talbot’s turn to butt in, “Actually a bear’s closest ancestor with a cat is over 50 million years ago. Then they split off. But with a dog it’s a little less, like 45 million years ago!”

Brenda’s happy to finally hear Isaac say, “Woah.”

Talbot's emoting sympathy, but he has to deliver the bad news, "And, she's right, we're a lot closer to rats than dogs or cats."

Isaac puts up his hands as little rat paws and dons the rat face Brenda just used to fhuh fhuh fhuh at his mom. He turns to Talbot. "Bears actually run a lot like a walrus. What about them?"

"Bears are definitely closer to them."

"And you look like a wolf!" Isaac says, pointing.

Mother is most miffed again, "These people imprisoned these animals without their consent, like grandma does with her birds."

Isaac looks like he may never smile again. "Oh, that makes me sad."

"Me too, sweetie, that's why you shouldn't listen to them."

"But they work for the zoo," confused Isaac says.

"They are jailers and abusers, honey."

"But . . . why do you know more than the zoo people?"

"You have to listen to me. I don't want to hear any ifs, ands, or buts—"

Isaac turns his back to his mom, "You don't want to hear any butts?" Sadly, he can't quite get the fart out to complete his joke.

"I swear, if you don't stop I'll leash you again."

"Jesus christ, don't be leashing your kid," Brenda can't help but say.

"You have no idea what it's like to raise a kid like this. You can raise your kids how you want, but keep your tiny little facehole zipped." She looms right up over Brenda's face, and speaks breathily into her ear, "My child is not a rat."

"One of the things about being short," Brenda says, "I can see all of your nose hair."

“AHHHHHHH” the mother screams in Brenda’s face, but out of fear, not anger. During all this, Isaac has climbed over the fence into the elephant paddock. Brenda’s quick to action; she vaults over the fence, reaches top sprint speed, and deftly scoops up Isaac well before he ever gets to the electrified fence. The mother leashes him and walks away without a thank you, a sorry, anything. She covers her nose as she leaves, her curses muffled and distorted by her palm as she shields any potentially visible nose hairs.

#

Talbot and Brenda are still by the elephant. Time passes. In Brenda’s mind, elephants stomp through time, one leading with a baton. Yes, time passes. She’s not sure what breaks her out of her daydream, “I’ve been thinking about what you asked, why I do this here.”

“Yeah, it’s pretty weird.”

“I don’t think it is. I’ve been thinking about it. And I actually have something to say.”

“You might have to say it, but I don’t need to hear it.” Talbot wants to shove the words back into his mouth.

“But you said—”

“. . . I did. You’re right. Go ahead. Sorry, I do that sometimes.”

“Full moon tonight.”

“Funny. So what’d you come up with? Why are you here?”

It’s hard to translate soupy feeling stuff to words, but Brenda tries. “I think that’s where a lot of problems come into play. Some of it is just how I feel; I just feel like a product, um, reduced; and I don’t mean it like oh, I am a product, we are all products, they monetize our data, tendencies, history, and then they sell you back to yourself without the friends and family discount.” Brenda remembers she has a shirt of herself—okay, not herself, herself inside Yetta,

inside the costume. “If I could tell you what’s wrong, or communicate with you, I would, but I can’t, it’s like she said, um, some ballerina, don’t remember, she said, ‘If it could be said, I wouldn’t have danced.’ I don’t know, I think doing this feels like I’m giving my soul a voice.” Embarrassment setting in. But embarrassed by what? That’s just how she feels. Talbot is silent. And so is she. The embarrassment, however, has a megaphone in hand. “Sorry, let’s talk about something else.”

Pretty clear that Talbot’s been wanting to ask for some time, “Do you know Simone Biles?”

“Everyone always asks that. I was too old. I’m six years and twen—and like, I don’t know, twenty-eightish days older than her.”

“Sorry, just figured. She’s the only gymnast I know . . . But hey, I’m happy you found a way to do that, the soul thing. Just, you’re going to have to find something else eventually. If I got two seconds to help out my future self, I try to use them. How are you doing that? What’s next, I guess.”

“Nothing. I’m stuck on something else. All these people walking around pretending to be perfect, demanding something be perfect. All these things that pop onto my screen, into my inbox and sightline without asking for it. It’s just going the wrong way. I just need to know that like there are other people out there who will acknowledge that each of us is a fucked-up person, that we need to charitably interpret each other, give leeway to my fucked-upness and yours, and, yeah, even the woman disinforming and leashing her kid.”

“I’m sure they’re out there,” Talbot says.

Brenda laughs; it’s like Talbot didn’t even consider himself.

Renee and Dr. Decora enjoy a pleasant evening together. The kids are off somewhere. Delon seems to be on the upswing. Dinner was fantastic as always. And they're in the middle of a particularly good season of a high-quality detective drama. Dr. Decora's tea is asteam when the phone rings, so he figures he'll get it, but Renee's up before his decision is made. She doesn't dance over to the landline exactly, but Dr. Decora always sees her dancing somehow, the fluidity of her movements, the grace with which she moves through all spaces.

"It's for you. Donald Anka?"

Dr. Decora takes the phone with a raised eyebrow. "Hello?"

"Hi, Dr. Decora, Son'yr yes?"

"Yes that's right, speaking."

"This is Donald Anka. We have—I believe we have a mutual acquaintance in young Mons Wright-Ulven."

"Yeah, practically lives here. But if you're looking for him—"

"Oh no, nothing like that. I simply felt compelled to apprise you of a situation Mons and your son Ty have stumbled into—nothing urgent or unlawful, mind, that is, unless they don't declare it on their taxes . . ."

"Excuse me? Taxes?"

"I'll get to that . . . uh well, Mons and Ty seem to have ran a bit of a grift on some of the members here at the country club . . . for rather high stakes I must say."

"Oh hell I was wondering why those two started golfing." Renee looks up from her meditation here.

"Quite, Dr. Decora. You're on the right track, actually. But it's not that they were hustling golf or even playing for money . . . they went for a bit of a bigger score."

“Score?”

“They’ve been hanging around quite a bit, getting involved with the prop betting scene here at the club, an atmosphere I’ve tried my best to curtail believe you me. But all of this happened directly under my nose.”

“Alright, but isn’t it a little cold for golf?”

“Again, quite, Dr. Dr. Decora. They began with the usual prop bet shenanigans. For instance, one of them would wager they could go from one end of the room to the other without touching the floor, and one of them would piggyback the other across the Great Room’s floor. Another time, well, let’s just say that they were rather successful shearing the sheep, but I fear now that they’ve killed it.”

“So what did they do?”

“Apologies for my longwindedness. It’s just the damndest thing. So the two of them have been a breath of fresh air, a real injection of vivacity, so I have to, club rules, ban them both from the club. However, since they’re both underage, it means, again, club rules, that I have to ban both sets of parents from the club.”

“Well I don’t care abo—”

“Oh we waived the ban, I wouldn’t normally, but appearances and all, I couldn’t very well waive the ban on Vera but not the Decoras.”

“Alright, that’s wonderful, I’ll be up at the next Polo fundraiser in a bowtie and straw hat. Mr. Anka, please, what did the boys do?”

“Why do I keep getting away from that? So sorry Dr. Decora. But your boys seem to have, and this is not my word mind you, *swindled* some of our members, some of our most influential members—”

“But, and don’t be modest, are you not the most influential of the members?”

“That may be true in a manner of speaking. Which is why no charges will pressed and, and I know this means very little to you, you retain good-standing with the club.”

“Well, boy howdy, Don, that’s terrific news.”

“I have gotten away from it haven’t I? It was a funny little scheme they pulled. And they followed the words to the letter.”

“And you said swindled.”

“The sum was over twenty-five thousand dollars I believe.”

“Oh jesus christ have them give it back. They’ll give it back.”

“No need no need, I spoke to all involved parties and they admitted their reputation was worth more than the lost capital.”

“They’ll give it back. But Don, seriously now, what in the hell did those two do?”

“They’ve been playing a lot of golf. Well, not really, They’ve been practicing driving a lot. And Mons is known around the club to have an excellent drive already, but he started telling people that Ty had an even better one. And after some conversation it was suggested by one of the boys that Ty could hit a ball over a mile. Well there was some gabbing back and forth and a beard was kidded about, a certain silliness noted when one eats soup, what have you, and money started flying around, proud men wounded over the things that made them what they are. Anyway they were all surprised when Mons and Ty boarded ‘The Truck,’ as it’s known around here—”

“I know it well.”

“Well the boys wave them all on to come follow them of course. We had a caravan leaving the club. All late-season ferraris and the like, all following ‘The Truck.’ A sight to

behold. They brought them about an hour north, these kids, and the men they were engaged with were in such a tilt (or perhaps enthralled by illegal substance) that they followed them the whole time. But the boys had found a spot on Lake Ontario that had clean frozen over, and well, you can guess from here, Ty teed up an orange golf ball, set it amidst all that ice, and hit about the farthest drive any of them had seen. And it rolled and rolled and rolled well over a mile. So the club members had to pay up . . . Dr. Decora I hardly think laughing is— . . . well, I guess [laughs], I guess [laughs harder] . . . those fucking kids.”

Strangely, I've found that leaving the knife out, blade open, I am less likely to do it.

Something about it would feel unfinished as a gesture. In every instance of the event I can imagine, the knife is taken from a private place and opened with due care, glinting only then, my reflection there only then. It must be done ceremoniously, commensurate with the beginning, a force that begins as well as ends. Now I wonder if I should leave the knife there, open. It's been a suppressant. A suicide prophylactic. Seeing the blade sharp and ready . . . it says nothing about the future. There is no event, or at least if there is the event has already begun. But to put it back? To leave the knife? To live or to help myself die. All very Hamlet, isn't it. Who needs to see Hamlet again? I am being coy with a decision when the decision is obvious and rounds out both tidiness and the more serious urges, the thinking urges. I'm going to put it away.

So he's dead. That stupid fucker. That fucking asshole. Claire's been saying it all day. He's dead, that fucker.

No autopsy. Wasn't a need. Purely accidental.

Claire thinks that's bullshit. Claire knows what happened. He did. He found a way.

He thought he was so good at disguising the pain, but she saw it. She knew it even before she saw his trove of attempted suicide notes. *What the fuck are these Ralph?* He was writing, he said. *Writing fucking what.* Ralph didn't even write his own routines or guest spots or video matter. *Write what, Ralph? Write what?* Death notes. That's what. She doesn't believe for a quarter of a second that it was accidental. *Incidental*, maybe. But there's no chance, no shot, no way that he didn't like orchestrate it. Which amounts to the same exact thing. He's dead. Never again will he drive the bus, never don his green jacket, never put his hand to the side of her head and kiss her, never have to wonder if she genuinely loved him because of the spoon thing. Because he's dead. He's dead. *Ralph is dead.* His name now is bile to her. She knows it was intentional. He promised he wouldn't. But it didn't mean he couldn't arrange it. *Christ I sound like I'm on a detective show.* She's not just paranoid? Right? She's not just crazy. Well, right now, she's not just sane. Because he's dead. And he'd be alive if he hadn't killed himself. The police didn't want to hear it. Her mother didn't want to hear it. Her friend, devout about true crime, was very interested, but Claire didn't want to talk to this friend about it. She was a hundred percent though. He was dead. He killed himself. Ralph. *Why did you do this?* She's not just looking for a way out of the truth. She wasn't talking about body snatching, or cloning, she's talking about one death against another. He's dead—she would not argue. So she'll play detective. And so what if she's wrong. All she'll have wasted is time. But where does she start? His phone for one, because he trusted her more than he was careful, she knows. And his phone

opens right up with the code, her birthday. He was so sappy. She'd never make her code his birthday. Fucking Ralph. He's dead. But what's this now? . . .

She's been realizing she believes in love, but only because she doesn't believe in it. If she doesn't love what she cannot believe in, she's taking a stance. There's an awarenessness of something, something to not believe in, and is that evidence of something?

Anyway, she believes in love since Ralph died. And she's remembering, scrolling through his gallery, that he was her greatest photographer. He made the light find her somehow in every shot. He said he didn't have to do anything, that it was natural. More lovey Ralph bullshit. The type of man who would never tell her when she looked bad, because to him she never did. Aggravating. Annoying. Unhelpful. And he's dead. Ralph is dead now. She'll find nothing on this phone, except herself, and she guesses by *herself* she means him, and when did so much of her become him, and has all that died with Ralph too? Because Ralph's dead now. And now so much of her.

From her second floor window she sees people walking in the crisp afternoon; there's an abnormal number of them in red coats on the street. Red isn't a color she'd expect to see so much of. *What color is the wall? Taupe. Why am I asking that?*

It's okay. She's okay. Ralph is dead. Not her. *He's dead.*

Some of the persons walking down the street hold the hand of another person. This has the expected effect on Claire. She denies an impulse to throw a chair through the window, but does not resist another to knock it over with such tepid force that she's annoyed by how blandly it falls to the floor. She picks it up just to knock it over again. Picks the chair up, knocks it over. Picks it up. Knocks it over.

You stupid fucking asshole, Ralph.

Picks it up. Knocks it over.

The Letter

Emma, my sweet Emma.

[illegible]

28 March 2023

Sometimes you're just on. You can't miss. The life you want to lead is expressed in your performance; all the preparation allows for automatic connection between the now and the then. Go ahead, throw a flip in, do an extra twist at the end. You are all three forms of matter, an instrument of grace itself, pointed at the audience to render spellbound. Your only limitation is what you can think up. You don't need to worry that the handle you've grabbed every other instance of your routine is not replaced. This is a performance that will fix everything, take the outside life you've been squandering and bring it in, right here, fingertip-close, and fulfill it, connect it to this moment always, so that it's enveloped periodically, centered, as you roll through life, forming an indelible connection that you can eventually let hang from your necklace's chain, a charm, a chance, a kind of fulfillment.

When you're in the zone you don't notice the man whose ass is not just flat but concave. You cannot see the couple kissing with total focus, hard, their faces rolling, pivoting over each other's noses, the way macaws might make out . . . you don't notice the child instinctively covering their face and recoiling at their grandparent's coughing fit, as if in a high wind. No, the zone does not recognize such things. They might as well not exist. Not until Brenda leaps and ZAP, a bolt of lightning down her spine shudders her completely and recoils her outstretched hand. She misses the ledge with her left hand, too soon, and, as she falls closer, bashes her head against the side of the ledge. She flails for something to grab, slips, and clutches the finale's ledge by what must look like the orangutan's wrist. The mystical zone evaporates. Those hushed audience members watching with tight fists ignite into gasps, covered faces, closed eyes that carefully, slowly, open against will. Hanging by her fingers, Brenda hears a little girl shouting the most encouraging phrase her vocabulary allows, addressing Yetta, Brenda's nom de orangutan;

the high frequency of the voice pierces through various sounds of inhalation, the spilling of the vendor's hot nuts onto the ground, and Brenda's pounding heart. The kind of anti-presence the zone provides, the mystical negafocus sensation of watching herself from afar, inverts into a kind of total social and spatial awareness of a throbbing fighting body that has spontaneously transformed into lead. She hangs there on the ledge, brain booming, pores opening. Four fingers on the ledge. Below, twenty feet or so, concrete lightly lined with artificial jungle floor awaits. It doesn't help that her mouth is filled with vomit and an orangutan mouthguard. Three fingers on the ledge. Tries to close her throat so the vomit doesn't seep down. Too late. Her blood itches. Reach inside and scratch it out. Reach inside and scratch it out. Two fingers on the ledge. Holding dead weight. Her left arm is too short to reach. Two fingers on the ledge. She may be inside the orangutan, but who is inside each of these people watching . . . what the hell are you talking about Brenda? Don't you fucking dare, Brenda, don't you fucking dare fall. Two fingers on the ledge, she stiffens her thumb against the wall, kicks her high-traction orangutan slipper against it and—

She gets just enough air to grab the ledge with her left hand, then quickly with her right, stabilizing until she can pull up the rest of her. Brenda collapses onto the fruit platter, regurgitates in her mask, and rolls into the safety of her secret room, the crowd positively roaring.

#

Every time she goes out of her way to watch something with dinner, someone in the thing she's watching is either urinating or defecating. Or spitting. Throwing up. Some kind of emission. It's been quite a bad streak of it really, 2-3 weeks at least.

Sometimes she's about to fall asleep and—she's pretty sure that her go-to washcloth got smaller every time she washed it—right in the middle of a pointless thought comes a ZAP.

Since she ceased and desisted the meds it's the same picture: the lightning. A fevered scratching on her brain. It was some dry storm driving in Kansas for some tournament, event, something. The prairie was hushed with anticipation, the sky purple, her mom and Adriana were discussing Oz while Coach drove, strangling the wheel. Only the strike of lightning lingers when the rest fades, when there's a jolt down her spine. Zap. It would sometimes take the form of a hand and reach from below her medicated stupor, out of the fog, take her by the throat, and clench . . . And why must she be constantly visited by dreams? They're getting more intricate all the time. Like the rest of her life, she keeps expecting some sort of clarity from these dreams in retrospect, a final stitching to bring all of it together, for it to mean something, to have all these thousands and millions of thoughts conglomerate like a school of fish and kindly point in some direction, swim somewhere she can follow. But of course . . . no. It's hard to not buy into your own bullshit. But the more you learn about the world the more you want to retreat into yourself . . . Zap. She misses her early days at the zoo, when she was in a sort of lustful relationship with serenity; the notion that it was temporary had to be held under water, but she was never able to drown it fully. Mastery becomes boredom, bloomed flowers are ripped from the soil of your mind after a light rain, new socks become old socks and eventually you're left with the sense that you are an observer of the world and no longer a participant. For the rest of the day you feel as if you are merely a visitor to this reality, peeking in, invisible, still very much an inhabitant of the world you were priorly immersed in, only to accept the very next day it is very much the opposite, and you crash into a jarring welcome back. You have to accept it, because after a while the drugs stop working, and you need higher and higher dosages, and eventually you're there with this pile of pills the size of a just-plowed superstore snowpack that'll still be melting well into spring. You get the sense that you're here only to endure, you have seen the road and the

map and the entire way promises pain, and you have accepted it, selected it with full knowledge of what's to come, and it sinks way down into the blood and circulates throughout the body and skull and you arrive at last to the *oh well* moment, the *fuck it* moment, the *hold your breath and jump* moment. You appear there like the urge to veer off the highway in the dark and just

smash

into the guardrail. The tricky part about these moments is that you arrive at them blindfolded. You are taken from the trunk and stood up to embrace them or erase them, without a moment to plan, and at such a terrible speed. Before you've thought about your decision you've already made it. It happened without your say-so, without even a courtesy warning. You've made this terrible split second decision and—Zap.

Another dream to endure . . . a dentist with hooks for hands, detachable, unscrewed by an assistant, two assistants, one for each hand, those gleaming *instruments*, that horrific drilling.

#

An irritating thing about dreams is that sometimes you wake up from a good one, and you're left with the difference.

Groggy, she reaches for her phone and—her meds have found their way up to the nightstand again. She gives them a maraca shake all the way to the kitchen, where she lets in the morning light, drawing the drapes, and then, lifting the window, twittering of so many birds, a kind of static, a fuzzy tv. She eases the remaining half of an everything bagel into the toaster and is entranced briefly by a gathering of snails at the top of her neighbor's fence post. In a random class she took to be a florist, or was it mycological consultant? something she took for something . . . it was a course about parasites. In it, she learned of the green-banded broodsac, a flatworm that takes over the brain of snails and drives the snail like a go-kart up to high places where they

are promptly devoured by birds, and the plan the whole time here is for the flatworm to release its eggs into this bird's intestines so the bird will do what birds do: disseminate seeds and avian waste and, on occasion, prospective broodsacs. Brenda's thinking that's what's going on with the neighbor's fence post anyway.

#

Call her changeling. Eventually your tics are no longer quirky and charming. So you swing on to your next self. But there's something stuck about it, something that made her feel like each time she became a different person the new entity was a new branch, not a new tree. Just a new branch to swing to, and old branches to break. Around and around and around the same tree. Maybe the solution is not to uproot, it's not to grow another limb, maybe it's to turn yourself into a lightning rod, burn yourself down to make room for another, give it room to sun, room to soak its roots.

Room to—

Hey Talbot.

Hey Talbot.

"Hey Talbot." She recognizes him only by his weird hunchy walk. Getting closer now, she can tell something's wrong. He doesn't look like him. His face was erased and it's balder now than her head. It's always weird for someone to reveal their face and it doesn't match the way it autocompleted in your mind. *Why do you look like this? You don't look like this.* She takes her hands and makes fists in the beard she doesn't have, "How long did this take you?"

"Two minutes. Brought out the orbital sander. What are you doing?"

"Just talking to myself."

"Fun . . . Hey, I'll see you at lunch. Big Boss wants to see me about something."

"The Hoss Boss."

“The boss thisssssss wide across.”

“He is. He’s almost transparently thin. If I knew him a little bit better I’d say something.”

“Why?”

“I mean I have this, like, recurring conundrum where I respect someone too much to lie to them, but also not enough to tell them the truth.”

“Why would you say anything at all is my question.”

“Because I—”

“Sorry, gotta go,” Talbot says. A few strides later he yells, “Elephants, lunch,” over his shoulder as he runs into the tiger mouth entrance, newly painted, the mouth echoing just a bit as he passes through.

#

Where is the leopard lady? No chair. No canvas. She’s always here. Not once has Brenda come into the zoo without seeing the painter. Where was she? What if she had fallen downstairs with her arms full of paints and canvases and her head was spiked on the javelin point of the newel post of the stairs, and her head is dripping blood onto a white carpet covered in lightning strikes of spilled paint and she’s writhing with her head stuck on the post and drip . . . drip . . . drip . . . Brenda sometimes slips into these panicked lines of thought, invariably morbid and dread-inducing . . . like, what if *he* had lived? this one happens a lot: *he*. Her body gets tased with disquiet as if there is an impending agent out there working to kidnap her from this timeline and smuggle her to another, one where *he* had lived, and the conjured anxiety grows, beat by beat, almost an exponential spreading as she idles around, in the shower, while driving, meditating, wondering about the life she would be having if *he* had lived, and terror pours into her body. Where is the leopard lady? Excluding off days, Brenda has watched her from the bear

bench, the bear pulling her in for a hug, the colors of the woman's paint becoming liquid smoke in the glass she dips her brushes in. Brenda's sat through all kinds of artist phases a few minutes here and there, watching the woman watch the leopard stride, not bothering to form any kind of relationship with the leopard, just imagining it as something else, another thing to draw *inspiration* from. Inspiration. An interesting choice of word, inspiration, instead of, well, maybe something like exploitation.

She hates living through these scenarios that feel inevitable but are in fact impossible. They introduce her to a horror within herself that seems to hollow her out, fixating on monsters under the bed like when she was seven. It feels so close; not just possible, but imminent. Somehow a knob might be given a turn and she'll walk into a life she would choose to abstain from. Sometimes Brenda feels as though she can revisit past events and manipulate them in such a way that everything is different. She can take a branch from one of these decision trees and follow it for years, and there's the interminable sensation that this is a plan and not a fantasy, because these things she cannot change feel so so easy to adjust, so easy to turn the dial on and live in as the moment could have been, should have been; changing her history requires only a little personal propaganda, a little self-denial, a little delusion. She is so scared of the person she might have been, that person who cannot say no to her instincts, a person who runs fights fucks runs, using each moment, each now, as an excuse to be brought out to sea on a tide of hormones. Where is the leopard lady?

#

And where the hell's Talbot? She even brought him lunch today. Brenda's not going to eat an entire additional chickpea salad sandwich. Where the hell is everybody all the time?

Gone are the days she would bring in a sign to wherever she was working to answer the questions of coworkers; someone would say good morning and she'd hold up her Good Morning sign, an index card and a popsicle stick; someone would tell her to have a good day and she'd hold up the You Too sign; someone would say good afternoon to her and she'd hold up her Good Morning sign; how many was she really going to carry around? But now that there's no sign to hold up? Now that what she has to look forward to is counting heads in a crowd, heads that after a while all wear the same face? Or is there another problem? She opens up the ground for others, but does she ever let herself fall? Loosen the grip and let herself fall? Let herself

fall? The orangutan can. It could sit there cross-legged all day as long as it had some termites on a stick. Just do nothing. Take a stick and entice some termites. Rock a bit. Back and forth. Tip yourself back while you're at it; relax. Who knows what's down there, Brenda? Maybe you should head on down, check it out. But you can't jump, Brenda. You won't go anywhere. You have to let yourself fall.

Brenda,

just let yourself

fall.

#

Sometimes the only thing you can do is go out there and be another person. Yesterday's close call necessitates a little different, and maybe a little more, preparation. All routines start in preparation. It's the only way you can set yourself up to perform. What do you do when you fuck up? Continue the routine. Everything's perfect. Better, roll with it; act like it was part of the routine.

She shot herself in the foot with Hubris's arrow last time. That's step one. Alright, she fucked up. She has fucked up many times. Brenda thinks of it more as relieving the tension of a coiled spring than outright failure, than actually fucking up too bad. If anything, she should be applauded for keeping it all together, making no embarrassing reveal, keeping the mask on to keep the charade going. Step two: make sure it doesn't happen again. Talbot never showed for lunch, so she has plenty of time to compose herself. She revisits the fundamentals; her body here does most of the work. Breathing exercises definitely need to be checked up on in the meantime. That Zap yesterday seems to have fried much of her circuitry. It feels so good to stretch, to breathe deeply and breathe with purpose, to make necessary repairs. She puts the kettle on in the little kitchen area she negotiated for herself at the beginning of all this. She meditates, though not deeply, waiting for the stovetop to scream. Goes back to meditating while the tea steeps. Let there be nothing. Then let there be hot tea.

E's last stand-up performance, Blue Cross Arena

“One of the worst things about getting famous was meeting so many of the people I’ve masturbated to.” The lights are hot, lush. The hometown crowd has shown up in force. “I would always go up to them to shake their hand with my right hand and be like, ‘nice to meet you-ewww, sorry I just realized...’ and then when they gave me the look you’d expect I’d say, ‘Just kidding I actually use this hand.’” Hometown crowds always laugh. Support is natural, especially when you’ve been active in the community. “But nah, I don’t actually masturbate. No pre-marital sex either. I just wait for the Lord to get me off. That’s what a nocturnal emission is. A blowjob from Jesus.”

Someone from the crowd, “TELL THE KING KONG JOKE.” More beseechers from the crowd agree, “KING KONG KING KONG KING KONG.”

They always want the King Kong joke, but generally only the Rochester crowd gets it, after all, that’s where it was first told, and E, though the joke is tired and wholly jejune, feels a compulsion to acknowledge it as almost an historical relic. “We’ll get to the King Kong joke in a bit. You know I won’t leave you all hanging. But let’s not be too hasty. That got me in trouble earlier. I was driving over here, and I almost hit this kid crossing the road. And I could just hear my mother,

‘You can’t do anything right, of course you missed. One simple kid and you can’t even hit it. Pathetic.’”

E doesn’t think this is funny, but they’re a little drunk, a little high, a little otherwise, and the crowd will laugh at anything. “But I treat my own son a little better. Yet I somehow still had CPS called on me.”

Ahhhhhhh the crowd drones. “The investigator showed up and said I had been reported, that my neighbors heard constant crying and bleating and calls for help. And I had to say it, I had to say ‘yeah, that sounds right, but my son is imaginary, so I can beat him as hard as I want. Little fucker.’”

The crowd is once again accommodating. E doesn’t bother to get dark in most other venues, but they’re honoring how it all started.

“Before I got here I was pulled over, which is why I failed to hit that kid earlier and why I was late. So, sorry about that. But the cop tries to give me a ticket, so I do the first thing I can think of, I show him my tits. And let’s just say he wasn’t all that impressed. So I think okay okay, what else can I do, so I tell him that I won’t report him the next three times I see him pummeling a citizen. But he gets this saucy little glint in his eye, and is like, ‘fine, okay, why don’t you get out of the car.’ So he’s got two more pummelings left. He basically paid \$150 to beat the shit out of me. And I’d never have someone pay to beat the shit out of me before. But I had to do this gig for free, so if anyone’s interested, come see me after the show.”

Someone from the crowd again asks for the King Kong joke.

E laughs, “But I just started.”

KING KONG KING KONG KING KONG KING KONG KING KONG. The entire arena is chanting now. KING KONG KING KONG KING KONG.

“Oh christ, who am I to say no.”

Applause.

“But you’ve really built it up now, so don’t blame me when it falls flat . . . shit, do I even remember it, now . . .”

BOOOOOOOOO BOOOOOO but it’s all in fun, the audience can tell E’s fucking with them.

“So, it’s a pretty tough economy right now . . .” WOOOOOOOOOO “and I must have applied to 457 jobs or something, I was really digging for anything, bottom of the barrel shit, cleaning up shit, I didn’t care. Rejection rejection rejection—but look at this face, I gotta be used to that.

“But lo! I finally got a call back. So now I’m a housekeeper for King Kong. Last night was garbage night, and wow, this dude generates serious amounts of waste. When I get up to his penthouse, the kitchen and dining room are just covered in garbage bags. I go to take out the first one and the bag starts like popping, like there’s a school of salmon trying to jump out of it. And so I yelled into the other room where he was working, ‘Hey King, what’s in these garbage bags?

‘Garbage bags? I’ve been using those as condoms.’”

And for a moment there is a silence that the words cut through, “SHIT JOKE, FAGGOT.”

There’s a looney tunes gunshot. E falls to the floor of the stage.

A screen from the back of the stage falls down. Giant words are projected on it that say:
WORDS HURT YOU KNOW.

E, still on the ground, puts the mic to their mouth and says, “and those ones nearly killed me.”

E has to hand it to the hometown crowd. They boo the fuck out of the guy.

“Oh no,” E says, standing up, “not a heckler in the hometown. Will the spotlight help me track this guy down?” The light scans over the crowd, but all in play, for a member of the audience is pointing directly with two hands at the heckler from behind.

If one chooses to live by the heckle, one must be prepared to die by the heckle. If your comment does not upstage the performance, it is likely that you, the commenter, will become the performance.

“Alright, so who dragged us back to the oughts and called me a faggot?” Lights pan, the heckler looks around as if he’s just as curious as everyone else, but, with now three people pointing at him, his date(?) included, shielding her eyes and looking down, there is very little doubt who the culprit is. “Out of all the things to say. Just boo me next time . . . can we get a mic over to the heckler’s date please?” E grabs a backup mic, turns it on, and hands it to the first row of the audience, who surfs it over to the woman with the fire-truck-red face. “Hi heckler’s date. So sorry to do this. But I have to ask, did you ask him to go here, or did he ask you?”

“I suggested it, I’m sorry, I had no idea he’d—”

“Oh I’m not blaming you, don’t worry, don’t worry. But it’s always the plus-ones, isn’t it? They can’t help it. Say, what’s your name by the way?”

“Theresea.”

“Alright, Theresea, do you mind handing the mic over to the heckler. Well, actually, first, what’s his name?”

“Um, it’s—it’s Mike.”

“Well pass the mic over to him, if you please.” Mike, rather crestfallen, takes it.

“Mike Mike Mike. Do you mind saying that again, Mike?” Mike is silent, watching his palms. “Go ahead, Mike, call me a faggot. You’ve done it before. Say it. No? Well hand it back to Theresa.” He does. “Theresea, just one more question, where does Mike work?” She hesitates. “Mike, why don’t you say it again? Call me a faggot, Mike. Grab the microphone and say it.”

“HE WORKS AT—” but the mic is cut off.

E smiles.

“Thank you Theresea. And all you lip readers out there, don’t spoil it please.” Mike gets out of his chair and makes his way out of the venue to much booing. “Oh Mike you don’t have to

leave. I'm done, I'm done! After all, sticks and stones, right Mike? Or, I guess in your case, faggots and stones? Mike! MIKE COME BACK. MIKE!"

Next to the pine tree, in the dark, is a house with but a single room lit. The streetlights make the grass almost blue, and the driveway look wet. The man does not bother to ring the doorbell because he knows where the spare key is. His first footsteps into the house arrive in the kitchen and echo down the hall, making the house seem vacant. But it is not. There is a little boy behind a locked door. The man, however, knows the trick with this door is to shake it with vigor for a moment, then it is as unlocked as you like. The little boy is five years old. He is crying, after a long day of crying. Today, for the first time, this boy thought about killing himself, or, at the very least, thought about wanting to die. The man says, Hi Emil, and sits next to the boy on the floor. The boy, crying softly, rocks back and forth, his hands holding his thin arms, his eyes closed.

Emil, the man says. Emil, I'm here; it's safe.

Emil hums to himself. Hmmmmmm hmmmmmmmmmm hmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm.

Emil, it was hard today I know.

The wood floor is a shade darker than the man remembered. Light makes a sharp shape into the hall off the door. The man leans against the wall and stretches his legs out, crossing them at the ankles. Emil scoots over into the blue wall and holds himself at the knees, rocks.

It hurt today, Emil says. It hurt all day. It still hurts.

What did Dad hit you with?

Stick.

Tell him to use the wrench next time, he loves that.

It was really hard today. Not because of that.

The man puts his arm around Emil and huddles him close. I know, the man says, I remember.

How do you do it? How do you make it not hurt?

I don't know. But that's why I'm here.

The stick doesn't hurt as much as this. Neither does the antenna.

I know, Emil. Do you want to talk about it?

I just hurt. I hurt. And it's dark. It's very dark. It's very dark like under the bed at night.

Where was Mom today? The man asks.

I don't know. She hasn't been here in a long time.

She does that.

I wish she wouldn't. She always comes back though.

Sure she does.

You're lying. I always know. Emil, against the wall, seems to spasm briefly, whimpers, winds up to bash the back of his head against the wall. His attempt is intercepted by the man.

You don't have to hurt yourself.

I want it to stop.

It doesn't stop that way.

When I hurt myself it hurts less.

It does, doesn't it.

Yeah.

Emil snuffles, and snuggles up to the man, getting snot all over the man's clothes. The man notices, but does not care; the man has made significant progress in his difficulty with germs.

How do I stop it?

You wait.

The boy begins to cry into the man's soft coat. The boy does not feel like he can wait. He wants it out of his head.

Why weren't you here? What took you so long? Emil whimpers into the coat.

I'm sorry. And that's all the man says.

Emil rocks back and forth against the man, who does not pull him closer. They sit against the wall, watching the moon travel across the sky.

Do you still love me?

You know I do.

But you weren't here. I needed you. And you weren't here. You're never here when I need you.

I know. The man stands up. You're right, he says, I think it's time we do something about that. He picks Emil up, who instinctively clings to him. You're safe, he says. We're safe, he says. We'll be together now, he says, holding Emil on his hip.

The little boy's little feet dangle and his velcro shoes clack as the man carries him out of the room, down the hall, out of the house, and into the night, together.

28 March 2023

Body stretched, mind calmed, tea consumed, her hand is just about all the way in the orangutan glove when over the steps rises a FreSuZoo cap, then Talbot's head; this morning's relatively hairless face has given way to a noon o'clock shadow about the length of your lawn the day before your neighbor finally works up the courage to ask you to please cut the damn thing. She smiles, or, at least, she feels herself about to, but it dies just before she's about to show teeth. Talbot's eyes are on his feet, and someone's trailing him, someone in an outfit very similar to hers, mask on. With the way her body feels like she's just chugged a liter of liquid dread, with the way her mint green nail polish on each of her fingers seems to weigh a thousand pounds, she already knows, but it doesn't stop her from asking, "Talbot . . . Talbot what the fuck is this?"

The person in the orangutan suit chuffs, then says, with perhaps too much throat, "Upgrade."

Talbot's lupine self seems to respond, "Will you shut up?"

"Talbot . . . what. the. fuck. is this?"

"Brenda . . . I don't know how to—"

"Just rip the band-aid off. Just fucking—"

"We're saying you died. The Big Boss said. Well, we're saying that Yetta died I guess . . . fell to her death . . . And we're introducing Chico today."

"Fucking Chico? Are you serious? I've been perfect. Every day. Every day I've gone out and put on the show that has generated almost a million fucking extra dollars this year, and that's before counting merchandise. Every single fu—"

"I don't know what to—I was in there for an hour trying to convince—"

“Yeah? And what did he say? What exactly did I do wrong? Ever? At any point throughout this entire ridiculous fucking thing. And what the hell does Chico here have that I—”

Chico sprawls out his arms and goes, “WOOO, SEVEN-FOOT WINGSPAN BABY.”

“Will you please shut the f—”

“I’m like a goddamn bald eagle,” Chico says, flapping a bit, “and you, you’re just bald.”

“Last time, leave her alone.”

“You are so fucking pathetic, Talbot.”

“Brenda. This isn’t on me. I just want to tell you—”

“You might want to say it, but I don’t need to hear it.”

“Alright, fair, I get what you’re doing, but it’s almost my point.” Talbot hesitates. “You do need to. And as long as we’re still friends I think—”

“Still?”

“You’re a tough room, you know that?”

“Then there’s the fucking door.”

Chico’s been chuffing and flapping while they argue, but, though meant for Talbot, takes Brenda’s suggestion and slides down the fire pole that will take him to the bottom of the enclosure. You can hear Chico going, “WOOOOOO,” all the way down the pole.

“Holy shit, Brenda, fuck it, alright, okay, how you are ain’t your fault, but I doubt you’re helping.”

“You are such a shitting dick, Talbot.”

Talbot makes a grab for her arm as she walks toward the stairs. “Hey, I know that—”

“You don’t know shit. Don’t ever fucking touch me. I don’t want anyone to ever fucking touch me.”

“Brenda, all I’m trying to do, all I’ve tried to do since—” Putting on the orangutan mask shuts Talbot up. “What are you doing?”

Brenda runs up the wall, backflips, and unleashes the sound of an angered King Kong.

It doesn’t seem like Talbot can control the laughter. “You know what? Fine. You can just—”

Brenda rips off her mask and makes the same terrifying King Kong sound in Talbot’s face, and now he actually does cower a bit. “You are such a shitting dick, Talbot.” She puts the mask back on and bounds down the stairs, leaving Talbot with his back against the wall, where he slides down slowly, not even making it to the floor before he hears Brenda bellow at a zoo patron, not even before the weighty fire door slams behind her.

#

Brenda runs with a crouch, knuckles on the ground, yowling at any human foolish enough to be close. There is quite a lot of screaming. And people running. Not to an exit, just anywhere else. Away. Children made into popsicles by fear litter the walkways. Parents unroot them and immediately make shields of their own backs. The zoo’s South America exhibits have wonderful vines, and she’s able to swing most of the way through the zone. She chuffs and spits and screams and yells above dozens of screaming customers. In the scattering, no one tries to stop her, not even the zoo’s workers and animal handlers, woefully unaware Brenda is in the suit, who all luckily seem to have left their tranq guns elsewhere. It’s a long way by vine and knuckle to the Big Boss’s lair, just after the aviary, where she climbs on top of cages, and Africa, where she and a lion roar at each other through glass, and, finally, the snow leopard cage—the painter still AWOL—the leopard facing an inconvenience of only a few sleepless blinks.

The Big Boss's assistant doesn't have the aplomb of the leopard, but who can blame them? The assistant, almost a sculpture now, automatically squeaks out the words, "He'll see you now," staring beyond the wall into non-existence, not fighting, not flying, only a thawing ice cube in a chair, watching as Brenda rips open BB's door and locks it.

Big Boss is sitting in his non-rolling desk chair, not even smiling, just amused in the vaguest of ways. He looks . . . not wolfish, not feline, but has a glint in his eye like he's the only one in the desert who knows where water is. He often matches the pattern of his socks with his tie; today it's white dots like thrown snowballs against a red barn. His suit is blue of course. His hair just begs to be donated to a worthy cause—full, and not just the color. BB brings an indomitable aura with him into every room he visits, a sociopathy just childlike enough to approach endearing, usually. "How about you take off the mask, take a seat and we'll—"

Brenda throws the mask at his head. It's so wide of the mark that BB doesn't even flinch. "You better have a good fucking explanation."

"Oh, I do, I do. I do I do I do." A screen pops up, playing yesterday's near-fall on a loop. "Well, Brenda, you've failed to outperform your eccentricities. Easy as that."

"For an entire fucking year I've—"

"You've nearly exposed all of this two days in a row, the duration before that is irrelevant."

"I've generated millions in revenue here. I have hard data, spreadsheets."

"Well, how lovely, you already have a new career path. Maybe I can authorize a small scholarship toward your being an accountant."

“I will fucking tell. I will send it to every single tabloid and news site, every single social media I can make an account for. I will personally tell every single fucking person on this fucking planet.”

“Go ahead, who cares, in ten years every animal in this zoo will be played by a person anyway. All I ask for is an adequate performance, a safe performance. I don't need some snot-bubbled kid catching that my orangutan swings from its forearms. Your arms are short. You can't swing right. Come on down from the trees and move on.”

Brenda takes out her phone, “I will fucking tell every—”

Big Boss laughs with what seems to be his entire face; his mouth turns into a canyon, swallowing his nose, eyes, and forehead, laughing deep from curled toenails, face quaking in the aftermath. “Here, allow me.” He reaches over, dials a number from memory, waits with poise until— “Oh hello Patti, ya, Randall Higantic here . . . ya . . . ya ya that's right, we know each other through Ricky Ide, oh ya we go back, different century altogether . . . oh ya, so I hear from Ricky that you're with the Democrat and Chronicle . . . exactly, well, I am the owner here over at the Freddie Sue Zoo . . . ya, that's right . . . I remember that story . . . the young lady who just walked in actually tells me Jambo's story is practically mythological in New Jersey these days, grandparents tell their grandchildren and so forth . . . oh, well, I wanted to give you a call and ask if you'd be interested in a story about a zoo where half the stock are actually people in suits? . . . Gorilla costumes, three guys to a giraffe, animal disguises, things of that— . . . No? Alright, well . . . oh, stop, you . . . alright, I'll be there, and you know me, always got a tie on, so we'll have something for the doorknob . . . oh, alright, alright,” Big Boss puts the phone back in the cradle and turns speakerphone on.

Brenda's rage is not quelled by the velvet of Patti's voice, "I actually just right now got a message that there is an orangutan loose in your zoo? An escaped orangutan?"

"Yeah, that's one of the aforementioned humans. Real headcase."

"Oh, well, alright, well, call me when you get something good."

Randall turns speakerphone off. "If I sniff out a worthy story you'll be the first to—oh, oh yes . . . bye bye, now . . . you too, Patti. Bye." He still isn't smiling, not until he looks her in the eyes. "See, Brenda, nobody cares. Evidently I'm the only one who cares about your health . . . And see? Look, right there's the playback. You were two fingernails away from being sprayed off the ground with a fire hose."

"You are fucking sick."

"Me? Brenda, this was your idea, you're the pilot program. How long were you planning to do this anyway? Jesus. Your head yesterday looked like my twelve-year-old went joyriding in it. You have this enormous dent, look, Brenda, look at the screen, you don't even need to zoom in to see your head start to swell. And you didn't even seek medical treatment, you drove home. If anything you should be arrested for reckless endangerment. . . . However, all of this, this is your brainchild. So, partners? That seem fair?"

"Partners in what?"

"Your idea, Brenda. Yetta was our maiden voyage."

"Our?"

"You were not the only close call, Brenda. In the very fat months since you've started, I've expanded your program. Right now on the lot I have two eight-year-old thespians—"

"You what?"

“—who want to build their resume playing emperor penguins . . . I have an Eastern European former basketball center coming in as a giraffe. I got a guy operating a rhino, and no one has a clue. By next decade I’ll be completely animal-free. We’ll hire a hirsute Norwegian who will lend me his beard for the gray wolf exhibit, get former collegiate linemen for yetis, we’ll have unicorns, goddamn Mothman soon. Every animal here will have a human stuffed inside. Where else are these people going to find work? Maybe, at some point, even humans could be animals, humans playing animals being played by humans, you understand. Expand to mythical creatures, monsters—hell, I got a new guy on the lot right now I can use for a werewolf. Maybe if you stop pouting I can give you a spot as a hobgoblin.”

“You’re already fucking doing this?”

“*You* started doing this. I do not know how you tapped into such inspiration. And it makes so much sense. We save a figurative assload with it—and I only say figurative because it would be many literal assloads of conserved capital—because I can just have the *performers* clean up for themselves at the end of their shifts, don’t have to pay for food, a/c, lights, and all the amenities. My god, and the savings not having to pay to cremate my elephants or god forbid have them buried in our old zoo cemetery. Brenda, I say this only with respect for your vision . . . you’ve been under the delusion that this was so successful because you’re exceptional, but it worked exactly because you’re not. Brenda, that is a good thing. It’s a blessing to find out that we’re all replaceable. Certainly you are. Maybe even me. You should applaud what you’ve given the world.”

“You said Yetta died, not me. So why can’t I keep doing this, just be a different orangutan, I mean, I could be Lijana, I could be Carla, I could be—”

“Brenda. Brenda. You can either never reveal the apparatus, or never hide it at all. These are the only ways to keep the crowd pacified. Like it or not, you’ve developed a style, something we can’t replicate, and a style is easy to see—without much effort, I should add. No, Brenda, to reveal the apparatus now would require no orangutan, no subterfuge, just Brenda Renetti, swinging to and fro. But Brenda Renetti is not what customers want, because Brenda Renetti would be starring elsewhere if she could, yes? You are more useful in other arenas. We will get there Brenda. This idea you’ve had, this supernova of inspiration, I promise, soon this will be an asylum for the spiritually, directionally, and financially parched. You are a lighthouse, showing the way in a world that’s harder and harder to monetize. Everyone can be who or what they want. Their spirit animal, minus the spirit. Thank you, Brenda. I believe your work and idea to be not just a fiscal turning point in my existence, but in *humanity’s* as well. It all makes so much sense. Mark these—mark these words. What you’ve done here will be known through further history as the Renetti Point.”

“Jesus christ, Randall. You’ve really really fucking lost it. Really really really really just fucking lost—I thought you had dropped your mind off High Falls when you started disguising yourself and having lunch with the crew. I don’t know what this is. Aside from insane. Randall, I think you’re having a literal psychotic break.”

“Sure would be a long one.”

“A Monroe County record.”

“Always this problem with you, Brenda. You never understand when you win . . .”

Randall hoists a sigh into the room . . . “I used to live in a windowless apartment, just down the street from here. One morning there was this beautiful strand of spider silk hung across one side of my door and then the other. I didn’t want to break it, so I didn’t, and decided to cancel my

plans for the day. Morning came and it was time for my daily walk, but the web had grown on the porch, and the way it shimmered in the sun and billowed so soft in the wind . . . I just couldn't destroy it, and I didn't know if there was much of a way to move it, probably not. Each day the web grew. Each day the leftovers I had carefully portioned for myself dwindled. After a while there were no rations, and I waited, Brenda, I waited and waited for the web to fall, for the cycle of nature to turn. I would bring a chair to the door and watch the web. And all the while I'm starving. I was lucky enough to be saved, to be checked up on. I was lucky enough to have someone do what I could not. And that's why you're fired. I can no longer tolerate ignorance. Get out, Brenda. Congratulations, you've fucked up again."

"You dress up as an employee to spread rumors about how great a boss you ar—"

"There's an entire show about it!"

"—those shows are all setups, Randall. You have a fucking fake nose, fake mustache, and that same fake fucking tie with the chicken marsa—you've had that stain there for months, Randall. And you're firing me for fucking what? Like I'm crazy. Like I'm the crazy one."

"Don't you worry, you'll be compensated."

"There isn't anything to give m—"

"Then leave, Brenda. I won't baby you anymore. Get out."

"Wh—"

"Your walking out of this office will constitute a forfeiture of—"

The orangutan, like the human, is a tool user, which means it's not difficult to wield last year's Best Park of Monroe County award and bring it down like a hatchet on Randall's head. She gets so close, but leaves it hanging before the strike; just wanted to see the look on his face. Finally that look of powerlessness. That defeated look. That defeated fucking look. Something

about his weakness makes her sick. Makes her want to start swinging the BPMC award at his stupid fucking head. FUCK YOU RANDALL. FUCKYOU.

“You never follow through,” Randall perks up from his cower, “your whole life you can never—you are daydreaming, since day one, and daydreaming is bad for you. It can inhibit ambition. There’s that little spark of accomplishment in the dream that dulls your canines. The dream pins you with one hand and takes an emery board to your fangs with the other, and you become . . . well, you become you.” A sound breaks out of Randall’s body like a screaming teapot. By force. As if someone dressed as an orangutan smashed his head with a repurposed tee-ball trophy, the pointy end, the end that’s sometimes stone, granite on this occasion. This blood gushing and this sound Randall’s making is taking up the entire room. This is a sound and pain that cannot be overridden by adrenaline. The pain makes both sight and sound blurry. There’s nothing to hear but Brenda’s throaty scream, but even that becomes visible inside his pain, like rain over his head, and he’s drowning in rainwater and rage and relief that Brenda’s arm doesn’t come down a second time. In moments of clearer-headedness, he would have guessed she’d have made a joke here, but somehow he’d have been wrong. So strange. You can spend so much time with someone, connect with them intimately on a level deeper than spiritual, and be wrong about them over and over. Perhaps there’s limitless depth, something you get closer to that only opens up more options the more you delve into each other’s personalities, another branch on the decision tree to swing to, to swing to, new and unpredictable and—

Brenda tosses the award on the floor and—can’t quite help it—says, “Congratulations,” walking out of the office.

#

It can be good to be consumed. You forget that at some point you were swallowed and chewed and in the first place someone else. Eventually you're out of it though.

Most of the screaming has stopped throughout the park.

Brenda exits through the zoo's black mouth entrance, regurgitated by a tiger's head. Her trail of discarded orangutan limbs looks like the spillage off the cart of an exotic butcher on his way to the trash.

Now in only her one-piece, and her car, she puts on the song, the one she needs to hear. For her, it's like a drop of cloud into a bottle of sky. Go on, Joan, go on, down to zero.

The moon shows up, early to the sky, lifts Brenda's chin, stares into her eyes and asks the unanswerable question, *Now What?*

What the fuck are you doing, Brenda? What. the. fuck. are. you. doing? Brenda, what the fuck are you doing. What the fuck are you doing? What the fuck am I doing. What the fuck am I doing? Why do I always do this. I don't understand. I don't fucking understand. What am I doing.

My pill bottle is in the console. How'd these get here? I take it out, shake it, ch chuh ch ch chuch ch ch

Dear Wiley Corover,

This will be my 37th attempt at communicating important information to you. I have, so far, assumed you are using a screener for your mail so I erred on the side of discretion, but now I must implore said presumed screener to tell you, since you have made mention of your mother's death in prior interviews, that your mother is not dead.

Sincerely,

Mons Wright-Ulven

9 April 2023

You've fallen through.

And so have I. Sometimes the answer was there before you even started.

Let's keep this short and sweet, while I click the morphine.

I make this decision knowing full-well my actions. I have lived with the guilt of killing my father for almost 25 years. Guilt is likely not such an apt word since I did not feel it. Could not feel it because I believed my mother was dead at his hand. I met with her, not long after that letter from Mons. She apologized.

She apologized. She was sorry to hear about my father.

She was sorry.

She apologized.

I click the morphine.

She was sorry.

I never looked for her after that night I burned down the house. I just made a decision.

Click click the morphine.

Click click the morphine.

She was sorry.

Click.

She apologized.

The.

I hope M will receive this news better than I did.

Morphine.

Click. Click.