Spring 2015

Beasts of Flight

Brian Wood
San Jose State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/etd_theses

Recommended Citation

Wood, Brian, "Beasts of Flight" (2015). *Master's Theses*. 4565.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31979/etd.jzr5-uc4y>
https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/etd_theses/4565

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Master's Theses and Graduate Research at SJSU ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Master's Theses by an authorized administrator of SJSU ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@sjsu.edu.

BEASTS OF FLIGHT

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English and Comparative Literature

San José State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts

by

Brian Wood

May 2015

© 2015

Brian Wood

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

The Designated Thesis Committee Approves The Thesis Titled

BEASTS OF FLIGHT

by

Brian Wood

APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH AND COMPARATIVE LITERATURE

SAN JOSÉ STATE UNIVERSITY

MAY 2015

Prof. Nicholas Taylor	Department of English and Comparative Literature
Prof. Cathleen Miller	Department of English and Comparative Literature
Dr. Susan Shillinglaw	Department of English and Comparative Literature

ABSTRACT

BEASTS OF FLIGHT

by Brian Wood

Beasts of Flight is a set of thirteen short stories connected by themes of personal impotence and the dysfunction of sexual relationships.

Some stories are bizarre. The title piece, “Beasts of Flight,” explores systemic hatred and fear through the eyes of a talking parrot. In “I Should Exit My Home When the Costume Party Causes Paralysis of the Brain,” the host of a Halloween party is frozen by the mask of one of his guests. “The Joytime Killbox” details a city’s obsession with staring down the barrel of a loaded gun. Crossing into sacrilege, “The Book of Smote,” is a subversive take on Old Testament storytelling.

Other stories display the inherent strife of relationships using piercings, airplanes, a couple’s movie night, and an impromptu lunch at a fast food restaurant. “My Roberta,” “Rough Air,” “Walking Dogs,” and “Cheri,” all focus on sexual conflict and marital breakdown.

The stories “Fallen Timbers,” “USS Flagg,” and “What to Say if Anything to a Child in the Speedway Bathroom” examines the unexpected repercussions of doing a good deed. While “Homecoming” and “Coetzee Comes to Dinner” illustrate that even the best families have their problems.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My gratitude to Nick Taylor, Andrew Altschul, and Daniel Alarcón for their direction, wisdom, and inspiration. And thanks to Susan Shillinglaw and Cathleen Miller for always encouraging me to do better.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface.....	vii
Work Cited.....	xv
Beasts of Flight.....	1
I Should Exit My Home When the Costume Party Causes Paralysis of the Brain.....	24
My Roberta.....	28
Rough Air.....	37
The Book of Smote.....	49
What to Say, if Anything, to a Child in the Speedway Bathroom.....	86
Chéri.....	90
Fallen Timbers.....	98
Homecoming.....	104
The Joytime Killbox.....	108
Walking Dogs.....	133
USS Flagg.....	139
Coetzee Comes to Dinner.....	146

PREFACE

Beasts of Flight, a set of thirteen stories, melds the mundane with the peculiar, to subvert the readers expectations of literary minimalism. What exactly is literary minimalism? In his article, "A Few Words About Minimalism," John Barth described (and perhaps better exemplified) it this way: "Minimalism (of one sort or another) is the principle (one of the principles, anyhow) underlying (what I and many another interested observer consider to be perhaps) the most impressive phenomenon on the current (North American, especially the United States) literary scene..." (1). Stylistically minimalistic stories are crafted to be economical and simple. However, many introduce hidden or bizarre elements that hint at a current of trouble beneath the surface of the writing. While a myriad of short story writers implement these techniques--Frederick Barthleme, Ann Beattie, and Bobbie Ann Mason come to mind--my admiration for the short stories of Earnest Hemingway, Raymond Carver, Barry Hannah, and Etgar Keret most heavily influenced this collection.

Hemingway's story collection, *In our Time*, serves as a prime example of minimalism. The stories are clean and simple. But like an iceberg, the majority of the substance is beneath the surface. Without tackling the difficulty of close reading, one would miss the true pleasure and fulfillment of Hemingway. In the story "Big Two-Hearted River," the protagonist, Nick, returns stateside from war. He goes into the wild for a fishing trip. On the surface it is a nice story. Nick smells good smells. He feels good feelings. He eats good food. Great for Nick. In simple, quarried sentences, Hemingway allows the reader to see Nick's world. But as he goes to the deep, dark parts of the river Nick grows hesitant. "Nick did not want to go in there now. ...In the

swamp fishing was a tragic adventure. Nick did not want it. He did not want to go down the stream any further today” (155). Why would Nick not want to land a big fish? This appears to be at odds for a war hero on a fishing trip. But beneath the surface, we sense Nick’s silent wrestling with the emotional trauma of combat. His unspoken pain and anguish are represented in the dark, still river water. Hemingway finishes the piece this way: “He looked back. The river just showed through the trees. There were plenty of days coming when he could fish the swamp” (156). From a surface read, this ending is not entirely satisfactory. The take home is this: you live to fish another day. But with a deeper reading, taking into account the emotions beneath the story’s surface, the ending resonates with a haunting chord. Nick will live with this pain his whole life. This beast will always be lurking just beyond the good things.

Like Hemingway, my sentences are often stylistically plain, tight, and clipped. In “What to Say, if Anything, to a Child in the Speedway Bathroom” the narrator becomes uncomfortable when he must share a public restroom with a child. He is clear with his emotions. “...Having him so close to me there, made me uneasy. And I did not like feeling that way in the bathroom.” On the surface his feelings are straightforward. However, beneath that veneer we sense deeper, more troubling emotions brewing. While waiting behind an inconsiderate shopper at the grocery, the narrator hints at his hidden anguish. “So I end up waiting, this vacant look on my face, as I watch her calculate which bag of sugar is the best deal. And as I gaze down the aisle I feel some strange kind of weight pressing in, like the world is too full for manners anymore.” The narrator is more than uneasy and uncomfortable. He is crippled with anxiety stemming from his social interactions. Taking a note from Hemingway’s minimalism, this collection uses clear honest prose. But beneath the surface of the lines bigger fish hide in the darker depths.

Along with Hemingway, Raymond Carver's lean and muscular stories also influences my style. But Carver takes his bleak landscape past the trappings of realism and modernism. He dips his toe into the bizarre waters of the postmodern. Fragmented personal identities and commodified relationships texture his literary landscape. Take the story "Viewfinder," from his collection *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*. The key elements of the plot are surreal and peculiar. The story begins when a stranger with hooks for hands tries to sell Polaroids of another man's house. Somehow Carver ends this story with the homeowner climbing to his roof and hurling rocks in his yard. It is baffling to say the least. But Carver deftly uses this peculiar facade to coil conflict and history beneath the surface of the piece. Both men live alone; both men look to commodify their relationship. The photographer asks, "'You want this picture or not'" (11)? Meanwhile, the narrator invites him inside for a cup of coffee for his own purpose. "I wanted to see how he would hold a cup" (11). Both men long to interact, but do not want to share themselves fully. "'How did you lose your hands?' I asked after he'd said what he wanted. 'That's another story,' he said" (11). Then the narrator offers him coffee, but he makes sure not to tell the photographer that he has made Jell-O; he hides the full extent of his capacity for hospitality. Layer by layer this strange and insipid interaction takes on a new level of enjoyment. A subtle power struggle vibrates beneath the surface. Similarly, I implement bizarre elements to build tension in my stories. In "Beasts of Flight" a bird is accused of murdering a blind man, allowing the characters of the story to project their feelings on an innocent creature. "My Roberta" tests a tired marriage when a spouse suddenly decides to pierce her genitals. In stark contrast to their bored relationship, this outlandish behavior unearths the slow decay of their

love. Like Carver, odd elements are juxtaposed with simple landscapes and sentence patterns to inject new life into a story.

Many of my stories are told using the first person narrative. This point of view allows me to be sparse with detail while still gaining credibility and authenticity with the reader. But a key to success in a first person narrative is having a strong and distinct voice. A major influence in my voice originates from the remarkable understatement of dirty realism and its foundation in literary minimalism. Again we clearly see this in Earnest Hemingway's short stories. In the widely anthologized, "Hills Like White Elephants," the entire story contains only a single line of description for the American and the Girl. "She had taken off her hat and put it on the table" (61). Hemingway resists every opportunity to add superfluous detail. Instead, he whittles down his lines. By the end of the story, we clearly see the two characters, we know their conflict, and we are shown who they are by the tone and clarity of voice. Raymond Carver took this same minimalistic approach in honing the voice of his short stories. Carver often purposefully limits his stories by placing two people in a single scene, confining them to a single room. In place of setting and description, Carver fleshes out his stories with his characters' speech. We see this in his story "Fat" from *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*. Two waitresses smoke cigarettes while they talk. One complains to the other about a bizarrely obese client. "Here is what I tell her. It is late of a slow Wednesday when Herb seats the fat man at my station. This fat man is the fattest person I have ever seen, though he is neat-appearing and well dressed enough" (3). By keeping his lines brief and intense, Carver's tone and voice illustrate the desperation and dysfunction of human relationships, a hallmark of dirty realism. With much of *Beasts of Flight* pushing into the

fringes of the bizarre, however, Barry Hannah's short story collection *Airships* served as significant influence in this collection.

Congruent with Hemingway and Carver, Hannah's writing is taught, simple, and restrained. Also like Carver, many of Hannah's stories were first published in *Esquire* during Gordon Lish's reign as editor. But Hannah distinguishes himself from Carver by using his sparse prose to temper the freaky territory of his stories. In his story "Coming Close to Donna," Hannah details a violent love triangle. Men fist fight in a cemetery, vying for the love of Donna. The narrator ultimately makes it with Donna on the fresh grass of the cemetery. Donna tells him, "'Climb me, mount me, fight for me, fuck me'" (48). But moments later the narrator crushes Donna's head with a tombstone. The narrator explains his horrific and bizarre actions in simple terms. "Some of us are made to live for a long time. Others for a short time. Donna wanted what she wanted. I gave it to her" (48). His story "Water Liars" is more subtle in its crazed madness, but simply navigates outlandish behavior the same. It describes a husband's hypocritical thoughts upon discovering his wife's sexual past. He explores his feelings with a group of old men on a fishing pier. "I dropped my beer and grew suddenly sick. ...I could not bear the roving carelessness of teenagers, their tangling of wanting bodies. But I was the worst back then. In the mad days back then, I dragged the panties off girls I hated..." (6). By narrating disturbing deeds and feelings with simple, forward language, Hannah makes the outlandish palpable for the reader.

Like Hannah, my stories use plain, realistic prose to balance the oddity of the setting and action. My piece, "The Book of Smote," describes a city both morally and spiritually depraved. It is full of rogues and vagabonds behaving poorly. In the opening scene the main character,

Harvey, describes his neighbor's suicide attempt as a "terrible wet smacking sound." Later in the piece, a gruesome alley fight between a child and an old lady is described in equally sparse terms. "The tinkling of glass danced on the street. There was a howling and a thrashing in the trash bags." By pruning the imagery and action to its fundamental details, the reader is forced to internalize the images. With simple speech and realistic tone, the dastard details of "The Book of Smote" are described with a gritty realism. Studying the work of masters like Carver and Hannah aided me in distilling my lines to their minimalistic essence, never reaching for a word like "earth" to describe the dirt.

In terms of theme, *Beasts of Flight* primarily addresses personal impotence and the dysfunction of sexual relationships. Many of the characters are helpless. In "What to Say, if Anything, to a Child in the Speedway Bathroom" the narrator does not know how to act when a child takes the urinal to his right. This simple angst ultimately prevents him from leaving a public restroom. Gregory, the main character of "The Joytime Killbox," is riding a popular attraction for the first time. Gripped by fear and incapable of defending himself, he is berated by the taunts of others. "Walking Dogs" describes a woman, stuck and powerless, in a joyless marriage. Each week her spouse pressures her into fellatio; each week she fails to leave him.

Etgar Keret also explores these themes in his story collection, *The Nimrod Flipout*. Along With Hemingway, Carver, and Hannah, Keret's stories serve as a touchpoint for my writing. Many of his offbeat scenes investigate helplessness and sex (often simultaneously). This is exemplified in the story "My Girlfriend's Naked." The narrator becomes scared and angry watching his girlfriend sunbathe nude in the apartment courtyard. He is helpless as he observes local kids staring and whistling at his girlfriend. His own brother tries to warn him that his

girlfriend will ultimately hurt him, but he is still unable to act. “My brother once said she’s the kind of girl who doesn’t stay in one place very long, and I should be prepared so she won’t break my heart. ...All of a sudden I remembered that, and for a second, I was scared she’d get up and leave” (107). He is angry at her for exposing herself to the neighborhood and simultaneously terrified of her moving. In my collection, the narrator of “I Should Exit My Home When The Costume Party Causes Paralysis of The Brain” shares a similar quandary as Keret’s narrator. He is also helpless in his own complicated relationship. He is angered by the haunting stare of a woman at his party. But by the end of the piece, he is terrified at the the thought of her taking her gaze elsewhere.

In another Keret story, “The Tit’s on an Eighteen-Year-Old,” impotence and busted relationships are again illustrated through a vulgar cabdriver. He drives the Israeli streets honking and harassing young girls. Looking at a teenager’s chest he says, “‘Believe me, you sink your teeth into one or two of those a day, your bald spot disappears.’ Then he laughed and touched the place on his head where he once had hair” (127). During his cab ride we learn that his son is on the front lines and that his divorced wife is concerned their boy is dead. The cabdriver laughs this off too. It is not until the final line that we discover the depth of his brokenness. “...He saw a thin girl in a miniskirt who turned around, frightened, when he honked. ‘Get a load of that one,’ he said, trying to hide his tears” (130). The cabdriver has already lost his wife and is shaken at the thought of losing his son. To compensate, he puts on a sexual front to veil his weakness. My story, “Rough Air,” also features a macho character trying to hide his weakness. Teddy, a police officer, is on a flight to propose to his long distance girlfriend. When forced to sit next to a strong willed woman, his misgivings about his soon to be fiancée quickly escalate. His world tilts, and

he is uncertain how to proceed in his relationship. Like Etgar Keret, my stories often explore themes of impotence and sexual dysfunction through an offbeat lens.

While there are dozens of writers I could site as influences--the morals of Franz Kafka, the dark humor of Kurt Vonnegut, the gamesmanship of Vladimir Nabokov, or the eeriness of Amy Hempel--in the creation of my work, I could easily make this family tree in terms of style, point of view, voice, and theme: Hemingway, Carver, Hannah, Keret. Their texts have shaped my work into stories that are simultaneously dark, grotesque, and funny. From their work I have learned to write simply with depth, to juxtapose the absurd with the mundane, and to utilize humor to uncover the feeble beast that lies buried within us all.

WORK CITED

Barth, John. "A Few Words About Minimalism." *The New York Times* 28 Dec. 1986, Late City Final ed., sec. 7:1. Print.

Carver, Raymond. "Fat." From *Will You Please be Quiet, Please?*. New York: Vintage, 1992. Print.

Carver, Raymond. "Viewfinder." From *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*. New York: Vintage, 1989. Print.

Hannah, Barry. *Airships*. New York: Knopf, 1978. Print.

Hemingway, Ernest. "Big Two Hearted River." From *In Our Time*. New York: Scribner, 1958. Print.

Hemingway, Ernest. "Hills Like White Elephants." From *The Complete Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway*. New York: Scribner, 1987. Print.

Keret, Etgar, Miriam Shlesinger, and Sondra Silverston. *The Nimrod Flipout*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006. Print.

BEASTS OF FLIGHT

THE BIRTHDAY GIFT

For his eleventh birthday, Christoph's mother took him go-karting.

He'd never driven anything before. And Christoph found himself exhilarated by the rush of speed. He liked how the ground zoomed beneath him, slowly if he looked straight, and blurring fast if he looked to his side. He smiled at how he commanded the wind with the weight of his foot. As his courage grew he pushed the accelerator harder. The engine whined and he felt like he might fly away. And although he was firmly in last place, he couldn't hide his joy as rounded the track.

On his final lap, grinning with the intensity of a birthday boy, Christoph wrecked. After careening into a hay bale, he spun out. As he began to correct himself another driver collided into his side, rolling Christoph's go-kart. The tumbling made his arms flail. His head whipped from one shoulder to the other. Once the terrible motion came to rest, his left arm lay pinned, crushed under the searing weight of the machine.

Even after a regimen of surgeries, grafts, and therapy, the arm remained a shameful creature. Patches of skin looked like wet paper towel. Grooves of lost muscle eroded down to the

bone, forcing his hand to hook in on itself. It cradled toward his chest. Below the elbow the arm was useless.

An executive from *Super Kart Family Speedway* mailed Christoph a formal letter. It was printed on luxurious cotton fiber paper, a fetching signature plumed at the bottom. The letter explained how Christoph's experience was unique. According to the executive, most children did not leave *Super Kart Family Speedway* with gnarled limbs. In fact, he included a pie chart showing how statistically children were more likely to be mauled by bears than suffer horrific life altering trauma from go-karts. To show his endearing appreciation, the executive included a badge naming Christoph a lifetime MVP. As an MVP he was entitled to: unlimited laps and track time, a priority parking pass, and a commemorative drink cup (with complimentary soda fountain refills). For added measure he included a coupon redeemable for 1,000 game tokens. He finished his letter with a postscript, "And a little secret between an executive and an MVP, use these tokens on the skee-ball machine. They have the highest token to ticket ratio!" But despite the executive's grand gestures of kindness, the pie charts and the parking pass and the cup and the tokens, Christoph was still angry.

He stood shirtless before his bedroom mirror. He followed the length of his healthy arm. Then he stared at his limb. How incongruent he looked. Incomplete. He was ashamed of his body. He looked at the claw his hand had become and remembered how it once held a steering wheel. How it once made the ground obey. Christoph stared at his frozen fingers. He told them to move. He begged but they would not listen.

"Why would you do this to me?" he said.

A new anger hollowed him. One he couldn't understand.

A CHRISTMAS MIRACLE

At sixteen Christoph still refused to go outside. He was tired of the stares, the way people glanced at his arm and whispered to one another when they thought he wasn't looking.

His mother decided to buy him a pet for Christmas. She thought it would help if Christoph had something to love, something living to distract him from his handicap.

In the pet store she was greeted by the peculiar smell of bird feed and hamster shavings. Walls were stacked with rodents in clear boxes, lizards bathing under heat lamps, a wilderness of dazzling fish. The animals seemed forlorn to her. They looked like forgotten trophies encased in glass. She perused a shelf lined with ferret cages. She was amazed how such a slender thing could produce an odor so pungent. The store owner inquired about her visit. After detailing the particulars of her son's situation, repeating several times his loneliness, she added: "It's important he has a companion."

The owner nodded and said he had the perfect animal. "Twenty years in this business, this is the smartest thing I've ever seen. He'll be a friend for life." Near the back of the store he took her to an impressive cage that housed a small grey parrot. "Tell him a question," the owner said. "Go on. Ask him anything. I'm telling you, this bird's a genius."

She'd never talked to a bird before and this made her timid. She couldn't think of a suitable thing to ask him. "Hello, there. How are you?"

The bird jumped from his perch and gently clawed himself up the side of the cage. He nuzzled his beak through the bars. "Fine, thank you," the parrot told her. "Y tu?"

“See. What’d I tell you? Bird’s brighter than his tail feathers.” The owner reached his fingers in the cage, fed the parrot a treat.

Indeed, she was amazed at this feat. But she was curious why he would sell a bird this unique, this intelligent. When asked, the owner glanced side to side; he leaned in. “Between you and me, I think he makes the other animals feel inferior.” He tilted his hand like he was tipping a scale. “Sad animals aren’t the best for business.”

“Sorry,” the bird said. “Sorry, sorry, sorry.”

“You’re okay, little guy.” Trough the bars, the store owner stroked the bird’s head with the back of his knuckle. “Even knows when to apologize. You can see, he’s a very smart bird.”

She removed her checkbook and walked to cash register. After licking her thumb, she padded to the back of the book. Although she had received a healthy settlement and could easily afford the high price of the bird, she still felt moved to negotiate a better price. “Who shall I make this out to?”

“Aquatics and Exotics.” He scratched his cheek while he watched her write the check.

Before signing she added, “Throw in the cage and you’ve got yourself a deal.”

The store owner made a sour face and choked it. He held out his palm and nodded with reluctance. “You’re lucky it’s Christmas.”

She made Christoph cover his eyes while she wheeled the cage into the living room. “It’s an African Grey.” She unveiled the parrot. “They can live to be 70.”

Christoph eyed the bird. He looked at its white face and black eyes, the grey feathers that wracked his body, the flair of vermilion on his tail. To Christoph the bird seemed simple for a rare thing from Africa. “That’s a long commitment,” he said.

His mother put her hand inside the cage. “The man at the store said these birds are as smart as dolphins, can learn over 800 words.” She put her finger in front of his legs, pushed her knuckles into his breast until he perched on her hand. “Here.” She placed the parrot before him.

The bird bobbed his head and sunk his beak into his feathers. He hopped onto Christoph’s broken hand. Christoph tried to recoil but the hand wouldn’t move. The bird side stepped the length of the defective arm and settled on his shoulder. He polished his beak against Christoph’s shirt. The bird rocked and leaned his head into Christoph’s neck.

“He likes you.”

Christoph smiled at the thought of having something as smart as dolphin on his shoulder.

“Tu tu tu,” the parrot said.

“Is that Spanish?”

“Si. Yup. Yeah,” the bird said.

Christoph brought his hand to the bird’s head and let him nuzzle his fingers. “I think he’s speaking Spanish.”

“The pet store said they mimic all sorts of sounds. Phones, door bells, cars noises.” She went to pet the bird. It dodged her hand and hopped closer to Christoph. “Look at him. He really likes you.”

Christoph let his smile go wider. With the bird on his shoulder he couldn’t think about his damaged body. “I’m going to name him Tutu,” he said.

That night he put Tutu's cage next to his bed. Christoph didn't like the thought of Tutu locked and confined; he left the door open so Tutu could roam as he pleased. That morning, Christoph woke to find Tutu balanced on the corner of the night stand, cocking his head, waiting to be petted.

ANOTHER UNIQUE EXPERIENCE

So it goes: Christoph loved Tutu. Tutu loved the park. Christoph took Tutu to the park.

Everyday Christoph walked the promenade with Tutu on his shoulder. Christoph enjoyed their strolls. For reasons unknown to him, the park was full of other freaks with rare animals. There were invalids, veterans, and day drunks, a zoo of exotic bodies.

There was the tattooed lady with dreadlocked hair that always rollerbladed near the fountain in her swimsuit. She would skate in small circles with a python scarfed tight around her head. There was the toothless man who wore nothing but denim. Shirt and vest and USA ball cap, all denim. He sat on the gazebo steps, his iguana clawing against his pant leg. He kept it on a leash, the collar made of stitched denim.

Christoph enjoyed the spectacle. He liked how nobody noticed him. At the park no one paid attention to his arm or asked how he got his scars. Instead, all eyes and questions were focused on Tutu.

"How much did he cost?"

"Too much," Tutu would say.

"Can he cuss?"

"Hell yeah," Tutu would say.

“Make him say something.”

Tutu would shake his head and the crowd would laugh.

“What does he eat?”

“You name it,” Tutu would say.

So like he’d done before, after walking the length of the park, and after taking a moment to let Tutu preen in the sun and talk to the crowd, Christoph began his trip home. He stood at the street corner, waiting for the traffic signal to change. But on this particular day, unlike all the others, Tutu decided to mimic the chirping sound of the crosswalk. With perfect pitch, timbre, and volume, Tutu parroted the crosswalk alarm. Three impeccable chirps. Pause and repeat.

Christoph smiled at Tutu’s accuracy with the noise. Just like the real thing, he thought. Like to see Flipper do that. He gathered Tutu deserved a sunflower seed. As Christoph reached into his pocket, a blind man mistook Tutu’s noise for his signal to cross. The blind man confidently stepped into the intersection, directly into the path of the Fourth street express bus. With the impact, the blind man’s body exploded into flaps of clothes and skin. A mist of blood hissed on the crosswalk. Pieces of clothing flapped in the air like dead leaves.

Tutu stopped chirping.

A crowd vultured around the fresh body. One woman kept whimpering, “Oh Jesus, Christ, Jesus,” while most of the crowd gasped and held the sides of their heads. Some of them began to search the scene. Their eyes looked for something, anything, to blame for this accident.

Through the air, Christoph felt the weight of their stares. It burrowed in his belly. His breath quickened and he scratched at his damaged arm. He took Tutu from his shoulder and

placed him on the edge of the curb. He walked away briskly, leaving the bird to clean at the splattered blood on its chest.

THE RED FACED JUDGE

Because a jury of peers could not be found, Tutu's judgment was biblical in its swiftness.

Presiding was the Honorable Tal Dipple. Along with his reputation for dealing spartan discipline, he was also known for his narrow set eyes, small ears, and propensity for courtroom perspiration. Beneath his robe he wore a necktie cinched so tight it strangled his throat. It forced his neck skin to spill over his shirt collar, making his face flush with blood. Tiny eared and red faced as he was, he maintained the constant appearance of a wailing infant.

"You're telling me this bird premeditated Robert Martin's murder?" Judge Dipple said to the prosecutor.

"Yes, Your Honor. You can clearly see in the Wikipedia article I printed out these animals are extremely intelligent."

Judge Dipple held his readers to his face.

"Please note that under the heading *Mimicry and Intelligence*, the article states *performs cognitive tasks*." The prosecutor took a dainty sip from a water glass. He cleared his throat.

"Cognitive, Your Honor."

"Objection," the defense said.

Looking down from the bench, Judge Dipple examined Tutu. He did not like the way the bird disrespected his court. His claws wrote illiterate scratches into the lacquered table. His beak was prone to fits of squawking. He didn't like the way the bird kept hopping in circles, pecking

at the lead fishing weight crimped to his leg. But most of all, Judge Dipple hated Tutu's round black eyes. He disliked how tight and focused they were, how they looked on him with objective indifference.

Nobody looks through me, Dipple thought. Not in my court. He ran his finger under his collar. "Overruled."

The prosecutor went on. "He planned the death of poor, blind Mr. Martin. How else could the impossible timing be explained? From the report, it's evident that this bird has not the mind of some feathered beast, but bears the intelligence of a dolphin." The prosecutor pointed at his temple for added effect. Then he pointed at Tutu. "He has the brain equivalent of a child. Should we not hold children responsible?"

Tutu did not object. Instead he tongued at his ankle. Tutu's attorney tried to settle him but Tutu remained nervous. He would not take his gaze from the judge.

Judge Dipple began to simmer. He couldn't recall the last time somebody looked at him like that. Eyes cold and fearless. He could not think back far enough. And this failed effort made his anger grow. Sweat collected on his eyebrows until it pulled from his face. He watched the bird bite at the ankle weight.

"Your Honor," the defense said. "It's obvious my client is under extreme emotional unrest. He was found abandoned, quivering. Covered in blood. In shock. The unfortunate accident at the park has rendered him unable to speak coherently. Look at him."

Tutu hopped and caught sight of Christoph in the audience. His head perked. "Chris-top?" Tutu said. "Chris-top?"

In the back of the courtroom, Christoph slid in his pew.

“Help,” Tutu said. He bit at his ankle weight and twitched his leg. “Help, help, help.”

Christoph tore his eyes from Tutu. He dropped his head.

“Your Honor.” The prosecutor removed his glasses. He raised his voice over the bird’s.

“Those were the same cries heard at the scene of the crime.” He pointed his glasses at Tutu.

“The crowd screamed ‘Help!’ as they ran to the slaughter stream that was once poor Robert Martin--a defenseless blind man. This sick beast is trying to relive the carnage of that day. He’s trying to revisit the crime.” As if to plead, the prosecutor placed his hands under his chin. “Serial murderers do the same thing.”

The Judge dabbed his hot, red forehead. He mopped the sweat from his lip.

Tutu snapped his head. He periscoped his neck, focusing on a leg of sweat trembling from the judge’s face. Tutu lowered his beak and leaned toward the judge with his ebony eye.

Judge Dipple was ignorant of the behavior of birds. He did not understand that in order to focus on anything in detail, a bird must cock its head. He did not know the twinkling pearl of sweat on his forehead wiggled down his face in the manner of a mealworm. He didn’t realize Tutu was curious why a man might have worms on his face. All Judge Dipple saw was the excruciating intensity of Tutu’s black caviar eye. This bird was sizing him up. This bird was judging him.

“Guilty,” he said as he clapped his gavel with such force the sound block lifted into the air. “Bailiff, get this animal out of my court.”

TACO NIGHT IN PELICAN BAY

As a corrections officer, Hiram was accustomed to the bizarre. But this was the first literal animal to come through his cafeteria.

It was Wednesday, which meant they were serving Navajo tacos. The inmates were in high spirits; Hiram was not.

“150% capacity and they got the nerve to send me a bird,” he said. “Kind of horse shit is that?”

The cafeteria cook perceived this as a rhetorical and did not answer. Instead, he placed a piece of fry bread on a plate and slopped it with taco meat.

Hiram watched the bird hop into the serving line. The parrot perched himself between two food trays. His claws clinked against the aluminum bars. Tutu rocked his head up and down, eyeing the foreign food. He leaned his eye toward a pile of diced tomato.

“What do I give him?” the cook said. He wiped his hands on his apron. “He on dietary restrictions? Never fed no bird before.”

Hiram let his wrist dangle over the taser on his belt. He tugged his mouth to the side. “Like I know?” If the cafeteria were a gladiator arena, Hiram was the emperor. He took pride in keeping a clean, tidy stage. Hiram rocked his weight from leg to leg. He pointed with his lips. “Give him some salad or something.”

The cook shrugged and made a plate. He reached his arm over the sneeze guard and placed the food before the bird. “Here little guy. Chef’s special.”

Tutu hopped to the plate’s edge. He ran his beak across the wet strips of lettuce. His feathers flared. He scratched at his beak.

“I don’t think he likes it,” the cook said.

“This look like a buffet?” Hiram said. “He takes his shit like everyone else. Or go hungry for all I care.”

One of the prisoners took a tomato off his plate. He cradled it in his palm, held it out for Tutu. “Where you from partner? How’d you land in a nest like this?”

Tutu lowered his head. He eyed the food with caution.

“Here,” the inmate said. He waited for the bird to take the food from his hand. “ I ain’t bite you. There you go. Nice, huh? You want another?”

Tutu took pleasure in the cool tomato. His feathers flattened and shinned with a brilliance. He swayed and let the inmate pet the side of his head.

“Don’t fuck with my bird, Peanut. I’ll bust a ruckus in your ass.” Hiram flexed his hands against his belt.

“I wasn’t meaning no harm, boss. He wants a tomato.”

“Touch him again,” Hiram said.

The inmate glanced away before leaving the line.

After swallowing the delicious gift, Tutu let out a melodic chirp. A beautiful noise floated above the scraping plates and the cafeteria chatter. Tutu pressed his head against the glass and sang. His talon reached for the tomatoes.

“Look now, see. Got him all riled up.”

Tutu hopped forward. He tapped his beak on the sneeze guard. His tongue snubbed against the glass.

“Enough,” Hiram said. He wouldn’t stand for this childish behavior, even from a bird. “I said that’s enough.”

But Tutu kept on.

HIRAM, THE FISHER

Hiram hated animals. His whole life he’d had one pet. And even that was short lived. When he was a child, his neighbor’s cat had a tremendous litter. They couldn’t give them away. Hiram asked his father for a kitten.

“Dirty filthy things,” his father had said. “I’m pulling doubles to put a roof over your head. Your mother slaves in there, keeping it clean. And you want to invite animals into our house?” His father’s mind was set.

That same week, at the county fair, Hiram was drawn to a carnival game. A kiddie pool was filled with water and seeded with a school of live goldfish. For three tickets he could reach into the pool and keep anything he grabbed. Packs of children gathered around the pool, plunging their fists, savagely punching at the water. Hiram paid the attendant and took his place at the edge of the pool. He licked his lips and rolled up his sleeve. He knelt and peered into the sloshing water. Golden fish scales glittered on the waves. He watched the fish, studied their behavior. They huddled into orange clouds; they scattered and regrouped. Hiram held his hand above the water, waiting like a hunter, holding the air in his lungs. As a milk skinned boy splashed the opposite side of the pool, sending the fish in a feverish escape, Hiram knifed his hand in the water. He pulled his fist from the pool. He opened his hand to find two fish skittering in his palm. Two! He cupped the fish gentle like he was nesting a baby bird. He presented his

catch to the carnival worker who tossed the fish in a plastic bread bag. The man filled the bag with water from the pool and knotted the top. He picked at his stomach and held the bag out for Hiram. “Winner, winner,” he said. “Fish for dinner.”

Hiram kept the fish under his coat when he got home. He took his mother’s glass Jell-O mold and layered the bottom with pebbles from the garden. He poured cool water into the bowl. Up in his room, he slowly shook the fish into their new home. He set the fishbowl on the carpet. Hiram lay on his belly and rested his head in his palms. His eyes watched the fish mouth at the water. He watched them swim to the bottom and nibble at the pebbles.

“I’ll call you Batman,” he told the bigger of the two. He pressed his finger against the bowl. “And you can be Robin, since you’re smaller.” Late into the night he watched Batman and Robin flap and dart. He watched them kiss the water’s surface. He’d never seen anything so beautiful. He could hardly believe they were his.

On his way home from school, Hiram used his allowance to buy fish flakes. He held the tube of fish food in his hand like a sprinter’s baton. He ran the length of sidewalk to his house. He was eager to feed the duo. As soon as he passed the threshold of his home, his father called him into the bathroom.

“Look what you did,” he said. “Look at your mama’s Jell-O mold.” He pointed to the fishbowl on the counter. “Look at the mess you made.”

Hiram kept his eyes on the clean linoleum floor.

“See what happens when we have pets?”

Hiram nodded.

His father lifted the toilet seat. “Go on.”

The boy didn't move. He scratched at his shin with the toe of his sneaker.

The father took a knee in front of Hiram. He took the boy by the chin and forced him to look him in the face. "I am your father," he said. His anger kept his mouth tight as he spoke.

"And you know my mind. Go on." He shook the boy's face as he let go of his chin.

Hiram cupped his hand in the fishbowl. He waited for Batman and Robin to eddy into his palm before he ladled them out of the bowl. As gentle as he did at the fair, he brought his fish to the toilet bowl. He poured them from his hands. Their tails flapped, as if shocked by the coolness of the porcelain. They swam the circumference of the bowl.

"Rules are rules," his father said.

Hiram swallowed. He watched the fish peck at the surface.

"Go on. Come ahead now."

Hiram could feel the unopened fish food in his back pocket. He just wanted to feed them, to see them dance around collecting the flakes. The thought of it made his chin shake.

"Get on with it."

Hiram did not look away. As the water flushed he watched them fight against the current. He watched as their sparkled bodies swirled into darkness.

A TASTE OF MEAT

Tutu raked his beak through the plate of lettuce. He chirped and shook his head. Lettuce flung across the counter. He rained salad to the floor.

"I don't think he likes it," the cook said. "I got seeds in the pantry."

“No,” Hiram said. “Bird’s going to learn to keep clean. He’ll eat every scrap he gets.”

Hiram went to Tutu. He took a pen from his breast pocket and forced the bird’s mouth open.

“Eat.” He shoved a pinch of lettuce into the beak.

Tutu screeched and flapped his wings. His tongue fought against the pen. Lettuce flew from the plate. Hiram packed the beak with more. “I said eat it.”

As he put his fingers in the bird’s mouth his pen slipped. Taking advantage of the momentary freedom, Tutu clamped down on Hiram’s pinky. His beak snapped through the skin like teeth through a cooked sausage. He clawed at Hiram’s hand and viced his beak down to the bone. Hiram tugged his hand free. The tip of his finger dangled from the knuckle. Tutu jumped to the floor. He scuttled to the corner and flexed his feathers. He huddled in fear as Hiram’s scream melted with the shouts and animal roar of the cafeteria hall.

INTERVIEW WITH DR. PRESTON BEAMON, ANIMAL PSYCHOLOGIST

Q. Now, in your own words, why are you here?

A. ---

Q. You understand you’re safe here, Tutu. You can open up to me. Feel free to explore, to express yourself. Now, with those ground rules, tell me, what did you do?

A. ---

Q. Alright, I see. Right. You haven’t done anything, so you have nothing to say. Now we’re getting somewhere. You feel innocent. I get that. Then how has this experience changed you?

How has your incarceration shaped you as a bird?

A. ---

Q. Hmmm. I understand it's a tough question. It requires us to look inside ourselves. And that can be a scary place. Hey, it's even scary for me to explore my inner space. Some frightening things in there. Perhaps there's a mother who wouldn't give us approval? A father who wasn't there? Did an uncle touch us in a bad way? I've heard it all, Tutu. I'm not here to judge you. I'm here to help you...discover you. Okay?

A. ---

Q. So what I want you to do is close your eyes. Go on. Close them. Picture yourself at a park, or at the beach--really any place you like--somewhere outside these walls. Can you picture it? Do you have your place?

A. ---

Q. Now, in the surrounding comfort of that place, wherever that may be, I want you to look down inside yourself. Go on and get in there. I'll give you a moment. Got it?

A. ---

Q. Now tell me what's down there. Don't be afraid, Tutu. What do you see?

A. ---

Q. Tutu. I'm a patient man. You can sit there and blink at me all you want. But I am going to reach you. You understand that, right?

A. ---

Q. You can be a tough guy. That's fine. But you must realize that without an answer, I have to notate that you're unwilling to cooperate. "Tutu doesn't care." Is that a fair statement?

A. ---

Q. Look, I've been more than clear that I'm a friend here. So I'm picking up my pen and asking you one last time. What have you learned from your experience here?

A. ---

Q. Have it your way. I'm taking note of this. ...Alright, let's move on. I'm not saying this was a failure, just an area for us to improve. It's an area of opportunity, okay?

A. ---

Q. Fine, look, let's try an exercise. Just a second, let me grab my briefcase.... Now, this appears to be an orange. It is round, orange in color. When you smell it...it smells citrusy. By all empirical measures this is an orange. Heck, I pulled it out of my lunch bag, right?

A. ---

Q. But in all seriousness Tutu, this is not an orange. Let's imagine this is your anger. Everybody, myself included, has some amount of hate inside ourselves. And our hate and anger has a source. It can be from something we don't understand or something we fear. Sometimes it's passed down from our parents. So what I want you to do is take all your anger and pull it from yourself. Release all your hatred and put it into this orange. Here, I'll put the orange in front of you so you can project onto it. Take time to channel your anger into the object.... Have you emptied yourself?

A. ---

Q. I'll take that as a yes. Now, what do you want to say to your anger?

A. ---

Q. Tutu, please. Will you please not peck at the orange?

A. ---

Q. Come on Tutu. I want you to speak to your anger. Hey, come on. We're not supposed to eat our anger. You're getting juice everywhere. We don't want to put the hate back inside you.

Understand?

A. ---

Q. Hey, stop that. I said quit it. Stop biting the anger. Give me back my orange.

A. ---

Q. Christ. He bit me. Goddamn bird just--son of a bitch bit me. Carl? Can you restrain him?

Shit. I'm bleeding. Hey, I'm bleeding here, man. Can we get something--now?

A. ---

BIG BIRD OF THE BLOCK

Two inmates sat in the yard smoking menthols down to the filters.

"The fuck is up with that bird?" the first one said.

"Who, Lil' Rich? He's cool."

"No, the bird. That actual bird." He pointed his cigarette at the base of the concrete wall.

Tutu huddled there, plucking his feathers. He shook his head and combed his beak through the dirt.

"Man, you don't know Big Bird?"

"That his real name?"

"Hell if I know? Nobody knows his name. I've been here a nickel, ain't heard him say a word." The second inmate ashed his cigarette downwind. "We call him Big Bird, on account that's one bird you don't fuck with."

“For real?”

“Man, you too new to be this stupid. I heard that little birdie straight killed a man. Made one guard transfer out.” He held up his hand and pulled on his pinky. “Popped it right off.”

“For real?”

“Already burned through three psychologists. Won’t even see him anymore. Can’t crack that nut.”

They watched the parrot rake through the dirt. Tutu held a jagged rock in his beak. He touched the rock’s surface with his tongue. When he realized it wasn’t a seed, he shook his head and picked up another pebble.

“What you think he’s doing?” the first inmate said.

The second inmate drew from his cigarette. “Probably figuring who to fuck with next.” He exhaled through his nostrils. “All I know, you see Big Bird come around, you better act right.”

Tutu hopped to a sunny patch of dirt. He closed his eyes and absorbed the heat. His feathers rippled in the wind. A guard wearing leather gloves approached. As the guard came near he slowed and took on a cautious demeanor. He looked ready to wrangle a python.

“What’s all that noise?” the first inmate said.

The second inmate laughed. “Maybe he got a visitor.”

Tutu sensed the guard’s footsteps. He stretched his wings to their limit and the guard recoiled.

“Look at that fool,” the second inmate said. “Scared as shit.”

The first inmate shook his head. “Why don’t he fly away? Man, I had his wings, I’d be gone.”

As the guard reached toward Tutu again, Tutu gracefully perched himself on the outstretched glove. There was a reverence in the way the guard held the bird. He carried him like he was an ark, as if the bird contained some unknown power. For a brief moment the yard fell silent. The men racked their weights and ceased their games. They all watched as the guard carried him like a standard. The second inmate felt small in the presence of such grand thing. He rubbed the side of his face. “Even if they weren’t clipped,” he said, “where would he go?”

800 WORDS OR LESS

The prison guard removed the receiver from its cradle and placed it in front of Tutu. “Three minutes,” the guard said. “I’m to inform you this conversation is monitored.” He left the bird to speak with his visitor.

On the other side of the glass was a peculiar looking man. Tutu stretched to look him over. Although he appeared youthful, the man’s hair was thinning. Beneath two strange, longing eyes hung dark bags of skin. The visitor hugged the phone between his shoulder and ear. With his good hand he hoisted his left arm onto the ledge. It rested there motionless.

Tutu angled his head to the side. His eyes glossed with memory. “Christoph.”

“Hello, Tutu. Been a long time.”

Seeing his friend so old and unfamiliar put Tutu at a loss for words.

“Look at you. You look good.” Christoph tried to smile but only his cheeks moved. “I’m not sure why I waited so long. I guess I knew I wouldn’t have anything good to say.”

Tutu leaned low toward the glass. He wanted to tell Christoph that he still remembered the good times. He wanted to talk about the promenade and the clean air. But he knew there wasn't time for sentiment. Christoph wasn't here for that.

"So..." Christoph cleared his throat. "Mom died."

"Oh, Christoph." Tutu thought of the first time he saw her from behind the bars of his birdcage, in the back of that cluttered pet store. He remembered her kindness. And the kindness Christoph first showed him. Tutu clicked his tongue.

Without notice, Christoph's face screwed to the side. "I've been a terrible friend." He began to cry. "That should be me in there."

Tutu tilted his head.

"I stranded you there. And I could have said something but I didn't. You asked for my help but I just sat there."

"Christoph." Tutu shook his head.

"No, listen," Christoph smeared tears across his cheek. "I can make it up you. What if I could get you out of here? You could come live with me. And I could take you back to the park, like we used to. I still have your old cage in the garage."

Tutu shook his head. "No, Christoph."

Christoph placed the phone on his other ear. He searched Tutu's face, trying to understand the bird. But he could not. So his face slid into an expression of deep sadness. His eyes and the corner of his mouth sloped toward the floor.

It was a look Tutu knew. It reminded him of the ferrets and the mice of the pet store, the beasts in their cages. And it reminded him of the animals he lived with now. All those sad faces dreaming of flight.

“Sorry,” Tutu said. He waddled closer and cocked his head toward his old friend. “Sorry, sorry, sorry.”

Behind him the guard unlocked the door. It groaned against the hinges as he entered to take the bird away.

“Wait, Tutu?” Christoph spoke into the phone but there was no reply. He wrapped on the glass and called to him again but the line was already dead.

I SHOULD EXIT MY HOME WHEN THE COSTUME PARTY CAUSES PARALYSIS OF THE BRAIN¹

Translated from the Spanish by Brian Wood

I should exit my home when the costume party causes paralysis of the brain. For hours my mind has been paralyzed by her mournful stare. At first I was too frightened to move; but now I feel justified in a hastened exit.

I don't know the woman. She wears a rubber mask. The frozen expression of Ronald Reagan hides her face. And she wears a navy suit with wide, crisp lapels. She also wears a power tie, bold and red. I first saw her dragging a potato chip through the onion dip. She was pulling at the lips of her mask and forcing the chip into her mouth. With the mask against her face she chewed and stared at me. Those dead eyes and that menacing smile. They have me paralyzed at my own party.

When the masked woman first stared at me I felt indignant: "Exactly what is your problem?" I asked of her. But she kept chewing and staring: it was like I wasn't in the room. I wanted to tell her to stop, but her waxy grin had a hold of me. Her look made the feeling bleed

¹ "Existe un Hombre Que Tiene la Costumbre de Pegarme con un Paraguas en la Cabeza" by Fernando Sorrentino, first published in *Mundis Artiam*.

from my ankles. My calves grew numb and my knees began to dissolve. In the presence of my guests, at my own costume party, she had me crippled. Before the humiliation could take hold, I willed my legs to carry me to the bathroom. Perhaps a splash of water could get my mind right. By then the terror had settled in my arms. It required incredible effort to close the door behind me. As soon as I was alone I began to picture her staring, her Reagan mouth chewing. The image made me scared and angry. I wanted to charge into my living room and tear the mask from her face. I wanted to expose her. But such a cruel thought made me feel sorry for her.

I had to spawn another plan. But this too proved difficult. For the apparition of my tormentor haunted my brain. Just beyond the wall, somewhere near the punch bowl, she was waiting to paralyze me again with her steadfast gaze. I decided she must be ignored. If I turned my back to her perhaps she would feel unwanted and leave my party. She could exit with dignity.

My steps into the living room were measured. I kept my back to the snack table. In an arc, my back to that woman, I glad-handed with my guests. “Wonderful to see you, love your costume, spooky.” But like a hair on my tongue, my mouth soured. I knew she was watching me. I had to look back.

Before I dared, I felt her breath, hot and onion scented, on my skin. She placed her hand on my shoulder. Slowly, with tenderness, she turned me. It was like we were dancing. With her head tilted the slightest tic to the side, she stared. Behind the mask her eyes were big and black. They were wet and bottomless. As she stared into me, the gravity of her gaze increased; again, she had me trapped. Beyond my feet and hands, she had a hold of my brain. She had me frozen in the center of the my party. And our locked moment had my guests looking at me. I could sense the weight of their eyes. The group by the bookcase, those in the kitchen, the smokers cloistered

on the patio, they all began to giggle. I felt the twang of their laughter. The embarrassment shook my insides. As though she didn't feel it, she continued to feed herself under her mask; she smacked and stared.

I looked stupid--we looked stupid--standing there. She, chewing. I, unable to do anything. The whole room was gaping at us. I wanted nothing more than to say to them, "Wipe that look from your face. Can't a man have a moment with the Gipper?" But I also wanted to make my guests happy. I did not want to be rude.

I thought of a plan. I would stand still all night. My friends would think it was a clever ruse: look, he's pretending to be a street performer. He's acting like a statue. But they would never think such things. And she was so persistent in eating right next to me. Standing like this, nose to nose, we looked like a couple. Each guest took notice. They gathered around us from the far edges of the room.

Since then she has stood beside me. For hours I have been stuck here with her. I cannot move, and she will not cease. Initially, I was so frightened I wanted to escape. Now part of me thinks I might miss her gaze.

Of course we have our problems. I hate the smell of onions, and her tongue is teeming with onion dip. I am not comfortable with prolonged eye contact, and behind her mask, I do not believe she has blinked--not even once. At some point I was longing to share an intimate moment with the woman in the white tennis outfit. I desired to join her on the couch and compliment her costume. But this woman has me paralyzed. And although I am cemented here, mute, I think we have reached an unspoken compromise. Something in her look convinces me she attended my costume party with a purpose far beyond my understanding.

Although her eyes are black and still, and even though the lines on her mask do not change, I know she is unhappy. Like me, I know she is sad despite her mouth forever arching in a hilarious smile. I know that she will grow tired of hectoring me. Or I will run out of chips and onion dip. At some point she must leave. And if she does not, I know that with enough concentration I can will my tongue to curl. I can force my legs into motion. I have done so before. But even with an eternity of possibilities, I am at peace with the twinkling thought that none of them will ever happen.

No longer am I frightened by her grotesque gestures. Nor do I concern myself with escaping the torment of my guests' pointed fingers, their covered mouths. A new kind of anguish controls me. What scares me is this: at any moment the chorus of laughter will cease, the party will be no more, and she will take her gaze elsewhere. I'm worried stiff at the thought of her leaving me. What would I do then, left there alone? What does one do with such a sudden, quiet freedom?

MY ROBERTA

One morning I looked over at my wife and caught her staring at our bedroom ceiling. There was something terrible in the way she watched our ceiling fan wobble. Like she was considering all that was wrong with the room and the weight of it wouldn't let her blink.

How long she had been doing that, I didn't know. And I didn't ask because I didn't want to have a conversation about it. Instead, I closed my eyes and pretended I was still asleep. I tried to imagine everything was fine. But in the darkness behind my eyelids I could hear her mumbling. It sounded like she like she was praying. "If this is it," I heard her say, "if this is all there is, Lord Jesus, kill me now."

* * *

My wife, Roberta, I can't even recognize her anymore. Her behavior grows stranger everyday. Just last month she got her clitoris pierced. She didn't tell me or anything. I had to discover it myself. She had just showered and had her foot on the sink. As she was drying off I saw it glinting there between her legs, a metal stud big enough to hang a towel from. Out of nowhere she does this. And where she got the idea, I don't know. When I asked her about it she just said, "So," and wrapped the towel around her head. Conversation over.

* * *

A week later--right out of the blue--she bought a motorcycle. She went down to the dealership and drained our entire vacation fund. I was out edging the yard when she came rumbling in with this black beast of a thing shaking between her legs. I stopped what I was doing and watched her park it on a sprinkler head. She swung her leg around the gas tank and lumbered slowly into the house.

Twenty years we've been married and she's a stranger to me now.

* * *

One night, coming in from a ride, she said to me, "Curtis, you have no idea." She went to the kitchen table and slouched in a chair.

"Dinner's ready," I said. "There's a plate in the microwave."

Roberta pulled at her bangs. "It takes so much concentration--I'm telling you--it's a miracle I don't lay that bike down. Every time I roll on the throttle I feel it growl against me. It's like a thousand fingertips touching me." She leaned deep into her chair. "All over my body there's this...electricity. To the ends of my toenails." She let her mouth twitch like she was savoring the last moment of a secret.

For the third night in a row I warmed her dinner. I sat across the table and watched her exert an amazing effort to eat. She lifted her fork like it was a paint can. After each bite she would exhale loud through her nostrils. Even then, I could tell she was thinking about that motorcycle.

* * *

After that, Roberta started cussing. The Roberta I knew never cussed.

It began at the art walk. Like we always did, we were at the mall to buy a pretzel and a lemonade, to stroll around and browse the window displays. And we were also there for the art fair. Someone at work said there was nothing like seeing a real painting, one on canvas, with brushstrokes pushed into the oil. I'd heard when you dimmed the lights on a painting like that, the landscape would fade. But if the artist painted light in the windows, they would still glow with life inside.

Just beyond the food court was a booth with pastel paintings of oceans and flowers. "Have a look here," I told Roberta. I made her stop and look at a canvas called *Seaside Cottage*. There was a cottage on an ocean cliff. Moss grew on the roof and a twist of smoke spilled from the chimney. Roberta had a kitchen calendar full of prints like this. Cottages and cabins. Lakes and sea spray. For our anniversary I wanted to buy her a canvas painting. I wanted to hang it over our mantel and install a dimmer switch.

I put my arms around Roberta. "Wouldn't it be nice to have a little home like that? Just the two of us with all that peace and calm."

Roberta leaned toward the painting and squinted. "I don't know."

This caught the artist's attention. He got out of his chair and stood next to us. "You've got a good eye," he said. "This is one of my favorites." He dimmed the light above the painting and like magic, time had passed and the cottage was eased into that good light. But the light in the windows somehow still flickered bright. He stood back and let us take in what he had done.

"That's incredible," I said.

Roberta tilted her head.

"What do you think?" he said.

She made a face like she wanted to spit. “You’re joking, right?” She looked dead straight at the man. “What kind of dipshit would want this?”

* * *

On the drive home Roberta had the windows down. What her hurry was I didn’t know, but she drove reckless. Her head was halfway out the window and she let the car drift out of her lane.

I tried to roll the window but the child-lock was on. “You mind?” I said. “I’m catching a draft here.”

Roberta closed her eyes as her hair flapped on her face. “Jesus, Curtis. Live a little.”

“Would you watch it?” Up ahead a lady pushed her baby into the crosswalk and Roberta wasn’t slowing. I grabbed the dashboard. “Take it easy,” I said. “There’s people.”

Roberta waited for the panic to hit my eyes before she mashed on the brakes. The tires chirped and nose of the car stopped short of the crosswalk. The mother startled. She glared at us before staring at me like I had something to do with it. Like I was supposed to control the woman next to me. She was leery, moving past the front of the our car. And as she rolled past us the wind kicked up and threw a diaper from the stroller.

“Jesus,” Roberta said. “Look at this.”

With one hand on the stroller the mother stretched to collect the diaper, but a gust tumbled it beyond her reach.

“What is this, amateur hour?” Roberta gave a tiny shrug. “Can we go already? Seriously, who does this?”

I dropped in my seat. “Please Berta. Just let it go.”

As the mother stuffed the diaper in her diaper bag Roberta honked. The woman snapped her head to look at us. More startled or appalled I wasn't sure.

"Come on Roberta. She's got a baby." But before I could do anything, and before the woman had a chance to move, Roberta had her head out the window.

"Move, you fat cunt."

I watched the mother's face burn from a shade of embarrassment to a deeper kind of red. She marched the stroller to my side of the car and Roberta honked the horn again. Twice. Three times she honked at her. She looked at me and laughed as she honked again at the woman.

"Christ, Roberta. The hell is wrong with you?" I tried to roll the window again but Roberta still had it locked.

"Watch out, Curtis. She's a live one."

The mother was at my ear, spittle hurling from her mouth. "Shit, Roberta. Roll it up. Drive already." I shielded my face as the woman began slapping wild at my head. "Sorry. We're sorry," I said. "Please Roberta, just go."

Roberta kept laughing. "I don't know, Curtis. She looks fired up. Better do something."

I wanted to scream. I wanted to tell her that Roberta hadn't been herself lately. But I kept finding myself yelling sorry, pleading for her to stop, begging for Roberta to drive.

* * *

That night I met my friend Perry for beers. I had a hard time explaining it to him and he didn't seem to believe a word. As I told him about it the edge of his mustache kept pulling toward his ears.

"She kept hitting me until, finally, Roberta drove off," I said.

He glanced over his shoulder. “She called her a cunt?”

“No, Perry. She called her a fat cunt.”

His mouth puckered like he just swallowed a whisky.

“It’s more than that,” I said. “You add in the motorcycle clubs, the late nights and body piercings. What are you supposed to make of all that?”

Perry tilted his chin to the bartender. He waved two fingers between us. “Bourbon,” he said. “Look, I’ve known Roberta a long time. There’s got to be some variable to the problem. Might be a reaction to something.”

I didn’t like the way he said problem. It made me want to punch his nose.

“If you had to guess--just throwing it against the wall here--you noticed anything strange?”

The only thing I could think of was a few months back, before I caught her staring. Roberta and I had been making love, same as we always do, but this particular night I got a tickle in my nose. And while I was still on top of her I sneezed one of those toe curling, whole body sneezes. And with me still inside her, my body pitched in way like never before. Roberta screamed. She called out so sharp I thought for sure I had just done something terrible. I got off her and wiped the hair from her face. “I’m sorry,” I said. “You alright? I’m so sorry.”

“Yes,” Roberta said and with both hands she grabbed me. “Get back here. My god, yes.”

A month later she had metal hanging from her lady parts and a hog between her legs.

“Honestly Perry,” I tore at my bar napkin, “I have no idea.”

Perry shrugged and raised his bourbon. “Well it’s like my daddy always said, If you can’t get them filthy rich, might as well get them filthy.”

I gave him a look. “Jesus, Perry. That’s my wife.”

* * *

On Thursday night I made popcorn. Thursday we leave all the pillows on the bed so we can sit up and watch *Law & Order*. I brought the popcorn to our room. Roberta had the bed turned down, the pillows strewn on the floor.

“What are you doing?” I said.

In a sad catlike impersonation, she crawled across the bed. She took a DVD from under the mattress. “I want you to do this with me.”

“It’s Thursday. I made popcorn.”

“I want us to do everything they do.”

“On *Law & Order*?”

Her voice got low and throaty. “I got a porno.”

So we watched it together. And this is what love was: five minutes in, the man had his way with the girl. He patty-caked her breasts with his dick. She moaned and twisted her nipples. Then he squeezed her throat until her eyes teared. He commanded she open her mouth wide.

“Do it,” Roberta said. “Spit in my mouth.” She opened her mouth full.

I did it.

After he finished forcing himself into her throat, the man mounts her from behind. As he rode her he spanked her oiled body. He slapped her until she was covered in finger shaped welts.

“Hit me Curtis.”

I did not want to hit her.

“Fucking hit me.”

I hit her but it wasn't enough.

"Hit me, you little pussy."

I hit her harder. This time with enough force to make her knees buckle.

When we finished she collapsed on the bed. She twisted her body in the sheets and moaned into the mattress. I stared at the ceiling and listened to her sleep. As the ceiling fan hummed I thought about how I might fix it.

* * *

In our backyard, next to the grill, Roberta sat in a lawn chair. It was the kind of day when it was good to be outside so she rolled her sleeves to her shoulders. I handed her a bottle from the ice chest.

"Happy anniversary," I said.

"This is fucking nice." She leaned her face to take in more light. She curled her toes into the lawn. "We should move, you know. Just pack a bag and leave it all." Her voice sounded drugged.

"Where?" I said. "What about the house?" But she didn't answer. She had just come back from another ride and was spent.

As she slept in the sun, I went inside to get the meat. On the refrigerator I saw a picture of us from decades ago, our honeymoon. There were palm trees behind us and past that was an ocean. Neither of us looked at the camera. We both looked at something just out of view. And for whatever reason we smiled at we saw. Roberta with her hair, feathered and wavy, framing the length of her face. Roberta with tinted lenses the size of orange slices. That quiet, mousy Roberta, faded and grainy, held in my arms. And there I was. My stupid shaggy hair. Me and my

high school mustache that would never fill in all the way. I'm right behind her, holding my girl tight like my life depended on it. I believed we were happy then. And I wondered if we could go back there. If I could get her to sell that bike, even at a loss, would we have enough to get away?

I set the meat next to the grill. I brought out the buns too so I could toast them the way she liked. While I waited for the charcoal to ash over, Roberta slept. The sun was hanging low now, and it cast that magic light on our home. And the smooth light made it seem like a sad thing. The sprinkler head, busted and weeping, in the corner of the yard. The gutter sagging from the edge of the roof. How could she sleep so peaceful while the house around her was falling apart? As I watched her chest rise and fall I wanted nothing more than to wake her with the feeling of my hands coming down tight on her throat. What I'd give to hold her there until the lights went off.

Instead, I slapped the hamburger into patties and threw them on the fire. I watched the smoke swirl around Roberta. Her drink had begun sweating in the sun and was slipping from her fingers. It tilted from her hand. The bottle threatened to tumble on the ground, to shatter and make a mess of things, but I didn't move. I let it stay as it was.

ROUGH AIR

Back when you could carry liquids on an airplane, a woman got me drunk. I was flying to Los Angeles to take Lauren out to dinner. I had strung her along far too long and it was about time to ask her to marry me. But thinking about it caused a panic in my head, making me feel like I was drowning.

From the aisle seat I watched each face board the plane. My hope was to sit next to a foreigner or a businessman. We could both nod and acknowledge our co-existence, then spend the next two hours ignoring each other. I wanted some peace. I wanted a chance to figure things out before I landed.

A fat man stopped at my row. He dragged a carry-on the size of a love seat. He went to work jamming that bag in the overhead bin, puffing air out his mouth the whole time. Listening to him breathe, right over my head, made me angry. He sounded like he'd pedaled here on a bike. I watched him as he studied his ticket. His eyes tightened behind his glasses. "Fifteen," he said. "Seat D. I think you're in my space."

"Thirteen," I said.

He scratched his scalp and counted down the rows.

“Here, sir.” I tapped the ceiling next to the sign. It clearly said 13D. “You’re two rows back.” But he wouldn’t move. It was like he didn’t believe me, that for whatever reason me and the signs in front of him had conspired against him. So he kept blimping over me until I was ready to move just to get away from him.

“Come on,” a lady said. “There’s enough seats.” She stood behind him in the aisle. She had sharp features that made her seem more angry than she probably was. But I liked the way she handled the man. “Just take the next one. We’re not going anywhere until you sit down.” She pressed herself against him until he was urged to leave. She’d had her way with him.

“Sorry about that,” she said. She glanced at her ticket. “Looks like I’ve got the window.”

I unbuckled my safety belt.

“I can manage.” She side stepped in front of me, straddling my knees. As her legs spread, her dress cinched drum-tight against her body. I leaned back as far as I could and tried not to notice. But she had a gravity only a woman could possess.

She took her seat and I saw how her body moved. Everything about her was compact, smooth and strong like a bird of prey. Her nose hooked from her skull and her cheeks were too wide for her face. She held an odd kind of attraction which made me uneasy sitting so close to her. So I leaned away until my lap-belt cut at my thighs.

I thought good thoughts. I told myself Lauren was a good woman. She was right for me. Stable and patient. She was reasonable--more than that. Lauren was a saint. I had a good thing waiting for me. I volleyed this in my head. But the woman beside me had a wildness about her that tore at my best intentions. She knew she looked good. It showed in the way she pulled her

hair back fast and clean. Or the way her hand swam through the air to turn on the overhead light. She was dipped in confidence.

Pretending to read, I thumbed through a magazine. I watched her unsaddle her purse. It was an expensive bag. That much I could tell. Lauren had one like it in her closet. She housed it in a felt box and before we could go out she would take it out and buff the bag. Lauren hardly put anything in that big bag, but she clutched to it like it was packed with diamonds. This woman kicked her purse beneath the seat. She tossed it around like a disposable luxury. As I perused an ad for the best orthopedic surgeons in New York, I made up my mind to ignore her. I knew Lauren wouldn't have it. And I knew what I was capable of doing. But most of all, I knew there was a beautiful danger in the way she drew one leg against the other. I would not talk to her.

"Can we just get this over with?" she said.

"Pardon?"

"Come on, really." She extended her hand. I did not take it, but she nudged it closer until I broke. "Veronica. I'm in HR. Girl's weekend with a college roommate." The strength of her grip surprised me. I released my hand from hers.

"I'm Teddy. Police Officer. I'm going to see to my girlfriend."

"Isn't that fun." She uncapped a tube of lipgloss and rounded her mouth. Veronica swallowed her lips and let them plump.

"I'm going to propose."

"Terrible idea."

"Excuse me?"

“Cops aren’t good at marriage. But I’m sure you know this already.” She reached overhead and pressed the call button.

I tried to ignore it, but her comment made me itch. “What do you know about it?”

“Is this working?” She leaned over me to examine the button. “I didn’t hear it ding. I don’t think this works.” As Veronica jabbed the button I could feel her breasts jostle the air by face. I shifted toward the aisle.

“What do you mean terrible? How is that terrible? You don’t even know me.”

“It’s not you. Nobody’s good at it really. Half my job is updating paperwork. Changing last names is a bitch.”

The way she poached my attention made me feel like I was being handled. I wanted her to think I was bored with the conversation. I flipped to another page in the magazine as loud as I could. “Veronica, it was a pleasure. But I have to get some reading done.” I focused on the page. From the corner of my eye, I thought I saw her smirk.

The flight attendant tapped our call button. Veronica ordered two cups of ice. “Overflowing with ice,” she said. “And an unopened can of club soda. It’s important.” The attendant feigned an apology. She tilted her head and told Veronica drinks couldn’t be served until we were in the air.

Veronica looked at me. She fluttered her eyes and wobbled her head. “Then once we’re in the air.”

Moments later, with the engines screaming and the wheels just free from the ground, Veronica punched the call button again.

She tapped my arm. “Are you going to order anything?”

Without taking my eyes from the magazine, I shook my head.

“Splendid.” She bent down to paw through her purse and her dress draped from her chest. I could see the scalloped fringe of her bra. I forced myself to look past her. Through the window I watched everything I knew become meaningless. Cars and freeways, the houses and buildings, they shrunk into points of color until I could no longer distinguish their purpose. As I watched this I felt a vast space open up between me and my home. I was on my way to it now.

None of it made me feel any better.

Veronica placed her hand on my shoulder like we were old lovers. “I want you to get a club soda. And ask for the can. We’ll need the whole thing.” I felt my pulse quicken when she said we. There was an unexpected excitement in we. Veronica put her tray table down. She put mine down too. “Me and Teddy are going to enjoy ourselves.” From her purse she pulled a sandwich bag packed with lime wedges. Next she pulled a handle of vodka from her bag. It was then that she gave me a smile so hot and terrible it made me want to do something reckless. She had the kind of mouth that made me want to transfer my savings into checking, spend it all on a weekend of empty bottles and room service.

The plane banked and the sun blasted through the window. It backlit Veronica’s face. The light fanned behind her head. I felt something deep and good start to well up and I knew I was in for some kind of trouble.

Who are you? Where did you come from? I wanted to ask her. But there was no need. I already knew. She was here and she was pulling a bottle of booze from her bag. She was anyone but Lauren.

They wheeled us the ice and soda and Veronica poured them fast. Mostly liquor with the smallest shake of soda.

“You could be the greatest or worst bartender in the world.”

“First one all the way,” she said.

I stirred my drink with a lime. “Should we toast to something?”

“Never.” She tilted her glass.

We burned down the vodka until the ice hit our teeth. She set up another and we raced them just as fast. She let me take my time on the third. But as a point of pride I shot that one too. I shook my glass at her. “What’re you waiting for?”

“Yes, officer.” And she set me up again.

Between sips, with liquor whiffing from her mouth, she asked me the strangest question. “What’s the worst thing you’ve ever done?” Her eyes rested on me with a tired stare.

I took another mouthful and exhaled. “That’s a little personal Veronica.”

“That’s kind of the point, Teddy.”

I took the bottle from her and topped off our drinks. A man in the row across from me watched us. He was sitting next to a lady so tired and bored she must have been his wife. He was drinking his coffee and staring. I could see he was jealous. Of the booze or me sitting with Veronica, I couldn’t tell. But he had the sad look of a man in wanting. “I never thought of bringing liquor on a plane,” I said. “Who gave you this idea?”

She drew from her cocktail and shook her head so her hair veiled her eyes. She looked at me through her bangs. “You first, Teddy. Worst thing ever?”

I didn't have to search far. The drink had started working on my head and my thoughts rode easy off my tongue. "While back I had to ID a victim."

Veronica leaned forward. "Like a line up in the movies?"

"Now's not your turn. This is my story." Her eyes narrowed. I could tell she liked this kind of exchange. I waited for her to see that I was in charge. "So I was with the coroner in the hospital basement. And he takes me to the vic, pulls back the sheet--that whole thing."

Veronica touched my arm. "Were they murdered?"

"You going to let me tell it?"

She held up her hands. "Please."

"This was a hit and run thing. He'd been down there awhile. Time I got there, the man was already examined and sewed up." I drew a line in the air, the shape of the incision. Veronica touched her collarbone. "We don't hang around for that sort of thing. So, I identify the body and the doctor leaves. It's just me and the guy. He's laying there under the light all bloodless. And God help me, I don't know why, but looking at the man I start to get angry."

"Why?"

"I don't know. There was something in the way he was laying there. How quiet everything was. You could hear the lights humming. And he was resting there so still. So I don't know. I just let loose and slapped him. Right on the face, I slapped this dead stranger as hard as I could."

"What'd it feel like?"

"Can't remember. Stiff I guess. His head barely moved when I hit him."

"Was he cold?"

“I think so.” I finished my drink in a long pull.

“You ever think hard enough about it? Enough to know why you did that?”

“No.” I stared at the headrest.

“Ever done something wrong just because you could?” Veronica’s eyes flashed like she had just plucked an old memory. I wanted to know her secret.

“I guess I liked the danger of it,” I said. “The doctor in the other room, being so close to trouble.”

“Oh, Teddy.” Veronica laughed and her wide face got wider. “You have no idea how good you had it down there.”

I shook my head. “He deserved better. Far as I know, he was a good man.”

“So why’d you do it?”

I glanced at the man across the aisle. He had finished his coffee. He was leaning into his old lady’s ear, his hand rubbing the back of hers. I think I would have slapped him too if he looked at us again. “I’m not sure I can answer that.” I shook the ice in my drink and laughed a little. “Never told anybody that story before.”

Veronica took a strange satisfaction in this. “Your girlfriend doesn’t know?”

“Lauren? God no. She doesn’t have the stomach for that sort of thing.” My tongue felt dry. I forced myself to swallow. “I don’t think she could be with a person like that.”

“Jesus, you’re a strange breed.”

“Men?”

“Cops.”

“How’s that?”

“You’re all reckless.”

I gave her a look that told her I wasn’t buying.

“Think about it. When there’s danger and everyone else in their right mind is running away, you guys are all big eyed running straight into the teeth of it.”

She had me there but I didn’t let her know. I took the bottle and filled our glasses. I was in a delicate position. I knew there was still time enough to get away from this. I hadn’t done anything wrong. But I couldn’t let it lay there. I wanted to know.

“Your turn,” I said. “Same question.” I handed her the drink. It was then that I became aware of how close we were sitting now. Her forearm against my shirt sleeve. Her knees next to mine. I didn’t pull away. “What’s the worst thing you’ve ever done?”

“Honestly I couldn’t tell you Teddy.” She drew long from the glass. Her chin lowered and she exhaled. “I haven’t done it yet.” Her head fell toward the window and it felt like she was pulling me from the aisle.

I had nowhere to go. I tried to lift my drink but her hand was on top of mine.

“Let’s toast,” she said.

I didn’t say anything. I took it in.

“For tonight.” She raised her glass. Her eyes went big. “Stranger danger.”

I wanted to tell her to stop. That I couldn’t. I wanted to tell her that Lauren was good. And that she wouldn’t want me doing this. Whatever we were about to do, I didn’t want it to be a story I’d have to carry around with me. But all I could say was, “Veronica.” I said it again.

“Veronica.” I liked the way her name sounded coming from my mouth. There was something

exotic in it. Something lush and thrilling that couldn't be found in a name like Lauren. Veronica. Her name was like a song.

She scribbled on a napkin. The beginning of a phone number trailed behind her flexed hand. She looped the bottom of a five. In a single swoosh she finished a six and I felt my pulse explode, the blood drumming in my head. "Veronica," I said.

"Yes, Teddy."

My tongue felt heavy. I took another drink. "You're bad for me."

She creased the napkin and planted her number in my breast pocket. I felt her fingers slide against my chest.

"Veronica, I can't."

Lines stacked on her forehead. She cocked her head. "Why not?" she said. "You got a good thing going. Why change now?"

I listened to the engines screaming at the air outside. The frightening noise grew louder. The plane was slowing now and I found myself forced forward in my seat. As I thought about her question, it felt as though that terror was drilling in my head.

"I don't know." I covered my ears. "Because she makes me take a baby aspirin."

Veronica touched the side of her neck. "If that ain't love."

We slowed more. The engines revved. "She calls me, every morning like clockwork. She hasn't missed a day in three years. She calls and asks me if I've taken my aspirin. She read somewhere it was best thing a man my age could do for his heart." I tried my best to smile at her but my mouth wouldn't listen. "What can I say? She wants me around."

The booze made Veronica's eyes look big and liquid. And she used them to look on me with such dreadful tenderness. I pressed my hands tighter against my head. I thought of Lauren. She would already be at the airport. She never picked me up at the curb. Getting there early, she was the kind of woman who would wait for me, right there in front of the gate. She'd have on a black camisole just because I told her once that I liked the way it looked on her. Lauren remembers things like that.

"We haven't done anything yet, Teddy. It's a number. We're both adults here." With that, she fished an ice cube from her drink. She positioned it between her molars and bit.

Hard as I tried my mind wouldn't linger with Lauren. I could feel Veronica's number in my pocket. I wasn't ready for this. Of all the seats on the plane she took this one. I prepared myself for Lauren. I needed to practice my proposal. But how could I make her believe I was still hers? Soon enough I'd be in the terminal clutching her body. How I'd cleave to that woman. She would squeeze me and tell me she loved me. And I'd hold her right, just the way she likes. Her arms draping from my neck. She'd thrust her weight into me and Veronica's number would sear into my chest. My face would go hot, knowing all the dark promises that napkin held. Lauren would cry. She's always overcome when we first see each other. I'd put a hand on the back of her head. I'd pull her into me until her heels lift off the ground. And from this embrace I'd see Veronica waiting for her luggage. Our eyes would meet and we'd share a private moment in the crowd. And with Lauren still hanging in my arms, I would know that the world holds more excitement and cruelty than I ever imagined.

Next to Veronica, I waited to make the descent. The airplane shook and the seatbelt sign came on. The engines tore louder at the clouds. And for the first time, I had the sensation that we

were hurtling with incredible speed. Below us the city lights grew bright. The buildings began to take shape beneath the clouds. As they drew closer a terrible sensation hollowed in my stomach. The plane dipped sharply and the cabin shuddered. The passengers groaned and my heart began to pound. Veronica put her hand on mine. "Here," Veronica said. "We'll be there in a moment. We're going to be just fine." She closed the window shade and I wrapped my fingers tight around her wrist.

And when I think back on it now, the two of us so close to danger, she may have had it right in more ways than I care to admit. Somehow she knew I'd never have it this good again.

THE BOOK OF SMOTE

“Is it not written in the Book of Smote?” --Nicholas 4:19

“Behold it is scribed in the Book of Smote.” --2 Andrew 3:7

New World Standard Translation

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE TEXT

Wrath and pestilence aside, He's a funny guy. He has this curious habit of using damaged people. He prefers the flawed and broken; the maimed and the wretched are His. He selected Noah, a drunk², to captain a boat harboring all His creatures. His man David, a voyeur and adulterer³, was anointed king. Saint Peter, prone to fits of rage⁴, was entrusted with the keys to the pearly gates. The first man He formed was a wimp⁵; the deliverer of His people was a murderer⁶; His best missionary was a reformed bounty hunter⁷. Hell, half the Book was written by lawyers.

So when He chose the lowly Harvey, told him He was going to decimate his city⁸, why should Harvey have been surprised? It's not like he had killed anybody. But in examining the text, why Harvey was selected--out of every doomed soul in Los Andes--is still shrouded in controversy. But perhaps that is part of the mystery in the way He moves⁹.

Location	In The Great City	In The Great Wilderness
Topic	A. "I won't go." B. "I will go."	A. "I'm here." B. "I shouldn't have come."
Division	A. Disobedience to Call / Harvey's Judgement B. Prayer of Harvey / Harvey's Deliverance	A. Obedience to Call / City's Judgement B. Plead of Harvey / Harvey's Exodus
Time	c. 2230-90 C.E.	sometime later

² Genesis 9:20,21

³ 2 Samuel 1:2-5

⁴ John 18:10

⁵ Genesis 3:10-12

⁶ Exodus 2:11-14

⁷ Acts 9:1,2

⁸ Smote 2:1

⁹ Psalms 77:18,19

ONE: IN THE GREAT CITY

There was a certain man from the city of Los Andes, a collections agent from the lower flats of the sanitation district, in the sector of the nomadic street youth, whose name was Harvey. By all accounts he was a failure. He was low in station. And of that station he was the lowest of his house.

One day the Lord's favor smiled on Harvey. On an oppressively hot afternoon his upstairs neighbor pulled a Gaynor from his penthouse balcony. He splashed on the pavement outside Harvey's window. It was rare in those days to give mind to such trivial calamity. One had little time for fruitless pursuits. But on this day Harvey took notice.

Down in the alley there was Harvey, the medics and some guy with a camera. Technically you could say his neighbor was there too. Don, the guy with the camera, was an angel from the Lord. He had disguised himself as a reporter. Don photographed the poor neighbor splayed on the pavement.

As he was shooting the body, Don told Harvey the man jumped because of his work. "Real shame, this one. He had a cushy job. Guy was a pet exterminator--pretty good one too, guessing from his apartment." His camera flashed. "You know they pay cash for that? I had no idea." Don winced his eye and took another picture of the broken body. "Poor guy got let go for refusing to retire a cat. Guess the kitty snagged the corner of some lady's couch. So what does she do? She calls him to take care of it. Perfectly good kitty. Done." Don cradled his camera and reached in his coat pocket.

One of the medics leaned against the ambulance and thumbed his phone. The other picked his fingernails. Using the corner of the gurney sheet, the medic wiped his hands.

“Two more minutes and he’s yours.” Don folded a stick of cinnamon gum in his mouth. He nudged Harvey with his camera. “Watch your feet there buddy. This one sprung a leak.”

Blood teemed from the man’s side. It trickled toward Harvey’s slippers. He shifted his stance wider. “All this for a cat?”

“Don’t move,” Don said. He crouched and angled his camera. “Hold right there.” His camera flashed. “Yes. Now we’re cooking with grease.” He turned his camera to show Harvey the picture: Half the frame was filled with Harvey’s pale, swollen ankle. The other half was asphalt and a blood stream.

Harvey cleared his throat. “Did he--so how do you know him?”

“The medics?”

Harvey tilted his head. “The dearly departed.”

“Him? I don’t know him from Adam. All I know--for whatever reason--he wouldn’t kill a cat so they fired him. So he comes home and...” Don whistled through his teeth, a sound like a bomb dropping. “I got called to shoot it.”

Harvey was impressed how much Don knew. He had lived in the building for ten years and had never seen this neighbor until now.

Another flash made the sidewalk glitter. Don looked at his camera. He adjusted something on the lens and took another picture. “From such heights, like a trampled bird¹⁰.” With the camera against his face he said, “Okay boys. Let’s get an action shot.”

The medic pulled the body by the wrist. The arm went taught but the body did not move. The other medic tugged and they installed the man in the back of the ambulance. Don kept the

¹⁰ Matthew 10:28,29

camera going. He was holding it above their heads, following them all the way into the back of the van. They attached wires to what was left of his face. Another set was suctioned to his chest. With a practiced indifference, the medic pushed buttons on the monitor. He paused and smiled as Don took his picture.

Don sighed. "Please. Act natural."

"This going in the paper?" the medic said. "My last name is Lotter. Spelled like otter but with an 'L'. Here, let me write it down," Lotter said. Eager for a pen he frisked himself.

"No need," Don said. "I'm not with the paper. This is a private assignment."

Lotter let his smile slide into an uncomfortable smirk. "No more pictures," Lotter said. The door slammed and the van left them.

Exhaust and the heat of the alley made Harvey's stomach turn. All that was left of his neighbor was a stain¹¹ that seemed impossible to clean. For Harvey, it made the man more real than when he was lying there. For a brief moment he felt bad. Had this man held the door for him in their building? They must have shared an elevator ride together. He buried the thought. Such knowledge could twist a man's constitution. He was better not knowing.

While Harvey tried to ignore the splatch of him that remained, Don focused on the building. He took pictures of every floor, from the skyline to the curb. He photographed the sidewalk, the point of impact, the blood puddle in the gutter. He knelt where the body landed and snapped pictures toward the noon sun. It was like he was trying to capture the last images the man had. He captured what the neighbor saw right before he hit bottom.

¹¹ Jeremiah 2:22

Harvey palmed the side of his face. He looked at the open apartment window. To live in a penthouse, he thought. “What a waste.”

“Odds are it’s because of his daughter.”

“Oh God.”

Don stood and brushed his kneecap. “You guys don’t know the half of it. Get this, he tells her how they’d have to cut back until he got a new job. Tells her with things tight and all, they might have to postpone their Disney vacation. Well, this was news the girl couldn’t take. She goes nuts. I mean bobo. She stomps out--nine years old mind you--catches the thirty-nine express, all by herself, to city hall. Guess what she does?” He tapped Harvey’s elbow. “Go on. Guess.” His cinnamon breath was close enough to smell. “Fine, I’ll tell it. She files for an emancipation.”

“No?”

“Shit you not. She paid extra for expedited processing. ”

Harvey scratched his cheek. “Kids.”

“So he gets served and he hurtles himself out the window. Blamo! Just like that.”

“How could you know all that? He only jumped a minute ago.” His eyes tracked the building. A curtain fluttered from an open window. The ninth floor: corner windows and skyline views. After the seventh floor you needed a custom key just to make the elevator work.

“I slipped the super a fifty. She let me look around his flat.”

Harvey considered greatly the glory of that heavenly room. The curtain waving down at him. His eyes welled at the thought of it. Whether it was staring into the sun, or the surging heat of the day, or perhaps the hope of landing that beautiful penthouse in the sky, Harvey did not

know. But for some reason a fat tear blurred his vision. Don took a picture of it as it pulled from Harvey's face.

"I found the court notice crumpled next to the window. It's crazy, man, I guess he really loved his child. Enough to...you know. Might of been the last good man in this town." He took another picture of Harvey: his neck stretched, looking up at the beautiful open window. Another tear sliding down this face. Don's camera clicked. He gave a short laugh as if he were amused. "Wait'll the boss sees this."

Harvey wiped his cheek. Normally, he wouldn't care. Somebody wants to end their life, he could understand. Happened all the time. Just last year the chancellor's son hung himself from a fig tree. The paper didn't run the story for a solid week. He guessed people had grown bored with bad news. So even then it was buried on page six below a euthanasia coupon. A neighbor's health was not his concern. But this man's failure gave Harvey a great hope. He yearned for a better apartment in his building but he knew there was a waiting list long enough to circle the city. To move up in this town you had to snare a miracle and move swift.

So when he saw the body blur past his window, when he heard the terrible wet smacking sound, he took considerable interest in the life lost. After Don, or maybe the ambulance drivers, he was the first to know about a space made available.

The sun flashed off the sidewalk. Harvey shielded his eyes as the flecks of mica¹² winked like a thousand diamonds. Today there was a divine countenance in the alley.

"What was his name?"

"Who?" Don said.

¹² Micah 7:10,11

“The jumper. Did you get his name?”

Don took a picture of what looked like a splinter of bone nestled in a sidewalk crack. His cheeks hollowed as he twisted the camera lens. “This is Los Andes, Harvey.” The camera flashed. “What does that matter?”

TWO:

That night the word of the Lord came to Harvey, saying, “Arise. Flee your wicked city. I have sent an angel to destroy Los Andes with a consuming fire.”

But Harvey only stirred. He had been celebrating the prospect of poaching a 7th story apartment. Bottles were opened. Mistakes were made. He was deep in slumber.

The voice of the Lord tried again. “Harvey, arise.”

Harvey groaned. “Mom? Is that you?”

“I am,” the Lord said, “not your mother. I have heard the cries of the holy. They are--”

“What? Holy who? Who’s there?”

The voice deepened with righteous anger. “Harvey!”

“God, what? I’m here.”

“Their cries are waxen great before my face. You have found my favor. Flee this evil land.”

Harvey rolled over. He folded his pillow firm against his head. “Christ. Can it wait? It’s four in the morning. I’ve got work.”

Moving in mystery, the voice left Harvey to his sleep.

THREE:

Now Harvey, son of Bernice, awoke with little recollection of the voice. Instead, he concerned himself with making toast and juice to remedy his sore head. And while he ate, he considered a dream¹³ that troubled¹⁴ him:

Standing above the great basin he saw the smoke of the country. Where Los Andes once stood was a great heap of ash, the skeletal frames of buildings groaning in a cauldron of rubble. Behind him, his mother, years deceased, called to him. "My boy Harvey. The city is lost. Their ways are over and you are all that remains. Rest with me Harvey, that we may know each other." She kissed his forehead. She poured him wine. "Drink and lay down." Her request disgusted him. Looking at her, advanced in years as she was, Harvey began to chuckle. Quick and nervous, he laughed. But as he examined her thin, emaciated lips, the skin slacking from her neck, his laugh grew in confidence. The round, hilarious sound echoed through the scorched valley. What use it it become the king of the dung heap? he thought. And without a queen?

FOUR:

In those days the walls of Los Andes were closed. It was the time for normalcy. The time of level stations, and forbidden charity. It was a special period. Credit was the law. And Harvey was mired in the employ of the largest credit reclamation service.

The racket was simple: credits were tagged by the owners. Owners donated to the poor and deducted their taxes. The custom, then, was to refuse credits from the sick and poor. And when they perished from starvation or exposure--whichever fate Los Andes ladled them--the

¹³ V Document reads *a distressing spirit of God*

¹⁴ 1 Samuel 16:14

tagged credits were collected from the dead and returned to their owners¹⁵. Of all the stations in the city, a Collector was the least, and Harvey was the least of these.

That morning his section judge, Menon, called him for a private meeting. Most days such an invitation would make Harvey sore afraid. His key performance indicators were trending down. And he was another bad month away from receiving charity himself. But he knew the man who jumped from the window was wealthy. He was a man deep in cash. Up there were clean, untagged credits. Real money. Fortune had smiled on Harvey for he could collect the man's credits himself.

Like all judges of the city, Menon was harsh. His skin drooped and he spoke with a yellow tongue. His breath filled the room the smell of cigar smoke and brimstone.

"Harvey, Harvey, Harvey," Menon said from behind his desk. "What to do with Harvey?"

"Sir?"

"Did you know that last week in..." he flipped through a report, "the eighteen block of your territory a woman was killed by bees?"

"Bees sir?"

"A man was--let me get this right." He turned the report. "*Upon the point of death, but continued to thrive*. Seems the beggar was being fed by a woman in your territory. Barefaced hospitality in your backyard."

Harvey looked at the floor.

¹⁵ Jasher 19:9

“So they bring her before a judge who saw it fit to anoint her head with honey and bind her to a tree. And rightly so, she was devoured by bees¹⁶. And I ask you, did you know there are bees in your block, Harvey.”

“Sir?”

“The screaming was so fierce, people outside the walls could hear her cries¹⁷.” He closed the report and squared it on the desk. “Now, what does this have to do with Harvey? It means your section is on notice. Imagine being eaten alive--no. Don’t imagine that. Imagine your collections for the next quarter.” Menon held a hand below his tie-clip. He stacked his other hand above his grooved teeth. “When the people get scared, people start to die. And I expect you to capitalize.”

“Well I’ll certainly be sure to--”

“Here’s how it is, Harvey. If this shit hole city were a teat, for the next few weeks your section would be the nipple. Now, they’ve proven they have the honey, and I want the milk. You go get it.”

The air in the office was hot and rancid now. “Thank you, sir. I promise not to--”

“Shut up, Harvey. You’re on top next quarter or you’re out. Next.” Menon spoke into the intercom. “That’ll do, Harvey. Delores send them in two at a time. Like hell I’m missing lunch today.”

Outside the office, Harvey stopped at Delores’ desk. She was frequently on the short end of office jokes for wearing too much make-up or having the worst tailor in Los Andes. And while Harvey entertained the taunts, sometimes providing his own jabs, he secretly enjoyed her

¹⁶ Jasher 19:43

¹⁷ Job 19:7

company. He particularly liked the way her lips smashed toward the center of her face. With a thick lacquer of gloss on them, they looked like the scarlet ribbon¹⁸ of a birthday gift.

“Tough break, Harv.” He liked how she called him Harv, too. It made him feel like they were lovers. He placed a hand on her desk. He tried to lean in a coy fashion. “And how’s that, Delores? My block landed the best leads in the city.”

Delores stabbed her stylus toward the intercom. “He left it on. The whole building knows you’re on notice.” She swallowed her bottom lip and gave a nervous smile. “Sorry.”

Harvey flushed. “Well, I’m not dead *yet*.”

“Ron and Margo have been killing. You’ll have to collect, like...” she stared blankly at the ceiling, “Jesus, Harv. That’s a lot of credits.”

“Can the condemned ask a favor?”

She clicked her stylus.

“Look up a name in the hospital record? My home section, Southeast. There was a jumper.”

“Emilio Valez. They have him at Bethany.”

“Thank you, Dee.”

“Shouldn’t you be combing your section? Menon said--”

“Who’s he anyway?”

“I don’t know, your boss. Someone who could have you stretched.”

Harvey looked at the office door. “Well, I answer to a higher call.”

¹⁸ Song of Songs 4:3, some texts read *pomegranate sash*

FIVE:

So it came to pass that Harvey traveled to the gates of Bethany. In the bowels of the hospital, he found Emilio not there. The man had not perished, but was recovering remarkably well post-op. Harvey went before the attending physician to discern Emilio's fate.

"Fractured femur, smashed jaw, orbital bone, face bone, back bone, the brain bone," Dr. John XI explained to Harvey. "From that height, it's a miracle I could even raise him up."

He found Emilio wrapped in gauze. Where his face showed, the skin was stretched and waxy. His body was stained with iodine and a bank of machines and wires compassed the hospital bed. One machine bellowed air into his mouth. Another dripped fluids into his forearm. Still another collected a foul smelling juice from his thigh.

Dr. John XI flicked a line connected to Emilio's earhole. "Somebody up there sure does love this guy."

Harvey watched Emilio slurp in air. *How could he have lived? Impossible. What kind of cruel god would let him live?*

The thought of staying in his low apartment pressed sore upon Harvey. He imagined himself rolled from his job and stuck on the ground floor above the alley. He pictured Emilio, frozen in his wheelchair, a smug look plastered on his crooked face. Him riding the elevator to the penthouse.

Harvey began to cry.

"There, there." The doctor rubbed Harvey's shoulder with a limp hand. "He's not going to be the same. But be thankful. We almost lost him."

Harvey began to sob¹⁹.

“Okay. That’s enough now. Alright.” Dr. John XI flagged an orderly. “We’ll have you fill these out. You can collect his things from the registrar.” Harvey did as he was told.

Among the possessions Harvey collected was a house key on a kitten’s foot keychain, a folded picture of a little girl, an unredeemed coupon for a free sandwich at *Gideon’s Grinders*, and an executive elevator pass for his apartment building. No cash was on his person.

SIX:

In the short of the day, with the sun pulling itself in, Harvey trespassed into the flat of Emilio. He marveled at the open floor plan. He contemplated the high ceilings, the wall of glass stretching before him, and he was envious.

By the window he took in the view from up top. The city glowed amber and green. No street noise this high. No screaming or offensive odor. Just groups of scattered dots on the sidewalk scurrying about their business. How insignificant they looked from here. This high you could blot them out with a brush of the thumb. This high one could almost tolerate the madness going on down there.

In the dining room he prepared the table. He unwrapped the sandwich he redeemed at *Gideon’s*. Sitting in the luxury of the flat, bologna never tasted so good. For a moment Harvey stopped eating. He felt moved to give thanks. In the wrong order he made the sign of the cross. He offered a simple prayer:

¹⁹ Or *weep loudly*

“Our most gracious heavenly father, bountiful are thou blessings. Thee giveth and taketh awayeth. Deliver me from my home. Take what you will that I may have a higher place, away from the streets. Take me up. That I might be...closer to thee? And please relieve your child, Emilio, from his suffering. Take him home, Lord. Take him that he might dwell with you. And that I might dwell elsewhere too. In the saving name of the Lord I pray.”

“Amen,” said a voice from the door. Harvey turned. Don took a picture of Harvey’s startled expression. “Yeah, doesn’t quite capture it. Put your head back down. Pretend like you were praying again.”

Harvey pinched his eyes.

“Much better. Nice.”

“Why are you here?”

“I was about to ask you. But I saw you crying at the hospital, the man giving you his things. I put the two together.”

“You don’t know. I thought he might have pets.”

“Didn’t take you for the sentimental kind of lot.”

“I was checking up.”

Don dragged his index finger along the countertop. “I really don’t care, Harvey. What are you still doing here, anyway?”

“I was hungry.”

“Not here. I mean here, Los Andes. Aren’t you supposed to be headed for the hills?” He took another picture. He looked at his camera and laughed. “Man, He sure can pick’em.”

Just then Harvey wrapped his sandwich and threw it in the waste bin. He rushed toward the door. “I think it’s time we leave. I have important work tonight.”

Don shook his head. “Used to, I’d make a visit, they’d roll out the carpet, find a choice calf, fetch the finest flour²⁰. But not anymore. Nobody wants to break bread with a stranger. Where’s the hospitality in this world?”

Harvey fanned his palm toward the door. “Perhaps next time. I’m afraid I’m busy.”

But Don stood by the window. He leaned against the glass and surveyed the skyline. “*Wilt thou also destroy the righteous with the wicked²¹?*” He looked to Harvey. “How many good²² would you say are down there, whole city?”

Harvey huffed. He shrugged in a quick, repetitive motion. “This is ludicrous. How could anybody know that? How could you even gauge that?”

“I’ll give you a hint. If there were fifty--not even--let’s be generous. If there was say...ten, He wouldn’t do it.”

An angle of sun reflected off a neighboring window. The flash of it hit his eyes like a bomb igniting. Harvey winced. And in that brief moment of illumination, his mind caught the image of the city leveled and full of smoke. He recalled the voice and the dream of his mother. His insides quaked. “You’re here to do it. My god, He’s actually going to do it.”

“Perhaps.” Don’s finger slowly wrote in the dust on the window²³. “Your people came up pretty short. But before all that we have one wrinkle to crease.”

²⁰ Gen 18:2-7

²¹ Gen 18:23

²² Or *upright*; some texts use *upstanding*

²³ Daniel 5:25

Harvey sunk his head into his palms.

“Put on your shoes, Harvey. This isn’t holy ground.”

SEVEN:

But it displeased Harvey exceedingly. And in spite of his anger he took heed the word of God’s messenger. And back to the hospital Harvey went to deliver Emilio from the city. For God found favor with Emilio. He was upright in the eyes of the Lord.

Emilio was a sad sack of flesh. Strapped to a chair, he had to tap his chin against a lever to breathe. Like a piston hissing, so did Emilio draw air. With another lever, Emilio’s chin piloted his chariot. The noise was horrendous. His driving was erratic. He jerked the chair forward, never keeping a straight line. Down the sidewalk he zigzagged. He careened toward the sidewalk and halted. Then he pitched back in a stuttering fashion. The going was slow.

A small tremble of his left eyelid and the jutting of his chin where the only movements Emilio’s spine would allow. So like their travel, communication was cumbersome. Two trembles for yes. One for no.

“You’re going the wrong way. We need to go that way.” Harvey scurried alongside the wheelchair. Emilio swerved and Harvey dodged a wheel.

“No. No. No,” Emilio winked.

“What do mean ‘no’? I’ve got the word. I told you. He’s going to barbecue the city.”

Emilio pressed his chin deeper into the lever.

“What? Are you hungry? You want to eat? *Gideon’s*, right? That’s your stop. We could have them blend a sandwich for you, put it in that,” he pointed to one of the bags hanging above the wheelchair, “that thingy. Emilio, please.”

But Emilio could not be detoured. He was possessed. Driving mad they continued toward the heart of the city, to a place where the waters were brackish and the evil youth roamed in packs. Deep into the city they journeyed until finally Emilio shook his chair to a stop.

“Here? This is what you want?”

“Yes,” Emilio said.

In the depths of an alley were two female voices. One old, the other sprouting and innocent. Emilio’s face was frozen in horror. Saliva collected in his jowl. It pulled from his chin in a thick rope. Harvey wiped Emilio’s face. He refused to turn down the alley. Instead, he listened to the voices.

“It’s too hot. They don’t even get garbage service here.”

“Pretty girl. That’s my pretty girl.” A voice came from the alley. It sounded like sand cooking in a fryer. “Don’t throw up. Pretty girls don’t throw up. You handle yours. There you go. Hold that down.”

A child’s laugh fluttered from the darkness.

Emilio knew but he refused to face the darkness. His eyes and nose began to water. His mouth collected it and it spilled from his crooked lip. Harvey sopped it from his face. “You know her?” Harvey waited, but Emilio would not move. “You know the old one?”

He blinked. “No.”

From his pocket, Harvey unfolded the picture. “Her. Is this your daughter?”

Emilio tapped his chin on the lever. Air slurped into his throat. The machine screamed and he seized the breath. Tears began to slip into his open mouth.

“It’s okay.” Harvey mopped Emilio’s face. “She can come. We can take her with us. I’m sure He’ll understand. It’s family. Wait here.”

Harvey turned and faced the darkness. He walked toward the end of the alley. The voices grew louder.

“That piercing hurt?” the old one said. “Looks like it hurt. Come here. Let me see. Don’t be shy. You know you’re a real pretty girl.” Trash bags rustled. “You can be shy or you can be pretty. You can’t be both.”

The girl laughed. “I’ve never been this drunk so early. One more and I’m going to die. Oh, god I think I’m dying.”

“I like that piercing. I want to get that done but I’m scared.”

Harvey pressed against the bricks. He tried to see into the shadows.

“If I get that done will you come with me? I want you to hold my hand when they do it. Here have this.” He could not see. “Does that thing, that make you do it better? Look at that thing. My god, I bet you do.”

Deep in the darkness the air fouled. All that was wrong with the city was steaming off the street. The stench had a presence.

“I’ll give you fifty to go down.”

Harvey didn’t like the voice. The pack a day timbre. The way it contrasted with the smoothness of the childlike voice. It was harsh. There was an experience in it. She had screamed with that throat. She had cried too many times for one voice to take.

“I don’t do girls,” the child said.

“They all say that. Even I said that.”

“It’s too hot. It seriously smells down here. I’m going to puke.”

“You’re too good for me? I got cash here. Cold Credits. You too good for cash?” Her cooked voice echoed off the bricks. “Let me see if that thing works. Before I get mine I want to see it. Fifty. Come on.”

“Give me the bottle. I need a...give me a moment here.” There was a reluctance in the child’s voice. Harvey heard something fall into the trash bags. A rattle of plastic and glass rose from the alley. He stood still.

“Don’t get up. Stay there. Right there. You just take the credits and take your time. Here. Take it.” The alley went quiet.

Harvey’s spirit was troubled. He didn’t know if he should charge into the alley or let it play out. Was it right to interfere²⁴ with the course of events. As he considered the consequence of his action the sound of a shattered bottle filled the alley. The tinkling of glass danced on the street. There was a howling and a thrashing in the trash bags. Harvey ran into the dark.

He saw the little girl swaying. She struggled to stay upright. Her legs straddled the body of a gaunt woman. The older woman was face down in the mounded trash. She moved her arms slow, trying to swim away.

“I’m keeping the money.” The child stood over the woman. She spat on the her head. “Told you I didn’t do girls.” She spat again. The woman writhed through the garbage moaning something awful. The little girl spat on her again.

²⁴ Job 21:7,8

“Knock it off down there,” Harvey said. He gave a mighty roar. “Let her alone. You got your money.”

The child snapped her head around. She looked up the length of the alley. Her mouth went long. “Holy shit.”

Harvey was proud. Making his voice go low like that. Getting it to rumble off the buildings. He felt important. He was God’s man, someone to be feared. But her trembling was not for him. He had not realized Emilio had rolled in behind him.

“How are you here?” The girl stumbled into the garbage. She gathered herself and increased the distance from her father. “You’re dead. You killed yourself. Oh, god.”

Emilio’s body swayed limp in the chair. He faced his daughter with the only look he could make: a longing behind a mask of scars.

Neither moved. A foul wind eddied through the street. The rotten smell swirled between them.

“We’re leaving the city,” Harvey said. “He won’t leave without you.”

The child looked at the old woman in the trash. Her temple bled and mixed with the garbage juice. Her eyes stung with blood. She blindly reached for her credits. The child kicked her in the ribs. She writhed and bawled like an old hound. The girl took the rest of her money.

“What’re you doing here? I left a note.”

“He can’t talk, can’t move. He can’t really do anything. But he wants you to come with us.”

“I told you I never wanted to see you again. I told you to drop dead.”

“He did.”

“The fuck are you?”

“I’m his neighbor.”

She looked at her father. The pumps and bags. His skin, shiny like chewed bubble gum. She didn’t let her face blanch. Her chin didn’t quiver. “Tell him to try harder.”

“You do it. He’s paralyzed, not deaf.”

She counted the credits, folded them in her pocket.

Emilio’s face did not move. It couldn’t. But behind the mangled visage Harvey imagined something tearing. Beneath the surface his wounds were bleeding. His beautiful child was dead. For Emilio, she was already hung and speared²⁵.

“I’ve got my life now. Leave me alone--you and your faggot friend.” She went to the mouth of the alley. “Stop following me.”

“He’s going to nuke it,” Harvey shouted. “He came to me in a dream. He’s going to tear it all down.”

Without turning, she laughed. “The next time you chat, ask Him what took so long.” She turned the corner and was gone.

They were left there in the foul darkness. Behind him was Emilio’s mechanical breathing and behind that was the constant bellowing of the concussed woman in the garbage; beyond her was the ochre haze of the city; and past that were the million stacked souls of Los Andes, trudging through the thick, hot mire of it all. They were out there, stupid and happy, waiting to be scattered across the earth on a wrathful wind.

²⁵ 2 Samuel 18:14,15

This was heavy on Harvey's mind. It was as if the sun had exploded and he carried the immense burden of understanding that nobody would know their doom for another 8.3 minutes²⁶. If he did not move--do something--he felt the responsibility of such knowledge might crush him.

"We must leave this place."

But before they made it to the street, Harvey received another message.

EIGHT:

So Harvey treaded from the alley for a clear connection. He held the line. He waited to hear the word.

"Harvey?" said the voice. It was high and angelic. The voice was like a honeycomb²⁷. It was Delores, and he felt good to his bones.

"I am here."

"Are you seriously trying to screw me, Harvey?"

"Sorry?"

"You think you can just stick it right in me and get away with it? Am I not getting through to you?"

"Did I...I don't follow." The street had settled into an eerie stillness. Harvey began to worry. "Did we talk about this?"

Her voice softened. "I'm in Menon's office. He's getting his face bleached and couldn't phone--Yes sir. Yes. He said he's there right now. Collections are going great."

"What?"

²⁶ Archaic. $(15 \times 10^7 \text{km}) / (3 \times 10^5 \text{km/s})$

²⁷ Proverbs 16:24

Her voice spiked. “They aren’t on my fucking desk you little shit stopper--sorry. Shit-stepper.”

“Is that you or him?”

“Harvey please, I wouldn’t say that.”

From across the office and through the phone Harvey could hear Menon scream. “What? He said what Delores? Tell me now.”

Harvey panicked. “Nothing. Tell him I said nothing.”

Emilio rolled his chair into the middle of the street. He aimed his face toward the dregs of Los Andes, the blocks run by lost children. He watched him search the emptiness. Harvey was uneasy.

“Tell him I said it’s coming. Tell him he’ll get his measure²⁸.”

Delores cleared her throat. “He said he’s got a whopper, about to land a real monster.” The line went quiet.

At the fringe of his sight Harvey could see something stirring; a pack of small bodies gathered at the edge of darkness. He sensed a terror on the horizon. They had sojourned there too long. “Delores.”

“Hold the line please.”

As he waited for Menon, he tapped Emilio’s chest. “We need to go.” Harvey swiveled the phone from his mouth. “Now.”

Like water ghosts, a group of children emerged from the dark haze. Emilio winked, “No.” Without flinching he positioned his chair toward the alley kids. He wanted to see their faces.

²⁸ Luke 6:38

The street children moved slow. Their cheeks were hollow. Their knees were all scabs. But what they lacked in energy, they made up in organization. They gathered with chains and bottle shards. Filed teeth and feral fingernails. From the next street three more rats flanked them. Soon they would be overrun.

“It’s too late. She’s not coming back.” Harvey pulled on Emilio’s shirt. “Let’s go.”

“Hold the line,” Delores said.

“What would you have me do? What does this prove?”

“Excuse me?” Delores said.

“There’s no time.”

“Don’t be so dramatic,” Delores said. “Menon said you have three hours before he freezes your assets.”

A thick tear teemed from Emilio’s eye. The children were close enough to smell now. He was ready.

“Jesus, we’re finished.”

“God, Harvey. It’s three hours.”

The clubs and knotted fists were about to consume them. As they were on him, Harvey was struck²⁹ with a blinding light. He cried for help. But the air in his chest was no longer there.

NINE:

²⁹ Genesis 19:11

In bright glory the angel Don appeared before them. A holy fire burned in his eyes. In his mighty hand he clenched the body of a grenade. With the pin hanging from his other hand like an ornament, he made the sign of the cross. The mob was sore afraid.

“Shall I open³⁰ it?” He held his fist before them. “I know your names and by God if I don’t know the hair on your heads.”

The children trembled. Like insects caught in the light, they scurried from the street. “Make haste!” he said to Harvey. “Or will you lose your breath when the city is punished?”

Harvey gave a simple, confused look.

“Seriously, tonight is the night. I don’t understand why you haven’t left. We’ve showed you your end. What is left here to gain?³¹ Take what life you have left and go.”

So they took heed and made their way from the city.

TEN:

The time for destruction was near. Don had made that clear. But Harvey still worried himself to make a collection before they rushed from the city. His reasoning was three fold: first, he was in need of traveling money. He knew he could survive. With a humble existence he could be sustained. But he was uncertain what kind of financial drain Emilio would cause. His health was fragile at best. And the bookends of life were costly. Furthermore, to endure the crucible outside the walls, they’d need bribes. It was like Harvey’s father had told him, “a dog-shit sandwich goes down easier with plenty of bread.” Harvey honored this instruction³². A little bread would go far

³⁰ Revelation 20:12

³¹ Psalm 39:4-6

³² Proverbs 4:1

in resolving their shitty situation. Like hell he would get clipped in the wild traveling with the lame. Second, Harvey wanted to invite Delores on their exodus. He thought of her often. More than he cared to admit their morning ritual of banter was the spark of his life. She inhabited his thoughts. For better or worse, she was a phantom that swirled in his dreams. Perhaps if he saved her, if he offered her the hope from an unexpected end³³, the prospect of prosperity, she would sojourn with him. Harvey smiled at this possible future. She and him in the wilderness. Starting a family together. They would be the seeds of a new Los Andes. A new garden for a new time. He knew this was explicitly against the Lord's instructions. But to Harvey's mind, what good is it to save the upright only to have them die without a future generation? Surely He would understand. If he provided an Eve for Adam, should there not be a Delores for Harvey? And third, Harvey decided to make one last collection because Menon had frozen his travel visa. Without fresh collections in his LARC³⁴ account his mobility would surely be limited. He could not leave the city walls. Harvey needed one big score. He needed to vulture the lowest, saddest beggar. A vagrant drowning in credits and close to the end. He knew what he must do.

ELEVEN:

Now it was in those days that the Andeans had lost their patience with animals. Their custom frowned upon extended admiration. As such they were infatuated with their pets while they were young. But shortly after a beast was weaned it was standard to have it exterminated or put to pasture in the city streets. Like aphids on a blossom, the forgotten strays of Los Andes foraged within the walls. Many fell prey to the beggars, while others were taken as companions.

³³ Jeremiah 29:11

³⁴ Los Andes Reclamation Center

Of all the animal collectors of the city, the greatest of these was Quacky³⁵. The beasts of the alley and the fowl that vaulted the skies, all that crept above and below, and all that had life wherein were kept in Quacky's care.

In the deep of night they arrived at Quacky's camp. The air held the fetid smell of carrion. Death's presence had weight here. The scent caught Harvey's nose. He had no desire to tarry long.

Quacky met them at the border of his territory. He dressed like a typical clown, somehow both bright and haggard, except his yellow boots were fashioned to resemble a duck's feet. And instead of a clown's tomato nose, he wore a plastic duck bill. "Come in, please. Join me that we may dine this hour." When he walked his feet tinked the ground. He was impossibly thin. How he staved death was a mystery. And the animals he kept were thinner. Dogs reduced to patches of fur. Birds so hungry they would not unhuddle their heads from their breast. Quacky went about knocking over milk crates. "Please sit. Rest your legs." He looked at Emilio. "Sorry. I mean come in. I don't take guests much anymore."

Although his face could not express it, Harvey could tell Emilio was offended with this place. A lean-to of chicken wire and pet soaked tarps. So low in station and anchored in stench. The dirt floor littered with torn paper and animal bones. This was a long way down for an exterminator with a penthouse view.

³⁵ Some translations, "the Duckman of Los Andes" or "Magical Balloon King" from the 'Q' document, in which his promotional card is detailed as: *"Quacky Duck" Magical Balloon King .The clown all youngsters can look up to! Featuring magic productions and balloonology. His entire career has been devoted and developed to good wholesome, entertainment. Featured on: radio, TV, provincial and county fairs, tradeshow, wakes, country clubs, shopping centers, parties and more. Before you celebrate, ask yourself: who's twisting your balloon?*

“Your lucky day,” Quacky said. “I’ve put on some goat broth.” He dipped his finger into a cauldron. He put it in his bill and smacked his mouth. “Though it may be pigeon? I do make a mean pigeon stock. Boil it down with cat bones, onion skins and rosemary--if you can find it. You’d swear it was goat. Just you wait. Let me fetch a bowl.” On his way to the next room, Quacky waddled past the largest stack of credits Harvey had ever seen. There were burlap sacks tearing at the seams with shekels. Quacky was sitting on a golden egg.

It would have been easy enough to take the clown’s life. Wasted as he was, there was little left of him to post a proper fight. And by morning Quacky would be smitten with the whole of the city. At best, he had hours to live. But Harvey knew he had not the constitution to take a life. At least not with the intimacy this required. Instead, he waited for Quacky’s exit and began installing the sacks beneath Emilio’s chair.

“Don’t wink at me like that,” Harvey said. He smashed the sack against the wheelchair’s battery pack. “You think I want this? I didn’t ask to be God’s errand boy. What should I do? Slay him here in the sand³⁶? Roll forward. We’re short on time.” When he was satisfied with his work, Harvey wiped his hands before Quacky returned with two bowls.

The duckman ladled a portion for Harvey. “It’s modest, I know. But when shared with friends.” An abrupt chuckle spilled from his bill. “Can he...should I spoon it here?”

“No, no,” Emilio winked.

“Yes,” Harvey said. He gave Emilio a stern look. “You can pour it in this one I think.” He fumbled with a drip bag that drooped above the chair.

³⁶ Exodus 2:12

Quacky approached with the foul broth. Emilio reversed. “Easy little buddy. Tranquillo.” He clicked his tongue like he was trying to pacify an ass. “Here you go fella.” Emilio backed away with a wild fervor.

“Don’t be rude. Try it. Look, it’s good.” Harvey drank from his bowl like it was a teacup. His face twisted a strained smile. His throat clenched and he fought the urge to vomit. “You don’t say. I would have never guessed there was, what’d you say it was, cat bones?” Harvey pulled a tuft of hair from his broth. “Go on Quacky. He’d be honored.”

But Emilio wanted none of it. He jerked his chair about. Quacky grabbed hold of it and they both belted into a beam. Like great waters pouring from a rock³⁷, Quacky was dismayed to see credits gush from Emilio’s wheelchair.

“What’s all this?” An anger stoked in his eyes. “I invite you in. I prepare a table for you. And this is how you repay my hospitality?”

“Come on, Quack. It’s not how it looks.”

“Take my food. Steal my credits. But you do not call me a Quack.” With his beak frozen in a smile, Quacky’s rage seemed maniacal.

“What can you do with all these? You give away balloon animals on the street.”

“I earned them.”

“Nobody will let you spend them. They’re tagged. It’s worthless charity.”

“I know the rules. You can’t collect them either. Not while I’m alive.” He stuffed his credits back into the torn bag. He tried to lift them but the strength had long ago left him. He

³⁷ Exodus 17:6

dragged them across the dirt. “We all see your kind come around all the time. Your glib little smiles. So eager to help when it’s too late.”

Harvey grabbed a corner of the sack. “Please.”

Quacky tugged but Harvey would not release his grip. The quarrel was pointless. Emaciated as he was, Quacky stood a better chance wrestling with an angel³⁸ than freeing himself from Harvey’s hold. “Give it. Let go.” He tried his best to be violent. A loose, pathetic fist slapped at Harvey’s face. “You’ll have to kill me.” Quacky screamed.

“Will you quit? This is ridiculous.”

Quacky mustered a new strength into his assault. He waved his fist like a symphony conductor, all the while yelling, “Mine, mine, mine.” A throng of birds shook their cages. The animals howled. Harvey wrestled him to the ground and they whipped up a great cloud of dust in the tent.

With the ruckus in full fury Emilio charged his wheelchair into the quarrel. The men tumbled; the cauldron spilled. The embers were kicked within and a fire licked at the walls until it grew with a fury. As the flame consumed the lean-to, Harvey scurried for the credits. The animals swelled in the growing fire. They quaked within their pens. Quacky set about saving his creatures while Harvey and Emilio made their escape. From the street they witnessed a holy fire consume³⁹ the treasures in Quacky’s camp. Flames devoured the structure completely. Harvey looked into the fire, searching for a figure of life, but found nothing. Then bursting like a meteor, a bird screeched from the hell. It blazed across the sky, a tail of fire streaking behind. Its feathers rained ash. The bird tumbled from the heavens and wilted in the gutter. Harvey watched with

³⁸ Genesis 32:24,25

³⁹ Deuteronomy 4:24, Hebrews 12:29

trembling dread. The bird shivered its last breath. Smoke twisted from its chest. And a great sorrow ached within Harvey. He prayed to God to save this beggar. Rescue him from this awful end. But the rest of the beasts, and Quacky within, were razed in the midst of the burning. Their screams carried on the waves of heat until there was only the ripping sounds of fire.

How soon the city would join him, Harvey thought.

Witnessing this portent, they made haste to the walls of the great city.

TWELVE:

When the word of Harvey's success arrived, Menon smiled upon him with delight. "My magic man," Delores said on his behalf. "Just as we're ready to write you off you strike the motherlode."

"You don't know the half of it." This was true. The haul they lifted from Quacky was substantial. So much so, Harvey had only claimed half of it in his LARC account, more than enough to gain favor and access to the city gate. "But I need a favor. There's a lead I want to follow."

"By all means, follow." His words, her mouth.

Harvey pictured her saying this. How full her mouth must have been when she rounded out the 'b.' The way her teeth harvested the gloss from her lip when she said 'follow.' He wanted to save her. She was already dead and he wanted her ears to hear his words that she might be restored⁴⁰. "Here's the rub," Harvey said. "I'll need my visa activated. This one takes me to the plain."

⁴⁰ Job 22:22,23, Acts 20:32

“Visa? You keep collecting like this and you can have the keys to my office.” Delores’ voice softened. “You’ve got to see this, Harv. He’s practically beaming.”

Time was waning. Harvey swallowed his rising fear. “Is your visa good? I mean, do you think you could take a break?”

Delores laughed. “It’s just before dawn, Harv. Crunch time. You know I can’t take a break now.”

“What I mean is can you come with me? Outside the city, will you go?”

Delores yawned. “Please. Come off it.”

“I’m serious. Like there was no tomorrow, would you go with me? I’ve got money and plan. I have the word and the hope for a future. Come with me.”

The line was quiet. He could not hear the stir of her breath. He tried again. “It’s not safe here. If you stay you’ll never see another sunrise. Los Andes is evil and it’s doomed. You’ve got to come with me. There isn’t much time.”

Through the soft, tiny static of the line a laugh began to flutter. At first, gentle as a golf clap, until it grew as loud and hot as a raging furnace. “Oh Harvey, you slay me.” The laughter continued.

“Is that you or--wait. Menon?”

Delores sighed. “My god. What do you think this is? We work together. What did you think would happen? And even if,” she choked on a laugh and took a moment to collect herself, “if you were the last man of the city, why would I go out there? Me and you out on the plain? Really?”

“It’s not like that. I’m trying to save you.”

“Good luck with that lead. Jesus, Harvey. We’ll see you tomorrow.”

Harvey waited on the com but Delores was already gone.

THIRTEEN: IN THE GREAT WILDERNESS

It came to pass that they journeyed to a small gate in the city wall called the Eye of the Needle⁴¹.

So low was the passage Harvey had to unload their burdens⁴² to travel through. To ensure safe passage Harvey paid the porter c400. The man looked at his palm and gibed. “Tagged credits? Do I look wet to you?”

Harvey peeled another c200 for the man. “This is easily ten times your fee. How far will this go at the next party? Imagine telling them you donated this much to charity?”

The porter pursed his lips as he measured the offer. But Harvey knew it was kosher.

He’d be a fool not to accept it. They squeezed through the Eye paying no attention to the man.

As Harvey and Emilio made their exodus, the angel Don had come in from the plain.

Where a camera had been, he now carried a wool duffel, pristine as the driven snow⁴³. He

looked upon them with a blend of amusement and pity. Emilio’s chair was so heavily loaded it scraped the ground. The thing hissed and moaned. And when it bottomed out on the path, Harvey

had to push it free. A jagged scar plotted their progress from the wall. “Sweet Jesus,” Don said.

“You sad sack of flesh⁴⁴. Sometimes I wonder who the joke is on.” He reached into his bag.

“What’re you still--why aren’t you in the mountain? You can’t be here now.”

⁴¹ Luke 18:24,25

⁴² Or *bags of shekels*; some texts *credits*

⁴³ Isaiah 1:18

⁴⁴ 1 Corinthians 1:28,29

“So we’re running behind schedule. You try fleeing with this.” Harvey breathed from his belly. He leaned on Emilio’s wheelchair. “Not too long ago he fell out a building, you know. I recall you being there.”

“Running late? You have no idea what this?” Don folded a stick of gum into his mouth. “This ain’t a hair appointment. This is messy. The city and the people, the walls, and all that an eye can witness.” He made a fist and flicked his fingers open like a flower violently coming in bloom. “You don’t want to be around for this.” He urged them to hurry. “Carry him on your back, crawl, I don’t care. But don’t stop. And do not look back. Run like hell or be consumed by the punishment of this land.” As he spoke the dawn struck the edge of Los Andes. A brilliant wash of gold rippled the sky. For all it was, sad, cruel, wholly corrupt, and self interested, Los Andes had never looked more beautiful to Harvey.

Don looked at the longing in Harvey’s eyes. “God almighty,” Don said. “It’s a tad late for all that.” He gave Emilio a push and sent them out to the plain.

FOURTEEN:

Emilio stopped at the edge of the plain. Upon a gentle bank, where the whole of the city was in view, he turned to watch the sun burn upon his city.

“Not here,” Harvey said. “He said not to turn back. We must keep going.”

But Emilio would not take reason. He had to watch. He wanted see what would happen. All those people and their homes. His whole life was down there. How could he not look back to

where his daughter had been? How could he forsake her? Looking back was the human thing to do⁴⁵.

Harvey pleaded. “I don’t want to walk this alone but I can’t stay here with you. Please, come with me.”

Emilio did not blink. As still as a pillar⁴⁶ he held his ground. He would not be moved. Instead, he stared down at the city. He stayed behind to bear witness.

FIFTEEN:

And so it was that Harvey kept his back to the plain. He went out with little boldness of spirit. Ceaselessly, he followed the sun. He hoped distance would allow him to lose the memory of the city. But the wind scattered the ashes of the city and the dust of a selfish people across the land. The scent of smoke was heavy far beyond the plain. Harvey breathed them in. It was a burden⁴⁷ he had no choice but to carry. He could not separate himself from the city⁴⁸. Their faces, the sting of their scent, they followed him far into the west.

Pitied and alone, Harvey pressed for the horizon. An orphan. A child without home. With no past to turn to, the world before him seemed too big to fathom. Beyond the mountain the land stretched out like a great brown water. So vast and empty was the land it seemed cruel. To a traveler, it was an endless road that rolled itself further away with each step.

⁴⁵ Slaughterhouse 5 1:21,22

⁴⁶ 1 Samuel 2:8, Genesis 19:26

⁴⁷ Galatians 6:2

⁴⁸ Psalms 103:12-13

But Harvey took hold of a fleeting hope. For without the crushing force of uncertainty there can be no dream of gold.

So with his hair full of ash and the smoke of a million souls upon his clothes, he made his way down into a new valley. He aimed for the edge of the horizon, the unseen place where the sun would reel. He searched for a new land, some unknown territory where flour would be rolled into bread and a table set before him. He was vagrant now, in need of a stranger's generosity. Harvey, chosen by God. A man with nothing, wholly set apart.

WHAT TO SAY, IF ANYTHING, TO A CHILD IN THE SPEEDWAY BATHROOM

I was midstream when this kid took the urinal on my right. There were three empty spaces, but he bellied up next to me. Something about him, having him so close to me there, made me uneasy. And I did not like feeling that way in the bathroom.

He was a little guy, no more than four or five by the size of him. His waist barely topped the urinal. When he got there he rolled his pants and underwear all the way to the floor. He pulled up his shirt and tucked it under his chin. Half-naked, he leaned back and held himself. He looked like a cherub arching a stream into a fountain. But after he finished he didn't get dressed. He stood there with his dungarees bunched around his shoes and seemed happy enough to stare at me while I went. I began to wonder where his parents were. Somebody should have been here looking after him, keeping him from behaving like this.

The boy tweaked his brow. He looked at me like the first man discovering fire, as if this encounter had changed his view of the world. Eyes all wide. His mouth amazed at the sight of the unthinkable. I tried to lean away from him but there was nowhere to go without hitting the floor.

Those big boy eyes. They made me want to scold him. I mean, I really wanted to set him right. But it was just me and the half-naked boy in the restroom, and I wasn't sure what I was allowed to say. That's how it goes these days. This *what-can-I-say-here* feeling cripples me more than I'd like to admit.

Sometimes, like when I'm at the grocery, it'll bear down on me. I'll be standing in the baking aisle looking at the bags of sugar or something, and it's pretty obvious I'm making up my mind, when an old lady slides her cart in front of me. She even glances at me over her shoulder. "Lady," I want to tell her. "You can't just park in front of people." But then I wonder if it even matters. She's probably been doing it for years. And it's not like it kills me if I sit there a moment. So I end up waiting, this vacant look on my face, as I watch her calculate which bag of sugar is the best deal. And as I gaze down the aisle I feel some strange kind of weight pressing in, like the world is too full for manners anymore.

I wasn't going to talk to the boy. But I had to do something. He was practically breathing on it. So I gave myself two exaggerated shakes before zipping up. That's how you do it, I said without saying. He looked down and wiggled. He tugged on his pants and his chubby fingers wiped at his thighs. Good enough. I made sure he was looking before I took a step back and flushed. The boy watched but didn't move. I cleared my throat. He startled but kept his eyes on me. I nudged my head toward the handle of the urinal. I cleared my throat again.

The boy rocked to his toes. Best he could he stretched for the handle. He huffed through his nose and tried again. There was a resolve in this boy that I started to like. The kid was determined. I could see his mind working as he looked up at the handle. He bit his lip and clasped onto the rim of the urinal. The sight of him cleaving barehanded to that filthy toilet made

my neck sweat. He hoisted himself up to the flusher. He tugged the lever and the water sprayed on his body. The boy jumped back in delight. He clapped his hands as if he had just rode a slide and was ready for more.

Before he could go again I grabbed him under his arms. His shirt was soaked with with toilet water. I took him to the sink and I brought my knee under him just as father had done with me. He sat on my thigh and leaned for the faucet. “Don’t touch,” I told him. “Soap them up. Here, like this.” I guided his hands to the dispenser. I turned on the water and cupped it in his palms. As I showed him how to rub his hands together, he watched me in the mirror. “Perfect. Just like that,” I said. “Front and back. bubbles all over.” We rinsed our hands and I showed him where to throw his paper towel. Then I knelt down and cleaned the water from his face. I dabbed his shirt dry. “There you go. All set.”

He looked down at his shirt, pulled at it with his fingers, then looked up at me. His eyes were bigger than before. This time full and earnest. And I thought he might want to tell me thanks but wasn’t sure how.

“It’s okay,” I said. “It’s not your fault.” I stood and the boy jerked backwards. He held his thumb with his hand and he pulled his arms close to his belly. I spoke to him with a tone that would calm a horse. “Listen,” I said. “You need to learn this. You can’t stare. Not in the bathroom. Not here.” I waved my hand in the vicinity of my groin. He stood there holding his thumb. “This is private. You need to respect that. Okay, champ? Got it?” I’m not sure why, perhaps my little league coach had done it to me, but I reached out and scuffed his hair. This touch jolted something in the boy. He looked at me like a snared animal. Eyes glazed with fear, a rope of spit hanging from his teeth. The start of a scream wavered in his throat.

“No, no,” I said. “I didn’t mean anything. There’s no need for that.”

The boy hollered. The veins on his temple flooded and he bolted for the door. Even after he vanished, his wail rang off the tiles.

I didn’t move. I could hear the boy crying outside. In two deliberate syllables he yelled *Stranger!* over and over like a car alarm. A woman asked him what was wrong. I heard her voice plunge with concern. She begged the child to tell her what happened in there.

What could I say? I touched him. I was only cleaning the boy. I was showing him how it’s done.

Nothing sounded right. So I planted myself in front of the sink. I straightened my shirt in the mirror and I swept the hair from my face. I was relieved to be there alone. But the moment was dashed by a rumble at the door. His mother called for me to come out and by god she’d have it. But I didn’t answer. I stared deeper into my face as she wailed on the door and I pictured that old lady at the grocery. The nerve she had, wedging her way in front of me to buy a bag of sugar. It made me think. If I’d had it my way, would I have made it out of there better off?

CHÉRI

In the corner booth of the restaurant Paula leaned in and said to me, “It’s time we should try a three-way.” She let her voice go low when she said this, which made all of it sound even more strange. And I wasn’t entirely sure how to take it. Part of me was still trying to figure how we ended up eating here: one of those conglomerates that’s impossibly a KFC, Taco Bell, and a Pizza Hut all at once. But from the latent smell of fish oil that hung in the air, I got the sense that it must have been Long John Silvers at some point before.

Paula saw me floundering and answered for me. “To be clear, this is for mostly for you. I don’t want you to think this is about me. Because it’s not. But I figure why can’t we mix it up a little?”

I wanted to be excited by this offer but my mind wouldn’t allow it. I bit into a taco. The shell split through the bottom and a stream of beef oil trickled through my fingers. Paula reached across the table and handed me a napkin. “You pick out whomever you want--when and where--and we’ll do it. Anything you want.”

This woman. I was used to her saying harmless things. Empty things like, *Cate Blanchett is striking*, or making hollow plans like, *We should take a cooking vacation to Italy*. But this felt different to me. There was a heavy in her words that had me concerned.

She cut into a Mexican pizza with edge of her spork. The timing of this. Why here and now?

Two tables over a pleasant looking family was sharing a bucket of chicken. As the kids kicked their feet under the table, the wife whispered into her husband's ear. Had they heard us? Were they judging us now?

I looked at Paula and thought she might be testing me. This was a litmus strip for our relationship. Maybe this was her hinting that I wasn't fulfilling her needs. Or maybe she was projecting her own inadequacy. Was there a key in the way she brought it up? Should she have said *whomever you want?* or *whoever you want?* Does that choice make a difference in the meaning of what was said? And what was she eating? Do they make pizza in Mexico? Is there an Italian-Mexican school of cuisine that I just haven't heard of? Is spork even a word?

I drank my soda, not to buy time and measure a response, but to settle myself from thinking. "This is new territory for me," I told her. "This kind of thing sticks with you. Like tattoos or owning purebreds. You immediately become one of those kind of people. You sure you want to be a member of this?" Paula kept her eyes on me and nodded quickly. "I'm not even sure how to go about it. Do you just ask a stranger, call a friend and be like, *Hey?*"

Paula spread her fingers. "Far as I'm concerned my part is over. I'm leaving this to you. Whatever you're comfortable with." She stretched and placed her palms on the back of her head. Her shirt pulled tight and I noticed. I took a moment to size her body. I hadn't done this to Paula

in as long as I could remember and was pleased to discover it again. The mole below her collarbone, the way her breasts, small enough to fit in a champagne goblet, somehow managed to slink low on her chest, made her uniquely mine. I pictured another woman taking them in her hands, kneading them high on her body. I watched her draw Paula's nipples to her mouth. I couldn't place a face on this other woman, but she was taller and fuller than Paula. She was soft and pear shaped. Wide hips and heavy breasts. And she had darker skin with a full tuft of dark hair between her legs, a physical contrast to Paula's features. I imagined Paula's hands taking hold of her and pulling her close. She writhed her body against this stranger, raking her fingers on her skin. "Why aren't you joining us?" the stranger said. "What are you waiting for?"

"Thanks for coming with me," Paula said. I looked up from my tray. "I know how you hate doing this kind of stuff." It hadn't dawned on me that maybe that's what sparked all this talk. We had spent the best portion of the Sunday buying patio furniture, which led to us getting an outdoor rug, something she said would make the space pop, along with a flatbed worth of terra cotta pots and succulents. She was all about succulents. And we went about picking them out as if we were adopting kids. Each one had a personality and a gender. Most of them already had names. Luc, Pierre, Dominique. Jean-Paul and Bernard. I had mentioned that we could call the tubby looking one Porthos, which she immediately dismissed. "He's not a Porthos. Look at him. Look how spry he is, all the tips pointing up and in." She held the plant's like a curator handling an artifact. "If anything he's a D'Artagnan. If he's a he at all." With a fervor like that I thought it best not to mention the impracticality of all this. We already had furnished the indoor living space and if we were lucky, we could only squeeze a few months of use out of the outdoor space. And I wasn't sure how our new family would handle the winter. I couldn't imagine Paula

letting them face the cold. I was surprised we were allowed to stop here and leave the plants in the car.

From across the dining area I caught the scent of brown gravy and a hot pepperoni pizza. I lost my appetite. “Would you want to be with someone French?” I said to Paula.

“Oh la la,” she said in a terrible accent. “Do you want a Frenchy?”

I pictured her again with Paula. This time with straight black hair. Long black hair. No. Short and edgy cabaret hair that curled to a wet point beneath her ears. Her lips were ripe and her nose took a harsh angle from her face. “God yes, Yvette,” I heard myself say. No, I didn’t say that. “Oh my God, right there Claudie.” I said. But that didn’t sit right either. She wanted me to be stern. “Take me in your mouth...Melanie?” I said. “Oh, fuck me Coco.” Maybe too stern. “Ride me, Mademoiselle.” I couldn’t think of a good name.

“You’ve got to help me out here,” I said.

“That’s what I’m doing.”

“Some perimeters or something.”

“You want guidelines?”

“What if I pick a girl who’s tall--this is hypothetical here--and say she’s a blonde, are you going to get all weird and think that I want you to be blonde?”

“Do you want me to be?”

“Or if she’s big busted, big sloppy boobs.”

“Is that what you want?”

“Because I love you. And I love what we have, me and you. You’re perfect for me and I want you to know I’m happy.”

“Would you listen to yourself?” Paula stopped cutting her Mexican pizza and looked at me square. “I’m giving you the night of your life, carte blanche to take me and someone else at the same time. Think about that.”

“I can picture it clear enough.”

“Blonde, tits, tall.”

“That’s what you want?”

“Pick whomever.”

“Whoever,” I said.

“As long you find her attractive, I don’t care. It’s sex among boring adults. You don’t have to think too hard.”

The family huddled around the chicken bucket stood abruptly. The mother cradled her daughter’s head toward the exit. I couldn’t help but feel responsible for them leaving. I didn’t mean for anybody to hear about our plans. I gave the mother a look that said so. But she looked back at me confused. I nodded my head to show that I was really sorry and her expression changed. She made a face that promised to gash my eyes out if I didn’t stop staring at her family.

I fixed myself on Paula. How was a man my age be so wrong about women? “I don’t know,” I said.

“What do you need to know? This is excess, plain and simple.”

“Does it smell strange to you?”

“Two sets of hands, all those fingers working your body.”

“It’s the tacos and the pizza. With the chicken grease too. It does something.”

“Two mouths on you. Tongues licking on either side of you. Think about it.”

My nose wrinkled. “All this together. Something strange to it.”

“I’ll tell you what, I take it back.” Paula pressed a napkin to her mouth before crumpling it on her tray. “Here’s my one perimeter. Whomever you pick has to be kinkier than me. That’s what I want.” Her eyes held stare on me and she let her lips puff toward the center of her mouth. Then she grinned in a way I didn’t fully understand. It was a smile that I hadn’t seen before. There was something hidden in it and it made me feel like I was out of my element. It made me feel like there was danger lurking. Maybe it was the eyes, maybe it was whatever was hiding behind her look, but for the first time I felt myself getting excited.

“We should go,” I said. “It’d be a shame to lose a plant before we got home.”

“It can wait. They’re built for it. I’m in the mood for something sweet.” She had a half gallon of soda and she still wanted dessert. But I entertained the request. I had never considered ordering dessert at a fast food place, but even in this we had considerable options. I gave Paula my wallet and made my way to the restroom to wash the smell of lunch from my hands. “What should I order?” Paula said.

“Surprise me.”

There was a strange comfort in the bathroom. It had a singular smell. A familiar bathroom smell. And the lighting was low with simple colors on the floor and walls. It was exactly as it should be, even down to the smutty graffiti on the walls. On the stall it said, *Fuck you for reading this*. Above the toilet somebody wrote, *Your a bitch*. And below that, in perfect cursive, someone else, someone with a finer hand wrote, *If you’re down, I’m down. Call me, Cheri*. With the same soft curves she wrote her number. My first thought was how strange it appeared on the bathroom stall. It was obvious that it was a woman’s writing. It was an odd beauty that did not belong

there. “Cheri,” I said. I liked it. It felt right coming from my mouth. “Paula this is Cheri. She’s down for anything.” Of course she was. Cheri snuck into the men’s room. And while that might have been where most women quit, Cheri was the type of girl who wrote her number on the wall. She wanted all the men who came after to know about it. She was down. I said her name again, this time with a heavier accent on the second syllable. “Chéri. Hello, Chéri. May I speak to Chéri please? ” Her name veered my thoughts. I pictured us talking, laughing. I saw the three of us enjoying a cool night on our new patio, the timid glances we made as we waited for the first move. Paula and me both hungry for a look at her. I took her number. I knew it was probably just some boy getting revenge on ex, tricking a bunch of old horn dogs into calling poor Cheri. But I took the number all the same. It was good a place as any to start.

Paula was waiting with a tray of desserts at our booth. “I couldn’t decide so I splurged,” she said. Before I sat I put my hands on her ears. I tilted her head back and kissed her on the eyebrow, then full on her mouth.

“We’re in a mood,” she said.

“I was thinking about the patio furniture. I’m still not sure. But then I started picturing it all together.”

“If anything you get a milkshake, so I got you the parfait. Look at the spoon they give you. It’s a big fat straw with a spoon on the end. Why would they do that? Who sucks down parfait?” She gave it to me and we ate in silence. She seemed to enjoy hers enough. For me, there was a thick sweetness that cloyed at my cheeks. It was a taste I couldn’t swallow away. And it got me thinking about all the pots and plants we had just bought. There was a good chance none

if it would look right when we got them home. Not even a rug could make it work together. But I guess it didn't matter in the end. We weren't using the space anyhow.

"Cheri," I said.

"What was that?"

"The small one in the car, on the floor between your feet. I think we should name that one Cheri."

Paula thought a moment and nodded. "That's a cute name. I think that'll work."

"But we're leaving it outside," I said. "We just got the living room looking nice. I don't want a bunch of plants in the house." Paula didn't answer. She was too busy enjoying her sweets. I had given up on mine and was staring out the window. Watching the sun cook our windshield and the succulents inside, I already knew I was done for. The first sign of trouble we'd have the back door wide open. And before the cold weather had a chance to hit we'd have a jungle swarming our living room.

FALLEN TIMBERS

“When the impartial historian records his preservation of Fort Meigs the reader will find a monument which no time can decay.” -- Celebratory toast given July, 4 1813

On the way home from the convenience store I encountered a sad thing. I was two blocks past the fire station, headed toward an open stretch of road, when I saw an old man walking in the heat. Even with the late sun, merciless as ever, he still wore a flannel, tucked in and buttoned all the way to his neck. And that made him an even sadder thing, it seemed to me. The man labored with a tiny gas can, swinging his arm out to keep his balance. With each step his blown legs shivered along the sidewalk.

I’m not the type of person to stop something in motion. I didn’t know why he was out here, so far from the fill up, struggling with that little can. But there was something in the way he fought against his frailty, possessed by what, that made me slow down.

I pulled over up ahead of him. I watched him in the rearview as he set down the gas can. He rubbed his hand then drew it across his brow. As the cars rushed past, he met them with a

scalded look. He shook his arm, picked up the canister, and pushed on. When he came near I leaned over. I opened the passenger door.

“Need a lift?” I said.

He bent down and looked in my car. Me up front. The bag of groceries in back.

“I can take you as far as Waterville,” I said. I waved him in.

He stood there rubbing his back a moment. “Up to Fort Meigs will do,” he said. “Best put this in the trunk on account of the fumes.” He filled the car with a smell of gasoline and stale tobacco. As the air conditioning recycled the scent it stung my nose like a cheap cowboy cologne. While I drove he kept a close eye on the old trees and dead houses. He looked at the road signs with a strange reverence like they were burial markers.

“You run out fuel?” I said.

“No sir,” he said. “I don’t drive no more.” He stabbed a finger against the window. “Big battle fought over there, 1813 year of our Lord.” He squinted toward an empty field. A Doritos bag spun a lazy circle in the weeds. “Ground drank up a lot of blood there.”

“You picked a hell of a day for an errand,” I said. “Radio said it was hottest of the year. Muggy too.” He kept staring out the window. His silence made me feel strange. And I began to resent taking him on. “What’re you looking for?” I said.

“Used to be a service station up there.” He pointed to another empty patch leveled to the concrete slab. “But that’s long past. Back to the way it ought to be I guess.”

My nostrils widened. The fumes were beginning to hurt my head but it was too hot to roll the windows down. “What’s with the gas then?”

“Like I told you” he said. “I’m taking it to Fort Meigs.”

“They sent you all the way back there for gas?”

“No,” he said. “I’m on my way there.” He reached over and touched my hand, which surprised me more than a simple thing like that should. “I’m a burn that thing down,” he said. He looked out the window and chuckled. “About time somebody did it again.”

I watched him laugh. That too, was a sad thing. The lines around his eyes looked burned and soldered in. I wasn’t sure how to answer. He had that little bit of fuel and he seemed determined enough. But I ignored it. I began to worry the heat might have gotten to him. “The fort’s closed today,” I said. I wasn’t sure why, but I used a tone reserved for a child to explain. “They’re only open on the weekdays. For kids and field trips about the war.”

“Think I don’t know that?” He laughed again. “I’m not trying to hurt anyone. I’m setting her back right. Besides,” he shook his head, “you’re talking about the museum part of it, the gift shop. It’s a damn fort, son. Anybody can walk around it when they please.”

We came around a curve and the fort revealed itself before us. Perched on a small bluff, against the bend of the river, the wooden blockhouse and the bleached palisades speared at the sky. I’d ignored it a thousand times. But he made it seem like a strange thing to me, a creature resurrected.

“Look, I can drop you off but you’re not really going to burn it?”

“Like hell I won’t.” He touched my arm again before pointing at the fort. “Look at that monster. It don’t belong here anymore.”

I pulled into the empty lot. On weekends, a lap around the fort served as a quarter mile track for joggers. And when the sprinklers came on at dusk, kids dogs would run through the lawn. But it was too late in the day and the heat hadn’t quit. We were there alone.

The spiked palisades cast a jagged shadow on the parking lot. I followed him as he staggered around to the back of the car. He knocked his knuckle on the trunk. "I'm a be needing this," he said. Easy enough, I could have told him no. What could a brittle old man do to me? But I knew I wouldn't. I didn't want to have a fight about it. And part of me still wanted to know.

"What'd this place ever do to you?" I said. I kicked at the gravel in the lot. The cicadas paused their awful chorus for a moment. But they were back at it before we could enjoy the silence.

"Watch your step on this sod." He pointed out past the river, off toward Fallen Timbers. "Right here we once conquered our foes." As he looked out on the land, the heat flushed his eyes. It looked like he might cry.

I didn't like seeing him like that.

"You want a drink or something?" I said. This time I touched him. A small nudge on his elbow. "I got a case a beer back at the grocery." I took it from the back seat and met him at the front of the car. We sat on the hood with our feet on the bumper. We watched the sun paint shadows on the palisades. The old staves looked like rotten teeth pushed from the ground.

"Warm beer on a hot day," he said. "That's realer than any of those reenactors who muster here." He started to chuckle but ended up coughing instead. I thought to pat his back but he seemed to have a handle on his condition. "You know what they did with this place after the siege sputtered out?" He tilted his beer toward a rusted cannon that guarded the river.

"If I recall, they abandoned it," I said. "Let nature take a turn at it."

"People slept in it for a while, inside the walls." He wagged his finger at the wall. "Kept them safe, I guess, from animals, other people. Tecumseh's ghost maybe."

“They ended up destroying it,” I said.

“Something burned her down. But who knows?” He thought a moment and winced at the fort. “Not like it mattered much, old thing like that, its purpose all but used.” He must have been thinking of something sad, because as he looked on his face soured. I couldn’t tell if he was saying goodbye or good riddance.

“You want another?” I said.

He shook his beer can. He took a healthy drink and wiped his mouth on his sleeve.

“Enough of this sentiment,” he said. “Let the big wheel roll.” He slapped the hood and held out his hand. I didn’t see much reason in arguing with him. He was a man. And he knew well enough where he was stepping.

I gave him the keys and stayed where I was. From the car I watched him splash the fuel on a corner of the fort. “Let’s see them build it back this time,” he said. “She’ll be burning bright by nightfall.” He looked over his shoulder at me. A sweet and toothless grin had captured his face.

I didn’t have it in me to tell him there was hardly enough gas in that little canister to make a difference. And even if, for some reason, a part of the palisades caught, the fire department down the road would surely snuff it out if the sprinklers on the knoll didn’t. Fort Meigs wasn’t going anywhere on my watch.

The old man poured his righteous anger against the fence and it seemed to me as good a time as any to offer a toast. I turned my hand and let the beer spill out. It fizzed as the ground drank it under. “To future fires,” I said. But I doubt he heard me. Wetting down the stakes had him tickled. He sent a raspy howl up at the sky. As the fire began to lap at the wall a new life

came over his legs. He marched about the small flame. He spun and his heels and kicked up a dust. The night was settling and he was happy near the feeble glow. By the time I opened another the fire was already dying. There was only a brief moment more to watch, before his dancing shadow dwindled across the empty lot.

HOMEcoming

When my sister first came home I took it upon myself to arrange a viewing. I went house to house, through the parts of my block I was allowed to visit, and invited the neighborhood kids to my home. I showed them in through the front. Before they were allowed on the carpet I instructed them to take off their shoes. I had never done this before with my friends. We weren't that kind of family. But with the arrival of my sister my father had rented a big red steamer from the grocery store. He spent a weekend cleaning the carpets. There was a fervor in the way he went to work with that steamer. Grooming the floors into perfect lines. Edging the baseboards with a rag. He was like a monk tending to a garden. No detail was lost to him. In his zeal, he had us all concerned about germs. As a house we abided by a new set of rules. He made us wash our hands before and after meals. We used a bathroom towel only once before laundering. And shoes were no longer an option. Because of this, I lined my friends in the entryway and inspected their feet.

It wasn't until I was content their socks were clean that I let them on the living room carpet. But we didn't linger. I couldn't risk them breathing their germs on my new sister. So I showed them to the back of the house, to the sliding glass door. I made them line up again on the

other side of the glass. I latched the door and left them barefoot on the deck, looking in from outside. Only then, when I was satisfied everything was secure, did I go to the nursery.

The way my mother had showed me, I picked up my sister. One hand supported her large head, while the other kept her close to my chest. I was gentle when I nested her in the bassinet. I cooed to my sister as I rolled her into the living room. Mostly I didn't want her waking up and acting fussy. But part of me wanted her to know that I was looking out for her. I told her not to worry. And I told her everything was safe. I would protect her.

I parked the bassinet along the sliding glass door. I could see my friends were stirring. The way their hands fidgeted in their pockets. How they danced their weight from foot to foot. There was an anticipation among them that pleased me. I settled the bassinet shade. Slow and dramatic I rolled back the blanket that swaddled my sister. Their faces pushed against the glass. They cupped their hands around their eyes and their breath stuck to the door in a fog. As I held my sister up for them to see, and as I paraded her along the length of the glass so they could meet her face, there was a silence that moved over them. Among my friends there was a reverie. Without speech or sound they took in the perfect newness of the creature before them.

This is her. She is my family. And she is a part of me now. It was in this manner that I introduced the world to my baby sister.

The second time my sister came home was much later. I was an adult then and had to arrange a last minute flight from Baltimore. She had totaled the family van and was getting kicked off campus. Mom and Dad said she was released from the hospital earlier than planned and they didn't have the strength to shoulder it. So they asked me to come out for the first week. They

thought I stood a better chance of getting through. Like it was as simple as extending my hands over her. Like I could calm the waves with a whisper.

I found her sleeping on the couch. The blinds were drawn open and the sun was painting an odd shape on the carpet. She didn't stir when I closed the front door. She stayed there dead in rest. I left my bag in the entryway and kept my coat on. I wanted to have a good look at her before I got comfortable. Her bare legs dangled from the arm of the couch. It had been a few weeks since she had shaved and there was a black monitor tethered to each ankle. A tracer to keep her home. And a scram to keep her clean. She was twisted in a blanket in a way that made it seem like she had been fighting with it, but she had quit and was now stretched into a bottomless rest. I threw my keys on the table. It would have satisfied me a little to see her startled. But she wouldn't allow it. She continued to sleep unafraid. I couldn't help thinking how far she had come.

Behind her was my old room. As a kid she used to crawl in bed with me the nights she was fearful. She would toss for a moment and I would comb her hair with my fingers until she slept. And when she lay calm awhile I would carry her back to her own room. But I wouldn't stay with her. I left her there alone in the dark because I wanted my sister to be strong. I wouldn't coddle her like Dad did. I wanted her to know she could face it alone. That's how I showed her until she stopped coming in anymore.

There was little of that girl that I recognized in the woman before me. She had thick dark circles that gullied beneath her eyes. Her skin was brittle and her hair was matted into clods. I could tell she did not want to be alone.

Seeing her like that loosed a terrible feeling. My sister was broken. And I admit it made me afraid because I didn't know what to do.

It felt wrong having her here, surrounded by a past we couldn't retrieve. The pictures of us as kids. The trophies we won on the mantle. All the paths we wore into that pristine carpet. It made me want to take her away. I wanted to steal her to a place where we were not known, somewhere she could start new. But even if I was strong enough, even if I could cradle her in my arms and carry her off, I'm not certain it would have made a difference. This specter would follow us.

I went to the sliding door and looked at our backyard. Past the empty deck was the torn fence and even further out were the neighbors somewhere beyond, the people I once invited to see my baby sister. I tugged at the blinds. The noise disturbed her and she woke. She brought a fist to her haggard eye. There was no surprise in her to find me at her side. She squinted at me like a child waking and a slice of light made her smile dazzle. That much of her remained. As she sat up my sister covered her ankles with the blanket. I didn't speak. I wasn't sure where to start, so I kept on with the blinds.

Wait, she said. Leave it. The light feels good on my face.

But I didn't entertain it. I darkened the room anyway.

THE JOYTIME KILLBOX

His Joytime Ambassador underlined several lines of the contract. As he explained each section he pointed to them with the cap of his marker.

“In the unlikely event of death Joytime Entertainment LLC is in no way responsible or liable. By initialing here, here, and here,” he slid the contract across the desk, “you hereby waive all rights for legal action and forfeit tendering financial gain.”

He was good at this legal kind of speak. The way he glossed over it all reminded Gregory of the way an announcer would blur through the contest details at the end of a radio commercial. Gregory’s Joytime Ambassador looked the part too. White short sleeve shirt. A thick tie loose on his neck. The smell of burnt coffee in his mouth.

Gregory moved his finger down each line of the contract before saying, “And life insurance?”

“Waived.”

“What about burial costs?”

“If you’d let me finish before you asked questions.”

“Of course.” Gregory slunk in the rigid chair. “Sorry.”

The Joytime Ambassador waited for him to sit still before he continued. He adjusted his glasses and read from the binder. "For an additional \$10.95 we can offer you a burial rider. Our burial rider provides full clean-up, removal, and rites for your body, regardless of religious or cult affiliation," his voice lowered, "in the unlikely event of death."

"Cults?" Gregory said.

"We get all kinds." The Joytime Ambassador took a sip from an exceptionally small styrofoam cup. "Let's see." He wiped between his lips with the side of his hand. "This covers up to but not exceeding six thousand in burial fees, including: disposal tax, stationery and program fees. However this does exclude all florals, parlor rentals, and make-up fees--as the result of death will most certainly prevent viewings of any kind. Would you like to secure the financial security of your loved ones by signing up for our burial rider?" The Joytime Ambassador looked up from his binder. His eyes fixed on Gregory's. He already knew what Gregory would say but was legally obligated to wait for him to find the words himself. The Ambassador clicked his pen.

"No," Gregory said.

"Excellent."

"Unless you think it'll, you know, go off."

The Ambassador exhaled slow and loud enough to steal Gregory's attention. "It's been a while. But it is a Joytime year." He rolled his eyes toward the ceiling. "And between you and me, there's not much to bury if it does."

Gregory swallowed. "I think I should get it. I mean, not for me, but just in case."

"Sure, yeah, here," the Ambassador said. He slid his pen across the table. "Check that box before you sign." He took another long sip from his coffee. "I'm a need your card again."

* * *

Along the outside of the building Gregory waited. It had been an hour, and somehow after all that time, he still seemed to be in the back of the line. Even in this the Joytime Killbox held a kind of magic for Gregory. As each person entered the warehouse and he took another step toward the threshold of riding, there was an incremental growth of anticipation that burrowed in his gut. He watched another man disappear behind the door. By his count the total ride time was no more than sixty seconds. About forty seconds to get situated in the box and the rest of the way with the light on. He counted the people in line as he took another step forward. Just a few more minutes now. Gregory forced himself to swallow. He couldn't get his breakfast to settle. And although he had already gone, he felt a ceaseless urge to go the bathroom.

In front of him was a little girl and an old man. The girl wore a school uniform and her book bag sheathed her from her shoulder to thighs. As far as he knew the two had not spoken to each other and he assumed they had not come here together. Of course they hadn't. Riding the Killbox, Gregory couldn't think of a more inappropriate outing for a grandfather and granddaughter. But there was something unnerving about seeing the young girl. He had heard reports of the volume of youth who had been riding. But from the comfort of his living room chair he had shrugged it off as kids looking for a thrill. Seeing it in the flesh was different. It filled Gregory with a deep, parental fear.

"Is this your first time?" he said.

She looked up at him but said nothing.

Gregory buried his nerves. He feigned a confidence he usually reserved for a job interview. A dumb smile pulled at his face. "Have you done this before?"

She leaned her head to remove something from her ear. "Me?"

"I was asking--"

"I heard you." She put the earpiece back in her head. "You should relax a little. Stop acting like it's your first time."

"Sorry. I was only being polite."

"Look down the line. See the focus? See them talking? No. They're getting prepped to ride. Only first timers get all chatty in line. 'What's it like? Is it scary?'"

"I didn't say that."

"You didn't have to. I'm a kid. I'm not stupid." She folded her arms as if she was playing dress up, reenacting a gesture she saw on television.

"Excuse me. Where's that come from?"

"Just chill and get ready for the light."

"You're the one that needs to chill. I'm ready. You just chill."

"Go troll a chat room. You're not ready for the Killbox." The girl turned toward the entrance. She swiped at her phone and Gregory could hear the crackle of music pulse from her head. He knew she wanted their conversation to end. And it was best not to agitate such an energetic youth. But Gregory couldn't let it rest. How could she know he wasn't ready? A child. He leaned in and spoke loud. "Listen. I wouldn't have come here by myself if I wasn't."

She dismissed him with an exhale and focused herself on her phone. "You have no idea what you're in for."

“I’ve read plenty.”

“Well, I’ve ridden it. So there’s that.”

“Was that so hard? Why are you so upset?”

“Oh, no,” she said. “Look out. The line’s moving. Get ready to die. We’re going to die now.”

Gregory tried to laugh but only a strange grunt escaped his throat. “Right. It’s unlikely.”

“And still somebody wins the lottery. You bought that stupid rider, didn’t you?”

“Please.”

“From here we’re about,” she pointed at the door with her phone, “twenty minutes out. Which means you’ve got cotton mouth and sweat soaking into your pants. Which is weird because it’s so unlikely anything will happen.”

The old man next her put his hand on her shoulder. He was a thin, dapper man who cast a pole of a shadow on the pavement. His fingers arched like spider legs. She shrugged his hand from her. “Gross.”

“Be kind,” the old man said. His voice was weak but still carried with it a grave authority. “It was once your first time too.” He glanced at Gregory. “Why don’t you trade me places? I’m in no hurry.” He ushered the girl in front of him. “I do apologize.”

“It’s best I get hip to it,” Gregory said. “They’ll run it all soon enough.”

The old man gave a single nod. He adjusted the sleeves of his tweed jacket. It was a beautiful coat from a lost decade. Wide peak lapels with a matching vest underneath, a period piece fit for waiting on a locomotive platform or the clubhouse of a horse track. It wouldn’t have surprised Gregory to find the chain of a pocket watch drooping from his vest.

“My father’s favorite suit was just like that when I was growing up,” Gregory said. “Said it brought him luck. He was married and buried in it.” The old man briefly met eyes with him, and it occurred to Gregory that he may have crossed a boundary. The man himself was close to death. But beyond that Gregory considered that mentioning death was taboo here. He quickly backed out of it. “I mean he didn’t go out, not anything like this.” His hand wheeled the air. “All natural. Nothing that could be helped, really.”

“My condolences.”

“It was long ago.”

“But she was right. You ought to prepare yourself now.” He extended a finger toward the door. “Many find it difficult to take an inventory of things inside.”

Another entered and they shuffled closer to the door. Before it closed Gregory caught what he believed to be the trailing echo of a woman’s scream. He tried to take a breath but found his lungs bricked over. He did not want to be there. But he did not want to leave the line in front of all these strangers.

If he weren’t so terrified, Gregory might have been amazed at the simplicity of the Killbox. This phenomenon, that had shrouded the city in the mystery of terror, could have been assembled in his garage. The box sat atop a pedestal like a prized jewel. No matter where you stood there was a clean view. The walls and ceiling were formed from clear acrylic sheets, the corners caulked with a clear silicone. It was formed into a perfect cube, just tall enough for an average man to stand inside. With arms extended, one could easily touch all four walls and the ceiling. Inside, a single chair was bolted to the floor facing a square tile on the opposite wall. It appeared as if one

would sit in the chair and stare at the dark reflective square. The tile was attached to a black box that protruded, about a yard it seemed to him, outside the wall of the Killbox. From the black box, a coil of black wires twisted out of sight into the rafters. The stream of riders circled in toward the Killbox. No cry or twisted face detoured them. They were lured still to the center the warehouse.

“Oh, god.” Gregory veiled his nose with a hand. He watched as an attendant carried an invalid out of his wheelchair and up the steps of the box. “They’re going to let him ride?”

The old man’s eyes seemed hidden deeper in his skull in the dark of the warehouse. Gregory could not tell if the old man was looking at him. “He signed the waiver. Joytime doesn’t make a distinction, so long you sign and pay.” The old man pointed toward the gleaming box. “Don’t turn away yet,” he said. “You shouldn’t miss this part.”

On the far wall of the box the attendant strapped the man’s locked body into the chair. His ankles were bound to the front legs; his torso fastened around the dowels of the backrest. The attendant exited and secured the door. The man was alone on the stage. His head slumped on his shoulder and his arms pulled tight against his chest. His face distorted into a cavernous frown and he began to cry.

Gregory’s chest surged. “Are they electrocuting him? It looks like it’s shocking him.”

The little girl turned to Gregory. “Serious.”

“He’s in agony. This wasn’t in the waiver.”

“You have no idea how this works.”

“Not all react the same,” the old man said. He chewed at his cheeks. “This isn’t unheard of though. This is the part that’s never reported. Screams, the occasional incontinence. Only a rider knows this.”

“The light’s not even on yet,” the girl said. “That’s when the real fun begins. This guy’s going to totally pop. I’ll put money on it. You watch.”

Gregory lungs shrunk. His heart flexed tight and he felt himself grow sick. He looked for an exit.

“You can tell he’s a noob,” the girl said.

“Me?”

“That guy. Look at him. He’s trying to wiggle out of the chair. I don’t know why he’s yelling to get out.” She made a falsetto voice. “*Help me. Oh, God. Help me.* Like that’s going to work.”

“They won’t let you exit,” the old man said. “Once you’re in you must ride. Never an exception.”

“Get ready.” The girl rocked to her toes. Her nose pointed up toward the Killbox. “Here she comes.”

Gregory grabbed his shirt collar. The old man handed him a handkerchief from his breast pocket. “I’m alright,” Gregory said.

“You know the best part of a wedding, my favorite part?”

“No,” Gregory said.

“When the bride is revealed.”

“Of course,” Gregory said. His eyes focused on the black box. The wires began to pulse to life.

“Most look back--of course they do. She’s beautiful and they want to see the dress.”

“The box. It’s shaking. Is that supposed to happen?”

“Completely normal.” The old man put a hand on Gregory’s back. He extended his other arm toward the rider. “When everyone rises to watch the bride I like to turn the other way. I watch the groom. The way a man looks when he sees his bride for the very first time. What it does to him. All that emotion on display. You rarely see that in a man. The way he fights to hold it together as his eyes well over. That’s the best part.”

The tile slid up and there was a momentary quiet that stilled the line.

“It’s moving. Look,” Gregory said.

The girl jumped and stretched her neck. “Yes. Here we go.”

Gregory held his breath. The pulse in his neck pounded his head forward. His heart quickened as he watched the box give birth to a sleek rod. From the darkness the barrel of a shotgun glinted inside the Killbox. The gun slipped into the room until it settled just short of the man’s chin. The man’s cheeks puffed and he snorted out his nose. He jerked his head violently to the side in an effort to avoid the barrel, but the restraints held. His chest tugged and he began to pant in quick, sharp cries. His eyes and nose gave their water. And the horror gargled from his throat.

“My God,” Gregory said. He grabbed the old man’s sleeve. “I don’t think I can watch.”

“That’ll be you soon enough,” the girl said. She cupped her hands against her mouth.

“Come on, man,” she said. “Ride hard or go home.”

The old man took a gentle hold of Gregory's wrist. "You shouldn't miss this. Look, there. It's just now starting." He guided Gregory's view to the Killbox.

The warehouse lights dimmed and the Killbox gleamed like a precious stone in a store window. A hush settled the room. The little girl held out her hand and began to count on her fingers. As she got to five a buzzer chirped and a timer lit up above the Killbox. A red light triggered and the Killbox was bathed in an ominous glow.

A roar crashed through the warehouse. In unison the riders counted down the numbers of the timer. "Nineteen. Eighteen. Seventeen."

"Now it's live," the old man said. "No safety with the light on."

Gregory winced. He did not want to witness this. He was not ready for the lifelong burden of burying something he could not unsee. A man shot. His blood on the glass. But he could not turn away.

The invalid shook. His screams carried over the crowd with the fervor possessed only by a man condemned. He stretched his neck, exposing a map of sinew and veins. But his fits held no reward. The barrel stared him down the same. Gregory veiled his eyes. "Oh, God. Please, no," he said. He removed his hand and watched the timer cross into single digits. The crowd raised their fists. As the timer drew closer to its end their chants grew louder. "Look at him," the girl said. "Man, he's really going now." The invalid shook faster. His body rocked with an increasing intensity as if it were building to one great crescendo before remaining forever still. Gregory's heart thudded. His throat cinched tight and his tongue dried in his mouth. He grabbed at his chest. Please let him make it. Not here. Not sobbing in a box like this. Gregory closed his eyes. He could not bear the final seconds. The crowd pumped their arms to the beat of the timer. As it

struck zero a buzzer rang out and the red light turned off. The crowd screamed and house lights came on. With the commotion it was hard to be certain, but Gregory did not think he heard a gun blast. He was hesitant. But it could not be avoided. He opened his eyes. The invalid was alive, panting and exhausted in the box. Gregory chuckled. He began to clap with the crowd and a laughter overtook him. As it did he put his hands on his head in disbelief and felt as if he might weep from the excitement of seeing him alive in there.

Two attendants carried the man back down from the Killbox. His head bobbed loosely as they installed him in his wheelchair. His clothes were steeped in sweat. As he sat his shoulders collapsed and it looked as if he had come from the back half of beyond. They pushed him toward the exit and the crowd cheered. If he had a hat, Gregory might have removed it as he wheeled past him. The man looked up at Gregory. He wanted to speak to him but did not. He wanted to know why. The man scratched his head and smiled. "That was it." His eyes fogged over. "Greatest day of my life right there."

Before the next rider, they sprinkled the floor with sawdust and swept it clean. They spritzed the chair, the buckles and straps and towed them dry. Gregory was impressed with the keen urgency of the attendants' work. It reminded him of a grounds crew primping an infield between innings.

"So who fires it?" Gregory said to the old man.

"Nobody," the girl said. She thumbed at her phone before nodding her head to the music.

"Guns don't just go off. Somebody has to fire them."

"Don't be stupid," she said. "That'd be murder. You can't kill people."

“It’s an algorithm,” the old man said.

“You should learn some manners,” Gregory said.

“From you? Please, that’s likely.”

“You could at least have the respect to put away your phone.”

She shook her head before turning her back to him.

Gregory threw his hands up. “I don’t get it.”

“They’re just mathematical rules for a problem.”

“These kids. I’d burn my hair to rip that phone from her head.”

“Best not to feed in.” The old man shifted his stance. “It encourages them.”

Gregory watched them load another rider. This time, a young mother. She had with her a pair of children in matching overalls. They waited for her outside the Killbox, gleefully pounding on the glass with their palms, jumping and shouting for their mother.

“This can’t be,” Gregory said.

“Where?” the old man said.

“That woman. What is she thinking?”

“I know. Those kids lack guidance, smudging the glass like that.”

“She’s going to let them watch? It’s disgusting.”

“What?” the old man said. “Would you have her leave them in the car? It’s not like it was in our day. They’ll call CPS, you try that.”

“But if it happens. Their noses are on the glass. They’ll witness...I don’t even want to picture it.”

“Answer me this.”

Gregory watched them strap her in. As they fastened her ankles the mother waved to her children. “Look at mommy,” she said. Her hand fluttered and she blew them kisses. “Mommy’s in the box. Look at your Mimi in the box.”

“Would you give a second thought, say, she were flying on business and the her children watched with same delight you see here, as her plane soared in the air?”

“That’s rhetorical,” Gregory said.

“Of course you wouldn’t.” The old man stuck the tip of his tongue from his mouth. He pinched it with his fingers. “When in truth, her children carry a higher probability of seeing their mother’s untimely end there than here.”

“This is different.”

“Is it?”

The light came on and the crowd gave a less than enthusiastic cheer. “This is a spectacle. We’re talking about a violent, awful end.”

“Versus a fiery crash.”

“It’s a barrel to the chin. And they’re right there.” The children jumped for their mother. They banged their palms on the glass. “It’s a load right to the face.”

The little girl snickered. “Load.”

“You know, for someone so cool, you take an interest in our conversation.”

“I’m not.” The girl turned to them. “It’s a boring ride.” Gregory and the old man watched the woman the box. She paid little attention to the gun in her face, but instead waved to the crowd, her lips growing proud. The little girl pointed her thumb over her shoulder. “I’ve seen her

around. First couple times she was a dumpster fire. It was friggin' awesome. Now she acts like it's open mic night or something. Totally dumb."

"Doesn't she care about her kids?"

"There's a welfare waiver thing," the girl said. "It's like, five bucks or something, and pays out the face."

"It's a sick type of show for her. How is she not afraid?"

"Understanding the odds. The algorithm," the old man said.

"I heard some of the youngsters at the office talk about it. Like getting struck by lightning on a clear day."

"Thereabouts."

"But it's still a loaded gun."

The attendants removed the mother. They cleaned the box and loaded another rider. The old man counted on his fingers for Gregory. "It's simple, really. The gun can only go off when the light is on."

"Certainly."

"A couple hundred thousand riders a year. That's about four million seconds with the light on."

"You're saying I have a 1 in 4 million chance of dying today?"

"Not quite," the old man said.

The girl held up her fingers, mocking Gregory. "Four, eight, twelve, sixteen."

"The algorithm is set for a four year cycle," he said. "So once a cycle starts it will randomly pull a trigger once in that period."

“So there’s a one in sixteen million chance it goes off on me.”

“Nope,” the girl said.

“Yes and no,” the man said.

Gregory pressed his fingers into his eyes. “Just forget I asked.”

Another entered the Killbox, a fetching young man. He wore sunglasses and stared into the barrel with a pitiless gaze. His mouth held fast to a pursed scowl. But when the light came on a stream of urine rilled down his leg. The crowd moaned.

“Look out,” the girl said. She pressed toward the glass. “We got a leaker.”

The old man stayed with Gregory. “All that matters is this. What ever the odds may be, the algorithm will make the gun go off. The math demands it. And the rider must face it.”

The young man’s knees quivered and his hands began to shake. His face struggled to hold its expression. “The poor man,” Gregory said. “I hope I’m not like that.”

“One more and I’m up,” the girl said. She nodded her head to a song they couldn’t hear. “You watch. I’ll show you how it’s done.”

As the man left the box he staggered past the line. The old man held out his hands and applauded. “Now here’s a man who knows. Well done young man.”

Gregory watched the girl take her place on deck. An atavistic fear took his stomach. In a rush he felt himself unsettle.

“That one,” Gregory said. He flicked his chin toward the soiled youth. “What impressed you? Even I could have lost myself like that.”

The old man leaned in. He took care to ensure his words slipped from his teeth to Gregory’s ear. “There’s never been a better chance than today.”

The girl unsaddled her book bag and dug toward the bottom. She forced two pieces of bubblegum into her mouth. Gregory watched her scan the crowd as she chewed. She looked lost and alone and more than ever it occurred to Gregory that she was just a kid. She was here alone. This sad creature without peers, trying to impress some strangers she'd never see again. His fingers trembled and he hid them in his pockets.

"Why?" he whispered. He could hardly move his mouth to speak. "Just, why?"

"That man knows what I know. Something a nice man like you ought to know before you go through with it." The old man's head tilted back. He looked down his nose at the rider in the box. "Never gone this long before," he said. "Only a couple days left in this cycle. Tomorrow, perhaps today, someone has to die." The light came on, casting its blood glow on the old man's face. And the grooves of his face deepened with black. Gregory turned away. His heart struck and he felt the thump in his ears. He watched the old man's face. There was a sharp hope in the way he watched the rider. Still and expectant. Like watching a bare horizon, waiting for news. He held this expressionless gaze. Black hollowed beneath his brow. The ridge of his nose reflected a stripe of red light. And when the timer broke to single digits the old man set his jaw and Gregory couldn't tell whether he wanted the man to live. The buzzer clanged through the warehouse.

Over the kick of the crowd Gregory could hear the girl's voice. Thick and wet with gum she said, "Zero. That's right, move him out. I'm up." She had a confidence Gregory could not understand. The folly of Catholic girls. The youthful revolt of a uniform. He did not know why. But he knew he must protect her. He would not let her ride.

Gregory moved forward but the old man stopped him. He clicked his tongue as he shook his head. "That's not for you to decide." Gregory wanted to call out. He wanted to tell her she didn't have to ride. But it occurred to him that he did not even know her name, so he stood there silent. The attendant took the book bag from the girl and set it next to the stairs. His hand circled her arm and he helped her onto the platform. She made her way toward the door but before passing the threshold of the box she turned. Her hair bounced as it brushed past her shoulder. She pulled up one of her socks, making them even on her skinny legs. And she let her arms dangle loose against her skirt. She was a child. And this was the moment she thought she wanted. Gregory saw the fear building in her eyes. A single touch, a simple act of sympathy, and she would have unraveled. Her eyes looked down at Gregory. She bent her arm and gave him a slight wave. Gregory looked to the floor. He did not want to see her there waving at him, asking for help in her way.

"She's never ridden it," Gregory said. The attendant turned her and herded her through the door of the Killbox. "Wait," said Gregory. "She can't ride." But the attendant was already inside securing her to the chair. Gregory pressed forward but was stopped by another man. "Stop," Gregory said and he flailed his arms toward the platform. "It's going to go off. You can't let her ride."

"No cutting," a man yelled. "Wait your turn," another said. And the crowd began to stir near the platform.

"Listen." The attendant shook Gregory by the shoulders. "I have the authority to open that back door with the front of your head. You take your place in line." The attendant's nose jabbed at him and Gregory shrunk. "You're up third. He's on deck." He pointed to the old man.

Then he held up his arm and gave a thumbs up. The other attendant raised his hand and extended his thumb and the wires began to shake into the ceiling. The Killbox came alive. The old man stood tall and soundless. He folded his hands in front him. He held a distinguished stance and kept a keen eye on the girl, his lips slightly puckering as the gun stopped short of her head. Gregory pressed his back against the platform and slid to the floor. He buried his eyes into his palms, pressing them so tight he saw sparks vein out from the darkness. He heard the crowd bellow and the child's shrill screams road over their waves. He wanted to pray, call out to a god, but did not know how. "Please, Jesus. Oh, god," spilled from his mouth. Over and again he mumbled his manic plea, his spine waiting for the rough blast of the barrel to wake him. The crowd bellowed. They chanted down the numbers. Gregory cried into his hands. He readied himself for the sacrifice. But the amen of fire did not come. The girl finished her ride with the long blare of the buzzer. The relief brought with it more tears. His chest heaved and his palms slid wet against his cheeks. Gregory uncovered his eyes to find a crowd of people looking down at him. He dried his hands on his thighs as he stood.

"Look at you," the girl said. "Were you crying?" Gregory turned to her. His face was red from bleating. She laughed. "Oh my god. You're such a noob." she said. "You were crying. You actually thought you were going to save me." Gregory wiped his face with his sleeve. His throat shook but he had no words.

"If it helps, you're not the first." The old man gave Gregory his silk handkerchief. "She always does this. Latches to someone new, then the poor orphan thing before she rides." Gregory felt ill. His head. That vice in his lungs. The curdling of his bowels. He was here for a purpose. A grave matter had brought him here. And it was just a game for her.

An attendant held out his hand to assist the girl. She pushed his arm away and hopped down the stairs. She whipped her bag over her shoulder and checked her phone.

“Why would you do that?” Gregory said.

She looked up for a beat and then was back down at her phone again.

“You let me believe--”

“Look, I need to go if I’m going to ride again before fifth period.” She made her way to the exit. “But if you really want to hash it out,” she pointed to the back of the line with a limp wrist, “yeah. I’m going to go.” She left him there before he could think of anything good to say.

Cleaner stung the air. The crew was at task misting down the Killbox. Gregory saw the focus honing in the old man’s face. His body leaned square toward the door. He was ready to ride and Gregory was timid in disrupting such concentration. He folded the man’s handkerchief.

“Sir?” he said. He held out the square cloth. “In case you need it.”

The old man glanced over his shoulder. He had a leg propped on the step, eagerly waiting the sign to move into the box. “Keep it,” he said.

“But it’s embroidered.”

The attendants had the box gleaming and the man began to tap his foot. “I want you to have it,” he said. “Something to remember me, all of this.” Gregory pushed the cloth further toward the old man. “Don’t,” he said. He turned sharp to Gregory. “Why are you even here?”

Gregory stammered. “I’m, I don’t know. Why’s anybody here?”

The old man fanned his finger at the crowd. “For her it’s all a game. I’ve got nothing left here. And you.” He shook his head at Gregory. “You’re not even a voyeur. You don’t even watch.”

“Rider ready?” an attendant said.

“Yes.” The old man took the podium.

“Wait,” Gregory said. The old man sighed before turning. “I’m tired,” Gregory said. “Of being ignored, passed up and left alone because I’m not quite old enough to be put to pasture yet. I just want to be a part of something.” Gregory could feel his chin wrinkling. He could not stop it from happening.

“Nice speech,” the attendant said. “Get in the box please.” The old man gestured for him to wait.

“Then watch,” he said. “Don’t turn away. Watch me ride this out.” He sat in the chair the way a royal might. Shoulders back. His wrists leisurely dangling from the armrest.

It had not occurred to Gregory before seeing him so singularly displayed in the Killbox, but the man was more than dapper. He was beautiful. And the thought of him being culled from this world in a glorious bang might be a beautiful thing too. When the gun revealed itself and the light illuminated the box, Gregory found himself clapping for the man. His fist, still clutching the man’s handkerchief, pounded on the platform. He cheered and as the clock rode down he found his fear giving way to a spark of excitement.

The man held his noble posture. There was no bargain in him. The weapon had no power over him. He leaned his chin to the center of the gun. His head tilted back and he looked down his nose into the rifled barrel. It looked to Gregory like the old man was daring it to go off. He did not fidget or writhe. There was no fighting the restraints or hope of escape. He did not gnash his teeth at the face of death. No, he stared down the beast with a fearless gaze. What manner of man does this?

Gregory wanted to know him better. He did not want him to die alone in the box, his secrets lost with his blood. But before Gregory had a chance to plea for the old man's safety the box clicked and the light turned off. His ride was over.

With the call of the horn the door opened and the attendants entered the box. The old man's posture changed. His head hung and his shoulders rose and slightly fell. A small gesture, not of relief, but of an unspoken failure. He had defied the odds yet again. As the attendants ushered him out, Gregory waived the handkerchief like a flag.

"My god, you made it," Gregory said. He pressed himself against the stairs. "Thought for sure you were going to buy it in there. What a ride."

The old man swallowed. His throat seized midway and he coughed into his fist. "It seems it is not my day," he said. He scowled at the mob. Somebody here would have his prize.

"Look," Gregory said, "I don't know anybody here. And it'd mean a lot if you'd stay and see me ride it." Gregory climbed onto the podium. "Don't want to do it alone," he said. "Don't really want to do it at all." He forced a sad laugh.

"I'd be honored," the old man said. "But it's not allowed. You'll be fine though. Look at them." The crowd was stirring. They shouted for the light to come on, to load another. "If they can make it, you can." With that the old man brought his hand to his brow. He motioned like he was tipping the brim of a hat. Then he slid his hands in his suit pockets. "Until then," he said, and the attendants showed him out.

"When?" Gregory said. But the man was too far to hear him. He felt a hand push against the small of his back, forcing him to walk, and after a step he found himself inside the clear box. As he sat in the chair he was surprised at how cold it was. His arms jerked.

“Alcohol,” the attendant said. He pressed Gregory’s chest against the backrest and began strapping him in. “The spray makes everything feel freezing. Loosen your legs please.” He took hold of his ankle and bound it. “But a little cold beats--who knows what you’d catch from that chair.”

“Like what, hepatitis?” Gregory tried to lift himself off the seat but he could not move.

The man was pleased with his work. “Okay, looks like we’re all set here.”

“Wait.” Gregory’s arms tugged but stayed planted.

“If I was in there, I wouldn’t breathe through my mouth too much.” He stepped out of the box and knocked on the wall. Gregory flinched. His chest heaved around the strap. “Good luck with the ride,” the man said, his mouth overemphasizing each word through the glass. With the door shut, the box was quiet. There was a stillness inside that unnerved him. No movement in the air. The sound, quiet and dead. Gregory tried to move. His body slid against the chair. He looked between his feet. A drain was cut into the floor. He had not seen it before and seeing it now seized his mind with the thought of death. If it happened, dear god, his life would slip between his legs. And what remained, left on the wall and the arms of the chair, would be mopped from the world.

“Shit,” he said, his teeth locked together. “Hey. Let me out. Please, don’t start it. Let me loose.” He thrashed in the chair. The attendant held a hand over his ear. He held his other hand high in the air, his thumb pointing to the ceiling. A whirring sound came from the black box. Gregory looked to the black tile across the Killbox. He could see his reflection disappear as the tile slid open. A heat burned in his chest. He felt a wet heat flood his eyes and his stomach caved into his spine. From the black square the gun barrel speared the air. First a small hole, no bigger

than a dime, but as it thrust toward his face the barrel grew to the size of a cavern. Gregory puckered his mouth. He shook his head side to side but he could not escape the cruel stare of gun. Gregory shuddered. His lungs clenched a hysteric scream from his body. The light came on and the barrel reflected a menacing hue. A deep, black red like blood still dark inside a body.

Gregory rocked in the chair. His arms torqued and he stretched his neck. But he could not hide from the threat. He puckered his mouth and tucked his chin. A feeble defense to stave off a shotgun blast. The barrel stared him down. As he looked in to the depth of the barrel he did not take inventory of his life. He thought not of his seventh birthday when his father bought him a football jersey, or his wedding day, his bride to be walking down the aisle, a veil so long she nearly stumbled, and he did not think of their child, taken from them inexplicably, and he did not cry to god to save him. His mind was blank, empty, and he felt the sensation that his insides, from his lungs to his groin, had hollowed, so that his emptiness was total and complete. And he felt the floor give way beneath him, that he might tumble headlong into the deep cavern of the gun barrel. There was nothing but him and the hypnotic stare of the gun.

The light turned off and in a rush the sound of the crowd returned to his ears. The gun retreated and Gregory looked out to the audience. He gasped for air and found that his shirt was wet and plastered to his chest. An attendant rushed in to free him.

“My god, did you see.” Gregory’s hands came loose and he cradled his head, “That was, I had no idea.” He tried to stand, but his knees folded. The attendant draped Gregory’s arm over his shoulder and nursed him out of the box. Gregory gave a tired smile to crowd. He was like a prize fighter that went the distance, staggering through the crowd with a beaming exhaustion. As

they carried to the exit he pumped his fist in the air. “It’s so great,” he said, before shaking into tears.

Through the exit was a narrow hallway that led him to an office. Behind a desk a woman waited, and behind her was a bank of monitors, dozens of screens stacked to the ceiling. They all displayed pictures of Gregory. Him getting in the box. The barrel in his face. His fear. His grief. His relief and release.

“I like number four,” the woman said. “Just look at that face. What a reaction.”

Gregory laughed. Number four showed him from the gun’s point of view, right down the barrel. His eyes wound shut. His forehead stacked with lines and the sweat flushing from his face. It looked like he was passing a stone. “Classic,” he said.

“We can print it and frame it,” she said. “We got t-shirts. Can put it on a mug, or a keychain.”

“I survived the Killbox,” Gregory read on a display coffee mug. It had a cartoon explosion with the picture of man screaming inside the Killbox.

“You can have it say something else. That’s just the most popular.”

“Can you put number four on mug, like that.” Gregory pointed to the display.

“Give me two minutes,” she said.

As he waited for his souvenir, Gregory helped himself to small cup of water at the cooler. He sat and thought about how’d he go into work. He was eager to amble through the office, into the break room, and fill his mug with coffee. He would place it on the edge of his desk and when a co-worker walked by and mentioned something about it, he looked forward to sheepishly brushing it off, like it wasn’t a big deal. He wondered what they might say to him and what that

might lead to. Somehow he knew that mug would make things different. And he wondered if he came here again, maybe not tomorrow, but perhaps next week on his lunch hour, would he see the old man waiting in line with his hands folded, hoping to punch his ticket? And the girl, too. If he rode it again would they cross each other? He hoped to God they would. He wanted to know. What could she say to him now?

WALKING DOGS

I had made up my mind to leave Teddy. It's these Thursdays. They're killing me.

Thursday is date night. And it's always the same. We go to Outback and start with one of those fried onions. First course, Teddy tells me how they have the best croutons here. Then he asks our waiter what all the different sauces are and what's in them and still orders the sirloin. I complain when my salmon comes out dry. And after we share the molten cake it's off to the video store. Then we go home for popcorn and I wait for Teddy to make his move, pressing down on my shoulders, holding his breath with the hope I'll give him head.

The only variety on date night is the movie. Being civil adults and all, we have joint custody of who gets to pick. On my weeks, I'll spice it up with a foreign film, or something classic that won a bunch of awards. Something that everybody claims to have seen and just loved. But this is Teddy's week, which means we're getting something stupid.

I went my own way at the video store. I didn't care to be around Teddy as he was picking out his movie, so I browsed the romantic comedy section. All the titles had covers with women frozen in silly poses. A lady leaning over and laughing so hard all her teeth were showing. Or another with a couple holding each other, but the girl is pulling away and making this face right

at the audience, telling us she has commitment issues. There were rows of them. All those faked emotions, everything painfully staged.

“Think I got a winner,” Teddy said. He came up behind me with a video in his hand.

“Let me guess. There’s a situation and some agent comes out retirement for one last job.”

He looked at the back of the video. “Not exactly.”

“Is there *Justice* or *Executive* in the title?”

He showed me the cover. A man held a pistol next to his face and squinted at some unseen danger in the distance. *Marked for Vengeance*.

“Great,” I said. We took it to the checkout line.

“You might like it. See, he’s a DEA agent and his partner gets murdered. But the twist is, his partner was a K-9 dog.”

“Can a dog get murdered?” I said. “Isn’t murder reserved for people?”

Teddy shook his head. “He’s an officer of the law. People get life for that.”

As we waited to pay, I thought about those dumb pictures on the movie boxes. It reminded me of when Teddy and I got engaged. We had to take engagement photos and the photographer told us we should go to the woods. He took us to a place where the trees fell away and there was a clearing. We stood there and laughed and kissed. All the while he snapped away with his camera. The whole time all I could think was, why I am in the forest wearing my best party dress? And who in their right mind would stand in a field making these stupid, sexy faces? The photographer kept shouting at us, “Yes. Yes.” He adjusted my head and tweaked my posture. “More of that,” he said. “What a perfect looking couple.” When he didn’t even know a thing

about us. The brush was scratching my legs to hell the whole time we were out there. But I had grinned through it all.

“This is going to be a bad film,” I said.

“Like you know.”

“I can tell.”

“It’s just a movie,” Teddy said. “You don’t have to get all uppity.”

“But we’re watching it together.”

“I sit through your week too, you know. That black and white bullshit. Those subtitle films.” Teddy set his jaw. “You think I want to read while I’m trying to watch a movie?”

I thought of a thousand things I had done for him and hated. It made me mad enough to spit on him. But we were in public and I wasn’t sure who was watching. So I gave the store an easy smile.

On the way to our car I saw a mix of teenagers hanging their legs off the edge of a truck bed. One of the boys passed a bottle to a girl. She leaned away but he pushed it on her anyway. As she tilted the bottle, the group cheered and the boy slid his arm under her breasts and around her ribs. He pulled her into his lap and kissed her ear. She spilled down her chin, gagged a little, but kept at it. For her effort they cheered even more.

I wanted to warn that girl. I wanted to tell her she couldn’t take back what they were going to do to her. But I felt Teddy pulling my arm, steering me clear of danger.

Most of the way home we didn’t speak. We listened to the radio until I couldn’t take the noise any longer. I turned it off.

“I like that song,” Teddy said. He turned it back on.

I cranked the volume down. “Why’d you pull me to the car like that?”

“What?” He forced a playful laugh.

“I’m serious.”

“They’re just kids, Lauren. It’s not like we’re their parents.”

“I feel sorry for their parents. That poor girl.”

“It’s the summer. They’re kids having fun. We used to do the same thing.” Teddy looked at me and I couldn’t tell if he winked or if something got in his eye. “Remember that? Those hot summers.” He put his hand on my thigh and squeezed.

It seemed as good a time as any to tell him I wanted to leave. But I wasn’t sure how to get it started. And I didn’t want things getting heated in the car. I turned the volume back up on the radio. The rearview mirror shook and distorted the road. I wondered where that girl was now.

After the movie was over, and after Teddy was finished and sleeping, I stole out the front for a cigarette. I went down past the steps to the flower bed, so I wouldn’t get ash on the porch. It was late and the heat still hung in the air. I could smell Teddy on my skin. And my fingers trembled as I smoked.

Down the sidewalk, I saw my neighbor coming in from a walk with his little dog. The dog pulled at the leash, but he kept him reined in. When the leash snagged at his collar the dog shuttered and pulled a tight circle before trying to run ahead. “Easy,” he kept telling the dog as he tugged the leash.

I waved as he passed the edge of our yard.

“Miss Lauren.” He stopped and rested a foot on our steps. “Didn’t see you at the homeowners meeting.”

“Miss anything good?”

He grazed his hand along our bush. “Shrubs no higher than thirty-six inches. Smoking is now designated to back porches only.”

“Really.” I ashed my cigarette. “You going to tell on me?”

“We didn’t see anything,” he said to his dog. “Did we?” He picked him up and let him lick his face.

A man and his dog. It seemed like a good thing to me. And I wanted to know how he came about such a good thing. “Are you happy?” I said.

“Sorry?”

“You and Marvin.” I tilted my head toward their house. “You guys seem to have it together.”

He closed both eyes and flattened his mouth. “Child, please,” he said. “We keep appearances, but we keep better fences.” The dog tried to jump from his arms, but he held him tight. “How’s Theodore these days?”

“Same,” I said. I watched the dog shiver in the heat. It looked at me with wide, nervous eyes. “You ever let him off the leash?”

“Out back we do. But he’d dart off out here.”

“My whole life I’ve had one dog.”

“Didn’t think you and Theodore were dog people.”

“When I was a kid. Her name was Pepper.”

“Pepper.” He stroked between the dog’s eyes. “How cute.”

“She was half German shepherd, half something else. But she was a good. Knew tricks and everything.”

“That’s great.” He kept petting his dog as he looked past me, trying to see into our house.

“Back then we lived next to an open pasture. And if we didn’t tie her up, Pepper would run off our property, jet out to the neighbor’s field. So one day she’s out there, off the leash and running, and her paw gets snared in a fox trap.”

My neighbor made a sour face. “Oh, no,” he said. He shifted the dog to his other arm. “Poor thing.”

“Know what a dog does when it’s stuck like that?”

He shook his head.

“You’ll love this.” I twisted my cigarette into the flower bed. “She gnawed it off. Beneath the knee, right through the bone. And she still had the sense to limp all the way back home.”

He stopped petting his dog and gave me a feeble smile. I could see he was concerned. Just not enough to ask.

“We had to put her down after that,” I said. “Don’t know why we did that. She’d have been fine on three legs. Wouldn’t have had to tie her up anymore. But my dad put her down anyway. Said it was the right thing to do with a lame dog.”

His mouth fell slightly ajar. As his focus shifted from my house to his, the dog leapt from his arms, bolting for the street. For a moment I thought the dog just might break free. A surge to the road and no looking back. But he yanked the leash tight and kept the thing near. “Come on, boy,” he said. “Daddy’s waiting. We’d better get inside.”

USS FLAGG

In remembrance of my friend Boyd, I went to his house the week after to sell off his things. His mother had found my name in his cellphone and called me unexpectedly. “You keep half of whatever you make,” she had said. She exhaled long into the phone. “I can’t have it here anymore.”

“Nonsense,” I told her. “I wouldn’t keep a thing.”

When I came over she stood by the window, looking out at the lawn. A rough pour of liquor sloshed in her glass and she held it loose at her side. She offered me one but I declined. I didn’t want to embarrass myself trying to keep up with her. She stopped short of the entry to his bedroom and showed me in. The cleaning crew had removed all the furniture and rolled up the carpet. They had tossed it by the side yard.

With the floor stripped down to the tack strips, and the bed and dresser gone, his room looked like a museum. What remained, mostly comic books and toys still wrapped in the plastic, he had proudly displayed on the walls. There was a curve of track lighting that spotlighted die-cast statues. He had a whole shelf devoted to limited edition figurines. And in the corner was a tarp, covering something else the size of a coffin. It was an impressive haul. In the right circle these

childish trinkets were worth a considerable ransom. I picked up an action figure I knew could fetch a few months rent. “There anything off limits, something you want to keep?”

“No,” she said without looking my way. “Nothing.”

As I took inventory, I tallied a running total. It had me kicking myself for not taking her original offer. And I hated myself even more just for thinking about it. Selling only a couple items, I could have come out of here flush. Just thinking about it gave me a terrible urge to take something small, something Boyd would want me to have.

While I cataloged his things I found myself glancing over my shoulder to see if she was watching me. But she never was. Each time I stopped to look at her, I caught her gazing out the bedroom window, her eyes searchless and vacant. It occurred to me that until the service I’d never met Boyd’s family. I had never been to his house or even knew he lived with his mom.

That’s how it was with us. I guess Boyd and I were friends the way most people are. We looked forward to our time together and our faces changed when we saw each other. We’d buy each other gag gifts every now and then. And around Christmas we’d put a card in the mail. But when it came down to it, we really didn’t know each other at all. Sure, we rolled dice together on Tuesdays after the comic shop had closed. Or once a week we’d play trivia at the bar. And if there was a dumb movie at the midnight theatre, we’d meet there before wasting the night drinking burnt diner coffee. I knew Boyd’s favorite film, his Mount Rushmore of cinematic nude scenes, which super power he’d pick if granted just one, and what he’d order at a Waffle House for late night breakfast. But as I stared at this cache of toys, I realized I didn’t know a thing about him.

“Marcus,” his mother said. “What was he like with you? I never saw him smile much.”

She took a drink and sneered at the lawn.

“If happiness was on the menu, Boyd would have ordered a salad.”

She covered her mouth with her drink. A surge of laughter shook her chest. She began to sob. “That kid hated everything.”

“Yeah,” I said. “It’s what I liked best about him.” She started to laugh again and I had to blow the air from my lungs to keep myself from welling over. I looked at a framed comic book on the shelf, *Fantastic Four #48*, *The Coming of Galactus*, and I felt like crying even more. “Are you sure?” I said. “This stuff is worth some serious money.” But his mother didn’t answer. She had already left to sulk in the kitchen. I was standing there alone.

Of I course I wanted to honor Boyd. He was a rare find. Guys like us don’t make friends easily. And the ones we have don’t get out much. But I kept having this rotten urge to keep some of his things. The more I looked through the shelves the worse I felt. A vinyl cape Jawa with original packaging, *The Incredible Hulk #180*, *#181*, my god--a mint in box Storm Shadow. These shouldn’t be sold. They deserved a better end than that. Boyd had treated them right. He preserved them, guarded them on his watch, and now they were to be passed off, rolled out the door with the carpet.

An anger I had buried was rolling up to my throat. He had all of this, and he had me as a friend. And it still wasn’t good enough for him. I didn’t know what to do. So I stood in the center of his room, feeling this impossible distance tear open between us, and I let myself cry like a blubbering infant. She must have heard me, because after wiping my face, I found her in the doorway again, another glass in hand. She held it out for me.

It struck me that I never said anything to her at the service. “I’m sorry,” I said and I took the glass. “I--I don’t get it. He never said anything about this to me.” My eyelids twitched as I drank it down.

“His father got him most of this.” She gestured loosely at the room. “After he left. He’d send them on his birthday, always with one of those expensive cards, the thick ones. He’d write ‘Do not open’ or ‘This is not a toy.’ Said they wouldn’t be worth as much.”

“He wasn’t wrong. The box alone is worth a few hundred on that one.”

Her eyes interrogated the wall but couldn’t find an explanation. “What’s the point? Hanging on to something you can’t even hold, books you can’t open. What’s the use in that?”

I wasn’t sure she wanted a response from me. And it wouldn’t have mattered because I didn’t have an answer. I just knew I didn’t want his things belonging to some stranger. I didn’t want the burden of knowing I shipped it all to some poor fool trying to regain his past. I set the empty glass on the windowsill. The day had started to cloud and it looked like a rain might come. “I’ve got most of it written out,” I said. “Might be a few months for it all to go. It takes a special kind of buyer for this stuff.” I pointed to the tarp in the corner. It still concealed some part of him from me. “Did Boyd keep it like that?” I said his name without weight, as though I expected him to come back from an errand.

“Cleaners left it like that. Feel free,” she said. “You can look.”

What I would find I wasn’t sure. I might have been better off not knowing. But in remembrance of my friend Boyd I looked under the sheet anyway. I took care folding it back, holding my breath as if peeling gauze off a wound. Hiding under the tarp, coming into light in all its splendid glory, Boyd had the mother of them all, the USS Flagg aircraft carrier play set. In

1985 it was the biggest, best toy a kid could ever wish for. I had never seen one in person.

Growing up, nobody in my neighborhood could afford one. And seeing it now made me feel like I had just encountered a celebrity. I wanted to take a picture with it just to prove it was real.

Boyd had it displayed atop a long folding table. I had to step back to take it all in. Stern to keel she was seven and a half feet. The deck housed a few dozen soldiers, skystriker jets, and a dragonfly assault copter. There were movable gun turrets and a fully operational wench off the back. The paint was perfect, all the decals flawless. Under the table he even had the pristine original packaging. And on the observation deck he had an original Admiral Keel Haul action figure. He stood proud in his maroon bomber jacket, a thick mustache painted on his lip. What a sight.

“My word.” I picked up the Admiral by the waist. “This is incredible. This guy here, version one, you couldn’t buy him. You only got him if you bought the Flagg.” I held him out for her to see.

She didn’t seem to care, glancing at him only briefly. “Looks like Freddie Mercury in a sailor hat.”

I started to laugh again. Boyd and I had joked about how most the action figures of our childhood looked like pedophiles. With his sky blue shirt only half buttoned beneath his jacket, the admiral was no exception. And that made me feel like I might cry again if I didn’t get a handle on things. “When did he get this?” I said. “It’s so big. I mean look at the size of the box.” She was twisting the ends of her hair as she watched the clouds bundle together outside. She stopped only to fan her hand at the behemoth in the corner.

“A month, maybe. Had to throw out a nightstand and put his computer on the floor just to make room.”

I couldn't understand why Boyd wouldn't have said something about this. He had a near mint Flagg with all the pieces. It seemed a significant thing to me.

“Can you tell me something?” she said. I was still looking the Flagg over, making sure all the radar antennas spun correctly. “What's a grown man need something like that for?” As she spoke I found myself putting the admiral into my coat pocket to free both my hands.

“I--I don't know,” I said. “Why does anybody hold on to anything?”

“It's not like you can take it with you.”

An icy weight calved down my spine. I could feel her looking at me, but I was too ashamed to turn. I stood straight and slowly removed the admiral from my pocket. Just as he was before, I perched him on the observation deck.

“You can keep it,” she said. “I don't mind, really.”

“Oh, no,” I said. “I wasn't going to take it. I just needed both hands to flip this hatch open.” I was still afraid to face her. “I mean, you really shouldn't separate him from the ship anyway. Kind of kills the value of it.”

“No. I mean the whole thing. The captain. The ship. You can have it.”

I looked over my shoulder. She was still looking out the window, watching the rain soak into the rolled up carpet. She never saw me put the toy in my pocket. “I couldn't, really,” I said. “Even if I could, I came here in a hatch-back.”

“It comes apart. You could take it with you.”

“And I'm kind of in a studio right now. I'm not sure where I could put it.”

She walked across the room and stood next to me. For a moment we both looked at the Flagg, not saying a word, until finally she broke the silence. “You want it or not?”

In remembrance of my friend Boyd, I told myself it was the thing to do. So I laid flat the passenger seat and I lugged the pieces to my car.

I was honest when I said I didn’t have a place to put it. Really, it didn’t belong in my car either. The boxed soldiers stacked to the ceiling until I could barely see out the back. Part of it scratched against my window and the edge of the stern hit my elbow every time I tried to shift. There was no room to move. And it made me uneasy the way it clattered on the road. Something as simple as getting milk from the store or driving to the movies was a burden with this hulk in the car. Piled up and moored around me, it seemed an even heavier, bigger thing. So much that even if I wanted, I couldn’t find the space to offer up a ride. With this in my life, I’d have to go it alone.

COETZEE COMES TO DINNER

I first knew the afternoon before the big dinner. We were at the department store shopping for shirts. I watched how he spidered his fingers over the hangers. The way he left the back of his hand on his waist, elbow cocked like a fencer. It all started to add up. My son was queer.

“Mom, what about this one?” He held the sleeve up to his face. “Goes with my skin tone, right?”

I gave him an absent stare.

I could accept a gay son. Perhaps even more. I liked the idea of getting pedicures together. Or maybe he would date a man who could show me how to create a focal point in the living room. How to pillow our sofa. I would like that. And somehow, I believed in my heart, telling my book club that my boy was gay would lend me a new credibility. If I wanted, I could hold fast to viewpoint that they couldn’t possibly understand without having a gay child of their own.

“Try it on,” I told him. “Let’s see how it fits.”

First time I saw her was in the dressing room. I waited with a shirt in my hand. This was the most important day of my life, and I had this heavy feeling that my mom was going to ruin it. I was drumming my hand on the tabletop, when a stunning woman walked behind the counter. Stunning because she wore a combination of clothes I never thought possible. Brown tights, stunning in their tightness. A sheer tunic, stunning in its graceful draping.

“Just one?” She wore a headband that would have looked odd on anyone else. But on her, she was transformed into bohemian beauty. “You have more?”

“No,” I said. “Just this.” I gave her the shirt.

In the beginning I attributed Ellis’ shy demeanor to him being a bookish boy. He never ran in the sprinklers with the other kids. Never collected bugs in a kill jar or broke glass bottles under the streetlights. But as a young man, a softness remains. There’s something he didn’t outgrow. He’s not strong and rigid like a man. In that he’s lacking.

To me, a straight man demands. He takes what he wants. But my boy said things like, “It’s okay Mom, order the pizza with olives. I can pick them off.” Not only that, his wrists often dangled. God, on the treadmill--those limp little hands. Dainty and useless like a T-Rex.

Through the slatted door, she tells me her name is Marion. I had never met a Marion before.

“I’m going to check on another customer. Let me know if you need another size.”

I wanted to start a conversation with her, but I didn't know how. Besides, I figured this was the wrong place for that anyway. I pressed my ear against the door and listened to her walk down the hall.

When I came out of my booth, Marion was waiting for me by the mirrors. She leaned both shoulder blades against the wall, her arms slinking at her sides.

"Looks good on you," she said.

I liked the coolness in her voice.

"The cut is amazing."

Ellis strode out of the dressing room. His mouth choked a smile and his eyes were airy. "Be honest." He turned to the side and ironed his palm down the placket. "I love the cut."

What kind of man said cut?

I shifted my weight and examined the shirt. A pale blue oxford with yellowed buttons. Too bland for the new Ellis. I turned him around and flattened the fabric across his back. His shoulders were angular and biting. He had the body of a gazelle. "I think we can do better. We want to make an impression, right?"

I had told Mom it wasn't necessary, shopping and all. I was fine with a simple, casual dinner. In fact, I told her that Coetzee would most likely prefer it. He was an ascetic after all. But she insisted that was all the more reason we should flair it up. *Flair it up*. Her words, not mine. I

tried to tell her that ascetic had nothing to do with art and beauty, but mom wouldn't have it. She wanted gusto.

Marion was right. I looked good in this shirt. With her, I felt a confidence I normally couldn't carry.

How those words resonated in me. I knew she was paid to say things like that, but I could tell she meant it. That bored look Marion wore served only as a disguise. She took pride in being earnest. And like me, I think she was an artist at heart. She liked transforming things.

In this shirt I felt like I could talk to her. With a little flair, I knew I would survive the night.

Maybe Mom was on to something.

"Take this one. And try this." I handed Ellis bright, beautiful shirts. "This too while you're in there." Ellis made a face like I was pulling out his toenails. So dramatic, my son. I rolled my watch on my wrist. "We've got plenty of time. The dinner's not going to start without you. You have to change out of that anyway." Ellis left for the dressing room. I walked to another rack. My fingers dragged the length of the fabric. If my son was to be a writer, he would be a well dressed one. And if he was going to be gay, by god he was going to be the sharpest gay man he could be. He would impress that old Coetzee. I would be sure of it. One look at my boy and Coetzee would think, Now there's a talent to look out for.

I decided that today, my son would embrace his own kind of manhood.

“Ellis, wait.” I walked to the dressing room. I caught him talking to the shopgirl, probably about the cut of his clothes. I gave him the dress shirt. “This pattern is gorgeous,” I said. I could tell the shopgirl liked it too.

He looked at the price tag and his eyes went huge. “Mom, I can’t.” He quickly handed back the shirt like he was passing off a crying infant.

“It’s a special night.” I nudged his ribs as he turned toward the dressing room.

I glanced at the shopgirl’s name tag. “Marion,” I said, like I knew her name, “don’t let him leave until he’s tried on that shirt. Promise me.”

She brought her hand next to her face. She crossed her fingers and gave me smile. It was a shallow thought, but she seemed like a girl a straight Ellis might like.

Marion took the clothes. She counted the hangers and pulled a card with the corresponding number. “Hot date tonight?”

“Not even. I’m having dinner with a writer.”

“You a writer?”

I wasn’t sure how to answer. “I like to write.”

“Who are you meeting?”

My throat cleared. I tried to sound casual. “J.M. Coetzee.”

“Never heard of him.” Marion took a shirt out of the pile. She let her lips pucker.

“Executive decision. You don’t want to wear this.”

I tilted my head toward a rack of rejects. It was a move I had seen in movies, when I guy

wanted another round from a bartender. Marion's flat smile told me it was a move that didn't suit me either.

"Tell me about Coetzee." She took another shirt from the pile and hung it on the rack.

"Wow. That's just, wrong."

"Well, he won the Nobel in 2003. He teaches now, in Australia."

"He's flying out here to have dinner with you?" She caught herself. "I mean, no offense."

"It's bizarre, I know. I've never met the man. But I took third place in a writing contest and won dinner with him."

"So you're on your way. Mr. Bigshot writer." Marion set the clothes on the counter.

"I don't know about that. It's a bronze medal."

"Dinner with Coetzee." Her ripe brown eyes got big, like she was ready to die a good death. "Ellis that's amazing."

I looked at the floor. I felt a desire ache in me. She forced me to feel it, deep in my body.

"Next time someone asks, say you're a writer." She hooked the shirts on her hand and began to walk me to a room. She stopped in the hall, her face was twisted in thought. "If you get a night with a Nobel, what did first prize get, a golden typewriter?"

"Close. Coffee with Stephanie Meyer."

Before Marion could speak, mom came into the dressing room with another shirt.

"Ellis," she said. "Isn't this a delicious pattern?"

I had never heard my mom use delicious like that before. And I wasn't sure why she was using it now. Marion eyed the garment. She looked like she might gag.

A month ago the mail had come and Ellis started yelling in the kitchen. “Cozy, cozy,” he screamed. I hurtled through the living room, expecting to find him cut and bleeding. But he was doubled over by the island, a letter in his fist.

“Are you hurt? Can you make it to the car?”

He raised up and grabbed the counter like it would save him. “They picked me. I can’t believe I won.”

I pointed to the letter. “You won what?”

“I got third.”

“Honey that’s great. Why didn’t you tell me you were playing sports?”

Ellis flattened the letter on the butcher block. “A short story competition. Second runner-up gets to have Coetzee come to their house for dinner. They picked me.”

“You won a free dinner?”

“Coetzee. He’s coming here, for dinner.”

“Who?”

Ellis pulled a book from the shelf. He showed me Cozy’s picture on the dust jacket. The man looked like an extinct bird. His skin was pallid and cracked. His mouth sliced to the side and one shoulder sloped, locking him in a frail, crooked pose. *Diary of a Bad Year* the book was called. Try, *Diary of a Few Decades*.

This can’t be him, I thought. This is the man my son adores?

I looked hideous. My reflection spoke to it. The shirt was so bright it felt humid. Tangerine and purple, creamsicle and violet, swirled into a nightmare sunset. Wax-red buttons--*exorbitant* might be the right word--dotted down the shirt. The collar was fat, thick as a slice of pie. And the inside of the cuffs contrasted with the outside pattern of the shirt.

“Ellis. Ellis, come out. Let’s see it.” My mother was waiting out there. But I couldn’t let Marion see me like this.

I began to feel that terrible feeling. Sick and embarrassed, like a teenager waiting to be picked up from school. Seeing that station wagon tug down the lane. Praying to anything that would listen, Please don’t let them see me.

Mom was going to ruin it with Marion. And she would ruin it with Coetzee too. Deep down I knew it.

At the market, I had told her Coetzee was a teetotaler. She still thought it was a kind gesture to offer wine with dinner. I told her Coetzee fulminated against all forms of animal cruelty. He wouldn’t dream of eating animals.

Mom told me, “And that’s why we’re having fish.”

“No,” I said. “Christ, he’s vegetarian. He won’t even wear things made from animals.”

And now she kept bringing things to Marion, having me try them on. Exotic leather belts made from alligator and ostrich. Calfskin driving moccasins. I knew she meant well, but this wasn’t the first time she had done this.

At a rack of belts I wondered which one best suited my new son. Something braided? Perhaps one that resembled a polished alligator? The buckles flared the light like summer on a windshield. It reminded me of something I had heard in the car the other day. This doctor lady said everything in our children pointed back to genetics and environment. Called it nature and nurture--which I liked. Because I blamed this sudden queerness on his father. It's his fault for never being there. Instead of showing him how to burn a steak on the grill, Ellis had to learn that room temperature egg whites made stiffer meringue. He learned that cream of tartar helped the peaks hold. When Ellis should have been in the garage poking under the hood, he was in the dining room, trimming the candle wicks.

What was I to do?

I saw an ostrich skin belt with fat dark stitching. The silver toned buckle looked liquid. This one stood out. Now this was the belt for my Ellis. I took it to the shopgirl.

In the sixth grade my class took a field trip to a conservation center. We had been studying all month about the recycling and the dangers of swelling landfills. The whole class was waiting by the curb with Miss Leighton. It was cold that morning and the bus was late. The boys shivered and tried to pretend like it wasn't that cold, while the girls were smart enough to be huddled in packs and stamp their feet. As we waited, my mom pulled to the curb. She'd bought a coffee for Miss Leighton and hot chocolate for the class. She began to pour from a disposable carafe. Mom was filling cup after styrofoam cup, lining them up on the car hood.

The class began to stir. Most the kids were excited at the sight. But the smarter ones protested. "Litterbug," one kid said. He pointed to the sleeve of cups. "Those aren't biodegradable. Your mom's a litterbug." Other kids joined in the commotion. Some were so convicted they declined it all together. "Miss Leighton, that's bad," one girl said. "We learned those cups are bad. We can't have them."

My mom laughed. "You know, you're right. I should of thought of that." She put her palm on her forehead and made a face that had my classmates laughing too.

I was mortified. I could feel my chin tremble. The wind kicked up and bit at my eyes. They began to sting and water. By the time the bus arrived, the class rushed to the door. They had already forgotten the whole thing. But I hadn't. I felt an embarrassment that bit to the middle of my bones. I waited in the end of the line. I pressed my back against the bus and let the engine's idle vibrate through my chest. It shook the tears from my eyes and they jagged down to my chin. I wanted it to stop. But the more I thought about it, the more I cried.

Miss Leighton had me sit next to her in the front seat of the bus. As we rode I stared at myself in the window, wishing I had a different mom. I kept wiping at my cheeks, smearing the tears across my face. Miss Leighton pinched my arm. I looked at her. She was staring straight ahead. I went back to the window and she pinched me again. I could tell she was hiding a smirk. "Don't let them get you," she said. "You have a great mom. I didn't see anybody else do something that thoughtful." Her head swayed as the bus roared through a turn. "You're a lucky kid to have a mom like that."

I couldn't keep stalling in the changing room. I knew I looked ridiculous. But I shouldn't hold it against her.

I asked the Sales Associates what kind of person wears these jeans.

“I’m not sure I understand,” he said.

“This pair, here.” I held them out. “Who wears these?”

“Men,” he said. “They’re men’s jeans.”

“I know that. But what kind of man?” I let my voice lower. “Are these gay jeans?”

The associate looked at me cross. “I’m not sure denim has that kind of orientation.”

“Well, then what type of person would wear this style?”

The associate tilted his head. He curled a finger under his lips. “They are really tight. I mean tight, tight.” His voice croaked at the end of his sentence. “It’d have to be someone ballsy. Lots of confidence.”

Confident, ballsy. It takes balls to put yourself out there like my son does. “That gal in changing room, Maryann, can you take these to her? Ask her to give them to my son. She’ll know who he is.”

The jeans were so tight they pinched at my balls. I pulled at the crotch and lifted a leg. There was no give. I tried to stretch them out. I yanked at the thighs and the knees. I crouched down into squat.

Marion wrapped on the door. “Okay in there?”

“I’m not sure.”

Marion gave a soft laugh that put me at ease. “If you’re wondering, they’re supposed to feel tight. It’s the style.”

“I feel ridiculous.”

“Come on, man up,” she said. “Come out and show me. I’ll wait by the mirrors.”

I couldn’t help but walk with incredible posture. The jeans forced a tall, confident gait. I stood before the three-way mirror. Marion slid behind me. Her eyes traveled up my body.

“The pants look amazing. But this,” she circled her hand at my torso, “is out of control.”

I looked at our reflection. In the sides of the three way mirror the two of us stood together. Over and over, as a couple, we went on forever. I wanted to stay here with her. She wiped at a thread on my shoulder. I watched her ten million hands touch me. My heart went fast and I felt like there wasn’t enough blood in my body.

“You pair those jeans with the first shirt you had on. Now we’re talking.”

“What about this one?”

“Just toss it,” she said.

“But my mom loves it.”

“Tell her it’s a compromise. You wear the jeans she likes and the shirt that we like.”

Hearing her say we. It opened up a galaxy of possibilities in my brain. She rolled the cuffs of the flamboyant shirt. It made me look like an ice dancer. “Or there’s this,” she said. “You get this one too.”

“But I hate it. Look at it.”

She stood behind me and looked at me in the mirror. “It gives you an excuse to return it. I wouldn’t mind hearing how dinner went.”

A child hid from his mother. He made a fort inside a circular rack of shirts. The child parted the fabric and poked his nose into the light. I watched him scout for his mother. The smell of sugared milk panted from his mouth.

“Brayden,” his mother called as she focused on shopping. “Come out Brayden.” Her voice was indifferent. This was a game they’d played before.

Brayden opened the shirts wide and stretched his neck. He was too clumsy to properly hide. When he saw me, I winked. His head darted behind the garments.

His mother went to another rack of clothes, screeching the hangers against the rod. “I’m leaving, Brayden. You better come out.”

Brayden poked his head out again. His eyes showed fear.

I looked at the child. “You can hide if you want, but you’ll be all alone.” My voice softened to a whisper. “I bet your mommy will love you if you come out of there.” He held to the sleeve of a shirt and looked for his mother before darting out and clutching her leg.

“Mom,” Ellis said from behind. He had a shopping bag in his hand. The shopgirl was with him too.

“Where are the clothes? I wanted to see the new you.”

“You will,” he said.

“You got the belt, and the shoes?”

He looked to the shopgirl and he nodded.

“And we got him that shirt you liked too,” she said.

“You’re not worried Cozy will get mad?”

“Coetzee?” Ellis shrugged and gave a frown. “I don’t know,” he said. “I’ve not met the man enough to really know a thing about him.”