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Isolated Incidents: A Short Story Collection

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ISOLATED INCIDENTS: A SHORT STORY COLLECTION

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 Art

by

Justin McBride Langley Bryant

May 2017

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The Designated Thesis Committee Approves the Thesis Titled

ISOLATED INCIDENTS:
A SHORT STORY COLLECTION

by Justin McBride Langley Bryant

APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH AND COMPARATIVE
LITERATURE
SAN JOSÉ STATE UNIVERSITY

May 2017

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ABSTRACT

By Justin McBride Langley Bryant

In my collection titled *Isolated Incidents: A Short Story Collection*, I explore the themes of isolation and loneliness while using dark humor and a satirical voice as an undercurrent to move the narratives. Isolation and loneliness intrigue me, because they are triggered and motivated by contradictory emotions inside of us. Fear, love, hate, and even nonchalant attitude and happiness can all mix to make us feel isolated even when we are not alone. People can be isolated when surrounded by others at a dinner table, or in a crowded bar, or even a small office filled with co-workers. Loneliness is universally experienced by humans, but we all have different reactions when the isolation becomes too much of a burden. My collection explores the different extremes people take to avoid the pain of loneliness through a dark humored, satirical voice. I believe that comedy, especially satire, combats and reflects the beautifully chaotic world we live in, particularly in this digital age where we seem to be more connected than ever; yet, we isolate ourselves further by eliminating face-to-face connections. This collection reflects how we lash out at one another to stop the pain and anger when we feel alone, and the ways in which the internet has exacerbated these feelings and actions.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface.....	1
Our Weekend in Hell.....	12
#TwitterJumper.....	30
Troll.....	35
They Come to Watch Him Swing.....	54
Roshomon.....	64
If You Don't Take a Picture, How Will Anyone Know You Were There.....	96
A Sure Thing.....	100
Church of the Hell Fire.....	118
This Story I Cannot Write.....	137
The Children's Birthday Performers.....	154

PREFACE

To be a writer is to be an observer of human nature. Humans are flawed, fascinating creatures, and part of good storytelling is reflecting what happens to them on the page. Isolation and loneliness are the major themes that connect my short story collection, *Isolated Incidents*. This collection explores the effect of how these themes can push the boundaries of the fragile human ego to a breaking point. Loneliness is a condition experienced in numerous ways. This condition does not just consist of the stereotypical figure living in solitude, closing him or herself off from the world of other people. People feel lonely in a crowd, in a classroom of peers, or even in their own families. To be lonely is to be human, but each of us has a different reaction when isolation becomes too much of a burden and weighs on our fragile egos. The stories in this collection revolve around one tragic incident brought on by a character's inability to deal with loneliness, frequently incidents created by the political or technological landscape. I argue that loneliness and isolation are not the sole reasons that bad things happen in the world, that would be ludicrous. However, I do believe that the inability to be seen and understood by other people can cause extreme results. The misunderstood can take drugs to numb the pain or commit a major act of violence to placate a sense of lonely rage. Such scenes connect this collection of stories, but the strongest connection consists of my development of a satiric narrative voice that conveys the stories and their scenes to readers.

To balance the bleakness in my collection, I use a satirical voice. Many elements contribute to this voice: tone, characters, dramatic tension, setting, narrative structure, and language. It has taken years of reading numerous authors and their stories to develop my own voice. The influence of a select few authors can be seen in how I shaped these stories around fragile egos and the themes of loneliness and isolation. From the satirical tone of George Saunders to the abstract story structure of John Barth, I will lay out some ways that these authors have influenced my creative process.

Satire is difficult to write because being satirical means more than being humorous. Writers must be funny while reigning in their rage to shape a sardonic wit. *Satire: An Anthology* defines the word as being used “subtlety and suggesting rather than through bluntness and plain statement. It avoids the direct approach of propaganda and sermon in favor of the indirect method of art.” (Ashley Brown and John L. Kimmey 1) My collection acts as a reflection of how I see certain aspects of the world. I am not playing out frustrated fantasies on the page, but using satire to show how much anger, pain, misogyny, racism, and loneliness exist in the world. The satiric writer in modern fiction who has most influenced my work is George Saunders. His stories satirically and absurdly reflect the existing world. For example, the story “In Persuasion Nation” follows advertising logos as they wander through life after their usefulness has run out. It brilliantly plays with the notion of our fast-serving, throw-away world. The tone of a George Saunders short story exemplifies how a writer uses satire because “satirists set out to attack with moral fervor. But instead of slashing and decrying, they express themselves in a complex and often witty way.” (Brown and Kimmey 1) The job of the

satirist is to invoke critical thought through humor without ranting and raving. George Saunders is in complete control when he crafts his satirical voice. He deftly balances humor with heartfelt emotion, working expertly with a blend of satire and drama. Sometimes his stories are not humorous at all; yet, they still explore a person's place in the world. His story "Home," follows a war veteran who returns home from Iraq, cannot recognize the world around him, and has trouble coping with civilian life. It critiques his society and its expendability of certain people, as in "In Persuasion Nation," but this story is about a person dealing with human problems, unable to find a place where he was once comfortable. Saunders has taken the humor out while keeping his witty satiric tone to focus his themes. Saunders's brilliant balance has influenced my storytelling. Not all the stories in *Isolated Incidents* are humorous; yet, a Saunders-like tone flows through all the stories rather than just being specific to one story. Even though the collection consists of ten different stories, the tone must stay consistent throughout. It exists as the first element to establishing my narrative, satiric voice. Once the tone is set and consistent in how I portray the major themes, I start crafting other elements, such as characters. Well-rounded, complex characters are important to a story. They need to be vivid, emotional, and representative of the author's themes. Saunders creates fantastic and memorable characters, but the ones in my collection are more influenced by another great satirical writer.

When I read Elmore Leonard, I see how he enjoyed creating his characters. His most interesting characters exist in a moral gray area between good and bad. There is no division between the two because grayness reflects life, as in his iconic U.S. Marshall

Raylan Givens. This character is witty, he is closed off, he is emotionally stunted; yet, this is the character we root for. In the novel, *Pronto*, Raylan is the focus of the story despite the plot revolving around a crooked bookmarker. Leonard guides the reader towards Raylan, a lawman who often must bend the law in order to enforce it, making his dubious morality a chief characteristic. Leonard writes about a world of cops and criminals, and often it is difficult to tell one from the other. Humans do not live in absolute right or wrong. Some try to be good and know the difference between good and evil, but a lot of the time others are motivated by selfishness. Leonard's characters are petty, self-absorbed, and prone to violence, but are also humorously written. He understands the motivations of people and this reflects the moral ambiguity of Leonard's characters and has helped me shape and develop my own. Some of my more dubious ones are the Troll in "Troll" or Ryan in "Roshomon." I'll be the first to admit that these are not the most likeable characters, as I wrote them not to be, but I want the reader to understand why they act in the ways they do and to see and feel a sliver of sympathy for them the way they would for an Elmore Leonard character. George Saunders helped me find my satiric tone, and Elmore Leonard aided my molding of characters. Still, satire needs content to point out absurdity and ridiculousness. With this collection, I explore how humans use technology to isolate themselves even more from the world.

Our internet technology gives us the ability to feel empathy for people halfway across the world or to understand a completely different side of life that we would have never known. Occasionally, we squander this incredible technology, using it to get into petty arguments and call each other names over a faceless space. In *The Circle*, Dave Eggers

satirically explores this world of the selfishness of humans in accordance with the internet. While not being a horror story, the novel is one of the most terrifying I've read because the characters are unable to recognize the consequence of their actions. Through selfish indulgence, they isolate themselves further from the actual world by getting lost in a phony virtual one. They think that by making their lives completely transparent and technologically dependent they are creating a better place, when they are actually feeding the ego of a power-hungry control freak.

We are more connected with each other than we've ever been, but at the same time we are still lonely, shut-in introverts. Online shopping has all but eliminated human-to-human contact in order to get clothes or food or books. Too much time is spent online getting into inane arguments, thinking our point is better or more valid, and not having face-to-face discussions anymore. In 2016, technology went so far as to partially sway our presidential election. This world is ripe for satire. *The Circle* reflects how social media sites have created a terrifying, selfish dystopia. It directly has influenced my stories as nearly a fourth of them deal with how interaction in the technological world isolates us and does more harm to fragile human egos. The story "Troll" most accurately portrays how I see this world. It centers around a lonely internet troll forcing a connection across the wires of the web. He doesn't understand people even though he thinks he is better than they. He can fake enough in the real world to float by unseen, but ultimately, he is afraid of actual interactions with people and runs back to the safety of his computer to fling insults. In another story, "#TwitterJumper," a man decides to commit suicide and live-tweets the event. People trend to the hashtag, but they are either more interested in

the spectacle or voicing their opinion rather than helping the guy. These and other stories in the collection show a different satirical look at technology, while still centering on the themes of isolation and loneliness. Despite being more connected, we are further away from people and reality. George Saunders, Elmore Leonard, and Dave Eggers all influenced my tone, characters, and content, and partially make up my satirical voice. A writer needs to keep his audience engaged in the story, because it does not matter how witty or developed his or her characters are if they have no sense of dramatic tension.

Johnathan Franzen and Michael Chabon are two authors who expertly handle dramatic tension. They keep it basic and use the family to convey the tension in their books. For my collection, these two fit perfectly as one can feel isolated by their own family. It's ironic because the authors' characters are surrounded by the people who love and supposedly know them best. However, this is not always the case, as families often do not know anything about immediate members despite being closely related. Franzen explores this family dynamic in his novel *The Corrections*. The story is about a family that does not know anything about each other, despite being close, and this pushes the dramatic tension: we expect our family to understand us and we take for granted that they do. None of the siblings can understand the motivations of the others as they struggle to deal with their father Alzheimer's. The novel is a study of complex family drama; yet, it is also quite humorous: A group of related people cannot relate to each other. I explored this theme with the story "Our Weekend in Hell," where a wife worries that she will never be able to reconnect with her husband as the couple face old age. This story has humor as it is about a couple going literally to hell to try and reconnect, but the tension

exists in the what-to-do-with-the-rest-of-our-lives-crisis experienced by the wife. The immediate family is the closest and most recognizable way to create good dramatic tension, but tension can exist outside the family as well.

I appreciate Michael Chabon because he often gets out of a comfort zone and creates stories from all different genres. However, whether it be a detective tale or one filled with superhero action, Chabon moves the story with dramatic tension. To me, *Telegraph Avenue* is the best example of his use of dramatic tension. He extends it from beyond the close family to the neighborhood of Oakland, California and uses race, religion, and corporate takeovers to heighten the dramatic tension. As with Franzen, the conflicts are with the characters and their inability to communicate. This failure causes the protagonists to lose their local record shop and almost dissolves their friendship. Both Franzen and Chabon craft the same dramatic tension of the family but in completely different ways: the closeness of the family and the openness of the neighborhood explore how one can feel isolated even within the comfort of others. I did not want to give ten stories about the same issues, replete with the same use of dramatic tension. As with tone, the tension must stay consistent in relating back to the major themes. For this reason, my dramatic tension climaxes often with a terrible, violent act being committed. The characters in my stories have reached that breaking point because they can no longer deal with their lives' crushing loneliness anymore. Dramatic tension moves the story and helps to build the voice of the author. The use of setting and how a writer takes in a social landscape is one more element that shapes the narrative voice.

Writers, and especially satirists, tell stories that echo a cultural, social, or political landscape of a specific time and place. The setting of a story comes to be an important element in crafting the narrative voice. The stories of Flannery O'Connor often explore the rift between the old and new South. O'Connor expertly shows the old, stubborn way of life in the South that does not want to lie down and let a new, progressive one take over. Her story "Everything That Rises Must Converge" fully portrays this cultural clash. It's about a white son, unable to stand the complaints of his mother as she reminisces how buses were better back when they were segregated. Then, a negro and her young child get on the bus and embarrass the mother. The son cannot let her alone in her humiliation and pushes her away. In the end, both the mother and son end up hurting each other by their stubborn pride and anger. The South was forced to change in the 1960's and people either accepted this or fought it. O'Connor's stories never condemn or advocate for one way being right over the other. She puts forth the social landscape and lets the reader choose the moral. However, some writers do use setting and landscape to put forth a biased view of their own political agenda, as John Steinbeck does in echoing the climate of his era to set up the themes of his stories.

Steinbeck's stories often work to reveal the false myth of the "American Dream." He saw a world where people were told they could achieve the life they wanted through grit, hard work, and determination, but he knew that this was just not true. This view is most famously represented in his novel *The Grapes of Wrath*, but it is his short story collection *Pastures of Heaven* where Steinbeck explores the false promises of the family in the neighborhood that most had an influence on my stories. Like Flannery O'Connor,

Steinbeck portrays a political movement and socio-economic changes through the characters and the hypocrisies of their lives and actions. In the stories of *Pastures of Heaven*, people have made a comfortable home, family, and life, but remain empty and unfulfilled. The neighborhood forces them to conform to live an uncomfortable life as it crushes the rights and individualism of the characters. My stories “Church of the Hell Fire” and “They Come to Watch Him Swing,” are heavily influenced by the setting of my current cultural, social, and political landscape. These stories are not funny, but still satirical as they point out hypocrisies in society. The former shows how organized religion takes advantage of lonely, desperate lost souls, while the latter echoes society’s squelching the civil rights of African-Americans. Setting and landscape, along with tone, character, content, and dramatic tension all make up elements of my satirical voice. The last tools that cement the voice for the reader and allow me to present a collection that people would enjoy are the structure and the language of the story.

While most of the stories in *Isolated Incidents* are told with a straightforward structure, in a new key, William Faulkner and John Barth both explicitly experiment with the best way to craft their stories. They play with the readers’ sensibilities and this is what I take away from their structure and their language. Faulkner takes care with every single word and his “stream-of-conscious” writing style in *The Sound of The Fury* portrays the different characteristics of the Compson family. Barth, with his short story collection *Lost in the Funhouse*, takes the reader on a ride through narrative structure, playing with the notion of how stories can be told. These are not gimmicks, but essential to the story as much as plot, theme, and characters.

The author must decide the most accurate way to tell a story and how it relates the themes he or she wants to convey. In “The Children’s Birthday Performers,” I flow between the consciousness of two characters as they navigate being the entertainment at a birthday party. Like Faulkner, it is the only way I can capture the mundane, suburban life of people through two of them that need to numb themselves to get by. The story, “This Story I Cannot Write,” is more Barth-like, as I wink at the audience, letting them know that I understand what most of these stories have been about: I am exploring the isolation effects on the human ego through control of my structure and my language. They separate me from the characters and the worlds I create. With Barth, the writer can often isolate the reader, take them out of the story, and confuse them. “This Story I Cannot Write” is about a writer getting frustrated in his inability to tell a story and I want readers to feel a bit frustrated when reading the story so they can better experience the character’s struggles. It almost is a reminder that one is only reading stories about the effects of isolation and loneliness on the fragile human ego, not experiencing them. Structure and language are the final elements to craft a narrative voice as they are how a writer presents the story to the reader. Each one of these elements equally adds to my satirical voice in *Isolated Incidents* and that voice is how I center the collection around the major themes of isolation and loneliness on the fragile human ego.

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Our Weekend in Hell

I must confess, I never thought Hell would change my life.

I mean, it is Hell after all. Literally, the underworld. Who goes there for vacation? I had no idea it was even a viable tourist attraction, but apparently, it has been really up and coming the last couple of years.

This past fall I wanted to do something special. It is a beautiful time of year: still warm, but cooling down; leaves changing color to a beautiful brown in the trees; the last of our darn kids finally off to college. It's why I love fall. I know spring is rebirth, but fall felt the same for me. The world changes during this time. It's one last hoorah, one last chance to explore before a cold and dreary winter ices us in. For Frank and myself, I felt we needed to jump start and invigorate our relationship. From here on out, it would just be the two of us. He would retire in a decade, mope around the house, and complain about there being nothing to do. I saw this happening to him. I saw this happening to us. Personally, I don't want to be one of those housewives who twenty years from now looks for another career as a caterer or something to escape the constant nagging of her husband to do something with her life. No, I was still young enough, we were still young enough, so let us enter middle age with a bang: a *perfect* trip was the *perfect* way to christen this new life.

"You should try Hell," our chatty, friendly neighbor Bradley Jones told me when I had trouble deciding a vacation destination.

"Hell," I said with mild curiosity. "The place were bad people go?"

“Only if you die, but to visit, it is actually amazing. Barb and I went last summer and it opened our life.”

This piqued my interest. I was looking for a life-opening trip and I trusted Bradley. He and Barb have always been there, watching the kids when Frank had his emergency appendectomy or always inviting us to their BBQ’s even though I’m a vegetarian (they also happened to have a veggie substitute that wasn’t just beans and cornbread). On his recommendation, I decided that Hell was our destination.

“Hell?” Fred echoed my earlier curiosity. “The place were bad people go?”

“That’s what I said, silly.” I really needed to convince Frank that this was the place for us. “Bradley swore by it and I have been looking into what they offer. We’d stay at The Holiday Inn Spa-”

“-Holiday Inn Spa?”

“Oh, they seem to only have a Holiday Inn in Hell. It is a Spa, though, and it is supposed to be luxurious. Anyway, the Spa offers all the regular amenities: couples massage, fine dining, poolside service, but they also have exclusive tours of the nine circles,” here I read from the printout I had, “where one can experience Hell from a safe distance and see all that the underworld has to offer.”

“Hm,” Frank took the printout from me and looked it over thoughtfully. “I don’t know Faye, seems pretty expensive.”

“Well,” I was completely ready to counter his argument, “if we book now through Trivago, then the Spa is half-off for next weekend. Hell is entering its offseason; everyone wants to go at summer for some reason, and they are looking to rebrand as a

year round resort.” Frank mulled over the printout. There was some hope that this man would want to go to Hell.

“Okay, you’re the expert here. Hell it is.” He kissed my cheek and I was elated. I hoped that this would be a trip we could hang memories on. Any slow day in our lives, we could just look over at each other and say, remember that weekend in Hell. That was a wonderful trip. Hey, we should go back sometime, or take some time off, now that we have nothing going on, and just travel again. You know, explore the land. Just the two of us, Frank.

Turns out, Hell was easier to get to than I’d planned. After flying into the Ontario airport (the one in California, not Canada), we rented an economy car and drove east on the Fifteen. Frank’s always too tense on the freeways and never enjoys the scenery. I, on the other hand, love to look out the window to appreciate the wonder of nature. The Southern California desert blossomed before my eyes and took the focus off my long legs scrunched up in the small car. Most people see nothing in this desert, just a dead, arid wasteland, but there is life around. I am always amazed at the stubbornness of the cactus flower. It could have migrated to a wetter region, but it willed itself to stay in the desert, not yielding to the harsh conditions.

About twelve miles east of Barstow was the turn off to Hell Highway, Route 666. I could barely tell we were on a different road, except there was a greater variety of animal skulls and carcasses littered throughout the landscape. Quiet storms lingered in the background, never threatening, but just there and ominous, like a hail storm could strike at

any moment. Twenty minutes in and the road opened, literally. The highway raised up like a rogue tidal wave coming to swallow us. Frank freaked out, skidding the car to a stop. He was about to turn around, before I reached over, touching his shaking hands with my bony, skinny ones and explained this was supposed to happen (I spend the previous week researching all the intricacies of Hell, thank you Google!) and we just needed to wait for entry. The road stopped and faced us, the cracked pavement eddied and soon the road opened into a gaping circle of darkness.

“Vacationer or Sinner?” boomed a faceless voice. I got out of the car. It felt good to stretch. I motioned for Frank to do the same. He was slower, I guess not as excited as I was, but eventually came out of the rental car. The wind picked up and a hint of decay hung in the air.

“Vacationers,” I replied to the voice. “It’s Frank and Faye Hillsborough, from Akron, Ohio. We have a reservation for two at the Holiday Inn.” The breeze picked up and we felt it move through our bodies, almost scanning us for information.

“You may enter,” the voice was softer now, friendlier, like a calm flight attendant. “Please proceed to the parking lot on your left. It is the visitor’s lot. You don’t want to make the mistake of turning into the wrong parking lot.” The voice squeaked a high, even laugh as we re-entered the car and Frank cautiously inched the car forward.

“Headlights,” I reminded Frank, and he turned on the high beams into the dark void and it yelped a tinny horror noise. How fun! This was to be a hoot of a trip.

We entered the void and the scenery changed to resemble a mix between swamp and cave. Other cars were on the road now too. Amazing, since we had been the only one on

Hell Highway. The parking lot was directly to the left and we followed a blue Camry in. The lot was full, but a parking spot materialized for us and the Camry. It was thoughtful, Hell trying to take care of its visitors like that.

I stepped out of the car and the stench was the first to hit me. It smelled like someone had left the garbage out in the hot sun for a week. Frank got out of the car and barfed.

“Honey, are you okay? Is it food poisoning?” Oh, how I worried that the trip would be ruined and we’d have to turn back, but then I noticed the man who got out of the Camry also barfed.

“No, I’m surprisingly better now.” Frank reassured me. Still, I gave him some mints from my purse, can’t have his vomit breath reeking up the hotel shuttle.

We walked over to the bus stop at the end of the parking lot and sat down with the couple from the Camry. They were a nice, older Jewish couple from Boca Raton and were taking their first retirement trip. They were especially excited to see the daily Hitler torture. He clutched her hand and kissed the loose, wrinkled skin. They were a nice couple and seemed very much still in love. I hope Frank and I can look as happy as they at that age.

The Holiday Inn shuttle pulled up thirteen minutes later. A nicely dressed porter stepped out and picked our bags.

“Welcome aboard folks. Name’s Virgil. I’m your guide for your journey. Please step on up and we’ll be at your destination in no time.” We got on the small shuttle and Virgil drove us off. “Don’t mind the smell. You’ll get used to it by morning. And for some reason the men always vomit when they arrive in hell, we’ve never been able to figure

out why.” I was ecstatic, mainly because the Holiday Inn had all our concerns taken care of. It’s nice to know we’ll be taken care of. It’ll give Frank and me more us time.

Virgil continued across a large bridge. It was dark, yet somehow well-lit outside. I could see everything from the shuttle, not that there was much to see, just a blue cave with swamp water. On my left, a large boat rowed by a giant skeleton maneuvered through thick, sludgy water.

“Virgil,” I asked, “what is that on the river?”

“Well, ma’am. That is the 1:15 highwayman crossing lost souls on the river Styx.”

“Oh, the river Styx? Did you hear that Frank?” Frank didn’t respond, but stared out the window at the boat. “Virgil, do you think we could cross with them?”

“You do not want to be on that boat, ma’am. Believe you me. You do not want to be on that boat,” He reiterated with a hearty chuckle.

The shuttle pulled up to the hotel, which looked like an upscale version of a Holiday Inn. The recognizable sign and colors were all there, but it was only one story. I was a little disappointed to tell the truth. I expected more out of Hell then just your average hotel, but I was not going to let it dampen the mood. Frank hadn’t said a word the entire ride and still stayed silent. Maybe he was just taking it all in.

Virgil took our bags through as we walked through the door, Inside, the hotel was glorious. The architecture looked old, older than anything I’d ever seen, but a classic old. It was completely white, with a texture harder than marble. A huge fountain of the devil burst through the center of the foyer. The hotel felt fresh and was bustling with tourists trying to navigate their weekend plans. Virgil brought our bags to the front desk.

“You folks enjoy now, and if you ever need a question answered, do not hesitate to ask for old Virgil, now.” And, poof, he disappeared. A short, balding man stood behind a massive counter, almost hiding him.

“Good day and welcome to the Holiday Inn Spa and Resort in Hell. Reservation?” I gave him my confirmation number and we got out room. “Please proceed to the elevators.” Elevators! That seemed odd for a one-story hotel, but we proceeded without question. In fact, Frank had still not spoken. I felt as if I’ve been talking his ear off the whole trip.

The elevator doors opened and Virgil appeared again.

“Evening ma’am, sir. What floor?”

“441,” I told him as we entered.

“Ah, the Greed Zone, fantastic.” He pressed the button for four and the elevator shot downward.

Below! Of course it would be below! Hell is completely below the earth and heavens, it all made sense now. The sight was incredible. The elevator shot down a glass tube and the glory of the underworld presented itself.

It was a gigantic cavern. The walls, lined by blue jagged rocks protruding outward, glowed from the beautiful orange fires that snapped up from the far corners. They were almost diamond-like the way they reflected. A winged demon flew past our elevator and ‘cawed’ loudly, snapping its jaws at us. I jumped back, laughing, but Frank didn’t move. He just stared down at the giant ice lake at the bottom.

“Bet that’s cold.” It was the first thing he said since we arrived.

We entered our suite and boy was it roomy. The bed was a king with fourteen pillows strewn across it. The bathroom was pure gold. I couldn't believe it, toilet and all. I thought it would be cold, but the seat was warm to the touch. The jacuzzi tub was enough to fit eight people comfortably. It was a marvel. I stared at the gold lining and the tub whispered my name. *Faye, relax inside me, Faye. Relax. Take some time for yourself, Faye.* At that moment, I needed the tub. Screw Frank and his silence. If he won't enjoy this trip, by golly I will do it for the both of us. I took off my clothes and sat in the tub, turned on the water, and let it run all over my naked body. I was more tired than I thought and the water in Hell felt cleansing. I could spend the whole weekend here alone. I have the rest of my life to cook dinners and read books and get stimulated through charity work. Right now, I just needed to not worry about anything but being in this tub. Frank entered the room. He saw me naked, my nipples poking just above the water and something clicked in him. He took off his clothes and jumped in the tub.

Now I was the one who didn't want to speak. I opened myself to him. I let him touch me like he hasn't touched me in years, like he hadn't touched me ever. He was an animal, I was his prey. His hands ran up and down my breasts, stomach, and thighs and it felt right when he entered me. We'd never made love in a hot tub before. My sister told me years ago how uncomfortable it was, with that warm, dirty water smacking up against and inside your body, but this was not the experience tonight. It was blissful as the water sloshed around us and we were kids again, discovering each other's bodies for the first time. It was over quickly though, and Frank turned back into the mild man I'd always recognized.

“I’m so sorry, Faye. I don’t know what came over me.” I shushed him and told him how happy I was to be in Hell with him. We sat in the tub until it was time to get ready for dinner. The water stayed the same temperature the entire time we were in it.

I looked fierce in my evening wear. It was a long, black dress from the Vera Collection and I felt sexy again wearing it. I don’t know if it was possible, but I thought I even looked younger. As I walked out of the bathroom, I spied Frank and I know he looked younger. His middle age paunch flattened out in a tailored suit. The gray streaks through his hair returned to a deep auburn hue. He was the spitting image of the man I fell in love with twenty some years ago.

“Wow,” his mouth was agog. I must have looked younger too. “I forgot you could look like that. You look as beautiful as when we had our first date.” I blushed, he presented his arm, and I took it. “Shall we, my dear.”

Every floor of the hotel exits out to an adjacent circle of Hell. Our floor was themed around Greed. Money lined the walls and we peeled off hundred dollar bills as we walked to the exit. Virgil was waiting for us as we stepped outside. The air was stale and warm, exactly how you’d expect a giant underground cave to feel, yet it wasn’t claustrophobic. It felt vast and open, as fresh as our Akron neighborhood.

“Good evening ma’am and sir. Let me call a car around,” greeted Virgil.

“Virgil, where’s the happening place around here?” Frank asked

“Well, the Greed Zone is a daytime activity. So it’s pretty quiet right now. Make sure tomorrow you catch the daily head-fund managers’ torture, where Wall Street bankers

experience crash after crash after crash. It's a hoot. Tonight, you're going to want to head to the dinner in Gluttony, then the hit the nightclubs of Lust."

"My dear?" Franks turned to me.

"Yes, that sounds lovely." I responded. "Thank you, Virgil." A black town car pulled up and we got in.

The ride was comfortable, but I felt unfulfilled somehow. It was a perfect evening so far, but I was pulled to what was outside the town car. It's hard to catch Hell at night, since it always looks like night, but the windows of the car were tinted pure black. I saw nothing and I yearned to see the outside world. I tried to roll down the windows, but they didn't work.

"Excuse me, driver," I called out. The partition opened and there was Virgil again, driving the car. That man was everywhere.

"Ma'am," he called in his familiar tone.

"Could you turn the safety locks off? I'd like to look at the landscape, please?"

"Sorry ma'am. They don't roll down. We have to travel through real Hell to get to the Gluttony Zone. Real Hell is not for mortal souls to see. Your eyeballs would bleed and explode inside your head. The air would seep through your nostrils, cutting your sinuses before causing an aneurism that would kill you instantly."

"Well, that's disappointing." I sat back and Frank wrapped his arm around me.

"Probably for the better, not dying and all." He tried to alleviate my sourness.

"It's not much anyway," chimed back Virgil, "just a bunch of ice rain pelting fat slobbs stuck in their own filth. We'll be in the zoned district shortly."

Time does not exist here. We could have been travel for hours or minutes, or maybe it was me nursing the disappointment of not experiencing real Hell, but the ride seemed an eternity. It had only been six minutes when we reached “La Fortuna,” a restaurant that Virgil recommended.

The food was delicious. Frank thought so too as he had *three* helpings of steak. I just had one helping of the ahi tuna, but it was perfectly cooked, and tasted succulent and not at all fishy. I asked our waiter how the food was so good here. He explained that it was seasoned with the essence of those who committed crimes against the animals. Frank’s steak was seared in the fat of CEO’s of giant conglomerate farms, and mine was marinated with the souls of those who cruelly depleted the natural resources of the ocean and brought on climate change, also garlic. The desert was even better, a triple chocolate cake the size of a football, dusted with the pure German, Austrian, and Belgian Nazis. It thought of how that nice Jewish couple would really enjoy this cake.

If the night had ended there, it would have been perfect, but Frank was full of energy and want to hit the night scene of Lust. Why not, I am feeling the youngest I have in years and thought, when in Hell...

We were whisked off to a place called “Cleopatra’s.” It was hopping as the kids would have said. The music was loud inside, but I didn’t care. Frank got our drinks (a cosmo for me, Jamison and coke for him), took me by the wrist, and led me to the dance floor. His hands were soft and warm, and he held on to me like he was afraid to lose me. I got a glimpse of our future life. I’d be making dinner and Frank would come and hug me from behind. A song we heard tonight would come on the radio and he’d say, *remember*

that weekend in Hell, and I'd forgot the dinner and we'd spend the night dancing and making love.

Dancing, yes. We'd dance just like tonight. All I wanted to was dance. Frank kept bringing us drinks (Babe, they're free!) and I felt comfortable grinding up on him in a public space. I felt twenty years old again. The alcohol swam through my body and Frank's grip on me made me feel warm and loved. We drank and danced, drank and danced, drank and danced. It was a perfect night, except for one weird moment.

I had to sit down. Frank went to get us some water, my mouth felt like the Barstow desert we'd earlier passed through. As I sat on a plush purple couch, a man approached me. All I could think was how handsome he was with a square jaw and a sweat stained shirt that hugged his trim body. He kissed me and I kissed him back. I kissed him so long that I failed to notice Frank had returned with the waters. I looked up at him and turned pale, but Frank was calm, smiling even. The man looked back up at Frank, rose to meet his face, and started making out with him. Frank dropped the waters in surprise, but to my astonishment, he received the kiss moving his big hands through the hair of the man. I rose and joined the two men and soon the three of us were making out passionately. Then the man split off, thanked us, and told us to enjoy the night, which was lost to more drinks and more dancing.

I should have been in pain the next morning, but I woke up rested. I had drunk as much last night as I had in the past decade, but I felt fine. Frank snored softly next to me, his

eyes fluttering as if he enjoyed the dream he was having. I got up and went to go soak in the tub before breakfast. That flipping tub was so wonderful.

“You feel good today?” Frank asked over a Spanish omelet and eggs benedict from the Hotel breakfast.

“Great, actually.” I responded

“Me too. It’s weird. I should be hungover. I drank like a Clydesdale last night, but nothing this morning. So, what do we do today?”

“I don’t know. What do you want to do?” There was a ton of activities in Hell, in retrospect, one weekend is not nearly enough.

“I was reading the brochure and, apparently, the big guy opens the Ninth Gate from 4-6 on Saturdays and you can go talk to him. Sounds like an interesting thing to do.”

“Yeah,” I trailed off and Frank reached over to cup my small, dainty hand in his large, smooth one.

“But?”

“I wish I could see real Hell. All this seems a little fake.”

“Honey bunch, you heard what Virgil said about mortals not being able to handle real Hell. I don’t want you to die.” Frank grabbed my hand. I felt fear from him. He was afraid I wouldn’t heed Virgil’s warning. I would, trust me, a painful death doesn’t sound ideal.

“Okay, let’s do the Satan thing then.”

“Great.” Frank finished up his breakfast. He was even more handsome this morning.

The rest of our Saturday was spent wondering the zoned districts. Anger was cathartic. Virgil recommended a place where we could kill anything that made us mad. For me, it was racism, and I went around chopping down Klu Klux Klan members with a hatchet. *CHOP CHOP CHOP WHEEEEE* It was a peach. Frank wanted to hurt Jimmy Dossage, the kid who bullied him when he was twelve, so he spent the afternoon punching Jimmy in the face over and over again. Don't feel bad for them. These people were in Hell and deserved our rage. I loved it.

Then it was time to meet the big man.

Virgil drove our town car through the Ninth Gate. It was less ornate than I expected. It was reinforced by iron bars, but there was no flash, just wood and metal. We got out and joined people in line, apparently, the dark lord meets with one person at a time and has a deep conversation with you. How thoughtful.

The line was long with tourists, but before I knew it I was being patted down by demons wearing TSA uniforms before being allowed to enter "Satan's Space," as it was called.

The room was warm, comfy warm, and to my surprise completely white. There was nothing, no furniture, no doors, not even a throne made of human skulls. It was purely empty.

"Hello." A man appeared from nowhere, his voice was calm. He was short and old, and kind of looked like the character actor Philip Baker Hall. "Welcome to Hell. I'm Satan."

“You’re Satan?” I was truly shocked. “I’m sorry, it’s just I expected something more, um, more-”

“-red, maybe? Demon-like? Some horns and a lot more menacing?” He smiled, it calmed me again. “I am not here to scare you, Faye. I find that the look of a humble old man reassures my guests of a real conversation. Call it the grandfather effect. Please have a seat.” A red, plush couch appeared and swept me off my feet. It was very comfortable. I wanted to go to sleep for hours, but was too curious. I mean the devil was right in front of me.

“Can I ask you a question, Satan?”

“Please.”

“Why can’t I see the real Hell?” Satan laughed and sat down in a modest, brown arm chair. It was the strangest psychiatry session I’d ever been to.

“Because Faye, you’re here on vacation. You want to get lost in what we have to offer, not see Hell for what it is. This place is for sinners, not for good people like you and your husband, Frank. It’s okay to ignore the real Hell and have fun. It doesn’t make you a bad person. Now, can I ask you a question, Faye?” He leaned in, his voice had a more sinister tone, but I wasn’t scared. Ironically, it made me more comfortable to open up to him.

“Please, Satan.”

“Why do you desire to see real Hell?” His question stuck in my head and I guess I never really asked myself before, because I had no real answer.

“I think it’s because you said I couldn’t.”

“Ah, defiance. Such a great human trait. You’re a woman after my own heart, Faye Hillsborough.” He laughed again, and I chuckled a bit. I stared back into his eyes and they glowed red, sending a tingle through my body. It felt good to flirt a little with the devil.

“Did you enjoy your time here, Faye?”

“Oh, yes. The resort was wonderful...”

“...but it wasn’t everything you desired, was it?”

“Satan,” I felt hypnotized by this celestial being. I was ready to pour open my heart, “I’m just afraid that when we get back I’ll go back to my boring ways.”

“That’s why they call it a vacation. You always have to return to normal life.”

“Yes, yes I get that, but this feeling is more.”

“Tell me.”

“Well, Frank’s been great this trip. I’ve feel great, like we’re twenty years younger. He has a new passion I’ve never seen in him, and I don’t want that to end. You see Satan, we had kids early and they kept us distracted from talking to each other. Now that they are gone, I’m afraid of us having nothing to say to each other, nothing to love about each other. We’ll both be going back, getting too old and ugly and complacent. I’m worried that he’ll want more and leave me. My house scares me. I don’t recognize it when it is so empty. I don’t recognize me when I’m empty...”

I rambled on some more about fears and hatreds and jealousies, all trite subjects that every daytime talk show guest blabs on about to Dr. Phil or Oprah or Ellen. It was embarrassing really, but I continued. The words flowed like an emotional levee broke

inside of me. I was crying, I was yelling, I was sad, happy, and angry. Satan said nothing the whole time, he just let me vent, smiling that semi-sinister smile the whole time. When I had no more words left inside of me. Satan got up, placed his old, wrinkled thumb on my forehead, and I went to sleep.

I woke up to the phone ringing back in the hotel room. Frank answered it and hung up.

“Wake up, call,” he said with his back to me. It looked worn and slightly flabby. He was the old Frank again. “Time to get going.” He groaned and creaked as he rose out of the bed and waddled into the bathroom. Today I ached. I felt my old self crawl back into my skin. I don’t remember anything that happened after my talk with Satan. I got up out of bed and started to pack up my suitcase. I didn’t even have time for one last soak in that glorious tub.

We arrived back in Ohio in the early evening. Our house looked its normal, quiet self. I almost called to the kids out of habit, but remembered they no longer lived here. The trip back was nothing. Frank and I basically slept the whole time. We must have been dead exhausted. In twenty more years, we shall stand in this front hall again, Grandchildren running around our feet. Maybe it’s a holiday or maybe it’s the summer. These walls will look the same. Our stairs will lead up to the same bedroom and bathrooms with the same small beds and tubs. The house will smell as it has always smelled. The wood and boards will creak as they always creaked. I’ll look over at Frank and say *remember that one weekend in He-*

“-Home sweet, home.” Frank called out, lugging the bags behind me. He kissed the top of my head. “I got to admit. It feels good to get back to our normal lives.” He walked into the kitchen to grab some water. I stood in the front hall, still unable to move.

“Nothing’s in the fridge. We got to go shopping in the morning.” He called out from the kitchen, voiceless, bodiless. “I’ll order a pizza.”

“Okay,” I softly replied to the empty void of our house as my eyes filled with water.

#TwitterJumper

Carlton Fitzsimmons @theFitzCarlton 56m

When you kill yourself: do a spectacle or do it quietly? Spectacle #TwitterJumper

Carlton Fitzsimmons @theFitzCarlton 56m

Tall building. Best way to do it. Laura you should have loved me. Not your fault though. #TwitterJumper

Carlton Fitzsimmons Retweeted

Laura Spencer @Lauraspace 56m

2 bagels for breakfast. CS out of cream cheese. Only Peanut Butter. I threw it away. #1stWorldProblems #Wastful #IKnow

Carlton Fitzsimmons Retweeted

Troy Davis @ManofTroy 55m

Laura, my new girl, brought me an extra bagel. No Peanut butter. #OfficeCrush #TroyWinning

Carlton Fitzsimmons Retweeted

Troy Davis @ManofTroy 55m

'nother day, 'nother dolla. Make that chedda. Yaw know how it is. Good living on planet Troy.

Carlton Fitzsimmons @theFitzCarlton 48m

I blame Troy. Fucking Troy. What did you see in that monkey, Laura? I stand corrected this is both your faults #FuckYouTroy #TwitterJumper

Carlton Fitzsimmons @theFitzCarlton 48m

This is why I chose your building. You two need to see what you did to me. You need to see your consequences. #TwitterJumper

Carlton Fitzsimmons @theFitzCarlton 46m

I'm gonna do this, promise you people. I'm gonna end my life Laura #TwitterJumper

Carlton Fitzsimmons Retweeted

Laura Davis @Lauraspace 45m

Troy bought me a stuffed teddy!!!! Soooo Cute!!!! more to come, he says!!! Carlton was never so thoughtful. #bestnewBF #blessed

Carlton Fitzsimmons @theFitzCarlton 43m

It is so cold up here. Should have brought a jacket. See, I'm still the joker Laura
[#TwitterJumper](#)

Brooke @catprincess4 50m
[#TwitterJumper](#) is currently trending. Is dude for real? Deats? [#WheresThePolice](#)
[#isthisastunt](#)

Brooke Retweeted

Carlton Fitzsimmons @theFitzCarlton 49m
Saw I'm trending. At least I'll have a crowd. Still love you Laura. [#FuckYouTroy](#)
[#TwitterJumper](#) [#SaveCarlton](#)

Brooke @catprincess4 49m
This dude is real!!!! Someone help him. [#WheresThePolice](#) [#TwitterJumper](#)

Brooke Retweeted

Carlton Fitzsimmons @theFitzCarlton 49m
Strong wind almost blew me off the ledge. I am doing this on my own terms. Laura I care
deeply for you. [#TwitterJumper](#)

Tony Yallo @tonyjyallo 45m
Yo this kid gonna kill hisself over a bitch do it kid let her know she made a mistake
[#TwitterJumper](#) [#FuckYouTroy](#)

Carlton Fitzsimmons Retweeted

Troy Davis @ManofTroy 40m
1 V-Day with Laura. Any suggestions? Thinking of a clichéd candlelit dinner. Hit your
boy up

Cary Yoko @TigerJuice 38m
Hey man, don't do this. Take it from your pal Cary. No one person is worth your life.
[#SaveCarlton](#) [#TwitterJumper](#)

Laura Spencer @Lauraspace 35m
So, I'm famous? Is this for real, Carlton? It's over dude. [#StopPretending](#) [#GetALife](#)
[#TwitterJumper](#)

Tony Yallo @tonyjyallo 28m
Is this still a thing? Haven't heard from him for some minutes. [#TwitterJumper](#)

Brooke @catprincess4 28m
[@tonyjyallo](#) yes, he is still up there. Don't jump!!!! [#TwitterJumper](#) [#Dontjumpcarlton](#)

Carlton Fitzsimmons @theFitzCarlton 28m

[@tonyjyallo](#) [@catprincess4](#) Yes, I still am going to jump. Laura broke my heart.
[#TwitterJumper](#)

Carlton Fitzsimmons [@theFitzCarlton](#) 26m
Feeling the love guys, but too late. The police are down there. Still gonna do it. She has to know how she broke my heart. [#TwitterJumper](#)

Goth Taylor Swift [@GothTaylorSwift](#) 25m
Darkness envelops the soul. End your life, Carlton. Your pain will be gone and I will write a song about you. [#TwitterJumper](#)

PhillyFan69 [@MetsSuck](#) 25m
Jump already faggot [#TwitterJumper](#)

SDPolice [@CityPoliceDepartment](#) 25m
Attention Jumper: Life is worth living. Do not do this. We are sending someone to talk to you [#TwitterJumper](#)

B.B. Dilley [@BigBadDollar\\$](#) 25m
Fuck da Police. Jump, son. Jump. Fuck that bitch. She hasa know how she hurt you.
[#ThugLife](#) [#TwitterJumper](#)

Troy Davis [@ManofTroy](#) 19m
[@theFitzCarlton](#) don't do this man! Look, I'm sorry we feel in love. It is over, but you do not need to do this. Please. [#TwitterJumper](#)

Carlton Fitzsimmons [@theFitzCarlton](#) 18m
[#FuckYouTroy](#) [#TwitterJumper](#)

Tyler Feller [@TFBaller](#) 18m
THIS SHIT IS FAKE!! FAKE NEWS! THEY ARE FOOLING YOU ALL!! BAA!! SHEEP!! BAA!! [#TwitterJumper](#)

Brooke [@catprincess4](#) 18m
You have no place to talk, Troy. [#FuckYouTroy](#) [#TwitterJumper](#)

Kerri [@KerriWithAnI](#) 17m
Been following [#TwitterJumper](#). Guy sounds like a real angel. Someone will love you Carlton. [#TwitterJumper](#) [#FuckYouTroy](#)

Tony Yallo [@tonyjyallo](#) 17m
[#FuckYouTroy](#) [#TwitterJumper](#)

B.B. Dilley [@BigBadDollar\\$](#) 16m

Aw yeah, [#FuckYouTroy](#) is trending now. Do it Carlton. [#TwitterJumper](#)

Goth Taylor Swift @GothTaylorSwift 16m

Fuck You Troy is the name of my new single [#FuckYouTroy](#) [#TwitterJumper](#)

KTSD @KTSD 15m

Possible jumper at the Northern Bank Tower. We will keep you updated. Tune in at 6 for the full story. [#TwitterJumper](#)

SDPolice @CityPoliceDepartment 15m

[@theFitzCarlton](#) we are still sending up someone to talk to you. Do you have any demands? [#TwitterJumper](#)

Billy T @BillyTreats 15m

Dude, the twitter jumper is right outside my window!!! [#TwitterJumper](#)

Bette Davis @NoEyes 14m

[@BillyTreats](#) OMG!! I can tots see the jumper from my building. [#TwitterJumper](#)

Troy Davis @ManofTroy 14m

Stop with the hate people! Don't know the whole story! This isn't how we resolve life's troubles. Let's talk it out, Carlton. [#TwitterJumper](#)

Carlton Fitzsimmons @theFitzCarlton 12m

Appreciate the love from everyone, but only want love from one person. This is the last tweet. I am doing it. [#TwitterJumper](#) [#FuckYouTroy](#)

Laura Spencer @Lauraspace 9m

The ambulances are below. Now I have this upon my head [#WhyamIsocursed](#)
[#TwitterJumper](#)

SDPolice @CityPoliceDepartment 9m

We have a situation at the corner of 9th and Broadway. Traffic has been rerouted to Main st. [#TwitterJumper](#)

KTSD @KTSD 9m

Please notice the police bulletin. Traffic halted DT 9th & Broadway. Tune in @6 for the details. [#TwitterJumper](#)

SDPolice @CityPoliceDepartment 9m

We have a situation at the corner of 9th and Broadway. Traffic has been rerouted to Main st. [#TwitterJumper](#)

Tyler Feller @TFBaller 8m

FAKE NEWS ALERT. POLICE WONT 2 MAKE LIFE HARDER. FU 5-O
[#TwitterJumper](#)

Brooke @catprincess4 8m
[@TFBaller](#) a man's dead. have some respect and get a life, weirdo. [#TwitterJumper](#)

Goth Taylor Swift @GothTaylorSwift 7m
The dead do not care. The will never ever get back together because they are dead.
[#TwitterJumper](#)

Cary Yoko @TigerJuice 6m
Wish someone could have helped this kid. He could've used my self-help seminar. No one is beyond reach [#TwitterJumper](#)

Brooke @catprincess4 8s
Is this still a thing? [#TwitterJumper](#)

Troll

You are still awake at one in the morning ignoring that you have to clock in at your mundane, shitty job in less the eight hours. You hope that by mindlessly scrolling down your *Facebook* wall and monotonously viewing all the new baby pics, or tags of people out at bars, or fishing trips taken over the weekend, you will stumble on to something that merits your attention. You crave the argument, to point out the idiocy that most people do not know they present to the world. Sleep can wait. The monster inside must be fed. It doesn't matter, anyway. You know you will still only get four hours, five if you're lucky, no matter when you go to bed. Insomnia is a byproduct of your anger and loneliness.

Facebook bores you. Everything bores you. No one really does anything interesting or says anything controversial anymore. They all argue and bitch about the same shit: politics or sports or stupid tributes to which celebrity has died that day. It's all links to *Huffington Post* or *Breitbart* articles reaffirming a comfortability in a certain political belief, or inane *Buzzfeed* articles about the "twelve hidden meanings in Disney cartoons;" or "five new ways to spice up your cooking;" or "seventeen ways my vagina scares me." Fake news sites ooze with click bait headlines trying to build up their visits. The worst is your own page is full of ads judging your last *Amazon* purchase or to try this new dating website. The internet thinks it knows you. It only exists to remind that you're single and have nobody in your life. You want stimulation, the need to fuck up somebody's world, not be reminded of your own inadequacies. You need that power, you need that control in your world and right now, no one can give this to you.

First you click over to the message boards on *ESPN*. There is nothing easier then to piss people off by insulting their favorite sports team. You look at a page between arguing Ohio State and Michigan fans. Easy, these people are already mad at each other for incomprehensible reasons. It's time to throw a wrench in their stupid arguments.

"Sports are meaningless," you type. "Why you arguing about who is better? This is what the industry wants. It rewards the brutes and the ignorant, and they make billions off your petty squabbles in which you have no control in the outcome." You recognize it's not the most well versed argument, but these people cannot understand a well-versed argument, and you have more bullets ready in the chamber.

Your comment goes ignored. It is lost in a sea of "Go Blue," and "O H I O," and "Roll Brutus." What's that last one even mean, anyway? This is what you get for tussling with sports fans. Their brains can't handle when you spit on their fantasy.

Your next stop is the *IMDB* message board. You find that someone named Cap'nStark198 has started a conversation about whether they are making too many superhero movies. Intriguing, as these boards used to exist as places for a good ribbing, one where people kept up with your uncanny ability to sling insult after insult and have it mean something. These boards use to be a place where people had no care or worry about pussy-footing around the issues. You click on it and read some of the previous comments. You cannot just go blind into this argument. These people demand a shade more respect than the Neanderthals in sports world and they aren't like random idiots on *4chan* spouting unintelligible, racist, sexist drivel at each other. Make it mean something if you go that route. Make it hurt. The internet is a zoo, and most the people on it are monkeys

throwing feces at each other. The users on *IMDb* used to be semi well-read and proficient in forming a coherent argument.

These users are fucking it up. They only make comments about which movies are their favorites, or whose power they would want the most, or whose backstory is the most tragic. What a crock of shit. There isn't even the basic Marvel/DC debate! No one is arguing anyone. Everyone just types their opinion and ignores the previous post. You feel for the original poster, he wanted to get a real conversation going, and his space is intruded by those who don't know how to act behind a keyboard. You scroll down through the section some more to see that Cap'nStark198 joins the pussy parade. All he does is agree with the people's assessments. He never even answers his original question! What happened here? These nerds use to be kings of useless arguing. You cut your teeth on sites like these, but these kids know nothing about how their forefathers laid the path to destroying someone with articulated ramblings. You wonder if humanity has lost its edge. Sure, these people can argue, they can hurl meaningless insults at each other, but no one wants to get real anymore. Where debates once thrived, now everybody now just ignores one another. You can't even dignify this page with a response.

It's now nearing half past one and you will take one last pass at *Facebook* before the trying ordeal of going to bed.

One person, who added you because you went to her high school, links to a *Jezebel* article: "Why comedians need to stop making rape jokes." This would be promising, but you know that people will ruin your fun by having an opinion on the subject. You've seen this play out all too well. It's a tired plot: first someone praises or insults the author,

then that commenter is, in turn, insulted or praise, then they fire back, blah, blah, blah. This happens with anything socio-political these days. The subject doesn't matter, be it politics, race, sexuality, all of them breed the same controversy, but you are not ready for sleep yet and ache to find something unique in this article. You click on the link and carefully read the article.

You knew the right decision was not to get to bed. You would have missed this gem, this beauty. It initially gets you deep in the throes of you own internal argument. *What stupid, uninformed bullshit! Can't this lady take a joke? That's what they are, jokes. They don't promote rape. They exist to make people laugh.* These are some of the many emotional thoughts that pass through your mind reading this champion of an article. You thought this night was going to be a lost cause. You realize that really the article is not about rape. You know the real reason the author writes is to move the idiots to think that way. She talks about quieting your freedom of speech, but you know her true goal: her article will start a shit storm of people yelling at each other. She wants to create this chaos. You look back at the author's name. Lindsey Trifecta, so obvious a pseudonym, that she might have well called herself Feminist Instigator. She is someone worthy of your presence. You will help her stoke the flames of controversy. Right now, this is merely a conflict, and your appearance here is like Nixon escalating into Cambodia. You ready your napalm and move on to the comments section.

"Right on, sister" and "way too tell it" and "I've only ever found these jokes demeaning," pepper the page along "shut the fuck up" and "bitch, go off an overpass" and "why don't you take a dick. You can't take a joke." It's all humorless women who

need to lighten up and understand the notion of free speech and unintelligible men who solely want to play out their misogynistic fantasies. Typical. You need to stir up some shit. You need to rescue this argument.

“This bitch has no idea what a sense of humor is. I hope she gets raped, that way she’ll see the difference between reality and a joke.” First shot fires off your keyboard and though you normally stay away from small insults, you find that it is necessary now-a-days. At least you recognize the need to adapt, the need to stay relevant. You punctuate your ammo with “Fuck this bitch.” This is a ploy to drag the author in, but first you need to establish your presence on the comments section. She will respect how you put to place the other ignoramuses. She will be indignant to your insults and have no choice but to reply. She will realize you are the person whom she was looking to find when she wrote this article.

You scroll through more comments and see more of “F U,” or “die and rot in hell,” or “ho needs to lighten up,” or “bitch needs to get rid of her cats and get a real man in her life.” They think they will hurt, but these are made by moronic fools whose insults will just be ignored by the author. Someone who writes an article such as this one knows to expect backlash by the amateurs. She deserves better, she deserves you. They are nothing but a scratch. You need to make yourself stand out. You need to nip an artery.

Then you remember the article. You actually read the article. Most of these other fuckers probably just saw the title line, and you remember how she talked about her father’s suicide. The care and emotion behind which she crafted those sentences. This is itching for attack. If they read the article, then they are huge pussies who are holding

back. Not you. You are no pussy. This is your wheelhouse. You ready your cannon and fire the fatal blow.

“Her faggot dad probably killed himself when he found out he had a humorless, annoying, cunthole for a daughter.”

She is going to feel that remark. No seasoned pro could handle that shot. You wish she is online at this moment so you can see her reaction, but gratification will have to wait until she responds tomorrow. She will respond, how could she not when you call out her dead dad as such? When you insult her with such vile crudeness? The main content of the article doesn't even matter anymore. You had an opinion on the matter, something that drew you to the conversation, free speech or some bullshit. She wants to do battle and this is what she gets. She is finally an enemy worthy of your prowess and she will wake up feel angry, dejected, pained. Her only play will be to respond to you, to call you names, to make you feel as small and shitty as you can when she reads what you have brilliant wrote about her dead dad.

These are your last thoughts as sleep's final pull takes over you and you collapse on top of your covers.

“Hey boss man, how's the morning?” greets Betsy, the bubbly receptionist as you groggily stomp into the office, still in the process of tucking in your wrinkled, white-collar shirt, the last piece of your real-world costume.

“It's Monday Betsy, can't get much worse. But you shine a bright ray of light as usual.” You force an unshaven smile.

“You’re too kind,” she blushes back at you.

“Someone has to be. It’s a harsh world out there.” She is just making pleasantries. She can’t help it. She must put on that fake smile and fake hello, and you have to return it, not just to Betsy, but to everyone else in the office. There are certain expectations you need to make as their leader and it pains you to make them. You didn’t even want the position. You thought that keeping your head down, not speaking out of place, not creating dissent would peg you as nothing more than a cog, a part that would be replaceable when the machine is finished with you. Boy, how wrong you were. The brass didn’t want go-getters, they didn’t want dissention. They fire those that question their authority. Someone who is quiet, someone who will act exactly as they want, someone they can mold them in their image and you were the perfect choice for them. You were glad for the promotion initially. You were given a job where people must listen to you, where they must do your bidding. You quickly discovered that no one really listens to their boss. All they really understand is how not to get fired. Sure, you tried to get Tim canned for coming in late once or twice, or Sandra for “stealing” office supplies, but having them collect unemployment is more of a hassle than it’s worth. Plus, it’s a scam for the lazy to leach off hard working, non-disrupting model employees such as yourself, fucking government.

“It was just a stapler and she brought it back the next day,” your higher-up said to you with a wink. Yes, you still have higher-ups. What’s the point of being the boss if you can’t have control over your employees? Not one of them even respects you. They do not fear you. You know they kiss your ass on Wednesday, then turn around and make fun of

you on Thursday. You thought being a boss would surround you with minions, but it only isolates you more.

You walk over to the large, dirty coffee machine, grab a random mug, push a button, and lukewarm sludge drips into your mug. A full day of acidic coffee and payroll sheets awaits your presence.

You hear what appears to be a champagne bottle pop open from Sandra's desk. Curiosity gets the better of you and you walk over to see what is happening.

A gaggle of idiots surround Sandra's workspace: Andy the moronic, Ingrid the insufferable, and B.O. Barry, who you're forced to stand next to. You wipe at your nose like you're clearing a booger attempting to mask his stench.

"Little early to be starting out, what's the occasion?" You cough. The finger over the nose is useless against the noxious aroma emitting from Barry.

"Boss man, oh hey, don't worry, it's just sparkling cider," answers Andy, "and Sandra here, she got one of her freelance pieces published in *Jezebel*. It's cause for celebration." Your heart jumps an extra beat and you nearly spill the sludge out of your mug.

"Really now? Hey that's great Sandra. What's it about?" Hopefully it's that article, but probably not, what would be the odds?

"It's about how comedians shouldn't do rape jokes." replies Sandra and you detect the pride in how she says this.

Now you nearly drop the whole mug, but catch it at the last minute. Are these people fucking with you? What you did last night wasn't real. There is no way it became real.

“A friend linked that one to my Facebook,” you smile behind your coffee mug, now can see your enemy right before you. “I had no idea you wrote that, Sandra.”

“I write under a false name. You never know what crazy person would take this the wrong way.”

“It’s a tough subject,” says Ingrid. “You should see all the negative comments. People are so immature now-a-days.”

“Yeah, you should see some of the things these cretins have written in response,” Barry adds and you realize his breath is just as offensive as the rest of him. “Funny how people are so brave when they can hide behind the anonymity of a keyboard.” You stare, thinking he might be one of those other people either defending or attacking Sandra. Probably not, though. What can this smelly oaf know about your world? He is pond scum. Barry can barely pull himself together for a fifteen-minute sales presentation, let alone know how to craft an intelligent argument.

Sandra *wrote* the article. Little, anonymous Sandra. Yes, of course, she is exactly like you, another faceless cog striving for recognition, striving for purpose.

“Oh, I never pay attention to those things.” Sandra smiles up at you. “I don’t even read them anyway.” She will read yours though. You know she will read yours.

“Good for you, Sandra,” you tell her in a cadence too quick. You stop, catch your breath. You need to act calm and not give these morons any suspicion. “They’re just losers anyway. Probably some fatso, who can’t seem to leave his parents basement.” They all have a laugh at your quip, and you chuckle along with them, but laugh a little too hard. The situation is unbelievable. You’ve been given a gift.

“I hope this means you’ve not moving on to better things. We’d hate to lose an asset so key to our company.” You smile at Sandra to let her believe your sincerity.

“There is no stability in freelance. You know how loyal I am.”

“Good, but now back to the grind people. Maybe on Friday will have a little celebration for Sandra, but until then, there is actual work to be done.” Everyone scatters back to their cubicles, but you stand in front of Sandra ogling her for a moment longer. You watch her straighten up her work area, getting ready for a long day of taking calls and filling out reports. Excitement rises inside your blackened soul. Your fantasy is now your reality. You thought it would take months, a correspondence of passive-aggressively insulting each other across the internet before you molded her into a deviant arguer such as yourself. You are awake. Sandra needs to read what you said and answer back, or else she will be stuck in this soulless bullpen, with no meaning toward her life. It is up to you to rescue her from her pathetic life.

“I just can’t believe your luck,” you smile down upon her.

“Same here. I’ve been trying for a while to get that article out. It’s a relief.” You see her big white teeth and muted red lips as she gives you another friendly grin before turning away to type at her desk. It surprises you that a hint of attraction percolates toward Sandra. She is plain, nondescript. Nothing stands out about her. You notice this the first day. Her blouse is out of every JC Penny catalog. Her glasses are big and boring, the kind that secretaries wear in the eighties. Her brown hair is always rolled up atop her slender head in a tight, professional bun. She is a walking cliché in her look. Nothing ever screams sexy about her, yet now you stare, mentally undressing her, with a

passionate lust that you've found a person who can go toe-to-toe with you. She is an ideal, a figure behind a keyboard. Now that person materializes from the computer screen into reality. New battle lines are drawn and soon you will see the spoils of your victory in real life. You strut back to your office, for now you have a kindred soul to mold in your image.

The lunch hour rolls around, but you ignore the grumbling in your stomach. All morning long you should have been marking and putting together the payroll, but instead Sandra occupies your mind. Occasionally you will glance out toward her desk and watch as her brown bun stands out among the other gray atrocities in the bullpen. You have read her article back-to-front and can recite her silly arguments of 'upholding a culture that makes it okay to dismiss the rape of women,' and 'making light of a violent, degrading act,' and 'comedy shouldn't be to offend, but to amuse' by heart. These phrases imprint in your brain, and every glance given to Sandra both makes your anger and attraction boil with her sense of self-righteousness. You keep the website open, periodically refreshing the comments, but they've fallen stale. More idiotic remarks telling her she can't take a joke or praising her bravery and voice. No response to your comment. You need to fire another shot to let them know you are the serious threat. What is the biggest issue in this thread? Censorship! Countless mentions of censorship and where that line that should or should not be crossed, that is the argument to attack with. You ready the ammunition, rapidly firing off your keyboard.

You post arguments of free-speech and about how this land, your land, is being taken from you. Your rights are being undercut by the feminazis, who try and silence you while making it impossible to have any real conversation. How censorship is an American right and you can use it as freely as you want. You never mention rape or call people names, why play down to their level now? You are above all these cretins. Your argument is solid, it cries to be intelligibly debated, and you now know Sandra is the woman to do such.

Six-minutes pass and your post gets some traction about ‘going back to the stone ages,’ or some inane bullshit. You go back up and read some of the earlier comments and most people are stuck calling each other names: whore, bigot, sexist pig, faggot, dildo stuffer, butt plug, cuck, caveman, asshole, etc. There is no use in arguing with people too stupid to understand your side. You are better than them and they know it, all they can just launch an insult instead of partake in a battle of wits. Idiots. Screw them, they aren’t worth your time anyway, just useless fucks behind an anonymous keyboard. Sandra is real and you will see the results of your actions in a live soul, one that will soon be as black as yours. You only care for Sandra’s response, but she has not appeared once on the thread. Sandra is working anyway and probably hasn’t seen it. Wait. Oh no. You forgot the possibility of her never seeing the comment. Not seeing a comment after a few hours is eons on the internet. If she never sees your comment, all your hard work is for naught. This calls for something big, you need to draw her out. You need to go back to the father and she will have no choice but to jump in. Before you go back to actual work, you type one last comment about her dad always being ashamed of her.

The last few hours of the day are spent dealing with the payroll, calculating the cost effects of printer paper, and approving overtime. You decide to check Sandra's article one last time. To your relief, someone gives you a lengthy response. Your heart races in anticipation, because you know the author immediately. Only someone who wrote the article would retaliate in such a manner, with such length and prestige. She is ready to do battle and you have finally met a worthy foe. Joy fills your being as you glance through Sandra's argument of comparing your "freedom of speech argument to people who spout hate from the street corners on the city blocks." Wonderful!

That "you are worse than the people who call us cunts. You are just a sad, angry man, who is too intimidated by the strong women that aren't afraid to point out the misogynistic nature of the world." Fantastic!

That "you are stuck in a delusion and should go back and live in the Stone Age, no the Stone Age was too progressive of a time for your neuron sized brain." Okay, she used the tired insult of the Stone Age but still, incredible!

This never happens, the only time people respond to you is to meaninglessly call you an asshole. Their insults are a mosquito bite, an annoying little bump on your skin that have no effect after ten minutes. This is a strike with a broad sword, something to try and do some damage, a warm welcome to the war you seek. Your heart palpitates and the keyboard clacks away under the furious sound of your fingers.

As you lock up your office, you hear a faint noise from the bullpen. You notice the light from Sandra's desk and strut up to see her wiping away running mascara with her fingers. See doesn't notice as you smile down upon her.

You reach into the cubicle next to hers, swipe a box of Kleenex, and plop it down in front of her.

"Thanks." She takes a Kleenex and dabs at her eyes. "This is embarrassing. I'm sorry, it's just stupid stuff."

You do not say anything. Let her talk. Let her say what you need to hear.

"It's just a stupid argument with stupid jerks on the internet. One stupid jerk in particular. I can't believe I missed the bus to get in a dumb argument on the internet."

You shake with joy. You have found her, now you must reel her in.

"Those are just sad little people looking for some kicks. He wants to see you like this." You smile, and she thinks you are being sincere, but you know that inside her wants she wants to beat the shit out of you. You want her to release that anger.

"I know. He didn't have to bring my dead father into it, though. That's just being an asshole."

"I'll give you a lift."

You watch Sandra hang her head as she walks beside you. She is broken. You have broken her. You set out what you mean to accomplish and you know you get to revel in the aftermath, free to rebuild her as the person she needs to be. You look back at her. There is no way this weak minded little girl even suspects you. Just listen to the slow

clicks of her black heels on the pavement. You are leading a prisoner to her execution. Glee should fill your body head to toe, but something holds your back. Something has gone wrong. This girl needs to be angry, ready to go run back in and try to get you to cry. The point is to win a long victory, not just be recognized by her, but she stands too broken, too easily ready to concede defeat. You realize you are disappointed in her. You had such high hopes. She is your kindred trollmate, not this emotionally fragile a creature. She is the one to give you that glorious debate over the internet, the person who will try, yet fail to take you down. It cannot be over just yet. You will groom her into a worthy opponent.

The ride has not gone as you anticipate. Turns out it is quite difficult to craft an enemy while not trying to be outright discovered as the opponent. The car is full with an uncomfortable silence. Not one of you speaks a word for seven minutes. The radio quietly plays hits from the '90's. Sandra continues to do nothing. She only stares out the windshield. Slight sobs trickle out of her every so often, but she does not even turn her head to look at you. It unnerves you. To think of the promise you once saw in this person. Oh, how you yearn to get behind that computer screen where it is so much easier to find that right words to say. I bet she understands this as well, because Sandra still says nothing and it upsets you. How can someone have no passion when you insult their dead dad? You want to hear how much hate she has for you, to see the pain in her as her eyes glow fire red with tears. If this is to be done, you must make the first move. You hear

yourself breathing rapidly, your heart rate accelerating, slowing, and accelerating some more.

“Man,” you break the silence, calming her racing heart. “The guy insulted your dad. That’s rough. I wouldn’t know a person could go so low.” The lie feels so good that you almost believe it yourself. “I mean, I wouldn’t know how what to do if some asshat did that to me.” Sandra stops the sniffing and wipes her eyes. She turns and gives you a good look-over before breaking into a smile. You feel life has come back to her.

“I wouldn’t think that would affect you. You’re always so chill. It seems like nothing gets to you. I wish I could be like you. It’s like you’re above where the rest of us exist. God, how I wish I wouldn’t let those assholes get to me.” And there it is. She knows what kind of person you are after all. She is calling out for help, for guidance. You need to open your world and give her a taste.

“I don’t know. If I got called a ‘cunthole’ after someone insulted my dad, I’d be pretty teed-off. Shit like that doesn’t roll off as easy as those other meaningless insults.” Sandra quickly turns to face you with a new life in her eyes.

“How’d you know he called me a cunthole?” She states. The carrot dangles in front of the donkey. She is confused, but at least now a passion returns in her. The same fire you saw in the words she used to respond to your post. She wants to hate like that again, she wants to hate you.

Sweat creeps down your back. The both of you are ready to take these next steps together.

“I’ll be honest, Sandra.” You say, hoping the quiver in your voice is not a noticeable sign a fear. “I read the comments to your article. That stuff... interests me, and most of the insults were petty and meaningless. Do people really think you’ll respond to some imbecile who just calls you a bitch? But cunthole, that stuck out.” You let out a little chuckle, relieved and satisfied at which the speed and credibility you answer her. “You don’t see something like that very often.” You turn, look directly at Sandra, and laugh again. “I mean cunthole? It’s pretty fantastic.” You let the words linger on her. Now you hope that she gets message, this is the reason you repeat the word. You want it to stick in her, to be kindling for her hate. You need her to go home to the computer and hit you as hard as she can.

“You want that person to feel as bad as you do. He insulted you dead father and called you,” you pause once more, “called you a cunthole. Now would you let something like that just sit? If I were you Sandra, I would throw all your hate and all your pain at him.” For a while Sandra says nothing and you can feel her gaze on the back of your neck.

Then Sandra lets out a loud, long chuckle of a laugh that echoes your earlier one.

“I get that I was going to get called names. I was ready for the bitches, and cat lady, and lesbo, and...” you wince because never mentioned cat lady or lesbian. Oh, these would have been wonderful to say.

“...but cunthole,” she says with reservation and pain, “that was actually one of the cleverer ones. Who knew they could be so creative in their insults? Some people surprise you, I guess.” Now it is her turn to let that last phrase hang in the air, to let it make its

way inside of you. She knows it is you that has changed her, and she knows she is stronger for it.

“Just around this corner,” she finally says, bringing you back to her. “I was so out of it that I forgot to give you directions.”

“I was here before, remember?” You say cockily. The last time you came to Sandra’s home was a work get together a half year-ago. It was to celebrate your promotion. Most of the office was there and they began kissing your ass that night.

“Thanks for letting me get all that off my chest,” she states with conviction. She has yet to exit your car. She is getting ready to let you have it any moment. “Like you said, you can’t let those people win.”

“Did I?”

“Yes, silly goose. I mean, you didn’t use those words exactly, but you basically told me I should just ignore it.” Sandra laughs and meets your eyes. You see a new life, a brightness in those brown eyes. Your reflection burns back through them. You see the anger growing in her. You know she will get on that computer tonight and will let you have it.

“You’re a sweetheart. See you tomorrow.” Sandra leans over, kisses your cheek, and gets out of your car.

You watch her sway up the walkway and bring a hand up to your cheek. The skin is still warm and you pull it back to see a smear of lipstick on your fingertips. You see as she looks back at you, smiles and waves before she enters the first unit in the complex. It is on now. She is a most worthy competitor after all. You shattered everything that self-

righteous bitch stands for and she gives you pecks on the cheek. She is stronger than you thought.

You're still in front of her apartment with the car running. How long have you been here? It could not be more than a few minutes, but there is no time today. Then you notice the curtains still moving in Sandra's well-lit living room. Is she watching you this whole time? Does she gloat from behind that window? Yes, because just like you she does the most damage from her own home. She thinks she will win, but no fucking way is that the outcome here. You are going to go back to that computer, say out every fantastical way she needs to pay. She will fire back with her own war of wits, and you will return the shot. She will come in tomorrow morning, smiling at you. Her eyes shining with a new life, slowly realizing the freedom you bestowed on her. She will happily talk to you during lunch maybe, and when she calls your name, it will pass over her full red lips like a victory lap. You created her. She is that other person to fling intelligent insults across the internet. She recognizes your presence and you will defeat her, because in the end you are both smarter, more dedicated to the cause. You will stay up all night if it that is what it takes. Victory demands sacrifice, but for now, it is nice to have someone to play with.

They Come to Watch Him Swing

The townsfolk called him Bubber because of the way he would stutter, stammer, and bubble through his speech. He hated the name and hasn't spoken in public since he was five. For the past year, he hoped they would forget the speech imperfection, eventually move on to some other irregular tic or maybe, one day, they would give Georgie Ray Tippon a nickname for some worthy deed he has yet to perform. They didn't, and the white children at school would call out "B-b-b-bubber, h-h-here c-c-c-come B-b-b-bubber." His kin were the worst offenders. They would click their tongues at him when his father wasn't around.

Bubber felt the sway of the dirt road under the slow-moving carriage. The scorching dust rose and stuck to his sweat-drenched shirt. The sun was at the highest point on this muggy summer's day. It was the first real hot day of the year and Bubber regretted agreeing to be dragged out of his cool, soft bed so early this morning to travel the dirt back road into town.

His father sweat healthily and Bubber saw dirt streak across his hard, unshaven jaw. He kept swearing under his breath, Bubber knew that these were bad words, but he was still too little to understand their meaning. It confused him as his father was usually of a soft, kind mind, but this musty, blistering morning, he had a look that could cross up the devil.

His father reached beside him, pulled out a tin bucket, and laid it Bubber's lap.

“Drink, Georgie.” Despite being partially in the sun, the water was cold and sloshed around so wildly, that Bubber had trouble bring his cupped hands to his lips. The water stayed cool as it trickled down his small throat, clearing away the dust.

“I don’t mean you’ll understand why I bring you out this way Georgie,” his father stated, keeping his gaze on the endless road ahead, “but you’ll see once we get there. I hope to God you’ll see.”

His father was the only one who called him Georgie, his mother called him ‘lil Georgie, and the rest of his family called him the hated Bubber, thinking it suited the second youngest. The only other folks who called him by his proper name were the Negroes down on Lincoln Square. They also called him lil’ Georgie when he would run into their shops. Especially Old Jones, who ran the candy store. Jones had the best candies in the county, and Negro kids from all over would run around in his shop buying the off-brand chocolate bars that were made with real cocoa and refined sugar. Jones didn’t mind Bubber being a white child. In fact, it made the old man mind him more attention.

“em, teeth ill rot, rot right out cha head, lil’ Georgie. Soon you be look’n like me,” and Jones would remove his front four teeth, smiling a wide grin that showed his bruised, toothless gums. Bubber ran joyously scared out the shop to the cackles of Jones every time. Week after week, he would come back and bask in the old man’s toothless smile and genuine good cheer he doted upon the small boy. Jones dubbed him the store’s official good luck charm.

“Candy, always get sold up when lil’ Georgie come ‘round.” Jones would cackle and hum a tune while Bubber and the other Negro children bought up all the sweets they could hold. Bubber didn’t understand why the other white children did not want to step foot in Jones’s shop. He once heard the Widow Jamison recall to his mother that no proper gentleman would be caught dead on that side of town, but he loved the ease with which the company of the Negroes spoke to each other and to him. The Whites in town looked at him like a disease, as if they would catch his stutter if they conversed. Bubber believed he was cursed among them peoples. He was to be avoided just as the Negroes were, so he might as well join them in their shops.

Bubber’s father sneered up from the newspaper when he overheard the Widow’s remarks, revealing his disdain to Bubber’s mother when the old woman had left.

“No respectable gentleman would take on her debt and that dying sweet potato farm of hers.” Bubber did not know if his father was telling him this or if he just said it. He could not yet intone subtlety in his father’s words, so he pretended not to hear the remark. He was glad for his father’s views, though. That Widow Jamison scared the ghost out of him.

Once she made a fuss when she saw Bubber playing with Willy and his sister Kaycee in front of Jones’s shop. Willy and Kaycee were the grandchildren of Mister Denton, the wealthiest negro in the town and sixth wealthiest man overall, his father always reminded him. The Widow Jamison stomped over to Bubber in horror and snatched his arm near out the socket as she dragged him back to his father.

“Keep him away from those dirty nigger children. He already has enough bad habits as it is.” She yelled so Mister Denton heard her loud and clear before storming off, heels clicking at a half run pace, and not giving his father a minute to respond. Bubber looked over at Willy Dee and Kaycee, who stood and stared back at him, the three children divided by a street.

“Go back and play Georgie,” he stated with a calm quiver, but Bubber saw his breath was hot with rage. “It’s okay. You can go on and play with Willy and Kaycee.”

Bubber ran back over, smiling at the young children who accepted him back as though nothing had occurred. He wanted to go hug his father, thank him, but he did not understand why. He saw Mister Denton waddle over to his father and try shake his hand, though his father yielded and just tipped his hat at the man.

The carriage creaked into town like it had done many Saturdays before. Bubber often accompanied his father on these mornings, but today his father was more insistent than ever that Bubber join him. Bubber thought the man wanted to spend some time with him. His mother and father had been fighting lately and maybe Bubber could get some special time with his father or at least let his father vent to him. He parents yelled constantly these days. They yelled about sending his older brother to college or having him stay home for work, about his father’s defiance in the face of the Widow Jamison, and about Bubber’s struggle to move beyond the Negroes in town. Last night, the two of them yelled so loud that Bubber couldn’t help but over hear. He snuck to the door of his parent’s bedroom and watched as his father sat on the bed while his mother stood over him, gesturing with her hands.

“George, I don’t care about the Widow Jamison, thinks-”

“-Christ you do, Lisa Ann. Else you wouldn’t be putting up such a mess about it.”

“Fine, but it’s not about what she thinks, it’s how they all see our lil’ Georgie. They have enough to make fun of him already. Lord knows they don’t need him think his father a nigger-lover.” Bubber saw his father rise from the bed and approach her.

“That what you think Lisa Ann? Do you believe that? Do you believe that about your husband? Christ” -he walked past her before stopping to face her again- “and it ain’t about that. I don’t love niggers, they have that tainted blood of Cain. This is about justice. A man should not be at the anger of a mob that feels right in treating him as animal. It shouldn’t make no difference the color of his skin.” His mother said nothing. Bubber couldn’t tell, but believed her to sob her next words.

“Bubber-”

“-don’t you dare call him that.”

“He don’t need to see something so cruel.”

“It’s because it’s cruel that Georgie needs to see it. That’s final Lisa Ann. Georgie’s going with me tomorrow. That boy sees more than we give him proper for. He needs to see this. It might just up and shock him enough to speak good. Let one of my boys experience this injustice, for Christ sake.” His father exited the room in such a huff that he failed to notice Bubber as he moved out of the way of the door.

Bubber walked the side of the street holding his father’s hand. He was excited to go to Jones’s shop, excited to play with Willy and Kaycee despite the rising heat. As he continued to stroll along, Bubber noticed that there were more people out than usual. The

Whites littered the streets when they'd normally be inside the shops buying their daily trinkets and groceries, especially with the heat coming down on them as such. They walked along side Bubber and his father, and Bubber heard clippings of their conversations.

“They finally going to get that nigger today.”

“It’s a day for justice for that poor girl.”

“She is with God and soon he will be with Satan.”

Bubber looked up and tugged at his father’s sleeve. He was anxious to get to Jones’s shop. He did not like the way these Whites spoke, but his father kept on walking, so fast that Bubber had to break into a quick trot to keep up. Dust kicked up and Bubber coughed, hoping to get the attention of his father for some more water.

His father stopped a short time later and Bubber was relieved, though a large crowd had gathered and the voices became clear again.

“The nigger should have never done what it did. He deserves all the punishment he goin’ get.”

“He deserve to rot in hell.”

“I came all the way from Biloxi to see justice performed. Haven’t missed one in six months.”

“This should teach all them uppity niggers a lesson, let ‘em know they place.”

Bubber tugged harder to get his father’s attention, but he saw how angry his father was at the crowd. He thought his father would scold every voice around him, but he just

stood staring straight ahead, saying nothing. Eventually he looked back down at Bubber and nodded forward.

Bubber followed his father's gaze ahead and saw a giant wooden structure standing high to the heavens. A crowd of Whites gathered atop the structure and read to themselves from some paper. They looked like important people as their clothes were fancy and clean. Bubber gazed off to his right to see Jones and the other Negroes gathered at the side of the wooden structure. Jones hung his head low and he was hiding Willy and Kaycee's faces behind his old hands. Mister Denton spewed fury at the fancy men atop the structure. They ignored him until he said something that got their attention. An exceptionally round man turned toward Mister Denton and said something that shut him up real quick. Bubber tugged once more at his father's sleeve and pointed to where Jones and the rest of the Negroes stood. His father shook his head.

"Not today. Just stay by me, Georgie, and watch." Bubber's father dragged him closer to the structure and he heard a lady's voice, crying. It was Miss Patsy, the sister of Mister Denton, and she wailed and wailed as a group of white men led her son Leroy up the stairs. Bubber knew Leroy, a kind boy, about ten years older than himself. Leroy worked at Jones's shop and would occasionally slip Bubber, Willy, and Kaycee pieces of candy. He would smile and hold a finger to his lips as if they were all in on a secret. Bubber liked Leroy. He had a brightness to him no matter how much work he had to do. One time he chased off a group of white kids that would not stop teasing Bubber with his push broom.

Bubber now saw the shine was gone from Leroy as he was led up the stairs. His clothes were dirty and torn. His face battered and bruised and he walked up the steps with a slight limp. His head low on his shoulders, slowly watching his shoeless feet take the steps one-by-one.

“My baby, ain’t do nothing,” cried out Miss Patsy. “He ain’t do nothing. Y’all ain’t have no proof. Give my baby, back. Please. Please. Please.” Bubber heard her wail with each step Leroy took.

“Please.” Step.

“Please.” Step.

“Please.” Step.

Mister Denton tried to have someone take her away, but the round man stepped in and yelled, “You make her watch, now. Make her see the punishment for her monster of a son.” Mister Denton did not yield to the round man’s demands and let Miss Patsy be led away. The round man stared back at Mister Denton with fierceness.

“That was a dumb move for a smart nigger like yourself, Denton.”

Bubber’s father had stopped him short of the front of the structure. It was enormous, the foot of God, he imagined his father saying. He also saw tear-streaks stained the cheeks from Leroy’s closed eyes and that he wore some rope like thing around his neck. Some men took a length of the rope from Leroy’s body and lassoed it over a single beam floating above them all. The round man read to the crowd from a piece of clean, white paper.

“Today, justice has been served to little Anne May Hickock. Her soul can rest easy in God’s kingdom to know her killer will be brought to justice.” Bubber was confused of how the round man spoke. He knew of little Anne May, a girl around his age. Like most of the white kids, she didn’t mind him no attention, but the past week, she had been out of school. Bubber didn’t know why, but he used to hear his father worry for her. Her papa was said to have a temper when he drank and Bubber heard rumors about the town of the pain he would inflict on Anne May.

“Today,” the round man continued, “we have tried and judged this creature guilty as the one who killed little Anne May.” A roar erupted from behind Bubber from the Whites, countered by wails of pain from the Negroes to his right.

“-Hang him. Hang that nigger.”

“-He didn’t do nothing.”

“-We come from Biloxi to see this.”

“-You have no proof.”

“-Hang him. Hang him high.”

“-May Jesus forgive y’all for this.”

“-Only good nigger’s, a dead nigger.”

“-Where is our justice.”

Bubber was so distracted from the voices that he jumped when her heard a crack and saw the structure open. Leroy’s body fell through the hole and the rope caught his neck with a loud snap. Bubber knew that other sounds and voices existed around him, but he could only see and hear Leroy. He hung there, red lines walked across his pure white eyes

as they bulged out his dark head. His mouth foamed and white spit flew as gurgling sounds escaped past his lips like he was drinking water, but unable to quench his thirst. His legs kicked up and down at nothing. Bubber thought he was trying to runaway but there was no ground below him. He flopped once more and a louder snap came from his back before his body finally went limp and swung slowly from side-to-side. Leroy, who always smelled like the candy shop where he worked, now smelled like the outhouse on a hot day. The sounds and voices came back to Bubber as the cheers from the Whites overpowered the wails from the Negroes. Bubber recognized Jones's voice as he sung that song he always heard the old man hum in the shop.

The Whites left the spectacle, turning around to go back to their daily lives. The round man ordered the body cut down and Leroy fell to the earth with a whimpered thud. Mister Denton went to gather the body but a uniformed police man stopped him.

"He goes to the trees. You should know that by now Denton." The policeman said to the black man, red with rage. Mister Denton turned led the Negroes away, but not before stopping to stare dead hard at the round man.

Bubber and his father were the only two left as they watched a group of dirty white boys attach Leroy to the end of a cart, and a horse dragged away the dead boy's body behind it. He felt his father try and turn him away, but Bubber didn't budge. He just stared and watched Leroy's body leave a trail of dust in the distance.

Roshomon

8:56pm blinked the time when Susan checked her phone as she entered through the club's back door. She cut it close tonight, but one truck had caught her eye in the parking lot, making her hesitate for a minute. She thought it was her father's Toyota, though it couldn't be her father's. He wouldn't travel forty-five miles outside the city. The only time he'd come this far out was to visit her at UGA. No, it was not her father's truck. He was at home caring for his invalid wife. He was a good man, he wouldn't be caught dead in a strip club. Although, the Peppermint Hippo was a classy gentlemen's entertainment club, not a sleazy strip joint. This was not the animal sties of the city, a place where girls danced for scraps in front of drunken assholes. The Hippo was for the wealthy and it celebrated the girls, not exploited the girls. Taking off your clothes and dancing for twenties was not a glamorous life, but it was her life. She made it glamorous. This was her place, had been for the past two and a half years. She owned the stage and she owned the men. She was the "alpha bitch" of the place, a self-proclaimed title she carried with pride.

Her story was not the typical stripper's tale. There was no broken home, no need to fill the void of a negligent father. She knew her daddy loved her, but she was still unable to tell him what she did for a living. Hell, coming out to him was easier than admitting her love for stripping. She knew he would disapprove, warn her about the dangers and moral ambiguity, but she was a grown woman and could take care of herself. For the longest time, it was just the two of them. Her mom ran out on them when she was a kid,

she never knew why, but her father said that she couldn't take being a homebody and a mother.

“She loves you,” he reassured her six-year old-self. “She just doesn't love the idea of us.”

For the next decade, they took care of each other. She had to grow up fast, cooking and cleaning, and missing out on normal girl fun, but girl fun was never an attraction. She'd much rather toss the softball with him (something he always found time for), or help him cut down dead tree limbs, or paint the garage. Susan always enjoyed painting, whether it was a mural of empowering women idols on her bedroom wall, or the mundane task of doing over the house. Painting gave her peace until she found that stripper pole.

When her dad met and married Sherry, she couldn't have been happier for him. He had always supported her, and now it was her turn to let him be happy. Maybe that's why she couldn't tell him the truth. She knew it would wreck him, especially after the stress of Sherry's accident. Sherry was a burden and she didn't want to add to his strain, but she wasn't going to stop stripping, she loved it too much. Her first experience was with a former girlfriend who had a pole in her living room, for exercise she told Susan, and when Susan got up on that specific pole, her former girlfriend's jaw dropped.

“Wow, Susie that was...wow. I got no words. You're a natural.” Susie had been on the pole for all of two minutes and struggled to catch her breath.

“Damn, you weren't kidding about the exercise,” Susan exclaimed between gasps of air. “That's a workout.”

“You got to come to the club. I was lying about the exercise, well half-lying. I work at this place just a few miles out of town. It’s called The Peppermint Hippo, real nice place. You just got to come with me next time.” A week later, she went to amateur night at the club, then came back the next week, then the next, and so on. The owner began to watch her night after night and saw how Susan commanded the stage. He hired her permanently. The money was good. It paid her way through college. When she graduated, she saw no other market available for a woman with a B.A. in Art History, so she continued, making nearly sixty grand in the past year alone.

‘Why do you strip?’ She was once asked while on a date with a Lit Major from Spellman College. ‘It’s so degrading,’ the condescending girl said with a hint of curiosity hidden behind a clichéd eye roll. Susan really wanted to get inside this girl, so she fed her a line, and told her how empowering stripping was, the authority displayed on that stage. It made bank and was better than being stuck under some useless man, making half as much as him while being twice as good at the job. Out on that stage was freedom to be her own woman, blah, blah, blah. Susan bullshitted the girl, and it worked. The girl had taken the bait.

“Besides,” she said, taking a bite of her hamburger, letting the juice run down into the crevice between her middle and forefinger before slowly licking it dry. “You wouldn’t believe how sexual it is until you see it in person. Watching those women twist and torque their beautiful topless bodies around for your enjoyment, you should come by some night.” Susan saw excitement in the girl’s slim face, showing an aching desire to be with her: this exotic creature. Her speech did the trick that night.

When Susan entered the green room, and saw the other girls changing into their personas for that evening, she smiled, remembering the certain joys that accompanied the job.

“Who’s gonna do it tonight, ladies? You bitches making those men pay up?” She laughed deep in her throat. It was that laugh the girls had come to recognize as Susan’s. It was one of ways she could steal command of a room.

She set her heavy bag down next to a lady with soft brown skin, already in her bra and a short mermaid mini dress.

“You’re next, Trudy.” She leered over her as Trudy adjusted her breasts in the sea shell top.

“Yes girlie, and you’re supposed to be after me. Cutting it close this time,” Trudy responded, looking at Susan through the mirror, but she wasn’t chastising her. Trudy Trident was a beautiful girl, with her vaguely ethnic skin tone and long, dark hair. It was her ink that really got Susan. She had a glorious tattoo of a serpent, bursting out of the sea of her back, wrapping around the girl’s waist, and climbing around her tone belly. It ended with the monster’s mouth agape, as if trying to swallow her left breast. Susan traced her finger along fake scales painted on Trudy’s back, brought her hand around Trudy’s waist, and laid her chin on Trudy’s sharp shoulder.

“You know it doesn’t take long to get ready when you already look this good.” Susan met her gaze in the mirror. Trudy put her hand up to Susan’s white face and lightly pushed her off.

“Fuck you.” Trudy smiled and they both pursed their lips to each other through the mirror.

“Those guys don’t have a chance.” Susan broke away from Trudy. They were friends and nothing more. Trudy wasn’t gay and Susan didn’t chase straight girls. Though she flirted a lot with the other ladies and they were all comfortable with her sexuality, she was a real professional. She came out loud and proud to them after her first year there and all the girls were supportive. She discovered she wasn’t the only lesbian and even more claimed to be bi-sexual. Looking at and being around these beauties was an admitted perk, but she had no time to get mixed up in a workplace relationship drama.

Susan walked across the expansive floor to the curtain that separated the green room from long runway to the stage. New Edition’s “Candy Girl” blared from the DJ both as a pale girl in a skimpy school outfit slide down the pole with one leg, all the while sucking on a lollipop.

“It’s amazing she doesn’t choke,” she said back to Trudy, while keeping her gaze on the small girl twirling a far.

“Well, at least not on that lollipop,” joked Trudy, still looking in the mirror.

“Shut up girl, you know we don’t run that kind of place here.”

“Oh, it’s not for money, just a recreational thing,” Trudy laughed.

“Funny,” Susan said without laughing and walked back to the mirror.

Susan finished putting on her mascara. Sixteen careful brushes applied to her right eye and eighteen to the left one. It wasn’t an obsessive or a compulsive disorder, just a little

ritual to ensure the tips would be good that evening, like baseball players not stepping on baselines on their way to the field, a superstition she took from her softball days in college. Trudy was gone now. She pictured her working the crowd as the Dubstep remix of Bobby Darin's "Beyond the Sea" blared on.

She sat, staring in the huge mirror that she shared with the rest of the girls, and blinked to ensure there were no clumps. Her eyes had always been her best feature. They were big as dinner plates and the color of a perfect deep blue sky. She used her assets to perfection, peering into the lusty look of the men coming to her to escape their realities. She knew her eyes weren't the first thing they noticed. In her profession, it would be naive to think such, but as soon as she caught their gaze, it comforted them somehow. She couldn't quite explain her hypnotic beam, but it was the money-maker. Men fawned over her and not just at the club. She commanded their attention where ever she went, and that could be a curse on some occasions.

She went to a gym once to work on her stamina, but the unwanted attention was too much to handle. Men are disgusting creatures. What was it about a sweating, spandexed woman that allowed them to behave like assholes, barely able to contain their erections through their gym shorts? Even the trainer, a short, overly buff, outline of a man, who kept trying to flirt with her during the session. He was supposed to be the professional, not the creep. She could feel the drool from their tongues as they watched her doing squats, fucking animals.

Unfortunately, this wasn't an uncommon occurrence. The Hippo's clientele was full of entitled jerkasses with too much money, who thought that because they were paying

for a service the ladies had to go further to compensate for their departed money. It was businessmen, or CEO's, or more recently actors and film people, due to Atlanta's rising popularity as a film destination, that tried to get fresh with the girls. The club understood the alpha male attitude and employed undercover "narcs," men who looked like normal patrons, but carried guns in case anything got too insane and the bouncers couldn't handle it. The club's owner was paranoid about that shit going down, despite a few fist fights, nothing ever did. She wished the doormen would frisk more, but she felt generally safe and secure upon that stage. Rarely, but it did happen once or twice, an overzealous fan would find her at home and declare his love, but all it usually took was a warning to call the police and they wouldn't bother her again.

The mascara had set; the lips glowed cherry red; the fake blond hair expertly woven in with her normal reddish tint, making the extensions look natural; the tassels dangled delicately from her breasts, covering her tiny nipples; the g-string hiked up, giving her an uncomfortable wedgie, but it highlighted the symmetrically glittered butt cheeks that shined like a disco ball; the boots zipped up to her knees and wide at the bottom to avoid slipping on the stage. Susan McKenny was no more; now in the mirror stood Susie Sapphire.

The beginning to Whitney Houston's "I'm Every Woman" pulsed through the huge purple curtain, the last threshold between fantasy and reality. She recited a little prayer, as she always did before she hit the stage.

Gentlemen, are you ready? Boomed an anonymous voice beyond the other side of the curtain. *Get those wallets out because it's time for The Peppermint Hippo's alpha bitch. Get ready to be hypnotized by Ms. Susie Sapphire.* The curtain whooshed open and Susie strutted down the aisle.

She heard the men hoot-n-holler and saw their cash ready in their hands as they rushed up to the stage. The fools, too willing to part with their paychecks. Susie's first move was to break into a run and jump, hitting the pole in the middle of the stage with the force of a wrecking ball taking down a condemned building. Her thunderous thighs held tightly to the surprisingly warm metal pole, letting her dangle upside from it. She moved her torso such that the tassels spun in a hypnotic clockwise cadence. The men jockeyed for position and tossed Ben Franklins at her. Susie slid down the pole, flipped herself over, and landed in the splits all in one motion. When she stood up, her eyes locked with an older gentleman, a tall man in his mid fifties, with graying hair, and a country dress of a flannel shirt and jeans. She lost her place, putting a halt to her careful designed routine.

“Susan?” the man questioned, staring at her.

“Daddy?” she sounded surprised and when she looked down and saw her reflection in the mirrored floor, she was unable to escape her shame. For a second, she thought it was someone else, an imposter. Someone was playing a terrible joke on her. She mustered enough strength to raise her head and look at the man once more. It was her dad alright. She recognized him from the red and green flannel. It was the shirt she gave him three Christmases ago. She wanted to run back behind the curtain, into the dressing room, pack

up her things, and get the hell out of there. One day, she would explain everything to him, but right now she wanted to be anywhere else. She didn't move, frozen in time, half naked in a strip club in front of a hoard of suddenly confused men.

A loud pop rang out from somewhere. She couldn't pinpoint it. She thought it came from her right side, but couldn't turn away from her father's sad face. A single tear ran down his hard cheek. A second pop rung out. She felt a fire hit her head and burn through her brain. She fell to the cool, mirrored floor and watched as her father ran toward her taking off his flannel shirt. It was the last thing she remembered before darkness encased her.

#

You're saying that guns are too easily accessible, am I hearing that, correct?

Essentially yes, but it's not as black and white to say that to owning guns is wrong and vice versa. Or that our Government is trying to pry them from our hands as a way to exert control over us. However, the heart of the problem is the misinterpretation of our constitutional rights by a certain lobby that has continually ignored the fact that in some parts of this country, guns are too simply acquired. Why is this? Just so they can sell more ammunition and avoid a certain tax bracket? People are fighting, kids are dying in our schools, and they refuse to hold their actions accountable.

Fascinating indeed and I wish we had more time on this controversial subject that continues to divide our Nation. I'd like to thank all my guests this evening. I'm Ezra

Niese. Stay tuned for NPR's World News. At the chime the time will be one minute past nine in the evening.

CLICK Phil had enough of the radio and looked up at the glow of the neon sign twenty-five feet in front of him. The large letters, reading The Peppermint Hippo, splashed an array of bright colors across the windshield of his Toyota Tacoma.

“I take it you’re ready to do this?” His buddy Fred asked him.

“Just...give me a minute,” Phil mumbled back to his buddy.

“Hey, take your time. I gonna step out for a smoke.” Phil watched his short buddy jumped out of the car, his head disappeared as he shut the door. After a minute, Phil saw light clouds of smoke pillow by the window.

He was stalling now. It was his idea to do something wild like come to this place. He justified it by convincing himself it was what he needed, a touch of sinful release after all the good he was doing. To balance out his soul, he reckoned. Besides, it wasn’t cheating and it’s not like he was planning on doing anything wrong. He was a good man. He had taken great care of his wife since she suffered a brain aneurism eighteen months ago. His lovely wife Sherry survived the accident, but it left her a different person. She would forget basic things like names, family members, and simple motor skills, such as chewing or holding an object. Phil had to feed her, wash her, and take general care of her, which he was more than willing to do. Sherry was his wife and had been just a shade under ten years. He truly loved her, but the constant need had taken a toll on him. He would never be unfaithful to his wife, but he needed a break, and Fred convinced him that looking on as a half-naked young ladies danced for him was his panacea. At that time, Phil happily

agreed with Fred, but now he sat in the truck, anxious about getting out. Maybe because he saw the legs of one of the girls going into the club just a few minutes earlier. It reminded him that these were real women.

Fred opened the door, but stayed outside as not to let the cigarette smoke inside the truck's cab.

“Why'd I want to do this again?” He hung his chin on the top of the steering wheel.

“Cause life's shit out there, buddy,” Fred stated as he stamped out his cigarette.

“Work's floundering, no one thinks they need any more rain gutters, your baby girl hasn't called in a month, only sent one email. You need a break, man. You need to treat yourself once and awhile. You said as much, and I won't even mention Sherry.” Phil slowly laughed.

“Yeah, don't mention Sherry.”

“I ain't mention Sherry. You're the one who just said her name. You don't to think about her in this parking lot. You don't think about that reality in these fantasies.”

Phil continued to sit in silence as he watched Fred light up another cigarette. He was glad to have a friend like Fred, this short, hairy, balding voice of unreason. He could confide in someone like Fred. It used to be his little Susie was the person who he went to with his troubles, but she had ceased communication with him. He knew she was a grown woman, but to abandon him at this time in his life after they had been through so much, he'd be lying if he said he wasn't hurt.

“Now look Phil,” Fred interjected, interrupting thoughts of his daughter. “You're gonna come all this way, sit in the parking lot, and not go in? Math doesn't add up here.

You wanted to come. You said so yourself two weeks ago, fact, you we're damn near excited." This was true. He had come to Fred a few weeks back and suggested the idea. Fred was known to frequent such places, so Phil told him they'd go after next paycheck. He just had two conditions, that they'd go a place outside of the city and it'd have to be a tasteful place, not like those sleazy ones that they always showed in sleazy movies. Excitedly, Fred told him knew the exact club, a joint he'd never been to, but had always wanted to try. Now Phil was here with Fred. The door was open, but he was still in the truck, thinking about Sherry unable to swallow her mashed peas.

"Just have one beer, buddy. One beer and then we'll go from there," Fred pleaded. Phil took in a deep breath. His old friend was right, he'd come this far already, what's one more step going to hurt.

"Okay, one beer. Then we'll see how the night goes." Phil shut the idled engine off and crept out of the truck.

The two men strolled toward the glowing neon buzz of the club. It was oddly hypnotic. This must be why bugs fly toward zappers without the hint of danger, he thought. Or maybe those bugs knew what they were going towards and couldn't help but understand this is how their lives ended.

The cool breeze of the night air took him by surprise. It was early September and usually the temperature lingered hot and muggy from the end of summer, but tonight the first chill of autumn hung in the air. He looked over at Fred, stocky in his T-shirt and khaki shorts, amazed at how he wasn't cold. Phil had overly dressed for the occasion with his green and red flannel shirt that was a recent Christmas gift from his beautiful daughter

Susan. Susan! What would she think if she saw him walking up to this club? Boy, would she rail into him. Saying how could he objectify women as such? Or saying how he could do this to his wife? Or maybe she would say nothing. He didn't know. He missed the sound of her voice. For so long it was just them, then he found and fell in love with Sherry. Susan said she was happy for him, but she changed after his marriage. She was more closed off, their talks were less frequent, and though Susan was always an obedient and caring child, Phil knew she was harboring secrets from him. A quick sickness passed through his belly, but he kept striving onward, walking past a small Ford Fiesta in which a man was hunched over and rocking himself. More people dealing with their inner demons.

Phil was a man of liberal persuasion, firmly standing in the belief of unions. A worker was nothing without a good union to let him or her feel secure in their job. He made sure that all his employees were well paid and had their healthcare costs covered. He also made sure to give work to immigrants and helped show them a path to citizenship. Raising a daughter correctly, taking care of his invalid wife, and making sure his people were taking care of, these were his thoughts as the glow of the entrance reflected against Phil's face. A parade of green, blue, and reds ran across his eyes, slightly blinding him.

"Ready?" Fred asked with his hand on the door. Phil nodded and motioned for Fred to open the door.

The smell was the first thing Phil noticed. It was a strong stench of sweet sterilization, like the whole place had been rinsed down with peach-scented hand sanitizer. This caught him by surprise, truth be told, he was expecting more of a vomit and booze aroma. The

peach smell was comforting, though, like someone was constantly baking a cobbler. The stage was the next thing he saw as they entered the club. There was no front room to walk though, the place wanted you to notice the long stage against the biggest and most purplest curtain that any curtain had the right to be. He could not see the faces of the dancers and had to squint at the curvy figure of a girl in sea themed lingerie, sinuously moving around a giant pole in the middle of the lit-up stage. There was no mistake about where he was: he was in a strip joint, and to his surprise, he was glad he was there. A burden was lifted from his shoulders and he was ready for a drink.

“Look at that one on the stage. Do you see that tattoo? The serpent coming out of her stomach and whatever,” Fred pointed as the men grabbed a table a good ten to fifteen feet away from the stage. He was clearly enjoying himself. Up front, men were throwing their money at her, rewarding the girl for her acrobatics. A girl on roller skates, dressed like a skimpy flight attendant, and carrying a tray of what looks like green and orange neon chemicals held in test tubes, rolled up to where they sat.

“You two look like you could use a shot.” The girl demanded playfully with a phony grin plastered on her face.

“Two High Life’s is all, honey,” Fred commanded like he’s done this once or twice before. The girl nodded and skated away, her mini dress flouncing behind her as she went into the abyss.

“See buddy,” Fred chimed, “like I said, classy.”

“You don’t lie,” Phil chuckled. He watched the other men toss bills on the stage, finding it humorous that one would fight for the attention of some girl who was paid to

give it to you, but they probably had troubles as well, doing what they need to forget them. The roller girl came back with their drinks and placed them on the clean table top.

“That’ll be twelve dollars,” she said.

“For two beers?” Phil responded, turning to the young lady a little embarrassed. He meant not to have such an incredulous tone of voice at the price.

“Don’t worry,” Fred jumped in, who took out his wallet and handed the girl a credit card. “I got this, remember. Keep it open, sweetie.” The roller girl skated away, for a second Phil thought she would just take off. She probably had enough dopes’ credit cards to get half across the country before any of them knew something was up.

Phil looked over at Fred, who seemed caught in some weird sort of mix of shifting and dancing in his chair, his gut giggled slightly to an awful rendition of “Beyond the Sea.” He looked like he was trying to get unstuck from his seat. Phil laughed, glad to see his friend enjoy himself, maybe he would join in.

“Thanks for doing this with me, pal.” Phil slapped his friend across the knee and took a long, refreshing sip of his beer.

“Hey, thanks for thinking of me,” Fred responded. “I always wanted to come to this place. It’s legendary, and the girls, whoo boy! Gorgeous. Much better than the shitholes I frequent.”

Phil laughed and turned his attention back to the Lady Poseidon as she did a backflip, balancing herself with two tridents protruding from the stage floor. Maybe Susie wouldn’t be so against a place like this if she saw how chic it was. Maybe she would

enjoy a trip out here with him one day. She certainly would like the girls. It would be a way to reconnect with her.

“How ‘bout I get you a lap dance?” Fred signaled his arm in the air, like he was at an auction. Phil pulled his buddy’s arm down, not into whatever lot was offered, but smiled at him, silently thanking him for the gesture.

“No need, I’m fine right here,” Phil took a long pull from his drink. Fred shrugged and looked at his watch.

“This next girl s’posed to be something special, she is why I’ve wanted to come here all these years.”

“How you mean?”

“You know I frequent The Red Pony back in the city.” Phil nodded and took another sip of beer.

“Well, I got this girl I see there, and she told me that I have to watch this one dancer at the Hippo. It’s amazing what she can do on that stage. She told me she comes on stage around nine-thirty every Thursday. It’s a special moment for both of us.” Fred held out his beer and Phil clinked it back in friendship.

“I hear ya, pal. Cheers.” They both downed the rest of the drink.

“Another round then,” Fred got up and left for the bar.

Phil watched the girl finish up and collect her dollars up on stage, a thank you for lonely men just wanting attention from a beautiful woman. He pictured his Susan forcing her way to the front of the stage to reward this athletic beauty. She would stand out to the dancer, a beautiful, young woman amongst a group of sleazy men. Five years ago, she

skittishly mentioned that she was a lesbian. It was Thanksgiving her sophomore year of college and Susan had come home for the break.

“So, you like women now?” He asked her, not condemning, but trying to wrap his head what she just said.

“I’ve always liked women, Dad.” She responded, trying to sound tough, but he could feel the fear in her voice. This must have been difficult for her.

He took her in and gave her a good, long hug, holding her as if she was his little girl again. He felt her tears soaking up his shirt. When he took her head, and looked at her face, her beautiful blue eyes were red and puffy. He was more proud of her than ever that night.

“Guess I was to right push the softball, huh sweetie?” She laughed and dried her eyes.

“It wouldn’t have mattered, Daddy. I was always going to be this way.”

“You sure were, Susie. You sure were.”

Gentlemen, are you ready? A voice boomed from the DJ booth adjacent to the stage, snapping Phil back to reality. *You better get those wallets out because it’s time for the Peppermint Hippo’s top lady. Get ready to be hypnotized by Ms. Susie Sapphire.* Phil witnessed the club roar and out popped one of the most beautiful creatures he’d ever seen. Men rushed over from the other side of the joint. It was hectic and security had trouble keeping up with the tidal wave of testosterone crashing up against the stage. He stood up. This was the girl he came to see. It was time to have some fun. He might even take Fred up on that lap dance.

Phil walked to the stage with purpose and with the first three steps, his excitement grew exponentially.

On the fourth, he stopped dead in his tracks.

How could he be such a fool? Her hair was longer and a different color, but he recognized the dancer in which all the men jockeyed for position to see. He took a second look, figuring it must be some mistake, but he was sure it was his Susie. He felt like vomiting. A deep, guttural noise seeped past his lips.

“Susan.” Phil said it so quietly, he almost didn’t hear it.

“Dad?” He saw she was just as confused as he. The two of them not expecting the one to see the other at this moment, and both equally unsure of how to react. Phil saw Susan immediately hang her head low, afraid to look at him. Truth was he afraid she would bring her head back up. Then he would really see it was her. It all felt like he was stuck underwater, chained to the bottom of a lake, and he had no idea what to do next. He felt like throwing up, but his throat had closed and nothing was entering or exiting. He wanted to turn around, walk out, drive home, go back to caring for Sherry, and pretend like this night never happened. He wanted to grab her, pull her off the stage, take her home, and rescue her from this degrading life. He saw his little girl again, the one that got a boo-boo from falling off her bike. She had run to him with tears streaming down her face. He had eased her whines by kissing her band-aided knee, telling her that the pain was fleeting, and this accident would only make her stronger.

He saw Susan finally lift her head to look at him. He thought he saw her try to mouth the words “I’m sorry,” but he couldn’t tell when the shot rang out. The echo was so loud

it deafened Phil and he couldn't hear the screams of the other people trying to run for cover. The walls shook like a giant earthquake had just hit the ground and was about to swallow them all into the depths of hell. Almost instantly a second shot rang out. Phil could barely even hear it, but it sounded, and everything moved in slow motion as he watched his Susan take what seemed like a life time to collapse on the stage floor. The purple curtain behind her splattered with fragments of skull and brain. Once she hit the ground, time sped back up. Phil broke free from his underwater grave and rushed to his dead Susan. He took off his flannel shirt, covered his topless daughter, and pulled her off the stage. He flopped on the floor and people scampered all around him. He saw Fred face first on the ground, look up, and call for him, but Phil didn't respond. He just sat there as the blood mixed with his tears, soaking his plain white shirt, refusing to let go of his baby girl's limp body.

#

9:22, the car radio lightly illuminated the darkened car. It was nearly time for her to hit the stage. *I'm just going to scare her is all. Just send a fear of god through her*, Ryan thought. *I got to let her know what I'm capable of. She'll see that end the end, I never meant to really hurt her.* Ryan sat in the car hoping that his nerves would subside. He breathed deeply, counting in to five, out to six; in to five, out to six; in to five, out to six. He opened the door, leaned out the car, and threw up. He was grateful that those men had

wandered in the club. If they lingered any longer and saw him heave his guts, he would have driven home in embarrassment.

Ryan Gorgaine never had much luck talking to girls. He was a shy, overweight child, too afraid to be around his crushes in high school, let alone speak to them. He spent his prom night alone in his room, eating frozen burritos, and watching the news. People couldn't stop talking about the murderous rampage those two kids inflicted on their high school in Columbine, Colorado. Ryan closed his eyes and placed himself at that scene. He grabbed a shotgun out of his mother's ammunition closet and joined those kids. With her working double shifts it would have been easy to lay waste on all the kids that ignored him.

That wasn't him, though. There were more practical ways to get girl's attention.

His first thought was to lose weight, so he hit the gym religiously for ten years, turning fifty pounds of fat into the mold of a body builder. He went to business school, but couldn't grasp accounting and dropped out after two years. He was forced to find work as a personal trainer at a shitty chain store gym, one with bright colors and an overly sanitized smell. He did everything he thought that TV or motivational speakers had taught him. He got a job, he got a body, and believed he was the master of his domain. He bought into all that late-night self-help bullshit and still had nothing to show for it.

What was wrong with these ladies? Shouldn't they be swooning at his muscles? Getting wet every time he danced his pecs for them? No, they just ignored him. This wasn't how it worked in the wild. The females always went after the most power male in

the pact, the alpha, and that is what he was, the alpha. Why the fuck would nobody pay him any attention? These women, they didn't know what they wanted. All of them talked about flexibility and that yoga crap. They said they wanted a man who understood them. They said they wanted a man with sensitivity, who cried at sunsets and cared about peace, and blah, blah, blah.

At least, that's how he overheard the conversations between them at the gym. It's not like he went up to and actually talked to any of them. The fact of the matter, it was ten years after that prom night and he was still in the same bedroom, alone eating the same frozen burrito dinner.

And then Cassandra came in to his life.

They matched up on Tinder. A coworker told him to look to the internet, saying it was the easiest way to get laid. He found Cassandra, who said she like guys with muscles. He messaged her and sent her more tasteful picks and she agreed on a date with him. There was attraction from the start. She was the perfect size: curvaceous and thick, but not fat with straight dyed, red hair, and a toned, yet round butt.

"How the fuck are you single on the internet?" Ryan shouted at her. He turned red immediately, not meaning to show such surprise. They were at a coffee shop in Little Five Points and some of the café goers glared at his vulgar output before going back to their books, or iPads, or whatever pretentious crap they busied themselves with.

"Sorry," he regained a normal tone, "you're so beautiful. I wouldn't expect you to be available." He took a sip of his coffee, and smiled as she blushed away his compliment. She nervously tucked a long strain of hair behind her ear.

“I usually attract assholes. I don’t know why, and I know that’s a clichéd answer, but it’s true,” she responded and took a sip of her green tea. Ryan didn’t say anything for a minute, but just stared back at this girl he knew nothing about, but was certain he had immediately fallen in love with.

“Green tea, good for the body and healthy to boot,” he winced into his coffee. Stupid, stupid response, he thought. He saw Cassandra looking around the shop, had she grown bored of him in two minutes? He wasn’t going to lose her.

“I’m no asshole,” he mumbled, forgetting he had the coffee still in front of his face.

“I’m sorry?” Cassandra answered. Ryan brought the coffee down on the table.

“I’m no asshole. At least I don’t think I am. I’ve never had anyone tell me am an asshole.” He was relieved when Cassandra smiled.

“That’s good. I’m done with assholes, Ryan.” She remembered his name! It was meant to be. “I guess, it’s what happens when I like men who look like you, with your firm chest, and your sculpted arms, and I’m assuming tight butt.”

“Very tight,” Ryan responded. He was very proud of his body and was glad a girl appreciated the hard work he put in for them.

“Yes, just as I’d hoped.” The two of them sat in silence sipping their hot drinks, even though it was a hot, muggy summer day in Atlanta. Cassandra leaned in.

“Say, you want to get out of here,” she naughtily whispered to him. “I know a place we could go and have some fun.” Ryan almost knocked over their drinks he stood up so fast. Cassandra giddily grabbed his hand and they were out in a flash.

They made love within a matter of forty minutes, and for the next five months that was their relationship. They would meet and hook up, very little talking, some getting to know each other, but overall it seemed just a frills sort of thing.

For the first couple of times, Ryan was in ecstasy, He couldn't believe a woman who wasn't piss-drunk wanted to fuck him. It was fulfilling, but he wanted more.

They never talked besides just pleasantries, and he realized that she would refuse to see him the next day, or the day after that, or even the day after that. In fact, their meetings were about week apart, exactly a week apart, always on a Tuesday. His coworker said that he was a booty call, nothing more, and he should be so lucky to find a girl who was down with just that situation.

“That’s all any of us really want bro,” replied the meathead.

Was it?

No, Ryan wanted more. On their next Tuesday meet up, he pushed the issue. She confessed that it was indeed a hookup. When he stated that he'd like to see her more than once a week, and take her out and spend money on her and show her off to the world as his, she got edgy.

“Last week when you tried to talk with me,” which he did, he talked about the problems with his mom, and how he hated the superficial people he worked with, and wished everyone would be real like her. “Well, it got me thinking. Most guys just want to use me for sex, but you’re the only one who I have to ask to leave.”

“The only one,” Ryan interrupted. “How many more are there?”

“Were there,” she corrected, “I had you rotating with two other guys, but I’ve stopped that, Ryan. About three weeks ago, when I realized I just wanted you in my bed, but I didn’t know how to tell you.” He could see she was about to cry, and though he was angry, he reached over and cupped her hand in his.

“See,” she smiled and wiped her face with her free hand. “You’re sweet like this. You want to be with me, but I just can’t handle that. I can’t handle a guy who wants to be nice and be with me. I’m not the person for it. I thought about it and decided I got to stop what we have. You don’t want a girl like me.”

He wanted to respond that he does want a girl like her, but couldn’t muster the words. The last image of her walked out of their coffee shop.

Ryan sat in the Hippo parking lot, hunched over in his Ford Fiesta, and looked at the .45 in his hand. It was two years ago, still heartbroken after the Cassandra debacle, when the girl named Susan McKinney came in for a free consultation. He knew now that girls wanted the asshole, someone who won’t care for them, who’ll treat them like shit. He gave into his darkside and, taking cues from his meathead coworker, he got comfortable in that role, using the perks of being a trainer as practice. It was easy to sneak glances at certain female’s anatomies as they bent, turned, pushed, crunched, or squatted certain body parts. None of them every caught him ogling because no one ever told him to stop. When he felt the tap on his shoulder, he knew it was time to delve into another fantasy.

“Excuse me, I got this in my mailbox.” As she held up a coupon, Ryan stared back at her speechless. It was Cassandra, well not Cassandra directly, but a different version of

her. She was the right size for a woman; curvaceous and thick, but not fat with a bouncing set of blondish-red curls. She had that 80's style that he lusted so much, with a gray sweatshirt cut out at the neck, exposing her bare left shoulder. Her pale, freckly Celtic look drove him wild, but it was her eyes that hooked him. They were soft blue and vast, like staring at the most beautiful ocean.

“Hello? Can you help me?” He forgot that he hadn't said anything.

“Oh, yeah...yeah I can help. It's that free consultation coupon, I see.” He stumbled over his words and grabbed the paper quickly out of her hands. “What parts don't you like about you?”

“I like all my parts. A woman should own her body. I just want to work on stamina.”

“A woman should own her body,” he snorted. “Cute. Well, let's get started. Name's Ryan.”

“Susan.”

“Susan, pretty name for a pretty girl.” He grimaced as her face torqued her at his attempted flirtation.

“Yeah whatever. Look are you going to help me or what? I can always go to Super All Hours Gym.”

“Fuck that, you don't want to go there. Those bastards don't care about the client, just the numbers. You want real care come here. Come to Ryan, I'll take care of you. You said you wanted to work on stamina?”

“Yeah, I need it for my job. I'm a stripper.” Now, Ryan torqued his face in confusion.

“Most girls wouldn't confess that.”

“Most girls don’t know how to own up that.” She stated with conviction. Ryan smiled back at her. He admired the breeze with which she admitted her profession.

“I think I like you Susan McKinney. Come on let’s get you ready to work that pole.” They started with different cardio workouts. Treadmills, ellipticals, stationary bikes, then he moved to burpies and squat thrusts. He had been trying to spit some game at her during this workout, but he couldn’t tell if any of his lines landed.

“Which club do you work at?” He was on her feet holding down her toes and threw the two-pound medicine ball at her chest.

“What,” she huffed between breaths as she caught the ball, threw it back, and bent back down.

“Where do you work? Simple question,” he caught the ball and threw it back.

“Peppermint Hippo,” she caught it, threw it back with annoyance, and bent back down.

“Never been, hear it’s a classy place.” He readjusted, inching himself close on her so his upper legs were placed in line with her lower legs. His crotch hovered atop her knees. She didn’t come back up, but stayed lying down, out of breath, on the floor. During their workout, Ryan noticed Susan commanded the attention of all the other men. She must be some stripper to have this control over men. She would look good on his arm. They would be the envy of everyplace they went.

“The classiest,” she responded and he watched her breast bounce up and down with her quick breaths. “Are we done now? I can’t do any more.” Ryan lingered on her a second longer, before shuffling off.

“Yup, were done.” He offered her hand, but she ignored it. She rolled over and propped herself on her elbows. “You really needed some stamina. I hope you continue to come to me to work more on it. I’ll make you all the stripper you can be.” She didn’t say anything, just responded with a thumbs-up between breaths. She stayed on her fours and Ryan watched the sweat that had gathered at her rear. “Maybe I’ll come by the club someday. See if what I did here actually helped.”

He remembered how she smelled that day. It wasn’t dainty like the other women who used perfume to mask their scent. It was a musk he couldn’t explain, like a just cleaned locker room. Her smell has been stuck in his nose ever since.

She never came back to the gym, which was sad. He could have molded her into something special, but just assumed she couldn’t afford the lessons. That was a shame, they could have worked out some sort of compensation.

He did come by the club, frequently actually, and went so far as to learn her schedule. He sensed she enjoyed his visits, as she would always look down and smile, or wink, or blow kisses at him. After a while, she was the only girl he’d watch. The rest were beneath them, not worthy of their time. She was his escape from everything, the gym, his home, and the lingering image of Cassandra. She needed him too. No girl *really* wants to be a stripper. He was going to save her from this filth. He felt sick watching her up on that stage, with all those losers lusting after her, jerking it to her image when they got home. After months of going to see her, it was time to rescue her from this awful life. She told him so through her eyes. Every time they meet him on that stage, he saw that she cried

out for Ryan to come and pull her off this stage. He would do it, and they would have the life that he never got with Cassandra.

Ryan looked at his radio flashing 9:28. It was just about time for Susie Sapphire to start her routine.

It'll be a fun little joke. She'll laugh, I'll laugh, and see it's nothing but a harmless joke. I wouldn't really be able to hurt her. His hands shook as he loaded the clip. Ryan stepped out of the car, pulled the hood of his tattered sweatshirt over his head, put the gun in the back of his jeans, and shuffled toward the club.

I won't hurt you, because I'm bigger than you. That's okay, I forgive you. You really didn't mean it. I still love you.

“What are you doing here?” Susie asked as she stood in front of Ryan. He wore his nicest shirt, newly starched. His blazer was a size too small as his muscles were bursting the seams, which was part of the plan. He'd show this girl the goods and let her melt in his big, safe arms.

“Susie Sapphire,” He had rehearsed this speech over and over in the car. “You will run away with me. You will be my wife. I will take care of you. I have enough money saved up and I can open a gym. You will birth my children.” Ryan presented flowers for her. She laughed in his fucking face. He lowered the flowers in confusion. She was supposed to go along with his plan.

“Oh, you’re serious. Honey, no. That’s not going to happen. I’m sorry,” She went to move past him, but Ryan stepped to the side blocking her entry to her apartment building. She would say yes by the end of this evening.

“Maybe I wasn’t clear,” he sternly stated before recomposing himself. “Susie Sapphire, I love you. You love me back. I’ve seen it in those eyes. I felt all those kisses you blew to me.” He watched her shake her head in amusement.

“I’m a dyke, dude.” She shrugged her shoulders. “I like girls. You see why it wouldn’t work.”

“You like women?” He watched her nod in agreement. He had to think quickly now. “That’s not a thing. You can be fixed. YOU understand, WE have to be together.” He watched the humor drain from her face and she stepped up to him.

“Listen psycho,” Ryan felt her hot breath on him. “I’m just going to say this once, and don’t worry, I’ll speak really slowly so it gets through your thick, Neanderthal skull. I. Like. Girls.” With each word, Ryan felt the firm poke of her finger against his forehead.

“You think you’re the first boy to try and come rescue me,” she continued slowly with each word moving closer to his face, “to come rescue me from my poor, sad stripper life, my pathetic life of degradation and filth. C’mon dude. Just go on home.” She turned away from him and walked back to her apartment.

“You fucking dyke cunt,” he didn’t know where the words came from, but they just continued out of his mouth. “Fucking dyke, bitch ass, cunt cunt.” The hate spewed out

him like it had been pent up for his whole life, and it shocked him. He didn't mean those words, not to her.

"I'm sorry... I never...I'm sorry," he stuttered for an apology that couldn't make its way out until he felt the hardness of knuckles wrap against his lips. He was shocked, lost his balance, and stumbled back over his feet, falling on the hard grass. Susie stood over him shaking out her hand. Ryan tasted the metal tinge of blood in his mouth.

"Get the fuck out of here, I'm calling the cops," She told him and walked into her building. Ryan sat up, his body shook with rage and embarrassment. Her other neighbors peered out of their units, curious as to what occurred in the common area. For the second time in his life, Ryan Gorgaine was humiliated by the love of his life in public view.

Gentlemen, you better get those wallets out and get ready to be hypnotized by Ms. Susie Sapphire? The voice thundered from the DJ booth bordering the stage. He was right on time and ready to put on his little ruse. He would show her that she had not embarrassed him before the night ended. He would show her how strong she made him.

Every man in the place pushed his way up to the stage, leaving Ryan alone on the dark floor. He watched her hang upside down from the pole, then expertly transition to the splits. He had to admire her athleticism one last time. Ryan thought back to those kids at Columbine. Did they have any last thoughts before they terrorized the halls? Were they scared? If someone didn't come along, and they never had to shoot that first shot, would they have lost their nerve and gone home?

He planned to sneak back stage wave the gun around, making the other girls run for safety. Susie would run and he would point the gun at her and then on himself. She would know he had the capacity to go through with it. An asshole would definitely go through with it. Those Columbine kids were assholes, that's why they went through with their plan. But he was no asshole, no matter how hard he pretended to be. The nice guy had finally won, and she would see that, all of them would see that he could never harm anyone.

He saw that Susie had put a halt to her routine. A tall man in red and green flannel stood directly in front of her. Her head hung low, like a dog that done something wrong. This wasn't in the plans. This was a glitch, an abnormality. No, this was not how it was supposed to go at all. Ryan lost his mind. Why does this man make her stop? How does he have power over her to make her stop her gift? Tears raged down his face. He didn't know why he was crying, but he found himself raising the gun and aiming it at the frozen goddess on the stage.

It all happened in an instant. Somebody screamed "get down" as he felt a fire punch to his washboard abs. The pain caused his finger to pull the trigger and the gun fired. He forgot to turn the safety on. The last image he saw was Susie immediately fell dead to the floor.

"Cassandra," Ryan blubbered before he dropped to his knees, clutched his gut. He saw the man run over to Susie and wrap her in his flannel shirt. *That's my job. That was supposed to be my job.* He crawled toward the man holding Susie, but stopped after a few short feet. The pain was too great in his stomach. He dropped the gun and reached toward

his underbelly. His fingers felt sticky and warm with goo, and when he raised them to his face, he saw that bright red blood oozed down them. Ryan passed out as a pool of blood grew bigger around him.

If You Don't Take a Picture, How Will Anyone Know You Were There?

As the famous person (what they are famous for temporarily slips the mind, but rest assured it was because of a great deed, something like philanthropic philosophy.) So as the famous philanthropic philosopher stood in front of the crowd he saw not faces staring back at him, but small rectangular devices with all different lengths and colors hair flowing from them.

He could not go on with his speech without a need to address this unique situation.

“Excuse me,” he wondered at the crowd, “but why can I not see your faces?” There was no answer, only flashes and clicks that went off like waves throughout the large crowd.

“You’re being quite rude, I must say.” The famous philanthropic philosopher continued. “I mean, I was supposed to present a speech to people, to students, to do-gooders, to concerned citizens. Me, a real-live human being came to educate about the injustices going on in the world: slavery in Africa, genocide in the Middle East, poverty in the Central America, and what we are doing to help eradicate such evils in the world. Yet, I don’t speak to a room of humans, but mobile devices with hair.”

“Now who’s being rude,” spoke a Samsung Galaxy 7 with an explosive shock of fiery red hair in the second row. “We have feelings. We care about those things. We are still listening to you. Just because we are electronic devices, it doesn’t mean that we don’t hear you.”

“Yeah,” a blue Android with curly brown haired afro chirped in agreement. “We are all ears.” The Android, buzzed incessantly. “Sorry,” it apologized, “I just got a tweet. Oh, it’s a good one. Hang a sec. ‘RT@ShawnEB: R female golfers getting hot? Or am I just into lesbians.’ HA, classic ShawnEB, favorite, aaaaaannnnndd retweet.”

The famous philanthropic philosopher stood at the stage with his arms crossed, not saying anything. He refused to address the crowd.

“Hey,” yelled out an LG G4 with a purple mohawk. “We came to hear you speak your beautiful words for us. We love your views. We believe in what you say. People we’ll be happy that we have come to hear your speech, which has helped so many around the world. We did not come to watch you just stand there.”

“Ya,” creaked on old Blackberry, with thin graying hair. I remember when the world was shit. Still is shit, but now, because of individuals like yourself, it is a little less shit.” The crowd agreed with the old phone, beeping and buzzing to show their appreciation.

“Thank you, sir, well not sir, but device,” the famous philanthropic philosopher again addressed the crowd, now that his ego was properly stroked. “And I do apologize for my earlier rudeness, but I was expecting people, not phones. I was expecting see and speak to people. I was just a little put off-”

“-Let the man see and speak to me,” interrupted the iPhone 7s with its long, flowing blonde weaves. Every other phone groaned as the iPhone took pictures of itself. “I don’t like this angle. Oh, this one’s cute, nah, not enough light, too much light, oh that’s perfect. Duckface.”

“Ha, you got to see this kitty on a skateboard,” interrupted a LG Tribute 2 with a time set business haircut. “Oh it crashed again, hilarious. I got to share this.”

“High score,” interrupted a Motorola Droid with medium blue and blonde streaked hair. “Time to beat it, again... Right... Now.”

The beeping and buzzing filled the auditorium with chaotic noise, the lights flashed more and more. The clicks grew louder and louder.

The famous philanthropic philosopher took off his glasses and wiped them on his sleeve, then placed them back on his face. He grabbed the microphone.

“Shut the hell up,” he yelled into it and the electronic devices turned their attention back to him.

“This is what wrong today,” he continued, finding his calm voice again. “Everything is so personalized. I have a picture of myself here and I’m posting it to this Instaface site, so everyone will now where I am and how important I’ve become in my own eyes. You like that fact that I’m attempting to make the world a better place, but do you actually do anything besides that? When was the last time you donated to campaign of a candidate you believe in? Or instead of spending spring break having margaritas made in mouth, you spent that week building houses for the poor in Mexico? Or hell, when was the last time you gave you leftovers to a homeless man on the street instead of letting go to waste in your fridge?”

The room was silent, through a few lights continued to blink on and off off throughout the sedated crowd.

“Well?” continued the famous philanthropic philosopher. “Does anyone have an answer to your own selfishness?”

“I could say anything, couldn’t I? You will all go home to your power cords and download whatever information you take from this lecture, which I gather is just to post on social media that you did your civic duty by being here tonight, but if you take anything away, please let it be this: Remember that at one time you were actual people who actually concerned in which the way the our race was living.”

“I’m sorry,” stated a Samsung Galaxy Note with a dirty blonde crew cut. “I didn’t catch that. I was trying to get a picture of you. Do you mind posing again?”

The famous philanthropic philosopher stared dumbfounded back at the crowd.

“Okay,” he gritted at them after a short silence, “but just one, I am quite annoyed with you devices.” He strained on a smile as the lights culminated into terrific flashes swimming through the sea of electronics.

A Sure Thing

I'd grown tired from two days of packing and needed to get out of the encompassing emptiness of my small one bedroom apartment. When my best drinking compadre texted me about getting one last good-bye beer (a good-bye beer that would last over the next two nights by the way) I jumped at the chance to escape the cavernous coffin that replaced my once cluttered apartment.

The night started off innocently. It was around eight in the evening. I was moving in three days. Uprooting the comfortable small town life that I'd carved out for myself for a shot at fame in Hollywood, The City of Angels, or Doomed Graveyard of Lost Souls, whichever nickname best suits your mood. I wanted to turn this small shindig into a big soiree, so I sent out a mass text to friends, relatives, coworkers, the plumber, the window cleaner, my accountant, the people who came to look at my apartment, any number that lay in my cell. People texted back: 'who is this?' and 'do I know you?' and 'could I please lose this number.' Mostly though, there were loads of responses from people swearing they will try their best to make it at some point in the night, all of them I knew to be relatively sad I was leaving. My heart fluttered when Raven, my now former coworker with whom there have been quite a few flirtations, emphatically said she not miss it for the world.

It was a sure thing.

About two years ago, Raven plopped her bottom comfortably in the chair next to mine. I explained the boring tasks of our simple job, staring at one monitor, mashing the

buttons on the control board, looking at another monitor to make sure the world didn't explode, you know basic, everyday tasks. She caught on rather quickly, more so than most of the faceless cogs I worked with. They're nice enough people, but they've gone insane from lack of sunlight and staring at late night infomercials for a decade.

We hardly got women in this job. Don't ask me why, I don't have any control over the hiring process and I thought she was attractive. She didn't fit my usual "Standards of Beauty." Not trying to sound shallow, but everyone has a different vision of beauty, and, I admit, mine is very high. To be fair, it has been warped by constant bombardments of Hollywood "news" shows and "Maxim Magazines," which lulled me into false sense of believing I could be a normal schlub who bagged a Kate Upton, an Emma Stone, or a Jennifer Lawrence.

Sure, I've meet and seen real women too. I've even been lucky enough to have done sex with a few of them, but Raven was different from those real and imagined loves of mine. She had a small top placed on a set of wide hips, like both parts were meant to go with other people. She had a gorgeous face, though. Perfectly symmetrical, nothing too big or small. Her long, jet black hair perfectly draped across her broad shoulders. It always looked freshly washed no matter what time of day. She did have a small bump, protruding from the left side of her nose. Some would call it a blemish, but I always thought it was cute, a reminder that an actual human female sat beside me. Plus, I think she kind of dug me.

Our flirtations were always innocent, a compliment here, an inside joke there, nothing too outstanding, but one could sense an underlying attraction to each other. I'm not a bad

looking guy, especially for a short, hairy man, who wears thick rimmed glasses, and whose auburn hued hair started thinning at just twenty-five years old. Pretty girls like Raven, fresh out of college, never talked to guys like me, but I guess she spent so much time next to me that she was forced into conversation, something she always insisted was the joy of her job.

It was a sure thing.

It was a few minutes past nine and I'm enjoying my first beer of the night. An Imperial Stout, twelve percent alcohol, tasted of roasted cocoa beans with a slightly bitter finish. It's a big boy drink. Don't worry, I'll be fine, beer is sort of my thing, so I'm enjoying this. Besides, this is my night to relax, my night to let loose. I'm not going to be here once the week has passed. I have no consequences tonight. No more having to explain my actions to friends, co-workers, bar patrons, the police. I hope not the police. It'd be a bad thing to get arrested four days before you change your life. Here's to being a good boy, cheers!

As I held my beer goblet to the toast I just gave in my own head, my buddy, Craig, automatically knew what to do. He received my toast with a nod and clinked my glass to his, looking me in the eye. 'Always look eye' as said by the wise Mr. Miyagi. Its seven years no sex if you don't look eye. I don't need my drought to continue into a full decade.

"Where's your head at, man?" Craig said, breaking the cheer. "You nervous? I mean, L.A. will be tough."

"True," I replied, "but I got a job lined up and I'm still youngish and pretty unfazable. Last night my opener went flat, but I kept strong and got the audience back on my side."

“Do you know why it went flat?” I looked in my beer and brought my head back to meet him.

“You want me to say because it was a fucking rape joke-”

“-because it was a fucking rape joke,” He interrupted almost in unison. “You should never tell a rape joke, let alone open a show with one.”

“Okay, it wasn’t a rape joke,” I smiled, responding to this silly debate. I loved playing with him like this. “To say: If you include incarcerations, men get raped more than women, so that’s just another thing we do better ladies. It’s a prison joke at that point,” I stated a little too seriously, but then I looked over at Craig and he was laughing.

“Man, I’m just fucking ‘round with you. I love that joke. I’m gonna miss it, and I’m miss you buddy.” With those heartfelt words, Craig raised his glass to me. He knows that tonight is for celebration, a night of bigger things to come. I’ve known him for nearly twenty years now, since our high school days together. You keep buddies like him around. He couldn’t be more different from me physically. Where I stand a height impaired 5’6,” he hulks over nearly everything at 6’8,” with the body of a long-ago college football lineman who quit exercising once his career ended. He’s a total sweetheart. Like the IPA he drank, Craig was bold, brash, and adored by all. He was the one who convinced me to start doing stand up comedy in the first place, saying that it was the perfect medium to display my neurotic Jewish tendencies in public. He was right. I’ve never felt better in my life than these past four years. I can’t help but feel a little bad, though. Here I am, on the brink of greatness with my craft, and my buddy is still stuck in our little, hick town struggling to tell his brilliant observation-style humor in crappy open

mics for drunks too inebriated to get any of his jokes. I'm sorry buddy. I hope you can forgive me, because I truly do love and cherish you in the best way one man can platonically love another man.

The night crawled along as Craig and I, or is it me and Craig? I'm so terrible when it comes to grammar. Anyway, as Craig and I continued to bullshit with each other, other friends poured in to the comfortable nook we've carved for ourselves in the crowded bar, piling more bullshit on top of ours making for fun, grand conversations. Most of these people are friends I have known since high school and college, or worked with me, or I meet at AA meetings. I'm kidding. I'm not an alcohol, at least not yet. The future is bright. Cheers. I love these people, but God, am I glad to be out of here. I've been in this town way too long.

At ten o'clock on the dot, which I took to be an omen, because in reality, nothing ever happens on the dot. One minute after, three minutes after, but never directly at zero. So, at exactly ten 'o clock, Raven entered the bar in stunning fashion. Her blue jeans and red sweater hugged her body like a corvette perfectly taking a sharp mountain road curve. Her hair flowed freely across her shoulders. Her eyes smiled at me as she wrapped her arms my body for what felt like a few seconds longer than normal greeting standards.

It was a sure thing.

The night rolled along as more and more people showed up to bid me a fond farewell. Some new friends mixed in with the old and I saw the forgings of early friendships. It's great to know that your friends will be okay with out you. It's a little sad as well, to know

that you were not *that* important of figure in their social life, and their world hardly ever revolved around you.

Raven inched closer to me as our grouping swelled and took over the whole back room. I noticed she has ordered strong Double IPA, one famous for its overly piney and citrus flavors. It is like sucking on the branches of a lemon tree in a good way. This was a *serious* beer and one only drinks it if one is *serious* about beer. This was not one to sample. You knew exactly what you were getting and you love it because you love beer.

“That’s a beer you got there,” I stated, then automatically realized I sounded like an idiot.

“Yep, it’s usually what you order at a beer bar,” she replied playfully. “It’s pretty much the only drink they have.”

“Well, duh. I just meant that’s a Hoptologist from Knee Deep. You don’t see to many people appreciate a beer of that quality.”

“How’d you know it was a Hoptologist?” She asked.

“The smell, it’s very citrus, very piney. You’d expect that color to be light, but it’s more orange than dark blond.”

“Wow, impressive, the man knows his beer.”

“Yes, I do, plus Craig ordered one right before you did.” I smiled and Raven laughed. The place was crowded, but right then, it was just the two of us.

“Beer guy, huh? I remember you mentioning it a few times at work.”

“You never said anything about being a beer girl. Man, if I’d known, there were so many events we could have gone to. You ever been to the Oktoberfest here? Shit gets wild.”

“I’ve been to the real Oktoberfest in Germany,” she gloated. She shifted on her stool towards me, then swayed back into a more comfortable position.

“Oh, world traveler, I see. I would love to go one day, but this one is fun enough. Last year I danced the chicken dance three times, ate a ton of bratwurst, and threw up later that evening.” I cringed, immediately regretting the statement, but Raven didn’t seem to find the movement of my bodily fluids disgusting.

“I puked in Germany,” she held up her glass and I received her toast, always look eye!

“Mmm, so good, I love that hoppy taste. So much better than Pliny the Younger,” she continued.

“I know, right?” I shrieked at her, almost falling out of my stool in excitable agreement. “Who fucking stands in line six hours for an above average Imperial IPA?”

“Especially when we have one right here that blows it away.”

“It’s mind bottling.” We both laughed. Our conversations continued in this ilk. Which breweries we’ve visited, which one’s we needed to visit, and all the eclectic beer bars we’ve been to, etc. I think I might be in love at this point. We debated which country made the best beer. I am a patriot, so I fervently argued the best country was America. She said Germany, sticking with her Oktoberfest experience. I had never met someone with as much knowledge and love of beer before. It was almost too good to be true.

It. Was. A. Sure. Thing.

Around 11:30 our group had dwindled down to four people, which makes sense, as it was a Tuesday and most people had to wake up and contribute to society in some form the next morning. Also, the beer bar itself swept its floors and turned up its stools, ready to for us to be out of there so they could shut down for the evening. I had bigger plans though. I was four beers in at this point, all much tamer Pale Ales after that first Imperial Stout, and I was in a good place. I wanted one last beer in my oldest, favorite bar, and that's where myself, Raven, Craig, and one of Raven's friends who showed up with her, were going. Like characters from an all-white version of "The Wiz," our quartet would "get on down, get on down the road" for more drunken revelry. It was a double date that none of us knew we were on.

The bar we headed to was my "Cheers" bar. It was the bar you go to that is definitively you, that one where the all three bouncers can greet you by first name. I had to say good bye to it. I was planning to do this the next night, but the hell with it, no time like the present. Plus, it was only a three-block walk and the air was surprisingly warm for a late October night. Craig was being his usual hilarious self, cracking the two girls up all the way. I dragged a step behind them, smiling at his jokes. At one point, Raven turned back, smiled at me, and then laughed as she clutched the hand of her friend. She stumbled and almost took out her sister-in-arms.

"I'm not as drunk as I seem," Raven said, immediately glancing back to me.

"It's cool," I replied. "You just haven't mastered walking yet. Most humans don't until their mid-thirties. That's a fact. I read it on a Snapple cap." Raven giggled.

“Yeah, it’s tough sometimes, walking. I fall at least once every three days.” She’s walking backwards now, using her friend’s back for balance.

“Well, most people usually walk forward. The whole seeing what’s in front of you goes a long way in not falling.” Raven smiled back at me. I was probably supposed to say more, but unlike most people, I like that awkward pause. I’m naturally weird in life, so I played to my strengths. I just stared at her. She broke the gaze, and rolled forward off her friend’s back and into her arms, both of them laughing as we entered the bar.

I flung the doors open and strutted in like a hero from an old western after he won the gun fight that saved the town from certain doom or relocation or bankruptcy or whatever ridiculous plotline befell him. Everybody cheered my name, the barkeep poured my usual, slid it across the long oaken bar, and I caught it without spilling a drop. At least that’s how I remember it, ah nostalgia, time’s natural filter. In reality, my entrance was rather tame as we walked in, found a table, and I ordered a pitcher. We choose to remember events however we want and the other way was so much more fun.

I ordered a pitcher for all of us. As I waited I looked around the bar and remembered why this one was my particular favorite. I lived in a small hick town with a second-rate college smack in the center. It wasn’t a bad school, it was my alma mater and I did decent enough, but the school was really for the partiers. It was a stronghold for a large Greek life and most of the bars in town catered toward this cliental. Most had ruffee-coladas on tap for Christ’s sake. But not this bar. This bar was for the loners; for the artists; for the intellectuals; for the comedians; for the drunken intellectual comedians; for the professors and for the students; for the women who wanted a night out and not have to keep a

constant guard from getting unwantedly groped; for boys too shy to part the bro sea of backward hats, cargo pants, and Affliction T-Shirts just to converse with a too made up girl in short-shorts and tube tops; finally, this bar was for me. I spent a good deal of my mid-twenties here, but that may be because I used to live a block away.

As I got back to the table, Craig really had the ladies laughing, amusing a group large or small is where he's in his element.

"Yeah, so my boy's gonna be a star now," Craig boasted. I started to pour the pitcher into perfectly chilled pints.

"I don't know," I chimed back in, "L.A. is so huge. There a ton of comedians."

"Fuck 'em," he interrupted, "you're funnier and more talented than anyone I know, except for me." He grabbed the first pint glass I finished pouring and handed it to Raven's small blonde friend with a spin, magically not spilling a drop. "For you my sweet," she blushed and giggled into her drink as she took a sip. Craig put his arm on the back of her chair and looked over to me. His eyes telling me 'I'm going to leave you be with Raven, now make your move.' I poured the next beer and gave it to Raven.

"Excellent pour," she judged the glass of beer, "just a half an inch of head on it." She took a sip.

"That's the way beer is supposed to be poured. Besides, who doesn't like a little head?"

"I know I do," she smiled at me. I didn't say anything. I just half laughed and let the awkwardness hang in the room while pouring my beer.

"So," Raven broke the silence between us, "L.A... Nervous much?"

“You know it hasn’t really hit me. I don’t think it will until I’ve been settled in for a month, then I’ll be like, aaah, what the fuck did I just get myself into?”

“Pssh, you’ll be fine. You finally have escaped this cow town. One month in you’ll be like, I totally made the right decision. Also, you’ll be famous, like on SNL or something.”

“Too old for SNL, but I wouldn’t mind writing for them.”

“Just don’t write for *Family Guy*, I don’t think I could look at you with any amount of respect if you wrote for *Family Guy*.” She took a sip of her beer. How I wanted so bad to be that golden liquid against her full lips.

“Oh, I’ll tell you if I write for *Family Guy*. You’ll be the first and last person I tell, because I want you to shoot me if I get that desperate.” We both laughed.

“It would be my honor.”

This was nice. Most of our talks had been at work and had been about work, but now it occurred to me I was having an actual conversation with an actual person, not just friendly words with a coworker as we tolerated each other’s company.

I liked this conversational personality of hers, it gave her depth. To my surprise, she was still in school, studying to get her masters in psychology. She also wanted to escape this small town, because she grew up an even smaller town and she always knew there was a much bigger world out there. I told her that she would have a place to stay if she drew enough courage to plunge into that gigantic world.

I feel I needed to point out that at this junction in the evening I’d never mentioned anything specific about her and taking our “conversations” to a more “intimate” “level.” I just assumed it was going to happen. Our minds had melded into one, brought together by

an evolutionary need for carnal companionship. I overthink every situation. It's a curse, like Spider-man, and with great power comes great responsibility. I'd been noticing her physical tells all night. She'd been biting her lower lips, touching my arm when she laughed at my jokes, subconsciously massaging her thigh from time to time. I thought I was in. I was ready, but I needed to use the bathroom first.

It was a sure thing.

Then I came back from the bathroom.

Then there was some other short guy with a blonde crew cut and glasses in my seat. He talked to Raven, and she reacted with the same cheeriness that she had displayed with me.

It was a sure thing?

I pulled up an extra chair next to the guy who sat next to Raven. I knew this guy and he knew me.

"Hey man, how's it going?" he greeted. "Sorry, I didn't know you were sitting here." He got up to give me the chair, but I needed to let it know it didn't bother me.

"Nah, it's cool Mark," I said, for some reason. "Stay, you're already sitting. Not like the place is for lack of chairs." I motioned to the near empty bar.

"So, you two know each other?" Raven asked.

"Yeah," Mark gleefully answered, "my man's done some shows for me over at The Blue Room. He's a funny one, this guy." Mark slapped my shoulder a tad harder than playfully. I wanted to playfully slap the shit out of his face.

“Yeah, done a few shows for Mark here.” I responded instead of slapping him.
“Usually, the crowds are pretty shitty, like twelve people.”

“Hey, it’s not like I don’t try to promote them,” Mark chuckled, “but kids would rather get sloppy drunk at a bar then watch amateur comedians tell jokes at eleven.”

“Amateur?” I voiced.

“Wow, slow down Bill Cosby. I just meant as you don’t get paid. I happen to love you guys. You and him,” Mark pointed over at Greg, “are fucking hilarious, man. I want comedy to succeed here. I think it’s great for the town to have a scene.” Mark and I stared at each other, neither one of us wanting the other there. So there sat the three of us, waiting in awkward silence for anyone to restart the conversation.

“Anyway,” Mark broke in, looking over to Raven. “I just came over for a quick hello.” Bullshit I thought, because that entailed there will soon be a goodbye, which was obviously not happening.

“I’d just thought I’d see how my ex has been doing,” Mark continued, I looked over at Raven, who blushed.

Did I hear him, right?

“Oh, y’all worked together or something.” I asked, hoping this was the correct answer.

“Ha, no. We use to date.”

“It was nothing really,” Raven quickly corrected. “Mark and I hooked up a couple of times for two years.”

“Well,” Mark chimed in, “we did couple stuff too. Movies, dinners, spas days. Oh, remember that one party at Jenny’s apartment.”

“Oh fuck,” Raven laughed, but turned to me. “We didn’t know it was a reverse gender costume party. So, we showed up like regular people, but everyone else is crossed-dressed.”

“And we’re standing there with Rodney the Riveters and Danielle Glovers,” Mark rerouted Raven’s attention, “and Jenny starts freaking out on us.”

“What the fuck you guys?” Raven said, imitating a loud shriek. “Why are you guys dressed like you? You’ve ruined everything. I hate you.” Both she and Mark laughed.

“Ah, Jenny,” Raven reminisced. “She had just gone through a big fight with her boyfriend ten minutes before we walked in.”

“Still,” Mark said, “she was a crazy bitch.”

“She was a crazy bitch,” Raven reiterated.

My beer buzz was gone, replaced by an increasing sense of insecurity. These two had history and clearly had chemistry. I was going to have to fight for what I wanted, and I would probably lose. I don’t win these contests, especially playing against a stacked deck. Here sat my enemy. I’m Poland and he’s the German armed forces marching over the border to claim what I’ve worked so hard on.

It was not a sure thing.

How would I react? War was on, what would be my first tactic? Raven seemed to enjoying being this Helen of Troy. She had two passive-aggressive beta males battling for her, each too nice to tell the other one to get lost. Mark and I continue to belittle each

other on her behalf. Saying that live theater was dead, comedy was subjective, and that no one really made a career out of a hobby, blah, blah, blah. It was a pretty pathetic peacocking display, two toms showing off for the last hen in the coop. She loved every moment, and with each laugh, hair touch, close lean in, or arm grab she gave Mark my anger toward her stewed.

How could I have been so stupid? I should have done something after the first bar. I should have never come to this one, especially since I was going to BE HERE TOMORROW NIGHT. We were doing great. I should have ended the night an hour earlier. Oh, curse this weak bladder of mine. Why did I have to use the bathroom so badly? I surely could have made the short cab right back to my place. I hadn't said anything for a while now. Raven and Mark talked and laughed, like they had the greatest conversations in the history of conversations. He'd put his arm around the back of her chair. He was making the move. I did nothing, but sat in my chair and stared at them like Norman Bates at the end of *Psycho*. Don't worry, I'd never hurt someone. I'd never hurt a fly.

It was Craig who called a cab and why wouldn't he? He had the girl wrapped up now. She had moved from his side onto his lap. That was a done deal, a sure thing for him. Mark suggested that the five of us spilt the cab. I said nothing and everyone assumed I was on board, because when the cab came minutes later, they were shocked that I didn't move. I just told them I want to stay here and drink some more. They all said okay, except for Raven. She looked sad. Good. She should be after playing with my heart strings so effortlessly like she was a gifted cardiac cellist.

She asked if I was going with them. When I didn't respond, she stayed standing, looking at me, and asked if something was wrong. I had one last opening, but I was too irate to notice.

The cab pulled up and Mark, Craig, and Raven's friend all got in. Raven stayed standing over me.

"You guys coming?" Mark asked with the taxi door open.

Raven and I stared at each other in another awkward silence.

"C'mon, cab's here. Get in Raven"

Silence still.

"Get in the fucking cab, Raven." Mark said, though he wasn't angry, more conveying the annoyance to the others wanting to leave.

Raven just stared down at me ignoring his plea. I was supposed to say something. I was supposed to yell back at him, she's staying here, or ask her to stay, or ask if she wanted to get our own cab. Any of those responses would've been the proper response. I get that now. I *see* that now. Hindsight is twenty-twenty. Raven turned to the group in the cab, then back at me.

"Aren't you gonna invite me to sit?" She asked.

"It's a free country," I shrugged, trying not to let my anger come through, and doing a very bad job of it.

The next move sealed my fate.

I tried to be smooth, I tried to be hip. I tried to "Fonzi" it, feeling I had to be slick to win a prize that was being handed to me.

I kicked the chair out, a charming attempt at a cool invitation. She would glide right into that chair and our conversations would continue through the night.

Except I didn't account for carpeting, and the chair hit a bump and skidded hard into Raven's shin.

"Ouch," she let out, rubbing her shin. "Why'd you kick the chair into my leg? Why would you do that?" I shifted in my chair, shocked at what just happened.

"I...I...I was trying to be cool. I didn't mean to kick the chair into you. I'm sorry."

"Well, you should be." All good humor was gone from her now. "That fucking hurt." I got up and placed the chair under the table again. I went and sat back down.

"Here, let me try it again." I went to kick the chair once more, but Raven stopped me.

"No, no. that's okay." She looked back at Mark who was still waiting with the cab door open.

"What happened?" he asked. "Are you okay, Raven? This guy started the meter."

"I'm fine Mark," Raven answered him and then looked at me. At least, I think. I was too ashamed to look her in the eye, always look eye! I felt her gaze upon me. "I'm going with them. Have a good life in L.A. Remember to keep in touch." She said with no anger, more disappointment, like a mother who bailed her worthless child out of jail for his or her third DUI arrest. She limped into the cab and it drove off.

"You were always going to fuck him anyway." I said as I downed the last of my beer. I sat there, alone at the table, spinning an empty beer glass. I was going to order another beer, then maybe another, and then maybe another. Who knows where this night will now

end? I do know that in a few days this small, useless town will be a dust cloud in my rear view and I will be on to bigger and better excursions.

That's a sure thing.

Church of the Hell Fire

The fire crackled, bursting red and orange flames against a dark moonless sky. It burned furiously like the anger of a jilted lover and, occasionally, a lone flame shot up, revealing the octet that surrounded the fire. Alisa smelled burnt wood as the smoke cloud shifted her direction, wrapping her body. The smoke was clear and stung her eyes, making them water. She wiped away with the sleeve of her faded hoodie, trying not to call too much attention to herself.

“It always seems to find the newbie,” chuckled Ted. “Don’t worry, just means it chose you.”

“Here switch me places,” suggested Dane, as he got up and pushed her out of the furnace and into the cool, refreshing night. The cloud rolled over and engulfed him, but Alisa watched him unaffected, staring back at it, challenging it to hurt him, and almost welcoming the sharp souls of the dying wood. “Better?” He asked.

“Yes, much,” replied Alisa coughing away the last of the smoke from her lungs. “There air feels so good. Way to be a hero.” She pulled her faded hoodie up over her curly dyed-blond hair with dark roots and hugged tight on his bicep. A little bit of smoke still hit her face, but she was going to not let it hurt her anymore.

“I should be able to protect you from smoke at least,” Dane spoke, but seemed a little distracted. Alisa tightened her grip on his arm, as if they were at the top of a roller coaster ready to descend into the rest of the ride.

She was glad to have finally met someone like Dane. He was the nice boy that a decade earlier she would have ignored. He was the boy, with a straight hair cut, dressed in pastel clothes and khakis that sat next to her in High School English. He was the boy whom she looked past in favor for the one with a shaggy mop for hair, wearing torn jeans and a dirty leather jacket. That boy was the one that always looked strung out after lunch; that boy skipped gym to get stoned in the parking lot; that boy, who flipped off the teacher after being thrown out of class. For ten years, she chased that boy and the lifestyle which was exotic to her. What else was a teenage to do for fun in the boring Eastern Tennessee countryside? All around her were mountains, meth labs, and churches. That boy was exciting, but after ten years of riding that life, she was worn down. She got tired off the lack of responsibility that seemed to find her at every corner. She was tired of going to the emergency room every other weekend to have her stomach pumped. Three overdoses and one abortion later, she decided that her life needed a change or it would be no more.

Sixteen months ago, on a Sunday, Alisa's mother asked her to accompany her to church. Her mother was never a devout worshiper, but Alisa believed her to be a good Presbyterian, as she went to church nearly every Sunday. A chance to be absolved from your sins of the week, is what she always her mother always said. It was funny because she was the one who taught Alisa to drink and even let her take her first sip of vodka when she was just fourteen. Anyway, she was too hung-over to mount any coherent argument and graciously accepted the invitation.

It saved her life.

She felt a hole finally being filled by something other than drugs and alcohol or material goods or even sex. It was a feeling that she could not quite comprehend, like the waning moments of a good dream right as you wake up. Alisa attended every Sunday, taking the faith more seriously than her mother, who skipped more and more sermons, especially if it was the morning after Bingo. In fact, her absent days grew more frequent the more Alisa attended the sermons. Alisa didn't mind, in fact, she admired her mother having such vivacity at that age.

Alisa continued to attend the church, but she never felt quite indoctrinated. She listened to the preacher, greeted the people around her, and sung along to the hymns, but did not quite completely buy into *everything* the church taught. She quit drinking, but still smoked pot every now and then. It calmed her nerves, helped her when she needed to get off the harder stuff. The church semi-condemned this deed as unchristian, which she thought silly cannabis was mentioned as a way of life in the bible. It wasn't just the little things like the condemnation of marihuana, but the the had told her all she needed was God's and Jesus's love. This was not true, because while she needed to fill love from a higher meaning, it was not the love she seeked. She needed a human love, not to fill lonely anymore, some to share her and God's love.

The men she tried to meet through her church were alright, but their faith always came first. The conversations were always about the Lord: 'he wants this for me,' 'he wants this for my wife, my children, my business,' 'he wants me to pray or go to church every day.' Enough already (and why was God always a "he" with these men?) She got

close enough to two men from her church, but they could not take the demons in her past and ran off scared.

Eight months ago, Alisa, nearly ready to quit everything and enter the service as a nun, even if that meant converting to Catholicism, received a message on her ChristianDating.org profile. It was from Dane. *I should give love one more chance before I give it all to God*, she thought.

He didn't exactly sweep her off her feet, but Alisa liked him. At first, nothing really stood out about him. He was decently handsome with a lanky frame, thinning brown hair, and a face that was so basic, it looked like every sketch artist's rendering of a person described to them. However, Dane never mentioned God's plan for him or for herself. He simply stated that God lays out many paths and we can choose which ever one we'd like. He asked her real questions, about her work, her likes and dislikes, and her hobbies. It was a real date conversation. In fact, religion hardly came up at all.

Dane was a big enough fish not to throw back in her ephemeral dating pond, so she decided to keep going out with him, besides he seemed genuinely interesting as well. Dane was a gentleman, talking it as slow as Alisa needed to go. After their third date, she allowed him hug her. On their fifth date, he snuck a kiss on her, which she enjoyed. He was turning into the perfect man, not totally taking charge, but also not wilting to her will. Plus, he seemed more handsome each time they hung out.

She kept mostly quiet about her past life, but she yearned to tell him, to test him and see if he'd run away like everybody else.

After three months of seeing Dane, she brought up the drugs and types of people she used to “run” with. It was a quiet Sunday picnic, she sat, intertwined into him as his limbs wrapped around her like a comfortable straight jacket. She felt his hot breath on her nape. It was a cool march afternoon, but a drip of sweat crawled down the front of her face.

“I used to deal dope,” she blurted, breaking the mood. Alisa looked back up at Dane, expecting a shocked expression, but he only smiled.

“I used to smoke weed every day until my dealer left, so it’s good to find a new source,” He kissed the top of her head, but she pulled away.

“I’m serious, I used to deal dope and do blow and even shot up heroin once or twice.” Alisa broke his chain with ease. She scooted over the other end of the scratchy red and black blanket. “I even OD’ed. Three times,” she looked away, tears swelled in her eyes, and took a deep breath. “The second time, I didn’t know it, but I was with child.” Alisa spoke into the flannel blanket, she wiped at the corner of her eyes, “there was no hope for the child, it had to be...I mean, I didn’t want to, but there was no choice, but to... I had... I had to get...” A single tear now trickled down her cheek. Dane wiped it away and grabbed her under her chin and made her watery eyes meet his clear baby blues.

“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” He dutifully stated.

“1 John 1.9” She replied, wiping her eyes.

“We all have our past. I’ve done some heinous acts myself I’m not proud of. Besides, you’re basically a good person now. Trust me, honey bear, I’ve got quite an eye for these

things.” He kissed her and Alisa believed she might have found love for the first time in her life.

Their courtship blossomed over the next eight months. She began to meet his people. First, he took her to meet his affable older sister Kim and her husband Kevin, who both hugged her a hearty, southern hello.

“Eeeeeewww, I’ve heard so much this swee’ pea, here. Ooooooh, she’s a small one, though. I could just put her in my pocket and keep her there,” squealed Kim. She wouldn’t release her bear-like grip of Alisa’s body. She was a large woman who looked exactly like her age of forty-two. One or two stray gray hairs peppered in a sandy blonde bob, crow’s feet forming at the corner of her eyes, and an extra layer of fat encasing her figure. She had the same beautiful blue eyes as Dane.

“Dear, you’re gonna squeeze the life right from that poor thing,” laughed Kevin, her husband, a man as large as his wife, balding with a graying goatee. Kim released her grip and held Alisa’s arms.

“Sorry, it’s just she is so perfect,” Kim hugged her tight one last time. Alisa had never known such affection, especially with basically a stranger. “Come,” said Kim, “y’all git to the next room. I have dinner to put in the oven.”

The four of them, sat and ate a nice pot-pie dinner. It was pre-made, *Stouffer’s* or *Marie Calender’s* or something. It didn’t matter. It was still pretty delicious. Kim explained she was never much of a cook, neither was her mother, in fact, most women in her family choose work over a life in the kitchen. Alisa liked Kim. She felt a warm

kindness radiate from her pores, and it was nice to meet a modern Christian woman, one who didn't just believe in service to God or her husband.

The evening was near perfect, but there was a strange moment with Kim when the two of them were alone in the kitchen washing the dishes and Alisa asked what faith they practiced.

"You haven't discussed this with Dane?" Kim responded with half a laugh.

"I've tried," Alisa said, drying and putting the dish on a rack next to the sink, "but I've never got a clear answer. He knows that I'm Presbyterian."

"That's good," interrupted Kim, handing Alisa a water-logged plate. "It means you got a sense of humor about this whole faith thing, swee' pea."

"So you're the same?" Alisa asked, taking the dish from Kim, drying it, and awaiting the next one.

"There finished," Kim stated smiling at her. "Shall we join the men-folk?" and then she left the room. It was a bit odd, but in some way, it humanized Kim. Though she liked the woman, Alisa never saw her as an actual person. She was all bells and whistles, a constantly cherry mother figure from a '50's sitcom. In fact, Alisa had actually been wondering if Kim and Kevin slept in separate beds.

Her relationship with Dane got stronger as the months went on. She kept meeting more and more friends from his church, including Ted. He was a fiery preacher, whom Dane has known since they were five. They were total opposites, physically. Where Dane was stretched out like Sunday's laundry, Ted was compact, like parts of his limbs and torso had been edited out. Ted was Mount Zion when he preached. He and Dane invited

her to hear Ted give a sermon on a breezy Friday night in early fall. It was a harrowing experience, one that she'd never forget. It was a small, old church, but keep up to look clean. It was packed to the rafters, and had no air condition. The warm, muggy Tennessee night stuck in the chapel as if too wanted to hear Ted preach.

Ted was mesmerizing. Every word passed with such passion and vigor. He sweated through his shirt in the first ten minutes and Alisa was afraid he would faint. Instead he kept going for an hour and a half, seemingly gaining more strength with "Jesus," "Amen," or "Hajellujah" the congregation threw back at him. Nearing the hour mark off his sermon, he looked over dead at Alisa, who was hypnotized by this small man who spoke with the voice of a giant.

"Brothers, sisters," Ted spewed to the crowd with a heavy evangelical drawl. "Tonight, Church of the Hell Fire is pleased to open our arms and our heart to a lovely young woman here tonight. Alisa, will you do me the honor?" He held out his short arm and little hand to Alisa, who was in the front pew along with Dane, Kim and Kevin, and two more couples she barely knew. The whole church goaded her to join Ted on stage.

"C'mon, Sister Alisa, God knows I wouldn't do you no harm here on this here stage." Alisa blushed and shook her head. She hid into Dane. "Okay," Ted continued, "I won't force you, but if God comes down and speaks into your ear to join me up hear, then I am hardly at any fault." The crowd roared, and what happened next, Alisa would never be able to explain.

Call it divine intervention, call it the need for attention, call it Dane, whispering in her ear, but Alisa grabbed out to Ted and joined him on stage. The crowd went into a tither.

“There you go, child.” Ted, exuberated once she towered over him on the tiny stage. “May I ask, what made you change your mind?” She could see of really packed the place was. People filled an area about the size of an art house movie theater, all of them attuned to Ted and the stage. They eagerly awaited her response.

“I heard a voice. It told me to take your hand.” She looked over a Dane, looking for any tell confirming it was him, but he gave nothing away.

“A voice!” boomed Ted. “I dare say it was truly divine intervention that led you here to us this evening.”

“Amen, brother,” one patron shouted, her hands raised to the sky.

“Keep on,” said another, louder than the first. Ted motioned to the crowd. A small lady brought him a chair and placed it in the center of the stage.

“Please sister,” he signaled to Alisa, “have a seat in our chair now.” Alisa did as she was told and sat. Ted was now at eye level with her. She could feel the heat emitting from him. She saw steam rise from his body. “Now, Alisa. I hear that you have been no angel. Now, now, that’s okay. I’m not here to judge. That isn’t for me to do.”

A laughter wave roared through the crowd. Ted continued.

“But we here in the Church of the Hell Fire, do not look toward the past, do we?” He gestured at the room.

“No, father”

“Not here, father.”

“No way, Father. Look to that girl’s future.”

“That’s right, brothers and sisters. The future, as it says in 1 Thessalonians 5.9: ‘For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ.’ Whatever her troubles, it doesn’t matter, now. All that matters is her salvation.” Another raucous ovation from the crowd, as Ted put his hand upon Alisa’s head. She sat up in the chair and closed her eyes. Though Ted’s hands were tiny, they seemed to encapsulate her entire head, making it feel safe and warm.

The wind through itself against the outside of the small church and the shutters pounded against the windows with a rhythmic knock. Alisa felt Ted’s sweat wash against her as he bore her hand deeper into her curly hair. She felt every eye on her, like the main attraction at a zoo.

“Now, I say to y’all right here, in this house of God, are we goin’ cast her out like a wicked soul?”

“No, Father.”

“Take her in, Father.”

“Or do we take her in and call her our sister?” She heard Ted voice again.

“She is our sister”

“Save her, Father. Save the poor girl.”

“Alisa,” She heard Ted speak in a softer tone, she could still feel his heat radiant against her. “I want you to stand out of this chair and tell us how you’ve long left this life of sin behind and accepted Jesus Christ into your life. Tell us, Sister,” his voice grew into a crescendo. “Please tell us, Alisa, now.”

Her eyes shot open, she felt as if she'd been hit with a wrecking ball, and it propelled her from the chair to the edge of the stage. The audience fell into a silent hush, awaiting her move. She saw every single person, including Dane, Kim and Kevin, eagerly tuned in to her response.

“Brothers and sister, I have long given up the sinful life I once knew for one of our Lord Jesus Christ.” The congregation erupted with joy. Alisa felt out of breath and wheezed as Ted came up and hugged her. She felt him stick to her, but it felt right, almost as if she was cleansed.

“Welcome to our flock, Alisa,” Ted said as he released her back into Dane’s waiting arms. He held his smile down at them before continuing with his sermon.

Alisa’s entire body shook, for she had never been moved so much, certainly not at her mom’s church where the pastors droned on from a podium, rarely looking up at the audience. She wanted to bring her mom here. Maybe she would go to less bingo nights.

After the ceremony, she and Dane were invited over to Ted’s house, which was directly behind the church. The small mousey woman who brought in the chair turned out to Ted’s wife, Louise. She was the perfect complement to Ted. It seemed what parts Ted was missing were in her and vice versa. The three of them sat on the musty living room couch as Ted emerged from the bedroom with a fresh white T-shirt on.

“You must forgive my tardiness,” he said in a subdued tone, but with a slight drawl. “I have to freshen up as soon as I’m done. Louise insists.”

“You’ll catch a terrible cold, ‘specially with this hellish breeze,” Louise responded back in an even thicker drawl. She got up and set the table.

“Did you enjoy the service?” Ted asked to a wide-eyed Alisa.

“It was incredible. I thought sermons like that were only in the movies. I was almost expecting rattlesnakes at the end there.” Both Ted and Dane snickered, “What? Do you usually use those? That would have been so cool.”

“Ted’s grandfather was a handler,” Dane explained.

“It’s probably where I got my showmanship from. He was a great man, ‘til one day rattler up and bit ‘im right there,” Ted pointed to his right wrist, “punctured the radial artery, the venom oozed into his blood. Was dead within minutes. After that, we just stuck to the verses.”

“So, you’ve been preaching a while I take it?” Alisa asked placing her hands on her knees and leaned in. Dane rubbed her back.

“My mother used to say I was born spouting the good book since the doctor spanked my itty bitty behind.” Ted responded with a hearty laugh. “I love preaching though. Couldn’t imagine doing anything else, knowing any other way of life. It’s helping the ones like you, trying to find your way to a better path. Dane told me of your struggles.” Alisa turned around and stared at Dane.

“Dane that was private.” She scooted away from him on the couch.

“I told him about how you use to abuse drugs.” Dane said defensively. “He needed to know so Ted could try and help you. You said you wanted help.” Alisa stared back at Dane. She guessed his intentions were good, but she didn’t like that he would share her private life with strangers.

“Honey,” squeaked Louise as she strolled in, sat down on the arm of the chair, and hovered over Ted. “You can’t get upset. These two have known each other since they were tiny tadpoles born from the same mud river. They tell each other everything. Dane here knows every nook and cranny about me.” She stared down lovingly at Ted. “You just have to learn to live it and love the man for it. Besides, I bet they’d marry each other when we’d both gone, even tho’ it’s sin.” She snorted a laugh, Ted chuckled as well.

“Also,” Ted interjected. “If Dane hadn’t talk to me, we wouldn’t know if you’d be the perfect candidate.” Alisa relaxed with a curious smile.

“Candidate? For what?”

“Now, it’s not a complete yes,” interjected Dane before Ted could respond. “It’s still up for debate, right Ted?”

“Come now, Danish,” Ted responded. “She’s perfect. Besides, It’s out of your control.” Ted stared back at Dane, whose expression soured a little. They held each other’s eye as if they were in a stand-off and having a telepathically serious conversation.

“Will someone tell me what’s the heck’s going on?” Alisa yelled a bit louder than she meant. “What am I perfect for?”

“She wants to know, Dane.” Ted stated in an eerie calm. “Are you gonna tell her?” Dane broke his gaze and slid into the couch.

“Okay, then,” Ted turned to Alisa. “Every five years we go on a special retreat in the woods, Alisa. It’s very exclusive, so you understand how important this is. My family has done this ever since my great grandpappy move us from Oxford, Mississippi. It’s God’s will, he used to say, us doin’ his work here on earth. We get back in touch with mother

Nature and our heavenly father while we welcome a new member into our flock. This is not like what you did tonight. Tonight, was for show. This is for serious candidates who want to be a part of our mission. Dane has been telling us about you for weeks and I'm so glad we could meet. You are the perfect new candidate."

Alisa hesitated. It was a big decision, or was it? These folks were kind, and she was ready to leave the Presbyterians behind before. These people seemed to get her, especially Dane. She could see a life with him. She saw dinners with Kim and Kevin, helping set up for Sunday Sermon with Louise. Maybe she would even bring her mother around one day.

"Ok," She stated with a flat calm. She thought Dane seemed a bit unnerved by the matter-of-factly of her response, even though he had no reason. Did he want this as much as she?

"I'm so glad you said that Alisa," responded Louise with a high squeak.

"Did you not want me to join?" Alisa turned to Dane, but he continued to stare at Ted before turning back to her.

"I thought things were moving fast, but I guess it feels...right." He said smiling as he took her hand. "Shall we eat?"

Alisa watched as the three of them uniformly rose from their seats and walked over to the table.

Alisa's mother stumbled in her room as Alisa packed for the overnight trip. Alisa smelled her perfume of cigarette smoke and cheap gin from across the room.

“Where the heck you goin’?” slurred her mother as she plopped down on the chair next to the bed. Alisa stopped to look at her mother, whose eyes could barely keep contact.

“If you must know, I’m going on a camping trip with Dane and some people from his church.” Her mother sat there, unmoving, she could have been a pile of dirty clothes. Alisa tried her best to ignore her, but she felt her mother’s alcohol breath permeate the room and settle on her back.

Her mother let out a tiny belch and stood up out of the chair.

“Do you think it’s a good idea? You know, goin’ on an overnight trip with this strange cult.” This was the most her mother talked to her about Dane and the Church of the Hell Fire. She just harrumphed when Alisa mentioned the service last week and went on to bingo.

Alisa continued to decide on what clothes to wear, she did not want to deal with her mother. Dane had been a little bit strange since she was invited on the trip. She hadn’t seen him in a week. She got one text from him, which read ‘been busy lately, sorry.’ She wondered if he was preparing some big announcement.

“Did you hear me, Alisa?” Alisa’s mother said with force in her voice.

“Yes, ma’am, but I’m choosing to ignore you,” Alisa continued to pack. “I do think it’s a very good idea. I really like Dane and his friends.” Her mother said nothing. She grabbed a small gray hooded sweatshirt draped on the foot board of the bed.

“Here,” she handed Alisa the sweatshirt. “You’ll need this, it gets cold out there this time of year.” Alisa took the sweatshirt from her mother’s grip, tears welded in her eyes

and she did not know why. She figured that her alcohol emitting from her mother stung her eyes.

“Thank you, Mother,” Alisa relented to her as she placed the sweatshirt on top of the clothes in her small travel bag. She gave her mother a big hug. “I love you.”

“I love you too, Alisa,” her mother reciprocated the hug. “I’m just afraid I’m losing you to this man.” She broke the hug and sat down on the bed, tears formed in her eyes as well. Alisa plopped down next to her.

“That’s kind of the point, though, isn’t it?” She placed her head gently on her mother’s shoulder. Her mother said nothing. She just lightly kissed her forehead. Alisa still smelled the alcohol, but didn’t mind so much now.

“I should be able to protect you from smoke at least,” Dane spoke, but seemed a little distracted. Alisa tightened her grip on his arm, as if they were at the top of a roller coaster ready to descend into the rest of the ride.

“So, what happens next?” She asked, staring up at Dane with anticipation, but he did not take his eyes off the fire. She kissed his cheek and it was cold despite being nearly inside the fire.

“Now,” Ted interrupted, “we get the indoctrination started.” He stood up and threw some powder in the fire. The fire crackled and snapped like it was in pain and cried out for someone to help it.

The two other couples whom Alisa had seen before, but did not really know all that well, moved directly across the fire from her. They had donned what look like big, dark,

heavy robes. Their heads were down and reading from some book, probably the bible, but Alisa had trouble seeing through the rapidly expanding wall of flames.

“They look like druids, Dane.” She turned to speak to him, but he was not there anymore. The fire roared on and the smoke grew thick and shifted back in her direction. “Dane,” she coughed. “Dane, Ted, this isn’t funny.” She stood up, to see above the smoke, but it grew thicker the taller she rose. It encased her whole body. She could make out vague figures through the smoke. It stung her eyes and nose, got into her lungs, and forced a violent coughing fit. Fatigued, Alisa sat back down and looked to see four people chanting through the thick yellow and red flames.

“Dane,” She tried to stand up again, but was forced back down by a figure on either side of her. They were both dressed in the same druid-like garb as the four figures across from her and, in unison, hummed a verse in some language she could not recognize. They turned to look at her, it was Kim and Kevin. She saw the fire flicker in their jet-black eyes.

“Kim, what’s going on?” Alisa asked scared. “Kevin, Kim, someone fucking say something.” Her lungs burned rougher than before now. Alisa had another coughing fit, and when she went to cover her mouth, she realized Kim and Kevin had a hold of both her arms.

“Sister Alisa,” a voice boomed from the fire. “It is now time for you to pay for the sins of your past and be judged in the kingdom of God.” Alisa looked up and Ted stood in front of her, dressed in a bright red robe. He stood as tall as a Goliath and blended into the fire that roared now behind him. It rose out of his shoulders.

“This isn’t funny. Ted. Let me go.” Alisa screamed at him as tears ran down her face. “Dane,” she called out, but could not find him.

“There’s no help for you now, girl,” preached Ted. She felt his heat once again. It was much greater this time. It slapped and sizzled against her face and skin like a piece of meat on an outdoor grill.

“I said to you once, that you will be received in his kingdom. I am not one to pass judgment, but we shall see how he forgives you for unnaturally pulling that child out of your belly.” Ted boomed, closing in on her. She felt his sweat against her skin and it burned.

“Lord,” Ted continued, “I am your servant. I bring unto you a sacrifice, oh Lord.” The chanting grew louder, faster. “We bring unto to you this sinner as a gift. See to it this sacrifice spares us faithful from your rage. We know what she has done can never be forgiven, we know you shall have final judgment on this vile, evil, creature. Take her. Lord. Take the wicked, so us, your faith, shall be spared another cycle.” Ted spouted with fervor. His face was so close she saw the spit fly from his mouth as yelled directly into her. “Lord, she is yours now. Do with her as you want.”

Ted moved away from her. Alisa tried to wrestle away but Kim and Kevin stretched her arms so wide and with the pain that shot through her shoulders, she thought they were trying to rip her arms out of their sockets. Her body went limp and she was walked toward the fire. The chanting grew louder, as they forced her to her knees, and pulled her head back by the hair.

When she looked up, she saw Dane across the fire. His hood pulled down. He looked at her with that poker stare.

“Dane,” Alisa barely wailed out to him, “Dane, please help. Dane, please.” She begged as he slowly pulled his hood over his head, turned, and walked away.

“Dane. Dane. Dane. Please help...” She couldn’t speak anymore. A sharp cold pain spread across her neck and she felt a warm liquid run down her neck, staining her gray sweatshirt. She tried to yell out for Dane again, but only mustered garbled cries. Kim and Kevin let her arms go and thrust her into the enormous fire.

Alisa fell to the bottom of the ashes. Her skin seared with heat as she looked up and saw seven hooded figures surrounded her, their chants fading out. She went cold, very cold. It was the last thing she felt before darkness engulfed her.

This Story I Cannot Write

“Applicable Quote” – Some famous poet/philosopher/great mind

In medias res, the beginning starts in the middle, as it is the quickest way to get to the action. But when you start in the middle of nothing, do you really start in the middle? It's the middle, but it thrusts the reader into the beginning of the action. The action is usually about people: a man and a woman or, more accurately, a girl and a boy. He or she goes through an arc, they learn, but I am supposed to start before you see that arc or as they are changing their arc. This is what the magazine wants with the short stories these days: trick the reader into thinking the author is being clever with slightly confusing language. The start is the start whether it exists at the beginning, middle, or end. And the characters are relatable, yet quirky; they are people one wants to read about. Then there is the underlying theme that the author sneaks into the story for his personal message, a social commentary if you will. There have been too many shootings lately, but if I write a specific story condemning our extremely obsessive, phallic replacement culture, then it runs the problem of being A) overly preachy, so much to the point that people won't want to read it without constantly rolling their eyes, and/or B) dated because there will be another shooting massacre by another nutzo, and even more useless noise placing the blame.

Forget all that then. I'll just keep it simple. We like simplicity that masks itself in cleverness: it is a story about a girl and a boy, but a psycho boy and crazy girl with the proper zany adjectives so the reader understands they are loony tunes. Here we go magazine, I'll start in the middle:

The boy [let me call him Tim]. Tim wept over the picture he keeps in his wallet. Her face worn from Tim's fingers constantly rubbing over it. Wait, why is he lovelorn? Because we love to read stories of people's pain. The magazine welcomes stories about the lovesick, about what can push a person to the edge. I want Tim to go on a rampage out of anger for his lost love, like that guy who shot Reagan to impresses Jodi Foster.

No, stop it. That is the subtle commentary. Don't concentrate so much on the shooting or the reason for the shooting. Keep it on the human story.

Maybe the story starts with the woman, the woman can be a nutzo. Is it sexist for a straight white male to create a nutzo female? Is it sexist for a straight white male *not* to create a nutzo female? Interesting times we live in. Again, the middle:

The girl [I'll name her Karen] Karen holds the dull scissors to her long, flowing, [third clichéd adjective, off color-hued hair] snip, snip, snip. The hair falls to the ground with what seems to be a thunderous thud. Snip, snip, snip. [More, more, more poetic imagery to acutely get the reader into her bizarre, broken mind] Karen continued to chop with a fury, determined to be noticed. Interesting.

She was not noticed before, or Tim failed to notice what she needed in the relationship. Relationships are difficult to manage; yet they are desired by most of us humans. She wants that basic, yet most complicated tenet of human companionship. We

can all relate to it, but none of us takes a break-up so hard that we would shoot someone. We need to see her view of the doomed relationship. The relationship only exists in the mind of the character. The narrator can point out that relationships are never real, that they only live in the mind of the people inside those relationships. How do you even know when one starts? When one ends? Someone can tell you, but do you believe them? We are never at the beginning, nor are we at the end? We get dropped in the middle of it them. Dropped in the middle of life, of love, of pain, of joy, this is why stories start in the middle. They need to feel authentic.

But how can it be authentic when the language does not sound how we sound? The magazine loves stories where the people never talk like “real” people. Is this authentic? The narrator uses big words that “real” people never speak, or muse on deep thoughts about where we start remembering life, even though “real” people do not usually think this way. It is all a farce. That’s why they call it fiction.

People are drawn to these stories, stories like the one I cannot seem to write. Maybe it is the connection with the characters. The narrator, whether it be in the first, second, or third person, allows us an intimacy that as a reader we never get in “real” life. Sure, Karen or Tim can be psychos, but we empathize with them because we can relate to them. It is a queer feeling to empathize with a psychopath, but on a deep level we, as readers, enjoy reading about these dark fantasies. The magazine enjoys these stories on a deeper level as it publishes them. The author enjoys them on the deepest, and therefore creepiest, level since he or she creates the story. Strange.

Maybe this is why the grotesque reality fascinates us. When people shoot up a church or school or a run a truck through a group of people, we can't help but gape at the television. We are drawn to the tragedy. If Karen ends up driving her car through a police line screaming, "Black Lives Matter," she thinks she is making a statement, but we know she is really displacing an anger that was transformed because she was not being noticed by Tim.

Or maybe that is too simple...

...yet the story is complicated by making it so simple. Just keep it on the nutzo relationship between two nutzo people. Before they fall in and out of love. They must have a meet-cute. A meet-cute between two insolated, neurotic souls to make the reader step back and see a connection occurring; two opposite forces pulled toward each other; two conflicting personalities somehow are overshadowed by a mystical presence in the universe bigger than themselves.

You dropped your bagel, Tim stated as he watched the doughy treat escape from the bag and roll onto the floor. It's like it wanted to leave you.

Rachel [I want to name her Rachel now. Rachel seems a better fit for a slightly psychotic white girl. I can't explain why. Names are tough.] looked down at her sesame covered breakfast that stopped at her feet.

Well, Tim continued, don't you want to pick it up? Five second rule.

She started bawling in the middle of the coffee shop. The rest of the patrons ignored the wailings of the small girl with the long blonde hair, dyed purple at the tips. Tim grabbed a napkin, bent down, pinched the bagel with his forefinger and thumb, slowly

elevated back to a normal height, blew three quick breaths on the food, and robotically handed it back to Rachel. She took it from him and immediately stopped the water-works.

Thanks, she calmly said back to him and took a bite of the bagel. Still good.

Our two weirdos have meet, cutely, with such detailed actions. Does this represent the detailed mind that Rachel has? She notices everything around her so she can focus all the attention on herself, the tears, the loud wailing. She wants to be seen and establish control over this man. So she remembers every single meticulous detail of that moment. This is a quirk that will test their relationship, Rachel has a photographic memory. Good. Nice.

Perspective. The story exists in perspective. It connects the reader, the characters, and the author. It is up to the author whose perspective the story wants the reader to see it from. The reader gets in Rachel's detailed mind, because we have her perspective, but if we switch to Tim, the meticulous details examine something quirky about him. Those details make him robotic, unable to deal with emotions and trouble dealing with other people. Here in lies the problem, both of them can't be too quirky, too off. It doesn't make them authentic as people or as a couple. One of them has to have a normal job, family, and friends even. Otherwise this becomes another silly Noah Baumbach movie-knockoff. Maybe Tim is slightly more normal or just without the knack to correctly express his emotions. This can balance off Rachel's emotional rollercoaster of life. Opposites do attract, they say.

Now they court, and we just skip a few months into the relationship. A dinner party in their first apartment. Their friends show up. New characters for the reader to learn about, though not too much. These "friends" exist as a reflection of Tim and Rachel, and are not

meant to be so interesting that we want to know their stories. Through them, we see what friendship means to Rachel and Tim: loyalty, humor, needing someone to cry to, someone to bitch about their lives to, needing a couch moved, etc. Rachel would have friends from forever, friends that understand her quirks, her eccentricities, yet fail to really understand her. She would complain about them to Tim, ignoring the fact that they are happy for her. Those friends are glad that Tim is in Rachel's life. They accost him, raving about how good he is for her, while secretly musing to themselves that they no longer need to worry about Rachel anymore. The friends are here to show the hypocrisy of human connection only exists to make the *self* feel better.

Tim has friends too, well maybe more of work associates, half-chums really. Tim does not like to be in a space in which too many other humans inhabit. He puts up with it at his job because he is forced to interact. We need to know where he works. It is important to his character and the story. If Tim is a day trader over, say, a college professor that completely shapes how authentic we feel about his character. He may be middle management, a pencil pusher, someone in too clichéd a position that is whitewash boring enough that no one would suspect the radicalness of the ending incident to happen there. The reader needs to see the rising in the action by now. The middle beginning, the meet-cute, and the introduction of new characters to reflect our main characters all make the ending authentic, and now the rising action. Every story in the magazine has some variation of getting to the place we are at now: A dinner scene, one that shows the love in the relationship, before breaking down these two when the inevitable occurs.

So the dinner happens and the adults talk like adults. They eat and compliment on the extremely well prepared dinner -Rachel is a terrific chef, showing an exquisite palate in the French culinary arts, maybe she once went to culinary school, or worked on the line at a Chili's. Either way, her discipline in cooking came from her ever-annoying need to please everyone- and now, they move away from the dinner for drinks and drugs and after gestation conversation.

Again, I've run into a problem with perspective: I still am unclear on whom to follow. I've given both and kept it a limited third. I don't want to be unreliable with either Tim or Rachel. The reader stays off guard, that way the tragedy committed by the character comes as just a shock to them as it would the characters on the page. The story starts out with a psychotic breakdown and the reader wants to get to said breakdown, but the breakdown also has to feel authentic. It all comes down to who is the more interesting one to follow.

Before concluding, I should try each one and see which fits best.

Tim took a small puff on the joint as [unnamed male friend] continued to drone on and on about the inevitable autocracy of America. All shit Tim had heard from [unnamed male friend] spout to [unnamed couple friends] and [unnamed female friend] the previous week before. He was so stoned that he never realized the redundancies in conversation. Tonight, Tim barely inhaled, he wanted his mind clear. Rachel had given a beautiful dinner for her friends and his acquaintances. She was in her element tonight and in that moment, he believed he was in love with her. Yes, he wanted his mind clear because Tim wanted to remember tonight; it was the first time he knew he could fully love somebody.

Okay, that's good. Tim is happy. Tim is feeling healthy and the reader must understand that Tim, at times, is capable to feel everyday human emotions. This is still early in the relationship and I can't doom them yet. The hope that these two might make a life together is the sensation that should be acknowledged by the readers, even though they know tragedy rears its ugly face.

Rachel would see the evening differently, thus giving a different perspective in human connections to the reader.

She felt cool, finally. They had all loved her dinner, she knew the rosemary pork shank with garlic mashed yucca and broccolini would knock it out of the park. Still, she was glad to have stopped sweating and glad that Tim seemed at ease with her friends. She wanted them to like him because she liked him. She wanted them to get along this evening and then that evening would lead to more evenings and more gatherings and more outings and more...

She let her mind drift and maybe the weed hit her harder than she expected. She noticed that no one was talking. Sure, they spoke, but they didn't talk. The old OutKast LP on the record player quietly soundtracked the evening as Rachel saw everybody ignoring the music, ignoring the cool city air, and ignoring each other. She would have to remedy the situation. Rachel looked over as Tim passed the joint to Henry and he winked back at her. That was a signal, she needed to bring everyone back together and get them to stop ignoring the world and to stop ignoring her.

Question: How smart should Tim and Rachel appear?

We know they are smart people, that has been established, in fact, the reader should see that their intelligence is part of what attracts the one to the other. Yet, their intelligence is what cause their lives to slowly dissolve or at least part of the reason. We know they are smart because they have conversations about:

- A) The classic literary debate about whose philosophical view of the world is more correct: Camus or Sarte -ignoring the fact the both persons' existential arguments are similar.
- B) deep conversations with their close circle of friends and family on the dying or revived art of the independent film
- C) how to fix our broken political state and which is better: a free trade system where the successful eat the weak or a mix of a capitalism and socialism under the watch of a big government presence? Note: the conversation never steers toward the exploitation of the socio-economic policies that have keep poor white jobless and poor blacks in prison.
- D) the usefulness of a protest that changed SeaWorld Orca policy

Any of these topics would do, but Tim and Rachel both need to recognize that they are superficial topics that are discussed at most pseudo-intellectual, pseudo-elites, and pseudo-liberal dinner parties. A blunder for sure, as this statement would never be expected to be said out loud.

The reader would think Tim to say it, but instead Rachel (drunk on her fourth glass of white wine, she is a lightweight remember) gets tired of one of the friends and their

hypocrisies and is immediately embarrassed. The friends leave in a huff and Tim spends the night consoling Rachel, a tender moment.

Sex scene, sex scene, sex scene. Look readers, you can't take your eyes off this first intimate moment between the two -well, not the first, but the first that we've seen- needed to happen now, these two needed to be growing more and more dependent on each other.

How much sex to reveal? How detailed?

I want to avoid smut, but I want to be shocking as well. Can I even be shocking anymore? It's not like the repressed 1950s that lead into the sexual awaking of the 1960s. I cannot titillate more than John Updike's Rabbit series or Hubert Selby's *Last Exit to Brooklyn* or Joyce Carol Oates's *Them* or others of that ilk. These books not just aroused, but opened the doors and pulled back the veil of the American people. Everything that has been done with sex has already been done by now, so just keep it on the characters and their descriptive, warm act of intimate love-making that excites the reader and goes on for half a page too-long.

Time has now passed. The white space denotes such. Tim and Rachel closer together, but more isolated from the world. The more they become dependent on each other, the sicker they become of each other and now I can pick at the unraveling thread of their relationship. They grow into each other more from that dinner scene, but trouble starts. Another character disrupts their life. Tim or Rachel or both develop scared feelings of intimacy and one of them goes and does something dumb.

This is yet another perspective problem (as all the problems with my stories have been). I've pigeonholed myself as the clever author, the voice to match the smirk upon the readers' face. This is what the magazine wants from me, expects from me in the story. But I just want to tell of a doomed human connection that leads to a horrifying act, undermined by a slight commentary on the too easy accessibility of guns in this country. I haven't figured out where the story is set even. It can't be liberal California or New York for the gun issues; yet the characters by this point have all sounded like elitist city dwellers. All this will come later, but now I still have to figure out through whom to show the tragic action leading to the doomed ending.

Tim can sense himself growing too close for the first time to someone and this scares him into doing something stupid. Rachel can see she has been too pushy or too paranoid in molding Tim into the man she wants in her life. Each one has shown to be slightly off, but relatable enough to everyday problems that exist in relationships. Then someone exhibits a warning shot [metaphor, foreshadowing the ending] for us to see them as unhinged.

~~*He did not answer. All she did was yell and tossed a paring knife at his head.*~~

~~*She screamed, you fucker. He did not respond. She screamed some more at him, you fucker, you fucker, you fucker, and then flung her paring knife lightly at his forehead, missing narrowly.*~~

A fight is clichéd. An argument is clichéd. Every couple has arguments, disagreements, quarrels. One person does or says something that doesn't take in their significant partner. It is the basic tenant that exists in all relationships. Some say the more the couple fights, the more they are meant to be together. But this isn't a normal couple. The reader knows that Tim and Rachel are doomed because we start at the end of the relationship. This couple's fight must be magnanimous. It can't be an argument about directions or one of them calling the other out on their bullshit. In fact, we've seen that already. One of Tim's charms is when he calls Rachel out on her craziness and one of Rachel's charms is her acceptance that Tim is making her a better person. This fight represents a shift in the plot. It needs to justify the ending disaster and by having a character throw a knife at someone, it exhibits their capability for harm.

At the same time, I just can't start with the knife toss. To give away the action immediately takes from the tension. I may think of it as a grabber, but do I have to grab the reader? At this point, they should be on my every word, they should reasonably accept that Rachel would pull and throw a knife at Tim, while also believing that Tim deserved to have a knife thrown at his head.

The fault is also ambiguous. The knife throw doesn't place blame, but symbolized the enormity of the mistake. There is blame and sympathy in both characters and their actions. The only certainty is that Tim and Rachel's relationship has reached the apex and though they will stay together, they are no longer happy: Rachel is now suspicious and angry, and Tim has failed to notice these emotions in Rachel. These two are mixed into a terminal moment and not amicably. Which leads the reader back to where we started.

Either Tim rips up pictures of Rachel like an emotionless shredder and Rachel manically starts chopping off her hair. We've reached the beginning, which is the middle, and now we proceed to the end.

Subtle political statement. It underlines the story, but now it rises to the front. The story exists with a commentary on gun laws and our sorry state of mental health. Tim could have a gun collection or Rachel could blow off steam at a gun range. The reader will have seen this happening or the author will have mentioned it before. It's a harmless activity, something no one would question, but could still consider odd. This all comes back to the climax of the action of the story.

It's not a big moment, not like a public shooting, because then the story becomes about the shooting and this is still a story based on human relationships, connections, miscommunications, and emotions. So the act has to be emotional and show the instability of the human ego.

Both of our characters are crazy. That has been well established, but we now see who is the more believable crazy. To me it feels like Tim. This was his first adult love. If we follow Tim, we see how much he feels for Rachel, but does not emote it, he has trouble expressing his emotions. This why Rachel got tired of working for his affection or just left or confronted him, called him names or cheated on him because she needed some release, she needed to feel what Tim failed to provide.

However, this pushes the blame on Rachel and portrays her as a two-dimensional female protagonist, hysterical and unable to control her emotional state. I don't want this. In fact, it's Tim I want to be the more emotionally unstable in the relationship, and the shooting could just be an act of passion. Tim could be the cheater. That could work because his love for her scares him and he reacts in a destructive matter as that is all he has ever known. Rachel takes the high road, dumps him, and Tim can't deal. So whose death do we get the perspective of, the killer or the victim? This would imply that the victim is either Tim or Rachel, it has to be since they are the ones we've followed up until this point. So, this means that the victim or victims necessarily don't have to be one of the jilted lovers. One more new character must have appeared earlier, someone whose role is to be the wrench that clogs their relationship. Someone whose timing is bad enough that their death is an act of poor faith and judgment and not one out of malice.

Rachel wanted to scare Tiffany [another white girl name, maybe a good friend of the couple. It certainly could be possible. Probably a coworker or even a relative. No, not relative. Rachel wouldn't shoot her sister or cousin even. But she has to know her. She also has to have a previous animosity toward the victim. She earlier recognized a jezebel, a vixen, someone she perceived to come take away her man], scare her shitless. She planned to wave the gun in her face. She wanted Tiffany to cry. How could Tiff, her [coworker? Classmate? Yoga instructor?] have done this to her, to them? Yes, she wanted to see the fear in her eyes, see her mascara run, see her beg for her life. This was all she wanted.

Tiffany didn't react, though. She just looked at Rachel, daring her to pull the trigger. She did not cry. She did not beg. She just stared Rachel down. She didn't say anything, but Rachel completely understood her language.

'You aren't going to shoot, bitch.' 'You don't have the fucking guts, bitch.' 'You're pathetic, bitch. 'Bitch' 'Bitch' 'Bitch' 'Bitch' 'Bitch' 'Bi...'

POP. Rachel can't believe the sound. She had never heard a gunshot outside the range before. It was both somehow quiet and deafening. The world stopped. Tiffany held her stomach as blood pooled around her fingers, staining her white, work shirt.

Rachel stood in awe as others in the building scattered. Some rushed to Tiffany. Others ran out of the building. The last thing Rachel remembers is falling into a set of floating arms before everything went black.

This is good enough for Rachel's ending, unless I put her mind back at the gun range, firing away, getting lost in her happy place, or I can just leave her, but I think the gun range acts as a good metaphor. There are not enough metaphors here and the magazine loves stories with huge sweeping metaphors, it usually is the mark of a writer in control of the craft. This last one needs to hit strong.

The ending. The denouement. Everything in the story must come back together to satisfy the reader, the characters, and the author. We've started at the beginning, circled to the past for the middle, then came back to the start to reach the climax. Is the ending in the future then? And who gets closer? Tim? Rachel? Does Tim visit Rachel in prison? But he can't talk to her or she won't see him? They never get their closure this way.

Try the “Sliding Doors” ending?

We are back at the coffee shop. The ending is the meet-cute, except this time the meet-cute never happens. Rachel ordering, Tim checks her out. The perspective comes from inside Tim’s head for this one, and he is deciding what to say to her. She drops the bagel and Tim sees the opportunity to reach her, to start the conversation. He struggles with what to say. He can’t just flat out tell her that she drop her bagel, that’s silly. That’s no way to talk to his future wife. So he hesitates and in that hesitation, Rachel notices that she has no bagel, bends down, picks it up, wipes it off and leaves. No meeting, no drama, no love for either and their lives continue as normal.

The sliding door is a parlor trick. I’m only using it to placemat the real ending I don’t have. Besides, it completely changes Tim’s character if he becomes too neurotic in his (non) action. Tim would tell her that she dropped the bagel because that’s how Tim’s mind registers human interactions. Then Rachel cries again in the coffee shop, trying to manipulate the situation and I am right back in the story I did not write. It should end with them meeting up. Maybe, Rachel didn’t kill Tiffany. She shot her, but hit her in the shoulder or missed completely, so she is not in prison.

It is eight months later. Rachel picks up garbage on the highway or volunteers at a homeless shelter or some other pillar of community service. She is a first-time offender and white, so the punishment is believable. Tim finds her. Tim actually tracks her down. They have a mundane conversation. He says ‘hey,’ and she replies the same. They talk and then the story just ends on the two of them, neither one quite ready to really talk to

the other person, but the reader gets that sliver of hope that these two nutzoid people will make it out okay.

The Children's Birthday Party Performers

In the hot, sticky, unassuming Southern California Valley; on a quiet, indiscreet suburban street punctuated by a lonesome cul-de-sac, sits an old, beat-up Volkswagen Rabbit.

Smashed in-between rows of anonymous mid-sized sedans and soccer mom vans, the dirty Rabbit squeaks as it bounces up and down; the fogged-in windows hide its insides from the rest of the world and only the rapidly successive words of a female and male are heard as such:

“Oh...oh...honk my nose! Honk my nose”...“Squeeze my flower, squeeze my flower”...“Honk my nose”...*honk*...“Squeeze my flower”...“Honk my nose...*honk*...fucking honk it more. Twice”...*honk honk*... “Squeeze it, get ready to squeeze it...*honk*... Grab a hold?” ... “Yes”... “You got a hold?”... “Yes, just give another honk” ...*honk*... “I’m ready, grab the flower”... “Okay”... “You got a hold of it?”... “Mmmm, yes, yes”... “Got it?” ...” Got it”... “Get ready to squeeze”... “Got it tight”... “Ready?”... “Ready”... “Aaaaannnd SQUEEZE!” ...*fiiiiizzzzzztttt*
honk.

The Rabbit ceases its rapid up and down thrusts, a sense of relief ripples over the tired shocks of the old car and the sounds of sparked up lighter and the long snort of some substance through a human orifice can now be heard inside.

The doors creak open and out steps a human male in the guise of a clown. Deep white make-up plasters his face, tight black circles accent his sunken red-eyes, and the tip of his nose is a disciplined black spot. He wears a surprisingly clean white shirt, the old-caked

make-up flakes hidden by his ridiculously large green pants which are held up with yellow suspenders. He places a red afro wig over his oily slicked black hair. Lastly, he drapes a worn tuxedo-like overcoat across his shoulders decorated on the left breast by a large fake daisy. This is the male and his name is Bozo. He reaches into the car to retrieve a comically large pair of shoes and knocks on the hood of the car while re-entering the dusty valley air.

“You ready?” he says with a deep accent. The passenger door flies open easily and smoke billows out of the car. A petite clown jumps out, pulling blue suspenders up over her small white tank-top. Her eyes set with comically large black lashes. Her face is symmetrically round, a lighter shade of white than Bozo’s with deep rosy cheeks that accent her felt red nose. She places an overtly small bowler hat on her head. This is the female. Her name is Binky and she already adorns her bright red ballet shoes which match her cheeks and nose.

“Always,” she responds. After spritzing himself, Bozo tosses her small canister of some phony pleasant odor.

“Spray yourself this time. You don’t want the kids complaining of the ‘funny smell’ again.” Bozo slides into his large shoes.

“Funny, I thought that is what we’re going for.” Binky winks playfully at Bozo, letting him know that his comment is received in jest.

“Wrong kind of funny my dear,” Bozo replies, his accent now nasally and British. “Shall we?” He extends his elbow and Binky takes it. To the children they need to seem a proper couple, so they need to keep up this appearance when they enter the house.

“We shall,” Binky takes Bozo at the elbow and off they stride, on their way to the house at the end of the cul-du-sac.

Despite the fact that both of these entertainers are costumed akin and despite the fact they just mated, these two individual are not a dating couple. The sexual ritual the pair partakes is only that: a ritual; an act to keep their adrenaline up. Company their intercourse with whatever substance of choice Bozo and Binky ingest into their bodily system, the two entertainers are now set to deal with the next few hours of screaming, crying, laughing human children, along with their drunk, grabby, cynical human adults. The sex/drug ritual keeps the two entertainers’ heads level, this is especially required when asked to portray clowns. When the over-bearing, stressed-out party host wants off-brand superheroes or theme park mascots, the world of the party is much easier work. The two entertainers feel safe behind these masks. The children are less wild, less likely to punch and throw discarded cake and party favors at a Copper-Man or a Rickey Rat. The adults just see a chump, some out-of-work actor they can outsource their children’s joy for the afternoon while they sit back and drink one too many margaritas and gossip about the weird, childless couple in the neighborhood. But clowns are different and add an extra level of stress. First there is the physical toll. When asked to be clowns, Bozo and Binky must prepare an impressive tumbling act, a low level Olympic gymnastics routine that needs capture the attention of children more interested in looking up cat videos on a tiny phone. Over the years, Bozo and Binky have strained, sprained, twisted, and broken muscles, joints, ligaments and bones. The two must then interact with the children, who are simultaneously afraid and overjoyed to see the tramps fall over each

other, or seltzer each other, or bonk each other with a plastic mallet, or throw a pie in each other's face. Yet, these are not the worst offenders. The kid's discretions are tame compared to the adults who usually indulge in some vice of their own at these parties, usually alcohol. This inebriation allows previous deep-conscious child-hood fears to boil to the surface and they get a reminder of their life-long fear through a distorted lens. The adults mostly deal with this fear by running from the clowns, but there is the minority that thinks the best way to overcome the fear is to copulate it out of their system. This causes bigger problems as most of the adults at these parties tend to be in pairs. The sexuality of this fear generally complicates the state of the marriage and most of the initial blame falls upon the inspiration of their fornications. So, you see, these entertainers need their sex/drug ritual. If not, they are liable to end their life after two years in the children's entertainment industry.

Bozo and Binky stroll about to a cheap looking brown house with white trim, just like all the other houses in the cul-de-sac, not much here for a sense of American individualism. Before Binky can knock, the door flies open. A middle age woman with stressed-out hair and with green icing on her face stands before them as distant shrills of happy children come from somewhere beyond.

Look at this frazzle-haired lady. She cries for us to come and rescue her; rescue her from the however many little devils screaming their silly little heads off in her backyard. I wonder how she survives this point until we arrive. I wonder how bratty her kid is. I wonder if she knows how bratty her kid is. I wonder if something exciting will happen

this time. I wonder if this job will be boring. I wonder if her husband is cute. I wonder if she will freak out when she catches me having sex with him. I wonder how she'll react. I wonder if she will take a hammer to his and mine heads after she screams when she freaks out after she finds me having sex with her cute husband. I wonder so much about this lady with the frazzled hair. I want to reach out to her, to rescue her, to take that little icing off her face, to restore a sense of order to her life. I wonder what that feels like, helping out someone in such a way. I wonder...

"Binks," Bozo calls out to me. How long we been standing in the doorway? I wonder if the drugs have taken effect. No, I reassure myself. Not yet I know how much time it takes to feel the effects and not that much time has gone by standing here in front of a frazzled-hair lady with icing on hair face. I wonder about how time works and if we ever really know how fast or slow time passes. Sure, there are clocks and moon rotations to give a sense of days, months, years, but what is one minute for one person is an eternity for another, even though you stand just two inches apart. It's so interesting the different perceptions two people can have of the same space they share. I wonder...

"Binks," he repeats with more authorial concern this time.

"I know," I reply. "What are we waiting for?" I smile up at him, then look back to the frazzle-haired lady. I take my finger, snatch the cake frosting off her cheek, and I put it in my mouth. It tastes like cherry. Then I skip across the threshold into the house.

It's a nice house, though bigger than it looks from the outside, no wait, I mean smaller, it's smaller than it looks from the outside. I think I'll tell Bozo.

“This place is smaller than it looks from the outside.” I giggle and he smiles at me quizzically. “At first I said it was bigger, but I actually meant smaller.” I break out into full out laughter.

“I wish I could see things through your eyes sometimes.” He joins me in me laughing fit. He knows exactly how I feel and I feel good, funny good, just how I’m supposed to before a birthday party. “THE CHILDREN SHALL BE ENTERTAINED” and I laugh some more at my mock assertiveness. The frazzle-haired woman looks back out our giggle fit with scorn.

“Is there something I can get you two? Maybe some soda water?” She asks the both of us angrily. That was a mistake, because Bozo can never restrain from a joke.

Oh, lady with the electrified hairdo, you did not just ask me if I want soda water.

“I’m sorry madam, what did you request of us?” I’m in my character now, a classy but clueless British tramp.

“I said,” she grits through her teeth, “would you like some soda water.” She repeats without a hint of question. I hear Binky laughing quietly like she expects my next move.

“Why no thank you, madam. I brought my own this evening.” I turn and squirt the giggle monster behind me in this small hallway through the fake flower on my coat, and her laugh increases as she tries to keep from choking on the seltzer water. Now I got to conserve for the rest of the show. Oh curse this natural showmanship. The lady with the electrified hairdo is not impressed by my antics.

“Better clean up Binks. Madam, may I inquire the direction of your washroom?” The lady with the electrified hairdo sighs loudly.

“Down the hall, third door. Be out there in ten minutes,” and then she turns away, no doubt to go back to the chaos of children tearing up her lawn. I look at Binky who still has a severe case of the giggles.

“You heard the lady with the electrified hairdo, off to the washroom you go.” Binky skips away down the narrow hall, her tiny shoulders nearly taking up the whole space. She stops and turns back to me.

“You’re wrong, Bozo. She has frazzled-hair, not an electrified hairdo.” Then she disappears into the wall. I can’t worry about her today. I can’t. I shouldn’t have to, but her random giggle fit is a cause for concern. I know she is a pro, a true performer. We have both been in this business a long time and I know she can handle her vices, but lately she’s been unhinged. Too many drugs, too many tumbles, too many men have her wondering untethered in an upside down world. I know she doesn’t need me. Another big brother type making up for wrongs in both our pasts, but I do worry the day is nearing when she tumbles her last summersault. I am a worrier though, part of my charm, either that or the weed is kicking in.

I pass through the narrow hallway unto the vast kitchen, strewn with the caterers’ spread: sterno lamps heating half eaten aluminum trays of Swedish meatballs or moussaka or lasagna or whatever blend of American ethnic food waits to be consumed. I walk around, pick up a meatball, and pop it in my mouth. It tastes mealy and crunchy and

nothing like a meatball. A man in khakis and a periwinkle blue polo t-shirt sees my intrusion. Good god, it's like he's a fucking Gap commercial.

“Mmmm scumdidliumptous delicious, my good man.” I tip my mock top hat that doesn't exist on my head at him. He turns and nearly walks into the wall. He gives me one more look back and then his eyes shoot straight forward. I know two things about this man already. One, he has a long standing, childhood fear of clowns; two, Binky will fuck him or at least he will try to fuck her. A frolic with a cute-as-hell tiny harlequin seems to be how most men exercise out past demons. *The power of Christ compels you to get freaky with this small clown!*

I put my finger smack in the middle of the lasagna. It's room temperature and the cheese is beginning to harden. I slightly feel the heat from the sterno as the tip of my finger brushes the pan's bottom and it burns just the smallest amount. I look out the sliding glass doors at the large untamed world with maniac children running unsupervised, their parents on their third or fourth cocktail, already in ignore mode. This is the world I live for. I am ready, and I emerge my whole fist in the phony Italian food, scooping up a meaty, cheesy, saucy pile of sustenance and tossing it back atop the dish in a messy eruption. It is time. I walk toward the bathroom.

The water feels so good, it doesn't matter that it fades most of my make-up, which is just the way I want it anyway. I love to look as natural as possible. Water is our lifeblood and I feel it seep into my pores and refresh my vitality. Oh, speaking of vitality, I reach into the slit just under my pants and pull out my small “Showtime” baggy of molly. I take off

my nose, place some of the glorious elixir inside the small opening, and reattach the fake nose to my real face. It becomes a part of me as a blissful numbness begins to overtake my body sensations and I go over my routine:

Bozo's big opening into a summersault, then another summersault into a front handspring, into a cartwheel, into a back flip, immediately into a final summersault ending in front of a scared child, both in awe and terrified, if I've done my job.

Another giggle fit comes over me.

"How would I know if the child will be scared?" I ask my reflection.

"You don't. It's just what you hope for," she responds.

"It's always more fun to win the scared ones over."

"Yeah, those kids who are happy to see you, it's boring to win them over."

"Because I've already won them over-

"-won them over," she tries to sync up with me, but I am too fast. I smile at her and she smiles back. A knock on the door interrupts our playtime.

"Are you ready my lady?" I see Bozo's words ooze through the door and float in between me and my reflection. I watch as they crawl through her ears and feel them roll around in my brain, repeating over in one continuous strand.

Areyoureadymyladyareyoureadymyladyareyoureadymyladyareyoure...

KNOCK KNOCK... and I'm back in reality.

"Well," she nods toward the outside world, "go get 'em."

The door flies open and Binky stands too close to me. This is mostly to do to the narrow hallway, but I like to think she wants to be this close. She smells like cotton candy, she always smells like cotton candy for the kids. I look at her and her eyes are huge and black and beautiful. I hope she doesn't actually frighten the children. I know she likes to scare the kids, but the adults hate it when she does, and I'm the one who gets an earful.

"I'm ready good sir," she confidently responds as she salutes me.

"Cheers, I have an idea." I take off my coat and turn my back to her, and shout "all aboard." Without hesitation, Binky climbs up on my back and turns herself upside down. She feels like a cat getting settling comfortably.

"Who are you?" I ask, even though I know the answer.

Yes, I fucking love the way his minds works! We are so in sync! This will be perfect for these monsters! They'll eat it up like birthday cake. No more giggles, I'm all game now and take long snort of my molly nose before replying:

"I am poop," though one last giggle escapes and echoes as I say poop, I am so ready now.

The hot jungles of the Amazon Rainforest, the vast arid plains of the Saharan desert, and the infinitely high mountains of Himalayas are all natural wonders of this world, meant to be both uninhabitable and yearn to be conquered by those brave enough to dare and try. However, they have nothing on a middle sized, suburban Southern California Valley backyard, encased with fifty screaming small children. Most explorers dare not attempt to

enter this frightening jungle as the locals are waiting to take down intruders with nerf guns, whiffle bats, and water pistols. Only those able to subdue the untamed locals with tumble tricks and juggle balls and balloon animals have the fortitude to enter such a fantastical place. It is a world meant for the children's birthday party entertainers.

The male enters the frantic scene, but our Bozo doesn't look well. He hunches over slightly, grabbing his stomach and moaning. The children they laugh at his perceived pain as they believe the show to begin.

"Oh, I ate one of those meatballs and I just might barf." Bozo states loudly as the children run away from him laughing, not wanting to be vomited on. He stumbles around and heaves in the direction of a small blonde-haired boy in a faded *Wolverine* t-shirt. But instead of vomit, bright colored confetti escapes his mouth and sticks to the small boy. The child laughs in relief as this is a much better fate than actual vomit.

"That's better, but I still feel funny. Children what do you do when your stomach hurts?" He asks the frolicking youngsters. "Anyone?" He comes upon a shy red-haired young boy in an offending yellow, red, white, and orange striped shirt. Clearly this youth is dressed by his mother, the same mother whom he disappears into her bare legs. "No, hiding into you mom won't help me," Bozo speaks at the child.

"You go poop," yells a well-dressed young lad in a sweater vest and khakis and is also the only one wearing a birthday hat. This one must be the reason for this afternoon's event. Bozo turns to face this bossy lad.

"Right here?"

"No in the bathroooooom," the child repeats as he smacks his palm to his forehead.

“But I don’t think I can make the bathroooooom,” apes Bozo, and he takes a squat position in the middle of the lawn, and the children surround him with wonder as most yearn to see this entertainer relieve himself all over the yard.

“Here I goooooooo,” and with elongated, phony grunt out pops the female, Binky, who seemingly slides from his back side directly from a summersault into an upright stance. The children applaud and squeal with glee, as do some of the adults, who are quietly relieved that this clown did not evacuate his bowels on the grass.

“I don’t remember eating that!” states a much relieved Bozo. The children continue in there joy by running around the yard as Bozo and Binky chase them.

“I am Binky, the acrobatic poop,” the female claims as she seamlessly performers another summersault, into a front handspring, and ending with a cartwheel. During this last tumble, she grabs some mud off the ground.

“It feels so good to be freeeee. I love to be freeeeee. I love to tumble around.” Here she does a black flip which wraps the children with awe and even more of the adults, but she has no time to bask in the glory and immediately counters her momentum into a final summersault landing in front of the shy red-haired child still buried in his mother’s legs.

“The air feels so good. You there, child. Are you glad to see the acrobatic poop?” At this word of “poop,” the child cannot help but take a glance at the small entertainer. She wipes some of the mud of on his pale, freckled face and he immediately returns to the safety of his mother legs. Binky cackles and springs into a triple back handspring, meeting Bozo in the middle, who also gets there by his own triple back handspring.

The next hour consists of more tumbling and juggling, as well as slapstick antics such as “the frying pan,” “the rubber mallet,” “chicken noodle,” and “little clown head.” The children are enrapt in it all, taking in the joy that these two provide. The jungle is now tame for and ready for the actual adults to colonize with ice cream and cake. Binky jumps on Bozo’s back and the two run inside. A much earned respite before one more performance beckons them back to the wilderness.

Binky slides off my back as we re-enter the house. I feel the coolness of the AC blast beads of sweat off my brow. Just one more performance out there and we can get on home to some sleep. Get some rest and rejuvenation, and wake up tomorrow ready to do same performance at a different house in a different neighborhood. The second show is always easier, less tumbling, more balloon animals and face painting, but not as fun, especially for Binky. She really killed it out there today.

“That’s was a fucking trip Bozo. God, it gets better every time,” she states to me and pulls off her nose. “I’m going to use the bathroom.” Off she skips, probably to put more shit up her nose. It’s not ideal, but it keeps her in the same mind with the children and that’s what counts.

I walk over to the kitchen counter top and now check out the liquor spread, a makeshift bar for this deceptively large kitchen, at least compared to the front hallway. The booze is all top shelf, so I gladly pour a shot of gin and mix it with the seltzer from my flower and gulp it down. Now that the tumbling is over I can indulge. I don’t need to be completely sober to make balloon animals.

I pour myself a larger shot and a lesser squirt this time and feel the alcohol crawl down my throat and warm in my belly. It tastes good, it feels good, and I feel rewarded. I go to pour one more drink when a large man, whose belly tests the stretchiness of his buttoned-down white shirt, comes from out of nowhere.

“Little pleasure on the job buddy,” he states more than asks. “Don’t worry, I won’t tell. Hell, you probably need this shit dealing with those little fuckers. That was some goddam show out there.”

He doesn’t look at me, but through the sliding door window at the sway of the bent over ass of a lady wiping cake off her child’s face.

“Some goddam show indeed,” he repeats and I wonder if this man is an apparition of some past mistake of mine. Maybe I should stop hitting the booze during shows.

“Much appreciated sir,” I respond, but he no longer cares what I say. I’m a second thought to this horn dog ghost.

“Yep, those little fuckers are a pain to deal with, but sure fun to make.” He laughs, too hard at his own joke. His red, cracked nose and cheeks signal he has dipped in the gin or something of that kind too much this afternoon: a spirit drunk on spirits, ha! He reaches in his back pants pocket and pulls out a sliver flask. He takes a sip, all the while not keeping his eyes off the sway of the bent over lady wiping cake off her child’s face.

“Here,” he pours the brown liquid into my cup. “A reward for you troubles.”

“Again, great thanks gent,” but he vanishes out the door. This ghost sent to stop me drinking has just poured me a drink. There is some irony here. Or maybe he is real after all. Just another inebriated male in pursuit of some glorious mommy snatch. His drunken

inhabitations long ignore his human tactfulness. I admire this man in way, a warrior of past lives lost or past lives regained or past lives never lived. I must be filling the liquor a bit if I'm mussing the adorations of a jackass trying to score with a woman who will continue to thwart her drunken suitor's advances.

The woman with the electrified hairdo enters through the sliding glass doors, whispering slight nags into the ear of the man in the periwinkle blue polo.

“and I want you to make sure James doesn't eat all of his cake he's already getting fat and it runs in your family and we don't want James to be made fun of when he gets to middle school and make sure that that Bill Schreckleton isn't too drunk to drive home we don't want to be liable as he has a tendency to get that way you know that reminds me I should warn Betty that he can be grabby toward the other guest 'cause it was just last month at the weird kid Arnold Bergenstein's party where he grabbed on Des'ree Jonson almost creating a huge ruckus and overshadowed the fact the Mr. Bergenstein was allegedly schtooping the caterer and no one talked about the hard job that Alice did getting that party together and poor thing I should call her see how she's doing it must be hard for her so anyway we don't want our party to turn into that disaster so keep an eye on that Bill Schreckleton and can you believe they actually pretended to be poop and it's so unprofessional but that tumbling was fun and are you even listening to me I swear”

She continues to drone on, but the man in the periwinkle blue polo looks up to see me and turns to run down the hallway. The lady with electrified hairdo blushes when she sees that I witness this fleeing form of what I assume is her husband.

“He’s afraid of clowns,” she says not looking at me, ashamed of his cowardice or of my eavesdropping or probably a mixture of both. She heads back outside, no doubt to make sure all her guests are in line, none of them embarrassing her and she is able hear the praise of how she threw the birthday party of the year.

I take out my oversized novelty clock from my coat and see that we have twenty-five more minutes before our finale showing. I take the swig the man left for me with no chaser. I feel it burn down my...

...my nose burns as I finish the last of the molly. I wait for that blissful calm to wade through my body. I took too much the first time and there is too little of the drug left now. I know soon I’m going to need something more before we head out for one final performance in twenty-five, no twenty-four minutes. This thought makes me sad, and I cannot be sad, not for these kids I have to frighten, frighten with joy and laughter. I go and sit on the toilet, which lies in an alcove hidden from the door. Toilets always help me, even when I’m not using one. I just sit, fold down my suspenders and whatever answer I need magically appears to me. In this case, I need more drugs. Come on toilet, work your voodoo, this high has to keep up for one more performance. Maybe Bozo has something? No, he is probably into the booze by now and that won’t do. Booze is icky and makes me feel trapped. I need to feel free and loose, and the last bit of molly has yet to do the trick. I crave more.

Now the door opens and in walks a man dressed in a periwinkle blue polo t-shirt and khakis and doesn't notice me. He stands at the sink fiddling with a bottle of what I know is some kind of drug. Praise be to you, toilet.

I tip-toe up behind him and tap his shoulder. He straightens stiff, spilling some little white pills.

"Are some of those for me?" I ask coyly. The man spins around and I see that his face is as white as Bozo's but without make-up. He's cute. He's also afraid of clowns. He's cute and afraid of clowns. It must be my birthday today as well.

"Hey handsome, there's no need to be scared of-"

"-c-c-clown," he stutters with fear, but does not flee the bathroom.

"-little old me, there's no reason to be afraid of little old me." I grab a pill off the counter and hold it in front of him, making him see my big, sexy black eyes.

"Xanax," he replies, a bit of the fear leaving his voice. I grab two more of the escaped pills and put all three on my tongue which I present to him. I then curl the end of my bright pink tongue around the pills and slowly pull them into my mouth.

"I w-w-watched you t-tumble out there," he stops to nervously take a swallow, to calm himself. "It was-"

"-erotic," I interrupt and fling the tip of my forefinger to feel his fear-erection, a mix of red hot lust and stone cold fear, he's never had sex with something he is utterly terrified of, there is no orgasm like the one I am about to give him.

I pull a condom out of my pants and drop them to the chilly tile floor. I give the rubber to him and place myself facing the mirror. I watch as my reflection smiles back at

me, a true voyeur experience for her and I see the pleasure grow on her face when I feel him enter me.

He starts slowly at first, still not sure if he should run for the hills, still unsure if this is even happening. I should reassure him, but that will take his fear away and neither of us will be satisfied, and then it just becomes regular, boring sex, like he probably doesn't have with his wife anymore. Soon though he is completely comfortable, and his speed picks up, back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. I reach out and grab my reflection, who gladly receives me as she aches to be a part of this wondrous experience. The molly and Xanax dance in my brain as we continue our own tango. A forbidden explosion of endorphins allows for small groans to escape from me. I look up at him through the mirror and watch his closed eyes and sweaty red face rhythmically grunt as he pushes deeper inside me. I can't tell if he grunts or cries, maybe he cries, they usually cry by this point. I am like air and start to float, but he places a hand on my butt to ground me back to earth. His other hand crawls up my back, a sensual handicapped spider whose five light, furry legs tickle my spine. I grab the hand and make him cup my small right breast. His other hand instinctually follows it mate off my butt and now he holds both my breasts and I am free to float again. I feel his sweat or tears or both drip on my back and I smile back at my reflection. In a few seconds he comes and there is no mistaking his crying now. He wipes his eyes, tosses the condom in the toilet, pulls up his pants, and runs out the bathroom. I'm out of breath; my legs feel a mile above my head. I think I'm upside down, but my head is twisted upright. When I look at my reflection I see

that she is boringly still touching the ground with both feet, head in a normal position. She never lets go of my hand and winks back at me before popping another Xanax.

Christ, what am I going to do with her? I see the man in the periwinkle blue polo exits the bathroom, crying, zipping his tan khakis. What am I going to do with her? She is getting worse and worse. I'll give her a minute to collect herself. Then we can go out, do our finale, and escape before she's fingered for ruining another marriage.

She fails to come out. I have to go and retrieve her. What am I going to do with her?

I walk down the hall, open the bathroom door, and see her bent over the sink, pants around her ankles, holding on to the mirror. She breathes hard up and down, her hair plastered with sweat on her face, her make-up all but ruined, a weird smile forms on her face. It smells like dirty balls and the under sweat of her panties.

"Binks, you look like shit," I drop my British accent. "Let's just get out of here. Fuck the ending we'll take a pay cut. I gots to get you home. You don't look well."

"No," is all she says back. No malice, no fun in her voice, just a blank tone behind those big, black eyes. I can understand how grown men are terrified of clowns.

"Shut the door," she quietly growls between breaths. "I'll be out in two minutes."

I shut the door and guard it, praying no kid has eaten too much cake and is about to shit themselves. Sorry kiddo, occupied. Go in the lawn like your old pal Bozo.

To my relief, the door opens just a minute later and Binky steps out looking better. Not good, but better. She still sweats profusely and still has this absent look to her, but at least she's somewhat presentable. I've never seen this look on her. I don't know what to

do. I think again about suggesting skipping the last act, that we should bail, but I don't know what kind of wrath of Binky I'd incur. This is uncharted territory.

"Ready?" she says back at me, but faces toward the jungle of children. "I'm ready," she slurs a reply to her own question.

Summersault, then another summersault into a front handspring, into a cartwheel, into a back flip, immediately into a final summersault ending in front of a scared child, both in awe and terrified. I am so ready and slide the glass door open with a thud, announcing my presence with authority. It works as a roar erupts from the children. They love me; they are all in love with me.

I go into my summersault and hear Bozo yell out.

"Binky no," I yell out to her but she is just rolling around into children. This is not a tumble routine. They run around and are terrified and they have every right to be. The adults look worried and they have every right to be. The lady with the electrified hair looks pissed off and she has every right to be. Right now, she has a feral, rabid female clown rolling up and down on her lawn, knocking children over like bowling pins. In an instant Binky stops and I see her motionless on her back. I rush with my life to her.

I'm tumbling now, but I no longer tumble on grass or a yard or even this earth. I am falling through darkness head over heel over head over heel over head over heel over head over heel over head over heel. Yet, I am not sick. I should be getting sick twisting

over myself, but I feel nothing. I don't feel happy, I don't feel sad, I don't feel sick, I don't feel well. I don't feel scared, I don't feel safe. I feel absolute nothing. I have no fear, or calm, or a sense of time. I could be tumbling for one minute or for an eternity. Time does not exist in this plain of existence. Is there even existence if time is absent? I don't feel alive, but I don't feel like I've died. Is this my hell? Doomed forever to be falling over myself for eternity never feeling any human sensation like nausea or even fear? I am not afraid. I know I should be afraid. I understand that I am continually falling with no end in sight. This should be terrifying, but it is not. I know I should also feel relief, but there is no relief. I still have the sense to know that I have no feeling, that I can still think about knowing that I should have some sort of emotional response. This should make me happy. I am not brain dead. I am not worm food. I am not dust to be given back to the earth. No earth exists where I am. No Bozo either. No frazzled-hair lady, nor her blue polo shirted husband, nor the thousands of the frazzled-hair ladies and their blue polo shirted husbands I have encountered on the same houses on the same cul-du-sacs in my clowning lifetime. There is just me and I am tumbling.

Then I stop.

I am upside down, I think. Yes, I am upside down because the darkness gives way to a picture and it is upside down. I see a young girl who looks like me, but is not me because the clothes are all wrong as she is dressed from a time period I only read about in my high school history books. This young, nostalgic version of me plays with a doll on a rug. She sings a song in a different language, sounds like Romanian or German or Austrian, one of those hard sounding European languages. The legs of a lady float in

view, next to this alternate version of my younger self and starts speaking to her in whatever language she sang in, but somehow I understand it.

Lydia, Lydia my sweet. My grandmother, her name was Lydia, and I am named for her. Lydia. It is time to go.

But I don't want to go.

Lydia with have to go.

Why do we have to go?

We just do my sweet, we have to go.

Is father coming?

Yes, of course my sweet Lydia. He is the one who says we have to go.

Why?

To build a life for us. This smaller version of me then turns to me and in English says: "It's time to go."

That's when I feel the pain. It's the first sensation of anything since I arrived here and it shoots through my heart like a lightning bolt and surges through my body.

Now I am spinning again and fast. The world turns to white blinding lights and it stings my eyes.

I sit up as life breaths its return to my body. I am back on the lawn at the birthday party. The children look at me in terror, the adults look at me in terror, Bozo looks at me in terror. No one speaks, they just stare. I reach to the corner of my mouth and wipe away white foamy saliva.

"Ta-da," is all I can muster to the throngs of eyeballs silently upon me.

A wave of relief washes over the crowd. Bozo falls down laughing in relief beside me and I fall on his stomach to feel his laughter transfer through me. The children catch the infection and laugh as do the adults. The only one who doesn't laugh is the frazzled-haired lady who says into her phone:

“Never mind, she's awake now.”

The children's squeals can be heard from the street as the sun starts to set on the dusty Southern California Valley. The party in the non-descript house on the non-descript cul-du-sac is now at its end, and children and adults pour out of the house. Many of the younglings greet the birthday guest and tell him that it was the best party they have ever been to, and the young boy cannot contain his face-wide smile as his mother hands the kids their parting party favors.

As for the performers, their afternoon also comes to a close. The stressed-out lady reluctantly hands Bozo a check. On his back sits Binky, matching the birthday boy's face-wide smile with one of her own. They exit the house and trudge their way back to the Volkswagen Rabbit.