

COMMON KNOWLEDGE

by

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“Common knowledge is a prerequisite for coordination, but common knowledge cannot be achieved in a system with unreliable communication.” –Robin Clark, *Meaningful Games*

Geosynchronous

...was no good for you, Mary, I'm glad he's gone.

You watch the morning news. You endure reports of shootings and tsunamis for a brief glimpse of your possible future, another man lying to you. He promises you that today will be generally pleasant with the occasional, inevitable shadow, but I know he is wrong. I can see the storm cell moving in from the coast.

Not the white blouse, Mary.

Bring your umbrella, Mary.

The office parking lot is mostly full already and you will have to park far away. It's a narrow spot, but you can fit. You're going to get wet, though, and your hair will stick to your neck and cheeks and drip water into your eyes and on your mail. As your hair dries it will become frizzy and you will pat it down with water. Isn't that silly, Mary?

Phil, the kid from accounting, will watch you a little too closely and route himself past your desk a bit too frequently and I will hate him for it.

He can't possibly look harder or closer than I do and I hate myself for it.

I try to look away when you shower, I really do. I want to give you that privacy, maintain your modesty, your mystery, but I can't. There are no mysteries to me. I watch the water drops slide and linger down your body, my eye multiplied a thousand times, scouring all of you – an army of little lenses. They divide and combine, snag on your finest hairs, pool in your navel, dive finally from your limp fingertips. I watch you squint against the spray as it clumps your eyelashes, runs along your nose in the groove between eye and mouth, atomizes from your lips as you exhale. Even from up here, you are exquisite.

You slick back your hair and soap yourself. The lather is almost indistinguishable from your milk-white skin, but I can, I distinguish because I know your form, I know your entirety, I know what doesn't belong.

I know the number of goose pimples that rise when you step from the steam. I don't count the three million one-by-one, but all at once. They rise to me.

You swirl the loose hairs on the shower wall into a slight ball that falls into your hand. I have seen many marvelous spirals, Mary, but this one is my favorite because you make it and it's made of you.

It begins to sprinkle as soon as you leave the house and as you squeeze your Corolla into the spot I found for you, the rain is heavy.

I'm sorry you hate your job, Mary, I am, I am. I know you hate it from the way you slouch driving home, the way you pry off the scuffed black heels you stopped polishing last month when Mr. Mayfield passed you over for the promotion, the way you fall backward into the couch and lean over until you're breathing through the pillow, drained by all those asking too much of you.

I ask nothing.

I don't know why you wear those shoes, Mary. They leave your heels reddened and raw and blister your littlest toes.

I'm sorry your evenings promise such little enjoyment. A hasty dinner, dirty dishes, bad television, sleep. I don't like when you sleep, Mary, I lose you when you sleep. White on white, camouflaged in bed on your side, sheets pulled up to your chin. You fall asleep with your hands under your pillow, but wake up clutching it, head against the mattress. One week a month you sleep on your back with an arm across your stomach.

There isn't much to watch while you sleep. There's plenty of activity elsewhere -- amorous couples, bats and opossums, night-shift works, solemn hospital hallways -- but I'd rather watch orbs of sweat squeeze from the pores behind your ear and dot the back of your neck. I watch the flats of your eyes twitch beneath your unshadowed lids.

What do you dream, Mary?

It's Friday. Finally, two days to yourself. You should relax, Mary, but you pace in your living room and eye the phone. You pour ten ounces of Cabernet. It darkens your lips and brightens your eyes, and you dial his number. You should never feel alone, Mary. I'm always here with you.

I read your lips as you invite him to come over on Saturday. I read his lips as he readily accepts – Alessi, your Sicilian stevedore.

You hang up and he hangs up and you finish your wine and roll over the back of the couch. I'm sorry you think he's the best you can do.

Saturday morning Alessi works on the river barges, lifting and lowering, organizing the contents of the world, checking water displacement and weight distribution. He builds the muscles beneath his work shirt. I watch his lips for a cruel word, his eyes for a leer. Today he only works, but I keep watching, for you, Mary.

You roll from your bed, get dressed and get in your car without showering. You turn the volume knob farther right and open your throat wide. I can't hear you, but I watch your rear-view mirror vibrate. You drum the steering wheel with gentle taps and I watch the fleeting oil whorls form and evaporate.

At the grocery, you pick up Peruvian potatoes, Cornish hens, shallots, Bartlett pears. I know what you're making and you forgot the thyme. That's rosemary in the cabinet, I checked. I don't want you to have to go out again, but I know you will. You

get home and check, bop yourself on the forehead and back out you go. On the way home, you miss the turn for the liquor store. I could have told you that it was coming up.

If you had asked.

I could have told you about the thyme.

The pinot noir you select is several years older than the cabernet. Alessi also picked up a bottle, \$25 gewürztraminer, a year older.

He gets home and showers. You get home and shower.

He rinses away labor's sweat. You rinse away sleep and nerves.

Your showers briefly overlap. You are momentarily simultaneously naked. I see you both naked together, simultaneous in time, separate in space. I can do that.

He gets dressed. You get dressed. You prepare dinner. He arrives.

Together you eat and drink. Your lip curls up and reveals your top teeth and you laugh. Your chin lands in your palm and you look at him over the split chickens and alien potatoes.

A family of three dies in a head-on highway collision. Traffic backs up for miles.

Alessi takes a confident sip of wine and reaches for your hand past the split chickens and alien potatoes. Your pupils dilate and your lips plump.

A hawk plucks a rabbit from a field.

A sober man bruises his drunk wife's orbit.

You stand and kiss him with plumped lips and lead him to your bedroom without clearing the table. Flies land on the potatoes.

A teenager carves loneliness into her thigh.

You press your mouth to his and fumble at each other's clothes.

He's going to hurt you, Mary. He's going to lie. It's inevitable. He doesn't know

enough of you not to.

He's on full display now and you're touching him. His finger circles your event horizon and then he's touching you in places I have never seen, can never know.

His skin is tanned from many days of river sun. It looks so dark against you, he eclipses you. He hides you from me and penetrates your fathoms.

Your hands clench vectors in the sheet. Your mouth curves around vowels, possibly silent, but to me, from up here, they appear voluminous. Gold-shaded lids veil your eyes and when they're open, you look at the sky, past him, past me, lost in the cosmos.

I'm sorry I can ruin your happiness, Mary, I'm sorry that I must.

I search for an old Soviet warhead I can rouse from its silo slumber and direct to engulf you in my irradiating embrace. Touch your molecules for half-lives. I'd rather stare at cement chips in a smoldering crater than watch you in his pleasure for another moment.

Nothing ignites. Your legs curl around him like tusks. You trace spirals between his shoulder blades. I exist in a realm of boulders and I scan for some other disturbance worth hurling. I will one from its trajectory at your seething nostrils, I will them all.

None obey.

Alessi brushes hair from your face. You nip his thumb, caress it with your tongue, and I have nothing left. I watch you writhe and urge a spark, a pulse, a byte, anything I think I can muster or spare, a virtual minutia that will acquire enough mass and substance across distance, through acceleration and friction, to pierce his skull and disrupt the hidden circuitry inside.

He collapses onto you and I think that I might have succeeded, but you're not

alarmed. No, you kiss his neck, you stroke his hair.

He stirs and reveals you to me once more. Your purity glossed with passion, red pressure points throb on your fleshy hips – his lingering embrace.

He rolls to your ear and his lips meet and separate in your name and something else I don't recognize.

Aisle 12 – Coffee, Creamer, Tea

Maggie pulled the coffee maker from the box labeled *small appliances* in green and set it on the counter. It took up a quarter of the space. She peeled the bubblewrap from the carafe and set it in its base, the handle aligned left. She turned it so the handle was in the center. She turned it slightly right. She took it out and promenaded around the kitchen, to the fridge, to the oven and back again, and tried to replace it naturally, without thinking, casually and comfortably like the handle of a coffee pot belonging to a woman too busy and confident in her new city to care about the position of a handle of a coffee pot she wasn't even sure how to use.

Maggie remembered many things about the house she left – the carpeted relief after the stretch of hallway tile, its midnight groaning, the weight of the fridge door, the smell of the preheating oven – except this coffee maker. She remembered its daily contribution and prominent presence during holidays, one of two brewing regular and decaf, but she had never used it. Her father had always put the pot on always with enough for her. Seattle being a city of junkies, there was always a fill station nearby to fortify herself against the oppressive dreariness. She had cooked for herself, been to the grocery store before – she wasn't completely helpless – just never this particular item.

Her mother couldn't stomach coffee and her father had recently given it up and so they sent the machine with her when she left.

There was nothing arcane about it. It had a place for water, a place for grinds, a place for coffee and a switch. All she needed was the missing ingredient and everything would come together. Once she got the coffee, she'd level off the measuring spoon, know where to put it and where to pour the filtered water, and wait for the gurgle to make her

apartment smell like home, wait for the liquid to lift her benthic spirits.

She locked the door and pocketed the key. She jiggled the knob to ensure it was locked. She checked her pocket for the key.

Outside, she navigated patches of ice, walls of dirty snow and the persistent slashing wind. She felt more bundled than everyone else in her tick down coat, red and white scarf and wool hat, like she was exposing her newness by covering herself. A trim woman ran by her wearing nothing but tight pants, a long-sleeve shirt, gloves and fleece headband. Her cheeks were wind-whipped and her breath shot ahead of her in jets, but she appeared perfectly calm. She passed under a streetlight and the reflective stripe down her pants shimmered. Maggie looked away and wrapped her coat around herself. She was tall, but unshapely and anything but the smallest smalls fell away from her, desperate for substance. Her mother would always say that she was swimming in things. "I should get you a snorkel," she would say. Unattended, Maggie had reverted to old habits.

It had been ages since Maggie expended that kind of physical effort. Despite all her layers, she still felt raw and chilled. She wanted a comforter, a terrycloth robe and a space heater for her insides. Every breath stung her dripping nose and she began to regret this excursion, this whole adventure. She had chosen Boston because she needed its rocky shoreline to delineate the terrestrial and the aquatic lest she wander, foot by foot, across blurred tide lines and realize too late that she was adrift.

Her father had considered the move impractical and unwise. Maggie had considered it impractical and necessary. California would have been far enough, he said, but Maggie had to go to Boston, thinking that the distance would somehow mask her failures and magnify her successes: opening a bank account, switching her driver's license, learning the "T," shoveling snow, making friends.

Her mother could work a room, serve hors d'oeuvres and top of drinks like a figure skater, superhumanly ensuring the satisfaction and pleasure of every guest except her daughter and husband. Maggie dreaded with a deep anxiety any kind of prolonged social interaction. Hair cuts and dentist visits were particularly brutal. She had been the ideal client when she was younger and dentists and hairdressers looked for that sort of thing. She had sat rigidly and moved only to obey commands of “wider,” “head down” and “rinse.” To make matters worse, as her parents aged and gatherings became fewer, or at least required greater justification, any of Maggie's modest accomplishments became the reason: straight A's, accepted to college, high school graduation, going away to college, dean's list, an internship at the Lewis and Clark Interpretive Center at Cape Disappointment State Park. It is surprising, then, that Maggie continued to have any success at all when the rewards were so unpleasant. Though, her mother would just have used smaller milestones, though Maggie did not think what she had done so far was all that impressive.

Her mother had stenciled quotes from her thesis, “Tupperware: a revolution in (gender role) preservation,” on long canvases for her graduation “come one, come all, cum laude” party. Maggie was shuffled around as her own words stared back at her in blue and yellow block letters, the colors of Whitman College:

“Despite the financial and social independence it seemed to offer, Tupperware actually reinforced established gender roles by keeping housewives and their 'extracurricular' interests staunchly in the kitchen”;

“The housewife of the 1950's became further indebted to her husband, or worse, the company itself”;

“The 'party' model intended to capitalize on the traditional homemaking skills

most women had without teaching them new ones. It created the illusion of advancement without challenging patriarchy or the women themselves.”

If her mother had even read it, she didn't understand it; the quotes she selected had been ones check-marked by Maggie's professor.

The supermarket's automatic doors slid open and Maggie stepped into the bright florescent building. The flat light blanketed shelf after shelf and wrapped the interior in disconcerting luminescence. Maggie noticed that she had lost her shadow.

The shelves were fully stocked and packed closely together, but the store held few shoppers. Signs announced each aisle: Aisle 1, produce; Aisle 2, condiments, spreads, prepared foods; Aisle 3...

Aisle-by-aisle, she peered along the walls of products. She felt delicate around the other customers who shopped with such immediacy and strong sense of purpose. She reminded herself that she too had a purpose, minor, trivial, banal and short-sighted, but a purpose. She found that if she shrunk her perception narrow enough she could function with less anxiety and intimidation. Planning things in advance stressed rather than comforted her. Something like this errand was doable. Go out, find store, buy coffee, get home. That was a manageable plan. When she got home, she assumed she would make coffee, but that was a decision for another time.

Sometimes her focus was so weak she would have to subdivide tasks even more, into wake up; shower: face, body, hair; dress: underwear, socks, pants, shirt, shoes. That had happened more frequently since graduation.

Coffee, she reminded herself, coffee, coffee, coffee. She touched her right thumb to her index finger with each syllable. Even if she drifted again, tapping the cadence would recall the thought.

“What else? ... right, I know that, but which kind? There's like fifteen different ones ... well, can you ask her? ... Don't give me that ... No, I – look, I'm not going to buy it if she's not going to eat it ... fine, I'll get 'whatever.' Bye.”

Aisle twelve – coffee, creamer, tea. She stopped in front of the coffee. There were maybe a hundred different kinds if she counted each brand, flavor and grind. Behind her a punctured box of non-dairy creamer had tipped and was pouring from the top shelf to the floor. A young female clerk in a red apron had swept the growing pile into a dustpan and was killing time watching the granules fall. Maggie wondered if she had spilled it just so she would have something to do.

As Maggie surveyed the selection, read the labels, each oddly specific description, she imagined who each might appeal to. Light Roast claimed to be mild, light, and crisp, while Dark promised to be bold, dark, and intense. To Maggie, they sounded like personal ads – middle-aged female seeking rich, elegant, complex man; Young male looking for a bright, lively, easy drinking gal – or even stages of life. She wondered which one she was or even which one appealed to her.

She stepped closer and examined the label of the Light Roast with its promise of childhood simplicity and teenage games of manhunt, inadvertent gropes in the darkness, exciting and meaningless. She looked at the Medium-light, its grains steeped in carefree college flings.

She thought the roasts might represent stages of life, and if they did, she imagined herself on the cusp of Medium, expected to settle-up and settle-down, but that was wrong. She had moved out here to escape that sense of coddled complacency. She considered the intellectual challenge of Medium-Dark or the adventure of Dark, a humanitarian trip to Africa, a stint in the Peace corps, perhaps. Maggie wanted

desperately to follow a path of coffee grounds with changing flavor profiles, to press her finger to the dirt, bring it to her lips and know that, yes, this was the way.

But it wasn't a linear progression, one didn't graduate from level to level, but jumped according to the whims of ambition and nostalgia. If anything, Maggie considered it a bell curve, peaking with a Dark-fueled mid-life crisis before descending again to the Light of old age, but even this she knew was wrong, or at least inconclusive, at least for her.

There was no order and that troubled her.

She was, again, her father, labeling and compartmentalizing life, even – especially – the aspects that most resisted it. Everything organized and understandable, all mystery and wonder excised. She wanted each roast, or aspects of each, and in that, wholly embraced none.

She envied the businesswoman, the old man, the groom-to-be, the unsatisfied mother. She wanted the authenticity of their pain, the unconscious audacity of their decisions, but Maggie saw none of herself in them.

“Looking for something?” the clerk asked.

“No, I'm okay.”

The clerk turned her attention back to the creamer which had slowed to a trickle. Maggie didn't quite miss talking to people, but this was the first person to approach her in days. Granted, she was just doing her job, but Maggie earnestly hoped she was more interesting than creamer. The clerk shook the nearly empty box and set it in the dustpan with the mound of white powder.

“They sound like people, huh?” Maggie said.

“If you say so.” the clerk said and walked away.

Maggie did not feel more interesting than creamer. She should accept that she wasn't the kind of person who could talk to just anyone, or anyone. It wasn't worth the burning sensation on the backs of her hands and neck. She grabbed the closest can and left in case the clerk came back.

She could be decisive, it seemed, after a failed and uncomfortable social situation. She walked to the check-out lane and placed the coffee on the end of the belt. The cashier clicked the switch and stared at Maggie as the coffee inched to her. Maggie looked at the coffee and realized that she hadn't noticed what she picked: medium-dark – “rich, elegant, complex.”

“Did you find everything today?” the cashier asked.

Maggie nodded.

“Any coupons?”

Maggie shook her head and swiped her card. The cashier put the coffee in a yellow plastic bag.

“Oh, I don't –” Maggie started and accepted the bag. She walked back into the Boston dusk clutching the scruff of the golden sack. It swung before her like a lantern.

“Hey, coffee girl,” someone shouted from the store's corner.

Maggie kept walking.

“Hey,” the clerk approached her with the balled apron. “Sorry if I was rude earlier. It was end of shift.”

“I meant the labels. They sound like they're describing people,” Maggie said.

“I believe you. Who'd you get?”

“Medium-dark.”

“Fancy yourself rich, elegant and complex, huh?” she recited from memory.

"I should get going."

"So soon? Chatting outside the supermarket was just getting fun. Hey, how about this, we stop by my place and make some of that mysterious coffee."

"No, I really should get going. I haven't even finished unpacking." She said and backed away. She turned back, "Thank you, though." These were the times Maggie wished for invisibility, the ability to disappear without having to navigate anyone else's desires. She turned right and walked down the street, away from the giant glowing Citgo sign and toward, she hoped, her place.

She could feel the clerk's presence a few steps behind her and pretended not to notice. Stealing glances in the dark storefronts showed... Maggie considered speeding up, but didn't want to do it in a way that she would notice. Ahead, the orange hand of the crosswalk blinked and counted down. She considered just turning right to avoid stopping, but she'd be thoroughly lost within minutes on the unknown street. Cars pulled across the intersection and Maggie stepped to the edge of the curb. She felt the clerk stop a step behind her. She stared straight ahead and peered in the windows of passing cars, a momentary glimpse into three, four, five, other lives, six.

The clerk leaned forward and looked to Maggie, who gave a curt smile as if to say, "well, look at this, how funny, leave me alone."

"Guess we're heading the same way," the clerk said.

"Looks like it."

"I'm Erika."

"Maggie." They shook hands. The light changed and they continued together now step-for-step.

"How do you like Boston so far?"

Maggie had not stopped regretting moving since she arrived, which was typical for her whenever she was somewhere new. She found Boston dark and cold and the winding colonial streets illogical and confusing. "It's fine."

"I guess it must be. I haven't left yet."

It began to flurry again. Not much, but enough to remind Maggie that the dirty bulwarks separating the street and the sidewalk wouldn't disappear into well into spring.

"What do you do?" Erika asked. "What brings you here? Where'd you come from?"

"Seattle. And nothing really."

"Wow, Seattle. Cool." Her eyes were wide and sincere.

"What do you do? Other than stocking shelves?"

"Sometimes I shelve stockings," Erika said, smiled. Maggie got the joke and wondered what the minimum acceptable reaction would be. She hmmm'ed and sniffed and sounded more like she had a cold than a good laugh.

"It's not so bad, really. There's something comforting in the simplicity of it. Everything is labeled and everything has a place and all those places are labeled. I just put things in their place. I organize the goods of the world. Stuff comes from all over, briefly stops here, then goes all over again. It's been on trucks, trains, container ships, just so I can place it on a shelf. It's kind of amazing, really -- sometimes I'll be holding a box of, like, corn flakes and just think about how far it's come. The store is like this single point of confluence, all these things meet then disperse." Erika held her hands open and apart, fingers drifting, then she slowly brought them together clasped them so tightly Maggie could see her biceps rise like small potatoes and threw her arms wide again. "Like the universe. They say it started all small and tight, then exploded and it's

been expanding ever since, and it's either speeding up or slowing down, they can't tell because if something moves fast enough it looks slow, but the scientists all pretty much agree it'll eventually become a ball again and start over. In 900 trillion years we'll have this conversation again and not even remember."

Maggie nodded her head, not particularly comforted.

"*Nova*," Erika said. "I don't have cable, but WGBH is, like, right over there," she said, pointing to the right. "Comes in perfectly. I watched it stoned once and didn't move for, like, three days. Almost got fired. That's why I need to stick to stocking shelves. Or airports. I think airports could be cool too, if the cello thing never works out. Well," she stopped in front of a door between a vitamin shop and a pet store. "This is me. Sure you don't want to come in?"

Standing still, the cold enveloped her. Maggie thought of the one-bedroom she would return to, dark except for the hall light under the ugly saucer sconce. The boxes, labeled by her father with masking tape and color-coded markers, would still be nested and stacked in the living room aching for a giant box labeled *boxes* in yellow. She hadn't been able to throw them away. Individually, they represented each empty aspect of her life: *utensils, plates, glasses* in kitchen-green; *pillows* in bedroom-red. Collectively, they represented why she had needed to leave. She remembered falling onto the couch after unpacking the last box and sobbing as she looked at all the stuff that had followed her east, that despite it all, she was so very alone, despite this odd girl, she was concocting excuses to go inside.

"Sure," Maggie heard herself say.

"That's fine. See you around, maybe." Erika had taken Maggie's affirmative as being sure she didn't want to come in. She had a way out, but now she had to speak up to

get in.

"I meant 'sure' as in I'll come in. For a moment," Maggie said.

"Great," Erika said and unlocked the door. She flicked her metal mailbox, and without looking, knew it was empty from the hollow ring. She looked so comfortable in her routine. She naturally sidestepped the fading phone book on the first landing and on the second floor she removed her keys, unlocked and opened the door in one fluid motion, closed and locked it with the same ease. Erika walked straight back to the bedroom, leaving Maggie to loiter in the living room and increasingly regret coming up.

The apartment wasn't quite a mess, but it looked like three people had been busy and suddenly left when they walked in. There was an oily pan on the stove and a crumbly plate and half-full glass on the table. The unsteady coffee table had a mug and bong. A copy of (book) was open, spine-up, on the arm of the couch. It looked as if Erika could and might return to any of these activities and pick up where she left off. Maggie's mother would have gently called it "lived-in."

"Come see my room," Erika called.

Maggie set the bag on the coffee table and followed. The walls inside Erika's room were layered with twelve-by-twelve paperboard egg crates. "I don't get to show many people and I think it's pretty cool."

If not for the occasional change to white or brown or pale blue from the overwhelming concrete gray egg crates, Maggie might have felt dizzy, like being in padded cell.

"It's for practicing. I saw it in a studio once." She caressed the peaks and valleys of the nearest wall. "Took a few months to do the whole thing. Edwardo in the bakery department saved them for me. Makes it really quiet." The feet of a ladder stuck out

from under the bed; even the ceiling was covered.

"Watch this," Erika said and closed the door. The back of the door disappeared into the wall, flush with egg crates. The door knob replaced four of the peaks. Then, Erika screamed.

"See? Quiet. You try."

Maggie squawked a quick vowel burst and felt the walls absorb the sound. It eerily left no echo behind, as if it never happened.

"Cool, right?" Erika sat in a metal folding chair in the corner and picked up a cello that had been resting on a stand, just waiting, like everything else, to be picked up again. She played a few lines of Vivaldi's "Summer." Her double-jointed fingers collapsed against the frets and the skin under her nails flushed white.

"So, you're really good," Maggie said.

"I thought so too, but musicians who get into Berklee are even better. I didn't really start until I was eight, almost nine, so I'm like three years behind. I'm going to audition again in the summer." She absently switched between thirds and adjusted a tuning knob. "Did you study anything?"

"History. At Whitman College."

"Cool, cool." She moved onto another set of notes. "Anything special?"

"Post-war American domesticity, mostly. My thesis was about Tupperware."

"Oh, yeah, my mom used Tupperware." Erika became increasingly absorbed into the cello. It wasn't just idle movements anymore, but she also wasn't intensely concentrating. The bow's in-out bellow motion, the oscillating vibrato of her fingers seemed to penetrate the space around her, like she was keeping the time of the universe.

"Mine didn't. My father didn't believe in leftovers."

“Is that why you're in Boston?” The warm major chords almost dulled what might have been an insult. Though unintended, the truth it carried stung Maggie.

“Excuse me?”

“Why would you move across country for nothing?”

“I just did.”

“If you didn't move here for anything, you must have moved away from something. It's geometry or chord progression or thermodynamics.”

“I'm not sure you realize what you're saying.”

“It's just, you know, reality.”

“I should go.”

“Are you leaving or arriving?”

“Leaving.”

“Suit yourself.”

Erika's playing crescendoed as Maggie found the knob among the peaks. She shut the door and the music was nearly silenced. Lining the room with egg crates actually kind of worked. Maggie wasn't running from anything. Not now not before, there hadn't been anything to run from and there still wasn't. But Erika was partially right that there wasn't anything to necessarily run to. When Maggie saw the yellow phone book on the stairs she remembered the yellow plastic bag and the coffee can's yellow lid and she couldn't leave without that stupid coffee. She went back up the last staircase and stood before Erika's door. She delicately tested the knob and it turned; it hadn't locked behind her. The soundproofing, it worked both ways. She could slip in grab the coffee and slip out, or she could just leave without it, or she could return to the store and buy another can, but that was her can. The cost and the coffee and the effort and Erika, it all meant so

little to her, so wondered why she ever bothered with anything.

The door's latch had already retreated and it wouldn't take much to just nudge it aside. She saw the yellow bag where she had left it on the table. She inched the door enough to squeeze through as Erika was coming down the hall from her bedroom.

“Maggie,” she said.

“Forget it, it's nothing.”

“I'm sorry.”

“It's nothing. I'm fine.” She grabbed the bag and pulled the door shut behind her.

“Maggie--” The living room wasn't soundproofed.

Would Erika chase her into the hallway, down the stairs, into the street? She didn't need strangers to care so vehemently for her. She wasn't a stray. She didn't need anyone to, least of all her parents, least of all herself. Her father's eager meticulous packing had just been part of his personality, the sorting and labeling the same way he approached every other aspect of his life, but there had been a certain impetus to it, a certain drive for efficiency, a certain drive to get it done, get the truck loaded, get her out. She found the Citgo sign and walked away from it, found the Green Line track and walked along it, the coffee can bouncing against her leg.

She found the door to her building, ignored her mailbox and climbed the stairs. The top lock fought her - she was discovering it liked to stick – and then she was finally back inside. It was all exactly as she had left it. That would take some more getting used to. Maggie locked and locked and chained the door behind her. She did like the feeling of sequester. With the only entrance shut and sealed, had the room been appropriately soundproofed, she could have screamed and carried on in a most uncivilized way, hidden from the eyes and ears of others.

She could have – water, coffee, switch – but she went straight to the sink and filled the carafe to the metal band – twelve cups. She poured it all in the reservoir. Water. Coffee. She pulled the metal freshness film from the mouth of the can and measured twelve tablespoons into the filter into the drawer. Done. Switch. Done. It hissed as it heated the water and dripped it over the grounds. The first drops sizzled in the bottom and steamed up the pot.

As it filled, Maggie assessed the living room. She put her hand over her chest. The boxes were organized by color and stacked alphabetically. But unpacking had been such chaos as she moved from box to box, unwrapping one thing, packing another, how had the boxes settled like this? She picked up an office paper box labeled bowls in the appropriate green and ripped it along the corner and across the base. The tear caught on the tape across the bottom, but a few extra tugs ripped it in half. She threw it into the middle of the room and moved on to *cups, dinner plates, servingware* and *utensils*, shredding each one in turn. When she was done, the room smelled of coffee and the boxes lied in a tangled heap. She poured a mug and sipped it. It burned her tongue, but tasted like coffee. There was nothing particularly elegant or complex in its flavor, but as far as she could tell, she had done everything right.

She drained the first cup and rushed to the door, peered through the peephole, unlocked, unlocked and unchained it – took a breath – opened it slowly in a sweeping motion. “Hello! How are you? Come in, come in.” She started to close the door, but jerked it open right before it latched. “Oh, SO sorry! I didn't see you. What a coincidence, everyone arriving at the same time. No, take your time, no hurry ... yes, he is right here, arrived but a moment before you, actually ... isn't it, just?” She closed the door. “Sit, sit. Excuse the mess, I'm still getting settled ... that's kind of you, but I know

it isn't much. Cozy, though, I could really see myself getting comfortable here ... I just put a pot on, shouldn't be but a moment ... what *am* I thinking? Please, let me take your coats." Maggie opened and closed the empty closet, then sat in the apartment's only chair. She hopped up again and walked into the kitchen, "I'm still listening, go on." She opened and closed the empty cabinet above the sink. She took three bubblewrapped mugs from the box on the counter, filled them with coffee and carried them to the living room. "Here we are, here we are ..." She set the mugs on a box of books and sipped from each one in turn. "The weather does get quite dreadful here sometimes, but I've gotten used to it ... sometimes I even head to the shop around the corner, it's just lovely. You'd never know it was there, I just discovered it last month. They make the absolute best scones, but sometimes Erik calls and I bop out there without a coat and don't even notice until I'm halfway home ... no, no, he's just a friend ... oh, he is cute and a student at Berklee, no less, cello, but no, nothing like that ... I have my share of dates, nothing to worry about there. This really is a very young city, everyone's quite friendly."

Maggie sat still for a moment in the near darkness. Passing cars disrupted the streetlight glow and shined stretching parallelograms across the ceiling that looked like the sun rising and setting and rising and setting again, a time lapsed life. "It really is so good of you to come by."

A Knife for Colby

A swarm of bees chewed through Colby's chest during the night, his morning shower and commute, and continued into work. The coffee hadn't helped; it never does.

“What if it's not a good knife?” Colby asked his fiancée, Jeanne, over the phone.

“I'm sure it's a perfectly good knife,” she said.

“That's what I'm afraid of. For \$128 it better be a damn fantastic knife.”

“I suppose you could always return it if it's not.”

“That's tantamount to defeat. It's certainly about the money, but it's also about more than the money; it's about pride. Returning it means I've been duped. I don't like feeling duped, it's an insult to my judgment.” Colby continued to click through search results for “SliceCo Knives, any good?” during his fiancée’s silence. He read review after review from users, on knife forums and chef blogs, but couldn't find anything he deemed informative or legitimate.

“You heard all of the great things the salesman said about it,” Jeanne said.

“Because that's a reliable, unbiased source.”

“You saw the demonstration.”

“Hrmp. You're starting to sound just like him. Rigged trickery, that is. The old bait and switch. They show you the good knives and ship you the shit knives. Signing us up for that sales pitch was your idea, by the way.”

“He's my nephew!”

Charlotte appeared in his office doorway with two to-go coffee cups.

“And now I'm out \$130 and you - it's like you want me to just accept everything he said and move on.” Charlotte bobbed the two cups back and forth in sync, like the

field mice Little Bunny FooFoo was so fond of bopping. “I should go,” he said. The left cup chased the right cup as it coyly hopped behind Charlotte's back, only to peak out and chase its pursuer around her slim torso.

“But –“

“Work stuff. Bye.”

Charlotte offered one of the cups. He eyed it wearily but accepted and rummaged through his desk for an acid reducer.

“What's eating you?” Charlotte asked. She left a red ellipse on the white sippy cup lid.

He swallowed the pill with a swig of coffee. “Some kid conned me into buying a knife last night – a chef's knife, to cut onions and carrots and stuff. Also apparently rope.”

“Rope?”

“Yeah the salesman – sales*kid* – held this piece of scratchy rope and had me cut it with the knife.” He stretched out his fingers and pulled his vertical hand effortlessly across his desk. “Sliced right through it, like a hand through air or an expensive knife through cheap rope.”

“Sounds like a good bedroom tool.”

“What? Why?”

“Never mind.”

“He probably soaked the rope in something to make it weaker. Didn't look like nautical-grade rope to me.”

“Too bad. That's the only rope I use.” She smirked, an alluring twitch at the corner of her mouth.

“That's what I figured. What good is a knife that can cut shit rope no one uses. You sail?”

“Nope. Why cut rope with it at all?”

“You never know; I've met some pretty fibrous plantains, or cassava or something. But it's more a symbolic thing, an indicator of quality. Why land on the moon? Just to prove we could.”

“Why flirt when you're taken?” she said.

“Exactly,” he said. “You do something more difficult to make the mundane carrot-cutting tasks seem easy. I still think it was shit rope though.”

“It's just a knife. If you're not happy, I don't know, return it, then.”

“No one gets this. It's an expensive knife, yes, but it's about more than just the money. I don't like feeling duped; it undermines my status as a discerning consumer and I prefer to live up to my own high standards.”

“How noble.” His phone rang: their boss with an actual business matter. “Better take that,” she said. He rolled his eyes and lifted the receiver. Charlotte raised her cup in parting and disappeared into the hallway. A pimply intern passed the doorway after her, eyes fixed on the alternating movements of her bottom.

—

When Colby arrived home, Jeanne was in the kitchen, tending to a vicious sizzle. When Jeanne peeked into the hallway, Colby had retired to the bedroom to change. When she walked to the bedroom still holding a slotted spoon, Colby was bent over the living room coffee table leafing through bills, and when he walked into the kitchen, she had already sat down to dinner. He slid a sirloin from the platter to a paper plate and licked the grease from his fingers. He added some brown potatoes from a skillet, picking

around the black ones, and joined her at the table. She had arranged a fork and serrated steak knife for him. He put his plate between the two and admired its symmetry- fork, steak, potatoes, knife. Each inhabited its own quadrant, separate but complete.

Colby looked at Jeanne from beneath his brow. She flippantly pulled a piece of steak off her fork with her lips and chewed dramatically. He tried hefting the small dinner knife like the salesman had showed him yesterday, but it was too light; it felt like nothing. His thumb and forefinger met and he wiggled it, feeling for its balance. Twice it clattered to the table. He pierced the meat with his fork, went at it with the knife and soon he had reduced it all to bite-sized chunks. The unprofessional, budget knife made each cut in only two strokes, forward and back. He dropped his head to his hands.

“What's the matter?” she said. “Your steak's all cut up, get on with eating it.”

“That is precisely the problem.” He held up the two-inch knife streaked with grease and meat flakes. “It works just fine. If it cuts steak like that, I should just use it to cut everything. That new knife was a complete waste, shit or not.” He ran his thumb along the peaks of the blade. Unscathed, he lightly sawed his arm. The depressed skin ripped back and forth, but didn't break. “I don't suppose this knife cuts rope, though,” he said. “You don't have any rope, do you?”

“I don't, no.”

“Nothing in the bedroom?”

“Who keeps rope in the bedroom?”

“No one. I'll just go on supposing then.” He imagined a wall of pegs hung with twisted hemp and coiled nylon. He imagined loops of rope on the bed like limp nooses. He imagined his wrists and ankles convicted of treason and appropriately sentenced.

He finally ate a piece of steak, but hardly tasted it.

“Cutting rope with a kitchen knife will dull the blade, you know,” she said.

“Are you serious?” he said. “Then why on Earth would they demonstrate it like that?”

“Just to prove it could? I don't know. It'll definitely ruin it, though.” She sensed his deepening disappointment. “But why would you need to cut rope anyway?” she said.

“I wouldn't.”

“Then problem solved. Plus, if it does become dull--”

“When.”

“When, what?”

“When it becomes dull; it is an inevitable, indisputable property of matter, like inertia or buoyancy.” She began clearing the table. “As soon as the knife is forged and polished, it begins deteriorating. Every slice, every second is a step toward obsolescence and further from perfection.”

“Well, like I was saying, if or when it becomes dull, you can send it back to the factory for resharpener. It has some lifetime warranty thing.”

“That sounds unrealistically benevolent. A Lazarus pit for knives?”

“Sure. It's the only knife you'll ever need.”

“Oh,” he said. He lowered the pitch of his voice, “Oh.”

“What?”

“What if I want a different knife, a santoku or cleaver? What if I want to change the handle color or grip shape? What if the blade's weight or angle, the immutable properties of the steel, don't jive with my radius and ulna, my metacarpals or phalanges? The factory can't fix that.”

Jeanne had no response.

“To hell with it!” Colby stood.

Jeanne rinsed the dishes and arranged them in the dishwasher rack. The silverware went in the caddy for such things.

“Once it crosses the doorstep, I’ll slide it onto a shelf where it will remain in pristine condition, a beacon of engineering and material perfection.” The orator looked at the back of his audience, she looked like a vertical snake whose last meal formed her hips. Water ran out the faucet, across some plates and down the drain. Ceramic clinked against metal.

“And when you need to cut something?” Jeanne said.

“I’ll get a cheap knife, use it until it’s shit, then get another – with a new grip, if I want. All different blades, all different brands.”

Jeanne wiped the water from the edge of the sink with a blue and white striped towel, turned around and leaned against it. She snaked the towel through her hands.

“It’s just cutting, deconstructing, destroying. Who needs elegant destruction? If the knife tears a pepper a little bit, so be it; that’s life and life is uneven and rough and sloppy. We all tear a pepper or two in our lifetimes. That’s the cost of freedom.”

Colby sat down and poked his steak.

“It’s cold,” he said. Jeanne walked to the other room and switched on the TV.

–

Colby leaned over the dark expanse of Charlotte’s mahogany desk to hand her the full to-go coffee cup; he had drained most of his on the walk. She accepted when she could reach it with a bent elbow. Charlotte looked small in her office, dwarfed by the wooden monolith before her and engulfed on all other sides by the leather executive chair. Her brunette hair flared in sculpted waves. She branded the cup’s pristine lid.

“Did you bring the Peterman file like I asked?”

Colby hadn't even noticed the request. He apologized.

“What's going on with you? You look beat.”

“Barely slept again last night, because – you know.”

“Okay, I'm just going to come out and say this – get over it. It's a knife, you bought it move on. A common schlub like you – and I mean this in the best way possible – but you and the other schlubs won't even know if that knife is shit.”

“Oh, you're good. You're so mean and so good. You hit it right on its little problem head. What's worse than using a shit knife and knowing that it's a shit knife? Using a shit knife and thinking it's great. That's what I'm most afraid of.”

“I'm sure that it will cut things and not fall apart, at least not right away. That's all me or you really needs. Look at it this way,” she said. “There's endless free coffee in the break room and yet we've built a symbiotic relationship around spending extra time and money buying this. Why?”

Colby took a confident sip and swallowed with a satisfied grunt. “Because it's better,” he said.

“Why?”

He opened his mouth to speak. When words didn't come out, he poured more coffee in. He rolled and roiled the brown liquid around his tongue looking for an answer. It was hot and earthy. “It's hot and earthy,” he said.

“Please, you can do better than that. Is 'hot and earthy' worth three-eighths a cup?”

Colby took another sip. Having expended the adjectives of hot and earthy, all that remained was a strong taste of coffee. He looked to the propaganda on the cup's insulating sleeve. “Volcanic soil ... full-bodied ... nutty undertones,” he said.

“Can you taste the pumice?”

“In every sip.”

“Bullshit. Neither can I. What if every cup I've ever handed you wasn't sourced from the shaded mountains of Venezuela, but the stained carafe of the break room?”

“Then I would be hurt by your deception.”

“But you wouldn't know. You would die buzzed and happy in full belief that your life was filled with the best of everything and your good friend Charlotte helped to make it happen.” She leaned across the massive desk. “Happiness doesn't exist; it's an illusion. That's the best and worst lesson you'll ever learn. That knife salesman is offering you a rare and wonderful gift: the ability to justify your actions. Sure, you might have overpaid, but what's stopping you from believing that that is the most fantastic implement you have ever used?”

Colby quietly, cautiously imagined a future of blissful chopping.

“Suspend your disbelief, your cyna- and skepta- cisms. Embrace the fiction. That could very well be all there is. There's no secret man behind the curtain, just a poorly Spackled wall.”

—

Twenty-four years earlier, An eight-year-old Colby watched Angela, sister, age five, roll her plastic fast-food prize on the vinyl tablecloth, around hamburger wrappers and over french fry speed bumps. Hidden mechanical wizardry caused a cartoon rabbit to bounce out the top and retreat inside the purple and green truck. Up and down, through a ketchup puddle, in and out. To twelve-year-old Colby, it would have resembled a phallus penetrating the air, an image he would have jeered to belay his budding fascination and slight nether stirring, but eight-year-old Colby watched jealously, sweat collecting on

greasy fingers as he gripped his own identical but inferior thrusting rabbit truck.

He had scarfed two fries and stretched a hole in the toy's plastic bag before unwrapping his cheeseburger. His heart sank as he inspected his unearned prize, something twenty-two-year-old Colby would have called a bribe of Big Business. The purple paint of the truck walls and the green paint of the body wavered and overlapped where Angela's had crisp lines and he detected a clicking inside where plastic gears didn't quite fit. The sliver of ear that never fully descended aggrieved him more for its proximity to perfection than if it had only descended halfway or not at all.

Forty-five-year-old Colby would have called this a Friday-four-thirty product made by a Chinaman eager to get home, eat rice and make male babies.

Eight-year-old Colby slowly rolled the toy back and forth until he found the ear's lowest point and ran his fingers across the bump. He applied increasing pressure until he heard a sickening snap. He froze and looked to his mother and sister, both oblivious to the grotesque crack. The rabbit now rattled somewhere inside. Colby watched his sister's continued amusement with her superior facsimile. She delighted in the smooth mobility that mocked his own dysfunction.

“Let me see that, Angie,” he said.

“See what?”

“Your toy.”

“It's the same as yours.”

“I know, but can I see yours?”

“Fine, can I see yours?”

“Later. You can see it later.” Angela surrendered the truck and Colby gave it a cursory once-over.

“I'll be right back,” he said and smuggled the two toys into the bathroom. Even on the rug's uneven surface, Colby admired the exquisite motion of Angela's truck, the rabbit's graceful buoyancy, the clean lines of the paint and lettering: ACME Carrots. His chugged along like a jalopy, a mess of clicks and spastic rabbits. He opened the bathroom door to his mother's imposing form.

“What are you doing with your sister's toy?” she said.

“Nothing. I was just giving it back.”

“Make sure you give her her's.”

Colby could not tell if the inflection on “her's” was real or imagined.

“Which one is her's?” she said.

Colby looked at the two trucks in his two hands, their differences glaring and obvious to him, but probably, maybe, no one else, and extended the hand holding his undesirable.

“Are you sure?” she said.

Colby nodded slightly and slowly.

“Don't lie to me, Colby.”

He struggled to believe that she could know which was which, but that possibility, seemed frighteningly likely. He flung the dishonest offering into the nearest wall and the plastic splintered on impact. Shards skipped along the hardwood floor and the rabbit stowaway took a final leap into a houseplant.

“But I don't want that one. It sucks!” Colby shouted.

“Colby! I will not tolerate your lying or your bad language,” she said. “Get to your room.”

Angela watched the spectacle in silence and Colby stomped up the stairs. He lay

face-down on his bed breathing through cotton.

Hours or minutes later, there was a soft rapping on his door. He opened it and found the surviving ACME Carrot truck on a scrap of paper with “To: Colby” scrawled on it.

The truck's wheels caught in the piles of the carpet and skidded along his bedspread but he watched the action from every angle: the rabbit's narrow profile, its goofy carrot-eating grin, the vacuum-molded indentation separating the backs of its ears. Soon he was asleep on the comforter with the truck between his pillow and nightstand.

His mother later checked on him and noted her youngest's generosity. She placed the truck in the plastic bin under his bed which held a hundred similar novelties. No one would touch it again until sixteen-year-old Colby would jostle the lot into a trash bag and send them to a landfill where the truck and the many others would outlast eighty-nine-year-old Colby.

—

The tracking website had boasted “delivered” when Colby checked it before leaving the office, but he couldn't spot the package as he pulled up to the house. He approached the house with a sharp pain in his gut and entered the kitchen in time to witness Jeanne unceremoniously draw his knife from its cardboard sheath.

“What are you doing?” he said.

“Opening your knife,” she said looking down at her reflection in the knife.

“You knew I had no intention of doing that.”

“Which is why I did it.”

“Why do you always think you know what's best for me?”

She punctured a packaging air sac with the pointed tip and the released air hissed

briefly past the steel. "Because that's the role you've given me," she said.

"What? No, I haven't."

"You have, but I wouldn't expect you to notice. You go to work and your business things and everyone gets bits of you, the good bits. Then you come home and I get the doubts and worries and neuroses."

"What are you talking about? Don't make this about us."

"I wish it was about us, but it's about you, Colby."

"No it's not. It's about a knife. An expensive knife that might be shit and wasn't to be opened."

"Well, too late for that," she said and held it aloft. Light bounced around the room. "Here it is! Out in the open, exposed, collecting moisture and bacteria, corroding, oxidizing, dulling."

"You knowingly went against my wishes. Stop making this about me."

"Right, fine. It's about this knife you wanted so badly."

"I wasn't even sure if I did. I was conned into it by the saleskid; I was duped."

"Duped? For fuck's sake, Colby, it's just a knife."

"It's more than that; it's the principle."

"So, now it's about principles? Some kind of moral crusade?" Jeanne dragged a carrot from the bag and slapped it on the wooden cutting board. "Are you sure you want to talk principles with the woman with the knife?"

Thwack

She split the carrot with such force her frizzy hair covered her face and the narrow half of the carrot rolled to the floor.

"Stop that. Don't take your anger out on the knife," he said. Jeanne held her hair

back on her head and smirked at him.

“What anger? I thought you were mad at me. Should I be mad at you for something?”

“What? No. You just seem like it.”

“I'm fine.” *Thwack*

“Now you're abusing it just to piss me off.”

“There's a difference-” *Thwack*

“Stop.”

“-between abusing-” *Thwack*

“Stop.”

“-and using.” *Thwack*

“Stop!”

“It wants to be used.” *Thwack*

“Stop.” A nub of carrot remained near the board's edge. Jeanne stared at him and swung the knife down. She missed the carrot and the cutting board and the impact of steel on granite made a horrible scraping sound. Though impossible, Colby thought he heard the tiny chip of steel clatter to the white tile floor with cataclysmic force.

“You ruined it. It's been open for ten minutes and it's already broken. I knew it was shit,” he said and rushed to inspect the injured implement Jeanne held aloft. This was his first real view of the knife, not the salesman's display model, not the picture in the catalog, but his actual knife. Fifteen-year-old Colby saw a nine-inch phallus, forty-five-year-old Colby noticed his receding hairline, eighty-eight-year-old Colby forgot why he was holding a knife and thirty-two-year-old Colby saw a beauty in the blade's three bands: the wide reflective one that showed his in-turned lips, the tapered, matte band that

angled to the edge and the thinnest band, sharply angled to the cusp, with the nick right where the edge begins to curve into the tip. Each breath clouded its surface, but the luster always returned. His eyes traveled from the handle, along the edge, lingered on the nick then to the point, then back, lingered again and continued back down the blade. He felt drawn to it, the nick, the nothing that was something. The blade was no longer a featureless steel expanse; the nick offered a point of reference, an anchor, spatially and temporally in the knife's existence. There was now and always would be a pre-nick and post-nick. Colby and Jeanne stood facing each other, two adults searching for the imperceptible point of convergence.

“It's beautiful,” he said.

“You can't be serious; after all that,” she said.

“It's marred with human experience.”

“You've lost it.”

“Almost.”

Jeanne lowered the knife and their faces were the closest in months. Neither moved. He searched her gray fractal irises and traced constellations in her freckles. She buffed the blade back to its original shine, wrapped it in the dish towel and offered him the handle. It had three tapered, supposedly ergonomic lumps and was smoother than he would have liked. He noticed the silver stripe along its length and three securing rivets of the full-tang, a major selling point, but he returned to the nick, that singular serration, which had become the knife's most endearing feature.

“Hand me an onion.”

A Wake for the Garry Owen

I had envisioned an all-night revelry with all of us, drinking through last call, carousing in the streets, cracking open whatever untapped sources of merriment remained in the apartment before our forced relocation to prohibition housing in our individual hometowns. I wanted to crawl from bed the next morning and pull on my dress pants and shiny blue robe in a hangover haze. I wanted three Advil and a Red Bull for breakfast.

Truthfully, though, we had been celebrating the impending apocalypse for the past month, so I shouldn't have been disappointed, but with everyone's folks in town, fatalistic packing and last minute preparations, I went alone. I cut across the train tracks that weaved through the campus' forested peripheries. No one had ever seen the train, and the nearby station even denied its existence with a placard sign stating "Trains Today: No" everyday, but if you left your window open late at night, it would inevitably startle you awake just as you were drifting off or she was drifting into your dreaming arms.

I leaned on the bar, made my last purchase as an undergraduate and sat at a table near the front window before Anne returned with the change. The musicians played up front, same as any Thursday night, the same songs they played every week. You wouldn't have known that this was the last night. You wouldn't have known that this was to be our wake for the Garry Owen.

Across the bar, Caroline waved her empty hand in conversation as if conducting the crowd and sipped stout between comments, giggles and guffaws. Caroline. Thick dark hair, dark eyes, and a fiercely entertaining wit. Even the music seemed dulled by the time it reaches me, as if the band played at her, for her, and I only received her rejected echos. Her legs were crossed, right on left and she bounced her suspended foot

to the music. She was showing off her shoes – white canvas high-tops splattered with day-glo paint. Chartreuse, purple and orange paint streaked recklessly across the fabric, unexpectedly vibrant in the smoky darkness. She seemed like the kind of girl who would decorate them herself and would let it ride if anyone assumed that. That was her greatest secret and greatest success. But I knew better.

I knew for a fact that the shoes were purchased online from a small boutique and I had the receipt to prove it. The shoes were a gift shortly before we ended our second attempt last semester, which was why they haven't come out until then. Caroline wasn't the kind of girl to squander a good gift. She looked my way once then not again and I only allowed myself clandestine glances at her, as per our tacit silence. That was fine, because I turned her down twice.

I wondered if her retinue knew that I enthralled her, twice upon a time. I always wondered that about people like her, people who can ignite a room. Who ignites their room? What pattern of rubbed sticks and struck flint lit her tinder box afire? For Caroline, I was the ticket, though she wasn't one to let on, not anymore.

I had bookended my college experience, more or less in her pants. She wasn't the first, but she was the first I had taken seriously, again, more or less. She sat in our freshman common room late at night writing in a yellow journal, bright yellow like those poisonous rainforest frogs, as if to warn snoopers “you won't like what you'll find in here.” She looked bookish and introverted in her round glasses on that quiet weeknight detailing sexual conquests in her caution-tape journal. I don't remember her explicitly telling me that she wrote erotic fiction; I just knew, a piece of information absorbed through her skin or pilfered from the depths of her hair.

“I'm writing about sex,” she might have said. “Raunchy, animalistic, Bikini Atoll

sex.”

I would have nodded my head, not understanding why she would have told me something so personal, so potentially embarrassing, but she did. They all did and I revealed nothing; the less I divulged about myself, the more they seemed eager to spill.

Separated by a spartan dorm table, Caroline and I courted over periodic games of gin rummy with a deck of beer-sticky cards. It was hard to take the game seriously; I'm not terribly competitive and I doubt it was even a complete deck and we never even finished the game. Someone would inevitably come along, distract one or both of us and that would be that. A pleasant timekiller, that's all it was. But the tighter I clutched my cards, the looser she let her hand tip until they were spread across the table. Before that first time, she had leaned across the table on her elbows. I memorized her hand and saw the white B-cup beneath her shirt before she kissed me for the first time.

In the weeks leading to our first winter break, we cloistered ourselves in her bed. It was a fluffy thing with pillowed surfaces and a thick, goose-down comforter. All that padding made the standard-issue dorm bed actually feel larger as we sunk into its folds, sometimes two lumps, sometimes one. A true feat of warm excess. We were caterpillar twins in a cotton-blend cocoon.

We passed the first snow like that, watching the inch or two collect on her basement-level window. It wasn't much, but during those first four freshman months, everything was novel. We heard the shrieks and splats outside as nineteen-year-olds became seven-year-olds. The guys tried to squeeze the dry fluffy powder into projectiles while the girls, with pajama pants tucked into their Uggs, hid behind parked cars. Two of Caroline's friends, one oddly tall, the other oddly short, overdressed in boots and snow pants, stood in the doorway and asked if we were coming outside. She looked at me,

nestled against my hips and declined; putting on more clothes to be colder wasn't appealing.

Our time in the snow came soon after, during a “talk.” We paced an ellipse around the dorm, crossing and overwriting our footsteps like a Spirograph in a veil of privacy only movement and cold weather can provide. The walking meant I didn't have to look at her much, and when I did, I looked past her at the snowflakes shimmering in the streetlights.

“So, what *are* we?” she finally said.

“We're humans,” I said. “Just and nothing else.” She glared over her glasses which I found arousing rather than intimidating, which I suppose could possibly have been the point.

“Come on, I'm serious,” she said and tugged on my arm between pout and tantrum. I don't like when girls get serious; it means that I have to stop having fun.

“I am serious. Serious is me,” I said to the falling snow. We retreaded over our previous steps. “Mr. Serious,” I said. My arm festered uncomfortably where she held it. I mentally annexed that point of contact, an emotional amputation.

“So,” she said.

“So, what?”

“So, what about my question?”

“What about it?”

“What are we?”

“Why do we have to be anything? Why can't we just be what we are?”

“Fine.” She stopped glancing at me but didn't release my arm. We completed another lap in silence. Playtime was over.

“Are we together or not?” she said. I had haggled her down to a simple yes or no question.

“I don't think I'm ready for a relationship,” I said finally and without fanfare. It surprised me more than it surprised her; I imagine she had expected that all along, whereas I had never expected to actually say it. She let go of my arm and I reunited it with my body.

“If that's how you feel,” she said and made fresh tracks away from the dorm and away from me.

It's strange remembering her being so vulnerable; that was before she evolved into the unshakable, attention-commanding creature that exists today. How much I had to do with her metamorphosis, I'll never know. Was I the threatening environmental factor that pushed her to her niche? That bed was more cocoon than I thought.

I wondered if her shoes sensed me as their selector, he who scoured the internet to find a gift worthy of upholding his lover's social charade. Those shoes had 69'd in their box freshly unwrapped on her bedroom floor as we did it on her birthday. I should have called her bluff. I should have purchased a pair of plain white shoes and a set of bright tempera paints. I could have been laughing to myself they languished in a closet, desperate for some legitimate creativity or spontaneity. Instead, I had purchased a pair with creativity baked in.

Caroline and I had discovered the Garry Owen together after finishing our video production midterm project last semester. The editing suite in the basement of Bridenbaugh Hall was windowless, dark, hot and quiet except for the fans of the four high-end Macs. We spent hours there alone trimming and rearranging our project. It was a place I looked forward to because I knew we'd be together, even though I knew nothing

would ever happen there. While our project rendered, we talked about going out somewhere to celebrate. We both wanted someplace new, away from the popular student hang-outs and the Garry Owen was only a street over from the popular bars, but had a rough reputation that had kept most everyone away. 'Scary Owen' was how others, those who even knew it existed, referred to it and it certainly didn't make a great first impression. It had no sign out front except a script Guinness sign and inside it was mostly empty save for a couple questionably unkempt townies who lazily watched us as we came in. We looked around at the charming wood beams, the Irish décor, the fireplace and I saw that smile creep across Caroline's face. The place had a comforting darkness, a delightful emptiness, and best of all, a slight haze of smoke. Anne had treated us as kindly as anyone else and when we sat at the long Irish bar, looking at each other in the opposite mirror behind the rows of liquor bottles, we knew we had found the place.

After that, we met there regularly to hide from my girlfriend who was not one for this kind of place. Soon, Caroline brought her friends and I brought my friends and two groups of regulars were quickly established.

Caroline and I regular left together, the hour and our sobriety dictating the closeness of the walk back. One night, we had wandered down a residential street away from the weekend revelry and stopped on the periphery of a streetlight's glow, each half-lit. Face-to-face, again, she said, "How many times are we going to do this, Jake?"

"I'm sorry." A moment ago she had been biting her lip in that painfully seductive way. I slowly inhaled the lavender and jasmine of her shampoo and her scent intoxicated me even more when fresh and unadulterated by dry leaves and exhaust. Focusing on her took effort, she was so close, and when I relaxed my eyes she multiplied, filling my vision with phantoms. I immediately re-focused.

“I don't care that you're sorry. We can't keep doing this,” she said.

“I know, I know.”

“If you know, then do something about it.”

“Like what?”

“Like what? Do I really need to spell it out?”

“It's not that easy.”

“Fine,” She pulled her face away and stepped back, ready to leave. The prickling electricity of her proximity dissipated and I came down hard.

“Wait.” I reached out to stop her and paused, letting my half-extended arm linger and collapse.

“For what? I've *been* waiting,” she said. Her anger momentarily softened. “Look what it's got me.”

“I'm sorry,” I said, more sincerely this time after glimpsing the pain my selfishness had caused, the surprising kind of pain I was convinced girls wouldn't trouble themselves with over me. “What do you want from me?”

“Are you stupid? I thought this would be a good thing, us, but if you aren't convinced, or convinced enough, I'm certainly done trying to persuade you. Now I just want an answer. Either we're going through with this or not, enough of this limbo shit.”

“Okay.”

“Okay? The fuck does 'okay' mean? Come on, Jake, I'm not going to keep doing this; I can't. You have a girlfriend.” She said it sympathetically as if she had been tasked with giving me the bad news. “I'm so stupid. This whole thing is stupid. I can't believe I'm doing this again,” she said, searching the darkness. “What's it going to be?” The white begonia perched arrogantly above her right ear mocked me with its intimacy. She

stared me down; her temporary weakness seemed ages ago. I knew it was unfair to her, to both of them, but I just couldn't let either one go. *I want you*, I thought, but I had repeated the words in my head so often they had become stale. Any attempt to form them crumbled on my tongue and left my mouth sticky and arid.

“I don't know,” I said in a pathetic mumble.

“*How* don't you know? What is there not to know?”

“I told you, it's not that easy.”

“No, it's not, but I can make it easy. Goodbye, Jake.” The twirl of her skirt flipped me off as she left. The streetlight sent a sheen through her obsidian strands as she crossed underneath it and faded to black.

The chorus of Petty's “American Girl,” joined by a smattering of audience voices, washed over me steeped in small-town sepia browns. Something finally seemed to acknowledge the significance of the night with the first hint of a eulogy. I had heard that song every week played just that way for the last nine months and every time I get that feeling, some kind of prescience when they played it, a clairvoyant nostalgia. As Petty had pined for the country's foregone youth, I had felt the exact feeling I felt then. It had been like being in two places at once, or the same place but different times; experiencing it while simultaneously already missing it, a preemptive reminiscence. I tried to ignore it because it seemed like a waste; the moments I had only half lived would only happen once while I had a whole life to perfect wistful nostalgia, but I couldn't help it. It was just what the music did. The band began another ballad and I realized that the set-list, gradually established through repeated performances, had been hand-picked for this night by all the others.

Usually exes fall back into each other, more accident than intent, having

previously eroded each other in a specific pattern of dimples and craters that still aligned, but we had courted again. In just three years we had become different people, so everything felt idyllic, both fresh and familiar, but I made the same mistakes. When it ended, we didn't ask or expect the other to abandon the G.O., with such little time left we handled it like proto-adults and just ignored each other, but anyone could have looked on this scene, looked on me looking on and know that it was all her's.

Caroline downed the last half of her beer in two large swallows. After the first one, she kept the glass tilted, draining what remained past her barely parted lips in a steady dark stream. The foamy head of the beer crawled down the side of the glass and she left for the bathroom or for another round.

I was tired of looking on and didn't even bring my drained glass back to the bar, unable to face Anne for the last time. I left casually, like I was just going out for a smoke break, which in a way, I was. A smoke break to inhale all the shit that actually caused cancer: a thankless job, unbalanced checkbooks, disappointed parents, male pattern baldness.

Outside the door, I nod to the harp on the round Guinness sign, the taupe-painted bricks, and the heavy green and brass door in solemn gratitude while I untangle my headphones. I glimpse my empty glass on the table where I left it, ready to be refilled and drained again by someone else with the money and the need. Caroline hadn't returned to her audience yet. I dialed up the Felice Brothers and popped in my earbuds. A growling trombone rattled my skull, and I was still on the front steps when the door opened, letting out the music and Caroline. We stood there, looking at each other with partial, rueful glances.

She reverently folded her hands. "Should we say a few words?" she said. She

saw into me in a way no one else could and at times like this I hated her for it.

“No need for theatrics,” I said. I hadn’t felt like tiptoeing my way through a conversation with her, but we had both made it out there that night when no one else did. I guess that meant something. “Leaving already?”

“You left first,” she said. She dropped down a step, pushing me off the stoop. The shoes had found me after all.

“I was alone,” I said.

“Those weren't my friends either, not really. They were all juniors. A legacy of sorts. You'd like them. They'll treat the G.O. well, but I got kind of bored.”

How could she have been bored on this night of nights? I sympathized for her; if she was already bored, things didn't look good. It was only downhill from there.

But in a way she was right. There wasn't much here for us anymore, or whatever there was would tomorrow be gone. Refusing to acknowledge it wouldn't keep it from being true. It was already over and there was no going back; that's what everyone else knew. That's what Caroline had always known.

She reached for my player and looked at the track. “Greatest Show on Earth”? Just because it mentions Gettysburg?”

“It's melancholic. I thought it fit.”

“God, you're sentimental.”

“Look, I wasn't bothering you.”

“I didn't realize I was bothering you.”

“You're not.”

We walked, not drunkenly, but close. I set my feet free and made that retreat I'd made a thousand times before along invisible indentations worn into the concrete over

four years, though I hadn't expected to be making it again with her. We turned down the dead-end street, passed the derelict warehouse's shattered windows and crumbling brick and reached the pavement's end. There was a brief bit of grass then the gravel bed of the ghost train tracks. We continued onto Constitution Ave and were passing the drainage ravine where I almost pissed on a skunk when I heard it, that distant rhythmic rumble.

“Do you hear that?”

“Yeah, sounds like the train,” she said without interest.

“The train! Come on, we can catch it. I've listened to that fucking train for four years and have never seen it.”

“It's just a freight train.”

“You've seen it?”

“I'm sure I have. Pretty sure.”

“Still. I haven't.”

“Fine. Follow me.” Her shoes were bright against the dark stained steel of the tracks that we followed along the fence and into the woods. “Good thing about trains, huh? They leave a trail,” she said. “And in return they always know where they're headed.”

“But do they know if they're coming or going?”

“Jake Berkshire, the fucking philosopher.”

We walked for I don't know how long, mostly silent, except for shifting gravel or a snapping stick. I no longer had any idea what we were doing, but she was still here and I was still here and this walk must have been easing something for both of us. Caroline wouldn't be here if it wasn't doing something for her. No, that was me. I wouldn't have been there if there wasn't something for me.

“So are you not upset about this at all?” I asked.

“About what? Us?”

“No, graduation. Leaving. The what-comes-after.”

“Should I be? It was great, sure, the best, but it's over.” She lit a cigarette. We were well beyond the streetlights now and the trees seemed darker than the sky. I couldn't hear the train anymore, or if I could, I couldn't distinguish it. It had melted into the background noise so quickly and just became another feature of the landscape. It was a failed errand and I didn't want to be there anymore and I didn't want to be with her.

“Why, are you?” she asked.

I took the cigarette from her fingers, careful not to touch her, and finished it in two long drags.

“Rude,” she said and lit another.

“Necessary,” I said.

“For what,” she mumbled, trying to light the fresh stick.

“To... do you have your flask?”

She exhaled. “No, why would I?”

I asked please with my eyebrows, hoping she could see that face and that it still worked. “Fine,” she said. “But be gentle.” She went in her purse and handed me the flask. I could feel the outline of what I knew to be a Rolling Stones logo. I took a long pull of spiced rum.

“Thanks,” I said and handed it back.

“Course.”

“Yes,” I said.

“Yes, what?”

“Yes, I am. Sad, or. Disappointed. That it's all over.”

And then we were upon it, this great trembling beast in the woods behind the pond behind the apartments. The train had stopped at a train yard or track switch or something and just sat there, occasionally exhaling a sharp burst of air like a whale's blowhole. We were at the last car and walked along looking for the front that curved out of sight to the left. Each boxcar had a small red light at the top and bottom, enough to bathe the surrounding trees in a sinister, dark-room glow.

“Guess it's going,” Caroline said. “Should we follow it?”

Though it wasn't moving, the entire thing vibrated from something running and unseen, as if it might depart at any moment. As if it was eager to. Caroline stepped closer and placed her hand against the crenelated metal. I did too and we could feel its impatience, the frustrated kinetic energy. It felt like a beached whale whose heart, even panicked, beat once for every sixty of mine. I could smell the grease and warm metal of the worn wheels. I leaned against it and felt the massiveness of its steel and cargo and my own comparative weightlessness, even in the presence of something so mundane and nearly obsolete.

“Is it stupid to be this impressed?” I said.

“It's just a train,” she said.

It awed me that something this immovable was designed to do just that. And then it did. Its vibration changed pitch, and imperceptibly at first, the wheels creaked forward, slowly stealing inches of track. Mighty labored chugs echoed through the trees from the hidden engine up front. The axles screeched as it pulled away, leaving us behind, lighting the woods as it went. I watched the last bit of light filter through the strands of Caroline's frizzing hair and recede, and I wondered what cruel perversion had kept me from

embracing her.

“Admit it,” she said, “You were bored too until I came along.” She walked passed me back toward the street, kicking gravel along the tracks, dusting her shoes gray. I wanted to walk with her, but I followed.

“I did finally break up with her,” I said.

She missed the rock and kicked the track, leaving a black streak across the white and fuchsia. “I heard,” she said.

“I did it for you.”

Caroline rubbed the marred shoe against her calf trying to clear the grime. “That’s a stupid reason to do anything.”

“I did it to be with you.”

“Yeah, well,” she said and turned around to face me. Everything felt different in the wake of the train. The air smelled empty and the woods were quiet, powerless and still. “It kills me to tell you this – the last thing you need is another reason to feel great about yourself – but you affect people, Jake, okay, you matter. Now, before you get all haughty or defensive, it isn’t just you. We all affect each other, more or less, and the sooner you realize this, the better.”

She looked serious, but not the way she had when ending things between us in the past. There was a difference between serious and vulnerable that I had never quite distinguished, in Caroline, others, or myself. She wasn’t opening up to me or begging me to open, she was just being sincere and that felt strange. If anything, it made me vulnerable.

“I’ve been wrong,” I said.

“I know, but don’t go on reliving your mistakes trying to figure out where. They’ll

be other bars that you'll come to like more than the G.O. You'll live in places better than Gettysburg. They'll be other Carolines, too – better ones, trust me. Kill your desires. Embrace that emptiness. If there's nothing left, you leave nothing behind.”

“Is that how you feel about me?”

“Yes. What? It's the truth. I feel nothing for you, not anymore, and I'm okay with that. It's why we can chat like this, or never again, whatever. I've moved on. You should too.”

“Who says I'm not over you?”

“Not me, jackass. This. College. It is whatever it was and now it's done and even you will find something new to enjoy and succeed at. You're not an idiot. You're talented, just kind of an ass. And self-absorbed.”

“You have no idea.”

“No, I kind of do.” She smiled.

The walk back felt quicker than the walk there, buoyed as we were by her flask and our discovery, and soon we were in front of the Garry Owen again.

“Maybe we should say a little something,” she said. “It is the end of an era. Remember what this place used to be like? You gave it a chance.”

“Someone would have found it eventually.”

“That's the spirit. We're not special.”

“Like the train.”

“Like the train. Like Garry Owen.”

“There was tradition here, though,” I said. “A ritual.” Every Thursday's daylight hours went as they did, but at 10 pm, we rallied the faithful for our weekly pilgrimage. We'd approach haggard and numb and depart staggering and a different, better sort of

numb. We tossed unfinished papers, busted condoms, overdrawn accounts and lipstick-stained collars onto the G.O.'s sturdy junkyard of a roof to hold for us, not just until last call, but until we could shoulder them ourselves once again, if ever again. Most of these offerings made themselves known in time, but some lingered like a fickle child's forgotten kite. The G.O. asked for nothing in return for accepting these burdens save a small tithe.

“That must be what church feels like for old people,” she said.

“That's probably exactly it,” I said. We even had our our ushers, our sacrament, our hymns, our fragrant, choking incense.

“Are you saying we're standing outside a church right now?”

“Didn't think you were the marrying type.”

“Oh, I'm not. Especially not, you know, you. You brought it up.” She checked the time. “The band's gone, but it shouldn't be last call just yet. I bet Anne would let us have one final drink.”

The night was warm and I didn't want to head back anymore. I enjoyed her company, I remembered now, that cruel way she had of wrangling the worst of me and leaving all the other bad parts for me to sort out as I got to them. That way of only slightly despising me. Tomorrow, we'd be dressed alike and she'd be in the row in front of me though our last names were four letters apart. Things would return to the way they had been yesterday, been nine months ago, been three years ago, then all four and all those after.

“No,” I said. “I'm good, thanks.”

“Right. That was a test.”

“It really is just a bar.”

“Just walls and taps,” she said. “Oh, and congrats. For what it's worth.”

“Yeah. You too.”

She walked down Constitution Ave in the other direction. I thought about walking her and those shoes home, just to be polite or chivalrous or chauvinist, but you can only say good bye to something so many times and I was already way over my quota that night. I made one last offering to the Owen's roof for whatever it was worth. In all likelihood, I'd never see this place again and what I tossed up there, I'd never miss, but I was comforted knowing that it would be there waiting if I ever returned.

On the walk back to my apartment in the empty early morning hours, I balanced on the track and waited for the train. The metal was smoothed from the weight of the wheels and a bright, polished streak cut down the middle. It looked fresh. If the train came along and slowed to a chug, I swear I'd have grabbed a boxcar handle and swung myself inside that rattling cage, to ride it wherever it might be going. But there were no more trains that day, or any other day, to my knowledge, before or since.

I passed the parking lot where Caroline had met my parents before our second relationship. “I think she likes you,” my mom had said. I denied it. “And I think you like her,” she said and I denied that too. I was twenty; she had to be wrong.

I had an awful feeling that I would spend my life doing exactly what Caroline had told me not to do, picking apart past mistakes while making new ones to be dissected in time.

Across campus our parting footprints still circled that dorm like planetary rings, and somewhere, she's looking at her shoes, thinking of me and trying to remove that set black smudge.

An Accidental Pyre

Five-watt candles dripping plastic wax outline the porch, multiply in the multi-paned windows, hide the outside -- three walls of fake flames reflected on darkness with nothing notable beyond. Only the refinery stands out, a grid of lights glowing on its steaming minarets, capped by a distant persistent flame.

He exhales a plume, watches it billow, watches the plume of the refinery, watches it billow. When topped with the coal, the hookah looks like the refinery topped with flame. He stoked the coal himself, made it glow, made it ember himself. There are two tiny coals, quiet but alive, and he blows off the ash obscuring the orange. One glows brighter, burns hotter, crumbles faster. The other is black and cold. He pushes them together, thinks they should be pushed closer together, nudges them together. The second will catch, he thinks, together the other will catch. They will keep burning, keep burning together, both, keep filling his lungs with the thick apple smoke, keep filling his head with words.

Keep that darkness at bay.

It's not the nicotine he likes but the tainted breath, the visible evidence of respiration.

The refinery worker looks up from his daylighted catwalk and sees the breath of his beast, evidence of respiration, evidence of production. He looks up and sees the billowing breath of progress.

The smoker misses so many people, apologizes to so many, even knowing he has

so many mistakes still to make. Earlier, he left for a get-well card he needed to send but instead came home with a handle of whiskey and he's downed too much already tonight.

It's not the nicotine but the glowing, the warmth, the evocation. Millennia have trained him to feel safe before the ember and he embraces it. Though he can't feel the warmth, it's too little, too distant – even the smoke is cooled by the water before entering the most sensitive parts – he knows it was once there, is there still if he reaches out and cups it.

The refinery worker doesn't think about the shattered states, the torn tundra of the crude, but the paycheck that dropped on Friday. He doesn't think of the long-term complications, isn't paid to do that, but to keep the coals burning, the fire stoked, maintain the country's community, this country's survival.

He feels like Prometheus.

She had been here the last time he smoked, next to him on the vinyl love seat. The smoke kept escaping through her nose and he pinched it to keep the poison in. She looked to him for advice because he was just so damn good at keeping it all in – at stoking the coals, at bringing the blurry.

They never touched, made it a point to never touch, but he had pinched her nose and she looked at him sideways, cheeks puffed, and he knew she'd never do it right, knew the smoke did no good from there.

Knew she secretly preferred to stay pure.

The refinery worker tests the railing, presses his shins, his stomach against the

railing. He marvels at how little it takes to suspend him up here, how little it would take to fail. He thinks how effortless falling must feel.

The fire wanes. The smoker heats another coal on the electric coil of the kitchen stove. The coil glows orange and the coal catches and if he blows just right it will ignite and burn. Suspended between the rings of the coil, the tiny flames flicker. He lies on the counter in its radiating warmth.

He wonders how to create something so flammable.

The smoker balances the coal on the hookah's peak and inhales to percolate. He leans back and exhales beneath the suspended lantern -- the hideous lantern made of molded taupe plastic like the fake candles, plastic made from petroleum, possibly from the refinery across town.

He had brought her a blanket to warm her in the way he wasn't allowed. He had wanted to inject her with poisons, had taken it into himself, cleansed it and leaned in to pass it to her. She retreated, refused it, what he could offer, all and only. He could not speak to convince her, if he spoke it would escape, so a soot-smudged hand against dark blonde hair cajoled. She asked what he was doing, said she could do it herself, pulled the blanket closer, took tiny puffs looking at nothing beyond. He knew that, no matter what, there would always be another whose distance he despised.

The expired smoke leapt from him in hacks.

The refinery worker wipes the grease from his hands on the rag in his pants. He reflects on the petroleum lubricant used to anoint its many moving parts – produce lubricant to produce petroleum to produce lubricant to keep the pieces moving. He

remembers that they used to use whales.

They used to conquer friction with flesh.

It isn't the nicotine but the asphyxiation, the intentional denial, the brief pain, the palpable panic of temporary death. The smoker doesn't consider the long-term complications of breathing in what he's meant to exhale.

When he stands, the blood drains from his brain and blurs the bricks, bricks laid by union hands, hands that had just won the war. Those hands stained with gunpowder and frostbite and razor wire, marks of what used to be, what might have been, what had it all become?

His hands are dusted with the ash of the coal he stoked himself, have been dotted with hairs stolen from the head he stroked, all and only.

He falls to the love seat, gripping the hose, tipping the hookah, spilling the coals. He imagines smoke billowing from the burn, the spreading warmth, the inevitable suffocation of his accidental pyre.

But the coal burrows itself into the piles, produces a singeing toxic smell. The carpet, too, is made of plastic, finely spun threads that refuse to catch.

They give and bend and stink instead.

Gentle stinking wisps of smoke, all and only.

He tries to pry the coal from the carpet but the two have fused, have formed an outline like cold wax. He lifts the metal screen from the bowl, finds the tobacco scorched beneath. The metal retains its heat and sears, but he doesn't catch, doesn't bleed. The skin reddens, bubbles, peels. He holds his finger straight and pus drips to his knuckle.

He wonders what it takes to spark someone aflame.

The refinery worker tells his son he spends his nights on the river, on prime real estate devoted to industry. He looks out over the sleepers in their ordered homes, at the skyline shining upstream. He sees the distant lighted span of the Walt Whitman and wonders if the good gray poet would be pleased.

Take Two

Shane's eyes follow Helen as she unlocks the door and walks her bike into the foyer of the apartment complex. His sweatshirt hangs around her curve-less frame; it's loose on him and even looser on her. It droops past and conceals her bottom, but that's okay; it's nothing special, relatively flat as it should be. Nevertheless, he likes how the sweatshirt looks, not because it's particularly flattering, but because of what it suggests, even if it only actually suggests the impending depths of autumn. Shane had graciously offered it to her in an earlier scene. She had resisted at first, as she should, as he knew she would, but the evening air whipping past her on the ride back from campus quickly brought shivers. She had been coy and cute and finally accepted, if only for homeostatic reasons. Shane didn't mind either way.

He soaks her in from behind as she disappears into the foyer. Her movement entrances him. It isn't a strutting model's walk; she doesn't kick her hips out left and right, as she shouldn't. It's subtle and deliberate, flippant even. It's the gait of a girl who long ago mastered walking and hasn't thought about it since. She closes the door as she exits, gliding past it like a stream lingering around a picturesque river bend. He imagines that she too wishes to prolong their moment.

As she heads back, she tugs twice on the elastic imprisoning her hair in a hasty bun and a shake of her head sends it all into place, shining like raven feathers in the evening's waning light. It's thick and the ends curl slightly, just as they should. He imagines what a shock it would be to see it wet and compressed, plastered against her cheeks, neck and shoulders. Maybe during a surprise rain, maybe fresh out of the shower, maybe in the shower.

Shane remains straddling his bike. Helen stands directly across from him, the bike's front tire brushing the insides of her thighs.

“Thanks for riding back with me,” she says, and twists the sweatshirt's drawstring around her finger like she owns it. Holding the grommet with her thumb, she coils the string from knuckle to black-painted nail with wide wrist rotations. His chest tightens with each pass.

Shane would not mention the sweatshirt. He hopes that she'll forget to return it and then he would sneak at least an envoy of himself into her forbidden chambers. An agent that could report back on the tattered posters of obscure bands, scattered DVD's of the foreign films they heatedly discussed, the rack of spice jars labeled “coriander,” “cardamom” and “clove,” the vintage French ads with black cats and frogs on stools sipping beer, and her bed. The bed with the Egyptian cotton sheets that her suitors, exchange students from Ecuador, Hong Kong, Morocco, wipe themselves on as they pull out and roll over and the goose down comforter that collects the ash of their hand-rolled cigarettes. The thousand-thread-count sheets that Shane imagines she wraps herself in on that rare lonely night as he shares his girlfriend's JCPenny's dorm chic, sandpaper sheets.

“No problem,” Shane says. “That's a pretty dark stretch back there, you never know what could happen.”

“I told you I'd be fine. I do it everyday, but it was nice to have the company.”

“It's on the way, anyway,” Shane says. She squints at him and smirks.

“It is not. You live completely across campus.” She's smiling broadly now, reading into the narrative of his actions, perhaps preparing an annotated version of his clumsy and illicit courtship.

“Okay, maybe it isn't, geographically, but I didn't mind.”

“Well, thanks, again,” Helen says. “Oh, and thanks for this.” She takes a step back and begins climbing out of the sweatshirt, one arm at a time. She tugs on each sleeve and retracts both arms into the threadbare beast's vast belly, reaches out from the bottom and pulls it off by the hood. The hem of her t-shirt hitchhikes to the foot of her breasts, exposing a soft midriff and a sliver of black underwire. This humble sight excites Shane like a Puritan glimpsing a Goody's ankle. A residual breeze animates the wayward strands of her mussed hair.

“You were right,” she says. “I did need it.” Helen steps forward, straddling the front tire again. Eight inches of October air separate their faces. Helen, the shorter, looks slightly up at him from behind her eyelids and appears innocent and eminently desirable. She hands Shane the sweatshirt –

“Cut!” Jake yells and rises from behind the monitor. Elena throws down the sweatshirt.

“Again?” she whines.

“Yes, again. Who's the director here?” Jake says. Elena and Martin head toward their starting positions. “No, what are you doing? Stop. Stay where you are,” he says and weaves between lights, dollies and tripods to venture on-set. An assistant retrieving Helen's bicycle from the apartment pauses and looks to Jake for instruction.

“Not you. Keep doing whatever you were doing,” Jake tells him. “I need to talk to the leads.” Jake stands adjacent to Elena and Martin, looking at the ground, arms crossed. His eyes meet Elena's.

“Do you know what you did wrong?” he says after a beat.

“Of course not,” she says. “If I did, I would have done it right.” Jake bends down, picks up the sweatshirt, dusts it off. Elena rolls her eyes.

“Shit.”

“Yes,” Jake says. “You *handed* him the sweatshirt again. You know that you're supposed to drape it over his shoulders.” He mimes draping and looks like a matador.

“Sorry. I keep forgetting; it's just so damn stupid,” she says and ties her hair back in a bun.

“I'm with her on this one, Jake,” Martin says. “The whole sweatshirt-draping thing is pretty dumb.”

“No, it's not dumb; it's the opposite of dumb and it's imperative for the integrity of the narrative.”

“Why? Can't I just hand him the damn thing?”

“Because this is the way it happened – happens in the script ... it's just something Helen would do. Do I need to explain the intricacies of this gesture?” They remain silent, knowing that he will explain regardless. Jake interprets their unresponsiveness as crippling confusion.

“Fine. The draping of the sweatshirt serves several purposes. Shane has both hands steadying his bicycle and would need to maintain a two-handed grip on the handlebars during the ride back, so pragmatically, Shane has zero free hands to accept or transport the sweatshirt. Furthermore, and more importantly, draping the sweatshirt requires Helen to be within an arm's length of Shane, exponentially increasing the already mounting sexual tension here,” he waves his hand between Elena and Martin.

“It also immediately leads into the succeeding interaction where Helen's proximity and her semi-affectionate gesture makes Shane nervous so he says 'Aww,' which embarrasses Helen, who is not terribly comfortable with affection to begin with. She then childishly, but flirtatiously, pulls the sweatshirt over his head as retribution for

his remark. The two, you two, laugh it off while privately regretting the moment that could have been. We cut to the parallel scenes of Shane riding home looking remorseful and Helen in her apartment also looking remorseful. This sets the foundation for the streetlight scene when they finally kiss.”

“You see, it all depends on the sweatshirt; if the sweatshirt isn't draped the whole movie falls apart.” Elena and Martin exchange glances like siblings enduring a parental lecture.

“Fine,” she says.

“Noted,” he says.

“Good,” Jake says, turns to leave, but stops. He positions himself behind Martin's left shoulder, walks along half the circumference of an imaginary circle while staring at its imaginary center and stops behind the very real Elena.

“Each time, we've shot this, it's been from Shane's left. I want to do it from here, Helen's left. We'll still shoot the first part from behind Shane because we need to see Helen walk inside, but when she goes to drape,” a glance at Elena, “the sweatshirt on Shane, I want to shoot from here. I need to see this scene from Helen's perspective.”

Jake walks back to his monitor and the crew sets up another camera at the new angle. They shift the whole set so that the entrance to Helen's apartment is now off to Shane's left and move the primary camera to shoot from Shane's right.

Jake leans against the canvas seat of his director's chair chewing the inside of his cheek and wishes he hadn't quit smoking. He runs his hand through the thinning hair of a thirty-three-year-old. The kid with the clapper walks on set.

“Sweatshirt scene, take six!” *Clap*

Helen goes to deposit her bike in her apartment. Shane, again staring intently,

hopes that if she insists on returning the sweatshirt, that she would at least have the courtesy to roll around in it a bit first, marking it with an enticing musk that would exclude it from soap and water. Jake wishes he could bring that scent to his audience and curses the limits of the medium.

Helen walks up to Shane, biting the left side of her lip, just as Jake had described it in the script. He tries to conceal the crippling way the gesture affects him, but Helen must know the power she wields. They run through the dialogue just as before. After Helen removes the sweatshirt, the monitor switches to Shane and Jake studies him intensely, watching for his imminent failure. He follows each motion, a lick of the lips, a glance at Helen's mouth, her breasts; he watches the screen like a programmer scanning a line of code for bugs.

Helen drapes. Shane “aww's.” Jake cringes at the line's obnoxiousness; Shane sounds like a twelve-year-old girl.

He whispers to an assistant, flips through the provided script, tearing several pages in the process, and re-reads the exchange; it's exactly as he witnessed. He wrings the script as if attempting to purge Shane's snide comment. He shuts his eyes as the actors continue the scene and rewrites Shane's reaction a dozen different ways, flipping through the logical effects, but nothing sticks. His hands tighten around the rolled papers. He considers that, in practice, Shane's expression could only be sarcastic and Helen reacts to that, not from an aversion to intimacy, which allows the future affection. Jake's animosity subsides as he realizes that it, in fact, strengthens Shane's character because Shane avoids similar remarks in later scenes.

Jake resigns control to the greater narrative and realizes he's missed the end of the take.

“Cut!” he yells. Elena, who had been walking to the apartment as Helen, turns on her heels and powers toward Jake as the crew begins the familiar task of resetting the scene. She stops at the edge of the set and shields her eyes from the key light that partially illuminates her left side.

“How many times are we going to do this, Jake?” Elena stands a few feet away in the lamp's heat, trying to talk to Jake through the equipment and his regrets. The crew looks at him curiously. “I said, how many times are we going to do this scene?”

“Oh. Sorry. Well, if you can do it correctly, then once more should be sufficient,” he says. “We're just about out of daylight; we'll be lucky to get another chance. I'm sorry, you said that just like Helen, as I picture Helen would have, and it threw me off. Good work.”

“Yeah, thanks. Can we finish this up, please?”

“Places,” he yells, a Hollywood cliché he never uses.

“Sweatshirt scene, take seven.” Clap

Jake ignores the monitor this time; he'd rather watch the people interacting in front of him than the pixel reproduction. Helen drapes, Shane “awws” and they part disappointed. Helen disappears inside.

“Cut!” Cast and crew hold their collective breath – “It's good,” he says – and exhale in relief. “That's all for tonight.” The crew expediently begins breaking down light stands and taming wires while arranging for after-work drinks far from the tyranny of Jake Berkshire.

The monarch himself watches the apartment door from his throne. A crew member signals to Elena that the shoot is over and holds the door for her as she exits. She's already extracting the mousse used to inflate her flat hair to Helen-volume with a

comb. Martin meets her for a chat. A camera continues to feed the monitor and Jake watches the interaction in duplicate, picture-in-picture.

“Mr. Berkshire, I need you to approve tomorrow's schedule,” says a pert woman in designer glasses.

“What?” Elena's face lights up at a quip from the funny, funny Martin.

“Tomorrow's schedule, you need to sign off on it. And these expenses as well.”

He blindly leafs through the offered materials, eyes fixed on the leading couple.

“Don't we pay someone to deal with this?”

“Well, we do, that would be me, but you still need to approve it.”

“Yes, yes. Fine.” He signs near the dotted lines, missing his three targets by an aggregated seven inches, and excuses himself. He strides along the boundary between on and off set searching for an opening in the fence of people, equipment and cases.

“Hey, Jake, that new shot looked good,” says Dylan.

“I'm glad. That's your job, isn't it?” Elena places her hand on Martin's arm in parting and they turn to leave. She stops and forces the comb through another patch of mousse.

“And I took a look at the footage from earlier. It looks okay; I don't think we'll need to re-shoot it, the approach scene.”

“Fantastic. We'll talk about it later.” A gaunt intern drags away a large plastic case creating a gap in Jake's personal Maginot Line.

“Mr. Berkshire, I logged the-” Jake nods and surges boldly into the breach.

“Careful!” someone more responsible than Jake shouts as his foot catches a wire and sends a cooling light wobbling. He leaves the clamor behind and reaches Elena.

“Sorry for being so tough on you today,” he says. He inhales deeply through his

nostrils and glances at her lips.

“It's fine; you're the director. It's part of the job, I can take it.” Half her hair swings limply from her head.

“You should know that I'm really happy with your work and the progress you've made during this whole project.”

“Oh, thanks,” she says and hesitates. “I feel comfortable in this character, seems to fit me.”

“Yeah, I noticed. Really good.” She tugs the comb through another inch of hair.

“Right, well, I'm gonna...”

“Do you want to get a late dinner tonight... or maybe tomorrow?”

The First Time the Man with the Extra Life Died

The hole the van had smashed in Rich's father's living room remained covered only by a blue tarp. The van had struck his father's occupied leather recliner and killed him instantly. A young doctor, too young to know his patient's fame, had called Rich after he pronounced his father dead. Give him a few minutes, Rich had said and hung up.

His father was fine now, physically at least, since he possessed the only known Extra Life.

He never revealed where or how, but from about age nine onward Jim strode through life, confident that he always had a second chance. This second chance came at age seventy-nine while he watched a Werner Herzog documentary about himself, and he hadn't left the basement since returning from the hospital.

The front door was missing the right side of its frame, so Rich folded back a flap of the tarp and ducked inside. He examined the exposed cross-section of the wall, siding, studs, tufts of pink insulation, all jagged and twisted. He let the tarp corner fall, which cut off the room's only light. The surviving windows were covered as always with heavy drapes.

Rich let his eyes adjust and the undamaged other side of the room emerged. His brother and sister-in-law had cleaned up the debris and restored most of the room to its pre-collision state. The room looked perfectly normal except for the large hole in the wall. His father's partial *Smilodon populator* skeleton reared in the far corner, its large canines as menacing as ever, among his father's other curios and mementos: a wooden bi-plane propeller hung on the wall, a spear adorned with a length of red silk leaned in a corner, parachute canvas was draped over the bulbous tube television. A pair of moon

boots lay perpendicular under a teak coffee table and an Emmy dulled by dust.

All these items could be displayed in museums or at least fine glass cases, but instead lay strewn like old circulars or family photos; in fact, in lieu of family photos. Rich knew they all had stories at one time, but he didn't know them. He wondered if his father even knew them anymore. The hallway was lined with the early print ads and the later commercial stills of Jim's endorsements: Jim lighting a cigarette with a tarred torch, "Some of us don't need luck, for everyone else there's Lucky Strikes"; Jim standing near a lava flow, "Keeps you dry / in any environment – Right Guard"; Jim posing with a Coup de Ville, "Be the Envy of your World. Cadillac – the Envy of the Road."

Rich passed the dining-turned-trophy room, filled with awards bestowed by humans and stolen from beasts, and descended the narrow staircase to the basement while photos of generations of dignitaries watched.

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From near-Earth orbit, Jim addresses the camera through his helmet. The sun glints off his visor as he hovers, weightless. Earth spins peacefully in the background. His voice is tinny and distant, strong but vulnerable:

"Kalia was – and still is – the love of my life. Her death was devastating, beyond devastating, and I would give both of mine to bring her back. Not for me, but for my sons, Rich and Arthur. They adored her, rightfully so. I adored her and she supported me in my every endeavor. It wasn't the Extra Life that made all my excursions possible over the years, but Kalia. She was the Extra that made Life worth living."

Jim lifts the ash capsule, his hand poised on the screw cap.

"Releasing her remains here is a way of releasing her from the bounds of Earth, away from suffering and gravity and into the limitless beyond. I will honor her unlike

any other.”

The scene freezes and the announcer cuts in: “When we return, Jim will commit his late-wife’s ashes to the vacuum of space. Right after this.”

—

Rich walked into the open basement. The house was an old Italian ranch and the basement extended the area of the floor plan and contained a second kitchen and bathroom, how his father was able to exclusively live down here. He had nailed plywood over the small windows. His father sat on a scratchy mustard-yellow couch reading an old National Geographic, the issue detailing his expedition to map the underwater caves near Mount Gambier in Australia, by the light of a single lamp, its shade tilted. Jim looked up, “So, we just barge into people's houses now?”

“This particular house has a giant hole in it. You need to get that repaired already.”

“The contractor said that the walls are still load-bearing.”

“Fall's coming. Drafts, heating bills, snow.”

“I'll be fine down here.”

“The idea is to not always be down here.”

“I'll get to it when I get to it, Jim said as an end to the conversation.”

“Right, as soon as your busy schedule clears up.” His father brought out the teenager in him. “You have to leave eventually,” Rich said.

“I don't, not as long as my boys, or at least one of my boys, keep bringing me food. And they would never try and starve me out. Did you bring any groceries?”

“You're being --”

His father walked to the stove, poured a can of pork and beans into a pot and set it

to simmer. The stove's white enamel was freckled from weeks of simmering.

“If a man isn't safe in his own living room, where is he safe? There's speeding metal death waiting outside and microscopic stopping death waiting inside, he said and stared through the skin on his arm. How do you do it? How do you and Arthur and your mother, back when she did, convince yourselves to leave the house and get in a car and breathe that air? Walk under tree limbs and overpasses and through thunderstorms?

“We didn't have a choice. It's all we know, he said. He refused to speak in the past tense. Let's go upstairs, just upstairs, you can show me your collection.”

“That shit's still up there? I told your brother to get rid of it all.”

“Everything must have story.”

“They do and they're all lies. I'm nothing but a washed-up actor, a spoiled fraud. I never did anything that no one else did, never went somewhere no other man has. I did more than anyone else, sure, but every expedition, every adventure I took was with people who didn't have the cushion of second chance. But I got all the credit, the one taking the least risk was the envy of the world.”

Rich didn't know how to respond. He, like the world that had followed his father's exploits, knew only the charming, brazen, utterly unshakable Jim. Rich entered every visit armed with a thousand weapons of defense and riposte and not a single salve for self-pity. He had never known a moment of weakness from his father and had never expected one, even now after first-death.

Yet, here he was, the man who had explored Everest, the Amazon and both Poles, stirring bubbling brown in a stained Old Milwaukee t-shirt: *It Doesn't Get Any Better Than This.*

After Rich's mother died, his father had paraded her ashes like an Olympic torch. He had turned the funeral into a press conference, announced that he would honor her by spreading her ashes to the far corners of the world and beyond. These were his first expeditions in a decade and Rich saw his father use his mother's death as an excuse for a reunion tour.

Each episode climaxed with the release of the ashes: tossed into the turbulent winds above the clouds of Everest, spread among the prismatic pre-dawn mists of Angel Falls, buried beneath the permafrost of Antarctica, sprinkled into the smoldering cone of Cotopaxi. They mingled with Saharan sands and finally floated from a slit package in the sun-starved depths of the Pacific.

But Jim remained unsatisfied. "Nowhere on Earth is inaccessible anymore," he had told Rich in the now-unused kitchen of his house. "The best I can do is inconvenient."

Rich sorted through his mother's accounts and titles. As executor, Jim had to sign the documents, but Rich was doing all the work.

"Should have thought of that before you dumped all of her ashes into the wilderness," Rich said.

"There's still your share."

Rich added savings to checkings to money markets on an adding machine with a tape roll, unable to confront his father, to just say no. "Take Arthur's."

"Arthur's share went into Cotopaxi. He wanted me to take them. He said 'Make Mom part of the crust.' He understood."

Rich said nothing and carried a one, then slid a document to his father to sign. When Rich returned home from dropping the forms off at the attorney's office, his

mother's urn was missing from his mantle.

—

Jim traced figure eights in the lumpy brown and thought of Yellowstone's mud pots. If Rich could have seen his father's vulnerability, he would have stopped. If he had ever seen it before, he wouldn't have started.

“No one watching cared about her. They watched for you and your risks and the places they would never see for themselves. She was just the dramatic dust released before the final commercial break.”

“Isn't this what you always wanted? The great globe-trekker, the envy of the world, he said with a flourish, hiding in a basement, afraid of it?”

Rich wanted to spit. “Cut the dramatics. There are no cameras here. It's just us, me and a selfish, depressed old bastard who didn't know when to die.”

“I'm not depressed. I had your mother, I had you two boys, I've been the envy of the world. No, I'm not depressed. Terrified, maybe.” He ladled beans into a single bowl and sat back on the couch.

“Part of me is thankful it happened like this. Since it happened, I've been thinking of all the ways it could have been worse. I thought of all those dives,” he said and motioned to the magazine, “how if one of the million potential things had gone wrong and I had drowned all those meters below, my first final thought would have been if I don't somehow float to the surface before I, you know, returned, I'd have to endure it all over again.”

“Stop. Just stop.”

“My second final thought would have been of your mother and you and Arthur and 'Thank God I only have two.’”

—

The finale was televised live. Jim joined a resupply voyage to the ISS and during a spacewalk, unscrew the lid of the airtight jar and released the last remnants of his wife into the wild beyond before a record viewership.

Rich had watched his mother's carbon rotate on the evening news as he ate a ham and cheese sandwich and sorted her clothes into boxes for Goodwill and the Salvation Army. The ash cluster spun like a galaxy and became a dense cloud as the particles drifted apart. Rich found it almost beautiful; beautiful as long as he forgot whose ashes it was and his own stolen urn and why his dad thought everyone else deserved his mother more than he did.

—

“What was it like? Dying?”

Jim exhaled and leaned back, folded his hands, admired something small and distant, as if reenacting helped him to remember. “I'm not sure, he said. I'm not sure how far gone I got before that extra life kicked in. I didn't chat with St. Peter, if that's what you're asking. There were colors, sensations, echoes of memories, damned if I know what any of it meant. I remember the taste of burnt coffee. If nothing else, dying tasted like burnt coffee.”

“Maybe it was the brimstone before the fire.”

“Don't be stupid. I tasted brimstone when I climbed Mount Etna in the 60s. It's not something you forget and it's not something you confuse with burnt coffee. I know what I tasted.”

Jim took tiny bites from the tip of the spoon.

“I almost killed myself once.” He laughed heartily. “Once, not twice. Definitely

not twice. I wasn't sad or depressed – what did I have to be sad or depressed about? I had your mother and I had the envy of the world. No, I was young, arrogant and bored. That was right after Senegal. I figured I had been, seen and done just about all there was. Except death. I could go somewhere no one else had ever been, maybe bring something back, answer a few troublesome questions.” He scraped the bowl. Rich cringed at the sound. “This was before space was an option, mind you, or else things would have been very different. Now space, space was a trip. But anyway, I set up a tape recorder and got a bottle of pills, because if I had made a mess your mother would have killed me. Again! He laughed, again. But, boy, I'm glad I didn't.” He swept some petrified crumbs from the coffee table into the empty bowl. “We're the same now, you and I. I hope you can see that.

“That's not what kept us apart.

Rich climbed the stairs past the memorabilia and souvenirs and had the strange feeling of traveling backward through his father's life. He parted the blue tarp and hefted two bags of groceries from his trunk and walked back to the basement. He set the groceries on the table as his father rinsed the bowl and the pot and the spoon.

The Wiki-Ballad of Theodore Pommel

Theodore Pommel

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

This article is about the author; for the sword component see Hilt#Pommel

Theodore Pommel (August 8, 1967, Manalapan, New Jersey – May 5, 2008, New York City, New York) was a renowned writer of both fiction and non-fiction, best known for his posthumously published novel about seasonal depression and drug abuse, *Four Leaves into November* and *The Fall of the House of US*, a collection of essays on life in America after 9/11.

Biography

Pommel was the only child of college professor Michael and Sharon, an off-Broadway actress. He earned his bachelor's degree in English and his Masters of Fine Arts in Fiction from the New School in New York in 1992. After completing graduate school, he returned to his parents' home in suburban New Jersey at the age of 25.

There, he started on the stories that would later comprise the collection *An Urn of Salt, A Pinch of Ash*, but struggled with inspiration, motivation and boredom. “Had I been living in a city at that time, I probably would have started doing drugs,” he later recalled in an interview, “but being stuck in suburbia, I turned to video games and masturbation.”

Frustrated with this lack of progress, he moved alone to Prague in 1995 after reading *The*

Unbearable Lightness of Being by Czech author Milan Kundera and other works about the Prague Spring. He worked odd jobs, bused for several restaurants and gave tours of the city to English-speaking tourists, while writing in his free time.

Pommel began friendships with several other young artists and writers living in Prague. In e-mails sent to friends in America, he lauded his compatriots and the creative circle that was developing. In this group, he found an eager outlet for ideas and discussion, which resulted in easy artistic expression. He claims that many of his most praised concepts and techniques were honed during his time in Prague. While none of his stories are actually set in Prague, nearly all of them, he said, incorporate experiences, characters or feelings from that time.

Later that year, *An Urn of Salt, A Pinch of Ash* was published to high critical acclaim.

Personal Life

Described as outgoing and gregarious by those who had known him, Pommel easily attracted friends and admirers in both New York City and Prague.

He had met his future wife, Marketa Dvorakova, a ballerina with the Prague National Theatre Ballet, during his four formative years in the city. They courted briefly, but did not pursue a relationship, as Pommel was soon to return to the U.S. After traveling to New York to study at the School of Ballet at Lincoln Center, Dvorakova sought out Pommel and after a short reunion, they married in the spring of 2002.

Tragically, Dvorakova passed away in November 2007 after a brief battle with ovarian cancer. Grief-stricken, Pommel receded from the public eye after his wife's funeral.

Death and Burial

His wife's funeral was his last public appearance and on May 5, 2008, the believed-healthy Pommel was found dead from an aneurism in the study of his modest Manhattan loft.

A public wake and private funeral were held soon after in New York City, attended by fans, friends, compatriots and many members of Prague's art scene. He is buried at the church of his parents in Manalapan, which has become a minor tourist attraction for fans of the author.

Critical Reception

At the time of his death, a nearly complete manuscript of a novel entitled *Four Leaves into November* was found open on his computer. His estate approved its publication and it quickly became his fastest selling work.

Strangely, he is believed to have died mid-sentences as the novel's last line ends seemingly unfinished and without punctuation, with: "The now calm waters lapped at his feet and with a great heave, Randolph"[.] This sparked one of the greatest debates in modern literature.

In that ultimate scene, the protagonist, Randolph, is holding his cell phone and a needle

of heroin. Most critics agree that he was about to throw one of them into the ocean, though which one remains a point of contention. Some argue it is his cell phone, symbolizing a return to his isolation and self-abuse, but others insist on the needle, affirming his dedication to becoming clean. Still others believe Pommel intentionally left Randolph in a torturous state of limbo.

Works

An Urn of Salt, A Pinch of Ash (stories) (2000)

The Fall of the House of US (essays) (2002)

Four Leaves into November (2008) (published posthumously in unfinished form)

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Theodore Pommel

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

This article is about a man, for the sword component see Hilt#Pommel

Theodore Pommel (August 8, 1985 – May 5, 2009) was a twenty-four-year-old retail clerk from Manalapan, New Jersey. On May 5, he was found dead by apparent suicide in his parents' house in front of his computer displaying a fictional Wikipedia biography of himself.^[1]

This article is a stub. You can help Wikipedia by expanding it.

References

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Sword

essentially stable, with variations mainly concerning the shape of the **pommel**Wertime, **Theodore** and Muhly, J. D.(1980) eds. ...

57 KB (8,375 words) - 15:26, 18 June 2009

The Footbridge

You remember the footbridge. The river cities of Europe all have their bridges but instead of London's aggressively modern Millennium Bridge, you fondly recall the modest steel and chipping brown paint of Bath's nameless footbridge.

The bridge was a link and a divider; it connected Bath's town center with Widcome, the neighborhood where you lived. You crossed the bridge to get into town and you did so many times every day with backpacks of books or groceries from the distant but affordable Sainsbury's, or like tonight, stomachs of ale.

The footbridge proved your citizenship more than a stamp on a passport or a name on a utility bill and each pass over the churning brown of the Kennet and Avon Canal incrementally changed you from tourist to local. Those tourists that posed before scarlet double-decker buses or formed lengthy queues outside the Roman Baths had no business in Widcome and avoided the footbridge like headless horsemen.

"Can I interest you in a *Big Issue* today, Sir? Only £1.50," asks a bearded wizard in a starred blue robe as you approach the footbridge to your home. Your gait slows slightly. As a local, you were acquainted with the *Big Issue* publication, a charity magazine sold by the homeless as a means to an income, courtesy of the salesman who often waited at the entrance to the footbridge. Your local salesman, through sense of humor, derangement or clever marketing, wore various full-body costumes and hawked his issues as a yellow-feathered chicken or Scooby-Doo. The hands hiding from the wind in your pockets finger the metal disks, warm from your thigh. Unlike America, "sorry, no change" is never a legitimate excuse; here, you always had change. Most of your transactions were done in change. You just bought a pint solely with change.

You certainly have the coinage, but your stomach has earmarked these quid for a greasier purchase. Plus, he's not asking for change, he's selling a product, no different than if he was waving a vacuum or an encyclopedia -- a product in which you're not interested.

You decline the mage's offer. "I'm sorry, not today," you say and watch for signs of crushing disappointment or violent insanity.

"Have a good day, Sir," he replies and you regret it a bit, but not enough. You wonder how many times he hears "not today" and if that proverbial "today" ever actually comes. You convince yourself that the person behind you will say: "Yes, my wizened man, today I would love one."

The person who crossed before you thought the same thing.

But you keep walking and reach the end of the footbridge and enter Widcome's main street, host to a convenience store, violin repair, hair salon, The Ram (your local), a coffee shop, and a late-night burger joint named Manhattan Burger.

Manhattan Burger sold the absolute best chips; to call them French fries would insult them. These were the chippiest chips ever dredged from hot oil. A regular portion cost only £1.50, an easy escape for the loose coins British cashiers keenly distributed. A large was 20p or 40p more. You never remember because you never got it; you never needed to. The owner was a cheery, lean, black man who called everyone "boss" and spoke absurdly fast. You've never actually conversed with him, but you know he knows you are a local. He must see you walk by his shop everyday on your way to the footbridge.

You order a regular chips in thick and obvious American English, fighting every instinct to call them fries, but he forgives you because he knows you're okay and that you

take the footbridge to get into town, so he says “You got it. One pound, fifty P, Boss.” You hand over the fare in coins, earlier guilt forgotten. He drops the basket of unenlightened spuds into the oil and it crackles to life, a sound as welcome as a staticky human voice on a shipwrecked sailor’s radio. The potatoes scream and resist with every starchy fiber, but it’s not tragic because you know that in the end they will appreciate their wire-basket metamorphosis. While it happens, you peruse the community magazines on the counter and recognize names and places because you take the footbridge.

Other patrons come in, locals, like yourself, but not -- natives. They talk to the chipmaster in quick bursts of their native tongue. Your native tongue. Your brain knows it's English, but your ears disagree. They're adults (real adults, you're not a real adult) and they're drunk. Monday is a bank holiday. You don't really understand bank holidays; they just seem to happen without reason and you only know when one is coming because the weekend prior respectable-looking patrons fill the pubs and act irresponsibly, as you often do, stumbling drunkenly home across the footbridge.

Once the potatoes have ceased being potatoes and evolved into chips (there are no timers or buzzers, just pure skill), the chipmaster lifts the basket, shakes off the excess grease and pours the whole crispy mess into a stainless steel trough. He rains salt, and stuffs the chips into a dinky white paper pouch. Then! He drops the jammed but still dinky pouch into a small brown paper bag, shovels the rest of the trough into the bag and buries the useless white pouch (when you dig it out later, you know the chips are gone). This is why you never order the large. He rolls over the top and hands you the bag with a “There you go, Boss.” He winks and gives you a thumbs-up as you thank him profusely and walk out.

One day you'll muster the courage to say "cheers" instead.

The grease freckles the bag as you walk further from the footbridge toward home. The roof of your mouth has just healed from last weekend's indulgence, but you pull out a steaming chip and draw with the vapor trail wave in the nighttime air. You don't think of the wizard on the bridge (tomorrow a Christmas elf) and you don't wish for a rolled-up magazine instead of a rolled-over paper bag and once again it's in your mouth too soon and once again searing the top of it, but it's okay, because you took the footbridge and your tongue still tastes and the chips taste like nothing from home.

Nothing from *America*, you correct yourself.

Best By:

Harmon Mayfield thanked us for coming in early on this trying day – the morning the first shipment of 4ever Pups would expire.

Mayfield reminded us that coming in early didn't qualify customer service reps for overtime or monetary bonuses of any kind, but he said that he hoped we enjoyed the doughnuts and coffee.

We did enjoy the doughnuts and coffee. We stood, sometimes two or three representatives deep, along the lavished folding table that they had erected against a windowless wall in our cubicle pod. We picked crumbcake morsels and frosting flecks from the wax paper, halved, quartered and eighthed doughnuts with each other, in whatever combination necessary to avoid the mortifying delight of consuming the whole, all except for Fat Francis who chomped along the equator without remorse. Too often we lived vicariously through his chili dogs and grilled cheese lunches. Cindy said that she would have preferred fruit, but scavenged enough doughnut slivers to build two wholes.

We flicked pink and blue packets of generic sweetener, tore, poured, swirled and stirred. Those of us who had currently quit smoking pretended to be settling a pack against a palm. Some packets had printed messages that claimed they weren't as sweet as us, which was untrue because saccharine is 300-times sweeter than sugar and the best of us was about as sweet as durian. Still, it was nice that a marketer in an identical gray cubicle somewhere thought to tell us the things our husbands/wives/kids never did.

We had willingly come in early, lured not by the promise of doughnuts and coffee, but truth and spectacle. Whatever had been pulling the hair out of upper management recently was certainly more interesting than paperclips or Solitaire. Rumors of the crisis

had drifted through the ranks and we were eager to learn what exactly the company sold and what it had done wrong. Mayfield had promised a thorough briefing for all who showed and so all showed.

We actually knew very little about the 4ever Puppi product other than that it resembled a dog and was a pet or simulated pet or animatronic pet of some kind. Customer support calls had been infrequent thus far, only a dozen or so in the eight months since launch. Many of us had had our hours slashed due to this lack of volume, but even the nigh-forgotten had been called in today, lending an even greater urgency to whatever was about to happen.

Most of the calls that had come in were related to housebreaking, excessive chewing and other behavioral issues we weren't allowed to address beyond reminding customers that the Pups were living, breathing creatures and were expected to act like puppies (we were told that we couldn't legally call them "puppies" or "dogs" and should correct the customer if they did so. Saying they acted *like* puppies was okay though) and that 4ever Puppi, inc. was the purveyor and not responsible for the product's actions or training. If the customer persisted, we were told to offer the supplementary training manual and DVD at a ten-percent discount, but nothing more.

Poor, old Loraine had been fired for sharing housebreaking techniques as a long-time dog owner (some thought hoarder) with a customer. It wasn't clear if she was fired for offering unsanctioned advice or for equating 4ever pups with her own authentic dogs or for those garish muumuus. These arcane semantic minutia had spawned various rumors and piqued our dormant curiosity.

With hopes of grand reveals, we filed toward our headsets and monitors with powdered fingers and glazed eyes, anticipating a medium-roast alertness and a tabloid-

worthy scandal.

“Alright, everyone,” Mayfield began, “hello, hi, listen up. It's almost time so I'm going to do my best to explain the situation.”

The gaunt lawyer looked at him.

“-or as much of the situation as I can. From 6 AM E-S-T through the day, we expect customers to discover that their pups,” he looked to the lawyer who nodded, “have, um, died.” He looked again to the lawyer, who again nodded.

“You can say 'die,’” the lawyer said. “They were living creatures who ceased to exist. 'Die' and its euphemisms are fine.”

We stared blankly at him and he noticed.

“That's doesn't make sense, I should back up,” Mayfield said. “4ever Pups are actual living... creatures that have been...” Mayfield chose his words carefully, navigating as gingerly as a new boyfriend caught with an old friend, “altered – can I say altered?”

“That's fine,” the lawyer said.

“– altered to remain... youthful for their lifespan. We delivered a pet with nothing but puppy-*like* enthusiasm that will never grow old or mature. However –”

“No 'however' that sounds regretful,” the lawyer said.

“‘Will never grow old or mature,' *by* abbreviating its lifespan. Basically, instead of maturing, it has been altered to die.”

Some of us gasped and a few stood in exaggerated protest. At the very least, we rabbled.

“No, no, it's not that bad,” Mayfield said.

“Don't qualify,” the lawyer said.

“It's *in no way* bad. Look, extensive market research into pet ownership shows a

sharp decline in consumer interest after the pet hits maturity. What we do is provide a product that precisely targets peak consumer interest. It taps that market like nothing before and it actu— it provides a humane solution. Look, most... pets that are placed in shelters are older. The abbreviated lifespan of our product prevents a lifetime of potential neglect and suffering. I expect to see a long-term decline in the population of... traditional animal companions, which we can agree is good – no, no, even better, we expect to see a decrease in the *over-population* of traditional animal, etc. and thereby an increase in our market share, which we can also agree is good. It's really a win-win.”

Everyone seemed mostly convinced and settled down. Arthritic Henry flexed his knees and his knuckles and wondered if he was better off.

“But,” Mayfield continued, “R&D hadn't considered this PR nightmare when they synchronized the pups' expiration dates for 'consistency's sake.' They had scaled the concentration of hormone-activated autoimmune toxin to compensate for the varying ages of breed maturity.”

“We expect the initial call onslaught to be swift and heavy as many of our customers are, demographically, early-rising professionals concentrated in the New York tri-state area and also Florida. There is another high concentration in California that will come later, everything else is pretty evenly distributed. I have a map and--” He looked at a blank expanse of wall. “No, I don't. Where's the map? No one has the map? Okay, I have to get the map.” He rushed out, leaving us to finger our headset cords and swivel in our chairs.

He rushed back in. “In the meantime, counsel will explain some finer points to you,” he said and disappeared again.

Members of the sales team started to trickle into their pod of cubicles across the

hall.

“Remember to never apologize directly. You can be sorry for their loss; you can be sorry that *they* misunderstood; but you can't be just 'sorry'. They got what they paid for, what the company promised. 'Forever is an inexact subjective timespan. Technically, the products remained immature for the duration of their lifespan, therefore 'forever'. Also, it's a 'numeral-four-ever Pup' and 'numeral-four-ever' is nonsense; it denotes nothing and therefore makes no claims.”

Mayfield returned with an unfurling map in his arms.

“Finally,” the lawyer continued, “the company slogan – '4ever Pups: the lovable pups that never grow up' – only claims that the product will not mature, and as promised, not one 'pup' grew up.”

Mayfield was struggling to pin the map to the wall and spoke through thumbtacks. “But that death was natural, painless and humane and should alarm no one. Remember, it's a win-win.” He pounded the last tack into the wall with the heel of his hand. “In order to track our geographic progress, I want each of you to shout the location after each call and I will mark it with a tack.”

He looked at his watch and saw the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists.

Counsel looked at his watch and saw billable hours.

We looked at our watches and saw so, so many hours.

A cluster of sales reps gossiped in the hall.

Mayfield took a deep breath. “It's time, everyone. Get ready. I know you're all going to do great.”

We donned our headsets and waited and for five, ten, fifteen minutes, nothing happened.

The first ring was indistinct and three of us clicked on and greeted the dial tone. Another ring and again it happened. The rings increased in frequency, but we kept shaking our heads, unable to connect with anyone.

Assuming a technical glitch, Mayfield looked just about to implode.

The chatting sales reps rushed into their cubicles and began a symphonic round of greeting.

“Hello, thank you for calling--”

“--you for calling 4ever Puppi,”

“--calling 4ever Puppi. How--”

“--Puppi. How--”

“--Puppi.”

“--pi.”

The phones kept ringing and Mayfield looked across the hall in disbelief.

Snippets of many conversations filtered over:

“Overnight and discrete packaging, yes.”

“Exact same model, Mrs. Goodwin? He'll never know the difference, no.”

“Shall I put you down for three?”

“Each Pup is individually vacuum-sealed and will last about a year unopened, longer if refrigerated or frozen.”

“Not to worry, sir, it's completely biodegradable.”

Mayfield pressed his hand to his forehead then his cheek as if taking his temperature. “How about that,” he said. “Who wants an early lunch? And long. A long, early lunch.”

We removed our headsets, clicked off the monitors and meandered out.

The lawyer patted Mayfield on the back. “Looks like it'll be another solid quarter.”

Mayfield agreed, though his mouth was contorted in thought. “As stressed as I was, for some reason I felt better when I was worried about the public losing faith in me. It doesn't feel right the other way around.”

“Don't worry about it, Harmon, they're paying for the non-commitment, the flexibility,” the lawyer said. “They're paying for freedom. Now, I think that's something worth selling.”

None of us went to lunch, long or otherwise. We just got in our cars and drove to our homes to wait until we would tomorrow return fragmented and reconfigured.

Or Best Offer

The hazy darkness of Chiang Mai's night market smelled of sweat and exhaust. Crowds of foreigners pulsed past vendors on the sidewalks as local drivers on their commutes home dodged errant pedestrians. Joel and Yana had wandered through the empty daytime streets as Thais on motorbikes forced the orange metal cages onto the sidewalk and now he watched her gesture to the Thai woman with a cracked leather face selling beaded purses. Yana held her hands apart, one near her stomach, and the other at her crystalline blue eyes. She waved the hand at her eyes then moved the hand at her stomach and clapped them together near her slight breasts.

The stall-owner picked at the individual beads on the purses with rough fingernails and made a stitching motion.

Yana held up thumb and forefinger, held two purses together, a twin set.

The woman offered one purse.

Yana punched the price into the calculator and the woman pounded her chest with a palm.

Yana fanned her fingers and shook her blonde head, bowed and walked away. The woman shouted after her, but Yana continued to weave through the crowd back to him.

Joel waited at a nearby beer vendor. For Yana, he ordered a large beer with an elephant and a large beer with a lion for himself. The prices were posted and he did not feel right haggling in the face of such certainty.

Seventy baht was still a good price.

"No Singha. Chang only," the woman said and pointed to the poster with two

elephants.

“Yes, okay. Two, then,” Joel said and nodded his head and held up two fingers, hoping the message got through.

The beer felt better in this country, the cold wet bottle, the slightly bitter fizz, the way the alcohol went straight to his dehydrated brain. His back forgot the hundreds of temple steps and his circadian rhythm reset but Chiang Mai remained overwhelmingly brown.

“No good?” he said and handed her a beer.

“They were nothing special. I never haggle for anything I couldn't just walk away from.”

“You looked like an expert haggler.”

“Pshaw,” she waved his compliment off. “I'm out of practice. I used to be much better, back when I lived in Taiwan.”

Taiwan, Vancouver, Bangladesh, Melbourne, Omaha, St. Petersburg, Inverness, Verona – these are the places Yana has known. She listed these for Joel after they met on the train from Bangkok to Chiang Mai over plastic cups of gin. He had expected her to depart once they arrived and every moment before and since, but here she was. She had stepped off the train into the dusty, humid station behind him with nothing but a small purple and white daypack. He had asked her if she had everything, she had said that she did and he became self-conscious of the weight he hefted as they walked to the Royal Princess Hotel and settled in separate rooms.

He watched her flit from stall to stall like a hummingbird, greeted at each before any other. Joel surveyed the stalls from a distance. Between passing shoppers, he stole glimpses of t-shirts hung on the wire walls, shelves of bootleg DVD's, keychains,

figurines, lighters and Yana. He was disappointed that, despite the apparent variety, the hundreds of similar novelties more Chinese than Thai, there was nothing here he wanted. The haggling provided enough of an additional barrier to dissuade him even when he spotted something he might not mind buying. He would hate to be undercut on something he didn't even really want.

He wondered if Yana saw anything she actually wanted either or if she just enjoyed the process, confident that she could claim something for the exact amount it was worth to her or even come away on top.

“Isn't it kind of cruel to haggle over a few baht?” he said when Yana returned to him once more. “What's the difference? A dollar? It's not much to us, but that's a lot to them.”

“They're ripping us off,” Yana said. “This stuff is all tourist crap; they expect you to haggle. It's a game. Plus,” they stopped. He looked at her. She looked nowhere in particular. “Plus, isn't accepting any price more offensive? 'I have so much of what I give to you and it means so little to me that amount doesn't matter.' The bartering gives legitimacy to the transaction, don't you think?”

He said that he did. Everything had significance to her, a trait he found exciting and somewhat exhausting.

“Simply giving something away makes it worthless,” she said.

They had paused before a booth layered with brightly dyed textiles. The salesman emerged and thrust a pressed blue and white shawl against her.

“Pretty shawl for pretty lady?” he said.

Yana handed her beer to Joel. “*Sa wah dee kah*,” she said with a rehearsed bow.

“*Sa wah dee kup*,” he said, smiling. “Hello, so, you like, yes?”

She turned to Joel and wrapped the loose end around her torso. “What do you think?” she asked. Salesman and customer surveyed Joel eagerly. The indigo blue diffused into the white mirrored her irises. The white itself matched the matte polish on her nails, chipped slightly from when he first noticed it outlined by flushed skin as she lifted the fifth of Gordon's to fill their cups. The skin became paler as the bottle lightened with each pour.

Blue and white – to Joel these were the colors of Yana bright against the umber city. Through practice or providence, the salesman had picked the perfect matching shawl.

“Very nice,” Joel admitted.

“Yeah, I don't know...” she trailed off and turned around. Joel dissolved behind the passing crowd to watch her work, afraid his honesty had endangered the transaction. She studied the fabric, rubbed it between her thumb and forefinger, looked at it under different lights, handed it back to the salesman, pointed at another, black and orange, repeated the process. She decided on this one and the negotiations began. The man smiled through his beard the entire time. She and the salesman exchanged head shakes. Yana deliberately turned from the booth and power-walked away. The salesman shouted after her. She stopped and turned, bumped into an older white couple. The salesman came out of his booth and touched her arm, her lower back, beckoned with an open palm. He took the garish shawl off the hanger, refolded it carefully, matching each corner with its opposite and slid it into a plastic bag. She handed him the money and they laughed together as he made jokes in deliberate English.

Joel watched her frosted fingertips as she bowed. The salesman returned with several bows, still smiling. Maybe it was all a game, Joel thought. Yana returned to him

and looked back at the salesman. He was still watching her, smiling. He waved and bowed again. She waved back and started them walking.

Yana held the bag open for him. The shawl had slumped into a black and orange mass.

“Not bad,” he said.

“Nope.” She took the beer which had been his and drank. “I didn't even want it, but I was having fun. And for 300 baht, why not? That's worth it for the experience.”

“I saw the walk-away feint. You're really getting good.”

“That was real. I was over it. I wasn't going to buy it, but when I left he came down to my price so I felt compelled.” The backs of their hands brushed. She shifted the bag to her left, outside hand. “Plus, it's only 300 baht.”

Joel converted to dollars in his head. “I think he liked you. You had more influence over him than the old purse woman.”

“You think so?” She nipped at her right pinkie nail and he wished that she wouldn't.

“Being a girl and all.”

“Just being a girl doesn't get you anywhere.”

“Being a young and...” he considered his next word – pretty, fit, clever, white, blonde, blue-eyed, charismatic, cute, attractive – he wanted to say pretty, but that was too subjective; attractive seemed better. He could objectively observe others finding her attractive, technically making her 'attractive' without necessarily thinking it himself, “Being a young and attractive girl does.”

She smiled. “I'm flattered you think that.”

He held her gaze for a beat and a beat and a half and she peeked into the bag

again. "I'm never even going to wear this. Maybe I'll give it to my sister."

"The white and blue one was much nicer."

"I couldn't let him think he just knew me like that." She finished her beer and handed him the bottle. "Another round?" she said and disappeared into the crowd.

Joel dumped the empties, leaned against the nearest storefront until Yana reappeared with two more elephant beers. "Found some beers," she said. "For the walk back."

He considered it not entirely unlikely that she had simply stumbled upon them or, perhaps, a passing stranger had offered them to her as a token of his infatuation. Whatever the case, she had remembered him and thought to grab two and they walked back sipping in the emptying street.

In his hotel room he offered her the last cold water bottle from the mini fridge. The bottle sweated even in the air-conditioning which smelled like lotus and lemongrass. She cracked the cap, drank and offered it back to him, but he had already opened a warm one. He accepted anyway and set it on the lacquered wood nightstand. She flopped face-first onto his unmade bed and he sat next to her.

He looked around the hotel room drinking the tepid bottled water with undecipherable slogans, thousands of miles from anywhere he had ever been and a distant few feet from where he had never been.

He avoided looking at her bottom, which he knew would be propping up her skirt and instead clicked on the television to disrupt the haze of fantasy and desire. He skipped over a news program, a commercial for whitening cream and landed on an impenetrable Japanese children's show. There appeared to be puppets. She rolled over and looked at him in the way he had often imagined, looked over her shoulder at the plush cow on the

screen and sat up.

“I have no idea what's going on,” he said.

“It's more interesting this way,” she said.

She scooted down, still vehemently distant and he considered the devastating effect this night could have on his psyche. As long as they never achieved this level of intimacy, this particular situation burdened with possibility, he could comfort himself with just that fact –it hadn't happened, the chance had never been there, but that consolation disappeared if they did this, if that chance came and went, if they slumbered adjacently on the same horizontal plane, whether accidental or intentional, premeditated or convenient, and nothing happened, nothing of the romantic, sexual, physical nature, whether accidental or intentional, premeditated or convenient. If she retreated to unconsciousness here, in territory purchased under his name, then she either wanted what he wanted or trusted him not to make such a move, and those were very different options.

She seemed to be drifting toward sleep, her eyelids fluttering and descending. He entertained the possibility that he might wake up to those lids polished clean. He felt creepy and looked away.

You're here. He looked back at her twitching eyes. I'm here. He looked to her stomach. He measured the distance between them.

Let's get here.

Yana woke up, hopped to the edge of the bed and started walking toward the door. She stopped to look at him and Joel, still suspended between sleep and fantasy, watched her from the bed. She stood, backlit by flickering Japanese puppets, and untangled a dangling earring from the hair that suspended it. Joel silently begged her not to go, to return to their private plane, he promised he would do nothing unwanted, nothing

uncouth if she would just lay her presence back down, weigh those springs again. It was late, he reasoned, very late and there was no reason to wake her roommate for entry when there was a perfectly shareable bed right here. He had hundreds of reasons why she shouldn't go, but said not one.

He never considered that maybe all she was waiting for was one ridiculous reason to stay, then her earring dropped free and she walked.

Joel continued to lay there, stalled, utterly unsure what just happened or how to proceed and heard her faintly knocking down the hall. He couldn't find his key so he stood in the hall with his foot in the door and saw her a few doors away. She knocked again.

"Hey," he said in a projected whisper, little more than a noise to get her attention. He imagined it bounding stealthily across the carpet piles and erupting upwards at her feet. She looked at him, rigid and defiant. He nodded his head toward the door, beckoned her back with his palm.

Yana shook her head and the door opened and she was sucked inside.

Joel lifted the weight of the door from his foot. He shuffled inside and let the door ease itself shut. It hissed and latched loudly. He hoped every room in the hall heard it. He noticed that Yana had left her bag against the nightstand, whether accidental or intentional, premeditated or convenient. Inside he saw the black and orange shawl and two elephant bottle caps.

The View from the Bottom

Carl detected an undertone of mildew amid the aquarium's practiced institutional scent. It worked hard to balance bleach and brine, to make the experience a strictly visual affair, with the exception of the loop of crashing waves piped through the speakers tucked in ceiling corners and disguised as rocks with the negative aspects associated with marine life. But the damp mildew note, foreign to most anyone in Nebraska with a sump pump defied concealment and Jean balked at it immediately. It was the inevitable side-effect of forcing hundreds of gallons of saltwater onto shore, blending the aquatic and the terrestrial.

Jean was Carl's girlfriend of several months and had never ventured to an aquarium and seemed reluctant, even perplexed by the idea of gawking at sea creatures organized and categorized.

She was, as Carl frequently announced, Japanese. He felt that her exoticism granted him a measure of ethno-cultural credibility that his own heredity lacked, though she was about as Japanese as he was Irish, but she had what mattered. Through careful stateside breeding, she maintained the slight frame, delicate skin and features, jet hair and surname filled with K's and long A's that tumbled from clumsy Western tongues. He imagined that "Jean" was a Westernized version of an ancestor's name and at home her parents called her something else, private and sweet, with no sleek English translation, like "flower petals among stones," but they didn't, at least not while he was around.

Her unfamiliarity with the aquatic and the aquarium in particular amused him, hailing from an island nation as she did. Though he himself at one point hailed from an equally island nation, Ireland was known for rolling green hills and sheep, not like Jean's

island chain of oversized typography where Carl imagined everyone was intimately acquainted with the ocean.

“That smell,” she said as he led her out of the lobby, past the sprawling gift shop and to the first dim hallway.

“It goes away, or you get used to it,” he said. “It’s part of the experience,” he added. They walked to the first tank and stood between the phalanx of children pressing their grubby hands and sniffing noses against the glass and the rear guard of mothers with shoulder bags and empty strollers. This arrangement worked. Carl and Jean could see over the greasy hair without disrupting the mothers, too pre-occupied with quick-draw tissues, bandages and scoldings to observe some fish.

The tank held a coral reef, mostly brain coral with a few undulating fan corals for interest. Beaked parrot fish swam through gaps and gnawed the brains. Long-antennaed shrimp picked through the gravel.

“It’s awfully dull,” she said. “Aren’t coral reefs supposed to be bright and colorful?”

“Tropical coral reefs, yes. This is a temperate reef,” he said.

“A simulation of a temperate reef,” she clarified.

“It’s a reef. It’s perfectly reefy. What makes it not a reef?”

“It’s in an acrylic box labeled ‘reef.’”

“And labeling something what it is makes it not that?”

“In this case, yes. Those are no longer actual parrot fish.”

Carl chewed the inside of his lip and felt the sting of a wasted thirty-two dollars and an afternoon. This could be a long day. “When I went snorkeling in Bermuda, there were so many parrot fish gnawing algae from the coral that the sound of it filled the

water. When I went under I could hear the scraping of hundreds of tiny beaks.”

All he wanted to do was find the octopus tank and impress her with some cephalopod facts he remembered from seventh grade, parrot-like beaks, color-change camouflage, problem-solving skills, taste bud-covered suckers, three hearts.

“This is dumb,” she said.

“These are the same fish – same kind of fish – I saw in Bermuda. I bet they even know each other.”

“They're out of context. It just feels fake.”

“Same context, just smaller.” He made a rectangle with his fingers. “Smaller context.”

One of the parrot fish brushed the fan coral and the coral retracted its lacy fronds into the tube. They slowly reemerged.

“Whoa, did you see that? One of the fish touched one of the corals and it – shoop – suck it in,” he said.

She had missed it.

“It was one of the fan-looking one's.”

“Called fan coral, oddly enough,” Jean read from the informative display.

“*Here we see *Coralis Fanis* protecting its fragile fronds within its hardened calcite tube,*” he assumed a distinguished British naturalist's voice. “Let's see what's next he said.”

They passed tanks of tropical Blue Tang and Grey Snapper, schooling Lookdowns, Atlantic Needlefish and Black Grouper. They passed a dark tank without fish. Jean looked at herself in the reflective glass. Her face seemed to hover in her now-invisible straight black hair. She pushed it back and pulled it up exposing her pink neck

and cheeks. She turned sideways and her ears became pectoral fins.

“*And here we have Nipponus Americanus*,” he said.

She dropped her hair. “I’m thinking about dying it.”

He thought: no, don’t; he said: “Oh, really?”

“Yeah, why not? The black is so boring. Maybe purple or orange streaks or just all dyed green.”

“No, don’t.”

“Why not? It’s just hair.”

“But it’s straight black hair. It lends you mystique. Anyone can dye their hair.”

She shrugged. “We’ll see.”

They walked to the seahorse tank. Most of the elegantly curved creatures swayed with the seaweed, their tails curled around the stems. One swam by the glass in short bursts, like it was just bouncing along.

“They really do look like little horses,” she said.

“Of course they do.”

“They have little snouts and saddles and everything.”

“Have you never seen a seahorse before?”

“Not live.”

“Ha! Appreciating the aquarium now?”

“It has its uses.”

He read from the informational signage, “*Here we have the Lined Seahorse – Hippocampus Erectus*.”

“Hippocampus? Part of the cerebral cortex is called the hippocampus.” Jean studied neurobiology at University of Nebraska at Omaha. Carl wouldn’t have had it any

other way.

“We have seahorses in our brains?” he said. He pictured a seahorse gripping the brain stem, swaying in cranial fluid.

“Apparently. Handling memory and –” She paused to think, “spatial reasoning, I think.”

“Did you just ask your seahorse what it does?”

“Yes, yes I did.” She smiled.

He watched the swimming seahorse. It didn't move like a fish or a horse, more like a bloated hummingbird.

“What's next?” she asked.

The day seemed to be turning around. He guessed she had acclimated to the briny scent.

“I believe we're approaching the octopus exhibit.”

The crash of waves became louder as they walked by a speaker disguised as a stone. The octopus exhibit was mostly dark with a series of rocks and crevices on the sea floor. It was thoroughly unexciting.

“Maybe someone ate it. Some people in some countries eat octopus,” he said.

“Gross.”

“Have you had it? Some Japanese people eat octopus. Have your parents?”

“We don't even eat sushi.”

“Oh.” Carl had a younger cousin that even ate sushi.

They both stood bent searching for the squishy mollusk. She leaned to the side to look at the signs.

He had to find this octopus. What good are facts without the subject? Monkeys

can open jars; chameleons change color; all birds have beaks; these things are only impressive because the stupid octopus looks so useless, like thick slimy snot. He loved it for that. He loved that those traits were so unexpected.

“Octopuses can change their color to match their environment,” she read, “and can squeeze through any hole bigger than its beak.” She looked at him, “It has a beak!”

How did she...? Then his brain seahorse reminded him that his seventh grade field trip had been here. Twelve-year-old him had stood right here in awe of these same facts, committed to memory.

“I had no idea,” he said. He wondered if it was still the same octopus. If there was any octopus.

“That's so cool. If only we could see it,” she said.

He looked harder, thought back to seventh grade when he had watched the tentacle unfurl from fiddlehead to flagpole and stuck against the glass. The class had moved on, but he lingered looking at the suckers, imagined them tasting the cold, salty glass; the dry, foreign air beyond. It formed a gently curving constellation. Did the points follow the line or did the line connect the points?

He had poked each sucker, imagined that it could taste the fruit snack sweet on his finger. Each one he poked released and as he went up the arm, it curled upon itself away from the glass. After he touched the last one, the octopus slinked to the back of the tank.

He looked among the rocks along the bottom of the tank. “I found it. There,” he said.

She bent next to him, her straight black hair tickled his arm and together they looked at the hidden scrap of bathmat stuck to the glass.

“It can taste with its suckers,” he said.

“Wild.” She pointed her slender fingers and touched all five suckers at once. The suckers disengaged and the creature disappeared completely.

“Did you have a moment just then?”

“I think we did. He didn't like my taste.”

“Guess it's mutual.”

“It wasn't that great of a moment. Maybe if we were in the wild, but here, that probably happens all the time. I bet it just wants to be left alone.”

“If it happened in the wild, you'd claim it was nothing because you were wearing goggles and breathing canned air.”

She shrugged. “Some things just weren't meant to connect.”

He rushed her along the next parts because his favorite exhibit, the shark tunnel, was just ahead. This was what he had really wanted her to see, to show her, to experience with her. After the octopus flop, it carried even more weight. She couldn't discount this.

Carl could see the gentle webbing of light filtered through water at the tunnel's entrance and covered Jean's eyes. He wanted to surprise her with the view from the bottom. He led her just inside the mouth and tilted her head back.

She reached out and brushed the smooth, cool tunnel. “Where are we?”

With his hand tilting her chin, he uncovered her eyes as the oddly smiling underbelly of a ray passed overhead. She shrieked and stumbled backwards, a hand over her mouth, furiously looking at the water surrounding her.

“Oh, no no no,” she repeated. “No, no, no.” She retreated to the dark hallway. “What the hell, Carl!”

“What's the problem? This is the best part, this is what I really wanted you to see.”

“No, no, no, I can’t go in there. Just because it hasn’t collapsed yet, doesn’t mean it won’t.”

“But it’s an arch,” he made an arch with his hands, “It gets stronger as it supports more weight.” He added, “Within reason.”

“Walking beneath thousands of gallons of water and thousands of pounds of pressure surrounded by sharks is not within reason. I just can’t, I’m sorry.”

“Of course you can, look at everyone else. Look at me,” he danced just within the tunnel. If it did collapse, he would be crushed to chum.

“Fine. I don’t want to. I’m sorry. Go without me, I’ll see you on the other side.”

“I will, I’ll go, I’ll see sharky undersides without you.” He entered and tried to focus on only the tunnel, but instead thought of better comebacks. Guess Jean would never take the Lincoln tunnel. Or the Chunnel. But she would, because she wouldn’t know. It was the knowing that bothered her. That was just stupid. He should have told her how stupid it was to not do something just because it could end badly. Everything could end badly; showering, eating cereal, breathing. All structures can collapse, shark-filled or not.

But the shark-filled ones were his favorite.

The shark tunnel was the future, a means to somewhere foreign and exotic. The tanks were just windows into this world, but the tunnel was entry -- acrylic-encased pseudo-immersion. Carl’s seahorse told him how his twelve-year-old self had felt, submerged, eye-level with sharks and rays and fish. He had lain on his back and looked up. He cupped his hands around his eyes to block out the carpet and sneakered feet, everything but the depths ascending above him. Refracted light from blurred unknown sources dashed across him broken only by shadows of beasts legitimately prehistoric. He

knew his teacher couldn't touch him or scream and make a scene, so he stayed like that until her voice dropped to an infuriated growl and he sensed the grumblings of his classmates.

Now, he wandered immersed, admired the sleek shapes, the nonchalant undulations, until he noticed the reflection of the path along the top. A dark streak ran along the length of the tunnel. He noticed the silicon-filled seams between sections. Did the sharks and rays realize this wasn't the ocean? Did they question what strange world existed just below the seafloor?

At the end of the tunnel, he took a last look above and behind and reemerged into a world of average risk and average wonder.

Jean was not waiting for him. She wasn't at the Lionfish or the False Pilchard or the Cardinalfish. He went back to the octopus, but she and it were both missing.

He peaked in on the hippopotamus exhibit and noticed her slender shoulders slouching. She sat cross-legged starting at the large glass wall that exposed a cross-section of the habitat, half land, half water. The massive beast trundled along the land near the back. Its flesh hung in slabs off its back like a heavy, dusty blanket and its stomach swept the ground. It had stubby toes, dim eyes and tiny ears that constantly twitched. Any movement seemed wholly unexpected. It shuffled its short legs and put its whiskered snout to the ground. It sat.

Carl and Jean were alone with the sedentary beast. They could hear the shrieks from the Touch Tank nearby as children mustered and lost the nerve to prod starfish and stingrays.

“Really?” Carl said. “This was better than the shark tunnel?”

“You'll see.”

“What’s to see? It sits every three steps and I’m never convinced it’ll actually get up again.”

“But it does. It always does.”

The hippopotamus stood and lumbered to the edge of the water, sniffed around, sat again.

“Watch,” Jean said.

Carl couldn’t even see its legs beneath its bulk, but it leaned forward and slid its mass into the water. Its skin gained a rich, oily sheen. At first it floated submerged except for its nose, ears, eyes and gently sloping back. It hovered momentarily, content, weightless, freed from the pressure of gravity, then it swam toward the glass. The water granted it grace and buoyancy. When it swam it looked like a horse galloping underwater. It pawed at nothing, gained speed, glided, glided along the edge of the land to the glass, pawed at the glass to gather more speed, looked as if it walked on the wall.

“It’s magnificent,” she said.

Carl couldn’t disagree.

Outages

Luckily, I had not mentioned offloading Leslie's father's oil lamp which sits unlit and illuminated on the kitchen table. It might actually be useful when the storm outside knocks out the power and I would have never heard the end of it. The rain remains light for now, but the wind rises and falls in increasingly grand crescendos.

The storm has been the leading news story for days. our preparations have been exhaustive. We moved the cars away from any trees eager to drop limbs, placed flashlights, matches and candles in every room, stocked the pantry with ready-to-eat dry goods, filled every pitcher and vase with drinking water – what we hoped was the recommended gallon per person per day for the five to seven days they said we could be powerless.

I'm packing perishable items we might need into a large white cooler. They said the refrigerator stays cold longer if it isn't opened after the power stopped. That had been a preparedness bullet point on the news last night along with the water and the cooler and boarding the windows which we didn't do and the candles and flashlight batteries.

Batteries.

“Did you get batteries?” I shout to Leslie.

She walks in the kitchen wearing a headlamp and tufts of brown hair bulge from the elastic. She raises her eyebrows and the wrinkles lift the lamp.

“You're wearing a headlamp?” I say.

“I like to have my hands free.”

“Flashlight batteries. Did you get them?”

She twists her mouth to the left and flicks the lamp on and off. “What kind?”

I don't know what kind. "Whatever kind."

"Candles are nature's flashlight," she says and walks out.

That means that she hadn't. "People make candles. They aren't pulled from the ground." I go back to the fridge and get the eggs, milk, cold cuts, pudding cups and pack them in the cooler with the bags of ice cubes Leslie has been stockpiling. After the ice melted, she said, we could drink the water. She is good at thinking ahead like that.

I put the eggs back because how would we cook them? I fit in four Miller High Life's instead. The wind and rain intensify. The gusting is nearly constant now and the house seems to breathe with the pressure changes. Runoff rattles against the bend in the drainpipe.

"It's really picking up," I say to Leslie who is in the living room looking out the front window. It's getting dark and she has the outside lights on and is watching the cascade blow in sheets across the flooding street.

"Over the last hour, the situation has become far, far worse," the television weatherman says. He looks as if he hasn't slept and his bow-tie droops to the left.

I hug Leslie from behind and watch the storm from her shoulder. We've endured some weather in our eight years together, but nothing like this.

"We're definitely losing power," I say.

"Only a matter of time," she says. She turns to face me.

To kiss her I have to lean around the headlamp. "Lightning," I say.

"No, not yet."

"Lightning would be nature's flashlight."

—

We sit on the couch and watch the weatherman point to the spinning bands of

white and green washing over us. That's what here looks like from space. The coffee table has yesterday's mail, a mistletoe-scented jar candle and a wide-beam flashlight which we may or may not have batteries for. I click it on and wave it around the walls and the beam seems dim in the lighted room.

“It seems dim,” I say.

“We'll be happy to have it when it gets dark.”

I click it off.

The news team goes live to some poor sod standing at the beach. His network-issue poncho refuses to lie still. Not a bit of him looks dry. The dune grass is bent flat and the ocean is all white.

“It's really getting bad out there,” Leslie says.

“It's really bad here.”

“But it's *really* bad there.”

I click through the channels. “Is there anything else on?”

“What else would be on? News is happening.”

“Let's watch something else while we still can.”

“I'd rather not,” she says. “It wouldn't feel right, I might miss something.”

Something distant groans and cracks, falls to the ground in a chorus of snaps.

Neither of us jump. We expect noises like this.

“There goes the first one,” I say.

“First of many.”

“We are definitely losing power.”

The television shows a map of the storm's projected path, an ominous red cone heading in from the ocean and right for us.

“We are seeing incredibly strong winds already and this storm has yet to hit land.

This'll be one for the record books, and folks, the worst is yet to come.”

“We're really in for it,” I say.

A siren sings in the distance.

“What should we do now?” Leslie asks.

“Whatever we want, I guess. Aren't we encouraged to calmly go about our daily lives in emergency situations?”

“There's nothing particularly emergent about this.”

“Still.”

“I think that applies to enemy occupation. This has yet to storm the beaches.”

I crack the window and let the fury leak in. The rain sounds different out there unmuffled by roof and walls – crisper, more like static than tiny drums. The window wheezes as the wind blows across it and vibrates the screen.

“I'm going outside,” I say.

“You can't. It's dangerous.”

“The inner-city is dangerous. Freeways are dangerous. Thermonuclear weapons are dangerous. This is just air and water. I'm going outside.”

I put on snow boots because I don't have galoshes. I put on a liner-less plastic raincoat that comes to my knees and button its three buttons. Over that, I wrestle into a cheap yellow poncho from the Maid of the Mist. It's thinner than a condom and sticks to me all over. The wind wants the storm door when I open it, but I hold on and shut it tightly. I walk out to the street which has several inches of water running across it and soon I am very, very wet. The wind blows the rain into my eyes and down my neck and mats my hair in clumps. There is no lightning, there are no immediately threatening

trees, I am in no visible, logical danger, but I still somehow feel like I am.

Overhead, the power lines slap and spin like taffy.

The wind bullies the rain in all directions, sometimes switching suddenly and kicking a torrent up from the street. I learn to see again once I adjust to my face being perpetually wet. The rain is falling in such volume and with such force it blurs and erases everything around me. Everything but me. There is nothing in the distance. There is no distance.

There is nothing here that could harm me. Unless the wind blows me over and I hit my head and drown in five inches of rainwater, which I won't. I scoff at the cowardice of my neighbors as they huddle inside – confined, really – when life was happening so thoroughly out here. We may never see a storm like this again and I can say I confronted it. Sirens harmonize in the distance, but here, I am alone, encased in the clean sheeting persistence.

A sudden gust buffets me and I hear another creaking groan, but no crack. There's a strange ripping and a sucking and a smack. The trunks are holding but the roots give way. The storm is tipping trees wholesale now. A mighty crash follows and a quick pop. The lights across the street go dark. I turn to my house, but I can see the television's flickering bounce around the living room.

Weak beams of light flit past my neighbors' windows as they enact their meticulous preparation plans, undoubtedly relieved that the inevitable has finally come to pass, while the rest of us wait in limbo for our own sickening pops.

I'm surprised and impressed at how quickly I forget just how wet I am, how quickly I become bored. Between the first stinging drops to my now saturated state, I forgot discomfort. Blowing water from my mouth and nose and blinking it from my eyes

is the new normal and I forget why I even came out here.

At the end of the street is a storm drain clogged by sticks and leaves and shopping center circulars. I kick aside oak leaves, tear a hole in a twenty-percent discount on tile and grout cleaning, butt isn't enough. The water skips across the drain in ripples and eddies. I squat and the water rises over the hem of my coat. I heap the debris onto the saturated grass. As I watch the water fall readily into the abyss, a vestigial toddler fear denies reason and physics and cautions me not to get sucked in. A more realistic adult fear tells me to watch my keys. I ignore both and tempt fate. I put my hand across one of the openings in the grate and feel, really feel the chilling water run through my fingers. I lean forward and put my entire sopping forearm across the barrier. I move it to the edge, interrupt the flow, and for a moment, I block it. I force the water to go around until it rises up and over my arm. I appreciate the clean lines of fluid dynamics and dare it to sweep me along.

I stand and admire what I have done. I have made a dent in the street water and the storm seems to lighten up. It had just been frustrated, backed-up, colicky. The water continues to flow down the street, everywhere except where I have worked.

I have created an absence.

I'm not even supposed to be out here, not expected to tolerate these conditions, but I altered the landscape. The stream of water flows steadily still except where I stood and where I worked. Where I am and where I was. I feel positive and negative. I feel cyclical. I am Alpha and Omega. I am Shiva and Vishnu.

I yell to the sky which tried and failed to keep me inside, where the power lines spin like school-yard double-dutch.

I bellow with my frail human lungs against the stifling din of torrent and gale

because here I am. I bear my chemically whitened teeth and roar until water pools on my tongue and foaming spit runs down my chin, warmer and thicker than rain.

I stomp and splash and cuss the storm until another approaches clad in similar permeable attire. It touches its head and a strong light shines forth broken, refracted and restored.

I am no longer alone

“They say this lull won't last,” Leslie shouts.

“What are you doing?”

“I don't know.”

“I'm cold.”

—

I put on sweatpants and a t-shirt and hang my dripping clothes over the shower rod. The bathroom has a pear-scented candle.

“You might as well put them in the dryer,” Leslie says. “They'll get musty.”

Mustiness doesn't bother me. They'll need to be washed anyway. They really just need a place to drip in peace without causing a mess. I hold the sopping bundle away from my dried body as I carry it to the laundry room and plop it in the washer instead. Leslie walks in with a dropped sock. I add more clothes from the hamper to fill the load and set it going.

Across the flooded street they are reading by candlelight and I have a robot agitating my dirty clothes.

I spy a dusty bottle of scotch on a shelf above the machines, aged twelve years, blended, crystal Scottish water, warm peatiness. Apparently a gift, since we never would have bought anything this nice for ourselves, and since we promptly forgot about it and

whoever gave it to us, apparently not a very good one.

I slam it on the kitchen table next to the oil lamp.

“Tonight we drink.”

“What's the occasion?”

“Occasion? Weather's the occasion, wind and water. Life. The last lighted hours.”

“Let me get the roast in first.” She put the finishing touches on a small hunk of beef.

“But the oven's electric. You really think we're going to have power in an hour? It's bad out there. I would know. The street nearly flooded.”

“If we lose power it'll spoil anyway. I might as well give it a chance.” She slides it into the oven and sets the timer.

I push the drinking glasses aside and pull the short *drinking* glasses from the depths of the cabinet. The ice trays in the freezer are empty so I steal some from the plastic bags in the preparedness cooler. I pour myself a dram and knock it back. It's bitter harshness confirms that it hadn't been that great of a gift and we had every right to forget its giver. Still, it isn't bad, entirely drinkable, and the mild burning stirs me. I pour one for each of us.

Leslie sips. She makes a face under the headlamp. “It's okay.”

“Exactly,” I say. “It's perfectly okay. I've had worse.”

“Have you had better?”

“Someone has. There must be better.” The wind shifts and sprays rain against the kitchen windows. I expect big blue slapping noodles next, like a car wash. “At least our house will be clean after this,” I say.

“If it isn't destroyed.”

“Right, assuming it isn't destroyed, it'll be quite clean.”

Leslie pus down her glass and wraps her arms around my neck. “I think the roast can take care of itself for an hour or so...”

I put my glass down.

—

Leslie turns off the light and climbs into bed. I turn it back on.

“Why?”

“So we know if the power goes out.”

“It's too bright. Turn on the hall light.”

I do and crack the door allowing a cone of light to bathe the room. Leslie lights the gingerbread candle on the night stand.

“We might need that later,” I say.

“Why not now?”

“Why not?”

Nutmeg and molasses soon replaces the struck-match smell. That corner of the room flickers with shifting light. By comparison, the cone from the hallway seems oppressive in its consistency. Leslie pulls the tie from her hair. The top is still constrained by the headlamp's elastic harness, but the ends fall in slight curls. I had forgotten how her hair curls when wet. I like it very much.

During the sex I keep staring at her dark third eye. This solves a problem I often have of where to look when our faces are too close to look at both eyes collectively. I can't chose one or the other, or nose or mouth or breasts. I resolve to focus on that spot on her forehead from now on, headlamp or no.

How fortuitous, how dramatic if the power cuts out at her instant of climax. All anticipation releases, her pleasure so strong and consuming it physically manifests itself, intensifies the storm, topples trees, overloads the grid in a great gasping flash.

I would feel good about myself for the rest of my life if this one great coincidence.

But she doesn't and it doesn't and I do and then it's time to check the roast.

—

The ice in our scotches has melted so I steal more from the cooler. I slice the roast with the electric knife and we eat dinner by recessed incandescent light. We run the garbage disposal and the dishwasher. We empty one of the ice packs into our drinks and pilfer from another. We take our scotches to the news.

“The wind damage is not over. We haven't seen anything yet.”

“They've been telling us that all night,” Leslie says.

“We should make this a drinking game. Drink every time they say wind or gusts.”

“Or rain. Or storm.”

“Or damage. Outtages.”

“Or really or heavy,” she says.

“Or worse,” I say.

“I can't drink like that.”

“I don't think I can either. At least not this fine, fine scotch.” We clink glasses.

“Recent numbers indicate at least 1.3 million customers in the area are without power.”

Leslie whistles, but it's more air than note. “1.3 million. How many actually do have power? Might be easier to just report that.”

“If you're still watching this, you're one of the lucky few. Remember, if – and let's be serious, when – you lose power, you can listen to our radio updates on battery-powered devices or online on your smart phone.”

“We're a reverse statistic,” I say. I stumble over all the s's and t's which come in frustratingly rapid succession.

Leslie stands shakily. “We don't have to wait for nature to knock out the grid if you want to play pioneer so badly,” she says. She clicks off the television and reaches under the lampshade. “This is all optional.” The lamp goes dark.

I get it, I'm with her. I flip off the ceiling lights, pull the drapes shut and pinch them together with clothes pins from the laundry room, shutting off lights as I go. I point to the glowing green numbers on the cable box. Leslie digs around behind the television and after a tug the numbers fade out.

“We shouldn't have done that,” I say. “It might have to reboot or reconfigure when we want it back.”

“How long does that take?”

“I don't know. It's never happened before.”

We admire our manufactured darkness. It's soothing. Somehow quieter than before, the darkness vibrates with charming purity. Our eyes begin to adjust and outlines emerge, familiar but dull and indistinct.

I walk to the bathroom and flip on the light because that's just where my hand goes when I enter. The light flood the hallway.

“Habits?” Leslie says.

I flip the light off and the windowless bathroom is awfully dark. “Fine, echolocation then.” I'll use acoustics to find the center of the bowl.

I see a light bobbing down the hallway and Leslie leans against the doorframe with headlamp blazing.

“I don't truss that one bit.” She illuminates the bowl and I cast a flattering shadow against the far wall. I urge and encourage things along, too acutely aware of her visible gaze.

“Forget it,” I say, “Just turn on the light and shut the door.” When I finish, the drapes are open to gray, the lights and television are back on. So is the cable box and progress creeps across a generic bar.

“Rebooting,” she says and slumps onto the couch.

—

We drink in silence. Relative silence. The storm still hurls itself against our home, but we've learned to all but ignore its racket. We sit in our new silence. The melting ice cracks and settles in her glass. The ice in mine rest on the bottom.

Her eyelids droop and she squints hard. She leans her head back on the couch and I lay in her lap.

“Whasit? What's wrong?” she says. “Were you expecting some kind of lights-out epiphany? To discover new things about ourselves and each other passing time in the dark? Something, anything, remotely life-affirming?”

“I've lived my whole life with the lights on. Is it so strange to want to go without for a bit?”

“That's terribly modern of you.”

“Isn't it?”

“Look, we made it this far. I'm sure it's all almost over. I'm... I'm gonna knock out the power in the bedroom and shleep.” She stands. “Enjoy your dreams of

darkness.”

I lie on the couch and listen to the window wheezing. Leslie doesn't know what she's talking about, it's far from over. She wasn't out there, out in it, not really. Her clothes weren't even that wet. My clothes –

I move them to the dryer and set it to tumble-dry low. In the kitchen, I stop and look at the stupid oil lamp. I remove the slender glass top and try to light the frayed wick. The flame consumes the match and burns my fingers, but the wick only sings. I twist the sharp grooved knob, not knowing what it does, and try again. I lift the base and shake the pale yellow oil. It glops up and down and I hope its soaking the wick, curled in the base like a preserved worm. I light it again and nothing happens again. I replace the top.

So much for that.

I go back to the couch. It's still bad out there. I would know. If anything, it's worse now. I doubt even I could venture out there in this. The street will just have to stay flooded. How. How in the fuck do we still have power?

“We must have power lines of... of steel. Lines of steel,” I say out loud, hoping to jinx it.

The reboot bar continues to trickle onward. It's only about twenty-five-percent full. I fall asleep with the lights on.

–

Another tremendous crash wakes me. This one ends with a flourish of tinkling glass and moaning metal. A wet carpet stain grows under the open window. The dampness will spread. I had let it in and it will soon take over. We'll live in a swamp. The storm will never end and continue to feed it through the crack I made. First mildew,

then mold, then marsh grass and cattails. Mangroves choking the television. The swamp will digest the carpet, the floor planks, the furniture into mud, detritus, primordial ooze until a live wire falls from a decaying wall and Contact.

Because we're the last house on the block. Because we never lost it.

I would defend whatever grows because I had let it in.

The reboot bar finally fills. The television returns, but instead of the news there's a design of concentric circles: "Please Stand By."

As the Lake Lapped the Pier

Saturday meant s'mores and Armand watched Ceci suck at the drying marshmallow on her fingers. White specks still dotted her lips. Armand nibbled the edges of his graham cracker. They sat on the dock and watched Van prepare and distribute the fireside snacks. He had several long-tined forks set varying distances from the fire, catering to all camper tastes, lightly toasted to charred.

“I think I love him,” Ceci said.

Armand shrugged. He often caught Ceci eying Van, which he understood. There was a lot to like about the brawny eighteen-year-old camp counselor, especially when the average day involved shirt-less swimming, shirt-less rowing and shirt-less volleyball. At night, Van put on a shirt, squeezed an acoustic Fender between his biceps and played pop songs from memorized internet tabs. Armand wasn't impressed, but he was the only one. Van's fretting was sloppy and his timing was off and he didn't bother to tune. It only got worse as the fire's heat warmed the strings and the guitar often dropped a whole step by the end. Armand felt that hiring guys like Van was irresponsible of the camp management as it gave these impressionable young girls unrealistic expectations of the real world, which he assumed contained mostly Armands and very few Vans.

“I'm going to do it next week, for sure,” Ceci said.

“Are you? Really?”

“Yes. At the end of s'mores I'll offer – no, demand – do you think he'd like that better?”

“I'm sure he'll like it either way.”

“What would you like better?” she said.

Armand thought. No one had ever offered or demanded to give him anything.

“Demand, I guess.”

“Okay, then I'll demand to suck his cock.”

Armand nodded and listened to the wet slap of restless lake water against the piles. He wondered if that's what it would sound like.

“Do you think he'll let me?” she asked.

“Well, if you're demanding it I suppose he'll have to.”

“Good. That's what I think too.”

“You should wipe the marshmallow off your lips, though,” he said.

She wet her lips with several flicks of her tongue and scrubbed with the back of her sweatshirt cuff. “Thanks,” she said.

Armand stood. “I think I'm going to turn in,” he said.

“Already? It's early.”

“I won't sleep yet; probably read and stuff.”

“I'll walk with you,” she said and reached out both her arms. He leveraged his feet against hers and pulled her up. She fell into him a little and he held her just enough to steady her and no more. “Away,” she said and leapt across the dock planks in pairs. They passed the campfire and Van packing up the s'mores ingredients.

He waved and twirled a long fork in his fingers like a drum stick. “Acoustic session starts in ten, guys,” he said.

Ceci cocked a hip, looked over her shoulder and said that she'd be there.

After Van turned his back, she smiled knowingly at Armand and he smiled back. He liked being in on her plan even if he disliked the goal.

Staring at the fire tinted the walk back blue, which the decrepit outdoor

fluorescents only made worse. Armand looked at Ceci in her rolled shorts and baggy sweatshirt. She still had a line across the back of her thighs from sitting on the dock's edge. He figured that she didn't know, though he couldn't figure *how* she didn't know, that every guy their age looked at her the way she looked at Van. Armand assumed that he was the first to notice the baby fat migration from gut to tit and thigh to ass. Almost overnight, Ceci's body had become something shapely and wonderful and Armand had figured their friendship was doomed. He had expected that she would trade him in for a wrestler and a group of socialite girls like she had gradually exchanged her cocooning threads for items tapered, plunging and fitted, but she did not. They kept texting and chatting, which only confirmed for Armand that she really had no idea.

“I wonder what his room will be like,” Ceci said.

“I bet it has a bed. And some clothes.”

She punched him. “I meant what will it say about him. Rooms can reveal a lot about someone.”

“I know, I can hardly wait to find out.”

“Enough, you.”

He smiled at her. They were at his bunk. “Good night, Armie,” she said.

“Later, Ceec.”

Armand watched her leave through the bunk's screen door. She pulled an iPod from her pocket and put in earbuds. The screen briefly lit the side of her face. He wondered if she had wanted to do that all along, but figured that if she had, she would have done it. He undressed and got into bed, but didn't feel like reading. He looked around his room, which wasn't his room, as it was temporary, and not really a room at all, as it was just a bed in a bunk. His influence didn't extend farther than the suitcase at the

foot of his bed and a small dresser stacked with worn detective novels and a stiff baseball glove from his father. This was camp and he packed light. No one was gleaning much from his room.

An uncomfortable erection distracted him from sleep and he rolled onto his stomach, pinning it against the mattress. At home, he would have taken care of it, but here, the pressure of his body only helped some.

—

A week later, on the night of expected demanding, Armand stood with Ceci at the end of the Saturday s'mores line. The guy in front of her kept twisting to scratch his wide shoulders and crane his neck in her direction.

“I'm really doing it. In case you're wondering,” Ceci said.

“Hadn't crossed my mind,” Armand said.

“Well, I am.”

“Let me know how it goes.”

“Would that be weird? Do people talk about these things?” she said with genuine curiosity.

“I wasn't asking for the gory details, a yes or no would be fine.”

“Obviously, I was going to tell you that,” she said and was enthusiastically greeted by Van. He pushed his blond mop from his eyes, his fingers creating wide, fleeting furrows.

“And for the young lady?” Van said. His sweatshirt sleeves, pushed up past his elbows, added bulk to bulk.

“What's good today, Van?” she said.

“The darks have developed a wonderful char, if I do say so myself.”

“So they have; I'm sold. Can I have – I mean, get me a double black and make it drip.”

“Such discerning taste. A girl after my own heart,” he said, pressed a hand to his left pec and smiled a senior-yearbook-superlative smile. “Dripping double black, coming right up.” He stacked two graham crackers, a square of dark chocolate and the crispiest marshmallow of the bunch and squeezed it together. Then he flipped it so that the chocolate was on top and set it in a pan next to the fire with a flat rock weighing it down. As the chocolate melted, it trickled through the marshmallow's white fissures and collected on the bottom cracker. Van handed the treat to Ceci. She thanked him and blew on it lightly as she stepped aside.

“For you?” Van said to Armand.

“Just graham cracker and marshmallow.”

“Again? That's not a s'mores, man,” he said with another smile.

“It's my s'mores.”

“Alright, alright, light roast, no cocoa, here you go.” Armand took it and walked with Ceci toward their usual hang-out. She stopped at the dock's edge, offered a knowing smile and doubled back. Armand kept walking. The rec hall's floodlight only lighted part of the dock and he settled in the darkness. Ceci gained a long, still shadow as she walked into its light and became a silhouette as she approached Van kneeling by the fire. She brushed chestnut hair behind the ear that already held it, leaned on her knees and appeared to speak. Van's head snapped up from the tines and chocolate bars and he put a hand on the back of his neck. He smothered the lingering embers with a bucket of dirt and together they walked toward the wooded path.

Armand lay on his back and shielded his eyes from the glare. He ignored the

skidding of stones and the snap of a lighter.

“Armandhammer, that you?” It was the distinctive accent of British Kelly, the camp's only exchange camper.

He said it was and crawled toward the voice, peering down through the slat slits.

“What're you doing up there?” she asked.

“Sitting, on the normal part for sitting.”

“Docks are for docking. They're not 'sits.”

“What are *you* doing down there?”

“Sneaking.” He was above her now and could see her glowing cigarette dot. He had smelled the smoke but thought it the campfire's final gasp. “C'mon down,” she said.

Armand sat on the dock's edge and hopped off. The pebbled shoreline was narrow and the dock was low. They had to crouch to stay dry.

“Fancy a fag?” British Kelly asked and extended the pack.

“No, thanks. Hey, you don't go around saying that, right?”

“I say what I want. Fag, fag, fag. They don't like it they can piss off.”

“It's just that – ”

“I get it, I know what else it means. Why do you think I say it? Christ, you Americans are so touchy with the sex stuff.” Smoke waifs drifted past her hazel eyes and short black-dyed Chelsea cut and disappeared past the dock-roof.

“Don't you think someone will see?” he said.

“Isn't that why we're under this moldy old dock? Who's going to see, anyway? Everyone's stuffed full of sweets and soon the pied piper will pull out his magic guitar and lull them all into an adoring stupor.”

“You don't like Van either?”

“He's a twat.”

“And garbage at guitar.”

“Ew, I know, right!” She touched his arm. “Bloody awful. And that sappy pop shit he plays makes me fucking gag.”

Armand mimed gagging. “Seriously,” he said. “And his picking is just like —” he scrunched up his face and waggled limp fingers.

“Like his fingers are tripping over the strings trying to escape the music,” she said.

“Ha, yeah,” he said. British Kelly expertly flicked her cigarette butt into the lake. Armand fished it out and stuck it between the planks of the dock-roof. They sat on the rocks. British Kelly shook out another cigarette and tilted the pack to Armand.

“You sure?” she said with a cigarette between her lips.

“I'm good,” he said.

She lit hers.

“He is kinda nice, though — Van,” he said.

“Fuck being nice.”

“I'm nice.”

“No, Armandhammer, you're a fucking maniac.”

Armand snort-laughed. No one had ever called him maniacal before and he figured she was probably kidding.

“How many campers do you think Van shags each summer?” she asked and answered, “probably hundreds.”

“There aren't even a hundred campers here.”

“Still, I bet it's a lot,” British Kelly said.

Armand had never considered this. He didn't think Ceci had either. Maybe she had and didn't care. He hadn't even considered that Van could be interested in any- or every- one else. Ceci's confidence and the way all the guys fawned over her had convinced him that she was the only one that could get with dreamy Van. His stomach did a thing. It wasn't jealousy he felt, but something else, disappointment, disgust or anger. He imagined Van only mildly enjoying Ceci's favor and ushering her out before entertaining his next clueless young suitor.

“I saw your friend Ceci go off with him, actually.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Yeah. Think he's shagging her right now?”

Armand shrugged.

“I bet he's shagging her. Fuck, I would. She's fit.” British Kelly took a puff.

Armand dreaded the inevitable next question. People always had to ask.

“You two ever do it?”

“Nah, it's not like that,” he said.

“Not even a snog?”

Armand shook his head.

“Shame,” she said.

Armand shrugged. British Kelly was right, he thought, Van was a twat. And so was Ceci for being so dumb and arrogant, thinking that she was the only one that could get him. Something reckless rippled through his nerves and he didn't feel like being so nice anymore. His mouth and tongue and throat cords acted out like the maniac he might have been.

“Let me eat you out.”

British Kelly stared at him with wide, fiery eyes.

“Did you *really* just ask that?”

“I demanded, actually.”

“Demanded! Are you fucking mental? You think I just lift my skirt for anyone who fancies a lick of my lady parts?”

“No, I – Sorry,” he said.

“I swear, you Americans really are all pervs, prudes or pee-dos.”

“Forget it. Sorry. Sorry.”

“You fucking perv, that's what you were doing up there wasn't it? Fucking wanking it in the dark!”

“No, shit, no.” He squeeze his eyes shut.

“Wanking yourself raw, waiting to watch your splooge dribble out your prick into the bloody lake. I fucking swim in this lake, you sick fuck!”

“That's... vivid,” he mumbled.

“What?”

“Your description... it was oddly detailed.”

“Fuck. Off.” She threw her cigarette at his feet and walked away along the shore.

Armand watched the cigarette smolder for what felt like a long time, but cigarettes only burn for so long. He sat down and picked it up. He felt for a dry leaf or something to burn but they were all too damp and only hissed when the ember touched them, a bit of noise but no flame. He ground it out in the rocks and stuck it up through the dock planks with the other.

Some time passed and he practiced not moving. When he got good at that, he practiced disappearing until he heard footsteps overhead and Ceci's voice, soft and

probing, “Armie?”

“Hey,” he said and looked up. “Down here.” Her face was dark and haloed by the light.

“What are you doing down there?”

“I, uh – nothing.”

“I’m coming down.” She moved deliberately as she lowered herself under the dock. They sat and watched ripples wrinkle the reflected light. Armand brooded over many things, but two in particular.

“How’d it go?” he asked finally.

“It didn’t,” she said.

“Like, he couldn’t get it up or something?” He really hoped that Van couldn’t get it up.

“No, he said ‘no.’ He said that he was very flattered and that I was a very nice girl, but he had a girlfriend back home and I probably shouldn’t go around offering guys blowjobs, anyway.”

This was not an outcome he had even considered possible. However, his excitement was soon erased by her look of wilted rejection, her eyes barely open as she scanned the shoreline for new pebbles and weeds to occupy her gaze. “But I saw you two walk off together,” he said.

“He just wanted to talk in private.”

“So, you didn’t see his room then?”

“Not even the building.” She sniffed and dropped her head on his shoulder. “I’m so stupid.”

“No, you’re not.” He wanted to touch her in some mature, gentle way, but his left

arm was too awkwardly close and his right arm too awkwardly far and so he leaned his head on hers like two old rocks too heavy to support themselves.

“I am so fucking stupid.”

“You're not. Really.” He hesitated but the words fell out anyway. “I asked to eat out British Kelly.”

She sat up. Already he missed her warmth and her weight and her smokey-floral smell. “You didn't!” she said.

“Oh, I did. Demanded, actually.”

She let out a shrill laugh and the whole ordeal seemed almost worth it. “No.”

“Yes.”

“What'd she say!”

“She wasn't as nice as Van.”

“Wow,” she said, then became quiet. The brief humor of his failure had likely reminded her of her own. She shifted and her movement was echoed down their tiny, sheltered beach, rock moving rock moving rock. The lake threatened to lap them up.

“Would you want to try it on me?” she said to no one, to the water and the wood, to their skittish foundation. He only heard “you,” “try” and “me,” but that was enough; he was the subject and she was the object and there was a verb between them. He knew what she was asking, it could be nothing else, but acted confused to stall. “You know, go down on, me?” she clarified quietly.

“Oh, well, yeah, okay. If you think you would want that.”

“I – it might be nice, I think. Just to try.”

“I've never done it before.”

“Me neither.”

He figured that they should kiss and he pressed his lips against the corner of her mouth. He felt her press back and for a brief moment neither moved. His lips pulsed but the kiss itself was dry, still and askew. They pulled back and kissed again, this time straight on. They mouthed silent vowels and Armand breathed only when they separated because his nose was smushed against her cheek.

Finally, their lips wet with shared saliva, his top lip slid between hers and her bottom lip between his. Her lip felt warm and plump and he jabbed at it with his tongue. This arrangement felt right, more right than anything he could remember and certainly more right than how they had just been kissing, so they kept doing it that way, separating each time with a satisfying smack.

They paused and looked at each other. Ceci nodded slightly and he knelt down. She laid on her back and pulled down her shorts and underwear and left them dangling around one foot.

Armand realized that he did not have the slightest idea where to start, so he stalled by kissing the insides of her thighs. She rocked her hips slightly each time his lips brushed the smooth skin. He had, of course, performed this act many times before on many different women in his mind. In these fantasies he knew exactly what to do, blessed with an instinct for imparting immense pleasure, but the details had always been fuzzy and now the multitude of places to put and ways to move his tongue overwhelmed him and he almost quit right there. He didn't know whether to lick inside or outside its many arcane folds, whether to lick in broad strokes or short flicks – feline or serpentine – or whether he was supposed to stick his tongue inside like Frenching. That last bit didn't seem right to him at all.

He craned his neck and looked up her stomach, flat and exposed with the bottom

of her bra showing, and asked if everything was alright. He didn't remember pushing up her shirt and wondered if she had, if maybe he should have taken off her shirt first. Then he wondered if it was too late and regretted not doing it because he would have liked to see her boobs, and really, boobs were more accessible, more public than vaginas, so he probably should have started there for the sake of order. He had skipped an important step and now he was lost.

“Yeah, fine. You haven't really done much,” she said.

“I know. I'm about to.”

He lowered his head and first traced the slit with a finger. It was soft and pleasant with wispy, coiled hairs around the top. It definitely had a scent, a distinctly human scent that reminded him of morning breath or when he buried his face in his pillow and breathed deeply, a scent he did not dislike. He eased himself into the act by kissing the top bit which seemed most complicated and tried to ignore that that was where pee came out. He started with little flicks of tongue and was soon tracing sloppy cursive letters on the slick flesh as he had heard to do in middle school when making out.

He rather liked being between her legs like this. Her calves pressed against his shoulders and her bent knees loomed above him like castle parapets and he felt secure. He did not know what to do with his hands and so he laid them at his sides, which made him feel somewhat like a seal – a seal in a castle of lovely white stone. A seal in a castle of lovely white stone with a throbbing erection pressing uncomfortably into a rock's edge.

Armand imagined his tongue performing acrobatic feats and he imagined Ceci experiencing unprecedented pleasure. He imagined she grabbed his hair and whispered “yes, yes, Armand, yes!”, she used his full name, whispered in reverence or shouted in ecstasy. Then she did touch his head and speak, but it was a tap and she only said “hey.”

He looked up, past the pale prairie and the mounds ruffled with folded fabric, and into her eyes somewhere in the darkness.

“It's okay,” she said. “You can stop.”

“Was it not good?”

“It was fine, really, but I just want to stop.”

“Sorry,” he said.

As she pulled up her shorts, he noticed the lines and circles of the flat rocks pressed into her soft bottom. He had the urge to disappear again and might have, except she sat against the bulkhead and nodded to the spot beside her and he sat there. They listened to the water. He had listened to a lot of water today and was sick of it, but their knees were touching.

“Walk me to my bunk?” she said.

He nodded and she climbed onto the dock. Armand quickly cupped some lake water and scrubbed his mouth. When he joined her, she was looking at the pair of cigarette butts he had stashed on the dock. He nudged them back through the planks.

As they walked, he rubbed her scent from his mouth with his collar and sleeve whenever he thought she wasn't looking. If she wanted a goodnight kiss, he didn't want her to taste herself.

Onwards to the Edge

When he watched the asteroid puncture the Earth, Lt. Aarón thought how serene it all actually was, bright and silent. The Earth's middle bulged like an overripe peach, the asteroid a thumb. Lt. Aarón wondered if the core really was a massive diamond and would squeeze out like a pit; or if it was molten and would dribble out like juice. He saw neither magma, diamond, pit nor juice. It had all been obliterated, disintegrated with his wife and son and Jeep and pastor; strawberry shortcake and rye whiskey and bananas foster and chicken vindaloo; Rocky I – V and the pyramids, all the elephants and chickadees, neo-nazis, rapists, computer programmers, all reduced to dust now forever expanding in the way it was born.

He dropped the bag of moon rock samples and they floated to the ground like the feathers of an ambushed swallow.

“Holy fuck, do you see this?” Lt. Marcus crackled through the radio.

“Holy fuck, indeed.”

Aarón began hopping back to the lunar lander, small hops at first, then larger with higher parabolas, wondering each time if the next one would be the one from which he didn't return.

–

Unsuited, Aarón sat with his head down on the only table. Marcus sat across from him. Col. Alex played with the radio, and it was now playing as it had as much chance of contacting anyone as a Fisher-Price cellphone. She flipped though channels and frequencies listening for anything, an old eccentric with a ham radio in a bunker full of Spaghetti-O's and baked beans sealed in an Earth chunk hurling through space.

“Eagle to Mission Control. Houston? Canaveral? Anyone? Moscow?” Alex clicked some dials. “Eagle to Mission Control. Houston?”

“We didn't even see it coming,” Aarón said.

“Maybe we did. Maybe someone detected it and knew it couldn't be stopped so they sent us anyway. Saved us.”

“Preserved us. Sealed us up in this useless tube.”

“What about everything else? Art, literature, history?”

“Whatever is left in our centrifuge-scrambled brains, I suppose. We're it. We're humanity's epitaph.”

“We should get working, then,” Marcus said.

They had all known that something like this could happen, not the destruction of Earth exactly, but some other calamity. They all thought of Challenger and Columbia at some point, Aarón most of all. Those events had had witnesses, mourners, epigraphers. Now, the proportions were all off; this was the largest disaster viewed on the smallest scale. These three could not elegize the entire planet. If any other beings were even out there, even bothering to watch, it would be millions of years before they noticed anything, before anyone even knew Earth was gone.

They still had notebooks and Marcus opened one and began to draw a tree. It wasn't a cartoon tree with sloped trunk, squirrel hole and leafy tuft, but it also wasn't a very well-drawn tree either. He hadn't added the leaves yet, which he planned to add individually for the sake of accuracy, and so it wasn't much more than a series of branching twigs. It could have been dendrites, veins or a river basin, coral or dill. He tore it out.

Alex continued adjusting the transmitting and receiving frequencies.

“London? Rome? Tokyo?”

“Dubalyewgee-eee-ate--” The radio speakers made a bored, nasally noise. They all looked at the speaker, then at each other to confirm that they had indeed heard something that none of them said. The voice was hollow and its message was English, as best as they could tell, or at least composed of English parts; the message itself was, for the moment, nonsense.

Aarón moved to speak and commemorate their collective awe, but Alex silenced him, afraid that acknowledging the miracle could murder it.

They sat and silently pleaded for the voice to return and just as they were about to abandon hope, as if biding its time, it happened again, the same dull, distant voice:

“Chicago answering American Airlines ... seventy-nine...”

“American Airlines? Chicago? I was confidently under the impression that neither existed anymore,” Aarón said.

“Shouldn’t we reply?” Marcus said.

“No, Marcus, we shouldn’t reply,” Aarón said. “I think it’s a hallucination or solar radiation or variable pitches of static that we desperately want to believe to be a human voice, but I don’t think an air traffic controller with the mother of all ham radios is spinning through space on a chunk of Illinois trying to reach us.”

“Me neither, but it can’t hurt.

“I vote we stick to S.O.P., act like nothing happened. We’ll finish the experiments and tomorrow we return to – or toward – Earth as planned.”

“What if we headed away from the sun? We could follow Voyager’s trajectory, float past Jupiter, Saturn. We could even reach the heliosheath... or farther.”

“Eventually,” Aarón said.

“Time is something we've got,” Marcus said.

The module was not designed for such an effort and they all knew what that strain could do to the life-support systems.

The first plink was as startling as the ghost in the radio. Bits of charred geologic history, igneous and metamorphic, scratched by Neanderthals and shoguns and pedophiles ticked against the aluminum fort.

“Should we go catch some? Add some Earth rocks to our time capsule?”

“I'm going, Alex said.”

Aarón said nothing, but began to suit up too and by the time they were ready, the Earth storm had intensified. The pieces were still small, but now descended with the cadence of viscous rain. Marcus took running hops and made elegant parabolic sweeps with his re-purposed moon rock bag spread wide. Aarón muted Alex's giggles and Marcus' gleeful grunts. Without sound to match the movement, he lost track of who was who.

One of them hopped to Aarón and spoke to their own reflection. It gestured to Aarón's anemic sack and its bloated own. Aarón un-muted the radio:

“You don't have many rocks,” Marcus said.

Aarón began plucking the easy ones from the surface.

“You can't do that,” Marcus said. “That's cheating. They're contaminated with moon dust – Earth truffles.”

“It's all the same.”

“Nah-uh, do it right.”

Marcus bounded away. He landed one of his leaps into Alex's back, propelling her forward trailing Earth rocks. She shouted, spun in mid-air, grasped for the lost. She

retaliated by launching her shoulder into Marcus. She hit his right arm and sent him pirouetting in an envious arc. He clutched his bag shut. Alex took several hops toward him as he landed. Their laughing blended together amid the tinkling shards of Earth, and when they settled, each only saw their own mirrored UVA-UVB-protected helmet infinitely reflected in the other.

The two grew oddly silent and made short hops back to the lander.

Aarón stood with his bag limply open and his face turned upward toward the endless empty sky. The atmosphere-filled suit created a comforting numbness. He knew he was being pelted with rocks and was aware of each impact but between the thick suit and the pressurized air inside, that's all it was: a distant awareness of disturbance. The canned air smelled only of him. The pebbles hit his helmet like a secluded lover's window and despite everything, everything else, he felt like he was hiding from summer rain in his Jeep, sheltered from a storm, though there was no more summer or rain or Jeeps or Dylan or Dylan records or record players or any records at all.

He listened to the tink pink pink tink tink.

—

Aarón passed through the airlock and between the hissing and the silence of space heard a ruckus from the cabin. He walked in and saw Alex astride Marcus on a chair, her torso shifting in place. Two unshaven legs rested on equipment at different heights and two hairy legs protruded below with a blue jumpsuit bunched around the ankles. His hands burrowed under her thick blue sports bra and the fabric stretched around his knuckles. Aarón stood with his helmet under his arm. Marcus peaked over Alex's shoulder, cursed and tried to stand. Alex twisted and grabbed her jumpsuit. The pair struggled to navigate their twisted limbs and return to discrete bipedal beasts and Aarón

put away his suit.

Reattired, Alex and Marcus dumped their spoils on the only table. Dust rose, swirled into tiny eddies and disappeared into the air filters

“Wait.” Marcus grabbed some woven straps and divided the table into thirds. “So we don’t mix them up.”

Aarón watched Alex and Marcus inspect the rocks with magnifying monocles and looked at his own small pile with disinterest.

“This is a piece of the pyramids,” Alex announced.

“I have a piece of Route 66,” said Marcus.

“This is the nose of a Terracotta warrior.”

“This is Ayer's Rock.”

“Washington Monument.”

“Grand Canyon.”

“The foundation of my parents' home,” Aarón said.

“You can keep that one,” Marcus said. “Alex, do you have any other monuments?”

Aarón stood up and found he had no where to go.

“Look, don't be jealous,” Marcus said.

“Jealous? Do you not grasp what has happened? Why would I be jealous that the last female decided to have sex with you?”

“Well, I mean, that. That would kind of be why.”

“I don't care about that, but it's been nothing but fun and games for you since the... event.”

“Good! That's the way I want it. I want to float recklessly, I want physical

intimacy, I want lightness. Do you not realize what has happened? We are free. We're completely, painfully, hopelessly free. Of everything. The freest anyone has or ever will be. I am not going to die mourning and morose.”

“We have an obligation.”

“We don't have shit.”

“Why would you risk creating something so doomed?”

“Don't tell me what to do with my body,” Alex said.

“There's no risk,” Marcus said.

“Exactly. We won't be around in nine months,” Alex said.

“No, I mean my launches are unmanned. I'm sterile. Always have been. So, it really doesn't matter. I left nothing behind, sacrificed no future. No siblings, no kids, I was the last of my line.”

“This could be your chance to leave something behind,” Aarón said.

“Maybe you're right. Yeah, maybe. May be.”

Marcus took his notebook again and sat in one of the command chairs facing the instruments. On the clean blank page, he began to record the entirety of human existence. When he finished, he shared it with his comrades:

Title: A Brief History of Humanity.

('Titles' are names for things we make. 'Brief' means short in length.

'History' is all the events that came before. 'Humanity' is what we came to call ourselves. Our title.)

I cannot start at the beginning of everything. There would be too much to tell and I know far too little of it. I can tell the universal factors, that is, the things that generally apply – applied – to us all.

First, we are born or birthed, that is, we emerge from our mothers (female parent) and come into being, we become. We eat, that is to take in nutrients to power our cells – our littlest pieces. This is harder than it sounds. If we eat too little, we die, that is, cease being (see dying). If we eat too much, we still die, but slower. We must also drink, take in water, and breathe, take in oxygen. Our cells need these things too.

Then, we grow, become bigger in body and thought, and soon, we develop the urge to breed, that is, make more of ourselves with another. This act of breeding is –

There was another page about breeding and dying, but Aarón quit reading. “You used words,” Aarón said.

“That's right.”

“But there could never be a translation.”

“What else is there?”

“Ourselves,” Alex said. “Our cells, DNA. It's the only thing other beings could ever possibly decipher.”

Alex put a rack and three vials on the table.

“A cheek swab, semen and blood,” she said. “A sample from each of us.”

“Guess you get the fun one,” Marcus said and handed Aarón a cup. “I'll provide the blood.”

–

Alex tied the elastic around Marcus' bicep and he pumped his fist to engorge the vein. The needle was thick, not intended for drawing human blood.

“Do you think they'd try and clone us?” Alex asked. She pierced the skin, then

the vein and blood squirted into the vial. Marcus looked away.

“Who's to say?” he said.

“I don't think I'd like that. I hope they just let us be.”

The vial full, she pulled out and offered him a band-aid for the wound.

“Wham, bam, thank you ma'am,” he said.

They admired the three assembled vials.

Marcus was pleased that they had managed to capture the core of human existence so neatly.

“There it is,” he said. “We eat, we breed, we die.”

Aarón was disappointed that they had managed to capture the core of human existence so neatly.

“That's nothing like it at all,” he said.

“I think things were always more elegant than we could see,” Alex said.

“But that doesn't explain any of this.” He motioned around the capsule. “It doesn't explain why we're out here, why we left.”

“That's the most beautiful part,” Marcus said. “If nothing else, they'll understand exactly that. When they find our frozen, lifeless bodies, they'll know what little chance we ever had of surviving out here and they'll know we did it anyway. If they can find us, if they have any concept of the beyond, they'll know that curiosity and they'll know we felt it too... and if they don't, well, maybe we can give them that.”

—

They ignited the rockets. Vibration rattled the cabin and muffled the constant plinks of falling Earth. They sat and waited, lulled by the foreign motion and the encompassing din. The engines cut briefly as the module changed direction, creating a

sudden silence punctuated by the syncopated impacts, then the roar restarted to whisk them around the moon and away from the sun.

Aarón watched the craters pass beneath them, their random distribution becoming a staccato rhythm when accelerated and repeated. He thought of a player piano. He thought of UNIVAC's punch cards. He thought nothing of the information carried in the absences, a record of injury.

The engines cut out for the final time and a long and total silence ensued. Aarón reached to the radio and clicked on the mysterious, familiar frequency:

'That little flight of Orville Wright's at Kitty Hawk, it meant that man had conquered the last element – the air.'

'That's pretty exciting alright. What happened after that, Mr. Bon?'

'Well, Annie...'

As the unplanned journey taxed the ship's power supply, systems and equipment started to shut down, their lights and displays blinking out. Aarón felt or imagined the capsule growing colder and he wanted, more than anything else, a steaming mug of Ovaltine.

—

Marcus went first. His eyes got wide and he began hyperventilating and Alex grabbed his hand. Aarón shut his eyes and willed the tortured gasping to end. When he looked again, Marcus was slumped on the table and Alex was breathing heavily. He couldn't tell if she was crying or worse.

Aarón realized that, as each of them passed on, those remaining would gain a little more oxygen, a little more time, a fact he would have shared with Alex if he thought they had the breath to spare. The dread in her wet eyes said she already knew. He could never

breath deeply enough to fill that deepest pit of his lungs. The more he tried, the deeper the air seemed to get and the deeper the absence retreated. He could not quite be fully fulfilled. The lights seemed to extinguish with increased frequency, but he couldn't tell if it or he was dimming. Alex seemed to be growing bluer, but he couldn't tell if it was her skin or the darkness, the darkness from around or within.

She struggled to calm her breathing and alternated between swallowing large gulps of air, taking short, rapid breaths and stifling it all together. Each of her troubled gasps made Aarón more aware of his own bottomless lungs, but he tried to smile anyway. He resolved to not look away and he rested his hand on the rocks before her. She put her hand on his, then her breathing stopped and she slumped in her chair.

With clumsy arms Marcus took the three straps from the table and pushed all the Earth rocks into a pile in the center. He stumbled along the table to Marcus, ran the strap under his arms and cinched it tight to the chair. His head still hung limply, but it was the best he could do. He did the same for Alex, brushing her hair out of her face and behind each ear, and finally to himself.

He had pulled the strap too tight against his chest and he couldn't breath. He stared at the buckle and the foreign, unresponsive fingers that fumbled with it as they shifted in and out of focus. A lovely periwinkle seeped from his lunulas. A sliver of white rising into a dusky summer sky off the coast of Maine. It isn't dark and it isn't bright but there are no city lights this far north and it remains the brightest thing in the sky for a long while. He picks his way along the ragged shoreline with one fist of green and clear sea glass and a small piece of blue in the other.

Lookit, he says to his dad, holding it out.

Hang on to that one.

Why?

It's pretty. Isn't that enough?

I guess. He rubbed the rounded edge on his palm, amazed that it would have once drawn blood.

You ever seen a blue bottle?

Nope.

Well there you go.

He deposited the lot in his father's shirt pocket and ran back to the water for more.