

BEFORE THE SCREEN, AND OTHER STORIES

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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Prior to the emergence of Tinder in 2013, discussion of the viability of online dating centered on the failure of online dating platforms to attract heterosexual women. Before the era of the screen, however, gay men, facing down laws and social norms which rendered their desires publicly unspeakable, had been meeting through other virtual means, phone chat lines and online chat rooms, for decades. The same year that Tinder debuted, Grindr, the first dating app for gay men, had already amassed over four million users worldwide, a quarter of whom used the app on a daily basis.

Two surveys, conducted in 2014 and 2015, found that 70% of gay men had dated someone they met online. This collection of stories, set primarily in Richmond, Virginia, asks what these men see reflected when they place themselves before the screen? Perhaps, like the protagonists of “Reunion” or “DeirdreMomLove1947,” they see a force of reconciliation. Or perhaps, as in “The Weirding Path” or “Adornments,” they are lured in by the potential the app holds for deceit, for retribution.

At its core, this collection asks readers to consider a philosophical question: when our romantic and sexual identities are mediated by a platform where we can say anything, or be anyone—who do we become?

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Men of Noble Ideals and Courageous Deeds

One day, there will be no middleman. There will be no need for any of this: no need for the newspaper deliveryman; no need for sweaty palms or carefully-worded letters of introduction; no need for the postman to carry the letters away. No need for the weeks of awaiting reply, for the lurking worry of having misunderstood a coded word or turn of phrase. One day, this catalog of minutiae will be as obsolete as formal courtship, as seeking parental permission.

Blair came to the end of the letter and paused. Closing had always been the most difficult part. He wiped his palms on his pants and reviewed the classified ad again.

28 yrs. bachelor seeks friend + companion. Interests: film (esp. French), magazines, computers, theater, travel (esp. European). Gainfully employed as mechanic. Enchanté.

The length had struck him right away. At twenty-two words, it would have cost almost five dollars, according to the fee structure of the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*. With expense, though, came clarity. It could be difficult to parse the difference between a lonely shut-in and a homosexual——Blair sometimes deliberated over the double meaning of a word, unsure whether to respond, as this would come with revealing, if not his address, at least his name. In the wrong hands, a letter expressing romantic interest in a man could cost him his job, or his apartment. But between the longtime bachelorhood, the European interests, and the use of French, the writer of this advertisement seemed unmistakably homosexual.

Blair wiped his hands on his pants again, and wrote, *Tout le plaisir est pour moi*, at the bottom of the page. He would mail the letter on his way to the Jefferson Hotel,

where he managed the bar. He could not trust the letter in the hands of his neighborhood mailman. Suppose the mailman were to drop it in a puddle, or somehow tear it in transit, exposing the message within. He could not imagine it too carefully without feeling as though he stood at the precipice of a cliff.

But the future! As he showered and dressed, pressing the collar of his shirt and the lapels of his vest, he allowed himself to imagine the new day that was coming. His friend Joseph had recently bought a Commodore 64, which could go “online”. Through some digital alchemy, the computer could connect to a sort of large, empty meeting space, where other people joined using other computers that were thousands of miles away. Joseph said that he had even played a game of Hearts where the other players were from Chicago, Houston, and San Francisco.

But last night, Joseph had found something better than Hearts, and he had invited Blair over tonight to see it. Joseph had refused to say what it was, but Blair had heard the giddiness in his voice.

Blair sealed the letter and wrote out the address from the ad on the envelope. To imagine: a whole country—America—online! It seemed fantastical, and yet it was here.

###

Blair’s walk to work passed quickly, and more pleasantly than he might have expected for muggy July. But as he passed the hotel’s fountain, the bronze alligator statues reflecting the sunlight in his eyes, the valet waved for him to hurry.

“Mr. Linwood has been asking for you,” the valet said, holding his hand in front of his eyes to block the glare from the alligators. “There was an issue with one of the new bartenders.”

The valet kept his hand in front of his eyes after he spoke, his mouth drawn up into a kind of smile. Every spring, the hotel hired a crop of students from the University who had chosen to summer in Richmond. The older hotel staff, particularly the valets and housekeepers, made bets to see which of the students would last until the Fall.

So he was surprised to find Deon behind the bar, his muscles straining against the fabric of his shirt as he wiped its tin face with a rag. Deon, who never once showed up late or drank on the job. Of whom he'd begun to entertain the fantasy, among others, of keeping him after the semester began.

“Howzit, boss?” Deon said.

“Good. How has it been in here? Any customers?”

“Just one. Oldest woman I've ever seen. Asked for a Sazerac.”

“Any problems?”

Deon looked up from the bar. “No, why?”

Blair waved him away. As he crossed to the deputy hotelier's office, alongside the front desk, Blair felt hopeful that whatever had happened had been a misunderstanding. But Linwood's face was red when Blair arrived in his doorway, and he told Blair to shut the door behind him when he came in.

“You need to fire the bartender,” Linwood said. “He insulted Mrs. Desautel.” Eloise Desautel was the director of development for the United Daughters of the Confederacy, which had reserved a large block of rooms for its autumn members' banquet.

“I can't imagine that's true. He hasn't caused a single problem all summer.”

Linwood stared across the desk, pursing his lips as if chewing the possibility, testing its grain. “Regardless, he’ll have to apologize.”

Blair closed the office door behind him and stood just outside. Across the lobby, Deon was preparing a martini for an obese man in a seersucker suit. The man at the bar said something, and Deon tilted his head back as though struck by the force of the words, his lips spreading across his teeth and lifting into a smile. Though he knew he was too far away, still Blair saw Deon’s Adam’s apple rise up in his throat, cradling his jaw as he laughed.

How he was to tell this young man that he must apologize for some unspecified violation of etiquette to Eloise Desautel, who had lately been loudly complaining that Arthur Ashe had been allowed to lie in state at the Governor’s Mansion. “That honor belongs to men of noble ideals and courageous deeds,” she had written in an op-ed to the Times-Dispatch, “not a colored athlete best known lately for getting arrested and dying of AIDS.”

It was a conversation best put off, he decided—indefinitely, if possible. He relieved Deon without mentioning his conversation with Linwood, and staffed the bar himself through happy hour.

It seemed to him sometimes that only elderly guests stayed at the Jefferson. Often, he caught them standing around in the lobby, gazing up at the domed ceiling or the elaborate wainscoting. They saw the hotel, he assumed, draped in the gauzy light of their childhoods, a baroque vision of their Jim Crow past.

He supposed this was how it had always been, the old looking back into the past, and the young reaching forward into the future. And he thought of the letter he had sent

only a few hours before. One day, one day, like the future was a mantra, something he could speak into existence. A little promise you dared the world not to keep.

###

Blair arrived at Joseph's apartment after nightfall. Joseph had just moved into Church Hill, and aside from his computer, Blair saw he had unpacked very little. True to form, though, he had sorted and organized the unpacked boxes, grouping them into little clusters tucked in the far corner of each room, and lined his potted plants along the windowsill in the living room

"I didn't realize you had this much stuff," Blair said.

"That's the point of organization," Joseph said. "Everything becomes much easier to conceal." He opened a box in the kitchen, extracted two glasses, rinsed them, and poured them screwdrivers. "To the future."

They raised their glasses, and then he waved Blair into the living room, where the computer sat on his coffee table like a monolith. The chairs were occupied by stacks of button-down shirts, and so Blair dragged a box over from the corner with both hands, grunting with exertion.

"Manuals," Joseph said by way of explanation. He moved the computer mouse to a program that looked like a comic book speech bubble and clicked on it. A box appeared bearing a larger version of the logo, and from somewhere behind the computer issued a series of electronic screeches. After a minute, the screeching stopped, and an empty window appeared. A bar ran across the top of the window, the center of which read, "Divine's Lavender Bazaar". As Blair watched, a line of text appeared on the screen.

Delroy9111: A big gay hello from Bloomington, Indiana!

Joseph pecked at letters on the keyboard, composing his response on the pulsing screen in a small box at the bottom of the window. He hit a key marked 'Enter,' and his message appeared in the window: *HiTekJoe: Greetings from Richmond, Virginia!*

"It's called a chatroom," Joseph said.

A long, rectangular column along the left side of the screen listed the users in the chat room, of whom there seemed to be about thirty. Blair tried to count the names, but users disappeared and were replaced more quickly than he could keep track of them. Messages piled up quickly in the window, and soon Joseph's disappeared from view. They had entered the room in the middle of a discussion about a dancer Blair had never heard of, but it didn't really matter whether he could follow the conversation or not. The mere existence of Divine's Lavender Bazaar was itself a revelation. There would be no more standing in line for watered-down cocktails, no more playing wallflower at the edge of sticky dancefloors in rooms with blacked-out windows. No more watching over his shoulder for the telltale flashes of light beneath the front door of the bar, the familiar signals of a raid. He would never need the Carytown Inn, or Christopher's, or Fieldens again.

###

He found himself waiting anxiously for return correspondence to arrive, but after two weeks had passed, Blair assumed that his letter would go unanswered. He found it tempting to convince himself that it had been lost in the mail, but he knew it was more likely that the author of the ad had simply found him unappealing. He recalled what he

had written with embarrassment now——the philosophizing, how self-important it must have seemed.

To make matters worse, several days after the incident with Mrs. Desautel, Blair had run into Deon near the valet entrance as the man was leaving the hotel. Deon's shirt had been roughly untucked, his bowtie undone and hanging over his broad shoulders like a miniature stole. His eyes had been trained on the ground, his footsteps heavy and purposeful. He had apparently not seen Blair, and he had jumped, tense and angry and startled.

“Why I have to apologize, huh?” he had demanded. Blair, caught unaware, had stammered, searching for the right thing to say. Seeing that he didn't have an answer, Deon had huffed loudly and pushed past him. Later that day, Linwood had reproached him for never having told Deon that he was to apologize. Before he had left work that same evening, Blair had called the phone number on file for Deon, and had left an apology on his answering machine. Deon had not returned to the hotel since, not even to collect his last paycheck.

Joseph's computer, though, was a welcome distraction from the tension at the hotel. Every night, after the bar closed, he and Joseph sat in Joseph's increasingly unpacked apartment, listened to the modem screech its complaint, and watched Divine's Lavender Bazaar appear on the monitor's wavy screen. Mostly, the same users appeared every night, but once every several days, a new user appeared in the chat room, identifying themselves, as Blair and Joseph had, by their location. Bristol, Opa-locka, Kansas City, Santa Cruz, Arlen, Fairbanks. Like little beacons of light, outposts along a new frontier.

But then, sorting through his mail one afternoon, Blair had his response. The slim envelope carried a faint green tint, the neat cursive lettering across its front sloping slightly to the right. He guessed that the author of the letter, referred to simply as D. Lewis in the return address, was left-handed. A left-handed mechanic, a green envelope—the details suggested further idiosyncrasies waiting to be discovered.

As he slid his letter opener along the crease of the envelope, Blair felt as though he had won a prize. He could not recall ever having been so excited to receive a letter—save for perhaps as a boy, receiving his first piece of mail: a letter from his cousin Elisa in Seattle. At six years old, there had been an element of magic to it, the idea that someone should be able to transmit their thoughts across a continent. And as he read D. Lewis' neat script, he felt that element of magic again. Though D. Lewis lived only a few hours south, in North Carolina, they were separated by a gulf, not of distance, but of permissibility, propriety—all the things they could say or do or think only in private.

“You will wonder how I became a mechanic,” the letter began. D. Lewis was really named Dillon. He had grown up in Durham, where both of his parents were researchers, his mother for Duke and his father for NC State. He had attended East Carolina University for three years, majoring in engineering, but he had abandoned his studies after an affair with one of his professors became public. So he had returned to nearby Cary and put his education to use fixing cars.

“I wouldn't admit it to just anyone,” he had written just above his signature, “but machines often make more sense to me than people. Perhaps this is why your letter struck me. So much of our romantic lives are left to chance. Take you and I, for example—you seem very interesting, but as we live in different states, had you not seen

my notice in the newspaper, neither of us would have known that the other exists. I think we will be happier when fewer things are left to chance.”

Dillon had attached a small photograph of himself to the last page of the letter. He had held the camera at arm’s length and taken a simple self-portrait, his face against a backdrop of the night. A reddish glow emanated from somewhere out of frame—Blair thought maybe a bonfire, though there was no one else in the picture. He imagined Dillon reclining in a cheap folding chair, sipping a beer, basking in the warmth of the fire. How relaxing it seemed, and yet how lonely also. It occurred to him that the same night the photograph had been taken, he and Joseph may very well have been sitting in Joseph’s dark apartment, bathed in the pale light of the computer.

The desire to tell Dillon about the computer welled up in his stomach like a shout. How nice it would have been to send his thoughts directly, without the various intermediaries—the paper, the mailmen—or even the delay of time itself. To convey the experience of this moment, the sudden association that the picture had evoked. Instead, he set the letter on his table and watched the sheets of paper settle back into the shape of the envelope. He knew he should wait before responding, let his thoughts settle and congeal.

Through his open kitchen window came the muted honking of the brass band that busked in front of the Hippodrome on Fridays, the sooty aroma of grilled chicken from next door. A breeze blew in and caught the edge of the folded papers. Nudged by the breeze, the papers rasped gently against the surface of the table, the sound vaguely mechanical, like something from Joseph’s modem. A tickle ran across the back of his leg, and he swatted at his calf.

Blessedly, the telephone rang, interrupting his struggle with his own impatience.

“Come out with me,” Joseph said. “We’re going to Fieldens.””

“I can’t,” Blair said. He looked around his apartment for an excuse to stay in, as though his couch or bookshelf would provide one.

“Bullshit you can’t. I need to spend time with real people, and so do you.” Blair couldn’t think of a response, so he said nothing. “Come,” Joseph said, “Or I’m pulling the plug.”

###

Fieldens had always struck Blair as something of a griffin. The ground level was more or less just like any other club he had ever visited, its façade and front door and windows all painted black, as if that alone could render the building invisible. Above the ground level, though, it seemed to grow larger and more ornate. At the very top of all the little vaults in the roof stood spires capped with meteorological instruments. A weathervane in the shape of a man peering forward with his hand shadowing his eyes from the sun, as if searching the distance for something which had not yet come into view. A barometer with model airplanes at the tips. A lightning rod whose four prongs were tipped with playing card suits. He imagined that the owner had simply lifted the original building off the ground and stuck the first level in beneath it.

Though Joseph had insisted on the phone that Blair meet him at Fieldens immediately, Blair had waited until after nightfall, anxious that someone he knew should see him entering the club, and by the time he arrived, the dance floor was already crowded and thick with smoke. Joseph cheered when Blair arrived, raising his arms above his head and sloshing a bit of his whiskey onto the floor. Beneath the light thrown

off by the disco ball overhead, his eyes were glassy, and he gave no indication that he realized it had been almost two hours since they'd spoken.

“This is Manuel,” Joseph said, draping his arm around a man with a narrow goatee. He leaned forward and brought his drinking hand up to the side of his face in a mock whisper, “He’s taking me home tonight.” Manuel wore a pair of mirrored sunglasses, and as the disco ball reflected light across them, Blair saw the back of Joseph’s head reflected in the lenses, the patch of hair near his cowlick that had begun to thin.

Though not yet thirty, already they were getting old, he and Joseph. In another ten years, they would be like the tittering queens who huddled around the bar, fey old leches, fatuous and invisible after falling into middle age. How those men lived was mysterious to him, but he regarded them nonetheless with a mild existential terror. Only in the moments such as this, when some new signifier of age narrowed the divide between them, did the desire for a boyfriend feel immediate and pressing.

When Joseph leaned over and kissed Manuel, Blair went to the bar and ordered a whiskey and soda. He leaned further across the counter than was necessary, arching his back, and he sensed the older men looking at his ass. He felt slightly ashamed of his own sudden desperation, but then, turning away from the bar and back toward the dance floor, gratified that he too could still be looked upon as an object of desire.

It was then that he saw Deon, near the middle of the dance floor in a tank top and a pair of torn jeans. His arms were larger than they had seemed in his work uniform, and his tank top clung to his chest and stomach. He seemed to be alone, swaying in time to the music, his eyes shut, holding his drink in one hand and his straw in the other. He

seemed softer now, something in his posture or the ease of his expression suggested gentleness, so different than when Blair had last seen him.

Blair started toward the dance floor, but then a new song began, and the gaps in the crowd filled in. The new song was electronic, frantic. As he moved between the dancers, they pressed into him, and he felt his shirt dampen with their sweat, smelled the ripe odor of their exertion. Beneath the heavy bass of the song, he heard a muted hiss, and a thick mist fell over the dance floor, its smell clean and bright in his nostrils. The strobe lights were going now, the flashes of light catching and brightening the mist like static on a screen.

For a moment, he was blind and disoriented, struggling to keep on course as the collective motion of the crowd pushed him first one way and then another. Anonymous hands found their way beneath his shirt, cupped his ass, brushed along the front of his pants. He could feel himself becoming aroused. He pushed harder into the crowd, holding his drink above his head to protect it.

And then he was through, only not where he intended to be. As he parted the final dancers, a couple who glared at him as he rushed between them, he saw that he had arrived on the other side of the dance floor, at the stage. Standing above him on the stage, the go-go dancers, three muscular boys with crewcuts and nearly identical faces, danced a lazy two-step. The one on the end closest to Blair looked down at him with something resembling pity. How lost he must have seemed, arriving at the edge of the dance floor with such intention and becoming immediately crestfallen. The dancer flushed with embarrassment when Blair made eye contact with him, and looked away.

The smoke machines had filled the room with mist, and though he could make out the shapes of the dancers lurking within it, Blair couldn't identify Deon among them. Still, he searched, and after a time, he reached the bottom of his drink. He followed the stage to its end, and then followed the wall until he was back where he had begun—only now Joseph and Manuel were nowhere to be found.

So he got another drink. He returned to his spot near the edge of the dance floor and waited for the mist to dissipate. When it did, he looked for Deon among the dancers, but could not find him. He allowed himself to wonder if maybe he had never seen Deon at all, perhaps it had simply been another young black man with nice arms—but this made him feel worse, that after the way Deon's employment had ended, he could be so easily mistaken for someone else.

After his third drink, Blair checked the clock hung on the inside of the bar next to an ad for Crown Royal. It was nearly midnight. He had been at the club for three hours and not spoken to anyone.

In another version of the night, perhaps he would have forced himself back onto the dance floor, or struck up conversation with the brooding middle-aged man across the bar, who he had caught looking at him twice throughout the evening. But he could feel himself fading; the prospect of a conversation with a stranger loomed like a difficult project, full of setbacks and pitfalls, and offering at best a fleeting sense of accomplishment. He closed his tab and tried to avoid making eye contact with anyone on his way out.

Outside, the air was humid and still. The streetlights on the block had been out for some time, and it was for this reason alone that Blair noticed the blue and red lights

flashing against the bricks of the alley alongside the building. On the next block over, two police cars formed a barrier in front of an ambulance. Paramedics climbed in and out of the ambulance; a police officer with dark skin and a bushy beard leaned against his squad car, talking into a handheld radio.

A man squatted against the wall at the far end of the alley, near the police officer, one hand by his side and the other covering his eyes. Blair heard the man's breath catch in his chest, saw his back hitch. As he watched, the man wiped his eyes with his hand, and with his other hand, mounted the sunglasses he had been holding by his side back atop his head.

It was then, as a wave of nausea washed over him, that he knew.

The policeman told Blair the story as the paramedics loaded Joseph into the back of the ambulance on a stretcher, his face lumpy and unfamiliar. They had been caught kissing in the alley, and had been attacked with an empty vodka bottle and a brick fragment, which the attackers had picked up off the ground. Joseph and Manuel had fought back, and the owner of the pizzeria beside the alley had called the police when he saw the two attackers running down the street. Although he had broken bones in his arm, torso, and face, and it was too soon to say if he would have brain damage, Joseph was alive and in stable condition.

Before the paramedics guided him to the ambulance, Manuel held himself to Blair and sobbed into Blair's chest, blood from a gash on his left cheek staining Blair's shirt. One of his eyes had already begun to swell shut.

"It's not true what the cop said," Manuel said, "They already had weapons. They came to hurt someone."

“It’s okay. You’re okay,” Blair said, though the words made him feel like a callous liar.

After the police and the paramedics left, Blair realized that he would still have to walk home. Though a short walk, it had never felt longer in his life. He flinched at the movement of shadows. When he arrived on his doorstep, his neighbor was outside drinking a beer, and Blair turned away as he unlocked his door. He didn’t want to explain the blood on his shirt.

###

Joseph was not allowed visitors the following day, and so Blair spent the evening agonizing over what he thought had been his role in the attack. When he could not distract himself with his weekend errands, he saw the attacker’s silhouette raising the vodka bottle above his head and striking fiercely at Joseph’s body. His hands shook badly from guilt. He tried to tell himself that he was not to blame, but this did little to comfort him. If only he had been more attentive to his friend, and had not gone onto the dance floor, perhaps Joseph would not have left when he did.

The following day, he called the hospital and the nurse who answered said that Joseph was awake and accepting visitors. He took a taxi to the hospital, afraid that if he drove he would crash his car, and bought a bouquet of lilies at the hospital florist. The nurses had bandaged Joseph’s head, leaving only his nose and mouth, and one of his eyes uncovered. When Blair entered the room, bearing the lilies before him like an offering, Joseph gave a small, high moan of recognition. His jaw, Blair realized, had been wired shut.

As he could not speak, the nurses had left a pen and a pad of paper by Joseph's bed. After Blair had given the apology he had been rehearsing, Joseph pulled the pad into his lap and wrote, "They say I'll be okay," in large, looping print. "Painkillers help." He grunted a sort of laugh and darted his eyes at the IV drip hanging beside his bed.

"What can I do?" Blair asked.

"Make sure plants don't die," Joseph wrote. He flicked his wrist toward his house keys on the bedside table. "Keep coming back."

For the rest of his visit, Blair forced himself to behave as normally as he could. He told Joseph about the letter he'd received from Dillon Lewis, and about the bartender that had been hired in Deon's place, a surly white lady from Petersburg who two customers had already complained was inattentive. He was sure she'd be gone before the year was out.

When he returned from the hospital, Blair found that he had begun to feel if not less culpable, at least less anxious. It had not yet happened in Richmond, but some attacks, he knew, were fatal. Though medicated, Joseph had been alert and responsive, not the vegetable Blair had feared he would find in the reclining bed.

By sunset he was calm again, and he drove himself to Joseph's apartment. The attack had made the news, and as he unlocked the apartment's front door, the neighbor children whispered to one another in a tone just beneath his hearing. He thought he knew what they were saying, and he struggled to remember how old he had been when his friends had found the word. Sometime before middle school, he was certain, although during middle school its meaning seemed to have changed. His classmates had discovered the practical implications of the difference described by faggotry. To be

called a fag had then carried with it a new, undefined sense of threat. For those not able or clever enough to hide, that had been when the violence had started.

The air in Joseph's apartment was stale and muggy, as though the plants had decided to get comfortable since he'd been gone. But no, Blair knew, Joseph had turned the air conditioning off before he'd gone to Fieldens. He had always been economical in that waste-not-want-not sort of way.

Joseph's plants had grown substantially since Blair had last thought to pay them any mind—the windowsills lined with ferns and cacti and herbs, some of them grown quite tall, like an indoor privacy hedge. It felt rewarding to water them, to see the droplets vanishing into the dry soil. He imagined that if he could hear it happening, it would sound vaguely like someone blowing up a balloon.

It was only on the way out, and surprised that he had let it slip his mind, that he remembered the computer. In the darkening apartment, it squatted on top of Joseph's desk like an oracle. Blair realized that he had never been alone with it in a room, never operated it by himself. As he initiated the internet connection, and the modem went through its screechy rigors, he found himself glancing at the threshold to the kitchen, as though he would find Joseph standing there.

When Divine's Lavender Bazaar appeared on the screen, Blair felt a pleasant surprise well up in his chest. After a moment, he realized he was surprised that it had not changed. So much seemed to have happened in the past several days that consistency itself had caught him off-guard. For a few minutes, he sat and watched the messages roll down the screen. The group was in the middle of a discussing whether or not a movie star that Blair had never heard of was gay.

Blair looked over his shoulder toward the dark doorframe of the kitchen. Joseph would have had something clever to say about the conversation, and they would have laughed about it together. Invariably, the comment would have reminded one of them about something that had happened, and they'd talk about it while the messages rolled down the computer screen in the background. When their conversation hit a lull, they would return to the chat room until something else provoked them.

Without Joseph, though, it was only he and the computer, and he realized that for as often as he and Joseph went online, he could not remember them having contributed to the conversation but for the very first time, when they had announced themselves to the room. As the thought occurred to him, and he settled his pointer fingers over the keys, a user who he had never seen before joined the room. And practically as quickly as his username appeared, his message appeared at the bottom of the chat window.

RVADon: Student here in Richmond, Virginia

Blair's breath caught in his chest. He had assumed that Joseph was the only gay man in Richmond who went online. And perhaps it had been so, but not anymore. The apartment was dark now, the sun fully set, and were it not for the light of the monitor, he would not have been able to see the letters on the keyboard. He hit the enter key, and his message appeared on the screen.

HiTekJoe: I'm in Richmond too.

What was meant to happen now? Blair sat with his fingers hovering over the keyboard, waiting for an answer. A box appeared at the top of the screen. It said, "Message from: RVADon," and below it was the message. The message was simple,

introductory. It was not premeditated, or congealed. It was an expression of curiosity, composed in an instant and sent for an instant reply.

>> *How are you?*

This was what he had wanted, wasn't it? On another screen, in another apartment, a man was looking back at him. They had never met, and yet all that stood between them now was a keystroke. There was no one to intercept their message, no mechanism to reveal their deviance. They were safe. He found the letters and poked at the keyboard.

I can't believe there's someone else. <<

###

Linwood mentioned after a few weeks that he couldn't remember ever having seen Blair in such a consistently good mood, and asked him conspiratorially if he had met a woman.

"I got a new hobby," Blair said. It took him by surprise that his mood was so legible. He changed the subject quickly to avoid going into any further detail.

But it was true—he couldn't recall another time when he had been so consistently happy. Every evening, when he went to water Joseph's plants, he chatted with RVADon, sometimes leaving Joseph's apartment so late that the sun had already begun to brighten the sky in the east.

Blair had been pleasantly surprised by how quickly their acquaintanceship had progressed. So much of the small talk that meeting someone out at the club would have required seemed unnecessary. RVADon did not have a computer of his own, but the university had a new computer lab, and after having recently lost his job, he had managed

to snag a position as a research assistant to a member of the engineering faculty, and could come and go as he pleased. He had found Divine's Lavender Bazaar nearly by accident.

They never talked explicitly of their attraction to each other, beyond each of them expressing, in an exchange that kept Blair at the edge of his seat, that the other seemed nice. Their conversation grew ever more intimate, and Blair felt confident that something was growing between them. Though it didn't have a name, he thought, yet it would.

He waited for another letter from Dillon Lewis, but when nothing appeared in his mail, eventually he stopped. He logged into Divine's Lavender Bazaar less often now than he had before, talking instead exclusively to RVADon, but when he did, he took a morose little pleasure in watching the annunciations roll in from faraway places—Cedar Rapids, Petoskey, Mud Lake—like envoys from other planets, bottled-up messages washing onto alien shores. He sensed in them now the note of desperation which had eluded him before. They wanted the thing which he felt he had found: a real connection. For many of them, online must have been their only option.

Autumn arrived with little fanfare. The replacement bartender began to call out of her shifts, and one day disappeared into thin air. After she had gone, the regulars asked him what ever had happened to the colored boy that had worked behind the bar, as though they had just then noticed his absence. The hotel's general manager was struck by a car three days later, and Linwood had been tapped to take his place. One of the housekeepers, Alina Elliott, won the pool for guessing which of the student summer employees would last until the Fall. Almost four hundred dollars. With her winnings,

she bought a Commodore 64, and now she told stories about friends from Honolulu and Los Angeles that she had met playing online checkers.

After they had been talking for a month and a half, they agreed to meet at a coffee shop in the Fan, near where RVADon went to school. Joseph had been healing remarkably well. His jaw had been unwired, and he would be leaving the hospital soon. If they were to continue having private conversations, it could not be online.

The day of the meeting approached like Christmas. The week before it was to occur, Blair prepared and fretted and prepared. He occupied himself between deliberating over what he would wear, and visiting Joseph, who though he had made a full recovery, spoke less often now than Blair could ever remember. Instead, he had taken up the habit of recording his thoughts on paper, and Blair had to remind him to speak his mind, not show him what he had scribbled on his notepad. Sometimes, when he held up the notepad, Blair saw things that Joseph had written before he had arrived. Often they were poems, but sometimes just a single word.

“Just thoughts that come to me at night sometimes,” Joseph said when Blair asked him what the poems were about. It seemed like a beautiful answer, though it worried Blair to imagine Joseph waking up in a cold sweat, having dreamt of his attack, and filling his notepad with terror.

And then, like that, the day arrived. Blair woke up later than expected, and he hurried to shower and shave, and to press the outfit he had finally decided was least likely to make him seem like a goon: dark blue jeans and slim-fitting white tee-shirt. RVADon, he knew, would be wearing jeans with a red polo shirt.

It was the beginning of October, but an autumn heat wave had descended upon Richmond, and as he drove into the Fan, the row houses blending into one another as he glided past, the breeze felt warm on his arms. Students were out in their yards and on the wide grassy median that ran along Monument Avenue, tossing beanbags back and forth between two slanted wooden boards in a kind of game. He felt so distant from them, and he wondered if his companion would be more like them, or more like him. He parked a block away from the coffee shop, and passed a few minutes with his head resting against the steering wheel to quiet his nerves before leaving the car and making for the door.

He had promised himself he would go in blind, but as he opened the door of the coffee shop, he couldn't help himself, and looked inside. Near the back of the store, a man with dark skin and a red polo shirt tore chunks from a dry bagel and dabbed them at a smear of cream cheese. And there was a moment of cognitive dissonance then, as the bell above the door jingled, between when Blair saw that the man was Deon, and when he realized that Deon was the man he had come to meet, when Blair saw himself again standing in the alley outside Fieldens, suddenly aware that a tragedy had occurred. He could feel himself moving forward, unable to stop. Closer and closer to disaster.

And then Deon looked up at him, and he saw Deon seeing him. Something passed between them that Blair could almost smell, or almost hear, something just beyond the register of his senses. He saw his own expression, his own fear, forming on Deon's face, and as soon as he saw it, so his fear dissolved, his nerves and anxiety and also everything he had intended to say. All the questions and anecdotes and witty remarks he had saved for this meeting, blown into the air like thistles of dandelion. Where would he go from here? Anywhere, it seemed.

And then the moment passed, and he sat down at Deon's table.

Silverfish

The Belmont branch of the Richmond library system had a section of its stacks set aside for science fiction, and it was there, down the curving staircase and toward the back of the basement level, that Derrick found the copy of *Dune* which the library claimed that he had never returned. They had mailed him a notice to this effect, printed on pink cardstock with the due date in boldface. The notice informed him that such mailings were triggered when the fine for a particular item exceeded twenty dollars and the item was removed from the library's inventory. Under other circumstances, he might have simply paid the fine online—but he knew he had returned the book, because he'd still had forty pages left to read when it had come due.

Derrick took the book from the top of the long row of shelves, standing on his toes and allowing the weight of the volume to push him back down off the balls of his feet. The library's copy of the book was from its second print run, and its slipcover had begun to degrade, the plastic foggy and cracking, the pages within stiff and yellow. It had the familiar shabbiness of something loved and then abandoned.

Derrick checked his phone. There was still nearly an hour before he was expected to meet Ramón at the bar down the street. Enough time, if he was quick, to read the rest.

He ascended the stairs to the ground floor. It was near noon—the elderly had vacated the overstuffed leather chairs near the windows, where they read their magazines, but they would be back to claim them again after lunch. Derrick sat at a long table and opened the book to the page he'd dog-eared. At the bottom of the page, someone had drawn a series of parallel lines with a dull pencil. They had not been there when he'd

returned the book. Derrick counted them—twelve——then turned the page. Thirteen marks on the next page, fourteen on the page following that. He flipped back and watched the pattern count down from fourteen marks to one. After that, he turned the pages quickly forward, counting the notches in his head.

There was a way, he knew from practice, to fall into the pattern—to stop thinking about what would come next. He admired patterns. They seemed possessed of a certain self-awareness, a defiance. They would change only as dictated by their own rules, and they offered, thus, the promise of consistency, of predictability.

Nineteen. Twenty. He wasn't reading the pages, just letting the thin leaves of paper slide between his fingerpads. The motion was automatic, and Derrick felt a kind of comfort laying into him slowly. He turned one more page.

Covering the face of the next page was another library notice, someone else's, its ink so flaked away that it would have been unidentifiable were it not made of the same pink cardstock as Derrick's own. He took the notice from the book and then dropped it as though burned. The notice turned in the air and he saw—speckling the back of the card like wallpaper pattern were a brood of pallid silverfish larvae, frozen in the moment of their death.

###

Ramón was already waiting for him at the bar in the Fan where they had arranged to meet. Before he sat, Derrick took his phone from his pocket and pushed his finger against the switch on its side to silence it—though really he was checking the time. The bus would come in twenty-five minutes.

They had been separated for two months, and although he hadn't wanted this meeting, Ramón had always been persuasive. It was a low pressure situation, he had said—just a quick drink at a bar near the bus stop. Ramón had tended toward understatement both during their relationship and since they'd split. Somehow, it worked for him—something about his tone made you think you knew exactly what you'd be getting.

Ramón greeted him cautiously, as though Derrick might crack if subjected to too much pressure—even though it was he, Ramón, who began to cough, mounting in volume and thick with the sound of loosening phlegm, while Derrick waited for the bartender to approach them. His breath smelled antibacterial in a way that Derrick could detect without precisely identifying further than “holistic.” Whatever his breath smelled like, it hadn't been prescribed by a doctor.

“Should you be drinking?” he asked.

“I can take care of myself,” Ramón said. This evasiveness had always been his way. During the three years they had been together, Ramón's health, and his manner of preserving it, had remained frustratingly mysterious. For better or worse. He had seen Ramón, delirious with fever, recover in the course of a single evening.

Ramón had also once pitched himself down a flight of stairs, lightheaded from dehydration.

They made small talk for twenty minutes before Ramón asked him to come back. Enough time had passed—Derrick had made his point. He would change. Derrick didn't ask what point Ramón had understood him to be making, or what unspecified change he intended to make himself. Derrick knew, because, indeed, this lack of critical thought

had *been* the reason, that Ramón had no idea why their relationship had ended. Still, listening to Ramón's overture, he felt himself getting hard, and took this to be a warning sign.

When Ramón went to the restroom, Derrick closed his tab in cash. He made sure to have his jacket zipped when Ramón returned; to stand and sling his bag over his shoulder when Ramón approached the bar.

"You're so flighty," Ramón said when Derrick leaned in to hug him goodbye. "What are you afraid you'll do if you stay?"

On the way home, Derrick sat at the back of the bus, as he always did—he hated the feeling of being watched. His phone vibrated in his pants pocket. This would be one of the men who had seen him on Cum'd, where he would have been reduced to a small tile, one piece of a mosaic of men, his position changing as the bus headed west out of the city, suburbs-bound.

During the two months following his breakup, Derrick had quickly lost interest in most of the conversation that was possible through Cum'd. The conversations, despite their surface differences, all seemed to touch on the same unfulfillable need, the same undercurrent of insatiable curiosity and desire. Still, he felt himself reaching for his phone—somehow, his own knowledge that the message was there seemed to require that he view it.

To distract his hands, he unzipped the large pocket of his bag and removed the copy of *Dune*, which he had stolen back from the library. If they were set on charging him for it—as the librarian had informed him was the only possible outcome once the book had come out of inventory—he might as well take it back. He flipped to the back

cover, where he had slid the library notice behind the book's plastic sleeve. From behind the plastic, the notice seemed to have gained intention, as though it had been placed there just so that it would be found, studied. There were, Derrick realized, eleven dead silverfish arranged across its pink surface, and it occurred to him that there were too many, that they were too young, to have died by any other method than poison. Had they been dead, or still gestating when he'd returned the book?

He flipped backwards through the book until he came to the dog-eared page, then counted back the pages until there was only one notch. The ten pages before this one were unmarked, but then he flipped one more page back and the pattern restarted—twenty-three narrow lines spaced evenly across the bottom of the page, like plastic soldiers frozen mid-march.

He had counted the pattern through three cycles before he began to suspect that he had no interest in finishing the book, that perhaps his retrieving it in the first place was simply a symptom of his own stubbornness.

He disembarked twenty minutes later, at the stop closest to his house, and walked to the Chinese restaurant where Shao worked. The hostess, a plump woman with a bob who he had never seen before, smiled at him and seated him in Shao's section without asking. While he waited, Derrick checked the message that had come in through Cum'd. Of course, it was Ramón, who had sent a picture message of himself stretched out on what appeared to be a park bench. His smile accentuated the scum of thin lines beneath his eyes, and the daylight, the pallor beneath his skin. He was alarmingly insubstantial, and Derrick imagined him fading away entirely, settling into the woodgrain of the bench

until he was recognizable only to the sorts of people prone to seeing the figure of Christ in their toast.

“Hey,” Shao said. He ruffled Derrick’s hair and settled into the bench on the other side of the booth, his own long hair swaying behind him. “Whatcha doin?”

“Big picture? Nothing,” Derrick said. He slid his phone back into his pocket and fixed his hair. “Just living.”

“Good,” Shao said. “I was counting on you being alive the next time I saw you.” He had been smiling since he sat down, but as he said this, the quality of his smile seemed to change. It was something Derrick envied about him, that the things he said from one moment to the next seemed to delight him, as though he had not seen them coming. “How was it with your ex?”

“He didn’t show,” Derrick said, the lie spontaneous and confusing in his mouth.

“Oh, that’s shitty. Sorry. Are you still coming over later?”

Hanging out—this had been the basis of their first conversation on Cum’d, where Shao had, for whatever reason, stood out in the stream of faces and torsos. After a few days of conversation, they had finally settled on spending an evening together to watch *Dune*, which Derrick had semi-truthfully mentioned he’d read but never seen, and which Shao had promised him was “horrible in a good way”. That had been three weeks ago, when all Derrick had really been interested in was the prospect of the movie starting, and the play of light and shadow it would throw across Shao’s profile. How his hand moving gradually onto Shao’s thigh would seem appropriate in that context, even erotic. It was a familiar routine—the movie, the sex, the sleep.

Then, by accident, he had stumbled into Shao's actual life, wandering here, to the Chinese restaurant, from his apartment in the West End one afternoon. Shao had been, that first day, a good waiter, but also charming and funny. Afterward, Derrick had discovered that he wanted to see Shao again. To have him in some other way. Not his body. Or not just that.

"Can't wait," Shao said. He winked at Derrick before he left the booth; he reached to ruffle Derrick's hair again, but his hand hung in the air as though he had thought the better of it. Instead, he made a sort of quiet, breathy sound that Derrick knew was the sound of air through a smile.

When he returned to his apartment, Derrick put on a streaming radio station and washed the small pile of dishes that had gathered by his sink. As it had always tended to, the act of cleaning, moving his hand over something and rendering it incorrupt, felt too satisfying to stop. When the dishes were clean, he found himself moving down the length of the counter—wiping away crumbs, sorting the loose pieces of junk mail that tended to accumulate there.

Periodically, he recognized the guilt cropping up in his gut, catching it in snatches like the scent of something acrid. Why had he lied about seeing Ramón? There seemed to be no reason for the deception. Nothing that he had said or done during the course of their interaction would have seemed remotely improper.

He could only chalk it up to having done the same thing once before—the first time he and Ramón had broken up. It had been almost a year prior to this most recent and final separation, and Derrick had begun seeing Hal, a grad student at a nearby university. Then Ramón had gotten West Nile Virus, and had endured two months of

crippling headaches, during which time he had barely been able to feed himself. So of course, Derrick had come back. But that had been different.

So then why had he lied? Perhaps he'd thought that to admit there had been no dramatic confrontation would imply reconciliation. Perhaps it had seemed crass to discuss his ex with a new romantic interest. At the back of his mind, he suspected the truth was that he was worried about losing Shao, but this seemed to lack nuance, like the reaction of a loveblind teenager. It seemed more likely that he had simply worried about introducing uncertainty, losing control of their interaction.

Derrick stood over the trashcan and shredded the pieces of junk mail by hand, one by one. When he was finished, he reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out the pink library notice. It seemed unlikely he would need it again, and yet he couldn't bring himself to shred it. It seemed to belong to the world of unfinished business.

He was in the shower several hours later when his phone chimed again, and even before he had finished washing the shampoo out of his hair, he knew that it would be Ramón. Like a songbird, Ramón seemed to have his own special call. Derrick finished his shower at an intentionally leisurely pace, standing in the basin of the tub with the shower curtain open and letting the streamlets of water exhaust themselves down the length of his torso and through the channels they had formed in his leg hair.

After some time, he dried himself off, then checked Ramón's message—only it was not Ramón. The number belonged to one of Ramón's friends, who said that Ramón had collapsed in the middle of a Macy's and had been taken to a nearby hospital.

###

The parking garage at the hospital charged five dollars per hour, and was nearly full when Derrick arrived. The entrance closest to the garage was at the other end of the hospital campus from the emergency department, and so Derrick wandered through the labyrinth of pristine hallways, past cafés and fountains and complicated arrangements of escalators, until there was nowhere left to walk—and there he found the ER waiting room.

Ramón, when Derrick was allowed to see him a half hour later, looked as though he had been beaten. The pallor beneath his skin had darkened into bruises, particularly in the hollows beneath his eyes and cheekbones; he seemed to look past things, searchingly, as though in the looking he might find whatever they would become. A middle-aged man who Derrick had never met, but who claimed to be one of Ramón's many uncles, was there in the room when Derrick entered, holding the untouched tray of hospital food that had obviously been meant for Ramón. There were no windows, but according to the clock on the wall, the sun would soon set, at which point Derrick would be expected at Shao's apartment across town.

“How come you can't just take a fucking antibiotic?” Derrick asked.

Ramón looked over, and seemed to look not at Derrick, but rather around him, discovering him through circumscription.

“I fell and hit my head,” he said, “They gave me something for the pain. Can you get me some water?”

Derrick felt déjà vu creeping in. Lying incapacitated in the hospital bed before him was a familiar contradiction. Even in his hospital gown, the curve of Ramón's muscular chest was apparent. As he grasped idly at the fitted sheet with his hands—the

restlessness a product, Derrick assumed, of the pain meds—Ramón's forearms and triceps pushed against his skin. The rest of him, though, seemed dried out. Drained of vitality.

His phone vibrated in his pocket as he opened his mouth to speak, and he reminded himself that Ramón had ceased to be his concern. He was like a burning island in the middle of a wide river. Maybe he could be reached, and his impending tragedy averted, but protecting him from himself wasn't Derrick's responsibility. He knew that he would not go back to Ramón.

But then, he wondered, later, after the sun had gone down—after he had excused himself to reschedule his date with Shao—how come it was that when the cup of water had passed from his hand to Ramón's, he had felt his frustration turn in on itself, as though it had been hollow all along, a memory of something without the substance. If he had made his decision, then how come he had stayed? He lay on his couch until late that night, turning the question over in his head. Eventually, he got tired and pulled up Cum'd, which made his phone vibrate every time he received a message. He opened them as they came in—though they offered no answers, each one at least felt like a way out.

###

When Derrick returned to the library a week later, he found it unexpectedly busy. The seniors had apparently been loosed from their respective assisted living homes *en masse*, and the city government had rented out the library's conference room for a community meeting. Elderly women reading newspapers occupied all the seats at the long table in the center of the reading area.

Derrick descended the stairs to the basement floor and walked back to the science-fiction section, looking over his shoulder as he turned into the stacks to make sure that the reference librarian was not watching. He found where *Dune* would be filed, and then took the book from his bag to return to the shelf, then stopped himself and opened the book to the back cover. The book had been jostled around in his backpack all week, and the silverfish larvae had begun to come apart. They seemed somehow sadder than before, like little tattered scraps of paper. Derrick took the library notice from his jacket pocket and slid it between the silverfish and the plastic slipcover, to protect them. When this was done, he slid the book into an empty slot on the shelf below its rightful place; he regarded it for a moment, then pushed it back ever so slightly, so that it was recessed from the others—less visible.

Then, he went to ask the reference librarian for help finding a book on the shelves. It occurred to him that, had he been patient, this deception would have been unnecessary. There was a sort of mean pleasure to it though, the feeling of control that came from manipulating the situation. He felt he could almost predict what would happen next.

“I was fined for a book I know I returned,” he told the woman at the check-out counter on the ground floor. She seemed to be the same woman who had been working when he’d first come in—hunched over, hair pulled back into a tight bun—the type of woman that always seemed to be working in libraries.

“I can’t take your fine out of the computer system,” she said after looking him up, “That book was removed from the inventory.” She looked up from the paper and her

face seemed to narrow, as though drawing her words into a point, “We release books for a month to give people like you time to finish what you take out.””

“That’s what I’m saying though—I did return it. Ask downstairs. It was here.”

The woman gave him a long, sideways glance, and Derrick knew she suspected foul play. But he knew also that she would make the call—which she did, phone clamped in the crook of her wrinkly neck. He watched her mouth draw into a line as she listened to the reference librarian explain that the book had been misfiled.

Derrick found himself waiting for the woman to meet his eyes again, but after she hung up, she erased the charge from his library account without speaking, without looking up from the computer. She looked now as though she might cry, and Derrick felt a dreadful shame come over him, as though he had been caught in a lie. Although hadn’t he been? Had he? He felt a sudden urge to run from the library, and yet beneath the weight of his shame, he was transfixed.

###

“You did the right thing,” Shao said the next morning when they met for breakfast. “You returned the book.”” The wind had begun to blow his hair into his face, and he gathered it behind his head with the hair tie looped around his wrist.

“Still—I could have paid the fine. She seemed so embarrassed.” They were on the patio at a breakfast place in Shockoe Bottom, near Shao’s apartment. It was just after sunup; they had beaten both the church crowd and the crush of exercise-wives-with-dogs that diffused from the row houses and high-density walkup apartments into the streets every morning.

“Look, boo, the fine wasn’t yours to pay in the first place.”

Derrick thought he felt his phone vibrate, and felt for it in his jacket pocket, but it was in front of him, face-down on the breakfast table. Somehow, who owned the fine didn't seem to matter—what mattered more was that he had made the decision and then clung to it, unable to let go, and that that decision had bit him in the ass.

Derrick put his phone back in his pocket. It occurred to him that there was no reason to have brought up the librarian with Shao, and he smiled in spite of himself. If unflattering, it was at least an improvement on his lie from their last meeting, and so it seemed like the product of a budding trust.

“Do you ever wonder about why you have the habits you have?” he asked.

“What do you mean?” A cool breeze pulled whips of steam from their cups of coffee, and Shao lifted his to his mouth, blowing against the breeze but never drinking.

“Like, you don't feel like you always know why you react to things in a particular way.”

“Sure I do.”

“Really?”

Shao smiled, and Derrick knew that the smile was an invitation, but the thing it was an invitation to do or say felt unclear. Were there people who knew exactly why they did everything? The situation seemed suddenly to lack precedent.

After breakfast, Shao invited Derrick back to his apartment to watch the film adaptation of *Dune*. The apartment was on the top floor of a renovated industrial mill, and looked out over the James River. The sun was still in the east, and the Richmond skyline seemed to cast a collective shadow over the western half of its own body. On the

dry expanse of rocks by the southern shore of the river, a bonfire party was ongoing despite a conspicuous lack of bonfire.

As they watched the movie, Derrick felt the heat of the sun rising through the panoramic windows on the back of his neck. He felt curiously dislocated. He had arrived at the beginning of his sexual relationship with Shao—the pretense for their first encounter—and yet the sun was out. There was no wine. Nothing was quite as it seemed it should be.

Derrick felt Shao's hand move gently onto his knee. He felt lust rising in him—but he knew even as his lust crowned that it was an automatic response, a product of routine. He leaned his head onto Shao's shoulder, and gradually, as the movie progressed, he felt Shao soften, his body accepting Derrick's weight, as though it had been made for just that purpose. Derrick felt himself nodding off to sleep—felt himself allowing sleep to come; Shao woke him when the movie ended, and they napped away most of the afternoon in Shao's bed, Derrick waking periodically and considering how the sun moved across the skyline.

Tomorrow, at this exact time, the city would look just as it did now. Only really, he reassured himself, the city was never the same from day to day—maybe it appeared the same from the outside, but it was always changing. One day, its skeptics would wake to find it transformed, its only recognizable structures now become vestigial: antique façades, horse-posts, legendary-cum-defunct temples of food and drink—everything that had defined the city once now reduced to the trivia of a walking tour. That would show them.

###

On the bus home that evening, Derrick looked at the backs of the other passengers' heads. He imagined he knew what the other people in the bus were doing. The African man three rows up was traveling to see his cousin in the suburbs, as he did every Sunday night. One row up and across the aisle, a Sephardi Jewish woman was making her biweekly trip to the combination halal/kosher grocery near Derrick's apartment. The driver of the bus was counting the minutes until her next hourly cigarette. They felt familiar with these invented routines—Derrick found that he felt more kindly toward them.

He ignored the incipient mess gathering on the table in his entryway when he got home, and went out onto the balcony. On another balcony somewhere below him, a woman was arguing loudly with an older female relative in a foreign language. Occasionally, one of the women stopped speaking, hocked loudly and spat, as though making a point. Derrick wondered, after this had happened several times, if she was spitting onto the floor of the balcony or over the railing.

His phone chimed. Ramón. He imagined reading the message, the inevitable news of crisis that it would contain—some emergency designed to keep his attention. Still, he caught himself reaching for his phone, and he sensed that he was coming to a point of no return. He knew, abstractly, that he had established a pattern for Ramón to follow. If Ramón summoned him, he would come. It was allowed, just as Derrick was allowed then to look down at the mess Ramón made of himself and feel a sense of superiority. There was a comfort to letting that pattern play itself out, but an undertow as well.

Before he could stop himself, he unlocked his phone and deleted Ramón's contact. Now there was only a string of numbers at the top of the text message screen, and it seemed to Derrick then that the messages themselves had lost whatever intangible quality had made them irresistible. He considered deleting the whole text message chain, but thought better of it. He knew that he would, one day, stumble upon these messages again. It was nice to think that they might have something to tell him about how he had changed if he looked at them from sufficient distance.

###

They had been watching the miniseries version of *Dune* for nearly an hour when the images onscreen faded out between scenes, and Derrick felt Shao's body shift on the couch. A week had passed since they had last seen each other, a week during which Derrick had settled into the idea that he had taken a step when he had deleted Ramón, and that if he and Shao were not dating already, they would be soon. Now, the sun had set, and when the screen dimmed, the empty Chinese food cartons and beer cans on the coffee table dimmed and went out too. When they came up again a moment later, illuminated by the brownish light of an establishing shot of Arrakis, Derrick sensed that Shao had turned to face him—that his turning was an invitation. They kissed slowly at first, a sort of establishing shot of its own, and Derrick moved his hand up Shao's thigh, beneath the hem of his shorts, where his leg hair had been smothered and worn away. When they went into the bedroom, they let the movie play itself out. Periodically, Derrick woke during the night to the sound of the DVD menu replaying itself endlessly from the other room.

When he woke the following morning, he found a cup of coffee and a muffin waiting for him, along with a note from Shao explaining that he had gone to work, and that Derrick should let himself out. Derrick drank the coffee slowly, savoring the comfort of being in this quasi-familiar bed on this quasi-familiar morning. It was a comfort he looked forward to growing accustomed to.

So to celebrate, he took a cab home from Shao's apartment instead of riding the bus, and the cab crossed the Manchester Bridge, wide and low with its uneven trickle of pedestrians crossing in the center median. And the cab turned onto Main Street and drove by the financial buildings, and drove by the university. It was a different route than the bus usually took. The cab pulled to a stop a few blocks into the Fan. Derrick rolled down the window to let the breeze in.

He looked over when he heard the sound of Shao surprising himself with some unexpected thing he had said. Behind the cab, perhaps the length of two cars, Derrick saw Shao sitting across a small iron table from a man somewhat taller than himself, somewhat broader. As Derrick watched, Shao's companion reached across the table and held Shao's hand. They leaned in and kissed each other, and there was a familiar tenderness to the kiss. Derrick felt a movement inside him as of something stretching beyond its capacity to restore itself.

###

Ramón looked up from his drink when Derrick walked into the bar. His eyes drooped, although Derrick could not tell whether this was from the black eyes or his obvious intoxication, or a combination of both. This had been the subject of Ramón's

latest text message, which Derrick had received the night prior—he had run off the road and totaled his car.

“Should you be drinking?”

“The doctor told me that I could drink in moderation.” Ramón swirled his drink roughly, the vodka sloshing over the edge and wetting the bar napkin beneath the glass. He ran his finger along the side of the glass and licked the spilled vodka from it.

The bartender gave Derrick a sympathetic look, and when Ramón lurched to the bathroom, stumping across the floor on his boot cast, let Derrick know that the tab had already been closed out.

Ramón spoke incomprehensible Spanish most of the way back to his apartment, which Derrick had agreed to walk him to out of general concern for Ramón’s wellbeing. When they stopped at street corners to wait for the lights to change, Ramón looked over at him with an expression that Derrick couldn’t quite place, but which reminded him of the look Ramón used to make when he had solved a difficult crossword puzzle.

In the elevator, Ramón kissed him on the mouth, his breath thick and pungent and medicinal. Derrick thought of Shao and felt briefly guilty—though what was the point? They hadn’t spoken since they had slept together. Derrick kept expecting Shao to appear on his phone, but part of him, the part accustomed to the pattern, suspected that this would never happen. That it was over between them.

“Do you want a drink?” Ramón asked when they got to his apartment. Except for the light in the entryway, the apartment was completely dark. Without waiting for an answer, he poured himself a glass of water, then propped himself against the kitchen counter. ““I’m glad you’re back.”

After he had poured Ramón into bed, Derrick wandered through the apartment. The few pictures that existed of the two of them together Ramón had kept, though he had turned the frames around. Throughout the apartment was scattered the half of the furniture that Ramón had kept in the breakup. Derrick settled into one of the remaining pieces, an overstuffed armchair. He picked up a remote experimentally; he pointed it at the TV and said, ““Click.”

Why was it, just then, that a wave of sadness struck him? What was he sad about? The answer to the questions eluded him, or rather, he couldn't seem to nail down an answer that satisfied him. The closest he could come was a vague sense of powerlessness, as he had felt watching the librarian struggle not to cry. And he wondered if this was what the silverfish larvae had felt just before they had been gassed. He imagined them, in their final moments, crawling across the library notice and dragging their mandibles across its sweet, stale ink, extracting some final gustatory pleasure before death.

From the other room, he heard Ramón turning over in bed, thrashing one of his legs out from beneath the covers like had always done. Derrick opened his phone and loaded up Cum'd. He hadn't been on it in over a week, and his inbox was full of messages. Instead of checking them, he scrolled through the mosaic of faces and torsos, touching his finger to the ones that pleased him. Was this the beginning of some process, or its ending? Or perhaps he was the silverfish, degrading, bit by bit, the binding holding the process together.

He sat in the chair that way for some time, sliding his finger down the length of his phone screen, watching the people go by. Eventually, he couldn't stand to be in the

room anymore, and so he left. It wasn't worth pretending this would be the last time he'd be here, but Cum'd at least offered a distraction.

Sometimes, he realized, the distraction was the best one could hope for.

Omission

“Technically, I’ll always have it,” Desmond said.

“Technically,” Andrew said.

“But they can’t find it in my blood, so really I don’t.”

The car was parked between streetlights near the corner of Sheppard and Grove, down the street from the house Andrew shared with his friend Maria. Always he and Desmond had met this way during the month since they had known each other, though rarely here, where it was too light to have any fun. For that, Desmond had known darker places: a side street by the train station; footpaths near the downtown floodwall; a parking lot beneath the interstate overpass, where they had been twice disturbed by an enraged vagrant. The second time the man found them, Andrew had turned on the car and driven away, pressing down Desmond’s head in his lap with one hand while the man shouted obscenities in their wake. Andrew had driven the two of them to this same street corner where the car now sat, reclined his seat all the way back, and pulled Desmond on top of him. Eventually, he had taken a condom from the car’s center console, and the cold foil had thrilled the palm of his hand.

“You can’t tell it like that,” Andrew said. “It’s a felony that way.”

“I’m so sorry. You have no idea how sorry I am.” Desmond was getting worked up, Andrew could tell, over how he couldn’t quite make himself understood. His breath hitched, breaking across the windshield and fogging it up.

“You have no idea how lucky you are. If I was anyone else.”

Desmond took his cigarettes out and lit two of them. He handed one to Andrew, and they rolled their windows down. A breeze blew through the car and flared the coal at the end of Andrew's cigarette.

Andrew looked over at Desmond; Desmond was looking into his lap. Every few seconds, he brought the cigarette to his lips, and the ash at the tip grew longer and longer. He was stressed, Andrew knew; but Andrew was stressed too. They were bad for each other that way.

The car reeked of smoke, had reeked of smoke the whole month they'd known each other. At first, it had been overwhelming, but as the month went on, Andrew had begun to pick up undertones—a whiff of curry, pungent cologne. The smell was changing, or perhaps it was simply drawing in other smells, attaching itself to them. Andrew wondered now if the smell would ever come out. Perhaps not. Some things, he knew, never come out.

The ash broke off and fell between Desmond's legs onto the upholstery. Desmond shifted back in his seat and brushed the ash gently into his palm. "I wanted to tell you."

"But you didn't think you could. You thought I would stop talking to you if I knew."

"Are you?"

Andrew's stomach gurgled, and he opened his mouth as if he would speak.

Desmond dropped his cigarette out the window and lit another. He turned and began to speak, but the alarm on Andrew's phone went off. It was ten o'clock. Andrew shifted in his seat and took two pill bottles from his pocket. He took one pill from each bottle and drank from an old water bottle in the driver's-side door, the pills chalk-

flavored and the water vaguely plastic. He wanted to look Desmond in the eye as he took them, but found that he couldn't quite bring his gaze level to Desmond's.

“Two down, twenty-six to go,” he said. He looked at the pill bottles, at the tiny directives only barely visible on their labels. Take with water. Do not consume alcohol. With each dose a portion also of resentment, uncertainty; toxic all the way around.

Desmond's eyes had adopted a shadowed quality, as though he might begin to cry without realizing it. He apologized again and got out of the car, walked to the end of the block. Andrew watched him go in the rearview mirror—noted how, in the dark, he seemed quicker, as though darting between shadows. He turned the corner, and when he was out of sight, Andrew reclined his seat and looked up at the roof of the car. Desmond had left his cigarettes sitting in the center console. Andrew lit one and took a drag, but the experience was not the same. He didn't want it. Or he wanted Desmond to light it and hand it to him, for them to recline in their respective chairs, talking or silent—but together, which was the important thing.

How had he let Desmond come to carry such meaning as to outweigh the satisfaction of the cigarette? It was one of those questions that he would think about for some time, hoping for some resolution, before ultimately letting it slip from his mind. This one, in particular, seemed obviously fruitless. Who could really parse out such a narrative? He had always distrusted people who formed their relationships with intention. The idea that he would choose his partners on the basis of their utility to him seemed cheap. He suspected, privately, that this mentality was what drove the divorce rate.

Eventually, the cold became too much, and he turned on the car. The house was a block away, but he wasn't ready to go in just yet, and so he began to drive, first to the end of Floyd, where there was a 24-hour Walgreens, and then down Thompson, toward the interstate. He wasn't sure where he was going, but suddenly he was passing Fredericksburg, and the prospect of returning to Richmond—pulling back onto his street and going inside, where he would spend the remainder of the night checking his phone for a text from Desmond—was too depressing to bear.

Two hours later, he parked the car off Dupont Circle on 22nd Street, and reactivated his account on Cum'd. It had only been a month since he'd deactivated the account, but already his profile picture seemed horribly outdated. He flicked through his photos looking for something better, but everything from the past month had been either taken with or taken by Desmond.

The bar at the corner had a fireplace in the window, and as Andrew walked toward it, his phone began to vibrate. The sidewalk outside the bar was crowded with men—men smoking, fighting, catcalling each other, waiting for the bus in the wind shelter nearby—and as he walked by them, Andrew sensed their eyes turning on him in evaluation. Though they weren't so unlike the men in Richmond, they seemed to know that he was from Somewhere Else, that he was not Like Them—and this seemed to come with the gentlest suggestion of hostility, the possibility of confrontation. The man checking IDs, just inside the door, seemed puzzled when he held his flashlight up to Andrew's driver's license.

At the back of the bar was a narrow, brightly-lit staircase which led in the direction of louder music, but when Andrew got to the second floor, there was no space at

the bar, and so he sat along a row of risers off to the left side of the room. The lights in the main room were dim to the point of uselessness; men came up the stairwell and disarticulated into large shapes in the dark. Andrew had the sense of something theatrical and aggressive taking place among the shapes—a feeding frenzy, or a slamdance—and he was aware only vaguely that he was one of the shapes himself. His phone vibrated again, and when he unlocked his screen, the backlight made him squint; again, he had the impression of his own strangeness. He had two messages on Cum'd and a text from Desmond.

“im so sorry plz don't give up on me,” Desmond's message said.

“whats up,” said both of the messages on Cum'd.

“The second one is from me,” said the man sitting next to him.

Andrew looked over. They were three feet apart from each other, and yet Andrew could barely see the other man. He was taller than Andrew, and slightly bulkier, and he wore horn-rimmed glasses and a wide-brimmed hat with a raised logo on the front—some brand name that Andrew didn't recognize. “How come you didn't just say something to me?” he asked the man.

“If I hadn't messaged you, would you be nearly as interested in the fact that I'm talking to you now?”

###

Andrew had not planned on ending the night in someone else's bed (or he managed to convince himself that he hadn't), and yet it happened anyway. The following day was Thursday, and he woke to the man—who had introduced himself as Exodus—coming through the bedroom door with two cups of coffee.

“Call out of work and spend the day with me,” Exodus said.

They talked about travel as they drank their coffee. Exodus would be going to New Orleans for a few weeks the following month, and he had recognized a restaurant on Magazine Street in one of Andrew’s pictures on Cum’d.

When the coffee was finished, they fucked in a way that proceeded more naturally than Andrew expected it should. Afterward, he stood beneath Exodus’ rainfall shower, letting the deluge trace the lines of his body. He had only known Exodus for perhaps twelve hours—but there was an ease to being with him. Either explicitly or by gesture, first times with new lovers always seemed to involve a discovering of boundaries. But everything seemed to come naturally with Exodus—the way he lay over Andrew, supporting himself with his elbows, above and yet not on top of him, so that his breast touched Andrew’s but Andrew could not feel his weight. How when Andrew sensed himself nearing orgasm, Exodus reached down and cradled a hand around his throat. Andrew had never known himself to enjoy these things, and yet here they were, exposed so simply. The experience was akin to lying on a shoreline, the tide-swept sand conforming to the shape of his body until there was a him-shaped crater on the beach. Wasn’t that the way people described “the one”? Or rather, failed to describe him, since the essence of “the one” seemed always to lie just out of reach of its elaborator?

Andrew had brought his clothes into the bathroom with him, as he would be wearing them again today, and as he was drying himself off, his phone alarm sounded in his pocket. It was time for his pills. He wondered, as he hung his head beneath the bathroom sink, sucking at the stream of lukewarm water, if it had ever been this way with

Desmond. Already Desmond felt like a memory, something not from yesterday, but yesteryear—a shrouded floor lamp in an abandoned wing of his sexual history.

Exodus was looking at his phone when Andrew climbed back into bed with him. Before Exodus put the phone down, Andrew caught a glimpse of the

It wasn't until that night, when his phone alarm went off while he was gassing up outside Ashland, that Andrew wondered if he should have mentioned the pills. He wondered, then, if by excusing himself to the bathroom that morning, when his alarm would go off, he had been hiding his medication—if perhaps he wasn't guilty of the same sin of omission as Desmond. Really it was not the same thing, although as he put up the gas pump, Andrew caught the man at the next pump eyeing him suspiciously, and he worried suddenly that the man knew what he had done. Andrew knew then that he would tell no one—that the month-long course of pills, and their purpose, would go unspoken. The small burden of silence, an unfortunate byproduct, would be the only price.

###

Only over the course of the next week did the size of the burden of silence become apparent. The morning following Andrew's return, as he was ironing his shirt, he heard Maria come into the kitchen behind him.

“I think I met a boy,” he said, before she could ask where he'd been. He'd sent her only a text message from the highway on his way to D.C. that he was heading out of town for the night.

“How does Desmond feel about that?” she said.

Of course, there was no truth to tell that didn't also reveal Desmond's secret. And there was no revealing that secret without also revealing the pills. So: a lie. Just a small one. Half the truth.

"He did some shit I didn't like," Andrew said.

Though he had always considered himself a guarded person, the opposite turned out to be true—or if he was guarded, anyway, that guardedness seemed to attract the interest of the people around him. That day and the next, his coworkers seemed especially curious what had happened to the "relationship" he'd been talking about for the last month, the one with the waiter that he'd left his number for that time at the bar. The simplest answer, "I stopped seeing him," was unsatisfactory to them. Why; they wanted to know why.

On top of that was the ritual of the pills themselves. As he needed to take them every twelve hours, Andrew found himself pursuing an increasingly esoteric array of strategies to ensure his privacy during the late morning, when the phone alarm, unless otherwise preempted, would sound. The best strategies seemed to be the ones that drew the most attention to him. The most effective involved taking a sip of water and beginning to loudly cough over whatever else was happening. Andrew would then noisily excuse himself and retire to the bathroom, where he would swallow the pills in a hurry. Then he would avoid talking to anyone for the next hour. The pills made him feel high, as though someone had immersed his synapses in Jello.

Only Exodus became suspicious of this strategy. Three weeks into the course of the pills, Andrew returned from the bathroom at the lounge where Exodus had brought him for their fifth date, and Exodus said, "You gotta go to the doctor for your throat."

“What do you mean?” Andrew said.

“You choke on things you drink a lot. Like, more than a normal person.” Exodus sipped from his drink, espresso vodka and Coke, garnished with a cinnamon stick.

“Sometimes I get a lump in my throat,” Andrew said, trailing his sentence off at the end to suggest some further detail that it would be rude to ask after. He smiled weakly at Exodus as he said it, and Exodus seemed to accept the answer, turning his gaze back toward the center of the lounge. As they watched, the area in front of them filled up with men looking to close their bar tabs. As the men stood, they craned their necks, looking discreetly over their shoulders, or at each other’s bodies. They were hungry, although Andrew sensed that they wouldn’t quite be able to tell him, if he asked, what they were hungry for. Was it sex, or love, or just some acceptable hybrid to get them through the night? He was sad for them, although periodically, he received messages on Cum’d, and his phone vibrated in his pocket.

The next morning when Andrew woke, Exodus was still asleep, and he climbed carefully from bed, so as not to wake him. He used the bathroom, and then stood under the warm stream of the shower, rubbing his hand over his short hair, the stubble cropping up in patches beneath his cheekbones and jaw like beach grass. He thought about a contract at work, about what he would have for lunch on the way back down to Richmond. His alarm sounded in his pants in the bedroom, and he kicked himself for having forgotten to turn it off. He hated waking Exodus, who reminded him of a grave machine that someone had powered down, some world-saving device. He imagined how it would be, later, when they would live together—stirring Exodus to life, watching the

great engine of his heart spin up—how the first kiss they would exchange every morning would taste.

When he left the shower, Andrew found his clothes folded in a stack on the bed—pants on the bottom, shirt next, and then underwear and socks. Exodus was sitting beside the stack of clothes, holding Andrew’s pill bottles, one in each hand. He seemed to be reading them, but Andrew suspected that this was mostly for dramatic effect.

“I went to turn off your phone and these fell out of your pocket,” Exodus said. He looked up at Andrew, his mood inscrutable except not really, “Why would you lie to me? You told me you were clean.”

“I don’t have anything,” Andrew said. “It’s so I don’t.” His heart was beating uncomfortably fast, but if he explained what had happened, he knew Exodus would see—that barely any words would need to pass between them. It was that ease, the thing that endeared him to this man. They had already had this conversation; he just needed to say the words.

###

Though at first they seemed concerned, eventually his friends and coworkers stopped asking why he didn’t go to D.C. anymore. When they did ask, he struggled to compose an answer. The past month was a cocoon of lies wrapped around an unspeakable truth. He couldn’t explain Exodus because he couldn’t explain the pills; he couldn’t explain the pills because he couldn’t expose Desmond. He assumed they saw through his stories.

He texted Desmond several times, but never got a response.

The course of pills ended. Mornings, he woke up feeling as though he had just eaten, even if he hadn't had much for dinner. When he got to work, he would make a full pot of coffee, and by noon, he would feel ill, and he would suffer through the afternoons until the earliest he could manage to sneak out. Weekends, he found reasons to end his evenings at the gay club, where he searched the crowd for beautiful faces, finding more and more frequently the ones he had messaged on Cum'd; who had never returned his messages; who, when they answered his gaze, held an aloofness in their eyes that made him angry. Like a Greek tragedy, their callousness seemed to suggest that it was a flaw in his own character that had led him to this state of desperation.

This made the lack of response from Desmond even more upsetting. Once a week or more, he would become aware that he was scrolling through their text message history. He found himself craving items from the menu at the Greek restaurant where Desmond worked; sometimes, he would drive down through the sleepy neighborhood where it was located, and when he pulled onto its street, he would pretend he had arrived by accident. It seemed as though, every day, he found something tied, in his mind, to the month they had spent together.

One night, he saw Desmond through the panel of tall windows that bordered the street. It was well past midnight, and Desmond was stacking the chairs atop the tables. He had begun to grow his hair out, shaving away only the sides, and it struck Andrew that he was more attractive now than when they had last spoken. Andrew parked the car and opened Cum'd, unsure of his intentions. Did he want to see Desmond's profile, or did he want to see whether Desmond *had* a profile? When there was no profile that matched Desmond's appearance, he worried if Desmond had begun dating someone new.

Over the past week, it had seemed that Spring would come unseasonably early, and so when Andrew got out of the car, it occurred to him that he no longer needed the overcoat and gloves that had been his uniform when he had known Desmond. He had begun to cross the street, but he stopped and took stock of his own appearance. He was leaner now than when they had last seen each other, and he supposed his beard was fuller, his hair shorter. He hoped seeing these changes would have an effect on Desmond—but but did he want Desmond back? Was that the purpose of this visit? No, not that—but if not, then what? Perhaps simply to make Desmond feel what he felt, the sort of nostalgia that had come from revisiting that lost wing of his sexual history where he had stored his memory of them.

Andrew was still standing in the street, and when he looked up, he realized that Desmond had gone out of view. He walked the rest of the way across the street and knocked on the plate glass window where Desmond had been standing. The lights in the restaurant were still on, but lower than before. No one answered his knocking.

It seemed that Desmond had gone home, but Andrew allowed himself a second knock, and a third. When he had given up, he heard the sound of an engine coming closer, and from the alley to the left of the building emerged Desmond's car, an old Volvo station wagon. The car stopped at the edge of the street, and Desmond leaned over the steering wheel, looking in both directions for oncoming traffic. He looked at Andrew, and for a moment Andrew imagined him putting the car in park, leaning over to open the passenger door, and lighting them two cigarettes.

But Desmond didn't seem to recognize him. He coaxed the car into the street and turned toward the interstate, leaving Andrew alone and half-lit on the empty sidewalk.

Adornments

I returned from the hospital the afternoon after my car accident to find that Alan had taken his things and left.

My apartment was on the top floor of a three-story walkup. It was large for a one bedroom, and had a covered balcony that looked out onto Floyd Avenue, where on Sundays I liked to sit with my coffee and watch the pods of joggers go by. It had always accommodated me well, never empty when I had lived alone, and never crowded during the two years Alan had lived there with me.

I walked through the living room and bedroom, taking an inventory of missing items, then went out onto the balcony and sat at the folding card table by the railing. Autumn had arrived early, and a thin layer of windblown leaves covered the balcony floor, which I swept idly with my foot, pushing them to the ledge and watching them turn over in little spirals down to the street. I wanted a drink, but the thought of alcohol made the gash on my forehead ache.

In addition to his clothes, Alan had taken our knife block, our Robert Mapplethorpe print, and the tree stump coffee table that we had bought on vacation in Costa Rica. None of which surprised me. Alan believed in a philosophy of curation. A person was really just a summary of the things they owned and with which they adorned themselves. The complete person, Alan thought, was the one who selected his adornments just so, balancing them for effect—which had always struck me as elitist, but at the beginning, it had been sort of nice. He only owned shirts with French cuffs, and he rarely left the house without ironing his clothes, even tee shirts and jeans. When

we traveled, he always had an Instagram follower, addicted to his unrelenting smile, willing to show us around. Heads turned when we entered a room.

Everything seemed to come to him so easily, but after a while it had become hard to tell what was real and what was put on for appearances. Did he like to cook Mediterranean food, or did he cook it to seem cosmopolitan? He claimed to love jazz, but I had only ever heard him listen to the same four artists. He always told the same stories when meeting someone new, and he always told them in the same way, like a stand-up comedian repeating a bit at every stop of a tour. Sometimes, when I got drunk, I suspected that he had no personality at all—that he was just a mannequin dressed up with attractive qualities.

Then, last night, we had argued, and I had told him just what I thought of him. After we broke up, I had gone to Babes in Carytown. It had rained earlier in the day, and the streets had been slick. As I had passed over the Boulevard, a drunk driver in an Altima had slid through the light and T-boned my car. I had been treated overnight for a concussion, stuck sharing a room with an old woman hooked up to a respirator, whose daughter had stayed with her all night, weeping quietly behind the cloth partition that separated our beds. I couldn't see the old woman, but I could hear the respirator inflating and deflating, and it struck me that the daughter could just as easily have been crying over a broken laptop as her mother. This is what we become when we age, I had thought: failing machines.

Only the theft of the coffee table annoyed me. During the afternoon, the sun had used to strike the table at such an angle that, for an hour or so every day, our living room was illuminated by a glowing ring of sunlight. During that hour, the dust motes would all

become suddenly visible, and the room would seem like an unsealed tomb—everything preserved, untouched by time.

I went into the kitchen and put the tea kettle on the stove. Where the coffee table had been, the sun hung in a lazy patch on the floor. My apartment smelled stagnant, as though I had been gone longer than overnight, and I lit a candle to get rid of the smell, one of those horrible pungent towers with embedded seashells and wildflowers. A scent that reminded me of colored syrup quickly filled the room. I refused to let myself feel sorry for the end of my relationship: things and boyfriends could be replaced.

While I waited for the water to boil, I downloaded Cum'd from the app store on my phone. The developers had changed the icon since I'd last been single—where before, it had been a sort of sloppy, white bulls-eye shape, now the icon was simply a large letter C, amber-colored, in some typeface with an exaggerated serif. And it was not only the icon that had changed; rather, the whole app had been redesigned. The color palette had all changed to amber, with rose-gold highlights that reminded me of a watch. The grid itself, the wall of men, had also been revisualized—while the users were still arranged in rows according to distance, some were now larger than others. An information bubble informed me that the larger users were the ones in which Cum'd had determined I would be most likely to take an interest.

To top it all off, there was a new feature. At first it seemed like just another grid of images, only new images appeared every few seconds, shrinking and growing in size as other users viewed and liked them. As I watched, an image of a pride flag mounted atop the Stonewall Jackson monument appeared, grew to a quarter of the size of my phone screen, and then withered slowly until it disappeared. The most popular image,

which never seemed to change size, was of someone wearing a black ram's head, the same one I had seen VCU advertising on their athletics billboards, fucking a bound man from behind. I held my finger above it, wondering how it was supposed to make me feel. It occurred to me that I had probably met both of these men, but somehow the image transformed them into something else, something objective.

The kettle began to whistle. I poured the water into one of my glass mugs and took a sachet of green tea from its tin, easing it after a moment into the steaming bath. Not right away though, I knew. That's how you burn the leaves.

###

I had to wear a bandage around my head while I healed, and dinner that night was instructive of the reason why I had rarely seen people with head injuries in public. Ben had been fighting with his boyfriend Devlin for weeks, as a result of which I had been eating out a lot, and tonight, he wanted to try a tapas place that had opened down in Oregon Hill. When we arrived, the hostess seated us near the back, where they kept the first-aid kit. Our waiter recited the daily specials in an inexplicably loud tone of voice.

"I never liked Alan," Ben said when I told him what had happened. "He treated you like statement jewelry."

"What do you mean?"

"You know exactly what I mean." I did know what he meant. When we went out, Alan would always manage to meet the most interesting person in the room, some diplomat's son or performance cellist. Eventually, he would bring them over to meet me, or I would find him, and he would introduce me not by my name, but by my occupation. *This is my boyfriend, the personal shopper*, or some such thing. I suppose he thought it

reflected well on him, but I could never tell in which direction he meant it to reflect. Had he thought that my job reflected well on his dress, or had it been the reverse—that he was my muse—that I clothed my clients in *his* style?

“You’ll find someone else quick enough.”

I nodded—it seemed like the right thing to do, even if he seemed mostly to be reassuring himself.

When I got home, I pulled up Cum’d on my phone, which had been discouragingly silent all through dinner. Indeed, I had no messages, although the lack of interest was unsurprising. Since I had last used Cum’d, I had turned thirty. Not that this meant I was old, but I was no longer In My Twenties. Now, my bachelorhood signaled damage. Perhaps I was a chronic cheater, or perhaps I was secretly HIV-positive. Perhaps I was older or heavier than I claimed. Who knew what I was capable of, now that my shiny, special twenties were over?

To stave off bitterness, I decided to masturbate. My browser had learned from my surfing habits to put my favorite Tumblr, *Bigdick Dadbod*, on my home page, and I quickly found a suitable video. None of the actors were identified by their names on the Tumblr, but I had seen this man before, and he always did it for me pretty quickly. He was maybe just over six foot—tallish, crucial for a good dadbod because it puts the protruding stomach into attractive proportion; likewise, he had thin legs and arms which contrasted nicely with the length and girth of his dick. And sandy hair, too—beautiful sandy hair like an aging lifeguard—but I had noticed when I’d seen the second or third of his videos that it wasn’t his looks that did it for me. Rather, it was something about the way he moved his face when he got his dick sucked, how his eyes would flutter up near

the top of his head for a moment, and the corners of his mouth would draw up, the way Alan used to do when he was having a good dream.

I had only been watching a few minutes when my phone chimed. The designers had changed the message tone as well, and so at first I didn't realize I had gotten a message on Cum'd. The sender was twenty-two, one of the child-gays, and his profile said he was a student, though it was July, and it seemed likely that he had just graduated and neglected to update his headline.

I returned his message, and before long, I found myself walking down Floyd toward Carytown. As I waited for the traffic light on the Boulevard, I looked at the median between the lanes of traffic, where specks of shattered glass from my windshield still glinted on the pavement. When I got to the student's apartment, we spent the requisite five minutes making small talk before getting down to the business of hooking up. We took off our clothes, and as I was going down on him, I had the sensation of being watched. In my peripheral vision, I saw that he had taken out his cell phone, and had it pointed at me.

"You weren't going to ask before you started recording me?" I said.

"You're doing a good job," he said, "I wanted to go back and watch later. Keep going."

Was this something young people did now? I was holding his dick in my hand, and for a moment, I considered taking it back into my mouth. Something about the gesture felt like a compliment, like I was good enough to be recorded. For posterity. An exemplar. I thought of the aging lifeguard in the video, his eyes fluttering as *I* went down on him. The thought thrilled me, but I made the student delete the video anyway.

When I got home, it was going on ten o'clock, and my apartment was silent. Normally, Alan would still have been on the couch, and if I was in the bedroom, I would hear him laughing at something stupid on TV. Despite his carefully manicured collection of affinities, he had always been a prolific consumer of televised garbage. I wondered if it meant anything that I had noticed the silence. I wasn't lonely, but perhaps my place felt empty after all.

###

I woke in the middle of the night with a headache. My curtains were drawn and my bedroom was completely dark. Colors, little bursts of them, flitted through the darkness, and arcs of pain shot from my head down along my bones and the curves of my muscles. I could feel my entire body in the pain, but the worst was my head. I had fallen asleep without taking any pills, and my head felt like it was slowly coming apart. Only the bandages were keeping it together. I need stronger bandages, I thought; and then, I need softer pillows. Or more pillows. Or stronger painkillers. I used the light on my phone to find the bottle of pills on my nightstand, and dry-swallowed two. Then, I lay in bed, holding the pieces of my head together with my arms, waiting for the bursts of color to fade.

I woke that way in the morning, the pain having faded to a low murmur at the back of my skull. It was Monday, and according to my phone, I was late for work. I looked over at my alarm clock, or where the alarm clock should have been. But the alarm clock had never been mine—it was Alan's, and he had taken it when he left.

I hated being late, but I got ready for work slowly. I rubbed my loofah over my body with purpose, watched myself in the mirror as I put on my clothes. I flexed so that

what muscles I had stood out, and snapped a picture of myself in the bathroom mirror to put in my Cum'd profile. In the picture, my body seemed more real to me, more immediate than when I looked at my reflection. I stopped buttoning my shirt, and prodded at my torso. What was this? Was this stretch of body mine; was it me? The question felt dangerous, unhealthy, as did the answer, which was that my body belonged to me, but did not contain me. If I lost an arm, I would remain intact. These are things, I told myself, running my hands along the sides of my body. You are a person, but you are also a thing.

When I finished getting ready, I called an Uber to take me to work and went out onto Floyd Avenue. It was late autumn, but still the air smelled pink, or white. Rose petals; hibiscus. It was still cool out, and humid enough that downtown was only barely visible through the haze. Somewhere down the block, one of my neighbors was listening to the Kinks.

The car arrived, but instead of the address to the boutique where I worked, I told the driver to take me to the open-air mall out in Short Pump. On the way, I called the owner of the boutique and told her about the accident. Mallory had been in an accident of her own the year before, so she could sympathize. She told me to take a couple days for myself, and to come back on Wednesday or Thursday when I was feeling a little better, which struck me as generous, but I realized, then, as we merged onto I-64 and the road opened up, that I had an open head wound, and perhaps her generosity had its own private purpose.

I saw the mall before we came upon it, the cornerstone department stores rising above the flat highway, slouching toward commerce. The Uber driver let me out at the

entrance to the parking lot, where cars squatted in the parking lot like sleeping cattle, and as I passed them, I looked through the windows at their contents. Passenger seats littered with crumbs, with magazines. Windows cracked to let out leftover traces of cigarette smoke. Backseats unfit for passengers, some of them—but then, others, compulsively clean: mirrors hung with air fresheners; glossy paint, freshly detailed. Antiseptic nearly. And their owners, I imagined, also—perfumed salesgirls with impossible and dramatic hairstyles. One such girl, high-heeled and manicured, with a wild blonde ombré mane, was arriving as I passed her car, and I seemed to startle her when she turned around and saw me, backlit by the sun and head-bandaged, just behind her.

“Where did you come from?” she said after I apologized for sneaking up on her.

“Richmond,” I said, stupidly, and then, pointing to the back of the lot, “Back there—I took an Uber.” I could see her taking me in, reconciling my tailored clothes and the bandage around my forehead wet with sweat and scab juice. Then she stuck out her hand for me to shake. As we walked toward the mall, she told me that she too had been working as a personal shopper, in the men’s department at Nordstrom, for three years, ever since she had finished college.

“It’s such bullshit,” she said, “Isn’t it?”

“What do you mean?”

“Man, like I didn’t look like this when I got the job, right?” she said. “I showed up on my first day in a JMU sweater, and before I clocked in I sat at the cosmetics counter and had them do my makeup. My boss gave me this outfit like nothing you’ve ever seen, and all of a sudden, I’m this personal shopper, giving randos advice based

on——what?—the idea that if I like what they wear then so will other women?” She laughed—mean, commiserating laughter.

“I mean, you look the part now.”

“Yeah, but I take this stuff off when I go home, just like you.”

My bandage had finally become oversaturated, and a droplet of sweat rolled over my brow and into my left eye.

“Right,” I said, even though it was only mostly true. Sometimes I would cook dinner in whatever I had worn to work. It made me feel good, valuable, to lounge around in clothes from the boutique, clothes better than what I could afford. Occasionally, I would fall asleep on the couch in them if I had eaten a heavy dinner, and I would wake, crusty from sleep, hours later, and I would feel privileged, as though I had all the time in the world. “You never keep the clothes on?”

“Okay,” she said, grinning, “Sometimes I do.” The entrance to the mall loomed just in front of us, a broad pathway bordered by the edge of the Nordstrom on the one side and the PF Chang’s on the other. We stopped at the curb, where the background music playing in the mall was just barely audible, and she leaned in as if to tell a secret. Her perfume was musky, like cologne. “It makes me feel like a better person, wearing them.” She smiled and put her index finger to her lips. Hush, don’t tell.

We parted ways and I wandered around until people started to arrive. The day heated up, but the morning haze never quite faded; by noon, I had begun to sweat just walking between stores. Waiting in the parking lot for my Uber, bags of pillows and over-the-counter medical supplies dangling from the crook of my arm, I realized I had forgotten to put on deodorant before leaving. On the drive home, I wondered how I

seemed to the Uber driver, decked out in designer shirt and pants, odorous, my bandage brown with dried sweat.

When I got home, I dumped the pillows on my bed, still in their wrappers, and covered them with a spare sheet. I slept naked on top of the covers, and dreamed about the lifeguard from *Bigdick Dadbod*. In my dream, he came into the boutique looking for a new outfit, only instead of taking off his clothes he picked his skin until it peeled away like a molting snake. Beneath his face was a pale, featureless orb, and he took faces down from the shelves one by one, sliding them over the orb and pressing them into place. After a handful of unsuccessful fittings, he complimented my face and asked if he could try it on. I tried to back away from him, but my legs had fixed themselves to the floor, and after he had taken my face, he preened in the mirror, asked how much it would be, and declared that there would be no need for a box, because he would wear it out.

###

By Wednesday the scab on my head had crusted over and dried, and things seemed a little clearer. Maybe my head hurt less and so my painkiller haze had begun to fade—whatever it was, it had cleared away, and I found myself singing in the shower, dancing a little in place as I made my morning coffee. The last few days felt like I had been looking at the world through a pair of old 3-D glasses, everything skewed, confused, but today I was back on track. Before I left the house, I stood in front of the full-length mirror in my living room, inspecting myself. Composed. Professional. Battle-tested. Who was this man? An expert in style? Yes. Yes.

But then, the Uber driver couldn't seem to find my house. I waited on the sidewalk in front of my apartment, the morning air thick and hot. Beads of sweat formed

under my arms, dripped down my back, and I contorted my posture to keep my sweat from staining my shirt. The Uber driver arrived a few minutes later, and on the way to the boutique, he laughed and told me that I had looked like a little marionette, or someone doing the robot.

Mallory gave me a hug when I came in, and then held my face in her hands, leaning in close to my forehead to inspect my scab.

“I’ll give you a cream,” she said. “You won’t hardly have a scar at all.”

More foot traffic came through the boutique that day than normal. The shoppers were mostly older women with severe figures. They wore shawls despite the heat, and left their sunglasses on as they browsed, evaluating the dresses hanging on the rolling racks and then sliding them out of sight with an almost clinical detachment. If they sensed me approaching, they waved me away—unless they had already seen something they liked, and then I would hold the garment for them at the register until they were finished. Only then would they take off their sunglasses, sifting through the contents of their purses for the tiny patterned clutches where they kept their money. One of them, a very old woman with a drawn face, seemed to notice me for the first time as she looked up, credit card outstretched in her hand.

“Oh,” she said, “I thought you were Mallory.”

“Not today.” I stretched my face into the exaggerated grin I used with customers.

“Well tell her this new line she has is gorgeous. She should hold anything in a size two she thinks I’ll like.”

The woman left, and when Mallory returned that afternoon with the cream for my forehead, I gave her the woman’s message. She wanted to know who the woman was,

but the woman had never given me her name. Together, we went through the credit card receipts until I found the right one, but Mallory couldn't recall the woman from her name.

“She'll be so disappointed when she comes back if I haven't held anything for her,” Mallory said. “Do you remember what she looked like?”

I said I did, which was mostly true. I remembered her polka dot shawl, and the cut of her pants. I remembered that she had straight white hair, so white that it must have been dyed. But not her face, her stature, the tone of her voice—I could only conjure a vague impression, a pale shadow in couture.

But that seemed to be enough for Mallory. She spent a half hour on the showroom floor, then stashed three outfits in the cabinet beneath the cash register.

###

I was sitting out on my balcony when Ben called, surrounded by a half dozen Citronella candles, picking absently at a carryout container of pad thai and swiping my way through an issue of *Vogue* on my tablet.

“Come out with me,” he said, “I haven't been to college night in years.”

“That's because you hate the child-gays,” I said, “and I hate them too. Just come over and let's drink some wine.”

“I'm worried about you. You need to get out—be around people.”

“Why?” I asked. “If I need a friend, I can call you, or Aaron, or Andrew, and figure something out. If I need a nut, I have Cum'd for that.”

“Because maybe Devlin broke up with me and I need a friend—how about that?”

I sat forward and picked the fabric of my shirt out of my armpit. My ears were hot, and I had begun to sweat. I knew that I had been selfish.

Below me, on the street, people in their twenties were on their way somewhere or somewhere else, their acrid cigarette smoke and trap music wafting up from the street in waves. Cool kids. I felt a sudden urge to go inside and take off all my clothes, and I did—I started to. But when I went to set my tablet on the coffee table, the coffee table wasn't there anymore, and so I stood in the middle of my living room, looking around helplessly like a lost child.

We got to Godfrey's just as the drag show began, and as we waited in line to go in, I had the sensation of standing at the center of a hurricane. The streetlight at either end of the block flickered, a kind of dueling chiaroscuro. From along the peripheral streets came a low ruckus, gaining in volume as the child-gays, fit and shrill and well-appointed, rounded the corners and joined the line. I had put on an outfit of Alan's that I'd found mixed in with my clothes, a tight printed tee-shirt and a pair of jeans the color of plum wine that I had always thought accentuated my ass. I knew or I hoped that I was being noticed. I had set my phone to vibrate, and though I felt it buzz against my thigh, I resisted the urge to take it out and see if the messages were from Cum'd.

Ben had shown up to my apartment an hour before we left, overly energetic, insistent that his breakup was for the best. Devlin was shallow; Devlin had been holding him back; Devlin didn't know what commitment meant. His eyes had been bloodshot from tears or booze, but still he had insisted that we take shots before leaving. We were finally both single again! Just like things had been before! I stopped short of adding that before we had still been twentysomethings.

Ben had been chattering with the child-gays just behind us in line, and when I turned periodically to check on him, I knew that the children had no idea what to make of him. He was cute, but he wasn't the kind of cute they wanted. His muscles had lost some of their definition, and he had begun to develop wrinkles on his forehead and around his mouth. Or maybe they didn't notice any of that. Maybe they noticed his necklace, his rings, his bracelets, and the tears in his jeans, signs of difference. The child-gays had septum piercings and wore joggers. They swam in their clothes, their forms suggested by the way things hung from them. Perhaps on Thursdays they wiped off their foundation, threw on a chain, and became different people—or perhaps there was nothing at all beneath their shirts but trapped smoke.

“Hey!” one of them called when Ben and I were near the door. I looked down the line, in search of the voice. A man leaned forward and waved his hand, and it was the student, the one who had tried to record me. He had put on thick, dark-rimmed glasses and slicked back his hair, and his voice seemed deeper than before. Had he worn glasses when we met? I remembered lying on my stomach with the tip of his dick in my mouth, looking up past the phone at his face. His nose had been sharper, more aquiline, his chin less defined. His hair had seemed lighter, or had all that been the aging lifeguard from *Bigdick Dadbod*? I waved sheepishly, and then it was our turn to go in.

By the time Ben and I got our drinks, Undía Unadiva had taken the stage, and was halfway through her first song, some ballad I had heard a hundred times but could never quite remember. As she mouthed along to the words, she made her way from one end of the stage to the other, singling out people from the crowd. One of her protégés, a husky Latino man with a soft face, trailed behind her, gathering up dollar bills from the floor.

As the show went on, Ben periodically disappeared and came back with drinks for us. The booze settled into me slowly, pleasantly, and when my head began to swim, I realized that this was my first time drinking since my accident. Even though it had only been a few days, I missed this feeling, how everything seemed to become gently fluid, as though my whole world and everything in it were a boat rocking against the tide of something large and powerful whose nature I would only ever grasp halfway.

Suddenly, I realized, time had passed, and the music was different than before—manic, electronic. The stage lights had gone down and I could see the drag queens, towering in their heels and wigs above the crowd, moving through the club clutching tightly to their free drinks. I turned around, looking for Ben, but all around me were only the child-gays, an impenetrable faceless crush of them, sour from sweat and vodka, dancing strobe-lit as though dancing was an ecstatic ritual.

I pushed my way slowly through the crowd and found my way to the edge of the dance floor, and then to the bar at the back of the room. Shapes slid in the darkness before and beside me, and when I sensed a crack between them, I inserted myself quickly. Hands found their way beneath the curve of my ass, and between my legs, and despite the violation, I felt a twinge of pride, because the groping seemed to imply a compliment. After a few minutes, I pressed through to a corner where someone had put a high-top table. There was just enough room for me to stand, and now the crowd passed in front of me on its way around the side of the bar and down the narrow hallway that led to the smoking patio.

I saw the student before he saw me. He had come in from the patio, and was fighting to get back to the bar. When he saw me, he came over and put one hand on my

waist and the other on my shoulder, guiding me to turn and face him. He smelled strongly of rum and tobacco. We were close, only inches apart from each other, and yet away from the strobe light the club was dark and I could barely see him, just the paisley print of his shirt and the vague impression of his features.

“Alan,” he said. Then he leaned forward and kissed me, and though it was Alan he wanted, not me, his tongue slid along and against mine like a complicated handshake, and I found myself kissing him back. After a minute, he closed his mouth so that just our lips touched, and when I looked away from him, I saw that, within the crowd, people seemed to be watching us. Some of them I recognized as Alan’s friends, and though it was dark, and I couldn’t see their eyes, I recognized something like evaluation in the way they held their faces.

And it would take me a long time, not months but years, to admit to myself that that was the moment when I recognized precisely what had happened. Because, at that moment, somewhere deep inside myself, I was furious with Alan, furious not because he had apparently also fucked the student, and furious not because the student had mistaken me for him—furious because it was suddenly clear that Alan had been right. His shallow theory about jazz and Mediterranean food and French cuffs was all true, and that made me a hypocrite, because I wore my boutique clothes when I got off work, and stood by while Mallory rustled up outfits for a mystery person.

I was furious because I had made my living peddling Alan’s cynical, elitist philosophy.

And I knew, though I would pretend that I didn’t later, when Alan confronted me, that in those clothes, no one was seeing me that night—it was him they saw standing in

the corner, making out shamelessly with a much younger man. It was Alan they saw looking out at them, pausing for a moment, realizing he was being watched, and then taking the student by the hand and leading him toward the bathroom.

The bathroom, a cramped room that in a different incarnation of the building had perhaps once been a closet. A semi-opaque window dominated the back wall, letting in ambient streetlight from the alley behind the club—once there had been an overhead light, but it had burned out months ago, and the ceiling was a dozen or more feet high, and no one had complained that it should be fixed. I pulled the student in behind me and nudged him back against the door. We kissed, and I took my phone from my pocket and pressed it into his hand. Then I lowered myself to his waist and undid his belt. I looked up once, near the end, to make sure he was recording.

I watched the video later that night when I got back from the club, laid out on the floor in the middle of the living room, where the coffee table had once been. The video was low-quality, due in part to the low light and in part to the student's shaky camerawork, but as I watched myself giving a stranger head in the bathroom wearing Alan's expensive clothes, my skin broke out in gooseflesh. I felt like I had been stumbling around in search of an answer to a question I couldn't elaborate, and in the video I had achieved some kind of balance. What would people see when they watched me? A person, someone they knew, or an object to like, something that lit up whatever piece of their reptile brain governed attraction? I couldn't know. I could only wonder as I uploaded the video to Cum'd and watched the thumbnail grow and shrink, grow and shrink. It was still there when I checked the following morning, but by the time I got home from work that afternoon, it was gone.

Evidence

From the roof of the hotel, Devlin could make out Manhattan, far in the distance, across the Upper Bay. Behind him, the light above the door to the roof entrance polluted the view, and he held his hands up to the sides of his face like blinders to shut it out. The mall spread out at the foot of the hotel, dark unto invisibility. Night carpet. Newark, all of it.

“Can you see it?” Ben said, slurring. They had gotten drunk on the train from Richmond.

“Yeah.”

The gravel spread across the roof of the hotel scraped and crunched, and he felt Ben’s arms circle his waist, the dead weight of Ben’s head on his right shoulder. He imagined them standing here atop the hotel, another time, in the dead of winter, their aura of vodka rising visible away from them like hot breath.

“What does it look like?” Ben murmured into his shoulder.

“Can’t you see it?” he asked.

“Yeah,” Ben whispered.

Devlin watched for another moment before shifting Ben’s arm over one shoulder for support. He had never been closer to Manhattan than this moment, and he felt himself fill with incredible accomplishment and longing. The buildings, so far away, were just as he had imagined them, tall, dressed in light, though each of them a different sort of tall, and host to a different quality of light. He sensed the constant motion of headlights—even this late, so much coming and going, so many people pushing constantly forward.

Tonight he turned twenty-nine, and tomorrow he would be among them, but as he took in the city he felt its pull, so immediate—as though by the time he arrived something fundamental would have changed, the buildings lost their special shine and the people their propulsive quality. As though the city existed only tonight.

###

Sometimes, though he knew he was still too young to be so concerned with such questions, Devlin worried that he was wasting his twenties. Friends he had grown up with were painting murals, hiring employees, moving with their wives to Glen Allen or Hanover, because the public schools were better there than in Richmond City. Still he went to the James River when it was warm, wandered Shockoe Bottom on Saturday nights, laughing at the drunk VCU coeds who fell crossing the cobblestones in heels. Familiar Richmond, so small he felt sometimes he could hold it in the palm of his hand. His friends now were newcomers from big cities who told him that Richmond was amazing, that they appreciated it for how it was neither urban nor rural. How it had, for them, just *enough*.

What was *enough*? What did that mean? After the thought had first occurred to him, Devlin had fumbled his way through his job at the clinic where he ran support groups for foster kids for a few days, driven to distraction. *Enough* suggested a continuum from horrible to amazing, of course—but the more he thought about it, the more it seemed also to suggest chronology, a before, a now, and a later. For there to be *enough* now, there had to have been dissatisfaction at some point in the past—and, he had realized, a fear of consequence if *enough* was not achieved in the present.

He had hunted down the evaluator at his job and asked her how she knew his program was working. She had given him the list of measures she reported to the Department of Social Services every three months—how many clients he saw, how many graduated high school, how many were arrested. The DSS turned the numbers into percentages, she said, and the percentages earned them grant money from the federal government.

“So does it work?” he had asked.

“It works well enough,” she had said.

Ben had come along around that time. Sometime. After they had begun dating, he had realized that he couldn't remember, as he could with previous relationships, the prototypical details of their flirtation. He remembered chatting with Ben on Cum'd after seeing the gym selfie he'd put up as his profile picture, and he remembered that they had first met while he was eating a hamburger. Ben had tapped him on the shoulder, and his mouth had been full of bacon, and Ben had stammered, and so their first encounter had been governed primarily by silence.

But then, suddenly, they had been a couple. And after four months, what was Ben to him? As his twenties waned, he worried that this lapse in memory pointed at something just outside his field of view, something he couldn't, or preferred not to see.

“You're better off remembering less,” Andrew had said once, a month after Devlin had met Ben. It had been the day before New Year's Eve, and the Carytown Merchants Association had already begun to stage roadblocks on the sidewalk along Cary Street and to construct the tower for the ball drop on the roof of the Byrd Theater. “In my

perfect relationship, every day would feel like it was the first day, like I was just waking up next to this man for the first time and I couldn't even remember how I met him."

They had gone into Alejandro's Grill and sat at the bar, and Devlin had sipped from a pint of cask beer and listened to Andrew flirt with the bartender. The cask beer was a hefeweizen, and Devlin had felt an unexpected gratitude for its sweetness and warmth, which quieted his anxiety. After a while, the bartender had moved down the bar to serve a group of red-faced housewives, and Devlin had turned to his friend and asked, "What would you do with him in the morning?"

"The bartender?" Andrew had said, "Bottom."

"No. In your perfect relationship. The man you woke up with."

"Oh," Andrew had said. "Bottom."

And Devlin had laughed, but then he had wished for an honest response, and he had started to ask the question again, but the moment had passed. Andrew's brow had been drooped, and his eyes hooded so that he seemed to be half asleep, and Devlin had sensed that there was no room for honesty in their evening together.

His boss had told him that the world was this way now, trapped in the land of irony and irreverence. Her young twins wouldn't watch the cartoons her older daughter had loved only five years before—they knew the characters already from the memes they saw on their phones. Even Batman they knew mainly as the man slapping Robin across the face because Robin's vapidty tried him. When she had showed them, once, an old Batman & Robin cartoon, they had taken turns slapping each other and laughing hysterically, until one had slapped too hard and made the other cry.

###

He thought he was on a boat, rocking gently back and forth, somewhere far out to sea. He had taken the sail down and curled it intimately about the mast so that the tide could carry him. He was stretched out on the deck, watching the seabirds circle soundlessly above the boat. But then he opened his eyes and saw Ben hunched over him, his face sickly and pale.

“You were having a nightmare,” Ben said. “I could hear you talking in your sleep from the bathroom.”

Devlin drew himself up against the headboard. “Are you alright?” he asked.

“I’m hungover,” Ben said, turning and shuffling back to the bathroom.

It was early still, not even 8:00am, and Devlin let himself sink back down to his pillow. They had never shut the blackout curtains, and morning had invited itself in, painting the room pale yellow. Though the light was soft, the unexpected brightness made him squint. He cupped his hand over his mouth and smelled the alcohol lingering on his breath. Through the window, a Boeing 747 rose above the trees fencing off the cluster of hotels from the airport, crossing hazy Manhattan and disappearing beyond the border of the window.

Manhattan. He was here.

Ben returned from the bathroom ten minutes later, and Devlin felt him lift the sheet away and slide beneath it. Then Ben was behind him, lips and erection pressed into his back, and though his head had begun to ache, still he turned his body and held his boyfriend to him. They kissed, and Devlin tasted toothpaste, the travel-sized mouthwash that Ben took with him whenever he traveled—he knew that Ben had been sick. With other men, this would have bothered him, but Ben’s tongue made the roof of his mouth

and his lips tingle. When Ben moved down past the flimsy border of the sheets, Devlin felt his mouth tracing its cool, warm course across nipples, ribs, and hipbones sensitive like tuning forks. When he felt himself nearing orgasm, Devlin lifted his legs onto Ben's shoulders, and Ben grabbed his thighs, his fingernails testing the surface tension of Devlin's skin.

He was back in Richmond, then—suddenly—back in trade's bed, hangover beating its way out of his skull, back arched and holding fast to the iron poles of the headboard, thrusting into trade's bottomless throat. Trade was gagging, his muscles spasming, his anonymous arms curled tight around Devlin's thighs.

Devlin came, groaning, body like a pincushion of nerve endings. He wriggled free of Ben's mouth. The sudden intolerability of touch, like flipping a switch.

"Enough," he said. "Enough."

###

They napped for an hour, and when Ben woke him again, he went to the bathroom and stood beneath the stream of the shower, the heat turned all the way up so that he could barely see himself through the steam. Ben laughed at him when he came out of the bathroom, his body splotchy and pink, skin puckering into goosebumps.

"What?"

"Nothing," Ben said, rubbing lotion over his torso and his arms, "It's just that you kept this room freezing all night, and now you've burnt all your skin off in the shower."

"So?"

"Has anyone ever told you that you have a flair for drama?"

He sat on the question all the way to Manhattan. People had been calling him dramatic all his life, but before he'd been gay, the word had seemed to hold a different meaning. From his family, it had felt like an accusation, as though it revealed some essential difference. *Dramatic* was what you were when you pointed out your aunt's submerged racism, when you argued the importance of sitting in one chair over another. To his mother, drama sprung from opinions that no one had asked to hear.

But that wasn't how he thought Ben had used it—or it wasn't quite. The cold room and the hot shower were at opposite poles of a spectrum, like the queens Devlin saw on the street as he and Ben left Penn Station and emerged into the Fashion District. It was typical Spring weather, hot sun and cold wind—the street kids were hidden away inside loose-knit sweaters and joggers, the ones his age squeezed into fitted waffle-tees and skinny jeans. And the older ones, middle-aged, dressed in a way Devlin thought they might call curated, everything bespoke and angular. The middle-aged gays seemed to wear the same sizes as the child-gays, but the garments themselves were of finer stock—houndstooth in place of terrycloth—and worn without the diaphanous sheen of irony.

They went down to the subway and got on a train toward Brooklyn. Ben had lived here for a summer while he was in undergrad, and while they were underground, Devlin felt questions welling up in his throat. The subway map on Devlin's phone showed this train stopping at every station, but their train passed many stations without stopping. Everyone seemed to know instinctively when and where the train would stop. When he looked over, hoping to find Ben looking back at him, Ben was engrossed by his phone, fitting shapes together with his finger and clearing them from the screen.

“I love you,” Devlin said, but around him, an entire world of chaos roared by, swallowing his voice: the train passed a station; a woman in a tall black wig sang a recitative; two Hasids hunched toward each other, whispering; the train car began to smell of warm cheese; the civilians crowding the center of this car jostled his feet with theirs at every stop.

Then the train arrived at Christopher Street and they were among the crowd on the platform and the chaos was amplified. As they made their way to street level, Ben jerked his head around toward one of the strangers, a light-skinned man in a turban. “Mohinder!” he yelled. The man turned, and Ben made his way back through the crowd, clutching tight to Devlin’s hand. Ben and Mohinder hugged and made conversation that Devlin couldn’t hear, even though he was only a few feet away. After a minute, Mohinder acknowledged him—leaned forward and stretched out his hand, which Devlin shook. Shortly thereafter, Mohinder waved goodbye and walked away.

“My roommate was dating him when I lived here,” Ben said after they climbed the stairs to the street. And, for a moment, Devlin felt an unexpected happiness filling him up. The city seemed a vast, dense labyrinth, and in its vastness, every hello was also a potential goodbye. To meet someone by coincidence a second time was a blessing. He wondered how anyone had stayed in touch before the telephone.

They walked through the village for a while and came to the pier, which seemed more like a park than Devlin had imagined. He wasn’t sure what he had been expecting—he had watched *Paris is Burning* a few weeks prior while recovering in bed from a night at the club, and he thought he remembered that the children in the movie, some of them, had come here. It had been just a wide platform, hadn’t it?

Now it was dominated by a lawn, on either side of which were footpaths leading to the end of the pier. A small crowd had gathered there, at the end, and as Ben led him closer, he saw men balancing cameras on their shoulder, college students in windbreakers shuttling clipboards and cups of coffee from one place to another. A half-dozen policemen stood watch a short distance back from the crowd, cordoned off from the rest of the pier by a line of yellow tape. When they came to the line of tape, one of the policemen held up his hand and said, “Filming,” as though it explained everything.

So they sat on a bench midway down the boardwalk. Devlin looked out across the choppy Hudson River at New Jersey, trying to pick out their hotel from the cluster of buildings far in the distance. Every so often, he watched a plane rise into the sky, the roar of its engines practically inaudible.

Ben’s phone made a noise and Devlin sensed him swiping his finger across the screen, bringing it to life. He heard the familiar noise of Ben’s game, and then, almost palpably, he was by himself, as though Ben had disappeared somewhere within the world of the game, all his individuality translated into equations, sequences of code that governed the movement of shapes across the phone screen.

“How are you feeling?” Devlin asked. This was not the afternoon he had imagined for them, although exactly what he had imagined—how the afternoon had begun to disappoint him—seemed just out of reach, unavailable. But it had been more scenic. Perhaps it was the end of the pier he longed for, the end of the pier like an island. Just Ben and him, alone together in a new place. A moment he could shrink, fit in his pocket and take with him; something he could hold up, later, to the light. But looking for what? Evidence?

“What?” Ben asked.

###

When they got back to the hotel the light had already begun to dim, and Ben fell asleep on top of the covers, fully clothed. Devlin put the TV on and gathered the things they had spread out across the hotel room into rough piles. Amazing how they had colonized this room in so little time—the smallest items, pens and chargers, scattered like Easter eggs.

His stomach grumbled. Had he eaten today? He knew he had, but he couldn't recall the food. Already, the details of the trip were fading. What had they been filming at the pier? He seemed to recall that it was a reality show—or had it been something for the Internet, or a commercial?

He shook Ben awake and asked him what he wanted to eat. But even with his eyes open, Ben was asleep—he said, “Beef terrorist,” and buried his head back in the pillow.

Devlin left the TV on and took the elevator to the café at the bottom of their hotel, learned the hotel was a Courtyard Marriott. He sat at the counter and ordered a Reuben and a beer. Behind the counter there was a door covered in plastic flaps, like the kind the butcher had at the Kroger in Carytown, separating the front of the café from the kitchen. Overhead and throughout the lobby blew a soft breeze of featureless jazz, but from behind the butcher flaps filtered something livelier, everything horns and piano. Something the staff listened to—he assumed it made them happier, distracted from the drudgery of dishwashing. When the clerk came back out to the counter, Devlin asked him how long he had been with the hotel.

“Two years,” the man said, pawing at his phone, which he had set on the counter beside the register, mostly hidden from sight.

“Nice,” Devlin said.

“Why is that nice?” the man asked, putting down his phone. A patch of hair on the side of his head had gone grey, and when he walked over to where Devlin was waiting for his food, he held up his hands, lined with age and fingernails ridged and perhaps too long, and looked silently at Devlin like, *What do even I say to you?*

His Reuben came out lukewarm, the bread soggy. It had come from a freeze-dried package. But he ate it anyway, even though as it slid down his throat in moist chunks, it made him want the brunch burger he now remembered having eaten for lunch.

He hadn't brought anything to better to distract him while he ate, so he video-chatted with Andrew, propping his phone against his glass of water. Andrew was sweaty and out of breath when he answered—and behind him, the familiar whirr and clang of exercise equipment. ““Trick, what you calling me for?” he asked. “Where's your boyfriend?””

“Sleeping,” Devlin said. “Have you found *your* boyfriend for the night yet?”

“Sure did. Got a little Southside trade boy coming over later.”

“Don't you worry that you'll wake up one day and you'll be fifty, and the trade won't want you anymore?”

“Okay, well you sound like you're in a mood,” Andrew said, glaring, “and I don't want that right now. So happy belated birthday and call me when you get back and goodnight.”

The call ended. Devlin ordered a salad for Ben and paid the bill.

Ben had gotten up while he'd been gone and shut off the air conditioning; now the air had gone stale, and Devlin could smell the residual odor of sex like something in the wallpaper. He made a cup of coffee in the single-cup percolator, then nudged Ben to life and handed him the plastic container, which Ben stared into as if it were a terrarium, and the coffee. Ben finished the coffee in a series of large gulps. He stretched, and then looked around the hotel room as though seeing it through fresh eyes. "I love you," he said.

The sentence sounded, for a moment, foreign, like someone pushing through a phrase in Latin—perfectly pronounced but lacking feeling. But then, Devlin heard himself saying it back, and he heard the same emptiness there, though he knew he felt otherwise. He was tired of the small ways in which Ben failed him, the drunkenness or disengagement—but it occurred to him that the reason these things bothered him was because they kept him away from Ben. That, were it not for these things, they could be a unit.

At his feet were two piles of belongings, what was Ben's and what was his. Although Ben began to dress now, for the club, and he gathered his outfit carelessly, rifling through both of the piles for the shirt, the jeans, the fashion socks that suited him. Ben's pile, alone, consisted of trifles, ugly things that Devlin didn't want: a belt with a gaudy, retro buckle; timeworn briefs; t-shirts Devlin had perhaps tried once and deemed too small to borrow. The nicest things they shared.

They took the train into Manhattan, the promise of the gay bar somewhere in front of them. Ben wanted to talk about the dream he'd had, where he'd been a community organizer rallying farmers against an impending livestock suffrage act. His voice was

barely audible above the roar of the train, and though Devlin wanted to tell him about what he had said in his sleep, he knew he would have to wait until the next stop, whenever that would be.

Eventually, the train slowed to a halt, and two Hasids boarded the train. Were they the same two Hasids as before? Devlin stared at them, and he knew he could never be sure, but they stood by the door and hunched toward each other and whispered, smiling, laughing silently at whatever jokes they told to signal to each other that they were alike.

After Error

Midnight had left us behind, Seth and Omar and Allyn and I, without our taking notice. We had been paying attention, instead, the four of us, sitting around a small table beneath a red novelty light bulb, to the stage. To Dolorosa.

Dolorosa lived on Tuesday nights and the weekend. Normally, she lip-synched the divas, old jazz standards. Tonight, for the first time, she was singing—something I had heard before, something off the soundtrack from a film about forgiveness. She moved but very little across the stage—only when the song hit an urgent note. When she did, the red light caught the rhinestones around her eyes and lips, and she seemed possessed by anger. Her voice was syrup, and in these moments the syrup turned dark like molasses. Elemental. We did not know she had this voice.

After she had done another song or two, she took a break, and I followed Allyn outside, hoping to steal a clove cigarette. I had quit cigarettes years before, but I was feeling porous. I wanted smoke running through me. When we got out to the street, though, Allyn had none to spare. He walked off down the street to get another pack, and for a moment I felt unmoored. Decontextualized. It would be embarrassing to return to our table so quickly, and so I stood on the sidewalk like a foundling, waiting for something to happen.

“Do you want a cigarette?” asked a man who I hadn’t seen. He held his pack out to me, smiling. The streetlight cast shadows into the bags beneath his eyes. I took a cigarette from his pack, and he formed his hands, large and dry, into a shield against the wind. He asked me where I was from.

“Hopewell,” I said.

He said that he had lived there for several years before moving here, to Richmond.

“It was a much worse area then, yes?”

“Yeah,” he said, “Although I never had any trouble there, and I’ve been robbed twice since I moved to the city.”

The first robbery, he said, had been simple—he had been walking alone late at night, and had taken out his phone to call an Uber when a man stuck what felt like a gun into his back and told him to hand over the phone and his wallet. When I asked him to describe the second robbery, though, he started to speak and then stopped. He squinted, tilted his head, as though putting something together for the first time. Then he started again, from the top.

###

When the police asked him if he’d had any suspicion, Eddie lied and said that he’d had no idea. How could he have known?

The truth, though, as it normally does, would lie somewhere in between yes and no, between the knowledge of what would come, and a sneaking suspicion that something ineffable that morning was not as it should have been. For example, that the water for his coffee had smelled faintly of lavender as it came to a boil. Or that his upstairs neighbors, Desmond and Alan, sniped at each other out on the balcony, even though the rain had been coming down since the night before, filling the gutter faster than the sewer could take, and gathering into puddles so large that the police had come out before sunrise and cordoned off a section of Marshall Street on the next block.

Or, strangest of all, that William had texted him in the middle of the night—a simple, mysterious, “Hey.”

“You better tell William to fuck right off,” Demi said when he told her. “Or, no: just tell him you don’t want a deadbeat boyfriend.” She picked restlessly at her bagel, which she had brought to the restaurant wrapped in aluminum foil. While the sign out front advertised that Cleopatra’s was open, the breakfast rush in Capitol Square picked up around 9:30. They would be alone still for a bit.

“He isn’t a deadbeat,” Eddie said, although when Demi pressed him to say what William was, if not a deadbeat, he struggled to find a type for his ex-boyfriend. William, who had unceremoniously dumped him after six months, taking the few clothes Eddie had encouraged him to bring over, and without leaving so much as a note. At first, he had thought nothing of their disappearance, but later on he had tried to call William and had discovered that his number had been blocked.

Only later, through friends, had he heard that William complained that he was boring, that he didn’t do anything but work and watch television and sleep. The irony: Eddie had heard from a friend that William was out of a job. How the tables had turned.

“He’s in a rut,” Eddie said. “It happens.”

“You shouldn’t be defending him,” Demi said. “He can’t have the market cornered on dick.”

After the breakup, he had taken up running, and yoga, and joined Cum’d in an effort to spice up his daily routine. And indeed, since he had joined Cum’d, getting laid had never been easier. It had embarrassed him, at first, to see its white Rorschach logo on the home screen of his phone. But when he had loaded the app, seen the cascade of

photos—all these men so nearby! He had touched his finger to one of them, a man with olive skin and a screen of wiry grey hair spread across his chest, and a sidebar showed him that the man was thirty-eight years-old and six feet tall, and that he was a bottom with a love for zen gardening.

He had imagined that he might have seen this man on the street, perhaps walking to the bar where he and Demi sometimes went for a drink after closing Cleopatra's. He searched the man's face for the thing that would give his sexuality away, perhaps the shape of his smile or his searching eyes—how his features would have looked on the street, in the afternoon light. How the man might have turned his head, so slightly as to be imperceptible to the untrained eye, to look at Eddie. Several days later, after a brief but flirtatious conversation, he had found himself beneath the man, whose name was Italo. When he performed the same act of basic conversation with others, it was just as easy to find his way into their beds.

Because it was fun and easy, Eddie struggled to articulate why it should be William over any of these others. How to describe what it was about him that Eddie had found so irresistible! It wasn't that William had the most stamina, or the biggest dick—but it was *good*.

The power of good dick was a curious alchemy. In an abstract way, he remembered that when they fucked he had felt pleasure, exceptional pleasure, but there was no larger meaning attached to that feeling.

It seemed to have something to do with empowerment. He remembered what William's dick looked like in detail—the yellowish undertone its skin acquired near the base, its mild starboard bent—and how it had weighed in his hand, its mysterious

significance. Holding it, putting it inside him, hadn't he felt like he was in control? And not just in control of his immediate sexual need, but also, somehow, his entire life? Yes, this was the power of good dick.

When Demi went to the back of the restaurant to cook breakfast for their first customer, Eddie texted William back. Nothing serious, just hitting the ball back: "Hey, how've you been?"

Later, he would think back to this moment while he watched *Santa Paloma Homicide* on his couch, and identify it as an important Moment of Error. That's what the lead agent in *Santa Paloma Homicide* called the key decision, the one that set the invariably dead or maimed subject down the path toward her death or maiming. The lead agent was named Agatha Muñoz. She said, "Moment of Error" in a way that gave it a pleasing moral heft, like you could look at a whole life in a forensic way, name a cause for any outcome. The Moment of Error gave the lie to fortune. Good and bad luck—such crap. Bad things happened because of bad decisions.

Since the breakup, Eddie had been obsessed with the prospect of identifying the Moment of Error in his relationship with William. During lunch shifts at Cleopatra's, while Demi worked the register, he would comb his memory of their time together for clues as he assembled sandwiches. How had William's face looked the first time Eddie hadn't wanted to go out for a third consecutive day? What had been William's tone of voice when he said he didn't really need to go to his coworker's Halloween party? Slowly, the details began to return to him, and he'd seen the traces of a narrative arc that had been previously submerged in the static of his own self-absorption. He had indeed

come to expect that they would stay in, that they would watch police procedurals, each of them fussing independently on their cell phones, until it was time to go to sleep.

But even this realization felt shallow, inadequate. Everyone had flaws—having a flaw was acceptable. What seemed important was to know, not the flaw, but the moment at which it became intolerable. As much as he turned the relationship over in his mind, though, he couldn't pinpoint that moment of irrevocable change.

Eddie watched his message to William transmit—saw how the timestamp changed to indicate that William had read it. It seemed ridiculous and embarrassing that he had thought he would be able to identify the Moment of Error unabated. What he needed was the other side of the story.

###

The rain slowed to a drizzle in the early afternoon, and on his break from the restaurant Eddie walked down 12th to Main Street, where the corner store advertised cigarettes and lottery tickets on an electronic marquee. When he and Demi had opened Cleopatra's, this had been their primary competition for the breakfast market, the corner store, whose owner had a hibachi grill and a line cook who was quick with a spatula. The inside of the store smelled perpetually like sautéed onions and peppers.

Eddie bought a Black 'N Mild cigarillo and a miniature lighter. He allowed himself to pretend that he was just having a tobacco craving, but as the sun rose over the statehouse and settled atop the long hill separating Shockoe Bottom from downtown, and still he hadn't smoked it, he knew he had settled into the idea that he would see William again. After all, it had been their routine to share a Black whenever they saw each other.

Sharing a smoke was a convenient way to build in time, when they had first met, to talk about their days.

The inevitability with which he imagined their reunion at once excited and depressed him, and though he tried to shake the thought, he caught the way Demi looked at him several times that afternoon. Her look read as a kind of existential worry, as in, “Climate change will put this whole restaurant underwater,” or, “What if the economy tanks again?”

“You aren’t going to see him, are you?” she asked when Angel came in to relieve him.

“It was probably just a drunk text,” he said, but he left quickly anyway, afraid to be pressed further.

The street outside his apartment had continued to flood, and the police had expanded the road closure to include his block. In front of his building, the water stopped just short of the top of the curb, like a makeshift canal. Two policemen waited at the barricade, and when not directing traffic, they took turns folding traffic citations into little origami canoes, priming the bottoms of the boats with lip balm to keep them afloat. As Eddie passed them on the street, the policemen set their boats at the edge of the water and watched as the current sucked them toward the sewer drain.

Alan was waiting on the stoop, smoking a cigarette, watching the policemen race their boats. Eddie nodded to Alan as he approached. Alan took a long drag and swept his locs back from his eyes. As he exhaled, the humid air thickening the smoke, a drop of water fell from the balcony overhead and extinguished the end of his cigarette.

“Shit,” Alan said, “Sorry—come hang out for a second.”

“Hey,” Eddie said, “What you doin down here?”

“Too wet on our balcony. Plus, Desmond is making me crazy.” He lit another cigarette, hunched against the misty breeze, and swept back his locs again.

“Oh,” Eddie said, feeling stuck and empty of inquiry. Though Desmond had lived above him for almost a year, and he had met Alan once or twice during that time, he couldn’t be sure if it was appropriate to ask what Alan and Desmond had been fighting about.

One of the policemen cheered—the drain had claimed his boat first.

“His mom wants him to forgive his dad,” Alan volunteered, “He’s mad that I think his mom is right.”

“Why now?” He had heard the story of Desmond’s father, whose silent rejection Eddie had at first suspected of exaggeration. But around the time that William had left, Desmond’s parents had passed through Richmond on their way to a family reunion, and Eddie had witnessed his father’s cold, evaluative gaze, how everything it fell upon received his reproach. Desmond’s mother, conversely, seemed to spill over with affection, running her fingers along Desmond’s picture frames, the contours of his furniture. Before Eddie left, she had taken his face in her hands and told him that Desmond had said he was a good person, and she was glad Desmond had him for support. His face had been very close to hers; even her eyes seemed dipped in gold.

“Supposedly he had an ecstatic religious experience.”

“Well,” Eddie said, “Let’s hope.” He rested his hand on Alan’s shoulder, a sort of goodbye, and went upstairs to his apartment.

The wind had blown open his terrace door, letting in rain all over the throw rug he kept just inside the threshold. The door only ever seemed to blow open during inclement weather, and as he turned on the television and retrieved a towel, he considered seriously the irrational notion that the apartment was haunted. Many apartments in Richmond were, after all.

The television was tuned to the news. The rain had caused accidents all over the city; where it had not caused accidents, it had caused flooding. In Mechanicsville, an anonymous 911 call had led the police to a basement where a missing woman had been discovered held against her will. Eddie dropped the towel on the throw rug and stepped gingerly around atop it, trying to soak up the water. The urge to live in the suburbs mystified him—the suburbs seemed home to endlessly more perversion and violence than the city.

His phone vibrated on the kitchen counter, where he had set it when he'd come in. He knew before looking at the message that it would be William, and it was, asking to meet for a drink around the corner at Gusto later in the evening.

The news cut to a commercial break, and Agatha Muñoz appeared on the screen, standing at the top of a darkened stairwell, pointing her flashlight into the camera. The camera cut to adopt Agatha's perspective; at the bottom of the stairwell, a disheveled woman in manacles raised her hands to shield her eyes from the flashlight. The commercial tag promised this would be a shocking episode of *Santa Paloma Homicide*, ripped straight from the headlines, and would shake the department down to its very foundations.

He felt convinced that there would be no Moment of Error in this episode. No one would blame the abducted woman for her abduction—perhaps this, the lack of a key moment of decision, was what would threaten to destroy the fictional police unit.

###

Though he intended to change into his running clothes, Eddie realized when Desmond knocked on his door that several hours had passed in which he had been laying on the couch in his work clothes, dividing his attention between the television and his Cum'd account. Old habits die hard.

The rain had picked up again, and Desmond's hair and clothes suggested he had forgotten to bring an umbrella with him to work.

"You have dinner plans?" he asked.

Twenty minutes later, Eddie was sitting at the kitchen table in Desmond and Alan's apartment, sipping from a glass of Riesling and picking at the remains of a chicken thigh. Desmond and Alan had been drinking before he had been invited to join them, and they laughed when he told them he'd be meeting with William that night.

"Call me boring and see what happens," Desmond said to Alan.

"Girl, I'd put someone out so fast," Alan said. He reached forward as if to high-five Desmond, and they clasped hands, holding each other up.

Sweat dampened Eddie's brow, a product of either the wine or his embarrassment at their reaction. While he had known Demi longer, he had not expected her to understand. Given their conversation, though, he had hoped Alan at least would understand his motives. It was, after all, a question of how much one was willing to forgive.

“I heard about your dad,” he said.

Desmond settled down. He shot a look at Alan. “Yeah,” he said, clearing his throat.

“How are you feeling about it?”

“I feel like my mom is in for a disappointment.”

“What happened to your dad, though?”

Alan pushed the remaining beans on his plate into a small pile. He seemed determined not to look up from his food. When the oven timer beeped, he rose quickly from the table and pulled a square baking dish from the oven.

“I don’t know,” Desmond said. “According to my mom, he had a dream where he died and St. Peter told him he was too judgmental for heaven.” He let out a harsh laugh. “She’s so desperate at this point that she’s going for deus ex machina.”

“Don’t you want to see him? You know, find out for yourself?”

The scent of brownies began to fill the apartment; Alan stood over the baking dish, working them gently from the baking dish with a spatula. He stopped what he was doing for a moment; he seemed to be waiting for Desmond to respond.

“Not really, no,” Desmond said. And perhaps it was an effect of the wine, but he looked suddenly older than his age. His scruff had begun to grey, his skin to dry out. “Some things you only get one chance at. I can’t get another childhood.”

Alan brought over three plates with brownies on them, but the atmosphere felt sour now, and Eddie ate his brownie and finished his wine in silence. Afterward, when he had thanked them for dinner and gone back to his apartment to dress for his date with William, he heard Desmond and Alan bickering through his ceiling.

He showered leisurely, trying for the first time a new exfoliating scrub and soaping his body with shower gel that had come with his cologne. He knew that he should not be doing such things for William, and he pretended that there was a vengeful edge to his preparation—that he wanted not to reconcile with William, or to learn anything about why their relationship had ended, but to show him how wrong he had been to leave.

By the time he left the house, the rain had stopped, and businessmen and lobbyists and hipsters prowled the street between restaurants decked out in seersucker and linen and leather and corduroy. The restaurants' storefront windows vibrated softly to their house music, and as Eddie passed the theater, a patron emerged followed closely by the sound of a standing ovation. Jutting up from the middle of the sidewalk, a cast-iron historic sign announced the location of the death of J.E.B Stuart.

Though Gusto's kitchen had closed at nine, and it was now nearly ten, Eddie barely managed to find seats at the bar. He texted William that he had arrived, and when the bartender came over, ordered a martini.

So this was where they would meet. Gusto had a sort of rustic, downscale decorating approach. Layers of weathered wooden slats covered the walls, and the bar stools had been fashioned from car axles and tires. In a far corner, a gangly man in a faded "Vote Cthulu!" shirt manipulated a soundboard to weave industrial sounds into a strange jazz. It was quaint, but nice—although as he waited for William, he noticed more and more the sharp edge at the bottom of the bar, and how the ring of the tire pressed against the bottoms of his legs and cut off his circulation. What would he say when William arrived? Small talk seemed impossibly artificial, but to ask the wrong question

would seem intrusive, aside from which, he had no way of truly knowing William's motives in texting him.

Quickly, his glass was empty, and when he checked his phone, he saw that it was nearly twenty after. He attempted to call William, but the call went straight to voicemail, and he took this to mean that either William's phone was dead, or he had changed his mind and blocked Eddie's number again.

Unsure whether to go or stay, Eddie ordered another martini, then cradled his chin in his palms just above the rim of the glass, so close that the chilled glass cooled his lips. The bar had begun to empty out, the late stragglers to dinner finally having finished their meals and settled up. Even the DJ had begun to pack up his things. It was difficult not to be disappointed by this outcome. A life came in little units, and at the very least, to see William again, regardless of what then occurred between them, would have been to curl a bracket around the open end of their relationship.

Eddie opened his phone, began a text to William, began a text to Demi, and finishing neither, opened Cum'd to see who was around. Within a quarter mile of him, there was one person, whose profile picture was a dog running in a field—although as the app refreshed, the distance increased a half mile. Whoever he was, he seemed to be joining the crowd of users all clustered around a half mile away, by no coincidence the same distance between Gusto and the downtown gay bars. Momentarily, he considered making his way to them, but the prospect of finding William there provoked his anxiety.

He finished his martini in a large gulp, deleted his original message to Demi, and replaced it with notice that he was on his way to Church Hill to see her.

###

“I knew you were going to try to see him,” Demi said. She dragged from the Black ‘N Mild and tapped her middle finger against its body, shaking loose the ash accumulated at the tip.

“I had to,” Eddie said. Below them, in the parking lot, one of Demi’s neighbors watched his dog take a shit and walked away without cleaning it up. He took a drag from the cigarillo and let the opaque, white smoke drift out of his mouth.

“Why? Like really, though, why?”

“I just wanted to know when it all started to be over,” he said. “Like, how fucked up is it that I was making this other person miserable and I didn’t even notice? It’s so weird—it doesn’t feel like me.” He stopped for a moment, took another drag from the cigarillo. “I don’t know. Today it was super important—like, the most important thing that could happen. Maybe tomorrow I won’t care so much. Isn’t it supposed to be that way?”

“You should see a therapist,” Demi said.

When the Black had burnt down to the plastic filter, they moved inside and opened a bottle of champagne, as though there was something to celebrate. Still, he had heard nothing from William, but beneath the champagne and the wine and the martinis, William was suddenly a little less important. There was a thing called a MacGuffin that he had seen a video about on the Internet—the MacGuffin was this all-important thing that drove the story, but you never saw it. It was a device to drive the narrative.

This is how William had begun to seem to him. He had loaded so much meaning into this relationship which boiled down to nine months of his three decade life. It

seemed like a trap to make one thing mean so much, to let the search for the Moment of Error become its *own* Moment of Error.

Then his phone vibrated, and for a moment Eddie was convinced William had returned his text. That there had been a misunderstanding. All his ire and frustration was turned on its head, and he saw an end to the path, an answer to his question sitting atop the horizon.

But it wasn't William—it was a message from Cum'd. The message itself was simply and flirty, and its messenger, tall and square-jawed with wavy blonde hair, could have been a model except for that, according to his profile, he had just finished his residency at the hospital's cancer center. He said his name was Dan. He lived a half mile away, and after a short conversation, he asked if Eddie wanted to come mess around.

“Yeah, I'd hit that,” Demi said when he showed her the message.

So Eddie put on his shoes and stumbled in the dark up the last few blocks of Church Hill, then turned right onto 33rd Street. The houses here still had old vinyl siding, and cracks in the sidewalk sprouted little tufts of crab grass. At the end of the block, a pair of large men in oversized white t-shirts huddled just outside the entrance to a corner store.

Dan's building had once been a pair of single-family homes, though it had at some point been converted into four apartments. Dan's apartment was on the first floor of the right side of the building, and when he knocked, Dan answered the door shirtless. He was skinnier than in his Cum'd picture, and he seemed tired, rubbing his eyes like he'd been asleep, and massaging a crick from his neck. He led Eddie through his

darkened apartment and down a long hall toward his bedroom, where the only source of light, likely a table lamp, cast a dying glow across the room.

Two things happened then, nearly simultaneously. Dan emerged into the light from the bedroom lamp, and Eddie saw him clearly, how his skin sagged into his cheeks, how it mottled across his forehead and chin, how it seemed on the verge of splitting open.

And, behind Eddie, something shifted in a doorway he had not seen, some shape barely distinguishable from the darkness, and blocked the path behind him. For a moment, even as he knew what he had stumbled into, he was convinced the shape was a ghost—but then the shape lurched, and Eddie felt his nose snap, felt warmth gathering in his face. The shadow lurched again and Eddie was rotating backward, falling, fading. His left eye burned, and he felt himself being turned onto his side, hands reaching roughly into his clothes. Something was running from his nose down along his cheek and onto the floor. It was blood, but he couldn't be sure it was his.

###

“I came to in a bush outside the house,” Eddie said, “With my wallet and phone and keys all missing. I hadn't been out long, because the blood on my face was still wet, and the two men were still standing on the corner by the Clay Street Market. Dan's door, I suppose his name wasn't really Dan, was wide open. I didn't think anyone was still inside, but I didn't want to go in and check either. The police said that the same two guys had robbed a couple other people—they used empty apartments.”

“What did you do,” I asked.

“I walked back to Demi's house and knocked on her door until she opened up.”

Inside, someone got on the mic and announced that Dolorosa was starting her second set. Allyn was still down the street, making his way slowly back toward the bar, and for as far away as he was, he appeared to hear the announcement, running as fast as his skinny jeans would allow.

“Girl, let’s go,” he said, pulling on my hand.

“Wait,” I said to Allyn. I turned back to Eddie, “What about William?”

“He called me the next day from the hospital—he had been in a car accident coming down the Boulevard.”

“And?”

“I couldn’t forgive him.”

We went inside, and from our table, I watched Eddie walk down the street and turn the corner toward Broad, passing beneath a large mural of a naked woman curled up inside a jar of strawberries. He walked with a determined gait, as though he knew exactly where he was headed, and yet as he grew distant he began to seem ethereal, like an idea. So clear and unequivocal up close, and then so hazy from far away.

I began to wonder why I hadn’t asked what William had done that was so unforgivable, but then Dolorosa cued the DJ, and her track started. Her voice rose from deep in her gut, and when the first note emerged from her mouth, she stuck her finger out into the crowd, accusing us. The rhinestones on her lips cast off light, and her eyes narrowed, and she wailed down at us that we had done her wrong, that we were no good. With every song in her set, she catalogued our failings. We make people who we want them to be, I suppose. We write a narrative for ourselves and fit them into it.

When Dolorosa's breath was gone, and the house lights came up, we applauded her. We gave her a standing ovation, and then we went home and disappeared back into our stories.

The Weirding Path

The storm had blown in Wednesday night, earlier than anticipated, and snow had already begun to fall by the time Walter woke Thursday morning. His tongue clung thickly to the roof of his mouth, a symptom of his having fallen asleep midway through a glass of wine.

Beside him in bed was a man whose name he found he couldn't quite remember—the man had given it to him by text, but this piece of information had mostly been a formality. They had forgotten to exchange names, and Walter had already been on his way to the man's house when he had received the message.

It wasn't until after he had gathered his things and retreated to his car that he checked his phone. Sometime in the night, after Walter had already fallen asleep, a subset of the people he'd messaged either by text or through Cum'd had returned his messages. He scrolled through his new messages, typing responses to the people he was really interested in and deleting the three or four who he had only contacted because he had grown desperate the night before. There was something depraved and yet strangely natural about this process. Whatever use-value he had constructed for these people last night was gone now. He wasn't horny anymore.

When he had finished with Cum'd, he checked his text messages. Igby had texted him back just before midnight with a dick pic and a grinning emoji. Walter felt himself getting hard, but it was a bittersweet sort of lust, because he knew the picture had probably been sent to someone else too.

During the three months that he and Igby had been casually dating, this had been Walter's primary source of anxiety. He had been immediately infatuated with Igby's looks and sense of humor when they had met at a happy hour organized by the apartment building where they both lived. But Igby wanted an open relationship, and while Walter had been willing to humor him, he'd realized that there was a treacherous edge to the allure of casual sex. It was unfulfilling, addictive fun.

When he returned to his car, he resisted the urge to linger. He was acutely aware that, at any moment, someone could load up Cum'd and see how close he was. Several families were on the street, in the process of loading their children and their duffel bags into their cars, having apparently elected to flee in the face of the snowstorm. It struck him that, back in Bethel, it would have been these people, and not whoever was on Cum'd, that he'd have worried would spot him leaving a one-night stand. Since he had moved to the city, he'd learned the subtle etiquette of anonymity. People wanted to be seen, but they wanted more to be than passed over. To notice someone too long—to observe them too carefully—was to stand out yourself, to reveal that what promise of invisibility the city had to offer it had not offered to you.

There was snow on the road, and so Walter drove slowly east through Carytown. The universities had closed, as had most of the advertising and financial firms, but the restaurants had stayed open. This had turned out to be a shrewd business move—the closer he drew to the Boulevard, to the Fan, the busier the streets became. Despite the incipient snowfall, or perhaps because of it, the disposable income of Richmond was out en force. Business would boom until the roads became impassible.

Igby laughed when Walter brought up his anxiety in his apartment later that afternoon over coffee, “This is nothing compared to D.C.”

This had been Igby’s predictable response to most things in the four months since he’d moved in next door to Walter. He reminded Walter of a childhood friend who had moved from Bethel to New York City after high school. When Walter had seen the friend again the Thanksgiving following his move, he had become insufferably urbane. It was as though he had wrung himself like a sponge and soaked up the city to his core. There was something attractive about Igby though that defied classification. The closest Walter could come to describing it for himself was a sort of perpetual and total enmeshment. Light and space seemed to bend around him, accomplishing not concealment, but rather an effect of accommodation, of rarefaction. Living in the Kleig-lit sphere of his attention was intoxicating, and had kept Walter from being bothered, until recently, by the lack of little things like monogamy.

“My point is just—isn’t it weird that I’d be more worried about being seen on Cum’d than being seen in real life?”

“Is it so weird? Cum’d is still the real world—it’s just a different way of being in the real world. You were still really there. What difference does it make how you’d be found out?”

“I dunno,” Walter said. Igby had taken out his phone while he was talking, and Walter watched his neighbor’s eyes move across the screen. He seemed to be in two places at once, at Walter’s kitchen table, bathed in pale snowlight, but not entirely. “It makes me uncomfortable.”

“It has its silver lining,” Igby said. “I mean, how did you think *I* knew you were home?” He set down his phone and took Walter’s chin in his hand, regarded him in a sad, sort of mocking way, then pulled him forward and kissed him on the mouth. “Aw—if you hate it so much, just delete the app.”

###

Walter made massaman curry when the sun began to go down. While it simmered, he sat at the kitchen table in front of his work laptop and logged into the customer service software for the discount telecom company where he’d been working for two years. He was the second-shift online customer service representative for the Mid-Southwest, which was what the company called Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas. The company had other employees with the same title as his—he had no idea who they were or where they lived, just that each of them covered a specific region of the country.

When the alert tone chimed and a chat window appeared on his screen, the online customer service representative was to give it his attention. The company preferred the online service reps to behave, in their chat conversations, as though they were in the places that they served. At random, Walter was periodically reminded, his chat logs would be reviewed by internal auditors. Exceptional performance would be noted and rewarded. The human resources shill who sent these emails from behind an anonymized listserv service would never use the word “verisimilitude,” but Walter knew that was what they wanted.

To this end, Walter raised three tabs in his internet browser with temperature and precipitation maps, one for each of his states. In Texas, it was 4:45pm, in New Mexico and Arizona, it was 3:45pm. There was a sixty-seven minute difference between sunset

in Houston and sunset in El Paso, but because El Paso was on Mountain Time, the sun would technically set there earlier. Walter imagined the person serving Virginia pulling up these same details, so that when someone clicked the button on the website to chat, he or she could type, “Stay warm!” or “I’m snowed in too!”

The sun had gone all the way down by the time he got his first customer service request. According to the company software, the customer’s IP address was from Alamogordo, New Mexico, where the sun had just set and yet the temperature was a balmy fifty-one degrees, information that Walter shoehorned into his greeting. He had no expectation that his performance would be rewarded.

“I’m still getting messages from my family and stuff, but my boyfriend’s texts haven’t been coming through,” the customer typed when they got down to her problem.

Walter had found during his time as an online service rep that people tended to relate to their phone service in very telling ways. He eventually referred the woman to an in-store representative, and helped her set up an appointment to bring in her phone—this was the outcome of most of the questions he fielded. When the exchange had ended, he leaned back in his chair and wondered if the woman had guessed that he wasn’t from New Mexico—if she had given even a moment’s thought to where he was, or if she had simply assumed from what he had said in his greeting that he was nearby. How much information did it take to trick someone this way?

Cooking had left his apartment slightly warmer than comfortable, overly fragrant with curry, and when Walter finished his shift, he gathered his coat and boots. Outside, he walked down the block, relishing the rush of the cold air over his skin. The bars and restaurants were open despite the eight or so inches of snow on the ground. From several

blocks away, Walter heard overlapping music, salsa upon classic rock upon hip-hop, the noise overwhelming and unintelligible. He felt himself moving toward the sound, its inscrutability somehow drawing him in, though he sensed that when he arrived, the sounds would separate, becoming distinct, and he would need to choose one.

###

Walter woke later, groggy and uncertain of the time. He couldn't remember returning to his apartment. His bedroom was bathed in odd light, and he pulled himself to one of the windows behind his bed, lifting the canvas shade with one hand and pushing his face between it and the windowpane, relishing the cold that filtered through the glass.

Below and away from his apartment, the James River had frozen over and was covered by a soft pat of snow. Likewise the ground leading away from the riverbank, and the parking lot just below the window, and all the cars. The streetlights illuminating the parking lot were topped with fragile white cones, and it was their light, reflected from the snow, that filled his windows.

Walter checked the time on his phone as an excuse to see if Igby had texted him since he'd fallen asleep. Disappointed, he pulled himself from bed and made his way to the kitchen, where he reheated a bowl of curry. He went out to his balcony and perched the bowl on the thick metal railing, letting its heat melt the snow around it. When he picked it up again, it was the perfect temperature to eat. He imagined that, were Igby here, he would have put his face close to the railing, watching the snowline withdraw from the curvature of the hot bowl, as though fleeing.

Before he could think the better of it, he put the bowl down again, loaded Cum'd and swiped his finger down the wall of men, dredging up profiles from further and further

away. He stopped when he recognized the frame of Igby's torso, set against a forest background—a picture Igby had told him had been taken on a camping trip the year before, chosen because Igby was proud of how defined his abs had been, how wide his pecs.

Igby was four miles from him, off somewhere in the wilderness facing temptation. Walter let his finger hover over Igby's profile, fighting his desire to enter it. He wanted to see Igby's face, to read his concise but inviting self-description, but he knew if he did that Igby would see that he had viewed his profile.

He felt a minute pass in which he had done nothing; then, the app refreshed, and Igby's profile moved. Not by much—perhaps a quarter mile. The app refreshed again a minute later, and Igby had moved another quarter mile away from where he had begun. Over the next five minutes, Walter watched him go a little further, and then back to where he had started. It was sort of hypnotic, watching Igby make these minor adjustments—and though it made him feel guilty, there was something intimate about the act of watching.

The new message tone broke his vigil. A thousand feet away was someone who wanted to suck him off.

###

Though he was still full from the curry when he woke again in the morning, Walter went to Igby's house near noon for late breakfast.

Igby answered the door in a charcoal facial masque, which he applied once a week. His apartment smelled perpetually of jasmine, and seemed to get more and better natural light than Walter's, a phenomenon that Igby had once told him was due to the

color and placement of his furniture compared to Walter's own. When Walter came in, Igby kissed him and then waved him over to the breakfast bar. The oven light was on, and through the glass, Walter could see Igby's quiche baking in its casserole dish.

"Looks like you had some fun last night," Igby told him from across the breakfast bar, raising a stemless champagne flute to his mouth and sipping gingerly from it.

"What's your remedy: coffee, or something stronger?"

"Can I have both?" Walter gathered that he looked worse than he felt. For the amount he had drunk the night before, an estimate he'd cobbled together from looking at the charge in his bank account, his hangover was unexpectedly mild. He attributed this partly to the curry he'd eaten in the middle of the night, but partly also to having had the man from Cum'd over before he'd returned to bed.

Of course, as it tended to, what the casual sex offered him in pleasure it had exacted later in self-loathing. When the man had gone and Walter was drifting back to sleep, he had felt the burden of the emotional control he'd given to Igby. He had felt foolish for having given of himself that way. Worse, he had remembered how the man's throat had tightened as he had gagged—how when he had felt the tightening, Walter had curled his hand around back of the man's head and held him there. That these two things might be connected, their tenuous but detectable causality, troubled him.

Igby passed a mug of coffee and a champagne flute across the breakfast bar, then turned and bent over to take the quiche from the oven. They ate slowly and then returned by habit to Igby's bed, shedding most of their clothes and then holding each other. Igby kissed Walter's neck and collarbone, and when Walter looked down, he saw that Igby's charcoal masque had rubbed off on him.

Full and tipsy, they ventured into the world. The storm had dropped just under a foot of snow on the city overnight. Now, the sun had come out, and Richmond was quiet and bright. They walked north away from the river until they came to Main Street, and made their way slowly past the stretch of bars where Walter had been the night before, the snowbanks now sloped against their doors and storefront windows effectively sealing them off.

“Everything is so much prettier when there’s no one around,” Igby said. He scooped up a handful of snow, dry and powdery, and managed somehow to mold it into a ball, which he tossed playfully over at Walter. Walter leaned into it, and the snowball struck his shoulder, disintegrating into a wash of snow. For a moment, some of the powder hung in the air, catching the sun, and Walter felt himself laughing, and saw Igby smiling. He felt the unfairness of his situation—that moments like this should be his biggest problem—for how the moment seemed invulnerable to it.

When they came to the Farmer’s Market, they turned and followed it to Broad Street, to the bottom of the long slope of Church Hill. The first intrepid children had made their way to the top of the hill with their sleds. The street was narrow, and lined with cars on both sides. Walter watched the children gather speed with each block, bailing from their sleds when they sensed imminent danger.

“What are you doing for Valentine’s Day?” Igby asked. He had taken out his phone and begun poking his fingers into the screen, typing a message.

“I haven’t thought about it, to be honest,” Walter said.

“Do you want to do something?”

Walter fought the urge to take out his phone. Something about the question made him want a screen to look at. He settled instead for turning away from where the children were sledding and looking up the hill that rose away from them on the other side, dragging Broad Street out of Shockoe Bottom and into downtown Richmond. The street was empty but for a single figure making its way slowly down the hill. Something about the image struck Walter as eerily nostalgic, post-apocalyptic. There was something world-obliterating about nostalgia. You could not return to an earlier time without destroying what had since been built.

“Maybe. I might have to work,” Walter said. He took out his phone and scrolled idly through Cum’d, checking who had viewed his profile.

“Okay,” Igby said, “I’ll make a reservation, and you let me know if you can make it.” He typed into his phone for a moment, then laughed and faced the screen, dominated by the muscular torso of a user named BiTopBruh, toward Walter, “This guy wants to have a three-way with us.”

Walter took the phone from Igby and scrolled through the text of the profile. His eyes moved over the words without taking in their meaning; he found himself instead focused on the man’s torso, how each of the abdominal muscles was not just defined, but raised. He knew, tracing the outline of the muscles with his eyes, that if he had seen the profile in a different context, he would already have sent the man a message. But for some reason, here, in the context of a three-way, the same action felt impossible. He didn’t want to share Igby with anyone, didn’t want to be shared himself between Igby and another man. ““Nah, not today.”

“No? Will you be mad if I go?”

Yes. No. Yes. Each answer came with its own uncomfortable implication.

“No, you go ahead—I’m gonna walk down to the river.”

Igby smiled in a way that struck Walter as concealing disappointment, and then began to walk up the hill against the flow of children. After a few blocks, he turned a corner. When he was out of view, Walter looked down at Cum’d. Igby had changed his profile picture to a portrait of himself in costume as Captain Planet, and Walter watched the distance counter at the top of the picture rise as Igby moved down the street.

“Is that Cum’d?”

Walter turned and saw that the figure who had been walking down the hill behind him had enlarged and become a tall, thin woman in a slim-cut coat, smoking an e-cigarette, the tip of which glowed neon green when she inhaled. She had long, brown bangs with frosted tips, which caught the breeze and blew across her eyes. Arts-type, Walter thought. Richmond was full of them. Still, while it struck him that the woman was being nosy, he was pleasantly surprised that she had violated the etiquette of anonymity—that she had said something, rather than just looking at him and then passing him by.

“Yeah.” Walter paused. “How do you know it?”

The woman leaned forward and looked into the screen. “That’s my friend.” She pointed to BiTopBruh’s profile picture with the tip of her e-cigarette. Walter saw her eyes tracking the text of the profile, turning up at the corners as though pleased. He looked up the hills on either side of them and at the Farmer’s Market back toward the river. It seemed as though someone had decided to fuck with him—that the whole

situation was some sort of elaborate trial by ordeal, and his fate would hinge on what came next.

“I’m pretty sure my person I’m seeing is fucking him right now,” Walter said, pointing at Igby’s profile.

The woman looked amused, and then she must have seen Walter’s face, because her expression softened. “Your person you’re seeing is in for a disappointment,” she said. “BiTopBruh is my friend, Rachael. She’s a woman.”

“What?”

The woman laughed gently. “Rachael’s a performance artist,” she said, as though offering an explanation. Rachael, it turned out, was a grad student working on a piece about the difference in online hookups for men and women. In a month, for her exhibition, she was going to have a blind date with a phone sex operator in a black box theater, while a Gregorian chorus sang the chat logs she had collected in the background.

When the woman left, Walter trudged back through the Farmer’s Market toward the river. He had no particular plan for when he got there, but he felt the need for new scenery, so he made his way to the canal walk and stood against a railing. Far away, he saw a figure bundled in coats slowly approaching across the ice from the south bank of the James. Walter wanted to shout a warning, but he knew that shouting would accomplish nothing, so instead he watched the figure draw closer to the north shore, waiting for it to disappear beneath the ice. He wondered how he would describe the figure later to the police—from this distance, even its gender was indeterminate. This seemed somehow to matter. What the gesture of walking out onto the ice would mean depended on who had made it.

Igby found him almost a half-hour later, and they stood together watching the person come across the river. Igby was red-cheeked, but seemed otherwise composed. His hair, as it had been when they had left the apartment, was perfectly arrayed. His eyes hadn't gone flat, as Walter had noticed they tended to when Igby had just cum.

"So how was it?" Walter asked as the person made the shore. He watched to see if the person would take something off, revealing itself through reduction——instead, it trudged off toward downtown Richmond.

"Perfectly acceptable," Igby said. "I love a nooner."

###

Walter stayed in the rest of that day and most of the day after, emerging from his apartment building only to retrieve a book from his car. The sun had risen over Richmond that morning with renewed vigor, and it had been so warm during the day that Walter had eaten his lunch standing on his balcony in a tee shirt and sweatpants. When he'd gone out to his car, he'd found that the sun had converted the snow into a mélange of ice and water, and he had soaked his sweatpants up to the calf wading through the parking lot. It was a perfectly beautiful, disgusting day.

Staying in also offered him the chance to be near Igby. When they had returned to the apartment building the day before, Igby had begged off watching a movie with Walter, and he had been more or less incommunicado since. According to Cum'd, which Walter checked periodically to see if anyone had messaged him, but really to see if Igby was nearby, Igby had not left his apartment——but he hadn't returned any of Walter's text messages either.

What was Walter supposed to do with any of this? From a certain perspective, it seemed as though Igby was irritated that he had been tricked by BiTopBruh. From another angle, though, it seemed possible that Igby had stronger feelings about his burgeoning romance with Walter than he was willing to let on. Walter couldn't know which without knowing why Igby had lied about his encounter from the day before.

His phone rang as the sun was going down, just as he was getting ready to begin work. The woman on the line was from the home office, and was calling to let him know that his chat log had been audited, and that the auditors had recommended him for a bonus. He had the option of an extra three days of paid time off, or an additional three hundred dollars.

“That’s not possible,” Walter said.

There was silence on the line, and then the woman said, “You do have the option to decline the bonus.”

“No, I want the time off. I just—really?” Despite the insistence of the emails, he had assumed the prospect of reward was just that, an eternal prospect, an enticement that would always remain just out of reach.

“According to the auditors’ report, you were consistently the most convincing of all the online reps last quarter.”

When he got off the phone, he emailed his supervisor to request the rest of the day off—this was easier now, knowing that he had the time to spare. Suddenly, his Saturday evening was free, and though his first thought was to text Igby, the prospect of one more abortive digital conversation turned his stomach—text messages, Cum’d chats—he was

tired of the plausible deniability that came with them. Before he could imagine the potential consequences, he left his apartment and knocked on Igby's door.

Igby answered the door shirtless in sweatpants, holding a glass of red wine. He looked as though he hadn't showered. He gestured to Walter to sit at the breakfast bar, and filled a glass of wine for him without asking.

"Why would you ask me out for Valentine's Day?" Walter asked. In the absence of pleasantries, the question sounded harsh and interrogative, and he regretted his own eagerness even as spoke.

"Because I like you."

"So then let's be together. You and me. Let's quit fucking all these other people. Let's just be together."

Igby's brow furrowed. "I don't want to stop fucking other people." He seemed annoyed that the topic had come up. "We talked about this."

Walter wondered suddenly what future Igby had imagined for them—if there had been a future in his imagination at all, or simply a string of days, one after another and yet nonsequential, nonprogressive. The casualness of it all struck Walter as profoundly selfish, and he felt at the same time his own capacity for self-delusion. As if he had not volunteered for this precise moment when he had agreed to Igby's terms three months prior. "I just thought you would change."

The words seemed to suck all the air from the room, and Igby's expression softened. Walter knew that whatever interaction he had previously had with Igby would no longer be possible. He left Igby's apartment in a hurry and went to his car. The wine had gone to his head, decentering him. He felt curiously separate from his body, and he

realized as he began to drive, pulling his car from the parking lot and moving towards the interstate, that he couldn't remember precisely what he had said to Igby when he had left, if he had even said goodbye. Perhaps his flight response had activated and he had run out in a pathetic cloud.

He pulled off the interstate and onto an empty two-lane highway hemmed in on both sides by tall stands of pine. He was headed east, toward the beach, although this was simply where the road led, and maybe he would arrive there and maybe he would not. The radio station had lost its signal, and low, constant static had taken over the inside of the car—when Walter noticed, he turned off the radio and opened the window to clear his head.

He wondered what would have happened if he had told Igby about meeting the woman on the street, about BiTopBruh, about how Cum'd was so phony and shallow, and he couldn't figure out what it was all supposed to mean. He wanted to believe that Igby would have understood, that whatever feeling they had developed for each other would have counted for something. But he was tired of self-deception. He knew Igby would have told him again to delete the app—and indeed maybe this was the best course. But it sucked.

He passed the airport. The car quickly lost whatever heat the day had left behind, and the rush of wind across the front seat numbed his ears and nose. He turned up the heat, notch by notch, relishing the aptness of the confused sensation that spread across his knuckles and along the soles of his feet. Heat. Chill. Everywhere mixed messages.

When the low fuel light came on, he took an exit onto route 33. A half mile off the exit, he pulled into an ExxonMobil and turned off the car. The gas station's only

employee, a squat white man, was out on the curb, smoking a cigarette and texting, and he looked up from the glow of his screen at Walter, gauging the odds, Walter guessed, that he would be interrupted.

Walter waited by the car as he refueled, watching the highway nearby. It would be so easy to turn around, to return to his apartment, but he lacked the emotional distance to know if he should apologize to Igby. He knew that if he did apologize, it would only be a further concession to whatever power Igby already had over him.

The catch on the gas pump clicked open.

Walter got back in the car and sat with his keys in the ignition, looking into the lock screen of his phone. The overhead lights went down. His phone vibrated, and he unlocked his phone and opened Cum'd. The screen whited, the other icons fading until the car was full of pale light. Walter looked up and saw the gas station attendant watching him. He drew his cigarette to his lips and inhaled. The attendant seemed to know him in the watching—or to know him as well at least as he knew anyone on Cum'd.

The screen resolved and the world of men spread out before him. The message was from the attendant, only really it was not; it was from a twenty year-old, Asian, undergraduate history student. The message itself was not a message at all: rather, it was a dick pic. Someone else's, cribbed for exactly the purpose for which it was now being employed. Walter looked up and saw that the gas station attendant had gone inside.

Cum'd, Igby had told him, was just another way to be in the real world. So which was more real, the attendant in the flesh, or the person he had made himself in the app? Or perhaps both told a certain truth, but a truth perceptible only from whatever weird path

Walter had found himself guided down. Experimentally, he dragged his finger down the surface of his phone, dredging up profiles from further and further away. He dragged faster, and the faces and ages and weights and races became indistinguishable, blurring like characters on the wheels of a slot machine. He imagined that when at last the screen slowed to a halt, he would see a whole new world of men, the component parts jumbled and reapportioned.

He opened his own profile. In his profile picture, his face was turned toward the sky, and half of him was cast in shadow. He wondered if anyone had considered what the darker side of him might look like. It seemed likelier that they had only ever extrapolated from what they could see, the information they did have. He opened the picture and cropped out the illuminated side of the picture, so that only the dark half remained.

The rest of the changes came almost naturally. When Walter finished, he looked down at his profile. So simply, so quickly, he had changed his username, become another age, another race. His interests could change, his hobbies, his past. He sat in the car as it filled up with heat, looking at his new identity. After a few minutes, his phone vibrated, and then vibrated again, as people responded to the man he had become. Instead of answering them, he went back to the stream of profiles. He found Igby's profile; though he had read it many times, they had never chatted.

Walter typed a greeting into the message box, slowly at first, but then, as he found his voice, more quickly.

Reunion

I used to dream about Mark regularly, in the weeks after I moved out of the apartment we had briefly shared together. The dreams grew less and less frequent as time went on, but they never went away.

They always begin the same way.

I see him across the room in an auditorium, noticing first the thin line of his chinstrap, the way his nose turns down at the end, how his hair is long and messy in a way that would make me think he was strung out if he wasn't an artist. All the faces except for his are indistinct, like mannequins. His chin is tilted slightly upward. He reminds me of the profile on a coin.

I never feel quite aware of moving across the bridge between this image and whatever comes next. Sometimes, later on in the dream, we are naked together. I can feel his dick sliding across my stomach, smell rainwater or bananas—smells from other parts of my life that make me happy. Other times, I'm standing outside a window, and he is on the other side. Or I am opening a door and finding him just across the threshold. All of the dreams, I think, are about being close to him, or far away. Ultimately, I wake from them disoriented, having lost my own sense of time and space, as I wake from most of my dreams. This is why my travel alarm clock projects the date and time onto the ceiling. There, I think, when I wake in a hotel: December 7th. March 3rd. 2013. 2014. 2015.

Yesterday, I returned to Richmond from my home in Memphis on business. I had not been back to Richmond since my move almost ten years before, but even as the little

Embraer descended over the airport, I was surprised by how little had changed. I suppose I felt that I had changed so much that I thought the city would have changed as well.

Since moving to Memphis, I had left the legal profession behind, gotten my MPA, and joined the regional office of the Tennessee Department of Transportation as a program manager—it was in this capacity which I was traveling. I had been in and out of three long-term relationships—or so they had seemed at the time—going so far as to have been engaged to my last boyfriend. He had been kind, and charming, but I had begun to feel, in the weight of the three nearly consecutive relationships, distant from myself, as though I'd been walking a path whose first steps had become invisible.

My hotel was on Broad Street, across from the convention center, and from the window of my room on one of the upper floors of the building, I could see all the way down past the Boulevard to where the 195 cut into the city like modeling wire.

Along the street, homeless people—so tiny from where I stood—walked shiftlessly between bus shelters and the awnings of closed up storefronts. Looking down from my hotel room, Richmond seemed so small, so pitifully knowable. It puffed me up a little, to know that I had left the city behind, gone on, despite my existential anxieties, to greater things.

I took a shower and let myself drip dry as I unpacked my suitcase. I try to do this wherever I travel, to establish a sense of consistency, of routine. As I unpacked, my phone vibrated periodically against the side table where I'd left it to charge. I knew these would be messages on Cum'd, otherwise I would have stopped what I was doing to check them.

I had begun to feel disillusioned about Cum'd—about all online dating really. I'd heard about it for the first time not too long after moving to Memphis, from a man who I'd picked up at the bar. An app for your phone, he had said, like Yelp! but for dick. Between the sense of discovery I felt living in a new city, and the constantly shifting pool of men on the app, my options seemed endless.

In the brief period between each of my relationships, I had always returned to Cum'd, satisfying my grief with a steady flow of dick before eventually settling into the familiar hookup-dating-relationship pattern. In the six months since breaking off my engagement, though, Cum'd had become something akin to an addiction. When I showered, I kept my phone propped between the faucet of the vanity and the wall, in case anyone should message me. Most of the people I texted during the day had “Cum'd” as their last name, or the name of one of the apps which had inevitably come after: Bilt, Ten, XYYX. I had seen many of these men on all of the apps I used. With every new app, my world seemed to close in a little. The apps weren't showing me a world of endless possibility—they were showing me precisely how small it was.

Still, there was a necessity to them. They worked.

When at last I finished unpacking my suitcase and did check my messages, I saw that one of them was from Mark. Since I had moved to Memphis, I had been prowling him from afar through the social media accounts of our mutual friends. He had come out several years before, and I had seen pictures of him at a Pride festival, his arm draped over a boyfriend's shoulders, both of them shirtless and wearing leather harnesses. He had become a prominent graffiti artist in Richmond. His murals had won awards, and I had seen him dressed in fine suits holding plaques embossed with his name.

His message was simple, "How have you been?"

I wrote two answers, one short and the other much longer, but after I had written them, both seemed phony and stupid. I sat for a while, trying to compose my thoughts, then told him simply that we should meet to catch up before I left town.

My organs seemed to be rearranging themselves in my body, as if jockeying for position. I felt I should reach into my body, take one of them out, and give it to him. But after ten years, what should he still mean to me?

###

I met Mark during the summer of my grand sexual exploration, what Alice would later call my "hoe year," though it began innocently. One night during the spring of my senior year of college, I arranged to meet a ROTC cadet in one of the piano recital booths in the student center, which were isolated and soundproof. When we entered the booth, I'd sat on the piano bench, and he had knelt and unbuckled my pants, taking my dick in his mouth. I'd had sex with women before, and so while the warmth and wetness of his mouth wasn't new, it also was, entirely. That was the moment when I accepted it, irreversibly: my gayness.

After a while, he stood up and pulled down the front of his shorts. I remember his shock of wiry black pubic hair, and that he was uncircumcised. His penis seemed malformed to me, and when I pulled back his foreskin, he told me I was hurting him.

Afterward, I went to my friend Alice's house, and told her what we had done. I had told her previously that I was bisexual, and she had been enough of a sport to play along with my delusion. But she had known all along. Later, I could admit that I had

known all along as well. At the center of me lay a molten core of desire, which I had only learned that night how to vent.

I spent the rest of the semester hooking up with a med student named Brad who lived in an apartment community that bordered a farm. His were the first abs I ran my fingers along, the first dick I felt press against my back in the middle of the night, when occasionally I stayed over. On those nights, when I awoke, I would feel his finger pressing gently into my ass, and I would hold myself to him, feeling his finger moving further and further into my body. I knew that this was a fortunate experience.

At the beginning of the summer, my lease ended, and I needed a place to live during the summer while I figured out whether or not to stay in Richmond. One night, Alice and I went out to the dry rocks on the south side of Belle Isle with a couple cases and a few bundles of dead wood to burn. One of her coworkers, Jorge, was leaving for law school in Charlottesville, an hour or so away. We drank one of the cases, and eventually, the party had grown such that I remember looking over my shoulder a lot, because the bonfire was burning too high, and I knew the police would eventually come.

When they did come, I ran to the far side of the dry rocks, where a line of scrub brush marked the old shoreline of Belle Isle. I hid in a small stand of trees, watching the policemen wave their flashlights around, ducking when the beams from the flashlights passed over me.

After they had satisfied their curiosity and left, I came out from behind the trees, and as I stepped back onto the dry rocks, I heard someone coming through the brush behind me. Homeless people slept on Belle Isle at night, propping up lean-tos in the

ruins of the Tredegar Iron Works, and so when Mark emerged from the brush, we regarded each other for a moment, each of us I suppose anticipating a threat.

“What are you looking at?” he asked.

“Nothing,” I said. I moved toward him and reached out my hand. “I’m Elliott.”

Beneath the moonlight, I could see only his shape. He was taller than me by perhaps an inch, his shoulders broader than mine, and sloping ever so slightly. When he shook my hand, the gentle curves of his arm muscles rose and fell. He had a firm grip, and when our hands clasped is I think when I felt something for him for the first time. Something nebulous seemed to pass between us, as though in the contact we recognized each other.

We walked back to the party together. Mark had just graduated, and was sticking around while he waited on his brother to piece together independent financing for his movie. Mark was a photographer in his free time, and so he would be the cameraman if the financing ever materialized.

Up and down the dry rocks, far enough away from us to avoid overlap, other people threw other parties, their bonfires and lanterns and the pilot lights on their wireless speakers bright like a warning. In the crevices between some of the rocks, or in the deeper darkness cast by the larger boulders, familiar shadows grinded against one another, murmuring indistinct encouragements in husky voices. We were all claiming territory that night, in our own way.

Mark had been sharing a two-bedroom apartment with his girlfriend, but they had broken up when he had graduated. Though we had just met, it seemed natural to me that

I should move into the bedroom which had been her office. Things like this always seemed to arise by chance.

I moved in, and for three months, my life with Mark was perfectly arranged. I was close to the Chinese restaurant where I was working for the summer, and rent was cheap. We grew close quickly. After the first month, I returned to the apartment to find him in the kitchen, perched over the stove, the room thick with fragrant smoke.

“What are you making?” I asked.

“Tacos,” he said. “You want some?”

“Sure.” I put down my keys and came into the kitchen. On the stovetop sizzled two saucepans, ground beef in one and pearlescent strands of onion in the other. “You having people over?”

“No,” he said. “But cooking for one blows.”

This continued throughout the summer—casseroles, stews, once a lasagna. On occasion, I would try to return the favor, only to overcook my pasta, or undercook my chicken. My failures in the kitchen were doubly embarrassing because, over the course of the summer, my fondness for him grew. Evenings, Mark liked to get high, and more than once we smoked ourselves to sleep on the couch, watching something on TV. Sometimes, I would wake to find myself slumped over against his shoulder, or with my head in his lap. After the first time, when I sat up and shook him awake, I found myself tempted to stay. I assumed he would be angry to find me there if he woke, but I balanced the risk against the firmness of his body, its monolith stature.

I had no delusions at the time that anything physical would occur between us, but there was something pleasingly domestic in the simple gesture of anticipating his hunger,

or falling asleep together. Mark knew that I was gay, and even if I had not told him, it would have been impossible to ignore my constant comings and goings as I explored my budding sexuality. He said he was straight, but still, our daily interactions nevertheless felt loaded with special significance. Though I'd had plenty of friends, my friendships with other men had never contained such intimacy. I imagined that we could stay like this, sexless, forever.

Later, I wondered if he had ever woken on the couch before me and moved my head into his lap, or even just let us remain leaned up against each other. Perhaps there had been room in our friendship for something more, or perhaps we had simply met each other at the wrong time.

I wondered, especially, about our last night together.

In August, I got an offer to work as a legal aid at a prestigious law firm in Memphis. The night before I was to move, I woke up in the middle of the night and went to get water. I left all the lights off, feeling my way down the hallway separating my bedroom from the kitchen. As I turned the corner into the kitchen, suddenly Mark was there in front of me. Surprised, I raised my hand in front of me, and it landed on his chest. We looked at each other for a moment, and just as when we met, something seemed to pass between us, and I leaned in and kissed him on the mouth.

Looking back later, I felt sure that the kiss had been brief, though I felt it, at the time, exquisitely. How his hair had rested against one side of my face, and how his tongue had still been cool from the water he'd poured himself. We were both in our boxers, and as I could feel his dick hard grow hard against my leg, so was I sure that he could feel mine.

I was aware even as it happened that a line between us had, at least momentarily, shifted. But, after a minute, the implications of that shift set in. Perhaps I had violated him. I backed away, and he sighed a little—was it from pleasure, or disappointment, or something else?—and moved quickly past me, down the hallway and into his bedroom. My heartbeat pounded in my ears. I couldn't bring myself to move, even as I listened to him pull back his sheets and climb into his creaky bed. He had left his door open, and though his room was pitch dark, I willed myself to think he had done so as an invitation. That perhaps he had been, at that very moment, watching me from his bed and hoping that I would follow him into it.

###

After the sun went down last night, I went to meet Harrod, one of my old college friends, at a bar near the university. We sat in a booth near the bar counter, and spent half the time catching up, and the other half watching the students play out their little dramas. We were both in our mid-thirties, not so old at all, but the students felt impossibly young, like they had never quite stopped being teenagers.

Harrod had recently gotten engaged to his girlfriend, Claire, who I knew only by reputation. Harrod had seen her running in Byrd Park every day for six months, but he'd been afraid to approach her. Claire was impossibly beautiful, her face perfectly symmetrical save for a mole beneath her left cheekbone, her skin smooth and tight. If she had been a man and I had seen her on one of the apps, I could have told her so without a second thought. And yet Harrod had been certain she would have thought him creepy if he talked to her. When I told him so, he laughed and said, "You guys get all the good stuff. Straight dating has so many rules."

“You make being gay sound like the Wild West,” I said. “We have rules too.”

He looked at me like he was deciding whether or not to believe me. “Such as?”

“Ask me how my last relationship started.”

“How did your last relationship start?” he asked.

“He messaged me on Cum’d and we hooked up.”

“And the one before that?”

“Cum’d.” I raised and lowered my hand in a tired circle. “Bilt, Cum’d, Ten, Cum’d. It’s possible I’ve never had a relationship in my adult life that didn’t start online.”

“It still sounds fun,” he said. His voice had lowered a little, and I felt a guilty that he thought I’d scolded him.

That night, I dreamed that I was sitting in a park looking out over a large open field, and Mark ran by with a man in grey running tights and a loose hoodie. Surprised, I called after him, and he and the man came back to say hello. We hugged, and when Mark went to introduce me to his companion, I realized that it was me. I shook the hand of my doppelganger, and we smiled to each other. His teeth, I noticed, were a bit straighter than mine, and his hair was absent the streaks of grey that have begun to appear in mine. He had a two-day beard that accented his cheekbones. As I examined him, I found that the distance between us seemed to be growing, as though the park was stretching out the space between us. I walked forward to counteract the stretching, but couldn’t manage to get any closer. Eventually, Mark and the doppelganger were reduced to specks in the green distance, and then they disappeared from sight altogether.

I woke in a dark room. The air was cold and dry, and the moon coming in at an angle through the window cast a shadow over the lounge chair in the corner. On my ceiling was printed in boxy red characters, “4/18/2015 4:38am”.

Too early to rise, too late to go back to sleep. I sat up in bed and gathered the covers around my chest. Out the window, Richmond was painted dark blue and black and white, so clear and still, and for a moment I wished I could always have seen it from overhead, so high up that the dingy particulars I remembered from my life here became invisible.

I turned on the TV and checked my phone, where a notification from Cum’d was waiting for me. It was Mark, from an hour before. “Wyd?”

His user handle was DaddyMG. Though he was out, his username still surprised me. Sometimes people do this, suppress so much of themselves before they come out that they seem to burst with flamboyance by comparison—but it caught me off guard that Mark should be one of these people. I looked through his profile, and at the pictures he had attached to it. The pictures were artsy, black-and-white and sepia-toned profiles and poses, and I assumed he had taken them himself. He advertised his interests to include photography, cinema, and tennis. Was this the person he would have become if I had stayed? Or perhaps he had just punched up his interests to seem more eclectic.

On the TV, a woman wearing a cheap wig swept her arm in a broad arc above a case of jewelry. Rings, bangles, necklaces. The camera zoomed in on the case: glimmering gems casting starbursts from their facets. High-gloss platinum bands. “That’s right,” the woman said. “It’s nearly too good to be true.”

I pulled the little hairs on my forearm to be sure I wasn’t still dreaming.

Eventually, Richmond began to come to life. The sun rose on the other side of the hotel, light blue and pink bleeding into the dark sky above my room, and then the morning light reflecting harshly from the windshields of the cars and buses that began to fill up Broad Street. By this time, I had begun to prepare for the trade show, but for a full five minutes after I came out of the shower the sight of the city waking up stopped me dead in my tracks, and I stood before the window watching the day begin.

It struck me as I watched that there was something here that I hadn't seen when I lived in Richmond before. Maybe it was that I had done some growing up, or maybe I was just thinking about what could have been. But in that moment, the city was full of potential energy, a thousand beautiful futures waiting anxiously to be born.

###

By the time I found the wing of the convention center where my conference was being held, the opening keynote speaker had already been introduced, and her introductory applause was just dying. This wing was on the second floor of the convention center, and had narrow hallways and high ceilings. As the applause faded, it seemed to do so by drifting up and up toward the hanging lights.

At the entrance to the exhibit hall, a woman wearing a state employee's badge checked my name against her list. Before her on a folding card table were three folders, one of which had my last name written across the front of it.

"Harper." I pointed to the folder on the table. "That one's me."

"One second," the woman said, flipping to the next page of her list. The plastic front of her badge was cloudy with age, and the picture on it had been taken very obviously in another decade, though she didn't seem very old to me, her face still plump,

the skin not yet begun to sag. When she looked at me over her clipboard, I could see that her eyes were green, and sharp, like the leaf of a holly bush. “Found you!” she said. She made a tick mark on the page of her list, and satisfied, handed me my conference folder.

I sat at the closest table to the door. On the stage, a woman with a thick Spanish accent dragged her laser pointer in the shape of a lariat over a large map of downtown Atlanta. The streets in the section of the map that she encircled were colored in dark red.

The woman’s name was Maricela Colón. I had listened to her talk on webinars hosted by the Transportation Bureau Affinity, a professional organization that worked with Departments of Transportation across the country.

“If we accept that our goal is to move people from one place to another as quickly as possible,” she said, “then anything that stops them up, or slows them down, we must regard as a threat.” This was apparently the end of her speech, and the other people at my table and the tables nearby stood and applauded her. I applauded too, and worried that I had missed something important, something that other people would talk about.

I spent the afternoon in front of the poster which had got me accepted to the conference, a study of lost productivity due to road closures. The poster session was crowded with presenters, with a few attendees circulating among the booths. Periodically, I checked my Cum’d account to see if anyone attractive was at the conference. Mostly, they were the same men that I had seen from my hotel room, but none of them seemed to take any interest in me. To keep myself occupied, I tried to strike up conversation with some of the men in my inbox from Memphis, but got no response from them either. In all likelihood, they could see that I was hundreds of miles away, inaccessible to them.

I wondered if Mark had met the boyfriend I'd seen in his pictures on the apps, and how they had found each other—where they had met, what they had talked about. Had Mark cooked for him the morning after they'd had sex for the first time—or had they ordered delivery and eaten from bed? Perhaps these were my questions because they were experiences I wished for myself.

I returned to the message he had sent me the night before, which I had never answered. I thought there was only one reason why he would have asked me what I was doing so early in the morning, and I wondered what he would have done had I responded. Perhaps he would have come to my hotel. I could have left the door open for him—let him open it to find the dark room waiting. I felt a thrill at the prospect of watching him silhouetted in the open doorway, as I had been so many years before, consumed by anxiety and desire.

What would come next? He would come inside and find me in bed. We would look silently at each other, and he would lie down beside me. But I could not visualize these events taking place. I couldn't imagine past his lanky body framed by the narrow door.

When the poster session ended, I went outside and walked the perimeter of the convention center to get some air. A cold wind had picked up since that morning, and though I hadn't brought a coat when I came over from the hotel, I forced myself to walk at a leisurely pace. It stuck with me that I couldn't even imagine us together. It seemed like a sign, like my image of him was so beholden to the past that, unless I did something different, he would always be an unanswered question, a what-if. Who might I have become if I had followed him into his bedroom?

The thought struck me like lightning, and I stopped dead in my tracks. The question suddenly seemed to have nothing to do with Mark at all.

I had stopped in the middle of the sidewalk at the back of the convention center, where the road had been closed for construction. The surface of the street had been torn away, and a pair of men in reflective vests and hardhats were at work pouring concrete over the stubbly underlayer, smoothing it out and tamping it down. Where the road had been blocked off, a detour sign directed drivers to turn left. A line of cars extended down to the end of the block, their drivers frowning behind their steering wheels, annoyed by the interruption to their routine. The air was thick with the smell of exhaust.

In Memphis, to completely close off a street for roadwork was a measure of last resort. My study, the one which had brought me here, had showed that the time road closures added to a driver's commute was proportionally linked to a loss of tax revenue for the city. Watching the unhappy drivers turn one by one onto the detour, I thought about the keynote I'd seen that morning, the idea that traffic impediments could be a threat. A threat to whom, or what?

I had thought I'd understood Maricela Colón to be saying that our goal was to improve the experience of driving, like a statement of philosophy. But in that moment, I thought I saw something new about detours. They threatened to remind us that every destination can be reached by more than one route. They forced us down the paths we'd otherwise choose not to take.

I took out my phone and opened my conversation with Mark. A green dot beside his username told me that he was currently online. I tapped in my message quickly, the wind nipping at my fingers and numbing the tips. "Drink tonight?"

###

I returned to the hotel and took a long, hot shower. I hadn't been sweating, and neither did I feel particularly dirty. I wanted simply to feel water running over my body, to see it running in channels over my arms and legs and chest. It's reassuring, how water always finds a way to get where it wants to go.

After I got out of the shower, I let myself drip-dry in a chair by the window, watching the shadows lengthen on the street below me and thinking.

When I first moved to Memphis, I met a man at the gym who quickly became my lover. He had strong arms, and developed abs, and the same name, Brad, as the med student—the first man I'd ever slept with. One night, after we had been hooking up for about a month, I mentioned that he and the med student shared the same name.

“Was he an important person to you?” he asked.

“Maybe,” I said. “My first experience with a man felt so furtive, like something we had to do quickly and in private. It was a rush, but it made me feel as if what we had done was forbidden. With Brad, I could take my time. I could feel good about sharing myself with a man.”

“Sounds important,” new-Brad said.

At the time, I wanted to know how Brad knew who had been important to him, and who had not. But I think it has something to do with the little details that you remember: how the person looked, but also how they smelled, and what you had been doing earlier in the day you met them, and what you were reading at the time. Snippets of conversation. I remembered many inconsequential details from our time together so clearly. Like that I would sometimes find him standing in the kitchen, eyes closed,

listening to the cylindrical rush of the dishwasher. Or the odd, irregular beat of my heart the first time I woke with my head in his lap. Fear. Pleasurefear. Pleasure.

Fearpleasure. Or this: on the day that we kissed, I spent ten minutes in a convenience store looking for Q-tips. I looked for them in the makeup section, and among the bandages and cold medicine—in the craft supplies aisle even—before finding them in the infant care section.

I had no reason to remember these details, and yet I did remember them. For an hour, I'd been thinking: what part of my life was I so unsatisfied with that I never stopped wondering who else I might have been?

Eventually, the sun set behind the hotel, and I put on a baggy sweater and a pair of jeans, and walked the two blocks from my hotel to Osteria Funghi. Two torches bordered the front door, and the smell of olive oil seeped from within, and though I had never been there, I found myself slightly impressed with Mark's taste.

I spotted Mark sitting at the bar at the back of the restaurant as soon as I stepped inside. He had chosen the seat at the far left end of the bar, as he always used to, being left-handed. As I made my way through the dining room, I felt memories flooding back—the scent of his conditioner, how he swept his hair away from his eyes with the back of his hand, not the front. I wondered if he would sound the same as before, what verbal tics he might have picked up.

“Elliott Harper,” he said when he turned and saw me. “As I live and breathe.” He smiled, crow's feet forming in the corners of his eyes, and it occurred to me that he had aged too. I had, without realizing it, held him in my mind as a twenty-two year-old.

I felt better for the thought, less anxious. The reality of the situation begun to set in: this didn't have to be any different than catching up with Harrod the night before.

"You look great," I said, and I felt a surge of relief, as I sit beside him at the bar, that I was telling the truth. His skin had cleared, and he'd cut back his hair and shaved off the sides. He was trimmer now than I remembered and he seemed happier.

As we began to catch up, I realized that he didn't seem anxious at all. He talked easily, laughed easily. He had been living in the suburbs south of Richmond for the last several years, since he left his last job and started a photography studio. Most of his work came from gigs with the local school system. He kept busy between yearbook and prom pictures, and on the side he freelanced with local models.

After we'd been talking for fifteen minutes, his phone vibrated against the bar, and when he unlocked it, I could see that he had a notification from Cum'd. I found it difficult to look away as he opened the message he'd been sent.

"So you're out now," I said to break the silence. "That's new since we last saw each other."

"It is. It's a big new thing." He tapped out a message and closed his phone. His eyes, then, when he looked back up, had something new swimming in them, like he was being cautious about what to say. "Happened maybe a year after you moved." He pointed to his phone, "Cum'd made it pretty easy."

"How did you find out about Cum'd?"

"I searched for 'gay' in the app store." He laughed. "'I was never going to go to a bar or anywhere where I knew the people there would be gay. Cum'd took the guesswork right out of the equation."

“I know what you mean. Although I sometimes wish it didn’t exist.”

“Why?” His phone vibrated against the bar again, and we both looked at it.

“That’s sort of the reason,” I said. “It feels like it becomes this substitute for the real world. You were probably the last man that I met in the real world, and that was a decade ago. It’s been all apps ever since.”

Mark had brought his beer to his lips, but he waited for a moment to drink. “I wondered if we would talk about that,” he said.

I felt immediately embarrassed, but I tried to play it off, “It was such a weird night.”

“I barely remember it, really,” Mark said. “I remember going to get orange juice, and then you kissed me. The next morning, I thought I had dreamed it, until I saw the cup on my nightstand.”

“Water.”

“What?”

“You were up getting water,” I said. “I remember, we had just changed the water filter on the sink that day, and you’d said something about taking a glass to bed with you. And then I remember the inside of your mouth being cold when we kissed.”

“Oh. Right.” He picked up his phone from the bar and looked at the message he’d received. I watched his eyes as he looked at his phone, saw his pupils widening. Desire. I guessed someone had sent him pictures.

“Do you really not remember the details?”

Mark looked over at me, but didn’t put down his phone. “I mean, what is there to remember. Nothing really happened.”

“No,” I agreed. My stomach had begun to feel as though I was in an elevator descending slightly too quickly. “But it was sort of a culmination, wasn’t it? I mean, wouldn’t something have happened if I hadn’t moved?”

The bartender appeared to take my empty glass away, and I gestured for him to bring me another round. Mark was looking at me with something like pity in his eyes. He opened his mouth and closed it again. “I’m not really sure I know what you mean,” he said. He fiddled with his beer bottle, rotating it by its neck. “It was just something that happened one time.”

I wasn’t sure what to say, and so I excused myself to use the bathroom. After I peed, I stood in front of the mirror and looked at my reflection. Perhaps I didn’t look as good to him now as I once had. Perhaps he was lying to save face. There was a certain amount of consolation in these answers, but I suspected that the most embarrassing possibility was also the most likely: that I remembered the events of that evening so long ago in much greater detail than he did because I had never stopped thinking about it. I had loaded with tremendous personal significance an event that had been a momentary blip to him. As I allowed the possibility to sink in, a great shame fell over me. I imagined him sitting at the bar, texting one of his friends about me: the weirdo from his past who’d been obsessed with him.

Then, I started to get angry. So he had contented himself to brush the past away. Here he was now, with some years behind him, but perfectly happy to set me aside and pretend, as he had apparently done then, that nothing had ever happened. I was just, to him, another one of the boys from Cum’d, the kind you message at three in the morning to get a nut.

And a clarity came over me then, my insecurity and anger and shame crystallizing into a rush of momentum. The bathroom was at the front of the restaurant, and as I had not brought a coat with me, I moved quickly to the door and out onto the street. As I walked quickly back toward the hotel, I felt bright, sure of myself. In ten minutes or so, I knew, Mark would start to get impatient. He would try to find me in the bathroom, and when he couldn't find me, he would unlock his phone and try to contact me.

Perhaps in the future, I would feel bad for sticking Mark with the check that night. But I couldn't know that then, just as I could never know who I might have become had I slept with Mark the night we kissed. But I thought I saw the thing about my life that made me dissatisfied.

I unlocked my phone and opened Cum'd. The wall of men fell down my screen like pieces on a game board. I tapped a little gear in the corner, and scrolled down to a large red button that read "Delete account".

DeirdreMomLove1947

Dear Sampson:

Yesterday I stayed out too long talking to Macy, the neighbor woman, and the tea kettle you got me for our last Mother's Day together dried out and exploded. Macy and I both heard it, and my first thought was that someone had broken into the house. She waited with me while I called the police, talking all the time in the background about how something didn't smell right, like it was burning—she came around the fence and went right up to the mail slot on the front door, squatted and pushed her nose into it like a curious dog.

The policeman who showed up was one of those who seem to be melting out of his uniform, an ice cream sandwich of a man. When we got inside, I saw that the tea kettle had mostly exploded into bits, singeing the wallpaper and melting little pits into the vinyl floor. The policeman asked if there had been a disturbance, if I'd been in a fight, and I said, "Only with common sense." I went to sweep up the bits, and the plastic bristles of the broom smoked and turned black. To get rid of the smell I burned the only candle I had on hand, a big pillar of citronella, which made me feel like I was camping.

You always complained about the way the house smelled—too flowery, you said, like a funeral parlor, or somewhere else where the fragrance is supposed to distract you from not wanting to be there.

This morning, I boiled the water for my tea in a saucepan. I dipped my cup in the boiling water, rather than lifting the pot to pour, for fear that my hands would shake, and I would spill. As I waited for my tea to steep, I noticed that a bit of dried onion skin had

found its way into one of the pits melted into the floor. I kneeled, fishing it out with my finger, but with every stroke the skin became more intractable, breaking into pieces. I kept trying until I smelled my tea, fragrant of rose, and realized that it would get bitter if I kept up. Before I left for work, I found myself again in the kitchen, gathering my purse and keys. I saw the onion skin again, still broken up and settled in the floor, and I became sad. Because I know myself. I knew that I would forget about the onion skin—that if it found its way out of the pit, it would be because it had worked itself out. To have given up on something so inconsequential! It struck me as a failure. Did I fail you this way too? Moving my attention from place to place like a piece from Macy's backgammon set?

Maybe I'm just rambling. I am taking a new supplement, and it makes me nostalgic: it's supposed to do this.

Anyway, you were always more enterprising than a piece of onion skin.

At work, I shopped for a new tea kettle just like the one you gave me our last Mother's Day.

Love,

Deirdre, your mother

###

October 27th, 2015
Dear Sampson:

I've been remembering so much recently. I feel as though a hundred years have passed since I've seen you, even though I remember some things from the last five years as through a haze. I remember you looking down at me once, the way the dentist looks at me, from directly overhead—your eyes were kinder than I remembered, but not as richly

brown, like something had sucked the color out of you. You had a film of hair all over the bottom part of your face. Not a beard, or not the kind men grow, like your father grew his once. Formless, unsure of itself: a boy's beard. You were wearing something green, and a man was with you, comforting you. You seemed sad to be looking down upon me, though I remember that I didn't understand why. Everything was brilliant to me then; I was brilliant, a star exploding softly from minute to minute, my invisible energy arcing like a solar flare. I wanted to reach up to you, to take your face in my hands, but my hands were attached to the bed by metal loops.

The post office returned the last letter I sent you. It had big red letters written across it that said, "Not Known at This Address," and, "Return to Sender." I was distraught, truly, and I called out of work for a day and stayed in bed. I moped late into the morning, but eventually I got hungry. Then something wonderful happened!

I had nothing cooked for lunch, and so I went to the Mr. Burrito that just opened on Broad St, near the 295. They actually do not sell burritos—it's a big joke. Maybe you have seen the commercials. The lunch rush was over, and so the place was almost empty. I ordered a Fajita Gigante, and while I was eating, I saw your friend Garth. He is bald and fat now, but I knew him sure as I knew the taste of cilantro in my Fajita Gigante. He was sitting near the window, alone, scooping the remaining black beans from his empty bowl, and after I reminded him who I was, he told me!

He says you are on a boat! That you are in the Navy!

(Since I addressed this letter to you at the Navy Yard in Portsmouth, maybe you figured out already that this was the wonderful thing that happened.)

At first I didn't believe him. I was convinced that he had you confused for somebody else, although your father and I named you, in part, so that you would be singular. It seemed impossible to imagine you on a boat, in a sailor's uniform, furling and unfurling canvas sails from tall masts, though I know this isn't the sort of boat they use in the Navy.

It seems now, though, as I sit in front of the television, watching reruns of game shows from when I was a girl, poetic. Your father's father was a sailor in the Navy, many years ago. You would have seen the picture of him, your grandfather, on the sideboard, next to the other pictures: of your father and I, of my parents, and of you, decked out in your school uniform—freckled, smiling, standing out against the green velvet backdrop recommended by the photographer. I imagine you must have looked at this picture of yourself, especially later, when I had worn you out, and you wondered where you had come from, how you had arrived in that moment of desperate alienation. Perhaps you could have glanced along the row of pictures and seen the image of your grandfather in his Navy uniform. Perhaps where you have come from is not so useless to you now as it might seem. It comforts me to think that this is true.

Love,

Deirdre, your mother

###

November 7, 2015

Dear Sampson,

My tea kettle has come. I thought it would be the same one that you had bought me, but it is not. It is the same model, but it feels strange in my hands. Lighter.

Flimsier. Ironically, this flimsiness appears to be linked to improvements in the design—my water seems to boil faster now than before, and when I drink the tea I've steeped in the water, it tastes cleaner, as though the new kettle has sucked out some of the impurities in the municipal water supply.

The doctor who gives me my supplement asked me this week to keep a diary, since the supplement is still in trials. When the trial is over, the diary will be included as data. "Just whatever comes out," he said when I asked him what I should write. Before I left, he asked me if the purpose of these letters is to seek your forgiveness. And sometimes I think it's true, that reaching out this way is a form of apology. But other times I wonder what I have done that requires an apology. To apologize, I think, implies intent to offend that I never knew I possessed. These thoughts come upon me at night in bed, in the bed your father and I shared when you were young. Your father—do you remember?—was always the one who comforted you when you ran in, afraid of something in the night. I could do nothing; I was scared, always, just like you. Since we first crawled out of the sea, night has always meant obliteration to us. To some of us, those like you and I, that fear never disappears all the way.

There is a new man named Michael in my office who makes me feel this way, a homosexual like you, who opens and sorts our mail. He is very tall, and has very dark skin, and very long hair, and sharp, narrow features that make you look the other way when he turns them on you. I suspect he knows I am afraid of him, because I look away whenever he delivers my mail—though not for the reason that, given the protesting *hmp* he makes, he must assume. It's just that when I try to hold his gaze, his eyes say that he knows something about me which *I* don't know.

Which frightens me. It reminds me of how your father, before he died, had started to look at me—and how you looked at me, after, when everything started to seem like a metaphor for something larger. Patriotism for forgetting; basketball for capitalism.

I know now that these were delusions—the supplement makes things clearer for me in that way. But the supplement also makes me remember things that I don't want to remember. They are specific and embarrassing and amplified: for example, recoiling from the preservative smell that floated off your father at the wake, so sharply that I knocked over the woman behind me, one of your great-aunts, who subsequently broke her hip. I remember this moment in Technicolor, at once so vivid and so faded, like something on an old VHS tape. "It's not him!" I remember shouting, my voice tinny and self-assured, "It's not him—it's a wax puppet!" And then: being quieted, kindly, but firmly, by many soft, familiar voices. "Calm, Deirdre. I'm so sorry," they all said, in one way or another.

I sense a greater clarity coming to me every day, but all I have found in my clarity, so far, is shame. Perhaps, if you can excuse their poor quality, these letters are an apology after all.

Love,

Your mother

###

December 12, 2015
Dear Sampson,

Last Wednesday, I again went to Mr. Burrito—although this time with Macy, not alone.

While she is my only friend, I find myself sometimes frustrated with her to the point of distraction. She talks all the way through movies, to herself, and to me, and to the other people in the audience who are also talking. She sometimes parks her car a foot and a half off the curb.

She gives—constantly—unsolicited advice.

The worst aspect of this last item is that her advice is sometimes creative and sensible.

Initially, we couldn't decide where to eat, and so we got to the Mr. Burrito inadvisably late. Maybe it was just a good night to eat out, or maybe we had hit a rush or a shift change, but the place was packed full of mid-level bank managers, oncology nurses, VCU students, tobacco lobbyists, bureaucrats.

While we waited in line, Macy asked if I had succeeded in contacting you. I told her that while you have not written back, your letters have not been returned to me, so I know you at least have begun to receive them. I happened to mention in the process Michael, the new man in my office, and Macy said, "Why don't you ask him to help you?"

"Well they don't all know each other," I told her. By this time, we had gotten to the counter, and I was a little embarrassed that the woman assembling my Fajita Gigante would overhear our conversation. She was an older woman, squat and grey-haired; scraggly white hairs curled at the corners of her mouth. I made sure to stand a little further in front of Macy than normal, and kept my head turned toward the cash register at the end of the line. I thought this would deter Macy, but when we got to our seats, she brought it up again.

“They use a program on the phone to meet each other,” she said. “I saw it in an episode of *Law and Order*.” She was looking at me across the table, making small, emphatic nods to underscore her point. In the background, mariachi music had begun to swell, and when her nods happened to match the beat of the music, it looked like she was dancing.

“I don’t know,” I said.

“What have you got to lose?”

I couldn’t think of anything to say, so I took a bite of my Fajita Gigante and chewed it purposelessly. I had nothing to lose except my dignity. But what has that gotten me lately? When I get home from work every day, I watch television until my alarm goes off and it’s time to take my supplement. Then, I cook, and watch television until it’s time to go to bed. Sometimes the supplement causes me to remember something from the past, and then I lower the volume to concentrate. I write letters, sometimes to you, and sometimes to myself, for the diary my doctor asked me to keep.

Macy’s suggestion stayed with me all night, and later my bed felt like it was full of lumps, the pillows too warm, like someone had been lying on them. I went to get a glass of ice water, and while I was waiting for my glass to fill, I saw my replacement tea kettle sitting on the stovetop. So similar to what I’d already had, yet better than the original, and the improvements, while small, meaningful. The kitchen was dark, but just then a car passed, and the headlights shone through the window. The light was different than normal, more direct, and I saw dust gathering on the backs of my barstools and my nest of mixing bowls. I hadn’t noticed it before, but when I turned on the overhead light, there it was. And not just the dust—my stovetop was streaked with grease and littered

with grains of rice, and the bit of onion skin from two months ago was still stuck in the floor. And though I've never been a cleanly person, I set down my glass of water and set about cleaning the kitchen.

Just like that! I sprayed multipurpose cleaner on the counters and stovetop, took a set of tweezers to the onion skin, wetted a rag to dust the stools and bowls and drawers and the top of the refrigerator. Finally, I scrubbed down the counters and stovetop and sponged away the cleaning liquid, squeezing dry the sponge so hard that my knuckles turned white. When I finished a half hour later, my bedclothes were wet with sweat, and clung to my belly and the small of my back. Afterward, washing my body in the shower, I raised my arms high above my head, my muscles already stiffening, and stretched.

I woke, the next morning, having fallen asleep in my towel on top of the covers. My arms and back were tremendously sore, but the kitchen seemed to sparkle as I made my coffee, and when I sipped at my thermos later, the coffee itself tasted brighter, as though imbued with the electric spirit of my labor.

At lunch, I went to a little sandwich shop down on Dock Street, by the canal. It was my first meal since cleaning, and I wanted to reward myself with a pastrami sandwich. On the way back, some sort of religion had set up to demonstrate on the corner of 13th Street and Main Street, and from the intersection where I crossed, I could see them, all bald and wearing karate gis, gathered into a cluster like a clenched fist. One of them was shouting into a microphone about how Jacob became Israel, and gesturing toward posters lain before him on the ground. He wasn't making sense, and yet he sounded so convinced of himself. My face got hot, and I hurried faster than before.

I ate my pastrami sandwich in my office with the door shut, playing the radio in the background for fear that the woman in the next office over would hear my chewing. When I finished, I opened the door, and there was Michael, as though I had called him, holding a manila envelope with my name on it. He had caught me off guard, and I him, and we both stood there for a moment. Finally, I summoned myself and took the envelope from him. He started to leave, and before he could leave, I said, ““I have a question for you. How does a homosexual meet other homosexuals using the telephone?””

This, I knew as I said it, was a graceless way to introduce the topic, but it was too late. Michael’s mouth twitched on one side like he was suppressing a smile, and he tilted his head so slightly that I wouldn’t have noticed had the gesture not caused his long strands of hair to sway at the tips.

“For my son,” I said, “I’m asking for my son.”

“Okay,” he said, “Well, what kind of—men——does your—son—like?”

“Oh,” I said. I hadn’t anticipated this question. “All kinds, I suppose.”

Michael looked at me from the corner of his eye. I was making myself ridiculous—but as much as I had begun to sweat under my arms, I felt exhilarated. Michael had known all along that I was ridiculous, and I was only just now finding it out. He didn’t seem so scary now. He showed me the application on the phone that you all use to find dates, whose obscene name I will not write, but will instead call “Lov’d”.

Before he left my office, Michael said, “They have all sorts of apps like this now. There are some for young people, and old people, and men, and—women who maybe are in a new phase of life and exploring a side of themselves they’ve never explored before,” and he paused very meaningfully, and then walked down the hall. When he was gone, I

opened a window and stood in front of it, fanning my face with my hands, embarrassed and happy and worn out.

When I got home, I downloaded “Lov’d” on my phone and made an account. Now, when I watch my shows, I also open the map tab on the application and swipe across the map until my little target hovers over the Naval base near the shipyard with its quays branching out into the ocean like two little fingers. Then I watch the wall of men cascade down the screen of my phone, and I look through the profiles one by one, hoping to find some trace of you there.

Many of the men have their genitalia or their anuses exposed—so far, I have not seen the telltale scar you have on your knee, so I know that none of these men have been you. If you receive this letter before I find you, please make sure I don’t have to suffer the shock of coming upon you, after all this time, squatting obscenely in front of a camera.

Your scandalized mother,

DeirdreMomLove1947

###

December 15, 2015
6:37pm

DeirdreMomLove1947:
Is that you, Sampson?

HardSmprsn:
No.
What u into?
Pics?

DeirdreMomLove1947:
Hello, I am looking for my son, Sampson Hartwell,
do you know him?

HardSmprsn:

Pics?

DeirdreMomLove1947:
Just in photo albums, ha ha!
He is 6'1" and has brown hair, and maybe a beard,
and he would be 26 now. And he is skinny.

HardSmpsn:
ive fucked like 15 dudes with that description
sry

###

December 17, 2015
6:55pm

DeirdreMomLove1947:
Hello, what is your name?

MascSLH:
Sam u?

DeirdreMomLove1947:
Deirdre Hartwell
I am looking for my son, Sampson.
Do you know him? I think he works at your
shipyard there in Portsmouth.

MascSLH:
If hes here why don't u just call him?

DeirdreMomLove1947:
I wasn't there when he needed me most and he
doesn't want to talk to me.
Tell your friends I am looking for him?

MascSLH:
ok

December 18, 2015
10:02am

MascSLH:
my coworkers dont know him.
told them to pass it around.

DeirdreMomLove1947:
Thank you, Sam!!!!

###

December 20, 2015
12:39pm

Dwntofk:
It's me.
My CO said his gym buddy told him you were
asking about your son that was angry at you.

2:45pm

DeirdreMomLove1947:

Oh my God...

I've been writing to you. Did you get my letters?

Dwntofk:

Yeah, but I didn't know what to say.

DeirdreMomLove1947:

You don't need to explain. I understand.

I'm better now than before.

I'm in a clinical trial for a new supplement.

I remember everything. I know I wasn't thinking straight. I know I failed you. I'm so sorry it's been so hard for you. Sometimes it seemed like I'd never see you again.

Dwntofk:

It's ok, I understand. I've had a lot of time to think.

Everything is different now.

DeirdreMomLove1947:

What do you look like now? I don't have any pictures since your father passed.

Can you send me a picture?

5:59pm

Dwntofk:

I don't keep pictures on my phone.

DeirdreMomLove1947:

When can I see you? I have so much I need to say in person.

So many apologies.

Dwntofk:

Okay, after Christmas. I am free after 2 on Saturday after.

Need time to prepare myself.

DeirdreMomLove1947:

I'll be there, I promise. I won't let you down anymore.

Love, Mom

###

December 31, 2015

Dear Sampson,

This is the first letter I will have written you that I know for certain that you will never see. I have no addresses left for you—my leads have run dry.

It's just after noon on New Year's Eve as I write this. I am sitting at one of the benches that encircle the pond far at the back of Byrd Park, the old stone ones you and I used to rest at, a long time ago, when I took you with me on my daily walks.

You could not have been older than ten or eleven then, but you have always had an old soul—you have always been the type of son to surprise a mother with his understanding. One day, you told me that you liked when we rested by the benches.

I asked you how come, and you said, "This is where Daddy proposed to you."

"How do you know that?" I asked.

"You always smile when we sit here," you said. Then I told you that a lot of things make me smile, and you challenged me to come up with the real reason.

"Ok, you're right," I said. "You're a very perceptive little son." And I told you a story about the day your father proposed.

You were so happy that I didn't even feel bad for lying to you. Your father never proposed to me in Byrd Park by the stone benches, the pond mostly covered with algae, the afternoon humid and full of birds singing their little avian jazz between the treetops, and the whole place fragrant of budding flowers and cut grass. Really your father proposed at a bowling alley, four months after I was pregnant with you, and there was no birdsong, and the dominant fragrance was a pungent mix of tobacco smoke and alley wax.

If you had ever discovered the lie, I would have told you that it's nicer sometimes to believe the story than to know what actually happened. Truth usually hurts, that's why

we make room for half-truths. We want to insulate ourselves from pain, and we don't want to admit that we have to lie to ourselves, sometimes, in the process.

Last Saturday, I woke up early and made myself tea, boiling the water in my saucepan. As the water boiled, I held my tea kettle in my arms, running my fingers over its flawless glass surface. I admired its lightness now—its flimsiness. It is both fragile and strong, complicated and simple. It started, wherever it was manufactured, as a dumpy ball of molten liquid. It was blown and molded and tempered. Now it is something else.

I drove up Hermitage Road and left Northside for the Museum District, for Carytown, where the road was closed west of the Boulevard for a holiday craft show. Though there was no cross traffic, the traffic light had never been shut off, and as I waited for it to turn, families passed from booth to booth. And maybe it was the supplement, or maybe it was my anticipating being reunited with you—the families didn't seem to be saying anything to each other really, just walking down the street, but they were together. I felt my yearning to be among them, and with my yearning a touch of dread, which passed when the light turned green.

In Norfolk, the wind off the ocean froze whatever little moisture the air had kept for itself, and like alchemy, little glittering flecks of ice appeared in the air for just a moment before disappearing so quickly that they never seemed to fall. I waited in the parking lot outside the Navy barracks, standing by the car until my nose and cheeks and forehead grew numb, and then huddling in the car with my nose nearly pressed up to the heating vent on the center console. Several families came and went from the parking lot.

My stomach grumbled, and I fished a dollar bag of peanuts from my glove compartment for a snack.

By the time I got the message on “Lov’d,” I had already figured out that you were not coming, that the “you” who had messaged me was not the “you” I remember, the wise old soul, the isolated grieving boy, the disappearing act.

The message was from a man who had offered to tell his friends that I was looking for you; he had consulted some sort of record and found that you were no longer stationed in Norfolk.

It’s taken me several days to write this letter. I had to convince myself there was a purpose for writing. We are so willing to lie to ourselves, I keep thinking. I keep thinking, people like me find it so easy to get caught up.

Perhaps I should have addressed all the letters to *you*, regulatory specialist at the university running my clinical trial. I wonder as I write these words what you will take away from them, excerpted as they are from the larger picaresque that has been my life since this trial began. I wonder, especially now, looking up from my writing at the joggers passing each other along the trails that wind through the park, what this supplement has gotten me. I feel more clearheaded and more mystified all the time. There was no mystery in my delusions—now, I can’t seem to hit a clear answer to save my life. I’m no tea kettle; I cannot be fabricated. Whatever form I take, it will be one I make myself.

Yesterday, before my office closed, I hunted Michael down in the mail room. I had determined that I would confront him, tell him that his vulgar application and deviant friends had ruined my life, but I started to talk about the letters, and the application, and

the messages I received, and he started to laugh—a high, wheezing, breathless laugh. And I started to laugh too. I was making myself ridiculous. But he had always known I was ridiculous. I was the one just figuring it out.

You will never tell me, regulatory specialist, even if you know—but I will ask anyway: if you suddenly had insight that you'd never had before, what would you hope to become?

Love,

DeirdreMomLove1947

Before the Screen

When Eugene saw the list I'd put in my Cum'd profile, he took me out to lunch at our favorite place in Carytown to warn me off it.

"You sound like an angry old bird of paradise," he said, looking into his phone and gesturing at the screen. "Looking at this list, why would I ever talk to you?" The restaurant had no air conditioning, just large fans overhead that pushed the hot air around. Eugene wiped the crown of his sweaty bald head and rubbed the wet hand on the tablecloth.

I had put up the list a week before, framing it in emojis so that the children would know I was serious. I'd picked out the most earnest emojis—the 100, and the flame, and the closed fist. With a little fiddling, I had figured out how to change the color of the fist so that was almost the same color as me. It had three items on it:

1. I do not want to be your friend.
2. I do not want to "see where this could go".
3. I do not want to pay you for sex.

"I just want casual sex," I said. "Don't you miss just fucking?"

"I don't have to miss it," he said. "I go to the bar once a week, and I take someone home every time. I'm sociable. That's what works, not cloistering yourself like a nun, not using your phone to lure some young boy into your lair with promises of Netflix and sherry." He wiped his hand on the tablecloth again.

Beneath the table, I crumpled the hem of the tablecloth with my hand. I wanted to ask Eugene what he had to do to get the boys to come home with him, but we'd been

friends for a very long time, and I knew that I'd be crossing a line if I did. No one looks in their sixties like they did in their twenties. You do what you can to satisfy your needs.

"They're all on the apps too," I said. "And anyway, I don't drink sherry,"

"Martin," Eugene said, his tone scolding in the way that I knew what he would say next, "Orlando wouldn't want-"

I put my hand down on the table, harder than I meant to. "Don't." Orlando had been dead for eight years, too long for me to be so dramatic, but still I hated to hear his name invoked. For many years, during his illness and then after he had died, I had heard too frequently what other people thought Orlando would have wanted. For us to live closer to his parents; to be cremated rather than buried; for life to go on without him. But none of those people had been his partner, and I had. In fact:

1. After his mother had thrown him out, Orlando had been raised by his older cousin, who had preceded him in death.
2. In the early nineties, after the death of what had felt like our hundredth friend, Orlando had told me he never wanted to see another funereal urn again.
3. Life going on and my moving on were two different issues

Our waitress appeared with Eugene's sandwich and my soup, and we ate in silences of different inflection: mine of anger, and his perhaps of ashamedness or sorrow. Around us, the café filled up with office workers and students, and they buzzed loudly enough to keep me from acknowledging what I couldn't bring myself then to admit, that Eugene wouldn't have brought me to lunch if he wasn't concerned.

Instead, as the silence between us continued, and it was clear that Eugene was letting me have it, giving me the space my anger had told him I needed, I felt ashamed.

“Sorry,” I said.

Eugene smiled, his laugh lines and the wrinkles beside his eyes deep from wear.

“No, I’m sorry. Really.” He patted my hand, which was still on the table. But why the list?””

“I’m a private person,” I said.

He kept looking at me then, his eyes hooded, and I knew he could tell I was being evasive. So I told him. For two weeks, I’d been messaging a man in his early thirties. A Hawaiian man, very fit, who had seemed thoughtful and interested. Then, a week ago, the night of the list-making, he had asked me if I was “generous,” if I was willing to pay. Looking at the message, I’d suddenly understood that he’d been calculating his responses, waiting until he thought I was snared and he could get away with charging me. I’d felt worthless.

“Okay,” Eugene said, “It’s an aggressive move, but I understand.””

“I’m getting too old to feel worthless,” I said. “I just want to be as clear as I can. Sex. I am looking for casual sex with someone who is attracted to me.”

We descended again into silence while we finished our food, but a friendly silence. Our booth was directly across from the bar, and I watched two men and a woman chat with each other, leaning in close together. The men both wore tank tops with loud patterns, and had bold haircuts, and it seemed obvious to me that, if not a couple, both were at least gay. As I watched them, the woman said something that sent the man in the middle leaning back on his stool and clutching his hands to his sides. It was hard not to see Orlando in him, the man laughing and wiping the tears from his eyes, though there was no physical resemblance. Or it was hard not to see Orlando himself,

laughing even after he had run out of breath, his laughter diminished to rhythmic little clicks.

I have no specific memories of Orlando doing this. I have instead a wave of recollection, a dislocated remembrance of him, how he looked, and the noises he made. When I felt the wave rolling in, I looked away from the group at the bar.

We paid the check and left. Eugene had walked to the restaurant, and I volunteered to drop him off on my way back to my place in Church Hill. When we arrived at his house, a few blocks later, it occurred to me that he had been living here, in the same narrow row-house, for thirty years. I imagined—thirty years with a rotating menagerie of student neighbors, thirty years watching the neighborhood change.

“You really never got tired of living here?” I asked.

“No,” he said. “But I moved back when this was still West of the Boulevard, you know? That neighborhood doesn’t even exist anymore. All the seedy bits got replaced by boutiques and restaurants.”

“A lot of stuff doesn’t exist anymore,” I agreed. “The city has changed so much.” Eugene had already been living in his house for a few years by the time I met him, and the first time he had invited me over, a junkie had been nodding in his front yard.

“One takes the ecological view with this sort of thing,” he said. He got out of the car, and I expected him to close the door, but he turned back. “Look, we’re getting to be that age where you’re either socially active, or your relatives start buying you little animatronic stuffed animals to keep you company.”

“What?” I laughed.

“Come out with me tonight. I will pick someone up, and you can do whatever you want.”

I told him I would think about it. At home, I poured myself a glass of wine and googled the animatronic stuffed animals that Eugene had mentioned. As I scrolled through the various options—kitten, seal, frog, calf, kitten—it was clear that they were the worst of the two options he had presented.

I decided I would go out, and to kill time, I turned on the television and scrolled through the movies that Netflix had recommended. All of them were love stories. In the romantic comedies, a man and a woman fell in love. In the gay ones, a man and a man fell in love. In the horror movies, a demon or a murderer fell in love with a series of lusty teenagers one by one. Some love is romantic and some is just a cover for sex and some is annihilating.

###

“Wake up,” Orlando said. I opened my eyes and his face hung above mine, his large brown eyes darker against the night sky, like little pits, tunnels to somewhere else. The skin of his legs felt warm against my face. He smiled, stroked my cheek and then took his hand away.

Far overhead, a car horn. I rolled onto my side, the rocks pressing strangely against my hip. Oh yes, we were at the river, on the plateau of dry rocks between Manchester and Belle Isle. I had fallen asleep in Orlando’s lap while we watched the sun set over the Nickel Bridge in the west. Nearby, someone popped a beer. Overlapping voices. Crackling firewood. Smoke.

But this had happened so long ago, and already the dream was fading. Orlando's hand was somewhere past my head, but when I reached for it I found only air. I reached again with both arms and held onto his waist. Overhead, the sky was draining of color, the setting draining of noise. I looked for Orlando's eyes, but his face was just a pattern in the stars.

Don't leave again.

Something vibrated against my hipbone, and I woke up. I was on my couch, the cushion damp against my face. I wiped my cheek, and my hand came away black in the light of the television. My wine glass rested on its side on the floor, a little red pool still in its basin.

By the time I unzipped the cushion cover, pre-treated the stain, and put the cover in the washing machine, it was near midnight, and the text message that had woken me up was a half-hour old. I only ever received text messages from Eugene, and so even before I checked my phone, I knew it would be him.

True to his word, he had gone to Dorian's, one of the few remaining bars from the old guard. I tried to imagine him standing in line among the little children in their drop-crotch joggers, and the newlywed or lovelorn twenty-somethings, and the men in their forties nervously studying their juniors, aware that they didn't fit in as well as they did in their thirties. No thirty-somethings—they would already be inside. Pragmatists, they arrived before eleven, in time for the early drink specials.

I texted him back that I was getting dressed. I had no desire to leave my house. The dream had left me sad, and the prospect of being around others filled me with anxiety. Still, as I listened to the washing machine slosh my cushion cover around its

cheap metal belly, I knew that he was right. At the very least, my aggressive move was ineffective. Since I had put the list up in my Cum'd profile, I hadn't received a single message. So I would go out—I hadn't gotten so old that I couldn't be a pragmatist too, every now and then.

###

I got to Dorian's just before the drag show started. The line was shorter than I had imagined, and differently populated—in place of the parade of generations I had conjured in my imagination were just a few men, and older than I would have expected. They seemed to be in their early fifties, though life was not quite so hard on the generation after mine, and it has gotten harder to tell these things. The man in front of me was slightly overdressed, as though he had not returned home since leaving for work that morning, and as I joined the line he turned and smiled gently back at me.

“How's it going?” he said. “Is this place always so busy?”

“I wouldn't know,” I said.

When we got to the front of the line, the bouncer asked for his ID, and the man gave an amused laugh. He handed over his driver's license, and after the bouncer hesitated, he leaned forward and pointed to the top-left corner. “Bet you don't see too many Texans here,” he said.

“No,” the bouncer said, waving him in and gesturing with his other hand for me to come forward.

Inside, the music had stopped, and the emcee, Dysplasia, was introducing a drag queen who had come in from Norfolk. I nudged my way through the crowd and found my way to the bar, where Eugene was talking to Helen, the owner.

“Martin!” she said when she saw me, “Gene told me you were on your way.”

“I’m trying to avoid getting an animatronic seal,” I said.

“What?” she laughed. She reached over the bar for a hug, and I leaned into her arms. Helen had cut her hair away to practically nothing, but what hair she had left smelled like lavender, as it always had.

I had met Helen and Orlando on the same night. Eugene and I had been caught in the rain on the walk over from my apartment in the Fan. When we had arrived at Dorian’s, the bouncer had kept us waiting at the door, peering repeatedly over Eugene’s driver’s license, scratching his chin with his free hand. Eugene looked like a statue back then, his muscles standing out in cords across his back and chest and stomach and arms. His shirt, soaked through by the rain, had clung to him, sinking into the furrows of his abs and bulging around his nipples, which the cold had brought to life.

“Aren’t you a little young?” the bouncer had asked. He looked down his nose at Eugene, and Eugene had flashed him a guilty smile.

“Tonight’s my twenty-first birthday,” he said.

None of it was true. Eugene had looked exactly thirty, which we both were. Why had he shined on as he had? At the time, neither of us could fathom that we would one day grow old. Where were the older men, to show us that it could happen? Most of them, and even many of the men not so older than we were, had disappeared nearly overnight, withered away like sand sculptures in a strong wind. It seemed at the time that we had just this one moment in which to crystallize, perfect and defined, before shattering.

Though the lights were off in the bar, and the dance floor crowded with people, Eugene had spotted Helen right away. She was hard to miss, her long hair dyed neon red and piled loosely atop her head. They had met in one of his grad school classes a few weeks earlier, and I was only tagging along on plans the two of them had made.

“You’ve missed most of the fun already,” she had said when Eugene introduced us, “But there’s still a little left.” She pulled Eugene in to dance, and as I had watched the two of them move against each other, I should have sensed that this was always how Eugene would be, him always on the verge of some adventure, and me waiting to be pulled along.

Someone had appeared next to me then, although I didn’t become aware of him until he said into my ear, “Do you think I should be jealous?” I looked over, and it was Orlando. He was slightly taller than me, and slender, with what seemed to be preternaturally large eyes. When he spoke, he placed a hand on the small of my back, I thought to let me know that he was talking to me, and the other had he had placed on his hip. He had seemed soft to me, gently feminine, though his voice was smooth and deep.

“Is she your girlfriend?” I had asked. Somehow, it felt wrong to assume that he would be gay, like Eugene and I. Every day, we spent an hour or more in the gym, hoping to purge ourselves through our developing bodies. Our bodies were our destiny. To work out, to patrol our body language, was to cleanse ourselves of the unmasculine, to distance ourselves from the wilting pansies that we were supposed by others to be. But looking at Orlando, I felt I had overcorrected, become a cartoon of my own.

“Actually, we just met,” he had said. He looked at me and smiled. “Want to have a cigarette with me?” I didn’t smoke, but I had said yes anyway. After his death, I

thought I should guessed way back then, as we sat at the bar and he lit our cigarettes, that they would eventually kill him. He had smoked them elegantly, as though he relished the ritual, the taste. He would never be rid of them.

But I could not have known that then. By the time the night had ended, and he had invited me back to his apartment, I had known only a feeling of incredible anticipation, like I had stumbled across something unforeseen and rare.

So much had changed since then, and yet so little also. After Helen greeted me, she and Eugene began to talk about some other friend of theirs who I had never met, and turned my back on them to watch the drag show. The queen from Norfolk was tall and dark-skinned, and I could tell from how she moved around the stage as she mimed the lyrics to her song that she had made her dress. The dress was a simple princess line, nothing complicated, but the bodice fit tight to her body, and when she moved, she sometimes ran her fingers along it the way she might have caressed the face of a lover, knowing its curves. When she finished, the crowd clapped loudly and cheered.

After another queen had come and gone, the show ended, and the loud, thumping music resumed. I turned back to the bar, but Helen had returned to serving customers, and Eugene had gone off somewhere. Suddenly alone, I felt out of place, and I backed my way into the corner and sipped at my drink. I pulled my phone from my pocket, loaded Cum'd, and let the cool light of the screen wash over me. The men were arranged on the screen in little rows of tiles, comfortably ordered.

I opened the profiles of the three who were closest to me, all of them within a hundred feet of where I stood. I looked up from my phone to see if I could spot any of the men from the app. Indeed, along the opposite wall I saw a young Asian man smiling

into his phone, a whiskey glass in his other hand. And then another, an older, heavysset white man with a trim beard, alone on the dance floor, swaying to the music.

It occurred to me that I was doing exactly what Eugene had complained that I did—separating myself from the rest of the world. If I intended to be a pragmatist, it wouldn't help me to come to the bar and not speak a word.

I put my phone away and turned to the man standing next to me at the bar. It was the man who had been in front of me in the line, and as I turned, he turned also. I was taken aback, but he smiled at me.

“What're you nervous about?” He asked.

“I'm not nervous,” I lied. “I don't come out very much, to be honest.”

“Well, you're out now.” He extended his hand. “I'm Daniel.”

Daniel was from Charleston, and he had stopped in Richmond for the night on his way to Baltimore, where his ex-wife lived. “We never quite clicked,” he said when he caught me raising an eyebrow. “Go figure, right?” He raised his glass, and I touched mine to it. “Are you married?”

Just then, I felt the wave threatening to roll in. One night, I'd woken to Orlando sliding a ring over my finger, and I'd pretended to be asleep because I knew that he'd intended for me to see it when I woke in the morning. The next morning, when I rushed into the kitchen, where Orlando had been making breakfast, he'd made the expression that he always made when he knew he'd made me happy, tilting his head slightly toward the floor and looking up at me through his curls. It had been illegal, what we'd had.

“In a manner of speaking,” I said. I gulped the rest of my drink and excused myself to use the bathroom. I stood by the sink and looked at myself in the mirror, which

was bordered with bright lights, like at a makeup counter. My skin seemed pale unto translucence, my hair thick and white, the green of my eyes dimming to mud—or perhaps this last bit was my imagination. I could still feel Orlando’s ring on my finger, feel how when I’d hugged him that morning, my face pressed into his shoulder, his shirt had dampened with tears I hadn’t realized I’d shed. I’d come into the kitchen knowing I would need to fake my reaction, but once I’d begun, all my happiness from the night before had flooded back, and there had been no need to pretend.

I felt something stirring in me, like perhaps I would cry, and I backed away from the mirror. It seemed suddenly preferable to buy a little stuffed frog and set it beside me on the couch to watch TV, like my little proxy Orlando. “Ribbit,” it would say. ““Reality TV is brain death. We should order Thai tonight.” It would never provoke my memories or challenge my emotions, the stuffed animal robot, my inert companion.

So I went home and ordered it.

###

I woke early the next morning feeling light and restless, like a weight in my gut had been lifted away—and while I had always relished a slow-to-rise Saturday, I scrambled a couple eggs to eat with a piece of toast and some hot tea. A heavy rain fell outside, so forcefully that though my apartment was the bottom floor of a duplex, I could hear the raindrops pattering on the roof tiles, and the hardscrabble patch of yard behind my apartment had begun to flood.

In front of my house was a wide covered porch, and I took my breakfast there, watching the water flow down the hill into Shockoe Bottom. The farmer’s market hadn’t been called off, but the rain had kept the crowd away, and the vendors moved restlessly

among each other's stalls. It struck me that they were bound to the ritual of the farmer's market so strictly that in absence of customers they had become the customers themselves. I thought of them exchanging the same handful of bills back and forth, back and forth, like the sale was a drug.

When I came back inside from eating breakfast, I had a message waiting for me on Cum'd. "I like your new profile," it said. The sender went by ~XL mr. Damian~. I couldn't recall having removed the list from my profile, but as I tapped my own icon on the wall of men and my profile appeared, I saw that I had replaced the text at some point before I'd gone to sleep.

Had I been so drunk? I'd taken a taxi home, yes, but I could remember feeling clearheaded when I'd arrived back at my apartment. I had poured myself a glass of red wine even, and sat down to watch Netflix. The replacement had to have occurred after I'd made the decision to go to bed, once my brain had determined it could safely check out for the evening.

The new text was another list:

1. Fine vintage aged 60+ years in Richmond, Virginia.
2. Regular mental exercise—physical exercise less so.
3. No relationships. Maybe looking for sex.

I had also included a series of emojis—a piece of sushi, the rainbow, a ghost, a frog, Santa Claus—which didn't seem to amount to anything. It wasn't bad, but I missed the aggressiveness of old list, the confidence I had felt in the days after I had made it. What I could not say then was that the list let me pretend that Orlando's death was behind

me, that it had ceased to influence my decisions. I knew only at the time that I had felt in charge of my life again.

“Why?” I wrote.

I set the phone down and went about cleaning my dishes from breakfast. When I returned to the phone twenty minutes later, I had another notification from Cum’d.

“~XL~ mr. Damian has unlocked their private pictures.””

I opened his profile and looked through the pictures. In the first one, ~XL~ mr. Damian was in what appeared to be his bedroom, wearing a pair of drawstring pajama pants and holding a handwritten sign in front of his bare chest. The sign read, “Hi, I’m Damian.”” In the second picture, he was standing beside a man who looked just like him, both of them wearing spandex workout shirts and sweatpants. Their arms, bent at the elbow, supported a tiny blonde girl in a cheerleading skirt and a tank top, whose arms were raised victoriously above her head. Damian and his twin smiled up at her. In the final picture, he was back in his bedroom, naked, standing with his back to the camera. His posture was relaxed, and his face, reflected in the mirror on the back wall, seemed peaceful. His eyes were closed.

I was ready to dismiss the message, but when I got to that final picture, I became unsure. Other people’s ass pictures were generally either of the ass in profile, to show its full roundness, or of the person bent over, spreading their ass cheeks and exposing their fleshy asterisk of an anus. Sexual, either explicitly or by implication. By contrast, Damian’s arms hung at his sides, his triceps slack but visible against his skin. His hands were open, palms facing his thighs, where friction from his underwear had stymied the hair so that it was shorter, softer, like the down of a teenager’s upper lip. His ass

appeared neither small nor large—it was what it was. He seemed to be saying, I will give you what you want, but on my own terms.

I unlocked my own pictures in return. My one private picture was of my dick, in profile, so that people could see that it wasn't short. For the picture, I had trimmed away my pubic hair and done a dozen or so squats. I'd had to get myself hard repeatedly, because the angle of the picture required more concentration than I had anticipated. By the time I finally taken an acceptable shot, or one that made my dick look bigger than I really thought it was, the first screen of my photo album was entirely dick pic outtakes.

I wondered, looking at my picture now, if people Damian's age had friends or lovers help them take their nudes. The children these days seemed so much more available, open to each other, although I know now that they aren't any different than Eugene and Orlando and I had been in our day. Before AIDS had hit, and even just after, until the first test had come out, when death had seemed immediate and inevitable, to be oneself, openly, had felt like a political statement. We'd had a moral obligation to fuck.

Maybe this was what I had wanted when I made lists. A statement of being, undeniable, like a testimony. Or maybe it was just what I saw when I looked at Damian's profile. He was undeniable. There he was, on display—take him or leave him. I imagined, contented with myself, that a glimmer of undeniability was in my new profile as well, that it was what had driven Damian to me.

I had tried the poor old victim routine, and I had tried Eugene's method—and neither had worked. But there's something to be said for confidence, I think. For being more than the sum of your parts. So I decided to take a risk. I complimented Damian on

his profile, and told him I thought he was very attractive, and asked would he like to get a drink.

To my surprise, he said yes, and he invited me to come over the next day. I spent the afternoon then in a very good mood, with one momentary exception. Late in the evening, my doorbell rang, and when I answered the door, a package had been set on my doorstep. I took it inside, and opened it, and inside was the animatronic frog. I had forgotten I'd ordered it. I took it out of the package and sat on the couch with it. I wasn't sure what it was supposed to do, and I kept waiting for it to move, or say something to me.

After a minute had passed, it seemed likely it must not have come with batteries. I didn't have any on hand, so I put it on the floor and turned on the TV to watch Netflix. *On Golden Pond* was at the top of the list of recommended movies, and for a moment I felt a heat at my back, and sense seemed to leave me. The recommendation struck me as so on-the-nose, like it was a shot below the belt. Before I could catch myself, I looked accusingly down at the frog, and I had to remind myself, as I have sometimes since, that algorithms have no will of their own.

###

I hadn't realized that Damian's invitation was to a party—but when I arrived, it was already in full swing. His apartment was in the Fan, in a building that had been mainly occupied by students even when Orlando and I had lived in it decades before. By coincidence, his apartment was just down the hall from where our old one had been. A woman had lived in his apartment then, an older woman who seemed to have a new boyfriend every few weeks. As I came into the apartment, I tried to remember what she

had been like. She'd come to break up a brunch we had held once, but her voice when she had complained had been thin and wispy, like her hair. She had seemed barely there at all, and so we had been struck even more by our imposition upon her.

Ironically, Damian's party was itself a brunch. After I introduced myself, he led me into his kitchen, where his friends, some of them young, but some of them middle-aged or older, had formed a line near the food.

"Guys, this is Martin," he said. His voice was nasal, and as he put his hand on my shoulder, his deodorant smelled floral and sharp. His friends said an awkward group hello, and then he moved away from me to perform some hosting duty.

I felt uncomfortably aware of my place in his apartment, a stranger at the tail end of the line, but I couldn't take his leaving personally. I was, after all, a stranger to him as well. It occurred to me to flee, but as I waited in the line, I caught snatches of conversation which seemed interesting. A young man in a pair of yoga pants and a long tee shirt asked an older couple how their son liked middle school. A woman complained loudly that one of her friends had set her up with a man who couldn't pronounce *confit*.

"Con-feet," she shouted. "And Diana told me they met in college French."

I came to the head of the line and filled my plate. Damian and his friends had prepared a feast: kale and barley scramble, crepes, a ham and egg casserole, bagels and lox. The kind of food I can eat now only on occasion. At the table, there were only two seats left open—I took the one on the corner, next to Damian, who was seated at the head of the table and poured myself a mimosa, which was bright with champagne. The woman who had been set up by her friend was sitting next to me, still telling the story of her bad date.

“Well, did you fuck?” the man sitting across from her asked when she was finished.

The woman shot him a glance that made it obvious she had. “It was big too, honey. Dumb and hung, bitch, he can say ‘con-feet’ all he wants!” The table erupted with laughter, and when it died down, everyone seemed worn out, and set to eating.

“Martin,” the man sitting across from me said after a few minutes, “What do you do for a living?” The table groaned loudly, and I looked around, unsure what was happening.

“Excuse Seth’s bad manners,” Damian said. “He’s visiting from D.C.”

“It’s alright,” I said. “I’m retired actually.”

“Sugar daddy, eh?” Seth said, winking. He reached over and nudged Damian.

Beneath the table, I crumpled the hem of the tablecloth in my hand. I was holding my fork in my other hand. I set it down and folded both my hands in my lap. I looked at Seth.

“Actually,” I said. “When my partner’s aunt died, she left him a good amount of money. Nothing extravagant, but enough to last. And when my partner died, that money was left to me. And I live a quiet life on it.”

Someone said, “Oh,” in a very low voice, and the table went quiet, shocked. Seth’s eyes widened a little bit, and he swallowed. His hair was mussed up and shiny with gel. He had a weak chin. He looked at the food on his plate, and when he raised his eyes again, he couldn’t manage to hold my gaze.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” he said. “Well, what did you do before you retired?”

“I taught etiquette,” I said.

No one said anything, and when I think of this moment now, crystallized before me, I see myself in a dining room not so unlike this one, many many years before, around a long rectangular table, sitting beside Orlando. We are both perhaps in our forties, young still, and our friends are there with us, drunk beyond good sense, embarrassing themselves. His death is only just more than a decade away, and the smartphone perhaps just more or just less far away than that. I think, in these moments, that this had been my problem all along, to assume that a gathering like this had belonged to a period before the Screen—that the Screen had descended, with its emojis and orderly rows of men, and had cut us off from each other. That it had distilled us down to an appearance, commodifiable. I see how foolish I once was, and it's a lesson in humility to know that I must remain so, even now. How silly the spats Eugene and I have now will seem when I am eighty!

At the time, it seemed that the silence would last forever, and I knew that though it had not been my actions which spoiled the brunch, I was the stranger, and so it would be remembered as my fault. But then, the woman next to me bust out laughing. She couldn't seem to contain herself.

“Etiquette,” she said through tears. “Bitch, he told you!” And, at that, suddenly everyone was laughing, even me. Brunch continued.

###

Seth apologized to me again before I left, and though I still felt a trace of resentment, I knew that he was being sincere. I got Damian's phone number. Perhaps we would sleep together later—I couldn't escape the feeling that his invitation contained

a subtext of attraction, despite our apparent age difference—but it didn't seem to press on me in the way it had when I had arrived.

As I drove home, the sun was just starting to set in my rearview mirror. As I drove down east from the Fan and into Shockoe Bottom, it shone at a progressively steeper angle, until it seemed to be coming from just behind me. At the far edge of the Bottom, where the slope of Church Hill began, I stopped to fill up my car. The weather was much nicer, and a festival of some kind or another was happening in the market stall on the next block, where I'd watched the vendors at the farmer's market milling around among each other's booths. I knew now that the vendors must have been talking to each other, a little community, complimenting each other's leafy greens and tomatoes, or maybe just chatting, the way friends do. When I went in to pay for my gas, I bought a packet of batteries and a bottle of cheap red wine.

My apartment, when I arrived, smelled still of the curry I'd cooked the night before. I had leftovers in the fridge for dinner tonight, but I wasn't in the mood for more of it so soon. I opened the wine and poured myself a glass, and then I sat on the couch and hauled the animatronic frog into my lap, turning it over to access the pouch where its battery pack was kept. I slid the four C batteries into place one by one, and when I closed the pack, the frog came to life, moving fluidly up and down like it might hop away. I righted it and put it on the couch beside me, and it made the up-and-down motion again, and tilted its head to look up at me.

“Ribbit,” it said.

No, it was no replacement for a person. Perhaps a cat would have been, or a rabbit, if I'd stayed lonely. But in light of the day I'd had, the unexpected belonging I'd

felt by the time I'd left the party, the frog didn't seem like a virtual companion—just a drunken whim I'd had.

“What do you think, frog?” I asked it. “Thai tonight?”