Standard Procedures: Stories

by

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Of course I have a name, but it did me no good out here. The world was stripped to its essentials here, down to the simplicity of self-survival, rendering proper names meaningless, along with the years. Time was measured instead by the moon and seasons: the moon was the minute hand, the season the hour hand.

Tonight, above my head, a hangnail moon. The sky was impossibly black, pierced with bits of light. Heavy winds blew in from the north, forcing the trees together as if they huddled for warmth.

I went around the side of my tent and consulted the thermostat, which hung from a support beam by a piece of fraying twine. Only a few ticks below freezing.

These were ideal conditions for a raid – my fourth in only twelve days. Perhaps too many over such a short span of time. Typically, I tried to space them out, keep it to one or two at most per every ten days. But my last raids had yielded a woefully insufficient haul. The cupboards of one cabin had been completely bare, save for a bottle of cooking oil and

Oak Ridge

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an unopened jar of minced garlic; I used the latter to temporarily mollify a toothache. My spree also provided me with a half-box of Devil Dogs, a snow shovel, two eleven-pound propane tanks, a few pairs of wool socks, three skillets, two bags of Cheetos, a handful of Smarties and bite-sized candy bars, a dog-eared copy of *Nursing Diagnosis Handbook*, and three cans of tuna. I’d collected eight loose double-A batteries from the backs of four different remote controls, three jars of peanut butter, one of Marshmallow Fluff, a half-bottle of Bailey’s and a case of Heineken.

It was a start, but not nearly enough. Not even close.

I needed to get fat, buttress myself against the season with blubber and flab. The bigger, the better. I had glutted myself on sugar and alcohol for the past two months in preparation. It was the most efficient way to bulk up, but it took its toll. For one, my teeth. Despite my efforts – persistent brushing and flossing and general maintenance – my teeth had gone to hell. They ached almost constantly now. One tooth, in particular, my lower right molar, gave me fits. Periodically, when taking a cold drink or eating something especially sweet, a pang of agony corkscrewed straight through the nerve, leaving me doubled over in the dirt.

The other issue was my body. I was older now and seemed to have a tougher time absorbing the abuse. My first two or three winters, gorging on junk food like a feckless wastoid felt like an unexpected perk of the lifestyle. Junk food eventually lost its luster, consuming it began to feel, as do all protracted bouts of excess, like a chore, begrudgingly undertaken. Still, it was a necessity. A matter of life and death, really. My chances of survival were slim without the extra fat cushioning me from the conditions. I needed food, and lots of it, enough to eat now, and left-overs to add to my stock-pile of provisions. I
lived on stolen food, since I hadn’t the stomach or will to hunt. Nor was I bestowed with
the requisite patience for fishing. These raids were my life-blood.

And winter was now fast approaching, though it was never far off in the wilderness
of Northern Maine. Winter’s presence hung like a specter year-round. Even in the languid
throes of summer, I could feel it, if only faintly, in the shadows lengthening beneath the
pines, and the early evening chills and breezes skirling off the sun-skinned lake only a few
hundred yards from my camp. These were constant reminders, a caution against
complacency.

Winter was no longer a mere suggestion, insinuating itself into the gloaming,
portending leaner days to come. Winter was nearly here, the first snowfall only weeks
away, perhaps a month, if I was lucky. I could feel the cold taking hold more and more
with each subsequent day.

I checked my watch, a silver-colored analog, which, technically-speaking, did not
belong to me. But then again, except for my glasses, nothing on my person did, from my
navy-blue nylon poncho to the wool cap on my head, all the way down to my skivvies – I
had gleaned each article from various cabins over God-only-knows-how-many years.

I paced the edges of my camp, dead leaves crunching underfoot like cornflakes,
waiting for midnight to arrive. By that time, the majority of those who remained through
the winter in the cabins nearby, the elderly folk and shut-ins, would likely be asleep, leaving
me to go about my business in relative peace. No doubt they were on alert – they always
were, to some degree – but I knew there was only so long a man would wait around for a
ghost to arrive.
On my third lap around the perimeter of the camp, I began taking slow, exaggerated steps, readying myself for the activities to come. It was an endeavor that seemed to take longer and longer with each subsequent season.

My body seemed to be telling me: Just because you aren’t conscious of the passing years, Bucko, doesn’t mean they aren’t conscious of you.

With each stride, I felt every cord and tendon in my legs strain, hot and balky. Sweat began to accumulate beneath my thick wool cap. A few rogue beads streaked down my cheek, cold against the night air, before catching in my beard. I stepped lower, deeper, my hamstrings tight enough to pluck out a jaunty tune.

I pulled up and then squatted down as low as I could manage, coiled like a snake preparing to strike. After a beat, I exploded upward, arms extending towards the trellis-like canopy of branches overhead. I squatted back down immediately upon landing and repeated thirty times over.

Slowly, I began to feel the blood sluice through my veins and joints. I stood with my arms akimbo, shaking the remaining ache from my legs. I breathed deeply, greedily. The taste of air was exhilarating.

It wasn’t even winter, yet cold and age already seemed to be having their way with me. If memory served correct, this would be my twentieth winter spent in these woods, and my fortieth overall, again, if my faculties of recollection hadn’t already begun to falter. Solitude does funny things to the mind, after all, especially when prolonged for years on end. Eventually, given enough time, your past and future seem to evaporate. The moorings of history disappear, and the dividing line between you and the world becomes tenuous, hazy. And what are you left with? Only yourself, and the uncertainty of Here and Now.
But there was one thing I knew for sure. When winter hit, it would hit hard. For months, I would be besieged by snow, foot after foot, a seemingly endless supply. The sheer weight of it would bend trees to its will, break them at the root. Drifts would accumulate, grim and impenetrable, deep enough to bury a man upright. There would be ice and sleet and a gloom so pervasive all of my lamps would have to remain lit at midday. The sun would refuse to show its face. The temperature would plummet, steeply and unabated, as though it too wished to burrow in until spring.

My daily movements would be limited to areas in which I was sure my boot prints wouldn’t be recognized and tracked, which wasn’t very far, only about a hundred-foot radius beyond the boulders and elms that girded my camp. I would conduct raids rarely, if at all. I couldn’t risk discovery. Over my time here, I had enacted seemingly endless measures to ensure my solitude, and I’d be damned if I squandered it with a careless mistake.

What did I do while restricted to the confines of my tent for months on end? Read, mostly. I’d burn through whatever books I’d stolen during the gathering season. Lots of pulpy crime thrillers and political potboilers. But I wasn’t picky. I read it all: local papers, pages yellowed by the sun; stacks of *National Geographic*; lurid biographies of matinee idols, circus freaks and tennis gods; how-to guides and owner’s manuals; dense geopolitical tomes; turgid literary criticisms, filled with impotent jargon, and the occasional nudie mag. And of course, there were the classics, all the books I had neglected or refused to read back in high school or during my brief stint in community college. My favorite was *Notes from the Underground*, which I’d read umpteen times since I’d first stumbled upon it, many
seasons ago. I could now quote from it freely. I guess I felt a sort of queer kinship with the work and its misanthropic narrator, a man, like myself, far removed from it all.

It was nearly time. Walking back to my tent, I pulled off my cap and wiped the sweat from my brow with a gloved hand. The wind had somewhat settled, branches now creaked in a slow, steady rhythm.

I slept in a single-person camping tent. To shield me from the conditions – whether it be snow, rain or wind – I kept it covered by several layers of brown and green tarps. Camouflage was essential. I didn’t want to risk anything shiny catching the eye of a passing hiker, or worse, the authorities, so I spray-painted, in dark colors, my garbage bins and coolers and cooking pot.

From the tent, I extracted an empty backpack, as well as gym bag filled with a collection of screwdrivers and flat bars and files. I looped my arms through the straps of the former, cinching the upper belt until its buckle pressed against my sternum like a knuckle. I hopped twice in place, checking my work. If the bag were too loose, it would brush against the nylon of my jacket soon as I began moving. The sound it made when they rubbed together – a gentle *shush* and *sheen* – admittedly wasn’t much, but then again, any noise, *especially* avoidable noise, was too much. I then unzipped the gym bag and took inventory of my tools.

I was meticulous in my methods, almost to a fault. There was little room for error. I knew the locals, aware of my presence, likely thirsted for retribution after nearly a decade of enduring my acts of petty thievery. In recent years, I noticed many had begun investing in security cameras or motion-detecting floodlights. A few even kept their dogs chained to
their porches during the warmer months. The slightest misstep and that was it – I would be done for.

I was sure there were men in this world built specifically for this kind of thing, men who charged headlong into the night, minds unburdened by even a worm of trepidation, but I was not such a man.

Each and every time I set out, I was fraught with terror, wracked with guilt and doubt. I had conducted countless raids over the years. I’d lost count at around two-hundred, and that was three winters ago. Lord only knows what the number was up to now. Four-hundred? Maybe even five? Granted, the majority of these weren’t grand heists or anything like that. Most of the time, I scurried away with as little as a garden hose or a jug of filtered spring water. But good luck explaining that to the area’s inhabitants, or the local police force. Crime was crime, and although I didn’t think of myself as a criminal – I was merely surviving, foraging for what I needed to make it through another day, a scavenger living on civilization’s leftovers – I was willing to bet there were people out there who would beg to differ.

I had staked out my intended target the previous night. It was summer camp of some kind, located about two miles away, give or take. Which meant the trip over would take around a half-an-hour, depending on how fast I hoofed it. I had spent three hours lying prone in a thicket of cedars at the far edge of the property, scanning for the slightest sign of activity. But there was nothing. No lights in any of the cabins, nor vehicles in the dirt lot flanking the main building. I figured there had to be fully-stocked pantry somewhere inside, a walk-in freezer, too. There would be enough food in both to set me up for the
entire season and probably even a few months beyond. And if I made it there before one – which I would – I’d have time for at least two or three trips.

I zipped the bag, slung it over my shoulder. I patted down my jacket pockets; in the top right breast, a roll of electrical tape and a small canister of bear mace, which I’d swiped from a ranger station a few weeks ago. I took a penlight on a shoelace lanyard from my pocket and hung it around my neck. It was the only light I used during my raids, a light small enough to avoid detection.

I breathed deeply, feeling as ready as I ever would.

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Even with my surplus of bulk, I moved swiftly, threading through the trees and bramble, twisting and striding with animal grace. Visibility was next to nil in such little moonlight, but it hardly mattered. I knew every step by heart, every mossy stone and felled pine. I knew when to duck and exactly how far to leap. I sidestepped gullies and deadfall, never once slowing or breaking a twig.

It was like a dance I’d performed so often that the moves were now practically involuntary. I was fairly confident that if it ever came down to it, I could tramp this route even without my glasses. Which was to say I could do it completely blind. Or at least close to it. These glasses were the very same pair I’d when I first came out here, a month after my twentieth birthday. Frankly, I was astounded they held up through all these years. They
were a relic, a pair of silver-rimmed aviators, heavily fortified with scotch tape. With each footfall, they rattled ever so slightly on the bridge of my nose.

I turned eastward alongside the creek and followed it down a silty hillside until I reached the lake. I paused briefly along the water’s edge, hoping to catch my breath. I’d been here for years, but the glory of the sky impressed itself on me every night; it was bigger than imagining, gusty and disordered, the horizon gently cupped by a black range in the distance. The wind had calmed to a flutter, leaving the lake crystal-still, the stars above shining so brightly in its reflection you’d think they were submerged.

The lake was decently sized, with a circumference of roughly five miles, and fed by a sprawling vasculature of runnels and cricks, which prevented stagnation. Still, I’d boil whatever I drew from the lake on a propane hotplate, not wanting to chance it. And in warmer months, I’d wait for nightfall and walk down to a quiet inlet and strip off my clothes and hang them from a tree and then run silently into the water, which was always much colder than I anticipated when I was taking its temperature with my fingertip. I’d wade in the reedy shallows until I grew numb to it and ceased chattering, then I’d push off into the depths, charting a course through the exhilarating blackness of water.

I trekked along the perimeter of the lake, bounding from rock to rock, careful not to leave tracks in the muck. A half mile up, I passed the first of a dozen waterfront vacation homes, wood-sided and just huge, shut tight for the offseason.

When I first arrived, most were still quaint cabins, with poor insulation and rickety screened porches. But they were soon bought up and remodeled by wealthy transients, which proved to be a godsend, as I assembled much of my camp with material I’d stolen from various construction sites. I’d fashioned my tent out of roofing tarps and discarded
drywall, and staked the corners with rebar; to keep my bedding dry, I built an elevated floor with heat treated pallets and plywood. Without their homes, I sincerely doubted I would have mine.

By this point, I’d been inside these homes countless times; I knew the layout of each as if it were my own. I knew which homes maintained a well-stocked pantry or medicine cabinet and which left their boiler on through the winter to keep their water pipes from bursting in the sub-zero nights. I knew which locks took time and care to pick and which could be opened with little more than a stern look, as well as which windows were susceptible to a flathead screwdriver and which required a hacksaw blade to the sash. I knew the oak floors and plush couches, the tiled kitchens and granite countertops. I was even familiar with the faces of the families who unknowingly sustained me, from the framed photographs on their dressers and walls; I watched their children grow and age in these stills, and sometimes I couldn’t help but feel more like an estranged uncle than an unwelcome intruder.

Typically, I’d get-in and get-out as quickly as possible, but every so often, I would find myself wandering aimlessly through the halls and rooms. Whether it was boredom, curiosity or hubris that compelled me, I wasn’t quite sure. But if I had to guess, it was likely a combination of the three.

I’d climb the stairs to the second floor, in search of nothing in particular. The master bedrooms were uniform in their opulence, with immaculate white linens and a transom window overlooking the lake, and the bathrooms invariably smelled of toothpaste and chamomile and cotton. I’d lean over the sink, splash cold water in my face, careful to avoid my reflection in the mirror. The last time I saw my face was forever ago and I had no
interest in changing that any time soon. Mirrors were just one of the luxuries I’d long since resolved to forfeit; my body now little more than some dumb beast I merely lived inside, and every now and then it let me know it needed me to do something – usually eat. The only household amenity I ever used was the microwave, to nuke the occasional hunk of frozen lasagna, but that was the extent to which I allowed myself to indulge in the creature comforts of civilized living.

Sometimes, after I finished cleaning myself, I’d continue through the darkened house, moving from room to room, inspecting items deemed worthy of abandonment. You could tell a lot about someone by what they’re willing to leave behind. The beach towels curled at the bottom of the hamper, still damp with bygone days; a cluster of creams and unguents around the sink; a half-finished novel, marked with a postcard, accruing dust on the nightstand; the collection of shoes arranged in orderly rank at the foot of the bed, waiting to be filled. I’d pick one up sometimes, turn it over in my hands, imagining where in the world the feet these belonged to were at the present moment.

But tonight, I passed these houses without a second thought.

I had raided two of them a month about, but came away with next to nothing. The summer camp was my only focus, my sole hope for survival. My plan was this: break in, grab as much as I possibly could in three or four trips and then get the hell out. It would be simple, an effortless operation, or so I tried to convince myself.

I trailed along the waterline until the bight crested into a peak, giving way to an unnavigable morass. For a clearer view, I clambered onto a slab of pink granite jutting into the shallows. There I saw it, looming in the darkness.
Oak Ridge was set far back in the cove, the campgrounds flanked by acres of dense forest. I still had nearly a mile of territory to cover, perhaps more. With the shoreline unpassable on foot, I’d hoof it through the woods and approach the property from the side.

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I returned to my post in the high, dry grass. I laid the gym bag in front of me, a cushion for my elbows. Cautious as always, I observed the property for twenty-minutes or so, scanning the row of bunkhouses, the tool shop, the rec center, the dining hall.

Cautious as always, I observed the property for what felt like an hour, but when I checked my watch, was only about twenty-minutes or so. I scanned the row of bunkhouses, the tool shop, the rec center, the dining hall.

Not a soul in sight.

The camp had been closed for months. The joyous yelps and cries of children at play, which bellowed across the lake for weeks on end, had gone dormant with the coming of fall. A maintenance crew were its only known inhabitants from then until spring. They came and went, periodically, but tonight their vans were nowhere to be seen. I spotted what appeared to be fresh tire tracks in the nearby lot, likely a simple drop-by. Or perhaps even a couple of local sweethearts, in search of a private spot to sweat each other.

I jittered my fingers against the bag, a nervous tic of mine, I guess. Despite the hundreds of raids under my belt, I still hadn’t grown accustomed to the queasy tumble of anticipation that I felt in the pit of my gut minutes before a break-in, and I seriously doubted
that I ever would. If anything, my anxiety only seemed to worsen over time, curdlying my innards before radiating outward to the far reaches of my body, as if it had nowhere else to go.

I rested my head on the edge of the bag, its zipper cool against my glistening brow. I shut my eyes and took a deep, almost meditative breath, hoping the fresh air would help quell my nerves, but to little avail.

I knew full well what would make me feel better again, and that was finishing what I came here to do.

But in order to finish, I first needed to begin.

I raised my head and gazed out at the clearing of vacant picnic tables and an empty fire pit, its cinderblock walls scorched black. The air was still, and the bunkhouses were six black silhouettes against the dark forest.

I checked my watch; it was time.

Clutching the gym bag tight against my chest, I crawled from the thicket, moving in a low crouch, my heart buzzing like a wasp in a jar.

I skulked along the far edge of the property, brushing along the drooping pine branches, wary of the motion-detecting floodlights affixed to various buildings.

Near the edge of the dining hall, I encountered a dirt path, soupy with rainfall and too wide to jump. I resolved to tip-toe across, like a vaudeville fiend up to no good. I hurried over to the back door, set down my gym bag of break-in tools and unzipped it. Inside were a pair of putty knives, several long-necked flathead screwdrivers, a paint scraper, among other items. I sized up the door; it was outfitted with a standard lock, nothing particularly fancy. Penlight clamped in my mouth, I selected a screwdriver and
slotted it between the door and frame, near the knob. And with two forceful twists, it popped open.

Only once had I tried to raid Oak Ridge, six or seven winters ago. Intimidated by the risk of breaking into such a large compound, I’d abandoned my attempt not long after setting foot on the grounds.

Unfamiliar with the layout of the building, I slipped through the doorway, searching. The air inside was stale, and smelled of citrus and grease. Crouched in the oily darkness, I turned my penlight on and surveyed the room.

The kitchen was pristine and enormous. There was a row of brass-knobbed cabinets above the countertops, and a stainless-steel kitchen island with a vent hood at the center of the room. And over the sink was a double-hung window with a view of the clearing.

I kept panning across the room until I found what I was looking for: a small alcove near the back of the room, with three shelves, each fully stocked with a wide assortment of goods.

I read their garishly labels softly to myself. The top shelf was filled with stacks of canned foods: tuna and SPAM, minced tomatoes and refried beans, sliced carrots and sweet whole kernel corn. Below it was mostly snack foods, minor fair for the campers and instructors to munch on in between meals; there was a couple of boxes of energy bars, both chocolate chip and oatmeal; two packs of single-sized Utz potato chips; three bags of marshmallows, and four loose sleeves of saltine crackers. And on the bottom shelf, tubs of granulated sugar and ground coffee.
Clicking off my penlight, I shouldered off my backpack and unzipped it. I planned to fill my bag with as much as I could and then stash the items somewhere in the woods nearby; that way I could maximize my take before dawn.

I started with the top shelf, grabbing three or four items at a time. I carefully deposited the cans in the bag’s main pocket, occasionally shifting and reordering to maximize space, until it was completely full and then began packing the side pockets.

When I was sure I’d exhausted every available inch, I zipped it back up and made for the door, stepping lightly across the kitchen floor. Before I left, I ripped off a strip of electrical tape and placed it over the latch bolt, to prevent the lock from resetting. Typically, I liked to use scotch tape because it’s pretty much invisible unless you’re looking for it, but it didn’t have a shot of holding up against a heavy commercial door. So, electrical tape would have to do.

Outside, a copse of blue spruces stirred, branches creaking in the wind. I heard little else. Only my own heartbeat; for the first time tonight, it was no longer in my chest, but in my head, something steady I listened to even as I crept slowly along the side of the dining hall, even as I crossed back over the muddy path on the balls of my feet, and even as I began to hear the soft rustling of dry grass against my pant legs at the edge of the property.

I moved through the brush until I eventually came upon a trail in the forest; it was narrow and covered in a paste of dead leaves.

Once I’d finished scouting the area for possible activity last night, I found an ideal spot to temporarily stash my haul. It was about a half mile through the woods, close enough to act as a midpoint between the summer camp and my own, but far enough as to ensure I could later retrieve the items without risking detection.
I followed the trail deeper. It went to the right and then climbed steeply. There were granite chunks in the hill that I used as steps all the way to the top. I turned and the clearing was no longer visible through the trees, but I still had ways to go. The path dropped again and was very rocky. I started down and grabbed at the branches beside the trail to balance myself. I was stepping down and over the rocks very quickly and when the ground finally leveled, I continued along the trail for another hundred paces before I made a sharp right turn into the undergrowth, moving as fast as I could under my backpack’s weight.

I saw my breath in front of me as I stepped over exposed pine roots and patches of wide green ferns. Above me, the high leaves of paper birches flittered in a breeze I didn’t feel. Beyond the branches, patches of stars were now hidden behind a pall of fast-moving clouds.

I slowed to a steady pace, my feet and heart beating in synchrony. I glanced around. There was frost everywhere; I saw the thin icy layer of it on the moss patches at the base of the trees, and the brown pine needles that blanketed the floor of the woods were covered with it.

When I stumbled upon a crudely constructed stone wall, I knew I was close. The wall was comprised of interlocking lumps of stone, all buttressed, layered and balanced carefully against one another, unmortared, held in place purely by the tension of their placement, though some of the topmost rocks had fallen away. There were miles of these walls around here crisscrossing through these woods, like veins and arteries protruding from the earth, marking boundaries hundreds of years old and enclosing an agrarian way of life now mostly vanished.
I scrabbled up the wall, found my footing at the apex and, from this point of elevation, considered the lay of the surround. I squinted through my glasses, surveying the darkness.

And then I saw it.

A glacial boulder, as smooth and round as a prehistoric egg, with a fallen shagbark hickory leaning against it. I stepped from the wall and set towards it.

Dropping to my knees, I shouldered off my bag with burdened grace. I’d already cleared a space beneath where wood met stone. It wasn’t much space, roughly the size of a microwave, but I didn’t need much more. I’d store two or three loads of smallish goods. The bulkier items I saved for last, hoofing them straight back to camp.

I began to unload the bag. I stacked the tuna first and then the SPAM, followed by the vegetables. Already I’d gathered more food than my last four raids combined; it was nearly two months’ worth of provisions, if I rationed sparingly. When the bag was finally empty, I folded the soggy edges of the shirt over the canned goods and then concealed the opening with dirt and leaves.

I started back towards Oak Ridge, the empty bag jostling against my back.

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The tape had held, and I was back inside.

But instead of returning to the pantry, I decided to check the cabinets, as they were, in my experience, usually where most of the sugary goods were kept. I walked over to the
cabinets on the other side of the kitchen island and opened them up. Inside were jars of assorted jams, a half dozen. I removed a jar of cherry jam from the shelf and weighed it with my hands.

It was then that I spotted something strange in the window. I leaned over the sink, hoping to score a closer look. It appeared to be lights. It was lights. A dirty sodium glow was peeking over the roof of an adjacent building. I knew immediately it wasn’t headlights; too high, plus the color wasn’t right. It was a floodlight.

My mouth went cotton, and I felt my heart pulsing in my tongue.

Had I set it off crossing the yard? Impossible. No doubt I would’ve noticed. But it had to be something. An animal, hopefully. A deer perhaps. Or even a brown bear. With my free hand, I felt the canister of mace in my jacket pocket. Only once had I ever encountered a bear while on a raid, and that was more than enough.

I needed to move, and quickly.

But as I stepped from the sink, from behind I suddenly heard a curt metal crunch followed by a click.

Suddenly, from behind, a curt metallic crunch followed by a click.

The noise was there and gone, a slap to the air that left it hot and thrumming. I was jarred, punch-drunk, blood droning thickly in my ears. Cabinets exploded in a shower of wood splinters. I shielded my face with a raised arm. Guided by dumb animal instinct, I dropped to the kitchen floor, whirling around as I fell. And in that split second, I glimpsed in the doorway the silhouette of man, wreathed in smoke, a shotgun pressed high against his cheek.
I landed with outturned palms, shattering a jar I didn’t realize I’d been holding. Tiny shards of glass skittered across the linoleum tiles. I remained prone for a brief moment, blinking to water away the sudden flecks of grit inundating my eyes. The bridge of my nose throbbed and my face was very hot.

There was another sound, the unmistakable crunch of the shotgun being racked, followed by the echo of an expelled shell.

I scrabbled across the floor on all fours, my hands slapping the tiles, seeking cover behind the island.

“Just where in the fuck do you think you’re going?” said a voice from the far side of the room.

I curled up against the kitchen island and brought my knees to my chest. My glasses had slid down past the bridge of my nose. I pushed them back into place, smearing something dark and viscous on the lenses in the process.

“You hear me?” The voice sounded closer now.

Heart in throat, I croaked, “Don’t come any closer!”

There was no reply, so I shouted the command again, this time adding, “I have a weapon!” I glanced around for my gym bag, which I’d left behind when I made my first drop, but it was nowhere to be seen. Not like a hacksaw or pocket knife would do much good against a gun, anyway.

From the silence, the man said, “Then you best be ready to use it.”

“It’s jam,” I called, making myself small as possible against the island. “Just fucking jam. You can have it. I’ll leave, never come back. Okay?”

The man said nothing.
Footfalls against the tiles. The room smelled heavily of gunpowder and sawdust. From where I sat, I could see the rind of moon through the window, a sideways grin in the sky.

I heard more footfalls. Softer, closer. He was flanking me, trying to find the best angle for a clean shot. I slouched back to my left, wormed farther down along the island, hoping to buy time. Near the corner, pushing off my right foot, I slipped. My boot squealed against the lacquered surface, and I winced, expecting another shot – but nothing.

I paused, holding my breath, listening. No sound but the squeak of blood in my ears.

Where could he be?

Certainly, he hadn’t left, gone to get help or call the police. I looked down at where I had fallen. Weak moonlight spilled through the window, illuminating the red mess on the floor, sparkling the jags of broken glass.

Still supine, at the edge of the island, I peered around the corner. The back door to the kitchen was only about a dozen paces away, but it might as well have been a mile. I hadn’t the faintest idea where the man was positioned. No doubt he was perching, finger coiled around the trigger, waiting for the slightest hint of motion. If I knew where he was, I could run where he wasn’t, but if the sound of my boot hadn’t roused him, I didn’t know what would.

I patted my pockets, trying to think.

Then: something.

Slowly, gingerly, I took the penlight from around my neck. With the other hand, I removed the electrical tape, and bear mace from my breast pocket. Quietly as possible, I
rose in a semi-crouched stance, careful to keep my head below the counter. Then, taking the penlight from my teeth with my right hand, I angled its bulb at the kitchen cabinets, only a few feet down from the blasted remnants of the others.

I pressed the button, and a bright shive of light pierced the darkness, glinting off the brass knob of the cabinet. Then, another gunshot, more splintering wood. Judging by the angle of the shot, he was at the back-right corner of the room, probably a good ten feet or so from where I was positioned.

The man racked the shotgun.

Moving quickly, I removed my wool cap, stuffing it in my mouth, at the ready. Then, taking the canister in one hand, carefully aimed its nozzle away from my face, and with the other hand, grabbed the roll of tape and began looping it around the canister’s handle, holding it in the down-position. A thick, bitter haze sputtered from the nozzle, filling the room almost instantaneously. With a strong side-armed lob, I threw the spewing canister over the island like a grenade, towards where I hoped the man was standing, waiting.

Then, another shot, only inches from my head, peppering the metal countertop with pellets. But this time, I didn’t hear the shotgun’s slide rack back into place. The man hacked and wheezed, stumbling backwards into a shelf, sending pans and appliances crashing to the floor.

I turned and ran, lunging so quickly from my runner’s stance I felt my right hamstring tear within a couple of strides, but I kept going, groping towards the door the dark and smoke and noxious mist, wool hat smothered against my face like a crude gas
mask. I barreled into the doors with all I had, bursting outwards, sending me stumbling into
the fresh night air.
 Didn’t mean squat how much we won by, and we won last Friday by a lot – it was a slaughter, an ass-kicking, a drubbing, a rape – Coach would still grind our ass to hamburger meat in film before Monday’s practice. Gain forty yards on a busted sweep? Should’ve lowered your shoulder for an extra two. Throw five touchdowns in the first half alone? Could’ve been six if you hung in the pocket. Stuff the ball-carrier on three runs straight? Would’ve been four if you hadn’t blitzed the wrong gap. The score could’ve been nine thousand to nothing and Coach would still have bones to pick with us. Everyone, that is, except for Oram. Not even Coach, a grade-A ball-buster with a jeweler’s eye for flaw, could challenge him. But I mean, how could he when Oram is who he is – the best defensive player Coach has seen in nearly thirty years.

Coach has even let up on me after how well I’ve played over the first half of the season. He even calls me a “difference maker” after my performance in our last win. He says I do what I need to do to put this team in a position to win. He says there’s only
three things in this world we can’t ever get back: the sped arrow, the spoken word, and the missed opportunity. Coach says when I see an opportunity, I take it. Frankly, I credit my technique. It’s served me well.

Here’s a tip: The thumb works best, in my experience.

You can apply the most pressure with it, really let him know you’re there, that you mean business.

Oram says index fingers are more effective because they maximize torque, something that’s very much needed when fighting for a football at the bottom of a dogpile, but frankly he doesn’t know jack shit.

I tell him, “Stick to what you know,” which is forcing fumbles, “and I’ll stick to what I know,” which is recovering them.

“Yeah yeah yeah,” is what he says to me.

The way I see it, the problem with index fingers is they have no stability. Unless you have Cohiba-thick fingers like Oram, you can’t use too much force. Otherwise, you’ll risk breaking the bone. And force is exactly what you need if you’re hoping to make your presence known. But with the thumb, no such trouble. Sure, you don’t have the same leverage or flexibility, but the thumb is sturdy, dependable. It sends a message to the ball-carrier, loud and clear: Give it up, or else. You make him decide which is more precious, what he holds nearer and dearer. And that’s what it’s all about, forcing someone into a touch choice: Your ass or the football, which do you protect? Nine times out of ten, they’ll opt to guard their backdoor and cough up the football. Can’t blame ‘im, really. It’s far from pleasant, being trapped at the bottom of a flesh heap, with someone threatening to turn you into a finger puppet. Of course, you come across a real stubborn prick every
so often. Someone hardboiled enough to call your bluff, and then you’re forced to prod vigorously enough to convince him that if he doesn’t give up in the next second or two, the fabric of their pants sure as hell will.

But the refs typically step in before shit gets weird.

‘So, yeah. It’s sort of my specialty. Of the six fumbles that I’ve recovered, two of which came during our win over Aledo High last Friday, half have come by way of the Thumb. It’s what I’m known for. Which is one reason Coach calls me Sick Puppy. As in Milt! You are one sick puppy! which he screams whenever I emerge from the scrum with the ball raised high above my head. The other is when I first arrived for practice, a few days after my family moved from Massachusetts, Coach said I was too frail for this level. Then a year or so later, after eating and pumping my way up from 135 pounds to about 160, Coach approach me outside the cafeteria.

I asked to play offense, preferably receiver or (because I was a team player) perhaps even tight end. They moved me to defense pretty much when I arrived. Apparently, I didn’t have the footspeed to be a ball-carrier, so I went after anyone who did. I figured just because my body couldn’t be a threat, didn’t mean it couldn’t be a weapon. Pretty soon I developed a reputation as a headhunter of sorts.

I got myself out of JV late my sophomore year, halfway through our intrasquad scrimmage. By then I’d already begun rotating in at nose-tackle pretty regularly, and on my second play, sensing pulling the guard, I followed close against his hip and cracked the tailback before he was able to secure the handoff, causing him to fumble the football. Somehow, I managed to latch onto the football, refusing to loosen my grip until I had reached the sideline. The very next day, I was moved up to the Varsity squad.
Needless to say, I benefit from lining up next to Oram on the defensive line. He forced all of those six fumbles, plus another three which he recovered himself. Only four games into the season, and already he’s broken the school record.

Don’t get me wrong, Oram’s other stats are just as impressive, but it’s his power that puts asses in the bleachers. If he cracks you going full-tilt, it takes all you’ve got to keep control of your bowels, never mind the ball. And whenever he’s given a clean shot on a quarterback, the crowd makes those oooh sounds.

It’s not uncommon for an opposing coach to require blood pressure medication after devising a game plan around him. If a team runs a tailback sweeps away from him, he chases the play down from behind. If they double-team him, he barrels through both linemen. And if guards chop his knees, he plants a cleat in their spine just for kicks before murdering the ball-carrier. Once, desperate to slow Oram down, an offensive tackle attempted an eye gouge, losing the tip of his pinky in process. Which is why Coach calls him Mad Dog.

Today, nearing the end of our scrimmage, I count upwards of thirty coaches in the bleachers. They’re fairly easy to distinguish from the everyday onlookers. Just look for the paunchy, prison guard-type dudes wearing visors and rumpled cargos.
Oram’s a blue-chipper’s blue chip, a consensus five-star player, the top recruit in all of the regular and online ranking services, who ran so fast and hit so hard college scouts kept a box of Kleenex on hand while watching his game tape. He’s been the cover of PrepStar Magazine two years running at defensive tackle.

College coaches have been pining after Oram since before I even knew him. His first scholarship offer came after a coach from Texas State happened by one of his Pop-Warner practices. Already carrying two-hundred forty pounds and bench-pressing well over that, Oram clocked a 4.4 forty in the eighth grade, and the legend is that coach ran even faster than that into the locker room to jack off over his stopwatch.

“Last play, fourth and one!” Coach calls from the near sideline. “You hear me? This is it. So make it fuckin’ count.”

Broiling in the Texas sun, the scouts and coaches seem to perk up. A few make their way down the bleachers and crowd the railing, hoping for one last close look.

Oram has offers from more schools than I knew existed. Powerhouse programs vie for his services. SEC, BIG-10, ACC, PAC-12, you name it. And with his decision looming, they’ve become increasingly desperate. Last week, Oram received a package containing a pair of well-traveled panties, which once belonged to the wife of an assistant coach. The week before, another coach personally delivered a sketch of Oram riding bare-chested across the 50-yard line on the back of a Water Buffalo.

I asked him once over the summer which school he was learning towards, but all he said was, “There are no schools but this one. There’s no place but here.”

I assumed that meant: Nah, not really thinking about it too much.
My prospects aren’t as promising. Partly due to my grades, which suck. But mostly because of my stature, which is even worse. My stats got me a few looks early on in the process, most from schools you’ve never heard of, located in towns you’d never go.

It’s a hundred degrees with eighty percent humidity. Even with your helmet off, it felt like breathing inside of a wet wool-mitten. Oram’s gassed, I can tell, and so am I. But we keep our shoulder blades pinched and our hands off our hips, careful not to let it show.

“Fuck up, pussy,” Oram says to a junior safety, who has taken a knee while the offense huddles.

Now that Oram and me are seniors, we’re on a mission. We want to cause panic on the field one hundred percent of the time. Our attitude towards everyone who’s not us? Fuck ‘im. Towards the dudes across from us? Fuck you. Towards those weak in the knees? Prepare the stretcher. Towards those on the stretcher? Alert the morgue.

We’re an ideal tandem. Oram blows up the backfield, and I make the tackle. He forces the fumble with Oram clobbers the ball-carrier, and I recover the football. He blows up the backfield, and I make the tackle. That’s how we work. Though I’m by no means a slouch, Coach calls me a complementary player. Which is fine by me. I know what I am.

To even say I complement Oram as a player is itself a compliment.

The play is a tailback dive, directly off the fullback’s ass. As I shuffle down the line, I see Oram wrench the guard aside in time to meet the charging fullback in the hole. They hit each other so hard, I can feel. The little earpads fly out of the fullback’s helmet
as he staggers backward into an unsuspecting ball-carrier. Oram, still charging, bear hugs them both, which allows me enough time to work up enough steam to finish them off. And so I charge headlong, and when I hit, I crash into a darkness I don’t care to remember.
The Son

***

I have reason to suspect that the heart of a tyrant beats within my two-year-old son. I’ve been watching him carefully, and of this, I am almost certain. If that sounds absurd, try to imagine how I feel. I didn’t come to this conclusion easily, after all. For a long time, I refused to admit anything could be off about Richard. In retrospect, it’s clear I was allowing paternal affection to eclipse my good sense. I willfully mistook signs for quirks, misidentified omens as eccentricities.

I now fear the world will someday pay for my follies.

Perhaps this shouldn’t have come as such a surprise. Even as an infant, Richard seemed to radiate an incongruous menace. My wife was the first to take note, as she nursed him at her breast, only two or three days after returning from the hospital. She asked if I saw what she saw. I said it was our baby, what exactly was there to see? She said his facial expressions (which she claimed, playfully, at least initially), appeared uncommonly stern, almost threatening. Naturally, I’d laugh this off, at least initially, say it was pure invention,
the product of an exhausted mind. I’d say I didn’t find Richard’s demeanor alarming, though I did find it rather odd that he hardly ever cried, and if given the opportunity, seemed fully capable of matching one’s gaze with fierce intensity for an ungodly amount of time.

When friends and family stopped by to see him, my wife, much to my embarrassment, would remark upon Richard’s expressions. She’d say stuff like, “Don’t you just love love love that unrelenting stare he’s always looking at you with, always?” or eventually, “Does this baby look menacing to you?”

People, being too polite, or perhaps (justifiably) terrified – whether of my wife’s question or our newborn, remains to be seen – never knew how to respond. Answers typically came in the form of tight, uneasy smiles. Or vigorous nods, which, if sustained, would likely require chiropractic intervention. And oftentimes, they would perform some horrid combination of the two.

I’d step in, chuckle heartily, and say my lovely wife was merely kidding. But the damage was done. After a few weeks, visits became less frequent. Soon, they ceased all together.

The baby and his expressions became a source of tension between us. Strains developed and our marriage frayed. We began squabbling daily, mostly about Richard. She’d insist something was off about him, and I’d insist there wasn’t, and then she’d call me blind, and I’d call her crazy. Before too long, we were nothing but an argument looking for different ways to happen. We quarreled over the remote, magazine subscriptions, garbage cans, spending habits, the merits of whole mike versus two-percent. Eventually, she left. But where, she didn’t say.

Of course, I feel even worse about this now.
Now, it’s just the two of us, alone. Since my wife’s departure, nearly a year ago today, Richard has developed into a reserved toddler, often evasive and distant; at other times, when tenanted by an appeasing temper, laconically amiable.

It wasn’t until this past summer that I truly began to grow suspicious of my son’s behavior. Spring began with the unexpected crash of the real estate market, which resulted in the closure of my branch at the mortgage company. Soon after, I was forced to sell our quaint two-story with the cobblestone walkway and thriving oak in the backyard. Which was fine, I told myself, too much house for just two people.

Then, earlier this week, I was forced to take Richard along to the office, after the fourth nanny in as many weeks suddenly quit without explanation. By this point, I’d been working in a call center as a telemarketer for a couple months. It isn’t exactly an enjoyable job, peddling discount timeshares in war-torn countries, but it offers decent pay and flexible hours. When we arrived at the facility, coworkers crowded around in disbelief, saying stuff like, “Woah, Tate. Handsome kid you got there” and “Yeah, man. Whose is he, really? Ha-ha-ha!” Of course, I’m used to hearing this by now. It’s true: My toddler is a pretty fine toddler. And it’s also true that, beyond his aquiline nose and pale blue eyes, my chromosomal influence appears minimal, only becoming apparent in the cruelest of funhouse mirrors. Although only two, Richard’s nascent physique that augurs poorly for future foes; he’s quite lean, built with the slender economy of a springbok. I myself am a degraded form, follicly challenged and of considerable girth. My body’s a pockmarked vista of rippling flesh. Months of sitting in a woefully insufficient office chair, talking up
decrepit bungalows and two-bit roach motels certain hasn’t done me any favors. But I still take it as a sort of compliment.

Around nine-thirty, my boss, a kindly old grandfather-sort, approached my desk, stooping to ask if Richard would like a tour, and perhaps, if he behaved like a good boy, stop at the vending machine. I said he would love that, to which Richard shrugged. “Fantastic,” he said scooping him into his arm, “Have him back within the hour.” Twenty-minutes later, they boss returned. “Here,” he said with a faraway look in his eye. “Take him.” Thenceforth, I was permitted to work from home until another sitter could be found.

Then Sunday, I took Richard to the local park, hoping to make the most out of his last day before preschool began. I thought it’d do him good, to get out of our cramped apartment. That was probably part of the problem. How couldn’t he help but act sullen, always cooped up in such a place? Yes, fresh air would do him some good.

It was early afternoon, and the park’s air smelled of decapitated clover, freshly mown. We slowly wended across the sun-dappled lawn, choked with blankets and people. Shrieks of children at play carried from a nearby playground. I suggested he join them, knowing his interactions with children his own age had, thus far, been minimal. Reluctantly, he agreed. And as he tottered away, I settled on a nearby bench, which sat beneath the scant canopy of a prematurely defoliated oak, where, lulled by the provisional warmth of an early autumnal sun, I must’ve accidently dozed off.

I woke in a panic. How stupid, I thought. How freaking stupid. I frantically scanned for traces of my son, unspeakable scenarios flashing through my mind. How freaking … But Oh, thank God, there he was! Right where I’d seen him last, atop the brightly-colored jungle gym. And much to my surprise, not only was Richard still on the playground, but
he seemed to be *playing* on the playground. As in, playing with other children who themselves were playing with other children on the playground. Could it be that my Richard, who had abstained from partaking in the merriments of childhood as if he were allergic, *actually* be playing and cavorting and apparently enjoying himself in the presence of other children? Yes, he could! And not only was he actually playing and cavorting and apparently enjoying himself, Richard also seemed, from where I stood, to be the focal point of whatever game they were playing! A very serious-seeming game, the likes of which I had never seen before; one that involved, for Richard, a great deal of command-giving and gesticulating towards the other children, and not much else.

I watched as Richard proceeded to monopolize the entire playground: bribing huskier toddlers with ill-gotten gummies to do his bidding, dispatching goon squads to expropriate swing sets and sandboxes, and judiciously distributing the spoils of his conquests back to the subjugated masses. My son reigned over his tiny kingdom not with despotic arrogance, but rather, calculated timidity – the hallmark of all great tyrants.

Why I didn’t step in and stop this, I couldn’t tell you. I certainly never condoned such behavior at home, at least I never thought I had. Never had I seen him act in such a way. Never once. Now, it’s takes all I can do to stop thinking about it. I think about it at night, when I kiss Richard’s forehead before bed, and in the morning, as I assist him with his shoelaces. I think about it at work, too, when making my daily calls. As a result, my sales have begun to suffer. Which is not good. When I phone a potential customer, I’ll think: Need to focus. Need to concentrate. Must eradicate thoughts of Richard from my mind. Then I’ll think: Eradicate is a poor choice of words. Too violent, too many not-nice connotations. How about *push*? Or even *nudge*? Or better yet, *lovingly nudge*? Yes,
lovingly nude will do just fine. I’ll think: Must lovingly nudge thoughts of Richard from my mind. But by then, I’ll have lost the call. Now, I’m currently on probation, and my boss say my thin ice is only growing thinner.

I’ll think: Come on. Pull it together. You can’t afford to lose this job.

I’ll think: Think about Richard.

Then I’ll think: Don’t.
Lazarus Go Home

***

After we deliver to our buyer, Cully and I hit the Pike westbound back towards Worcester. By this time, the highway is already choked with rush hour traffic, and soon in the river of cars ahead an ignition of brake lights rolls back to us like a wave. We lurch to a stop and Cully takes his hands off the wheel, carefully rolls up the sleeves of his shirt and then lights a cigarette, though it’s against policy to smoke in the transfer van, or any company vehicle for that matter. I briefly consider protesting but don’t, knowing it wouldn’t do a lick of good anyhow. I power down the passenger window only slightly and then lean my head against the pane, watch as blue tangles of smoke escape through the narrow crack. Outside, a dirty apron of snow flanks both sides of the highway, and just above trees like inverted brooms, the sun is low and mercilessly bright.

“Goddamn sun,” I say, raising a hand to shield my eyes. “Feels like we’re driving into the asshole of hell.”
Cully says nothing, hasn’t since the sale. That’s how I can tell he’s pissed – gets all
tight-lipped. Cully and I are close as can be, practically brothers, really. Only two months
my junior, he’s a sawed-off brute, stoutly built and cobbled with muscle, like a jockey on
steroids. Although he lacks proper stature, most recognize the hair-trigger behind his eyes
and resolve to keep their distance, especially when he’s in one of his moods. For a time
back in grade school, a few buddies half-joking began calling him Ripass. The nickname
had a sort of double meaning, as Cully’s most menacing when silent, and when he’s at his
most menacing, there’s always a shot he will rip some poor dumb asshole to shreds.

“I’m done nickel and diming,” Cully says finally. “We should’ve just told that guy
to screw.”

“What do you mean?”

“What I mean is that we’re the ones risking our asses. We’re the ones doing the
legwork. We’re the ones driving halfway across the state with body parts in tow. And these
dudes, these so-called medical professionals, still have the stones to haggle over price.”

“Hey,” I say. “This here is a side business. We’re damn lucky to be getting
anything.”

“Lucky? Whole lot of work and a whole lot of risk, all for just over five-hundred
bucks? I’m sorry, man. Not exactly seeing the luck here.”

“Cash is cash,” I say holding up the manila envelope we received in exchange for
nearly an entire body’s worth of bones. “At the end of the day, we’re walking away five-
hundred dollars richer than when we woke up this morning. The way I see it, that’s damn
good.”
“Yeah, well, then I recommend getting your eyes checked,” Cully says. “Because we’re getting. Hard. There’s no two ways about it.”

“Then what do you suggest?” I say, although I’m pretty sure I already know the answer.

“Listen, I don’t exactly enjoy what we’re doing here,” Cully says after exhaling an impossibly long drag. “But as long as we’re doing it, we might as well do it all the way.”

We ride in silence for a while after that.

***

Cully has worked for Remi Marquez at the Funeral Home for nearly ten years. He started off with the gig I have now, running the transfer van, after he dropped out halfway through our junior year. After a few years, he worked his way up to assistant mortician. And a couple years after that, Remi stuck him in the crematorium. The job is pretty much the only constant in Cully’s life; like myself, he’s got almost no family and even fewer prospects.

In the years before I took over for Cully, I bounced between a series of odd jobs; a short stint as a telemarketer, a gig many regard as the occupational equivalent to herpes. After that, I worked the door at Hurricane Betty’s, a scuzzy little strip joint next to the P&W railroad, where college kids came for cheap laughs and handjobs. My last job before Remi’s was scrubbing shitters after hours at the Public Library. It was better than it sounds. I actually came to enjoy the solitude. And whenever I’d finish early, I wandered the aisles,
running my fingers along the spines of books I’d never read, as dawn bled in through the dirty windows.

I was barely a month into the job when our little side business started up. Cully claimed it was foolproof. See, every so often, W.’s Finest find a homeless dude - track-marks on his arms, shit in his pants - all expired in an alleyway. So after the EMTs arrived, and did whatever EMTs do with dead guys, these stiffs would end up at the City Morgue. But because of limited space, City Morgue can only hold bodies for approximately six weeks. And if unclaimed, the medical examiner would send them to Remi’s for consolidation, which meant the body got cremated; a cheaper, more efficient alternative to burying all these JoDos. According to Cully, this deal between Remi and the City had been in place for like, ever, which made sense, seeing as how Remi’s worked on the right side of the funeral business longer than anyone else around.

So all we gotta do, Cully said. Is wait for Remi to vacate the premises. And when he does, we’ll yank one of the unclaimed stiffs due for the hotbox, and then discreetly usher him out the back door. Simple as that.

Oh? I said. Simple as that.

That’s right.

What about Remi? I said.

What about him? Cully said. Remi doesn’t even know what time zone he’s in anymore. Dude’s fuckin ancient. Like so old, Martha didn’t even have a Vineyard yet when he was born.

And the City?
You really think the City gives one hot fuck about a couple of unclaimed stiffs that they were absolutely *itchin* to dump on us in the first place?

No, I said. But W.’s Finest might object.

Christ on a cracker, Cully said. What confidence you have in your *own* flesh ’n blood.

Ain’t no betting man, I said. But if I *were*, I’d put what little I got on the law taking issue with anyone selling *stolen* bodies for profit. But that’s only a hunch.

Listen, how long’ve I been working for Remi?

Long time.

That’s *right*, Cully said. A *long-ass* time. So believe me when I say that I know how to skirt around the system.

Man, all your life you’ve had enough trouble just trying to *lift* a skirt, never mind getting *around* one.

Real hilarious, Cully said.

I just don’t know, man. Doesn’t feel right to me.

But see, you gotta realize, Cully said. We aren’t the only ones benefiting from this. Medical schools, research facilities, they *need* these bodies. Need em *real* bad. How else are they supposed to test all their medical shit and stuff?

Aren’t their people out there who like, *willingly* sell their bodies to science?

Yeah, course there are. But there ain’t never enough, Cully said. They got the need, okay? And *we* got the product. Supply and demand, B.. Shit’s the bedrock of our capitalist economy.

*Bedrock of our capitalist economy*? I said. Who the hell are you, JD Rockefeller, Jr.??
Done my homework, Cully said. These dudes, they’ll cough up serious shekels for fresh stiffs. Talkin five, six grand a pop.

Six-thousand for one stiff? I said.

Betta believe it, Cully said. Think about it, man. Seems almost wasteful not to, don’t it?

Wasteful? I said. Cully, these aren’t old stereos we’re trying to junk for pocket change. We’re talking about people, humans - human lives.

Listen, you know I got the utmost respect for human life, Cully said. So let’s get one thing straight - we’re talkin about stiffs, bodies, corpses. Your heart opts out? Then there ain’t no more life to respect, is there. You croak? Well, then you’re just a big bag of meat and bones now, aren’t ya. Shit, man, you ain’t even that. You’re nothin. When you die, you go from being somethin to nothin. That’s it, B.. That’s what dying means.

Okay, okay, I said. I get it.

All I’m sayin, Cully said. Is answer me this: why should we turn all these poor SOBs into dust while their bodies, their perfectly good bodies could still be put to use? Still be used to benefit those of us who aren’t nothin? At least, not yet.

I told him that the answer to that still seemed rather obvious.

Ok, sure, Cully conceded. But doctors, they use those things – those bodies to progress all that medical science type shit. Like new tools and medicines and techniques. Near impossible to do that without, like, actual bodies to try em out on. Please, just think about this for a minute, Brucie.

I stood there silently, sucking on a tooth.

Could do a lot of people a lot of good, Cully said.
You mean it could do us a lot of good.

Well. Yes, Cully said. Us and many, many others.

While at the same time, putting cash in our pockets, I said, my tone flat as our products’ EKG-lines.

I mean, y’know, Cully said, smirking. Kind of a get two birds stoned at once type of deal.

***

Cully has never seen home in this place, a city joined by seven hills and divided by one six-lane highway. He can’t help but laugh whenever people refer to Worcester as the Heart of the Commonwealth. He says it’s a piss-poor moniker, spoken only by outsiders, city councilmen and lace-curtain fuckwads. If anything, it’s more like Boston’s Ugly Little Sister. He often talks about leaving, but he knows he never will.

It’s a place that had once been well-off, but beyond the condemned industrial buildings, little evidence of that time remains. Besides a research hospital and a few nearby colleges, there isn’t much here. Only rows of clapboard triple-deckers with flaking paint and Madonnas in the garden, a stillborn shopping mall, a squander of pubs frequented by geriatric keno-fiends with fat hands and dead wives, and an interstate diner where single mothers push fries at ghosts all day in the drive-thru, until their faces are no more than an uncooperative canvas onto which the world has etched its many disappointments.
It’s night by the time we get back to the funeral home. It’s a two-story Victorian with twin spires and oblong windows, which, in this neighborhood, sticks out like a diamond in a coal bucket.

We pull around back, park next to the dumpster by the service door. The lights are off inside, so I slip the keys through the mail slot.

We start off towards home, talking and smoking the last of our cigarettes. The sky has gone the color of a nasty bruise, stars all smeary and faint. The wind has picked up, forcing the trees together like lousy drunks. Crusty piles of snow line both sides of Park Avenue; they glitter under the streetlight, and I yawn and think of my electric blanket and bed. We pass the discount shoe store and then Mahoney’s Pub, outside of which, locals have gathered to shout at college girls with giraffe legs and no jackets. Ayyo honey yew lookin’ fur five Irish inches of disappointment toniteee? At the corner, we cut through Elm Park, trek along the crystal-still pond where shopping carts luxuriate half-submerged in the shallows.

Our apartment is on the top floor of a clapboard triple-decker. I spot lights on inside from the road, a surefire sign that Fish will once again be commandeering our sofa for the night. Which is fine, as he’s practically family at this point.

Fish showed up one day, decades ago, at my brother’s side and never left. He’s like most: basically good. Only difference, Fish, by all accounts, wasn’t exactly the brightest log on the yuletide fire. When coupled a caring heart, this combination typically meant trouble, especially during adolescence. But with Cully’s around, kids never seemed to bother him much.
Fish used to deal smoke and low-grade E, in part to support his cousin. It was going well before he got sloppy, and soon after, popped by Worcester’s Finest. Nowadays, Fish splits his time between hauling suitcases at the airport and studying for his masseuse-licensing test.

When we get inside, Fish sprawled out on the sofa in his underwear, thumbing through a textbook on *Centering Your Chi*. Fish is big and doughy, stature warped by a lifetime of shit posture. He’s older, nearly forty, though he doesn’t look it, with a round, ruddy mug like a sixth-grader who has seen some serious shit.

“For the love of all things holy, cover up, because Mo and Tanya are on their way over, and that,” Cully says, gesturing down at Fish’s crotch, “is absolutely no way to greet a guest.”

Cully disappears into the kitchen, returning with a couple of beers. He lobbs one over to me. I don’t feel much like boozing tonight, but I don’t say a word.

I leave the beer unopened on the table, and retreat to my room.

A few hours later, I emerge from my room to take a piss.

Fish is still in his underwear, and everybody’s shitfaced. The air is heavy with smoke, cheap perfume. At the far corner of the room, the television is flickering, drowned out by the warble of a steel guitar, easing from our secondhand stereo.
Cully is on the recliner with Monique in his lap, her arms lassoing his neck. Monique is a pleasant-faced chick, densely troweled in eyeshadow and sporting an insufficient skirt. Monique is in her senior year, while also pulling nights and weekend mornings as a cashier at Austin Liquors.

Her best friend, Tanya, is on the far end of the sofa, with a bottle wedged between her thighs. She’s beautiful in a neutral way, severely thin, with a frizzy cascade of blonde hair and a soft smile complicated by a dead tooth. Fish is at her side, talking more at her than to her, loudly and without pause. Tanya’s palm is cupped against her cheek, as if rapt, nodding dutifully, undoubtedly humoring him. This is clear to everyone but Fish, it seems, as Tanya smiles and laughs whenever the moment calls for it, always seeming somehow present in the way only those aware of their own imminent departure can be.

Tanya spent her childhood awash in a sea of testosterone. She’s the youngest of six and the only girl. According to Tanya, her father installed septic tanks before he was beset by a phantom injury, which persisted until his employer agreed to grant him disability, therefore freeing him to live out his remaining days perched on a stool in a murky barroom.

Her mother’s dead. She was gone before Tanya turned three.

Tanya comes from similar stock, but she’s nothing of our ilk. She’s on scholarship at a nearby preparatory academy, and next fall she is off to art college in Savannah on another full-ride.

Cully always says that I should bang her. I try telling him that she’s not even eighteen yet, but he says he doesn’t see why that should get between me and primo trim.
‘It lives,’ Cully says, as I stepped out into the living room. ‘How sweet of you to come out and socialize for once, dear brother.’

I nod at Tanya and Monique.

‘What drew you out of your cave?’ Cully says. ‘Finally out of Vaseline? Start to take off a little skin? Don’t you remember what Father Kerrigan said? That every time you played with your pecker, an angel lost its wings.’

Fish chortles through a milky bong hit.

‘Don’t laugh,’ Cully says, with faux scorn. ‘This is a serious matter. Keep it up, B., and God won’t have anyone left to do his bidding. You’d be putting Him in a real tough position.’

For once, I think, it would’ve been nice to return the courtesy.

‘Gotta piss,’ I say, pointing to the bathroom.

‘Hi, Bruce,’ Tanya says, peering around Fish, who seems to be moving steadily closer.

‘Hi,’ I say, flashing teeth.

‘Interest you in a beer?’ Tanya says, leaning to extract an unopened beer from the collection of the cans assembled on the table. ‘Your choice between a wide bevy of domestic …’ Tanya’s voice tapers off, eyes scanning across miniature skyline, ‘…and domestic-light.’

I dodder my head from side-to-side, sucking a tooth in mock deliberation.

‘Be forewarned,’ Tanya says, rolling the bottle between her hands. ‘These feel a bit warm. Well, not warm. More like room-temp, really. Y’know, like how the Germans drink it.’
‘Beer as tepid as Tanya’s interest in you, Fish!’ Cully says, lightening a cigarette.

‘Come on, sit. Scoot your ass over, Fish. Clear up some real estate.’

‘Fawk you, I ain’t movin’ anywhere,’ Fish says.

‘Nah, thank you, though. Stay put,’ I say, motioning at Fish. ‘Rain check. Not really in a beer drinking-mood tonight, anyhow.”

‘Oh c’mon,’ Cully groans, expelling tusks of smoke through his nose. ‘Don’t be a bitch. Take a seat. Stay awhile.’

I glance back over to Tanya on the sofa. She raises the bottle – something red, still uncorked, from between her legs. She tips her head towards it, a silent query. I wave it off. ‘Unfortunately, I’m more of a boxed-chardonnay type-guy,’ I say, with flagging sarcasm.

‘Well,’ Tanya says, searching. ‘How about a seat, then?’

I pause again in deliberation.

‘C’mon, I’m willing to be that you fancy your women like you do your wine,’ Tanya said, with a smile igniting her face. ‘No interest?’

‘No,’ I say, lying. ‘Not tonight, at least.’

I go and take my piss.

When I return, Monique is saying something about being like, so totally depressed but studies showed that people with super high IQs tended to get like, wicked fuckin’ bummed out a lot.

‘Makes sense,’ Cully says. ‘Explains why Fish is the jolliest fuck around.’

‘Up yewrs,’ Fish slurs, tossing an empty in Cully’s direction.

‘Fish,’ Cully says, with a grin. ‘You’re half a retard, and that’s the good half.’
‘Azif yewre some kinda schola, dood,’ Fish said.

Cully reminds Monique of the time Fish tearfully announced to the entire pub that his bedridden cousin, after undergoing a battery of tests, had been diagnosed by doctors as a ‘necrophiliac.’ Cully, acutely aware of Fish’s folly, immediately burst into hysterics; while Fish, thoroughly confused, stormed off in a fit, shouting that poorly clotting blood was certainly no laughing matter.

‘Well,’ says Fish, ‘I’m still willin tibet that I got more inches on m’dick than yew got IQs in yewr brain.’

‘IQs in my brain,’ Cully repeats.

‘That’s right, yew heard me,’ Fish says, sounding triumphant.

Cully, who appears to be either softly whispering or kissing Monique’s ear, pays little attention.

‘Hey!’ Fish says, staggering to his feet, ‘yew hear me? Whatta yuh gotta say to that, Alan Einstein?’

‘You want my comeback, Fish?’ Cully says. ‘Then go find your mother.’

Monique recoils and thumped Cully hard on the chest with the heel of her hand.

Tanya, eyes fixed on the TV, ignores the commotion. I turn to see the screen, a grainy news clip, pulled for some sort of documentary, it seems: a double-decked bridge high above brown water, a lone man perched on a beam, just beyond the railing; a crowd had gathered, gesturing wildly, wordlessly, but somehow, the man didn’t seem to be threatening a jump; it was as if he were content, finally, on that beam, imagining his freedom, admiring the river as the tide yawned steadily out to sea.

I turn and head back to my room.
I wake to the sound of rain softly pattering against the shingles. Gray light seeps through the venetian blinds. I slept like shit. The sounds of Cully and Monique fucking kept me up for most the night.

I roll over and check the time. Quarter of nine. Still somehow managed to oversleep. I get up and try to get my shit together as quickly as possible. I rummage through my drawers for a clean collared shirt, even though wearing it seems sorta unnecessary.

I take out the manilla envelope containing Doc’s money from my jacket and remove just over nine-hundred. I crumple the bills into a wad and stuff them beneath my mattress, and then put the envelope back in my jacket’s breast pocket.

The living room is trashed. Cigarette butts litter the rug, and an emerald bong cataracted with resin is sitting on the coffee table, surrounded by a sticky constellation of beer cans. Tanya’s still sleeping, her scrawny frame coiled kittenishly on the sofa, gently shivering. She clutches a jacket close against her throat. I can tell the window’s open by the slight fluttering of the Barney towel temporarily serving as a curtain, so I go and close it.

Fish is passed out, face down, on the kitchen floor. There’s a small pool of discolored liquid around his ankles, which seems to be slowly spreading across the peeling linoleum tiles. I watch him for a moment, just until I am positive that his chest is moving.
I put on my jacket and start down along the rain-slicked street, hoping to catch the 9:10 over to Nan’s.

After dropping off the envelope at the Finance Desk in Adyta’s Main Office, I head over to the sector in the living facility designated for cognitively impaired patients.

They keep all the doors locked as a preventative measure, so I wait for a nurse to buzz me in.

The lobby looks sorta like if God made a low-budget replica of Eden only using items from The Sharper Image. There’s a chintzy chandelier shimmering overhead, and in the corner, a burbling waterfall covered in fake vines and protected by plexiglass. A dreamy-sounding harp track softly plays on a continual loop.

Coming here always gives me the freaking willies. All these weary, shrunken-looking humans with absent stares, shuffling aimlessly along the hallways, never knowing where they’re going or where they’ve just been.

When I get to Nan’s room, I find her hunched in her chair, frowning at the wall. I don’t bother saying hello or even announce my presence. I just lightly kiss the crown of her head and turn on the TV.

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Nan’s been at Adyta Senior Living for about eight months. Sure, the decor’s a bit bougie, but it’s the Taj-fucking-Mahal compared to the shitbox she was living in before.

The least I can do is put Nan up here. The woman practically raised me. She took me in after Pops died, and Ma went away.

Nan’s pretty much catatonic at this point. Alzheimer’s. She was diagnosed four years ago. Doctor said Nan, at seventy-two, was actually one of his younger patients. A couple months in, her memory, like most afflicted, was the first to go. Real simple shit at first: numbers, recipes, where she left her keys or remote. Next to go was names, which was tough. And soon after, the faces went too, which was even tougher.

Nan completely stopped speaking about six months ago, give or take. But for a few weeks after, I’d still carry on with these one-sided conversations. Wasn’t like I was dishing on all my hopes and dreams, or shit some like that. It was usually everyday type stuff. I knew there’s a good chance she couldn’t understand, never mind respond. Still, though. A part of me thought that maybe on the best of day, a bit of what I said managed to trickle through.

But now, I don’t even try. It was during one visit, in particular, that I noticed a change in Nan’s stare. Suddenly, her eyes assumed this distant, lifeless quality, which made talking to her feel like almost trying to chat up a goldfish.
About halfway through my fourth straight episode of Family Feud, a nurse comes with lunch. I take the tray and pull a chair up next to Nan’s. She can still eat on her own for the most part, though silverware gives her fits.

I tear through the lid of Nan’s pudding cup. I raise the spoon and watch as it disappears into Nan’s mouth.
The house appeared empty when Clement pulled into the driveway. Dusk was approaching, nearly dark, and yet not a light on inside. He remained in the idling truck, searching, bent over the wheel, as if the extra few inches made any difference. His breath was fouling up little spots on the windshield, obscuring his line of sight. With the back of his hand, he wiped them away and continued scanning for any sign of activity. But there was nothing; no lights, nor movement, not even the television’s faint, blue pacifierial glow.

He sat back in his seat and closed his eyes, listening to the truck’s engine continue to burble out its stertorous din. Had last night finally done it? he wondered. He leaned across the seat and opened the glove box, taking from it his phone. He turned it on, expecting a message or voicemail, but there were none.

Her car was still in the driveway, hadn’t budged an inch from where it was this morning. She couldn’t have left, right? he thought. After all, where the hell could she have
gone to without a car? Sure, someone could’ve come and picked her up, but who? Except for an aunt, somewhere up outside of Albany, Mindy had no family. And of course, Mindy had friends and coworkers, but he sincerely doubted she would’ve asked to stay with any of them, not now, not in her condition.

He turned the key and the truck shuddered to rest. The house seemed so strange, almost eerie.

She had to be inside somewhere. Perhaps sleeping off the medication, or had drawn herself a bath. Or, perhaps she had just preferred to remain in the dark. She was in there, he was almost sure of it.

But he had to ask himself, was that really what he wanted?

***

Today had been Clement’s first day of work in nearly a week, and it hadn’t been an easy one. The job itself was supposed to be pretty simple, a standard fumigation procedure. But soon after arriving at the site, it was clear the fumigation would be anything but standard. The house, a stately three-story colonial located across town, at the end of an oak-lined cul-de-sac, had been completely overrun with termites. A writhing swarm of subterranean invaders. They were everywhere. Beneath the floorboards in the kitchen. At the bottom of the exterior walls where the stucco ended. Along the floor joists in the crawl space. He had given the house a quick once-over the day before his week-long hiatus, but saw nothing out of the ordinary. Perhaps he had been too distracted. What other explanation was there?
It was one of the worst infestations he had ever seen, though you’d never know it from the look of the place. Perhaps that’s what made them such a formidable species. They were the problem you didn’t even know you had until the floor gave out from underneath you. Clement was the best exterminator in town, the entire state, if he was honest – but even he couldn’t help but feel overwhelmed by the extent of the problem. It took eight canisters of Termidor and as many hours for him to feel comfortable calling it a day. Even then, he would likely need to return for another eight the following week.

If he was honest with himself, he didn’t feel quite right about heading to work so soon following, but God knew they needed the money, as hospital bills sure as shit didn’t pay for themselves. And anyhow, he couldn’t bear to be in that house any longer, with that silence, like a Great Colorless Space, swelling further and further between he and Mindy each time they occupied the same room.

***

He opened the door to a rush of cold air, scented with burnt leaves. Only November, but it felt as though it might snow. He thought of winter coming, how it’s the only season that stays like it will never leave, and he thought of last winter, just his third with Mindy in this house, and how it had looked then at this hour, with smoke curling steadily from the woodstove chimney and a rug of light unfurled on the lawn just outside the bay window.

They’d inherited the house from Mike, his (fifth and final) stepfather. Of the four before Mike, none of them were particularly bad, just varying degrees of inadequate.
Wrong for his mother, and wrong for him. As for his biological father, he left before Clement was born. Beyond that, he knew nothing about him. Mike and his mother had gotten together just before he turned thirteen. He was a large man, with a nose like a cucumber pickled in red vinegar. Mike moved in two weeks later. Not long after that, he appointed Clement his Second-in-Command in the pest control business.

It was a single-story house, with a postage stamp lawn and a detached garage that held all of his pest-control equipment, which his stepfather had also bequeathed to him.

The house needed its fair share of work, there was no doubt about that. Only a few weeks ago, Mindy had written out a list of tasks she planned to accomplish in the last few months before the arrival. First, they would finish converting the spare room, repainting the walls and tearing out the carpet. After that, she’d set herself to the task of regluing the kitchen’s linoleum flooring that had come loose, curling back on itself at a long seam running the length of the room. And then, if there was time, she would replace the bay window, which had grown opaque over time.

He stepped onto the driveway, a gloved hand bracing his lower back, still aching from the day’s work. He still knew himself to be young, just barely twenty-six, but he felt his body and its age more and more with each passing day.

Clement went around to the back of the truck and opened its rear doors. Inside were a dozen canisters of Termidor, each marked by a tiny skull whose stenciled grin curled broadly in defiance of the inscription below: **CAUTION – HARMFUL CONTENTS WITHIN.**

‘Sonofabitch,’ said Clement, hefting the first tank out of the truck and over to the garage. He thought of Mike, who had always cussed in times of strain or exasperation.
Bitch was what he’d say, repeating it over and over, like a chant, as if Bitch were some goddess of woe.

After Mike’s accident, Clement had cleared out the detached single-car garage that flanked the western side of the house, and redeemed it as an occupational-armory, of sorts, for his extermination gear.

He set the tank down gently inside and flipped on the lights. The cedar tang of mildew spores hung thick about the air. Clement flexed his aching hands for a moment, and then headed back out to the truck.

He glanced over at the house: still no discernible activity inside the modest shoebox of a house he’d shared with Mindy for three years. Clement tried many times, over the course of the day, to imagine her in the dimly lit bedroom he saw her last; but each time he did, a complex hurt overrode him.

Clement was still unloading the truck, his back to the street, when a delivery van pulled along the front yard. It took a moment to register the sounds: the cooling engine’s metronomic tick and the hermetic thwump of its rear doors closing in dual succession.

When Clement turned, he saw the deliveryman halfway up the flagstone pathway; in his hands, an arrangement of white flowers. ‘Jesus shit,’ Clement said, or maybe just thought. Mindy did not want nor need this now, and neither did he, for that matter.

‘Hey,’ Clement called out to the man. ‘Hold up a minute.’
The deliveryman, up close, revealed himself to be hardly that – he was a kid, sixteen, maybe seventeen, tops. The cherubic cast of prepubescent years still lingered about his ruddy face. There was little that could be done to obscure this, though the kid attempted, with a John Waters-mustache and a pair of bottle cap-earrings.

The kid regarded Clement with a bewildered look, his expression a little bloodless knot of confusion. ‘Uh, sweet getup you got there, man,” the kid said.

Clement looked down. He had forgotten to take off his white-plastic style-fit coverall suit – state-mandated garb for any fumigation work. ‘For my job,’ he explained.

The kid smirked. ‘Job?’ he said. ‘You work on the moon or in a meth-lab?’

Clement found that mildly amusing, although he did not laugh.

Clement always felt foolish in the suit, thought it made him look something like a giant prophylactic: ‘a 6’2 jimmie-hat.’ Actually, he’d used this line with Mindy the first time they met, four years prior. Clement was twenty-six and Mindy, twenty-nine. He had been out on a job, spraying for cockroaches in what turned out to be Mindy’s apartment building. Clement went door-to-door, instructing residents to open their windows – cockroach spray was hell on lungs.

The condom-crack had gotten him through the door. Mindy asked if he’d like a drink, glass of water or perhaps a coke. Water was fine, Clement said, adding that that he liked water. He *liked* water? had he really just said that? – liked *water*. Jeez, what a gem.

Oh, you’re a fan of water? she would say. Well, do tell: what are your feelings on *oxygen*?
Clement had begun to perspire. He felt a self-consuming dread, a hot tide rising within him. Clement imagined sweat accumulating in milky globules at his brow, the dismal animal odor gathering beneath his suit – a suit that had certainly done him no favors.

Clement had tried to regain his composure. Mindy would soon return, glass of water in hand. There were a number of books on the coffee table. A couple Clement recognized from his stint in junior college. He picked one up and absently thumbed through the pages. When Mindy returned, she explained that she taught 11th grade English, before asking if he’d ever read it – the book. Clement flipped to the cover and read out the title: Beloved.

‘No,’ Clement said, with manufactured ease. ‘No, I haven’t had the chance to read this one yet. But I love his work.’

Mindy flashed a faint – almost loving – smile at this. And, at that moment, Clement had felt the shift in gravity’s scorn, as he begun to plummet for Mindy with the furious velocity of a cartoon anvil.

***

‘Look, man, all I know is that my dad told me to drop these here flowers off at this here address here,’ he said. The kid held the arrangement out before him in the same manner a parent might an infant in dire need of a change.

Clement repeated himself: they didn’t want the flowers. So the kid would just have to take them back and give a refund to whoever sent them.
The kid sucked a tooth. ‘Listen, my dad’ll just think I blew off another delivery unless you sign this here sheet,’ he said, with a softened tone. ‘So just like, *please* just take them?’

Clement glanced back towards the house. If Mindy was home – *if* – then she would eventually hear them and come out if they kept yammering on like this. ‘Give ‘em here,’ he said.

Clement took the arrangement into the garage. The two working light bulbs inside were still on. He’d already managed to move the majority of his equipment into the garage. The canisters were arranged in a row by the far wall, behind them, a stack of unmarked cardboard boxes, which Clement brought in from the house three days ago.

Clement walked over to the window that faced towards the house. He rested the glass vase upon the edge of the windowsill. Clement watched the world beyond where he stood evaporate in the sad light. The whole scene so tragically ordinary: working-class sedans, sickly-colored and dappled with rust, in the driveways of working-class homes; porch lights winked down the street. All things emitting a slow cosmic yawn.

Clement looked out across the yard, examining the flagstone pathway. He’d laid it himself this summer upon Mindy’s request. They didn’t have the spare cash to have it done professionally, but Mindy had always asked so little him.

Clement leaned towards the window.

Mindy had even helped lay some of the stones. It was a June afternoon that seemed, even in Clement’s head, uncommonly oppressive. The memory continued to unspool: the
muted language of yard dogs far off, starlings opened like fists against the sky, the air pregnant with moisture and mosquitoes flying kamikaze missions.

Clement pulled back and the plumes withdrew. In the darkness, tree and homes were becoming mere sketches of trees and homes.

Clement looked at the house. Mindy had to be in there somewhere.

He raised the vase from the windowsill and turned toward the trashcan. The arrangement shifted to the crook of Clement’s left arm, and with his free hand, he raised the lid of the trashcan. But something stopped him – the card. He peeled it from the side of vase and opened it: To Our Mindy & Clement, With All Our Love & Thoughts. It had been signed by a few of the other teachers at Mindy’s school.

Again, he raised the lid, but this time he allowed his arm to slack. The arrangement crashed to the bottom of the empty trashcan. He dropped the card in after it, watching as it fluttered out of sight.

Mindy had always detested flowers, even before all that had happened. Clement learned this about her on their very first date, when he’d stuck out a fistful of sallow looking tulips at her – freshly liberated in the dark from a memorial garden a block over. He had been so goddamn nervous the whole day that he forgot to pick some up beforehand.

Clement had never given flowers to any girl he’d taken out before, legitimately acquired or not. He’d always thought that romantic shit like that was kind of faggy. But with Mindy, all that changed.

Because they always withered and died far too quickly to give any real care or thought to, she had said. She took what flowers survived the journey and placed them into an empty coffee tin. Clement had always regarded this act as a type of mercy.
Clement knew that the flowers would only serve as another reminder of all that happened that past week. He couldn’t do that to Mindy, even after their fight, even after all that was said.

It was now completely dark. One of the two working bulbs began to gently pulse. Clement rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands. What it was exactly that Clement was feeling, he couldn’t quite put into words, and each time he tried – and subsequently failed – it made what he felt feel even worse, but in a very abstract way.

He turned to the unmarked cardboard boxes against the far wall. It had been three days since Clement moved them out of the house and into the garage. He knew he had to get them out of Mindy’s sight before she came home from the hospital.

A full week had passed since Mindy came out to see Clement in the garage. Her hands were pressed flat against her engorged belly. Something was wrong, she had said, something was definitely wrong. Clement pushed for details, specifics, on the ride over to the emergency room. But all Mindy kept saying was that something was wrong, something was most definitely wrong.
The unmarked boxes contained all of Its things. He corrected himself: It wasn’t *just* an it. Clement thought of all that these boxes contained: the hand-me-downs from Mindy’s aunt in Albany; a few How To books that Clement hadn’t wanted to buy; a set of shoes fit for a doll that he did. Clement had purchased them a day after Mindy had broken the unexpected news.

She had been waiting on the front steps when Clement pulled into the driveway. That was five months ago, in late June. Clement could see that Mindy clutched something in the palm of her hand as she walked over to greet him.

They’d put Mindy in a small windowless room that smelled heavily of disinfectant, and banks of fluorescent lights hummed, a song of ambient lament.

She lost it, they had said. She’d lost it and – for her own safety – they would need to induce as soon as possible.
The next day, the hospital had sent a woman, an official whose job it was to handle the aftermath of these situations. Mindy had sat as upright in the bed as she could manage. Clement was in a chair at her side. The official provided them with various forms and certificates to review and sign.

The only matter left, the official said, was Its name. The woman had told them to take all the time they needed, that it was obviously a very difficult decision to make, especially at a time like this.

Mindy interjected. She told the official that wouldn’t be necessary, that they wouldn’t be giving It a name.

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Clement felt bad feelings rise inside him. He turned from the boxes and walked back towards the window. The faulty light bulb had ceased flickering. He stared through the darkening glass as it began to reflect more of his warm and motionless silhouette than the stuff of the outside world.

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The day after their initial meeting, Clement tracked down the official’s office. Mindy had yet to be released, the doctors insisted on keeping her for precautionary reasons.
He had lied to the official. Clement told her that he and Mindy had reconsidered, that they would need a few more days to decide on the issue of a name.

The next morning, Clement boxed up all Its things and brought them out to the garage.

That had been three days ago.

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The window was a mirror. Clement stepped towards his own image, now reflected in the glass. He couldn’t put words to what he was feeling. When he tried, what he wanted to say seemed to catch in his throat.

***

The night before, Clement had told Mindy – or at least tried – what and how he felt. He brought up Its name. Had she forgotten? Had she forgotten what they’d agreed upon: that Mindy would choose the name if It was a boy, and Clement if It was a girl. That It wasn’t just an it – it was her, it was a she.

Clement had asked that after all these years, could she not see? Could she still not see as he felt? That he’d felt lonely in an inexplicable way for these last five months. That he’d felt detached, somehow separate from a process that no longer required his presence.
That he’d felt guilty over all the pain she’d felt these five months. That he’d resented her for this, as if her pain somehow gave her a truer connection. And that he’d felt even guiltier because of this resentment.

Still, none of this had felt quite right.

That he’d felt this Great Colorless Space growing between for months, and felt it even more so now. That he loved her so, but could she not see? Could she not see that this – this name, was his only opportunity to play some activate role in her life?

Mindy hadn’t spoken a word that entire time, though Clement realized he hadn’t given her much of a chance.

She said only this: If you love me like you say, then why do you insist on giving my failure a name?

Clement left the house after that. He waited out the night in the garage, and left for work before dawn.

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Clement stepped back from the window. All that existed beyond his world seemed to exist no longer: no trees, nor lights, nor houses. Just his own dumb face reflecting back in the glass.

But beneath that, beneath what Clement had come to recognize as himself, a hope endured. Hope for a time when windows would cease to be mirrors and become windows
once more, hope for a time when what was within to catch but a glimpse of what lay beyond and thereby allow him to try once more yet again yet again yet again.
En route to my third and final funeral of the day, my stepmother called with news of Ed’s arrest.

“Most unfortunate,” I said. “Not exactly surprising, however.”

“Total bullshit,” Donna said. “The petty larceny charge? Sure, that I understand. But assault with a dangerous weapon? Gimme a friggin’ break. Since when are teeth considered a dangerous weapon?”

“If I had to guess, I’d say the moment you bite a cop in the leg,” I said, checking my watch. Already quarter-to-four. The funeral home was only a few blocks away, located on a gritty, struggling side street in midtown. I stepped off the crowded sidewalk and cut through a negligible allotment of grass and cobble that passed for a park in this municipality.

“Rent-a-cop,” she corrected. “Besides, security around the trailer park is a joke. Bunch of glorified meter-maids on a power trip. Guys aren’t even allowed to pack heat. Which, thank god. Don’t even want to imagine what might’ve happened if they were.”
“I’m happy to imagine the possibilities for the both of us.”

“Is that any way to talk about your father?” Donna said. “The man’s mind, it ain’t right.”

“I should say so.” Overhead, a large blue violence of storm clouds had begun to swell. The urban air felt heavy, almost viscous with humidity. With two fingers, I clawed loose the knot of my borrowed tie.

I already knew how I would spend the next two hours: stuck in a poorly ventilated room that reeked of embalming fluid and antique furniture, perspiring with reckless abandon while I chatted up strangers holding Styrofoam plates of catered eggrolls. A fate, if not worse than death, at least in the same ballpark with it.

A sudden earth-shattering blast overtook the other end of the end, loud enough to make me wince. “Christ on a cracker,” Donna said when the roar finally ebbed. “I’m pretty sure I just busted an eardrum.”

“Was that a siren? Where are you?”

“Standing outside of the emergency room,” she said. “We came straight here from the police station. The guard whose leg he bit cracked him a few times with a flashlight. Gashed up his forehead pretty good. Broke his nose, too. Can you believe that? Teeth are considered a weapon, but somehow flashlights aren’t? Some world we’re living in today.”

“Is it that bad?”

“It sure as shit ain’t good. He needs stitches and a whole lot of them. You should’ve seen the cut on his forehead. The friggin’ thing was still bleeding when the police finally released him.”

“Old man must have a hell of a bite,” I said.
“Actually, I just spoke with a lawyer who said Ed’s beating is a sort of blessing in disguise. Guy said there’s no way they could justify wailing on a sixty-four-year-old man whose only friggin’ crime was a poor choice in exterior decorations. He could probably bargain down the charges to a misdemeanor, if not have them dropped. And he even said we could sue the property owners for inflicting emotional and physical damage. Can you believe it? How’s that for a silver-lining?”

“All’s well that ends well, I guess.”

“It’s going to take hours to get all that crap off the roof,” Donna said. “I’ll tell you one thing, your father’s going to be the one who does it, head injury or no head injury.” She paused, sighing. “Don’t make a lick of sense.”

“You say that like it’s something new.” I’d long since reconciled myself with Ed’s antics and the phantom logic guiding his actions. But his most recent actions perplexed even me. From what I’d gathered, Donna went to visit her sister for the night, leaving Ed behind at home, against her better judgement. Early this morning, when Donna returned, she saw what he’d done. Affixed to the roof of their home were dozens of hubcaps, intricately tied together, forming a single metal carapace, which flashed with sunlight. Ed was face-down in the front yard, pretzeled with a security guard. Another sat in the dirt nearby, grimacing and clutching his inner thigh.

Ed had apparently acted under the cover of darkness, stealthily attaching his makeshift shield, which was strung together with wire and then electrified by diverting the trailer’s amperage into a generator outfitted with jumper cables. Security soon arrived, and a tussled ensued. After he was booked for assault, the police quickly realized my father
was likely connected to the recent spate of reports concerning stolen hubcaps. Donna said it took three Folger’s tins of cash to cover bail.

“This is Ed we’re talking about,” I said. “His line of thought is about as clear and refined as a glass of unpasteurized milk.”

Back on the sidewalk, I passed over a steaming subway grate, cut behind the panting crosstown bus shedding exhaust at curbside. A throng of besuited workers streamed from a nearby office building. They shimmied and jaywalked, juked and darted toward their destinations in a pathological state of hurry-up-and-get-home. It was an impulse I never quite understood.

“This is different,” she said.

“Seems par for the course, actually. Except for the arrest, of course. And the biting. The man never struck me as a biter, quite honestly.”

I stopped at the corner across from the funeral home. A small circle of mourners had formed near the entrance, each smoking in oversized sunglasses. Among them were two of my coworkers, chatting on the outskirts of the group. Which was strictly prohibited. Those working for Monetized Mourners weren’t allowed to interact with each other while on assignment. A precautionary measure, really. Not only were we there to fill empty seats, but we were also expected to convince others of our grief. Which meant we couldn’t be seen together; it couldn’t appear as though we knew each other. This would only complicate matters, force us to coordinate backstories and align identities. A wrong answer could potentially raise suspicion, cast doubt on our legitimacy. Or so we were told. Most of those who worked for the service were either actors or addicts, and though I was currently neither, I’d dabbled in both.
“Trust me, it’s bad. He’s bad.”

“Bad compared to what?” I said. “Because for this conversation to be halfway productive, I think it would behoove us to establish what exactly you mean by bad in this particular context.”

“Bad as in the opposite of good,” she said. “Bad as in worse than before. Bad as in the worse it’s ever been. At least, the worst it’s been since we’ve been together.”

“I’ve already provided my two cents on how you should proceed.”

“You and I both know he would never agree to that,” she said. “And even if I wanted to, which I don’t, it’d be nearly impossible to have him like forcibly committed.”

“Well, I don’t know what to tell you, Donna.”

Therein ensued an interval of contemplative silence. I backed against a nearby tree, watched the handful of mourners finish their cigarettes and begin filtering through the entrance. With my free hand, I pulled at my tie, even though I was still sweating profusely.

I knew what she was about to ask. And I knew what I was about to say. My answer would be simple. One syllable, a single breath. That’s all it would take.

No. No. No.

It would be easy, really. I’d say, I’m sorry you have to deal with him, but no. I’d say, Frankly, I’d rather pass upwards of three dozen kidney stones than spend one more hour with an inscrutable man in an intolerable place. So, thank you, Donna, but no thank you.

The rain began, a soft silver sound in the high dry leaves.

“Davis?” she said tentatively. “Do you know what would really do your father good?”
I purchased an early morning flight from Newark to Bangor on a discount airline recognized in online reviews for its exceptional service, atrocious service, hidden charges, and salted nuts.

The plane was a terrifying thirty-seater, a poorly ventilated tube of recycled breath and skin particles. Anxious passengers shuffled down the aisle, suit bags slung over shoulders, briefcases knocking together, breathing one another’s smells. My window seat was behind the emergency row. Outside, a group of men in orange vests and earmuffs worked under a baggy sky and a rain so fine it seemed to come sideways with the wind instead of fall.

I turned and found myself locking eyes with a young father who had an infant strapped to his chest in a high-tech carrier and a quilted infant-supply bag at his side, as he made his way down the aisle. He appeared to be unaccompanied by the mother and stopped when he reached my row. He shouldered off the bag and placed it in the overhead compartment and then began the process of extracting his child from the intricate contraption on his chest. By the time they finally settled into the seat next to mine, the flight attendant was finishing her half-hearted rendition of a passenger struggling for oxygen.

The man was trimly bearded in a button-down. He held the infant in his lap, facing towards him. The infant’s face was mostly eyes and its nose a mere pinch, with a wisp of
red hair atop his head. The infant writhed and burbled in his father’s arms. I felt as though I should say something kind, perhaps about the infant, to let him know I wouldn’t spend the next hour quietly aggrieved at the inequity of fortune.

“Cute kid,” I said.

“What?” the man said. His tone was surprisingly sharp, almost harsh. He stared at me with either confusion or contempt.

“Your baby,” I said. “He looks just like you.”

“This baby?” The man gazed contemplatively at the swaddled runt and then back at me. “This isn’t my baby.”

The cabin lights flickered off as we lurched from the gate and then crossed the wet tarmac. I didn’t care to return home. I hadn’t been back in nearly two years and would’ve been fine with extending that streak for a few more. Whereas some longed to return home and others longed to escape it, I was simply indifferent, both to the area and the man who had moved us there when I was fourteen years old. But I couldn’t bring myself to deny Donna’s request. She sounded desperate, at the end of her rope and prepared to hang either herself or my father from it. A decade of caring for someone like him would do that to a person, I guess.

The whine of the engine steadily climbed the tonal scale as we lifted off the runway. The aircraft began its ascent, tearing a hole in the air. The highways and rooftops and rivers below disappeared and then reappeared at a point I had to squish my cheek right up against the plastic inner window to see, before the landscape disappeared for good.

The infant was now wailing, a high pure shining sound. The man cooed and rocked him softly. Wisps of cloud flashed past the window. Above and below were a different
story, but there was always something disappointing about clouds when you were inside them; they ceased to be clouds at all. It just got really foggy.

We continued to jostle and dip even after reaching cruising altitude. The plane rode the updrafts and downdrafts like a dinghy in a gale. There was someone retching a row of two behind me. A staggering girl commenced the beverage service but abandoned her efforts after spilling a Pepsi in an elderly woman’s lap. The pilot apologized and blamed last night’s storm for churning the skies into a turbulent mess. He said he was looking for smoother air, but our chances of finding any were doubtful. After a half-hour of ceaseless pitching, clouds again began to overtake the windows.

My father’s mind seemed to decline in a manner similar to our flight pattern; there was a precipitous drop followed by a sustained leveling-off and then another even steeper plunge.

My father and Donna met during one of his leveling-off periods. They had been together for nearly a decade. I was fifteen when they met and fifteen when they married. His troubles had begun the year before, in the aftermath of my mother’s death. He had divorced her about a year before she finally went.

The changes in his behavior almost imperceptible at first. Growing up, he had oscillated between bouts of joyous affability and brooding silence. But I’d grown curious after noticing a pocket-sized notebook in his possession. Suddenly he seemed to carry it with him everywhere we went. I’d occasionally catch him scribbling in it, only to secret it away as soon as he saw I was staring. It was strange, to say the least. For the first thirteen years of my life, the only thing I’d seen him write was his name at the bottom of my private school tuition checks. Soon he was filling an entire notebook every week. I’d search for
them in his room when he was still off at work, but I could never find where he’d hidden them.

I assumed the writing was some sort of therapeutic exercise, a way to sort out his shame and grief. But when I finally asked about Dr. Orlofsky, I learned he was no longer attending sessions with him.

“The man is a quack,” he had told me. “If you gave that man an enema, you could bury him in a matchbox. He’s chock full of it.” That’s what he always said when he was suspicious of someone’s motives, They’re chock full of it. Politicians had always been chock full of it. As were his partners at the Boston trading firm where he had worked for nearly a decade. But soon after the notebooks appeared, the number of those who were decidedly chock full of it began to increase. Added to the list were psychiatrists and then regular doctors, too. He became suspicious of our garbage men. He referred to them as a “Platoon of scheming brutes.” He believed they were sifting through our garbage, though for what exactly he never said. Ed began disposing of our trash himself. I would sometimes accompany him on these trips. We would drive with the windows down and a pile of weeping garbage in the backseat of his Luxury Couple. We would stop at three different landfills and scatter a few bags in each. I still remembered these trips quite well. I remembered the crunch of shattered glass underfoot and white gulls wheeling in the early summer sky and pyramids of waste steep enough to ski and a smell so thick it enveloped us both, pressing in like a weather system.

But soon my father’s ire turned to inanimate objects. He threw out our microwave and cable box, dismantling both before he disposed of them. He canceled our cell phone service and internet provider. Our home, a boxy three-story at the edge of upscale
development, had fallen into disarray by summer’s end. Neighbors who had initially stifled their comments out of courtesy, began to draft notes of complaint, citing the risk to property values. When the grass finally overtook our mailbox, they filed a formal grievance with the Homeowner’s Association. A week later, I came home to find Ed’s sour-smelling Coupe packed and idling in the driveway.

On the drive out of town, Ed told me that he’d been fired from his position at the trading firm. After a quick stop at the bank, where he emptied all of his bank accounts, we drove north until we arrived at a wood-paneled mobile home in the middle of Bumfuck, Nowhere.

Two weeks later, Ed and Donna met in the parking lot of a local swap meet. They married a month later. The ceremony was brief and officiated by a harelipped bureaucrat in the basement of City Hall.

Of course, Donna had known about all of this before she signed her name on the dotted line. She knew about his clinical aversion to Japanese microwaves. She knew about his suspicions regarding banks, how he eschewed savings accounts in favor of stuffing Folger’s tins with banded wads of non-sequential bills, which he then buried beneath our store-bought porch attachment. She knew; she just didn’t care. Donna didn’t walk on eggshells. She was born and raised in Bumfuck, she changed her own oil, she listened to Motley Crüe.

The way she saw it was Hey, we’re all batshit, right? Some are just better at hiding the stank than others.

Therein ensued a period of leveling off. Ed, for the most part, reigned in his antics. I left three years later, two months after my eighteenth birthday. Guided by a lack of
imagination and vague ambitions to become an actor, I moved to New York City, where I promptly booked a nationally syndicated commercial for hemorrhoid cream and then virtually nothing else for seven years. Residual checks, as well as my earnings from Monetary Mourners, kept me afloat. I had a studio apartment on the Lower East Side, which people were impressed by until they came up for a look. Since my move, I had only returned home a handful of times.

Then came the second, steep plunge. Donna began calling with reports of Ed’s increasingly erratic behavior six months ago. Habits she regarded as mere eccentricities had become almost intolerable.

Donna now called two or three times a week. A month ago, Ed grabbed the mailman by the lapels and whispered, “There are unfavorable omens in the sky.” Before that, he’d ripped every inch of copper wiring from the walls of their trailer. And before that he’d penned an editorial for the Bumfuck Gazette entitled, “Dear Mr. Mayor: When Are You Going to Stop Killing Whales?”

“Whales,” Donna had told me. “Frigging whales. I couldn’t believe it. I said to him, ‘Ed, you’ve never seen a whale in your life. What do you care about whales? And besides, we’re thirty-miles from the coast! Thirty! No one around here is killing whales, especially not the Mayor.’ And all he says to me – get this, you won’t believe your ears – is, ‘You’ve not yet attuned to the textures of higher reality that lay beyond the self.’ I was like, huh? What the frick is that supposed to mean? And what does it have to with whales? Or the Mayor? It’s like I’m living with, you know, Play-Doh, or something. But that’s all he said. The next day, it was back to normal. Relatively speaking, that is. I mean, I don’t know what to do, Davis. I don’t know what to make of him.”
I told her what I always told her, but Donna refused to entertain the notion of committing him. Ed always preferred stubborn, controlling women. Donna possessed the same bull-resistant strain of genome that carried my mother through fifteen years of marriage and straight into an early grave. If Donna didn’t want to take my advice, so be it. I wasn’t the one dealing with him.

But when Donna asked, I had agreed. I couldn’t say no. Not to Donna, the Bumfuck native and Motley Crüe enthusiast. Donna, who use to entertain me by extinguishing lit cigarettes on the tip of her tongue. Donna, who I once saw crush a beer can with her heavy tit. Donna, my father’s keeper.

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Donna met me near baggage claim. She was standing at bottom of the escalators, holding a cardboard sign with some jokey name on it. She did this whenever I flew home; it was sort of her shtick. This one read PHIL LATIO in black marker.

Donna was short and pretty, with a frizzy cascade of red hair. She had the weathered skin of a veteran smoker, as if someone had come along and smoother out the crumpled ball of her face.

“Get over here, you,” she said.

I dropped my bags, and we embraced. She smelled of Parliaments and hand lotion, and her broad face felt warm pressed against my sternum.
“Mr. Big City Actor,” she said. “How nice of you to grace us with your presence.”

“What can I say, I guess I’m a glutton for punishment.”

“You’ve certainly come to the right place then,” she said.

“No Ed?” I said looking around. “I thought you’d never let him out of your sight again.”

“Big goon’s still in rough shape,” Donna said. “Wait to you see his face. Looks like he went ten rounds with Tyson. But I found someone to keep an eye on him.”

I looked at her funny. “You finally spring for a babysitter?”

“Might as well have,” she said. “I got the closest thing to it. A lawyer.”

“A lawyer?” I said. “The guy from the hospital?”

“You better believe it. Guy’s working on our lawsuit as we speak.” She paused and her grin went slack. “So, you ready to come home?”