Versions

by

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In earlier versions of this story, the coffee stains had been removed from the white tablecloth before the couple sat down for dinner, and this act occurred before the onset of the text, without the reader’s knowledge. In a particular earlier version, the first sentence was, “The couple sat at a table next to the window in the kitchen and both began slicing their pork into cubes, averting their eyes from the handgun resting on the sill.” In that version, the diners, both men, discuss at length their dedication to the cause of overcoming their fear of failure, and both offer possible solutions, being that they are lovers and wish one another happiness. However—things not lasting forever—tensions escalate to a violent conclusion, where one man shoots the other in the knee, then apologizes profusely, thinking the gun hadn’t been loaded, and the man who was shot bleeds out before the other can get him medical attention, this owing to the fact that the action occurs in a remote location.

But the previous paragraph is quite incomplete inasmuch as it discusses the common “dedication” these two men share, or might share if given the chance. While the endings of many versions all result in the same bloody scene, the pieces differ greatly regarding the lovers’ “dedication.” Along the spectrum of the past—and then of course, also the present and the future—the men discuss their dedication to the cause of:

1) helping one another through bad times (times categorized elsewhere)
2) guiding one another through the pathways of evil
3) socialism
4) taking each step deliberately, with consensus and some measurable love

5) planning a heist

6) how on and on and on goes the pebble down the endless mountainside. . .

Still, there are versions of this document which differ from the ones referenced thus far, versions which neglect to inform the reader of the gun on the windowsill at the beginning, and instead choose to introduce the object about halfway through, after the couple has spoken at length. These versions, which delay the mentioning of the weapon, occur by candlelight during a power outage inside a small gray apartment in the corner of a city. The dialogue in these several versions is only interrupted by brief but imagistic descriptions of the lovers working their knives through their dinner, which features dripping slabs of red meat rather than pork. Despite the fact that this grotesque and repetitive knife imagery served to build tension and mirror the concurrent breakdown of the lovers’ interactions, it was determined that the gun could not be sprung upon the reader so late in the narrative, because it came off as nonchalant, or only existing as a tool to move the story forward by any means. The gun is evident near the beginning of all later renderings.

A few attempts saw the narrative occurring in reverse, some lines of which have been preserved here:

*The bullet backed out of the man’s knee and returned forcefully into the gun’s chamber. At the same moment, the shimmering bloodstains dissipated from the shin of the man’s cotton trousers, and his pant leg was pressed beige as he rose from the floor into his seat across from his lover, who was placing the gun on the*
windowsill beside their dining room table, a tension releasing slightly from the shoulders of both men. The two then raised their forks to their mouths, removing oblong chunks of red meat which were assembled into juicy steaks on their plates as the evening’s discussion regressed to its infancy.

This construction was surely inventive and maybe even a bit psychedelic, but ultimately it was decided that the dialogue (which has been redacted here) was too opaque when read in reverse, and thus the story was not worth the time it took to decipher its chronology.

As suggested earlier, most recent versions, like the document here, feature coffee stains on the tablecloth, which summon an amorphous but palpable sense of disarray. In this version, the knives have been removed from the scene, though you may have been imagining knives before now. Here, the men have made rotisserie chickens over an indoor wood-burning stove, and they tear the birds apart with grease running down their knuckles. This seems to indicate a rural or pastoral setting but doesn’t completely commit to it. The view is only what it is from a particular stance. These men don’t sit within the city listening to harsh sounds, but there is also an emptiness—surely a darkness—to expansive landscapes. To rolling grasslands or forested hills or at least a yard with a swingset you wouldn’t expect.

But it is entirely conceivable that the swingset will endure through several later versions. There may be a shed next to the swingset, there may be a wheelbarrow and a shovel, perhaps miles of scrub grass, perhaps woods or water. And who brought these dogs? Or are they overconfident wolves? There are questions of tone, surely, but do the
men know, in their hearts, of any lurking canines? Has anyone here seen the beasts the whole time, felt weird mentioning them? Both men could very well fear the same canines, and maybe with this common fear, no one will have to die. Dogs can walk straight through the story into another, causing little interruption, or they can walk for miles into the living room of the gunman’s mother. An awareness of the other lover becoming the gunman is subtle but significant in some iterations, including the one here. Still, though, the men might band together to gun down these dogs passing through. They might be protecting a real or imagined fortress.

If the dogs are to make it, can they be stopped from devouring the mother out of extreme hunger, the hunger only nomadic dogs feel? The dogs could easily prefer to be gunned down by the two lovers, avoiding such a long trek altogether. The brutality of these dogs is hard to pin down, but the brutality of the two lovers is unquestionable, in the sense that they are human.

The lovers sit with a candle between them at a table by the window. The candle is quite close to the half-open drapes, and it should be moved. The gun still rests upon the wooden sill. Dogs bark in the distance, and the lovers either ignore the sound, or fail to register it.

Drapes can catch fire in any story, but this has yet to occur, despite the earlier allusion to this danger. Always, the lover moves the candle to the countertop, resulting in the unfortunate displacement of a feasible weapon to be used against the gunman. The gunman, despite his inability to shake the label, is the lover of the lover. The gunman and the lover are lovers, still.
But the gunman can know this. He must know this, as he stands there, pointing his weapon and yelling at his lover about the thing his lover did wrong. The kind of exasperated yelling that involves spittle. But the gun can become one of those black gun dildos. The gun can be plastic with an orange tip, filled with hose water. The gun can be printed on a 3D printer and fully lethal. The gun can have its serial number filed off by the previous or current owner. The gun can be purchased legally at a number of locations. The gun can be a raised thumb and a pointer finger slid into a lover’s ass with a bit of KY jelly, and then it’s not a gun at all. As such, the gun can mostly disappear, but still echo through the story. As such, the story can echo through the gun, as many stories do. Travel through the barrel of a future gun, as a future bullet, and there could be a point where the bullet turns around, bound backward and retreating from its own inevitability.

Say the gunman stands with an outstretched arm. Say his palm is open, and the gun still rests upon the wooden sill. Say he grabs his lover’s hand and he is just a man again. Say the dogs pass through the fields at night and make it to another story after all. Say the lovers blow out the candle and retire to bed under a thick wool blanket. Say “lovers.” Say “gun.” Say the sun rises in the morning and no one is dead.
The regular shriveling of our town was something that we'd gotten used to. When the shriveling occurred, we all retreated back into our houses. We could only bear to shrink amongst familiar items, and that way the temporary smallness would be a little easier to stomach, and we'd wait it out. When I was a child, my mother would never talk about the days before the shriveling, when the town didn't need to employ the mechanism in order to stay whole. We had no choice, she'd say. The problem was that the Issue Men had to come do their runs, and the Issue Men had small hands. We were victims of the Issue Men, victims of their cycle of delivery which was on a monthly schedule. We were usually safe so long as no monumental storms occurred, and no absent-minded worker fell asleep headfirst while monitoring the shrivel button, sending the town into turmoil as the smallness had to be faced in foreign locations for many residents.

It should be noted that "shriveling" was the most apt word to describe what happened to our town, though many substituted "shrinking" or "shrinkage" when referring to it in more informal situations. Shriveling, though, was spot on. When everything got smaller, it never did so evenly: humans were left with rows of wrinkles on their cheeks, sagging skin flaps hanging off their knee caps, and many had to lift the forehead skin from in front of their eyes to see where they were going (hence the desire to be in a familiar place, where one could navigate with limited use of the eyes). But organic matter was not the only thing to become distorted when the shriveling occurred. Ridges and craters formed along brick walls, windows looked liquid and wavy, and lamp
posts curved in s-shapes or occasionally bent down as if kissing the ground. Abstract sculptures and paintings began to resemble more realistic representations, creating a dichotomy of the shriveled and unshriveled image that revolutionized the concept of art in our town.

But soon the shriveling was over, and we went on. One of my first memories is of watching my mother's face refill with bone and cartilage as she stood over my crib, cooing and telling me not to worry. Her lips slowly undrooped themselves, her forehead seemed to widen and become round again, and her eyelids resuctioned. The sheer reversibility of it all was unnerving. People forgot about permanence.

Things were efficient, given the circumstances, and the Issue Men were able to do their rounds in around three hours at most. It wasn't always like this, when the Issue Men began their reign, but their population was monstrous at their height. I am not trying to be hyperbolic or inexact when I use this adjective to describe the scope of their numbers; it is purely due to the fact that no certifiable data was ever released or has ever been recovered. Monstrous—that's as close as we can get.

The Issue Men delivered our "consolidated needs" by way of a large video file, uploaded through a small port in the front doorknob of every home and building. Families gathered in front of the shrivel-proof televisions, which were installed before the first issue ran. Victimized by shriveling, all residents sat amazed at the television's power to remain perfectly rectangular while all other matter distorted and warped. It was another way they kept us enthralled. For those caught outside during the shriveling, the monthly issue was projected onto the sky.
We were never completely sure when the shriveling would occur during a given month. The Issue Men sometimes took their time composing the next issue, weeding out the fluff of tax evasion statistics, linoleum flooring ads, reading recommendations, and filibuster recordings from early America. They pared it down to necessities like the menu for the month, ads for useful items like the hair clips which also held back shriveled forehead skin, and symbolic representations of the town's power compared to other towns in the country. It was sometimes mandated that we affix our eyes on one of these symbolic representations—perhaps a severed finger placed next to the bulbous root of a redwood tree, or an umbrella handle curled inside a roulette wheel, or a more offensive model such as a man on all fours fucking a mouse—for four whole minutes so that the true scope of our power was memorized, and we all kept these in our heads as frames of reference: we were the chosen ones. The issues confirmed this.

Now, whenever my mother describes the day that the Issue Men took over, she cries, and seems to stretch her face outward as though to resist the shriveling that she still fears will return to warp her bones and flesh. I have to say, Don't worry, we're safe now. She never spoke against the Issue Men while they were in power. She cared about me too much. She'd say Listen, Harker, don't you worry about the shriveling. Don't you talk about it in school. You just get the best education you can, okay? And I'd say Okay and walk out the door.

About a year after we were safe, I worked up the courage to ask her. I had to know how it started, and why she'd never talked about it before. The shriveling was part of the routine of my childhood and I didn't understand.
* * *

She said: Harker, I've been waiting for you to ask. You have a right to know. It was a sunny day, all too beautiful, all too whole and rewarding. I was coming home from the tailor, having just purchased my first pantsuit at the age of twenty. I was interviewing the following week for a government job that I never got, obviously. As I opened the door to leave the tailor, I felt it—you know, the pressure, the looseness—but I had no concept of what was happening to me. I was that egocentric at first; I thought, whatever it was, it was happening to me. I started yelling help! Help! And felt low and slack and soon I had collapsed hands-and-knees-first on the sidewalk. My hands slid back and forth, skinbags catching the grain; I thought that someone had slid enormous rubber gloves on me, and I instinctively tugged at my opposite fingertip—or where I thought I should have a fingertip—with the other useless hand. All I could think was that I needed to go to the hospital. Someone had drugged me. Something was wrong. Eventually I realized I wasn't alone. A woman was lying, screaming, on the black granite platform outside the tailor's shop. I thought, That can't be the same woman who had left the shop behind me. I remembered her face, what it was supposed to look like; I'd held the door for her no more than a minute before the shriveling started. She looked in my eyes, both of us parting our facial sags. I remember seeing tears follow new trails and valleys across her face. All she said was what is it, what is it, what is it over and over again. I stopped asking for help. I turned and looked around the square. Shriveled bodies everywhere—more than you probably ever saw, even during an accidental shriveling. Right as I sat considering a corvette, shrunken but raised in the middle like an inchworm, the sky lit up. It was the
first issue of our consolidated needs. The first issue was much different than the issues released later in their reign, the ones you were used to. Directives, assertion of power, some earlier models. It was all of that. But the difference was the scope of everything. We had no idea what was happening, so there was a great deal of explanation. We were to shrivel every month. We were to do so in our homes. We were lucky for this. A single Issue Man made these sweeping claims from his pedestal in the sky, with his white brimmed cap looking conspicuously angular against the clouds. As you can imagine, we all felt overpowered. But somehow a part of something new. We felt privileged. When the issue was over, our lives changed.

***

A lone tear traveled down my mother's cheek as she said this final sentence, and I considered how much rounder her cheeks appeared now. How sure of themselves. How stoic.

The Issue Men were a subterranean people; at least that's what most have come to believe. They were never seen outside, except during a shriveling. So their holes and caverns were as real as we imagined them to be. As real as the month when the shriveling never came again, and we all tiptoed outside our houses for weeks, sure it was just late. As real as Old Man Raritan, who after three months of nothing, thrust out into the open air, fists shaking at the sky, and yelled FUCK YOUR LITTLE HANDS AND FUCK YOUR SHRIVELING! and it was the first time anyone had dared. Soon, we all dared.

The shriveling is gone now; it no longer plagues us with its wrinkles, its warp, its small-handed men. We've become more accepting of formal continuity. Glass is blown
once or shattered, and there is no in-between. They've created recycling centers that deal solely with useless forehead skin clips, melting them down into walking canes, cell phone cases, lumberjack figurines, red fire trucks, tupperware containers, spectacle frames—an estimated fifty-five percent of our plastic goods now can claim most or all of their material came from these abandoned clips.

It's been 10 years. We figure we're safe. But sometimes, I dream that I'm crawling on my hands and knees through a dirty tunnel, somehow unseen by roving hordes of white-hatted men carrying clipboards and pencils, silently nodding at red buttons on the filthy walls, tracing circular spots for new ones, quietly calculating the unveiling of our next hell.
A man stands chain-smoking on his front porch in his maroon slippers. His eyes are sunken and staring through a nearby bush, which he feeds with billows of smoke that dissipate beyond his walkway above the sidewalk.

A woman walking by with a tiny dog in tow catches a whiff of the man’s cigarette. On the next block, she ties her dog up to a post and goes into a corner store to buy a lottery ticket. Still tasting the smoke of the man’s cigarette from the block before, she buys a pack of Marlboro reds. She smokes three on the way back home. The next morning, the woman’s husband finds the pack in the drawer and drops it into the garbage can on the street before riding his bicycle to work.

Around 7 AM, a group of neighborhood kids waiting for the bus by the garbage can notice the nearly full pack of cigarettes sitting on top of a greasy pizza box. One boy picks up the pack and opens it. A girl, much taller than the boy who has the pack, snatches it out of his hands, pops a cigarette in her mouth, and pulls a lighter from her front pocket. She takes slow, learned drags. The butt is stained off-pink from her lip gloss. One boy raises his eyebrows, hesitates, then snatches the pack back. He lights his own, and offers smokes to the rest of the kids, two boys and a girl. The boys accept. The other girl doesn’t want to smoke, so they force her to run up the block to keep lookout for the school bus. The lookout does her job, and they get on the bus undetected, likely due
to the fact that the bus driver has already had three cigarettes by that time, 7:34 am, and he’s really just thinking about finishing his route so he can have a fourth.

After school, the girl who lit the first cigarette at the bus stop walks to her boyfriend’s house. He is older and he lives with his father in the neighborhood adjacent to the school. The boyfriend’s father is at work, so she rings the doorbell, lights a cigarette from the carton in her backpack, and sits on the front steps. Her boyfriend comes out and sees her sitting there with her back to the door, smoke passing through her green hair. He thinks it looks sexy, seeing her smoking like that, and he says so. His mother used to smoke on the porch, too, ashing to the side of the stairs while he played in the small plot of grass as a boy. Sometimes, he would throw her a frisbee from the yard and she’d toss it back to him between drags. Sometimes, she’d yell at him and say she just wanted to smoke in peace. The green-haired girl offers her boyfriend a cigarette. *Got ‘em for free*, she says.

The black cat creeps through the yard and peeks from behind the wheel barrow. She’s finally made her move, having crouched at the base of a roadside hedge for several minutes, determining whether the humans smoking on the porch posed any threat. She’s on her way to the drainage pipe, where the water gleams with dissolved metals. It rained last night, and so she knows the pipe will be pumping with such force that she will drag her paw across the stream, and then lick the water from the soft fur of her front leg, as she does now, perched on a mossy piece of concrete beside the pipe, having bolted from behind the wheel barrow, across the yard, and down the embankment several minutes ago.
while no one was looking. The water is sweet and cold, made colder during its trek down
the rusty underground pipe. It is the best water in town. At seven years old, she would
know. Her sister was hit by a car on the way to the water at only a few weeks old. Her
brother, after only a year of life, was poisoned by an old man. After eating a pile of tuna
from a stained paper plate, the black cat and her brother had curled up in an alley on a
pile of rolled-up carpeting for two days, shitting blood and foaming at the mouth. When
morning rains pelted her coat and woke her from her stupor, her brother was still curled
into a knot. She licked his face and ears, nudged his neck, but her brother was dead. Now,
she suns in the brown leaf cover beside the gushing pipe, cleaning herself. She sniffs a
box—something new, something oily and rich inside—a few strides from the pipe. She
bites into the shredded meat matter and hears the swing of a hinge and a mechanical
click. She twists around the small space in a hopeless circle, folding in half to find an exit
to this six-sided cage, and soon her tail is puffed and she is trapped, yowling, and she’s
stepped all over the food.

The woman grabs the metal handle on top of the box trap and lifts it off the ground,
shushing the black cat inside. *It’s okay momma, this is for your own good.* The woman
crunches back through the leaves to the edge of the road, where she opens the sliding
door of her minivan and straps the trap down to the floor with a few bungee cords. Her
husband is in the driver’s seat scrolling through his phone, saying things like, *now he’s
saying this. Unbelievable.* The woman gets into the passenger seat and they drive. The
wind sends leaves fluttering across the road. It’s the black cat yowling and the woman
saying *sh sh it’s okay momma, you’ll see, you don’t need a man!* not saying anything to her husband’s *what’s for dinner? or seriously have we hit every single red light?* until they are talking to the vet with the caged cat yowling on the countertop. The vet says, *She looks healthy.* The woman asks about a scar on the bridge of the cat’s nose. *It’s just a scar,* the vet says. Back at home, the woman makes gin and tonics to celebrate catching Momma. *The amount of litters she’s had? The city should give us a medal.* The husband is seated at the couch, scrolling with one hand, taking off a sock with the other. *Can you come with me to pick her up in the morning?* Now he’s scrolling with the sock hand, and removing his sock with the scrolling hand. *Sure,* he says, shrugging into the posture of reading the news.

The teenage daughter at the kitchen table uses the back of her hand to nudge an orange cat off the top of her algebra homework and onto the floor. *Twenty-four hours, mom.* *That’s how long you keep this one before letting it back out.* A brindle-coated cat does figure eights between the girl’s legs below the table, swipes at the orange one, still hovering. The daughter scratches the brindle cat’s neck. *I love them, but we have enough.* The mother sticks her tongue out. The daughter gets a text: *Meet me at the playground?* And the daughter is under the curlicue slide kissing the girl from up the block, leaves clinging to their hair and getting caught in their jackets. The girl from up the block always arranges these meetings: she is a senior and the teenage daughter is not her first. But they are in love; they’ve said it before, as they do now, finished: *I love you* says the daughter, blowing smoke through the fiery tip of the joint the girl from up the block
brought, having nestled it into the zipper pocket of her phone case. The girl from up the block says it too, takes the last drag, and pushes the roach into the wet soil beneath the leaves. She brushes the daughter’s hair aside, plucks a leaf, and then they are walking down the sidewalk under the cold yellow streetlights. There is a corner store that should be open, and it is.

The cashier rings up the daughter and the girl from up the block. He scans their items with four successive beeps: two sodas, a large bag of cheesy corn puffs, and a king size Snickers, for a total of $8.42. As the girls leave, the cashier walks around the counter and steps outside behind them. He leans against the plate glass window of the store with his back against an Arizona iced tea poster advertising “Big Cans,” and he lights a cigarette. He tilts his head back, closes his eyes, and blows the first drag through the neon light emanating from the store’s façade. The girls are disappearing up the block, shrinking to a smudge on the concrete horizon. Their laughter is nearly inaudible, but the cashier can discern that they are holding hands. Thinking of his own daughter, he is disgusted with himself for staring at the two girls walking away. He coughs and spits on the sidewalk and walks back inside. As he lifts the hinged counter to duck back behind the cash register, the bells on the front door jingle violently and the cashier drops the weighty piece of pressboard on his head. The cashier hoists himself up feebly, one hand on the counter by the register and another on the small ledge below the stacks of cigarettes, and he looks through dazed eyes at the barrel of a gun.
The man in the hot pink ski mask hadn’t planned on this, per se. He hadn’t spent very long plotting this at all. Thirty minutes or so before he entered the corner store wielding a handgun, he had been playing Mario Kart in his mother’s basement. He had been sweating profusely and mashing at the buttons. A few times he threw the controller and cracked the fake wood wall paneling. When he’d rummaged through the garbage bag of winter clothing in the downstairs closet and found only the hot pink ski mask his ten-year-old sister wore to play in the snow, he almost didn’t go through with it. But he did go through with it, he’s realizing now, trying to control his shakes while the cashier empties the register into a bag, looking not quite right. The man in the hot pink ski mask knows to say *That’s right, put it all in the bag and no one gets hurt* and the cashier knows to say nothing. But the trickle of blood coming down the cashier’s temple and collecting into his beard was not part of the plan. The man in the hot pink ski mask cannot explain how the man has come to bleed like this, cannot explain the sequence of events which led to the cashier going limp and tipping to the floor with a thud, unconscious. *What the fuck? I didn’t*—says the man in the hot pink ski mask, and he swipes the bag from the countertop and bolts into the night.

As the glass door swings open behind the man in the hot pink ski mask, the jingle bells attached to the upper hinge break free. The paper clip the cashier had used to hoist the bells has been proven unfit for the job, unable to withstand the forceful exit required after armed robbery. They jangle into space, spinning and shimmering toward the aluminum shelving, bounce off a bag of potato chips, and come to rest upon the wide gray floor mat.
The cashier is unconscious, the paper clip unfit, the man in the hot pink ski mask frantic, the jingle bells grounded.

A half hour passes before a woman walking by chains up her dog. Having just passed a man smoking a cigarette on his front porch, she thinks she might buy a pack of Marlboro reds. Still, she tells herself that she is going to the corner store to buy a lottery ticket. The glass door sweeps across the gray floor mat and the jingle bells shoot to the other end of the store and crash into the base of the refrigerators. Oh! What was—I’m sorry! says the woman, though she sees no employees present.
THE HOUSE

The house had to be burned. I'd decided this, and no one could really stop me considering who I was. It was simple: the house was decrepit, and I really didn't feel like I had the time to redo the bathrooms, where years of sputtering piss had waffled the wallpaper and corroded the heating vents so that they looked like rusty camouflage. Furthermore, I was sure that if I were to beautify the house in order to put it on the market, I'd spend a whole lot of money and probably never make it back. I knew this. The people who lived in my house, however, refused to rationalize with me at all. To them, the house was a symbol of familial growth, to me, one of impediment; to them, the house was a cozy haven, to me, a free-standing death trap. I had nightmares every night about rotted support beams swinging like pendulums from above my bed and driving their jagged nails through my skull. This, they knew. The sounds I made at night were indication enough.

When I came to the conclusion that I've already mentioned—the burning—I decided that it was only fair to let the other people in the house know what the plans were. I held a meeting in the living room on the wraparound couch and I sat far away from the middle of the room on a cold folding chair. I explained to everyone my concerns—legitimate ones—that the house was no longer fit for living. Several people objected, saying that the house had passed all the necessary inspections when the fire marshal came last month (as I'd requested) and this in itself nullified my claims. I told them that the fire marshal was a known drunk, and he'd pay for what lies he'd spread
throughout our house. The people continued to hem and haw over my decision, though, saying still that they'd never felt unsafe in the house, and if it was always this unsafe, as I'd said, then why did the structure look so fortified and sound?

I gave them a little gem about appearance versus reality and that seemed to sway them for at least a bit. It was when I began to rattle off the terms that things went awry. I found the terms to be pretty agreeable, and I couldn't see why they continued to labor over specifics. I was trying to start a new life for us, I'd said.

I informed them of the basics—where I'd light the first match, who was to pour the gasoline, whose clothing would be used to lay the fuse—and then I moved onto the more cerebral stuff. Louie was to give the farewell speech to the structure, since he was the least vocal and I thought it would be a good learning experience for him. Chase butted in a few times during my presentation, claiming that I wasn't the boss of him, and frankly I was, and so I made him the facilitator of the moment of silence. Moving on, I asked for a volunteer to go down with the house. Then a shroud of silence fell over the entire room, and I scolded Chase, called him incompetent, and told him NOT YET. Chase apologized, said really he didn't intend for the silence to occur, and I said he'd better not let it happen again. They must have sensed my frustration, because after Chase's apology, Catherine raised her hand and said she'd go down with the house. I thanked her and the meeting was adjourned.

So all was pretty close to settled. I told Lynn, my wife, to start preparing the evening meal, made sure it included chicken, and I drove off to pick up necessary materials. These included six gallons of gasoline, thirty-seven logs of fire starter, a large
box of strike anywhere matches, a scroll on which to type the farewell speech, a new pair of leather shoes because I felt I deserved them, and a bag of weed and rolling papers for celebratory purposes.

While out on the town I saw a few unnamed people who all gave me a downward head nod in passing.

I returned home to a house that was in shambles. Structurally, still standing, but the people within had completely revolted. They walked around madly, my wife banging pots and pans around the kitchen, my children yelling over one another, vying for a chance to express their complaints. I labored in, carrying my two three-gallon jugs in either hand and pinning the box of matches in between my chin and my clavicle. I squatted and placed the two jugs next to the welcome mat and set the matches on the kitchen table. I sat on a wicker chair at the wide side of the wooden rectangle and prepared to roll myself a joint. The ruckus around me was truly unpleasant. All I could really think about was finally watching the house burn. I thought that maybe the bag of weed would be used for preparatory, instead of celebratory, purposes. I thought, fine, fine, nothing I haven't encountered before.

I set to rolling the joint. Breaking the buds up with scissors in a coffee cup from another day, funneling the greenery into the crease of the EZ Wider paper, pinching it and packing it, licking it, rolling it, twisting one end closed like a tootsie roll, and leaving a hole on one side to pull. This was all a part of my relaxation process, thinking and finding a way out of this house. The cacophony of sounds in the background didn't bother me now; I was striking a match on the table top, pulling through the flame and blowing the
smoke into the kitchen. My eyelids sagged and cut off the top of Lynn's screaming head to show only an overactive mouth; I couldn't focus on her waving arm, accusatory finger. Unfortunately Chase, at only fourteen, hadn't reached Lynn's height and I had full view of his black hair falling over his eyes with the emphatic gestures he was making to go with his complaints. I felt a wet sensation on my right forearm, which must have been Chase spitting on me with each fricative and plosive, and I silently cursed Lynn for never getting him those speech lessons. He'd needed those speech lessons. Catherine, not much taller than the backs of the kitchen table chairs, paced behind Lynn and Chase with her arms crossed, probably pouting and saying whatever curses four-year-olds knew. I could only focus on Louie, who stood, eyes bowed, with his back against the threshold between the kitchen and the living room.

I figured Louie was my best bet, then. His fixed and dejected nature was somehow more enticing to me at that moment, so I called him over. He walked over slowly, neck still at forty-five degrees, and stood next to my chair. I asked him what the fuss was about; I thought we'd settled things at the family meeting. He said nothing. I pried. He said nothing. I told him that we couldn't very well solve anything if he was just going to be a sourpuss about it all. He finally spoke, saying that perhaps he and the rest of the family had a right to be a bit chagrined at the fact that I was mandating that we vacate and burn our family's ancestral home. I said the home was hardly ancestral, and more of a means of living for a few generations based on a lack of alternatives. And now we were looking at alternatives, I said. He gave me a dubious look at my mentioning of alternatives. I told him, indubitably, we could move out of the rural section of Warbleton
and into a more classy suburban home that would be closer to the school and the town center—a much better situation! He told me good luck concealing my weed habit with all those neighbors, and walked back to his doorway post behind the picketers, who had died down only barely since I'd started talking to Louie.

Things looked pretty hopeless for my case at the moment, so I decided that I had to go back out. What really irked me was that the "ancestral" home that Louie was talking about was my ancestors' home! Not Lynn's! I was entitled to do with it what I would, and I wanted to burn it.

It was just a house, after all.

I walked along the neighboring streets and contemplated my condition. Soon I was sprawling out on some nearby grass. I was atop a small knoll and I sniffed the green blades, inserting them into my nostrils and arching my back. I sneezed incessantly every time I did this, startling a passerby walking her dog. Both woman and dog turned away as if frightened. I said that a grown man was entitled to his own eccentricities, and they should walk on.

I returned to the house and walked through the noise. I cut it. I carried a gas can to the top of the stairs, vented it, and tilted the yellow nozzle downward. The fragrant rainbows slinkied down to my crying four-year-old. She was balling her fists and asking why. I stripped the sheets off the master bed and draped them down the fuel-soaked stairs like a slide. I watched the absorbing power of cotton. I drizzled the flower pots in the guest bedroom, stopped by the master bathroom for my last shit in the house and didn't flush. Chase clambered up the stairs to try and stop me, his socks sopping in gasoline, but
the Styrofoam in his beanbag chair was already primed to emit toxic fumes. I burst past Chase and bounded down the stairs for the other can. It was still by the door. I opened the coat closet and slid the nozzle in between packed Gore-Tex and leather and linen. Dribbles rolled over buttons and zippers and made puddles in the depths of out-of-commission shoes. The noise was gone. Fully cut. I went back into the kitchen and spun around with my arms spread, as a child mimics flight, and let the gas can in my right hand spew on the oak cabinets, let it collect in the dirty dishes in the sink, let it form square canals in the divots of grout between floor tiles. I trickled the rest of the gas on the long rug leading from the front door to the foyer.

My family was on the front yard now. I grabbed a match and dropped it on the long rug, then quickly slammed the door behind me. I walked slowly out to the others, watching the tears. I joined them and turned to see the house fully engulfed in flames. I started to wish I’d brought out my sunglasses. The heat rolled over us in waves. I watched the pressure burst windows.

I had no plans.
It was our first day, and we were standing in an expansive room. We were the first large wave of hires, so the company had fashioned an orientation. For training purposes, we were asked to perform an exercise, which the boss referred to as an “icebreaker.” Our new boss and his associates viewed us from above, delivering instructions from an elevated glass platform which was suspended from the ceiling of our open-concept office. We were first told to stand in a circle and determine our own pulse rates by placing our left pointers and middle fingers together against our carotid arteries. We then placed the same two fingers of our right hands on the neck of the person adjacent to us, forming a continuous ring. Once we had counted our neighbor’s pulse, we were to close our eyes and will our own heart rates into sync. When this was achieved, we opened our eyes and saw that we had each received a delivery of items. We were told to crumple the single sheet of paper which lay at our feet, use the matches to light the paper ball, and drop the inferno into the little aluminum garbage cans. With that, the documents had been destroyed.

We thought it was not so much an icebreaker as it was us just performing our job: we were hired at this startup because we exhibited a high capability of macro-consciousness, and we had all graduated from a school that was training people to do this type of work. In close proximity to others with this cognitive gift, we could enter increasingly identical headspaces, allowing us to experience the same thoughts and store
the same information simultaneously. Many other startups were working in this new territory: training people like us to store secrets and memorize sensitive documents.

However, our boss, in tandem with the periodic hand gestures of his associates, explained that our company did not aim to store anything: we practiced various methods of high-stakes document destruction. The team on the floor below us, we were told, specialized in the erasure of digital documents through layered encryption and dispersal, while our department disposed of tangible things. Therefore, much of our department’s duties consisted of the destruction of papers containing information our customers wanted gone forever.

More elaborate was our process for destroying tangible, non-paper items. We would sort through boxes of deliveries, collaboratively agreeing on the order of destruction. The object in question was usually something revealing, embarrassing, or presumably incriminating for the customer: sex dolls, firearms, documents so sensitive we were the only company they’d choose. Simply put, these were things people did not want to leave by the curb. Other times, it was not clear why the customer had paid for our service to destroy one of their possessions. In this category were countless framed portraits of people we didn’t recognize, a few stamp collections, doll collections, stuffed animal collections, and once, most bafflingly, a single log of firewood.

We destroyed each batch by way of a different method, because it was thought that this produced the highest success rate for collective forgetting. Often, the end was the same—a burning, or perhaps a soaking in hydrochloric acid—but we followed several labyrinthine steps to arrive at the final destruction. We tore the corners of paper
documents and fed the bits through industrial fans, spit ceremoniously between the pages, performed shrieks to confuse the text with noise. We used an industrial electric woodchipper to shred up everything from rubber sex toys to trophy collections. The movements and methods, we remembered, while words and names were lost. Our company was unique in that it harnessed macro-consciousness for its potential to make things go away. We could collaboratively examine, damage, and erase tangible and intangible things and forget ever having done so. All it took was consensus to follow the boss, and the experience was erased.

The one hall in the office led from the elevator to the open-concept office and it was lined with modern art. Wide multicolored swaths of paint swept across the walls of the hallway in an off-kilter crosshatching which looked as if each line were rolled in one pass. The rest of the space was wide open. Our desks lined the outer edges of one floor of a high rise building, where we sat facing fake windows which would project various nature scenes, making the space appear endless. We could imagine the space from above.

Often, they asked us to eat, and we were brought to a white marble buffet room. There were monitors lining the walls. The monitors projected images of us working. We saw us sitting in a continuous ring, typing feverishly, with headphones in our ears: small purple earbuds. As we grabbed a tray and headed toward the filet mignon, we turned and saw ourselves projected on another screen mounted behind the rotisserie chickens: we were dropping flaming documents into aluminum garbage cans. We did not know who had cooked or delivered all of this food as there was no evidence of a kitchen or staff. There was no one refilling the buffet, but it was clear that we would not be able to finish
it, even with us being 56 parts. Music was always playing but we’d never heard it outside the office before. It seemed to be the company’s own invention.

They had us taking naps in these pods. They were white ovals with sliding hatches on the side. Within each pod was a velvet maroon womb where we could curl up and nap. We woke from slumber feeling more well-rested than we’d ever felt lying on our mattresses back home. Time slicked by us in slow trickles. We completed introductory yoga, meditations on our common commitment to our supreme gift, and grueling sessions of something called cognitive lanyarding. It seemed we’d napped at least thrice, but then it seemed like twenty.

And yet, we felt ourselves becoming stars. We were rare. Mysterious. We could do anything, and our bank account reflected this. The number ticked up right before our eyes on a digital sign mounted below the elevated glass platform. Our boss said that seeing this number ticking up and up on just the first day of work should give us an idea of just how valued we were, and how life-changing this job would surely be for us and our families. Behind the boss, an associate motioned toward the digital display and remarked, “There’s a lot more where that came from.” Applause was heard, and we discovered that our hands were involved.

As we floated deeper into us, the movements of destruction were a clockwork and then an unquestionable singularity. The boss was a conductor and all of our arms were in sync so that each ripped page was deafening and the lighting of a match sent a whooshing throughout the space. There was music happening within us, and without us there was
nothing but silence. We once believed the first day immersive, incredible. There was a point when the first day was indeed flying by.

We’d eaten many fine meals. Crab legs, we loved. We built our own omelettes. A few times, we drizzled hot chocolate syrup over vanilla scoops. We felt as if we’d been interred for several weeks. We wondered what our kids were doing, if our partners were worried sick. The boss told us that our first day was starting off on the right foot. We didn’t know the time, and we were told not to ask.

When our hands became calloused, we started to know. Our fingertips were like rubber treads. Our nails could slice through thick stacks of copy paper. During destruction sessions, our eyes bulged, staring across the ring of us, and we were perturbed. We locked into sequence, and performed the physical tasks while lost in collective realization. We feared saying what we were thinking. We would be laughed at—fired, if the boss and his associates overheard. Were we imagining it?

We were. And so we realized we didn’t need to say a thing. All of us knew that the company had ill intentions, and they’d used our gift against us. The next time we were asked to nap, we crawled into our pods but left the doors cracked, and we did not sleep. We meditated, and threw our thoughts about the room.

Some of us beamed through, “We should escape in a running mob. If they try to stop us, they’ll be trampled.”

We largely recoiled, and offered, “No. Foolish. If one unit falls, ten more are bound to drop. Let alone the situation at the elevator. Fifty-six leave. We all leave.”
Admittedly, many of us were considering killing the boss and his associates. We thought the elevated glass platform could be shattered if hit with a projectile. We estimated the fall to the office floor to be at least twenty-five feet.

“We throw the garbage cans,” we reasoned with ourselves.

But then we worried that the boss and his associates would survive the fall, resulting in a great deal of ground combat. We all tentatively considered this, and while we knew we could likely kill the boss and his associates easily, we reasoned that we’d prefer not to have to enact bloodshed in our escape. Murder presented too many variables, and so we retreated back to meditation. Some of us nearly fell asleep with the strain.

We would have to play a slow and deliberate game. We resigned to take every other nap. The non-naps became covert planning sessions where we delegated consciousness throughout the group. During destruction sessions, we performed our compartmentalized duties. About a third of us began to function as analog-organic timekeepers. This involved counting seconds in sync with other timekeepers, while simultaneously searching the outskirts of the room for regularities in the projected landscapes. We sought to identify a repeated gesture, such as the batch of pixels which regularly flickered every two hours, twenty-four minutes, and seven seconds near the bottom right corner of the left wall. Through discoveries like this, we marked time in larger modules.

A cohort of ten initiated efforts to connect cognitively with the programmers downstairs. It had been determined that we would attempt a dual escape if at all possible.
Unfortunately, the floor was found to be too thick for optimal transference, and so we resigned ourselves to an attempted rescue in the midst of our own escape. The ten of us were then reassigned to design the escape choreography.

The rest of us, nearly half of the group, started to eyeball the potential avenues of escape, making several collaborative spatial estimates. How many units wide could we travel down the corridor? How long would it take to arrive at the elevator if moving through the corridor at a brisk, but controlled pace? How long would it take to crawl? To run in fear? And just how high was the elevated glass platform?

We answered what questions we could. After a final nap pod meeting, we emerged into the open-concept office for our final destruction session. First, we presented the boss and his associates with a diversion: in one explosive moment, we flung four-inch stacks of classified documents into the air toward the elevated glass platform. A great pile of papers filled the once-transparent balcony, and from below, we could see nothing but the soles of the boss and his associates’ shoes as they crawled and struggled. We hoped to deliver paper cuts. Their shrieks were to be expected, and we tuned them out and set to focus. The excess leaves fluttered through the air around us and we began to march toward the elevator. We formed eight rows of seven units and entered the hall.

Two of us who marched in the front row carried metal barrels of documents, both of which were placed by the elevator doors. We pressed the elevator button and twelve of us entered when it arrived, bound for the programmers’ floor. On our left and our right, two flanks of us continued into the stairwell, while those of us who followed the elevator crew pressed our ears to the cool elevator doors to listen for the crew’s arrival at the floor.
below us. When we heard the *ding*, we dropped a match into the metal barrels, which igniting the kindling and tripped a smoke detector. An alarm blared, the sprinklers came on, and a heavy glass fire door swung shut at the threshold between the office and the hall. The elevator would become inoperative.

In a scheduled check, those of us left on our floor turned back en masse to watch the boss and his associates being doused, but we were surprised to see the elevated glass platform slowly lowering to the office floor. We’d previously thought the only egress was above the platform. In an unscheduled continuation of the scheduled check, we held our gaze as the elevated glass platform descended through the floor of our office. It was a second elevator, unaffected by the alarm situation.

We took this into account and continued our march down the stairs. We rendezvoused on the floor below, where the programmers were telling us it was their first day and they were a new wave of hires.

They said, “The first day has been absolutely immersive, incredible.”

Our designated informants performed cognitive triage on the misguided programmers, suggesting that they follow us, and we continued downward with 28 units of us in each stairwell. In order to remain in sync, we stomped loudly down each step, which shook the building in a metronomic fervor. We expected to come upon the boss and his associates at any moment, but at each level we found yet another macro-consciousness group. We liberated the workers on the floor below the programmers, and then on the floor two floors below the programmers, then three, then
four, then five, then six floors below, and we shuddered with the realization that the structure was much taller than we’d originally conceived.

We recalibrated our vision of the floor map in real time and understood that the entire structure was layer upon layer of hires, all having been told they were the first of their kind, all experiencing their first day in an expansive room. We now understood that the boss and his associates rode the glass platform from floor to floor, moving through the center of the skyscraper. Our naps and meals had been planned precisely so that the scope of the operation was hidden from us. We descended in a swelling mass, and each new level of sameness fed the gaping mouth of our exponential dread.

We continued to gather members as we marched lower and lower. The stomps grew louder. We emerged into a large lobby as a synchronous mass of 448 units, the product of eight floors of 56 units each. The boss and his associates were nowhere to be seen, as the glass elevator had jammed, overwhelmed by the piles of sensitive documents. We burst into the city streets in the dark of night. We were free.

All of us are together now, having become one. We move across the space that opens before us, trying to make it back to those we loved. But there seems to be more to us than this. We can’t seem to separate, can’t leave the hive through which we now understand the world. We don’t know what we’ve destroyed or how long it took, can’t remember where we were supposed to be. For awhile, we walked the way we thought was right. Beyond the buildings and the streets we’ve found a field to lie upon, to circle up, and the grass is wet and soaks us through the shoulders of our shirts, but we don’t
mind. It’s a summer night, and the way home will come to us somehow, if we can just think.
LAMENTATIONS OF A HITMAN

Just a few hours ago, I stood there under the desert sun and thought to myself, if only I’d made some different choices in my early twenties, if I’d masturbated more and studied less, if I’d maybe rescued a couple cats, lived frugally on an office job and went in search of a wife to love, if only I’d become a respectable father with a meaningful connection to his children, children whom I might have said were my life, and if only I hadn’t done all that I’ve done, if I hadn’t always experienced the world as a burning propagation in my stomach, if my stomach hadn’t been filled with money earned in this way for so long already, for longer than it seemed I’d done anything else in my life, if I’d just made it a point to steer clear from violence, and if violence had not become steady business, if business such as this was never made usual, if privately commissioned bloodshed had not become a sweet release that I hid from all who knew me, if all who knew me were not such a select few, if my training was not so precise, if I did not know how to disarm a gunman so efficiently, if I was not so ripped, so tactical, so dashingly cloak-and-dagger, but before all that, if my mother had not insisted on bringing me to that bowling alley, had not sent me to the in-house daycare room where the workers would feed us kids a soft cheese which I swore had something wrong with it, was tainted or radioactive or both, if I’d refused that cheese on principle, slapped away those clammy nanny hands, and likewise, if there was never that certain stroganoff my mother used to make at home which I remember had a similar effect as the bowling alley cheese, an effect of vibration and crackling at the back of the throat or the brainstem, and maybe
without my father repeatedly forcing me to complete that seven-mile hike deep into the forest, the hike which seemed also to infiltrate my psyche somehow, to produce an effect of constriction or molding, after which I surely became quieter and more internal, less in tune with what is assumed to be the natural human desire for collectivity or closeness, and if I had not built a covert underground forest bunker at the age of sixteen, inside which I would sit, alone, cataloguing the movements of the nation’s most wanted criminals on a daily basis in order to capture said fugitives independently, and if I had not subsequently at the age of seventeen caught the most wanted man in the nation and anonymously delivered him alive in a cage at the back of a shipment of carpeting inside a plain black semi truck to the capitol building, if I hadn’t been so into binary code in my youth, if I did not like to drive sleek black cars fast, if I did not have a collection of grappling hooks which I first learned to operate by latching to sturdy trees and climbing to their upper boughs, if stealing mail was not my first favorite felony, if I was not so charmingly sociable when I was faking it, if I could not fool fools for sport like I do, if I could just be less skilled, less shrewd, less thoughtless about human life, and if I didn’t find pleasure in machination, if I didn’t enjoy creeping around corners in the dark, if my suits were not so tailored and technological, if I had already been killed, as many are, in this line of work, and if this line of work was not becoming more lucrative each year, then maybe, just maybe, I would not have been standing there, where I had been just a few hours ago, my hands holding a dusty shovel in the desert, looking down upon the bloodied body of a dead man, a man that I indeed had made dead, a man who was destined to be dead the moment his name was given to me, a dead dad in fact, a dad who
did dreadful deeds and deserved to die, by my deductions, and for a hitman the ethics aren’t always so cut-and-dry, and so alas, I reminded myself that all would be fine, provided that I meticulously followed the steps for disposing of the body, and provided that nothing came back to me regarding the job, just as nothing had come back to me for the many men and women buried in the desert or dissolved in acid or thrown from an airplane or tossed overboard a cruiser or sniped from a distant rooftop or delivered alive, for a fee of course, and there would be more work like this, provided that I continued this impressive streak, and so I would have nothing to fear, then, so long as the cash came through, so long as I could travel in my black vehicle to my home where I live alone, where my loneliness is counteracted by the fact that I’m afforded a lot in the way of safety gear, and also ubiquitous action, far more action and safety gear than most men can claim they have, unless they are hitmen, like me, and in this life the easiest thing to do, the only option for self-preservation is to just give up and stop feeling, and then start feeling good about what others might feel bad about, because I’m already a hitman, have been one a long time, and I may as well be a damn good one, and right now, in this moment, as I lean back on my black couch, in my futuristic condominium, as I loosen my tie and let out a sigh of relief that another man is dead and I’m still here, now that I’ve buried that man and it’s all behind me, at least until tomorrow, now that I’ve determined that protocol was met, that no mistakes were made, I might as well take a nap, and perhaps have a glass of brandy when I awaken, and I think all of this, truly consider it, as a wave of exhaustion overtakes me, my eyelids flutter, and I watch my right hand remove a tiny tranquilizer from the side of my neck.
THE MASS

They were a mass of people, not quite visible from space but definitely from a plane. They stood upright. The mass was filled with items. One-eyed dolls, nails, tatters, syringes, lemon peels, woody splinters, semen, papers of revelation, playing cards, greeting cards, at least thirty-seven bongs, multi-colored paper clips, empty pens, tires filled with perpetual rivers, but above all there were eyes. Eyes could see things, of course, but really only zoomed in, as though each person was looking through a magnifying glass with his or her face pressed right up to the thing he or she was trying to view, and so it was a sensory mess where what you were touching was probably what you were seeing, and this made people forget about the removed perspective that eyes granted to the beholder. To remedy this condition the mass was on a strict schedule which allowed it to look up at the sky at once (since how could a person tilt up one’s gaze to view the sky at liberty, where one would likely hit one’s chin on the neck or eye or shoulder blade of the person in front, and do the same with the back of the head to the person behind), and when the mass conducted this procedure, there was a great groan that sent a vibration through the throats, the chests, the abdomens, the thighs, and tickled the feet on the earth. According to the almost forgotten lore, at the time of the Most Massive, this great vibrating groan shook the crust so violently that it parted in a zigzag fashion, and a barreling fleshfall began to rush down each side of the expanse into the black abyss, legs upturned, fingers clawing, uniform groan shifted to reeling, divergent screams. Adults told this tale, lips brushing ear in the hush of night, but the mass made
no effort to quiet the upturned groan. Adults, and especially elders, held the history of the mass. Shoulder to shoulder with each other, and shoulder to hip with the nearest children, they imparted wisdom.

The primary activity of the mass was to be. It was charged with living. Its collective identity as a mass was all it endeavored to know. Everyone set off to forget everything but this one point. To bury thought was to make thought truly beautiful.

The mass was men, women, children. The mass was size and scope unknown. The mass maintained a core temperature. It was dressed in endless cloth and never changed.

A man fell asleep on his feet in the middle of the day. He jerked out of dream, falling slightly forward and hitting his teeth on the elbow of a very tall woman, who pulled her arm away in shock and pushed the woman in front of her at the small of her back, and an endless falling occurred for the rest of the day. It was not hand but hands and they were pressing on other things and this pressing gave birth to ubiquitous pressing.

This was when the focus was lost. Every man for himself, every woman herself, and the mass suffered. When the mass finally worked to its feet again, forgetting was prioritized. Become one again. Relinquish memory. Erase catastrophe.

Only the person who started the dismantling would remember the horror and feel the guilt. But one stomach made a fist, and others followed. This was the trouble: the looming burn in the stomach of the mass. As the mass grew, more dismantling occurred, and more perpetrators felt the personal guilt. Black auras surrounded these unfortunates, and the mass felt the permeating flush.
Out of fear, there was no talk of this curious phenomenon. The mass must forget everything but itself. The mass is. But eventually every person in the mass knew he or she was faking it. It was low-grade floss that shreds and leaves teeth dirtier. Frightening awareness hindered it all. Insanity was suspected of oneself. Everything became internal, rehearsed alone. The commonality of the mass gave way to secret cranial monologue. The daily upturned groan felt less fulfilling. The smell of hair became distinct.

The anxiety caused fidgeting. Shifting from foot to foot, standing on tip toe, trying to shake out the bads; all of this contributed to imbalance. Ulcers developed from the stress. Soon the groans became moans and they sounded at random as stomach pains smarted amidst the mass. This made the disconnect even more apparent. Each person had a different moan, and in true turmoil, this moan would produce any pitch it wanted. People longed for the comfort of the daily upturned groan, the homogeneous Ahh that vibrated them so wholly, so evenly. Still no one talked about it. Verbal acknowledgement was the greatest fear of all.

Eventually the ulcers corroded straight through. People tried to plug the holes with fingers, stacks of useless pennies, balls of cloth. Still, infection spread. Moans and stinging and mouths agape. People started dying. If enough of the living surrounded the dead, the corpse would be kept upright until others died, which was inevitable. Proximity to other death created proximity to one’s own death. When more than one person died in a compact section of the mass, the falling would start again. But now, the living fell and sloshed through the decay, and the pressing would not always press back. As more died, space grew. The mass compacted itself, retaining a façade of the closeness it once had.
However, this could not be maintained. The mass was standing on its dead. Heels were lodged in toothless mouths, toes sunk into atrophied muscles and dead bones splintered under the force, cutting the feet of the living.

Healthy members of the mass created special calls to alert other healthy members of their presence. There was a great migration through the mass so the healthy could unite. This, of course, caused more falling, and eventually the sick joined the dead. The mass was now much smaller, but was healthy and sought to return to its peaceful existence. But the guilt of abandoning part of itself infused the mass with a newfound anxiety.

The time came when all unity was lost. Ulcers. Far worse, far larger. It all happened again. The healthy mass could not retain its health. The death was crustier now, bloodier, and when the first falling came it never stopped. Newly dead fell upon oldly dead fell upon long dead, which was soil.

When the mass finally perished, it was when it could no longer rightfully call itself a mass in any sense. No—just a single, individual, brown-haired little girl, trouncing aimlessly through the stinking vastness in a stained white dress, stepping over miles of entangled, rotting limbs, plugging her nose, clutching a one-eyed plastic doll between her elbow and her side.

While matter can neither be created nor destroyed, we typically follow alternate guidelines, dictated by hope, which is created and destroyed by the second.
Wiring Helvetica

In the secret meeting room at the back of the community complex, the mayor informed us that the wires needed to be run around all structures in the northeast quadrant of the city in a single week, with all of us working consecutive full nights. It would be supremely challenging, what with the covert maneuvers and breath-holding and considerable danger, but we were the ones for the job, he said. Our mayor, a plump and shrewd man just like the last, worked his whole life to get this job. He used to be one of us.

It was my third month as a Community Consciousness Operative for the town of Helvetica, and so far I’d only done targeted jobs. Usually, this involved running the wires around individual structures over a single night. Taking out the northeast quadrant was yet another step in the process toward Total Occupant Surveillance and Influence (TOSI), a goal our city had been seeking for a number of years.

The twelve of us leaned in with our chests against the oblong conference room table. We nodded at the mayor as he spoke and drew horizontal circles in the air about an inch above his yellow notepad.

“Run the filaments around the base of each small home and bi-level structure. At least three times around the highly-populated apartment complexes. Consult the guidebook for all blocks in the metro center near the river, ditto for the hospital campus along Rubimore Street, and as usual for all buildings with greater than five stories. All of these will require several revolutions of wire, and the inspectors have recorded the
numbers for you in your guidebooks. The largest structures are accomplished faster in
teams and you should also consider bringing bicycles or skateboards for efficient
wrapping. Don’t bring the Segways—they reveal your authority. Let’s consult the map.”

The mayor stood, grabbing his belt buckle and shimmying to hoist his pants well
above his belly button. Despite his size, he was quite limber and known for being adept at
handling a whip. He unfastened his whip from the curve of his lovehandle and snapped
the tip of the leather around a metal hook that protruded from the ceiling. With the whip
taut, he pulled all the way to the floor, unspooling a large map of Helvetica. He began
whipping the map to continue identifying areas of concern.

“Go twice around the McMansions at the outskirts here, along the waterfront.
Don’t forget to encircle sheds, gazebos, and pools. These are places where citizens have
realizations, and so these locations present a significant opportunity of influence for us.
We’ve got the Fleur estate in the northeasternmost corner, which would be a good place
for some of you to start. The Fleur family owns several acres of land, including horse
stables and a private golf course. We want full control of their estate. If we could harness
their power it would be a significant step in improving life for all in Helvetica.”

I jotted down “Fleur” into my notebook and everyone else looked to be doing the
same.

“As you know, the northeast quadrant is our most highly-populated area, and our
final frontier. Bosworth, McKimby, and Rao: you guys are the veterans here. Make sure
you take care of the newer agents. Lead the charge, delegate as needed. As always, I will
be back in the command room should you need to contact me. And all of you—if in
doubt, double, triple, quadruple wrap. Don’t skimp. We have the wire to spare. Any questions so far?”

We all looked at one another with stone faces and sure eyes. We knew what had to be done.

“Good.”

The mayor cracked his whip and connected with the large button on the east wall of the secret meeting room. The button depressed and after an ascending arpeggio of tones, a computerized female voice proclaimed, *whip recognized.* The east wall, which was really a large garage door, slowly rose to reveal our vast stockpile of Helvetica wire spools.

The wire was stacked three spools high and four spools wide ad infinitum, as far as I could tell. Unspooled, the wire was thin and golden, like fine blonde hair. Its light and almost airy texture might make one underestimate its power. Each of the spools weighed only five pounds, but contained 5000 feet of wire, and it was stronger than copper or steel. We wore thick leather gloves to handle it, but in training, they made us learn the hard way why we wore those gloves. One morning during our months-long training camp, the mayor had asked three of us, the newly recruited operatives, to remove the gloves from our dominant hands and pick up an end of one of the three twelve-foot lengths of Helvetica wire which lay on the concrete floor before us. As we each stood there clutching the yellowish fibers, the mayor tied the ends of all three wires to the end of his whip. Then he stepped back, nodded at each of us, and cracked his whip violently onto the community room floor which ripped the wires from our hands. The sting was
deep and immediate and we were staunching the blood for days. I ran my left thumb along the tender pinkish line that ran the length of my right palm, and knew I’d never forget my gloves.

“Momentarily, you’re going to put on your gloves and start loading wire into your vehicles. You should choose your vehicles based on the area you plan to tackle that evening. All of the vans, cars, and school buses are fair game, but don’t bring the eighteen-wheeler to the suburbs. That’s reserved for whomever decides to start wiring the metro center, where we will need the most wire. Any volunteers?”

Rebecca McKimby craned her neck forward. “I’ll take it.”

“Thanks Operative McKimby. You’ll need to bring at least three other operatives for the job.”

“I’ll take the new crew.”

“Good. Operatives Lasky, Pembleton, and Krauss: You will answer to Operative McKimby.”

The mayor looked at us one by one, nodding sternly, then paused his gaze on me.

“Krauss! You keep rubbing that pink thing on your hand and I swear it’ll break back open. Stop fidgeting and just wear the gloves!”

“Will do, sir,” I said, staring him down and tensing my eyebrows to appear stern and resilient. My palms lay flat on the table.

Pembleton laughed and nudged me on my right shoulder. He had his guidebook open to page 11, and he was tapping a curved finger on a diagram.
Evidently my hand had healed the worst of all, and it was a running joke that I’d forget my gloves one night and shear my baby-soft scar back through. The other operatives laughed belly laughs en masse and the mayor smiled and said, “Alright. Alright. Let’s assign the rest of you to a district.”

It was decided that Operative Lucas Bosworth would lead the crew of Operatives Tarlin, Flaboyne, and Zusicraft to wire the multi-acre Fleur estate. Lucia Rao and Operative Huck would head in their vans to bi-level suburbia. Operatives Baker and Loot would begin the patchwork—which meant wiring smaller community-use structures like playgrounds, bullpens, and port-a-johns.

We put on our gloves and began loading spools of wire onto flatbed carts. We did several trips back and forth on the smooth grey inclined plane which led down to our vehicles in the underground garage. When the cargo space of our semi-truck was loaded floor to ceiling, we hopped into the four-seat cabin and drove off toward the metro center. The town was dark and quiet, and under the streetlights the roads were wet with a sheen of evening fog.

We parked the truck near a grocery store to hide in plain sight. We all wore our Helvetica Wire dry-fit shirts and brimmed caps—the same clothing issued to the town electricians, who did not know that secret community operatives existed. In the metro center, we generally could not avoid being seen by a few citizens roaming the city late at night, so as we unloaded spools of wire, we did so confidently, with expressions of nonchalance. With proper body language, the passing citizen would barely notice us; we
belonged and we were integrated into the city’s churning mechanism. We were just another crew of maintenance workers doing our jobs.

We did, however, have to watch out for the occasional unruly or curious citizen who might try to approach us or touch the wire. People never lose that infantile desire to touch shiny things. The wire was indeed sharp and capable of shearing skin, but fortunately its properties were not eternal. Once unspooled, the wire would slowly soak and dissipate into the matter around which it was wrapped, a process that took a mere two minutes. If kept in a gloved hand, the end would remain intact and would not begin to dissipate until a full loop was made. Then, over a period of one to three days, Total Helvetica Seepage (THS) would occur, where the invisible filaments would climb and spread and conquer their way throughout the structure. After THS, signals would emanate imperceptibly through open space, to be collected by the mainframe in the community center and categorically sorted.

I grabbed a length of copper pipe from the floor of the shipping container and tossed it to McKimby, who stood on the wet street. She caught it one-handed and slid the pipe vertically through a stack of three spools of wire, then slowly tipped the the stack toward Lasky. Lasky grasped the upper end of the pipe as it tipped, and Mckimby grabbed the pipe from the other side. They set each end of the pipe on heavy cinder blocks, and the wires were ready to be run.

“Krauss, tie these three lines together and grab your skateboard. You’ll be our frontman,” said McKimby.
I bent down and twisted the three filaments together, then stomped the tail of my skateboard so that the board popped up into my right hand. “All set here,” I said.

“Good. Lasky and I will stay here and guard the truck. Pembleton, you’re on lookout. Trail behind Krauss as he does this block. Remember, don’t leave long lengths of filament unattended until full dispersion occurs. You and Krauss need to communicate so that we minimize the possibility of citizen exposure. Krauss, listen up and pause the wrapping as needed.”

“Roger that.”

I grabbed the wires in my gloved hand, dropped my skateboard to the pavement, and kicked forward. The cityscape was flat and well-manicured, and so it was easy for me to slow-roll down the sidewalk, hugging the buildings to ensure the wrapping remained relatively taut. As I neared the end of the first length of the block, I saw a group of young and rowdy citizens come around the corner toward us. There were five or six of them; I couldn’t quite tell, for they stumbled and rocked in a drunken, amorphous mass.

These were the ones we worried about. Drunk or otherwise intoxicated citizens were significantly more prone to wire-fascination than their sober counterparts. In camp, we had heard stories about what had been done to citizens who’d inspected our work too closely. The mayor put it bluntly to us. “You give them the choice. They get into your vehicle and become one of us, or they won’t be anyone anymore. That simple.” Over time I’d learned that a few of the other operatives had joined the force in this manner, and to me, it seemed like a pretty efficient way to land a high-ranking job in local
government—though I suppose they had no way of knowing that this would be the result of their actions at the time.

The ruffians approached, emitting squawks and giggles, all shoulders and knees. They passed a brown-bagged drink among them, and I saw a few arms tip the bottle skyward for a sip. A cloud of smoke hovered over the group and I heard a cough break through their chatter. I turned and nodded to Pembleton, and from this he knew we’d halt the pull and wait. I tried to appear confident and relaxed, my mouth closed in a calm smile, aware of the passing ruffians, but not concerned about their passing. Fortunately, the young drunks wanted nothing to do with us and jaywalked across to the other side of the street before they got too close.

I gave the signal to Pembleton and we continued the pull. It was pushing three a.m. and we were fortunate enough to have the block to ourselves for the remaining three sides of the first revolution. We had just enough wire left in the three spools for another loop, so we did just that before starting process over again, and then we completed it a third time. The guidebook had suggested eighteen revolutions, so with nine spools of wire each wrapped twice around, we had completed the block by four-thirty a.m.

“Good work operatives. Tomorrow night, we’ll try to do two blocks,” said McKimby while we loaded the copper pipe, concrete blocks, and empty wire spools back into the cargo space of the semi-truck. “Time to bed down.” We all slapped hands and the muffled thwack of our leather gloves echoed off the buildings we’d just infiltrated.

Back at the community barracks, I retired to my dormitory and drew the blinds to block out the encroaching sun. I reviewed the section of the guidebook dedicated to
wiring metro spaces until I drifted off to sleep. I slipped easily into dream and saw myself standing in a cityscape fully shrouded in blonde filaments. The wires were spun thick around every structure, but it had not yet dissipated. Something was wrong. I yelled for Lasky, for McKimby, for Pembleton, but heard no response. It was morning, and all around me citizens were running, inspecting, sliding their fingers along the endless golden threads, pulling their bleeding hands back toward their chests in reflexive anguish. I looked down at my bare right hand and found that I was holding the ends of several wires. Blood seeped between my fingers and dripped off my knuckles and I saw the drops were feeding a tiny red river which ran between cracks in the street. My eyelids fluttered and I fell forward, my chin cracking forcefully on the pavement.

When I woke at six p.m., my jaw was sore and my teeth felt different. I bathed, dressed, and made my way to the community operative eating hall. As the sun dipped behind the trees outside the windows, we ate eggs benedict and sipped coffee and discussed the accomplishments of the previous night. Bosworth’s crew had wired the main lodgings and garages at the Fleur estate. Rao described a near mishap with a family dog in the suburbs.

“It bounded out of its wooden house in the yard right as we set the spools up. The poor pup would’ve shredded itself to bits. Luckily it seems Operative Huck here is a dog whisperer. He cradled the thing and stroked its back the whole time I was wiring its owners’ house.”

Baker and Loot almost had a situation on their hands when they unknowingly wrapped a port-a-john that was in use. The man inside struggled to exit the door for thirty
seconds or so, cursing loudly, then finally stumbled forward into the night when the wire had fully seeped. We all had a good laugh, our mouths and bellies full of benedict. I chewed and felt grateful that our first trip to the metro center had been relatively uneventful. Just as I finished the last sip of my coffee, the mayor announced his arrival with a loud crack of his whip. We simmered down and turned our heads to face his address.

“Good evening operatives! Congratulations on a fine job last night. We are well on our way to taking the northeast quadrant, and all of greater Helvetica! I’m sure proud of how far we’ve come, and you should be, too. I’ve spent the last few hours reviewing the data that’s already pouring into the system from your runs last night. Before you depart again this evening, spend a few hours analyzing the data and developing Influence Plans for the citizens affected by last night’s infiltration. Take pride in this work, because you’re all doing your part to improve our city immensely. Enjoy the rest of your meal and I will be waiting for you in the SIC.”

That was the Surveillance and Influence Center. In the SIC, we saw the scope of our work, and we harnessed the power of our wires. From a surveillance standpoint, we could hear everything occurring inside any given structure. We could hear young Maximo Fleur III, grandson of the first, turn the page on his comic book and argue with a caretaker about bedtime. We heard a business owner in the metro center fire a young employee for stealing from the register. Occasionally, we heard citizens making love.

While we performed regular listening, the mainframe did much of the organizational work for us. It listened for key words, phrases, and voice tones in order to
monitor tension levels within each structure, then ranked each location as compared to
the rest of the structures in that neighborhood, and as compared to all structures in
Helvetica. Once the wires had seeped for three days, the computer sorted tension levels in
an increasingly granular fashion, identifying individual rooms within buildings and
homes which saw the most strife and unease.

With this information, we could begin to influence citizens by altering life
situations and life sensations covertly. We did not have control over the citizen’s minds,
per se, but our wires allowed us to remotely control the environment and ambience within
a structure. Through manipulation of citizens’ physical sensations, we were able to
biologically suggest that they act in whichever way we intended. Much of this had to do
with the use of heat. For instance, if we wanted two citizens who we deemed
incompatible to separate, we would amplify their incompatibility through environmental
changes within their dwelling. When the couple was arguing, we’d raise the heat in the
room by ten or fifteen degrees. For nights on end, we would warm one side of the bed so
that one of them woke up sweating. The sweat-soaked one would be embarrassed, and the
other one would gradually lose the ability to hide their growing disgust. When the
sweater finally gave up and moved to the couch for a night, we would direct a cool breeze
through the room, and that citizen would finally find a night’s sleep that was comfortable
and dry. When one partner was cooking, we would make the temperature of the oven or
the stove skyrocket, burning the food, setting off the smoke alarm, and rendering the meal
inedible. Eventually, the two citizens would begin to associate one other with an
increased level of discomfort, and decide to separate.
We could also design environmental operations which boosted comfort so that they had the opposite effect on citizen relationships. We identified couples who were the most compatible, and therefore most beneficial to the city of Helvetica, based on an algorithm which considered tension levels, household income, and levels of community engagement. These were the relationships we hoped would succeed and allow Helvetica to increase its prosperity. Of course, to increase the number of Beneficial Citizens (BCs) in Helvetica, we tried to promote reproduction in these couples. Since our wires mapped for us a floor plan and layout of each and every structure and dwelling, we could be extremely precise in our use of heat. We would often locate the drawer in which the young BCs kept their prophylactics, and elevate the temperature within that drawer so that the latex was bound to break with use.

On a macro level, we could identify struggling businesses and cause them to burn down in the night, driving these failed entrepreneurs out of our city. When entire residential buildings were occupied with families and couples who were bound to fail based on the algorithm, we would systematically vacate the building by elevating tensions among all of the couples and families living there, causing them to move out in droves. With buildings vacated, wealthy BCs would swoop in and purchase these buildings, renovating them, further beautifying the city, and attracting more BCs to these dwellings. Once a renovation was complete, we would rewire the new and improved structure in the dark of night and begin positively influencing the new BCs who had moved in.
As we all reviewed the data collected from our first night wiring the northeast quadrant, we were buffeted by feelings of success. We were making a difference for the quality of life in Helvetica. Over the rest of that pivotal week, we ran wires with speed and agility, and not one of us had to capture or kill a single citizen, a feat that had not been achieved in the other three quadrants. We dedicated ourselves to each other and to our city, and the wires seeped in and elevated our cause.

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On the ten year anniversary of the wiring of the northeast quadrant, the mayor held a meeting in the secret room at the back of the community complex. He cracked his whip with enthusiasm and poured us all frothy glasses of champagne.

“Operatives, today is a glorious day for us and for all of the wonderful citizens of Helvetica. As you know, our results have been nothing short of incredible. Helvetica has become one of the most prosperous cities in the world. We’ve been ranked at the top of several lists of the happiest places to live and work. One article proclaimed, ‘Ask anybody who’s lived there, and they’ll tell you: there’s something special about Helvetica.’ And I know all of you, more than anyone, would agree. Just last week, the mainframe confirmed that Helvetica has surpassed 90% BC population. Suffice it to say that nothing will stop us in our quest to ensure peace and prosperity, now and always, runs deep in our wired city. Cheers to all the work you’ve done, and all the lives you’ve influenced for the better. Whether our citizens know it or not, you truly are the best of Helvetica.”
We bellowed into the conference room and raised our glasses to our lips. I hugged and kissed McKimby, who had become my wife, and I bent down to kiss the forehead of Benedict McKimby-Krauss, our son. As I thought back on all we’d done to ensure the happiness, safety, and prosperity of our citizens, it was hard not to well up with tears of pride and gratitude. I closed my eyes and envisioned the illuminated sign which beckoned beneficial citizens to our thriving city. It sure was burning bright.
As I scanned my roster for this school year, I saw his name, and froze. It was the Schoolboy. I’d spent the whole summer steeling myself. Deep breathing. Hoping not. His name has the kind of overreaching power to elicit universal sighs, apologetic pats on the back, offerings of alcoholic evenings. The kid is a fantastical nightmare of a boy—a reaching, clawing being. If one is not too vigilant, this boy could do his worst. I’d heard the discussions in the teachers lounge. Half-whispers floated through the dead air while the microwave whirred:

Those three months he was at Bryden Academy were the happiest time of my life.

I know. It was during my archery unit. We may not have survived otherwise.

I know who you two are talking about, and you’re right—you practically got off scot free. I had him the following year, when he was kicked out of Bryden and came back here. That place only made him worse.

Sarcastic whisperings were a way to respond, but I have seen many colleagues cry openly at the will of this boy. Today, I fortunately did not do that. The Schoolboy was relatively tame, as most kids are on the first day of school.
The Schoolboy Responds To A Writing Prompt About His First Day of School

I enter the classroom. I sit in the middle of the fourth row. I am acutely aware of the teacher’s cologne. It’s overapplied. And his strut is weak. Does not seem in control and/or confident. Pit stains. But it’s also clear to see he’s fooled more than a few of my classmates already in these first few crucial minutes. Some have their eyes locked on his sharp first-day-of-school-outfit. Summer pastels and a clean half windsor. Their hands are folded over color-coded notebooks and folders. Kids that look like a back-to-school commercial for Target.

The Schoolboy Forgets His Homework

His prepubescent mustache is where he gets his power. I’m sure of it. It looks like he’s been doing lines of shavings at the pencil sharpener. Which I wouldn’t put past him, this boy. What pains me is the way this mustache is respected by the rest of the class. It’s a point of discussion. Pride. The Schoolboy forgot his homework today. I asked why, and he said he was, quote, balls deep in some serious reading of Infinite Jest. The Schoolboy is well-read. He is ten.
Today, the Schoolboy made quite a wave at the anti-bullying assembly. Prior to lining the class up to descend the stairs to the auditorium, I specifically told the students to *bring nothing*. The Schoolboy, in blatant insubordination, brought a hand-woven yoga mat from his family’s recent trip to India. The Schoolboy is into yoga, and says so often.

As the auditorium began to quiet down, I had walked to the other side of our class row to confiscate Yelena’s cell phone, and the Schoolboy seized this opportunity to ask well-meaning Mrs. Jenkins if he could *please use the facilities*. He smiled intently at Jenkins, averted his eyes from my gaze, and offered no response to my whisper-yells, once I realized what had occurred. As he exited the side door of the auditorium, I felt the blood leave my face.

On stage, the black curtains drew back behind the presenter to reveal the Schoolboy, spotlighted in Lotus Pose atop a wooden storage crate, eyelids bobbing in deep concentration. The audience of children became a shrieking mass, hundreds of arms pointing and laughing at the stunt. It is unclear who or what drew the curtains to reveal the meditating boy, as the only other person nearby by was the anti-bullying presenter, Jeff, who was visibly rattled, and remained so, even after the Schoolboy rolled up his mat and walked offstage to uproarious applause and sustained laughter.

Later, in the principal’s office, the Schoolboy claimed to have left his body. As I followed up Principal Petro’s reprimands with paraphrases of the same general message—*if only you would apply this creativity in a positive way, we want the best for*
you, please take some ownership, get it together—the words bounced around us and didn’t seem to latch. The Schoolboy just smiled.

I wiped a nervous streak of sweat from my brow as Petro and I turned away from the Schoolboy to strategize about the boy’s fate. We came up with some loose plan which we would have posed as an opportunity for the Schoolboy, but the details of that plan are lost on me now; the details were concisely mitigated by what we saw when we turned back to the Schoolboy: he had a bushy brown mustache parked on his upper lip. Petro sternly said Kid, stop the games. Take it off. But then we saw it: his mustache continued to grow thicker before our eyes. He brought the thumb and pointer finger of each hand to the corners of his lips, and twisted the hairs into an exaggerated handlebar.

Is there a problem? That was all the Schoolboy said for the rest of the meeting. Petro stuttered nuh—no, that will be all for today, that’s fine, that’s great, why don’t we, uh—and in so many words he requested I bring the boy back upstairs.

His classmates didn’t seem to notice the growth, and when I turned back from writing the homework on the whiteboard, the mustache was pencil shavings again—all but gone.

The Schoolboy Covers the Bathroom Walls With Graffiti of Dirty Palindromes

As I entered the second floor bathroom today, I caught a scent of paint. I rounded the corner toward the urinals to see the following gems sprayed in beaming red against the white tile wall:
1. *Lana Evil did live anal.*

2. *Stacy L, guru of tatas, sat at four ugly cats.*

**The Schoolboy Crawls Needlessly About the Classroom**

If the Schoolboy has any reason to move about the classroom, he will crawl. He did so today, yet again, to monumentally disruptive effect, though I don't have the strength to record the details of it here. These antics sit in blatant opposition to the Schoolboy’s dedication to the practice of yoga and meditation.

Following this most recent incident, the administration has suggested that he be given time to meditate whenever he feels so inclined. This, they hope, will calm him back into focus. I have agreed to this measure with full knowledge that the Schoolboy has been orchestrating such a result this entire time, but I agreed also with full knowledge that a mental breakdown on my part feels imminent, and I could live with a few days of constant meditation on the part of the Schoolboy.

I have just awoken from a nap, during which I had a nightmare where the floor of my classroom and everything upon it began to cycle through below me like a treadmill, and I was running an endless linoleum abyss, dodging school furniture, to escape his insistent crawl. His handlebar mustache grew larger and thicker until it dragged the furniture along with it, and as fatigue set in, he caught me, and I was crushed to death below a mountain of plastic, aluminum, and particleboard.
The Schoolboy’s First Free Verse Poem

Yr the One to Blame

for your mom
You are fearful of your past
The shattering glass
Life no clearer than an opaque blade of grass
With chilling lemons
And a yogurt parfait
The bites get slower, smaller,
And build a wall.

The Schoolboy Engages in Antics While I’m Being Observed

Today, Principal Petro came to observe my class. As he entered, the Schoolboy dropped to his knees, arched his back, and howled as a wolf does at the moon. I sternly demanded that he please return to his seat, as I was giving a crucial lesson on subject-verb agreement, but he redoubled his effort, crawling mechanically toward Mr. Petro, who was still standing in the doorway, looking perturbed, no doubt remembering our previous meeting with the Schoolboy.

Mr. Petro and I shared a visual exchange. I believe I made my face to appear apologetic, disdainful, yet not totally surprised; Mr. Petro’s face, as mentioned, was
classically perturbed, like “The Scream” without his hands on his cheeks. Just as the Schoolboy reached the principal’s black leather shoes, he halted, stood up, and apologized, saying he mistook Principal Petro’s bald white head for a full moon. He extended a hand to shake, and returned to his seat promptly.

I decided then to ignore the behavior now that it had subsided, and I attempted to continue the lesson so as to get a good write-up from Principal Petro. But it was Petro who interrupted this time, his face red.

*Kid, you think you can just pull this nonsense when your principal walks into the room? You think that’s funny? You know, to me, you just look like a fool pulling that. And maybe some of your peers who laughed are foolish too. Sure looks that way to me—I wonder what your teacher thinks?*

I nodded in agreement. Petro pointed a thick finger at the Schoolboy. *You’re coming with me.*

My performance review mentions nothing about this incident, which took up just about the entirety of Petro’s visit. Instead, I am rated highly effective in all categories for my lesson on subject-verb agreement. In the text, Petro references activities I did not employ, and speaks positively of a one-on-one writing conference I had with a student I’ve never heard of named Susan.

No official disciplinary action was taken against the Schoolboy. He returned twenty minutes later in good spirits, and an email from his guidance counselor states we *sorted things out*. 
The Schoolboy Gets Caught Vaping

As I sit here vaping pensively on my couch after a long day of teaching, I can’t help but reflect on the fact that the Schoolboy vapes as well. It was my luck to be the one who caught him today, just as I was headed back to my classroom with a steaming plate of leftover spaghetti, which I’d warmed up in the teacher’s lounge. It was then that an overwhelming scent of berries assaulted my sinuses, and I nearly gagged as the smell mixed with that of my spaghetti. I reluctantly followed the scent to its source, and there was the Schoolboy, leaning against the yellow wall of the third floor bathroom, reading Gertrude Stein’s *Tender Buttons* and sending billows toward the drop ceiling. I told him to hand me the vape pen, but he vaped into my plate of spaghetti and bolted out of the bathroom on all fours. I turned after him, but he was prancing along at surprising speed, dodging the other students in the hall. His cackling filled the space until he burst through the fire doors, the sounds muted, and he disappeared up the stairwell.

I stood staring for a moment, then returned to my classroom to eat my spaghetti, now cold. I was unable to address the situation, and also unable to eat much of the spaghetti. I regretted throwing it out in my classroom garbage can, for the stench made me nauseous for the rest of the day.
The Schoolboy Gets Me Written Up

I was called down to Principal Petro’s office this morning before the students had arrived. Petro sat behind his desk in a leather chair and the security guard, Mr. Garcia, leaned against a filing cabinet with his arms crossed. They didn’t look pleased.

Turns out, Petro and Garcia had reviewed the hallway footage from the previous day and saw me standing there with my spaghetti. They could see I failed to make any attempt to discipline the Schoolboy, and on top of that I didn’t notify security that a student was missing from class. The main problem here was that after I abandoned the situation to sulk in my classroom, the Schoolboy had continued his freakish sprint through much of the school. They showed me footage of him pummeling through a double-file line of kindergartners. Then I watched another clip of him crawling on all fours across every surface in the main office, kicking over computer monitors, a vase full of flowers, and at least four mugs of pens. Papers fluttered through the air. Many times, the Schoolboy evaded capture by Mr. Garcia, who is not built like a runner. The Schoolboy’s rampage ended when Garcia managed to quarantine him as the boy ran into Mrs. Jenkins room, where she had been alone, grading papers. The boy destroyed several dioramas, knocked over a bookcase, and finally collapsed onto a beanbag chair and fell into a deep sleep.

Petro thanked Mr. Garcia for securing the footage, and the burly man left the room.
Petro then explained to me that based on my failure to act in a situation where both students and staff were potentially in danger, they had no choice but to write me up. I couldn’t see how they were blaming me for the Schoolboy’s behavior, but Petro assured me that this was only a reminder to me that safety is our number one priority, and otherwise, he was pleased with my performance this year.

My only solace is that the Schoolboy has been suspended for five days after the incident. Class proceeded without disruption today, as I assume it will for the rest of the week.

The Schoolboy Returns From Suspension, Renewed

With all of the antics I’ve come to expect from the Schoolboy, I was still wholly unprepared for the him to return from his suspension in the form of a wolf. Today, an upright gray wolf entered my classroom and sat all too anthropomorphically in the Schoolboy’s chair. He sat down, marked the page of his novel with a stray tuft of wolf fur, and proclaimed in a deep, grumbling voice, I apologize for my uproarious behavior during the first few months of this school year. I now understand that my actions were triggered by a deep internal strife, the burden of which I’d been carrying for the entirety of my thinking life. Now that my true wolfiness has emerged, I feel liberated. I feel virile. I have a newfound thirst for knowledge. My eyes and ears are keen. Teach me.

Petro arrived soon after the morning bell to wish Wolfboy good luck on his first day back at school. Apparently, the two had met and come to an understanding. There
was talk of *turning over a new leaf* and *starting off on the right foot*. *The right paw, you mean*, said Wolfboy, and the two shared a laugh.

Petro smiled at me, seeming to indicate that all was normal, and left.

I stared around at my class. Not one child was paying Wolfboy any mind. Samuel was mindlessly scribbling on the side of his shoe with a pencil. Tevin was frantically searching for his homework from a backpack that appeared to have been left out in the rain. Yelena was on her phone again. Sitting right behind Wolfboy, Litzy craned her neck around his broad shoulders, read the warm-up question on the board, and began writing in her notebook like it was any other day.

**The Schoolboy Adjusts to New Life as Wolfboy**

Wolfboy is nothing like his former boyish self. He trots throughout the halls on his hind legs, his whole body fluffed with thick greyish-black fur. Having dedicated himself completely to his studies, he now wears a jacket and tie to class every day. He is participatory, and seems to relish the opportunities afforded him. Occasionally, he howls (involuntarily, he says), when he gets a correct answer. When he is next door in Ms. Rebundo's room, I hear him through the walls.

I am grateful for his improved behavior, but his pretension remains vigorous.
Wolfboy Makes a Citizen’s Arrest

Before school today, Wolfboy witnessed a hit and run. He was finishing his morning constitutional on the trail behind our school, and as the trail met the road, Wolfboy saw a vehicle strike a rollerblading teenage girl, who fortunately was okay save for a few scrapes and bruises. Upon seeing the incident, Wolfboy took off running after the car, which was a convertible, and pounced upon the lap of the driver, pulling the e-brake and using his calloused paw to steer the car to a safe stop at the side of the road. After placing a 9-1-1 call using the motorist’s phone, he remained on the man’s lap and growled in his face to prevent him from fleeing before officers arrived. Wolfboy is now being granted a medal from the city mayor, and our class is scheduled to attend the ceremony.

Wolfboy’s Award Acceptance Speech (text acquired from city library archives)

Good afternoon teachers, administrators, staff, community members and fellow students, and thank you so much for being a part of this generous event. As many of you know, I’ve taken to morning walkabouts as of late. They allow me space to clear my head, and as the cool breeze rustles the leaves on the trees and the dew coats my paws, I find myself in a deeper peace than I ever thought possible. It was from within this profound state of peace that I have had my most salient revelations about the state of my life and its relationship to the school and the greater community.
There are no words that can fully express what this town, this community, and all of you here mean to me. And that is why I did what I did. I did it for that rollerblading girl, first, but also for all of you, who work hard every day for a better life for us kids, even wolf kids, like me.

Now I suspect many of you are just here because of my recent unexplained transformation into a wolf. Suffice it to say that this is a personal matter, and I will continue to do my best if you all can promise to do the same. Let us all agree to be positive, love one another, and allow a wave of good vibes to blanket this town and never let it go. Thank you.

**Wolfboy Announces Entry into School Board Race**

After much pomp and circumstance surrounding Wolfboy’s recent good deeds, and also much talk of how fluent and convincing he sounded during his award acceptance speech, he has recently announced that he’s running to be a member of the school board. Wolfboy claims he’s a wonderful candidate, given that he is within and without: a student in the trenches, who understands the workings of the school from a student perspective, but also a wolf who must contend with a certain burden of difference.

I stopped by Principal Petro’s office during my prep to see if this was really true, or even legal. Who would want this kind of person representing our school? Were we just supposed to ignore his tumultuous, violent, conniving past? Petro seemed upset by my
line of questioning. Wolfboy is doing good things. What do you have to complain about?

Has he been disruptive at all? Causing trouble?

No.

Then I’d count your blessings because this boy might be the turnaround story of the century. It’s results like these that made me want to enter education in the first place. It’s inspiring, really.

I could sense I was already on thin ice given my recent write-up. I just nodded, said okay great, and went upstairs to microwave my frozen burrito. Back in my classroom, I burned my tongue on its molten core and cursed.

**Wolfboy Plans a Walk-a-thon Fundraiser**

As part of his run-up to the school board election, Wolfboy is hosting a walk-a-thon through the trail network in the woods behind our school. During homeroom today, he passed out glossy, colorful fliers for Wolfboy’s Zen Walkabout. In partnership with local businesses, the event will raise money for afterschool programs. Wolfboy had a spiel.

Walking is deeply connected to our spiritual well-being, as is our relationship to the natural world. My hope is that this can be a fun event for teachers, students, and families. The results will be twofold: we will gather funds to support and improve our school community, and everyone involved will experience the wonderful trail system neighboring our campus, which I would love to see utilized more frequently.
The class is still obsessed with this boy, and even more so since he returned from suspension. As Wolfboy concluded his announcement, my students clapped excitedly and a few reached over to give him a neck scratch or a pat on the head.

Wolfboy bared his teeth in what I couldn’t quite call a smile.

**Wolfboy’s Zen Walkabout is Anything But**

These past few weeks of fundraising for the Walkabout invigorated the school with a newfound sense of purpose. Students gathered pledges from parents, relatives, and several businesses. Wolfboy assembled groups of volunteers, who passed out fliers at our local Shoprite. Altogether, nearly $5000 was raised.

At noon today, when hundreds of us gathered in the school parking lot before the Walkabout, Wolfboy delivered yet another monologue—*community, collectivity, respect, positive vibes, etc., etc., etc.*—to booming applause. He set us walking with a celebratory howl, and led us into the forest along a well-marked trail.

The cheery atmosphere was punctuated by Wolfboy’s effort to make conversation with nearly every attendee. While the massive crowd walked leisurely along the trail, all of us sheathed in the flannels and downs of late fall, Wolfboy continued to double back, talking to students and parents about what steps could be taken to better the school, how we could continue the success of events like this. I witnessed him give wolf rides to several smaller children, their parents laughing as they watched the wholesome scene. In
the first hour, Wolfboy trotted around the perimeter of our long line at least three times, checking in with folks along the way. He did not acknowledge me once.

When three hours had passed, there were some grumblings about just how long this Walkabout would take. Wolfboy assured the crowd that we’d be emerging from the woods and back into the parking lot soon. But a few dads began talking about how they knew these woods pretty well, and they weren’t sure we were headed in the right direction. Wolfboy laughed and said there was no need to worry, he didn’t spend the week lining the route with caution tape for nothing.

Unconvinced, the dads took out their phones to determine exactly where we were, and that was when it started. One of the dads called Wolfboy over, presenting his phone and pointing to a blue dot in the center of a green abyss. Wolfboy snarled and lunged toward the dad, pinning him to the forest floor and latching onto the hand that was holding the phone. This is about community, Wolfboy growled, not letting go.

Another dad leapt forward and kicked Wolfboy hard in the ribs, attempting to stop him, but Wolfboy pounced upon this dad too, and went for the jugular. Seeing this, the hundreds of Walkabout attendees bolted in every direction, shrieking and stumbling over rocks and logs. But the crowd was no match for Wolfboy’s speed, and he made quick work of them, tackling them one by one. After that first rib-kick from a dad, no one else went on the offensive against Wolfboy. All of them ran, until they didn’t.

Night has fallen. I am high up in an oak tree. I am grateful that the darkness now obscures my view of what surrounds me on the forest floor. A few minutes before
Wolfboy’s attack, I was overcome with a sense of dread. Something led me up this tree, and just as I swung a leg over this sturdy branch, I saw Wolfboy take down the first dad.

Now, at the base of the tree, Wolfboy sits with his spine arched, howling at the full moon. Flanking him on either side are several wolves, howling too, who arrived to greet him at dusk. Wolfboy hasn’t said a word of English since the pack arrived, but I know through their gestures that they know I’m up here.

If I, too, am to die tonight, may this document serve as a factual record of the progression of this terrifying beast. May it educate the masses on the warning signs. Dear reader, please bring Wolfboy to justice, if there is still hope. I’m so, so sorry.
1. The day the treeman left his tree was decidedly a day by standards of the clock.
2. The tree was coughing greenery from stalks, rather blackery.
3. The treeman fell from his post at the curve of a girthy branch, rubbed raw by years of grubby denim.
4. The treeman fell by accident, enticed by shiny things that sat upon the earth.
5. The media did wonders with the incident, published it in papers, cast the tragedy as inevitable demise.
6. Special news editions were made on parchment paper, gathered and pressed from the treeman's tree, framed in frames for history.
7. The treeman was embarrassed by naked limbs in winter.
8. Some men hated the treeman's tree because his branches shaded houses and prevented wives from getting tan.
9. The treeman fell willingly, garbling statistics from his mouth throughout the fall.
10. A neighborhood girl ran screeching at the treeman's thump, scissored off a greasy lock to sell on eBay.
11. One witness said the treeman sprouted wings at first, but retracted them and braced to hit the mulch.
12. One young boy said the treeman coughed obscenities as final words.
13. The treeman's pigeons were raised by Mike Tyson.
14. The tragedy was never captured on amateur camera, leading many to speculate that the treeman never fell.

15. The tree was suspended in seasonal limbo.

16. The townsfolk shielded children's eyes.

17. Several times the treeman's foes released termites on the trunk but the treeman always pissed them all to death.

18. The treeman was naked as he lay there dead.

19. Prior to the fall, the townsfolk depended on the treeman for tourism, charging fees in summer months.

20. The treeman coughed up blood and several splinters.

21. None had ever seen the treeman on solid ground before.

22. The treeman was coerced to fall, promised bigger light and lighter bags.

23. The treeman got up once before collapsing back to concrete.

24. Conspirators claim the local government caused the treeman's fall, a public stunt to bring the town to sorrow and reunion.

25. The treeman was masturbating prior to his fall.

26. Most accounts agree that the treeman's left hip hit mulch first.

27. For 27 years, the treeman lived in and on a growing home.

28. The tree is dust and dogbrush now, and not as much a landmark.

29. Many townsfolk asked that he pay taxes, for his home was growing larger by the year.
30. The treeman's fall is taught in many nonfiction, fiction, creative nonfiction, and journalism units across the country.

31. Tourists came in droves for weeks and weeks as many disbelieved his death or sought to spy a speck of blood.

32. The treeman's tree commenced dying with the treeman's death.

33. The treeman got up twice before collapsing back to concrete.

34. Most accounts agree that the treeman's left ear hit second as it slammed beyond the mulch to concrete pavers.

35. The treeman trained his pigeons to blanket him with grease-green wings and just like this he mustered through the night.

36. Sustenance was a mystery; the treeman stayed alive.

37. The treeman's clothes were shed by airflow from the fall.

38. No one knows the treeman's date or place of birth.

39. The tree divided the town post-fall as many sought to commemorate the treeman and others thought the tree was dangerous and dead.

40. The treeman's hair was long and tugged by squirrels, resulting in his fall.

41. The treeman landed on his feet and people marveled at his height.

42. The treeman spoke in perfect English.

43. The tree's death was officially attributed to either lack of treeman or maybe poison left by treeman's foes.

44. Each year the townsfolk wished the treeman would remove the waste of acorns and unsightly crinkles created by his home.
45. One mother's yelp was loud enough to bring remaining townsfolk out of doors.

46. The treeman never had a wife but talked about her if pressed.

47. The treeman never fell but finally whittled a livable space within the upper trunk from which he still refuses to emerge.

48. Birds still frequent the treeman's tree, though his pigeons have never returned.

49. The treeman's tree was as much a tree as any tree could claim to be.

50. The treeman's pigeons removed his clothes with eager beaks and slung them flagged and windswept on a high hard branch.
HOW THE SKY MOVED US

Before we made our official descent into the earth, we heard reports explaining sky death. How it feels, how quickly it's over, if one could palm the gel and kick and swim to safety. The remaining scientists who had studied this impending event fed us reams of lore: that sky death was at least 104 times more pleasurable than the human orgasm, that it was possible a more evolved sect of humans would emerge with the ability to live in and breathe the sky blue muck, that struggling against the sky would either ignite a rock of anxiety in the stomach pit right before death, or conversely it could prove increasingly erotic for those enticed by tie-ups, mastery, punishing, especially asphyxiation. The most hardcore S & M enthusiasts, hearing this news, trekked high into the mountaintops, eager to be fucked by the sky's sloosh, to feel its blue lubey slip. How hot, how irresistible, to be dominated by the unfathomably far-reaching sky. These ones liked to imagine they were participating in an atmospheric sky orgy that included millions of participants at any given moment, all openly yielding to the powerful sky. Many women rallied together to end the worry and constant retreat from the encroaching sky; some were jived by the chance to penetrate the sky full-bodily, to be taken. These women posted signs about the town: "Stop running from the sky! Fuck the sky!" All the signs listed the place and time of departure for the group's ascent.

The sky's lowering is said to have been caused by gravitational forces peeling down the azure, but I have my doubts. Scientists who might be able to provide support for the government's original statements have long been dead, their faces engulfed by the
gelatinous gray-blue. Many suffocated willingly—in the name of science—dropping their jaws and building layers of sky gel in their lungs. The prominent Swiss scientists went first, as the sky overtook their mountaintop labs in the Alps. It's said they neither swam nor squirmed. The sky hit high-dwelling people early on, just by the simple nature of proximity. Mountain tour buses became lodged like toys in jell-o; high-altitude cyclists and distance runners climbed forward unknowingly into the sky, appearing to trot or pedal in slow motion before each and every trachea was packed blue. The earliest reported deaths occurred on Everest, when a group attempting to be the first solely female crew to reach the summit was swallowed up. Soon, governments across the globe released warnings. At least what little warning we were offered was enough for me, my wife, and my daughter to begin tunneling.

My wife took up the task with a diligence I'd scarcely seen before. In the flashes of the early dig that I remember, I was usually at the front of the assembly line, driving a shovel into the deepening hole at the center of our basement, placing shovelfuls of moist and wormed dirt into the makeshift basket of my wife's splotched floor-length dress, which she carried to the bottom of the stairs. Then my daughter used her own shovel to carry the soil to the top of the basement stairs, sealing the door crevices from the seeping sky. I can still hear the muffled dong of shovel hitting soil as she beat the pulp through every open seam. I couldn't guess our term in that basement, be it weeks or months or somewhere outside time, but when we left the basement for the earth, its walls were fully choked with dirt. We knew this was a temporary measure—the sky would surely squish its way through each and every pore—but we relished in our semblance of control.
Some men relished in what they imagined was a cushed re-entry into a safe and supportive womb. Fathers were sucking thumbs and deserting their families, and our neighborhood was no exception. Children looked robbed and desolate, clutching living and synthetic balls of fur, each other, doorframes, elbows, father's pant legs, and wondering what now. Mothers screamed of abandonment or wore it on their faces like shag.

The outlying groups that chose to climb closer to sky death disrupted the urgent evacuation of the highlanders, most families carrying little more than a knapsack of supplies, and all of them gaining speed—in cars, wagons, wheelbarrows, lawn mowers, tandem bicycles—barreling over rocks, tall grass, gravel paths. We watched these people on the news, their faces puckered with fathomless urgency.

I don't think I really understood it all until they aired footage of highlander families evacuating. These were families with values, mini vans, respectable credit scores. They'd moved skyward for the view, and now the view was toxic. The view had mass—it floated down and covered air like pesticides. Like all of us, these families wanted lots to look at—an organic canvas for the eyes—and why the river that enhanced my view did not decide to turn to acid and seep out to kill each of us in the valley, I couldn't understand. I sat at the television, my eyes glazed over with valley guilt.

Other eyes that glazed were those of news anchors in the field, their reports mechanical, their intonation suggestive of manuals, cue cards, a detached comprehension. *Anyone living at 500 or more feet above sea level is advised to evacuate immediately. You may check your town's elevation online. Be sure to bring sufficient food and water for at*
least a week of living. Proper nutrition and clothing are necessary in providing a safe and painless relocation. Please leave all pets behind, as they will not be permitted to enter the designated emergency shelters. You may attempt to make arrangements to stay with low-dwelling friends or family, but do so at your own risk, as you will not be given access to government shelters once they are at capacity. Questions may be directed to the number on your screen or you may visit the Sky Gel Evacuation website at www.skygelevac.gov. I watched a newswoman say something to this effect, shudder, and retreat offscreen. I gathered my wife and daughter and we went into the basement.

The sky leaked its plushness through our initial walls in bubbles and spurts. The clay and dirt were simply too porous, and we spent the first few weeks retreating almost constantly. We soon learned the necessity of the elbow, a curving tube that tricks the sky, changes its course and slows its comprehension. A single elbow, along with a pitch-packed retaining wall, might buy us a week and a day. While this means we only dig once a week, we constantly fear that we'll make a wrong turn and break a seal. Other Fears:

1) that the earth will become so over-tunneled, so ravenously penetrated that it collapses and implodes toward its core with a force so biblical that the planet's matter compacts into a marble-sized wad,

2) that other humans continue to tunnel like us, or are otherwise subsisting in Plexiglas globes or air-tight sky-resistant metal domes or repurposed submarines or whatever makeshift survival apparatus was thrown together to save above-grounders, as there must have been some apparatus in the works;
3) that there still must be people dying all the time, albeit at lesser rates than those that occurred during the initial onslaught, but still regular deaths at predictable intervals, and so I long for those charming statistics that used to come out all the time when I lived on earth, not in earth, things like, "There are approximately 100 shark attacks worldwide each year", or, "Icicles kill 100 people annually in Russia," or, "Hippos kill 2,900 people annually in Africa", because at least then you have a sense of the death that is around you and how you can avoid being a part of that death;

4) that I can't decide whether we're digging away from death or toward it, or maybe instead we're living in death—we're breathing in its must and acting out a prolonged dying;

5) that we won't burst a seal, but hit the squalid air of someone else's cavern;

6) that we'll hit a patch of wormless dirt;

7) that we'll re-emerge in a pristine Washington, DC;

8) cannibals;

9) frothing walls and foaming mouths;

10) that no one will remember us;

11) that which could be lost:
   a) sanity
   b) shovel
   c) limbs
   d) health
And finally, we fear our own eyes. Our sight powers have intensified beyond anything we could have imagined before our tunneling. We need no light to make out one another's features, no light to decide where the softest dirt will be to cast the pointed shovel next, no light to find the flattest space for bed, no light to watch each grain of soil falling silently through our fingers to the floor of the tunnel that the sky has made us build.