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Inventions

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INVENTIONS

Stories
by
Christopher Litman

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ARLINGTON HOUSE

I wonder whether mankind could not get along without all these names, which keep increasing every day, and hour, and moment; till at last the very air will be full of them . . .

- from Herman Meville's *Redburn*

At sixty-nine years of age, Clarissa Gallagher is not the oldest resident at Arlington House. Despite this, she still shares many of their ailments: her hands ache when she washes them in cold water; because of a fractured denture, she has difficulty eating broccoli and pork chops; she possesses nearly a year's supply worth of heating-rub. For some reason, her daughter, Joanne, keeps sending five-tube packs every few months or so, even though Clare only uses a fingertip's worth to grease the wheels on her grocery cart.

On move-in day at Arlington House, she introduces herself as Clare but nearly all the other residents insist on calling her Clarey. They seem quiet to her and willing to let their commonalities go unspoken. They say to her that she looks very young for her age. She smiles and gives her usual response, that she never wears make-up, that she will never wear any make-up even when she's up for viewing in a casket. Rachel Striker, the Res Life director at Arlington House who is thirty-something, good postured, and carries a PDA where ever she roams, hears this as Clare finishes unpacking her utensils.

“Well, you're such a joker, Ms. Gallagher,” she says, stabbing at her Palm Pilot as

if she is killing it. “You’ll have to invite me over one time and we can have ourselves a girl’s night out, you know, nail-polish, Mel Gibson videos. Won’t that be fun?” she says, a slight Texan dressing sprinkled atop her vowels.

Although she seems to like Rachel Striker, Clare knows that she will never take her up on the offer. She is not sure what to make of this. Maybe Rachel just says this to everyone—*be good or I’ll come over and paint your fingernails!*

“Now, you seem like you’re all set. You’ve got my number, so just buzz me if you have any questions. Welcome to the family! I’m sure you’ll do great here.”

“Thank you,” Clare says. She shuts the door, steps inside, and sits down on her bed. She tries to take in the new space around her. The one bedroom apartment seems smaller now than when she first saw it a month ago. She doesn’t have much inside it, pictures mostly, a few knick-knacks, a mini-TV. Everything else has been thrown out, sold, or given away. What remains is sufficient, an accumulation of memories: she has a grown-up daughter far into her own life; as for herself, she’s been married twice and lived most of her adult years in Northern Virginia. Now, she is content to have a place that she does not have to share--not with a husband, not with children, not with anyone that she really cares about.

A knock at the door. A sable-haired woman, short and plump and wrapped in a gray sweater walks inside before Clare can politely keep her out.

“Hello, I’m Milty. I live next to you in 204.” The woman looks down at what she cradles in her hands, a small cake glazed in an off-white icing. “Don’t worry, it’s sugar-free in case you’re a diabetic, and there’s no eggs or dairy in case you’re a vegan.”

“A what?” Clare says.

“Vegan,” the woman says. “Cow and chicken worshipers. The cake's a welcome gift for you.”

Clare notices that Milty does not look at her while she speaks. “Oh, thank you. That's very kind of you.” She takes the cake and puts it on the kitchen-counter top. “It'll be a nice treat after supper.” Milty sits down and places her hands on her lap. “How long have you lived here?” says Clare.

“Three years.”

“And what do you think?”

“What's there to say? Everyone knows why they're here.”

“Yes, you're right, of course,” says Clare, smiling. Both women go silent. “I lived in Alexandria before, and before that Fairfax City with my husband. I mean, ex-husband. Husband, well, we're not really--”

“It's okay, honey, I understand. My Charlie died before I had the chance to leave his lying and cheating bee-hind. There's a bunch of us here, you'll find. That's just the way it is. Welcome to Arlington House,” Milty says, looking down at the floor as if there is a dead body lying in front of them. A few minutes later, Milty walks out, leaving Clare to wonder what exactly she has gotten herself into.

The first few days pass without event. She tries to learn the behavior of her new home. There are little things that she is not used to. Laundry rules, for instance. That a resident is only allowed to use one washing machine or one drying machine at a time, and never at the same time. Strange curfew times--that all residents have to sign-in at the front desk after 8:00PM, sign-out after 9:00 PM, the common room closing promptly at

ten but then reopening at eleven if only to close again at midnight. There are rules on the proper disposal of coffee filters and the recycling of Ensure canisters. For some reason, when Clare first toured Arlington House, she did not see the signs posted sporadically on walls, but now she does not miss heeding their reminders—to walk along the right side of the hall and to whisper when walking in front of apartment doors.

These and other quirks, she quickly absorbs. Arlington House is not an *old folk's home*, the phrase for such a place in her mother's day, but rather a government subsidized facility for the elderly. This is how Rachel has described it, except that it isn't entirely true. Clare has seen a woman, a younger looking woman, about Rachel's age, often sitting in the common area and staring at Clare as she walks by. There is something wrong with this resident, a European kind of wrong, she thinks. Desperation in the eyes. She thinks she has heard another resident call her Petra. Fish from different ponds forced to swim together. She learns from Rachel that the facility was originally built with this exact idea in mind. Modern group living theory. Who's mind the theory belonged to, the architect, the resident, Clare is not sure.

Arlington House is a two story building with two large circular shared spaces in its center. Each unit is apart of a quad, each quad staggered around either the commons area on the first floor or the small dining hall on the second floor. If one wants to get to either area, one has to walk past at least one other quad. The idea, Clare discerns early on, is that you are forced to be in the vicinity of the other residents at some point, either in eating at the dining hall or in walking to the dining hall. The problem is that it takes too damn long. You have to traverse nearly half of the building's interior to get anywhere, gingerly striding or wheeling up or down the two semi-circular ramps. The effort required

for each trek seems to prohibit the very thing it is supposed to promote, and for this reason and because of Petra's Medusa-like gaze, Clare feels that it is best for her to stay in the apartment as much as she can.

Milty has been drawn to Clare like a cat to a fishbowl. For the last three nights, Milty has cooked Clare dinner, their food consisting mostly of cabbage and noodles. Tonight, they have cabbage and potatoes, the cabbage stuffed with something Milty called Tofurkey.

"I was off just two numbers last week," says Milty. "Two numbers, can you believe it? I'm so close. It's a test, I know it's a test."

"A test of what?" says Clare. She has been dividing her plate into opposing territories of cabbage, potatoes, and Tofurkey.

"A test of faith, of course."

"Of course," says Clare. "You know, I've never been close. Not once. I've played every week for twenty years, and I've never gotten more than four numbers to match."

"My sister, Margie, says I shouldn't play. She says it's a waste of money. But, she's not a believer. Besides, someone's gotta win, right?"

"That's not true. How else do you think the jackpots get so big? When no one wins for weeks, months at a time."

"What are you, some kind of jinx?" says Milty.

"No . . . I just think, I think I am going to stop playing. I could use that money, you know."

"For what?"

“For . . . fixing my denture, for one thing,” says Clare. “So, I could eat something other than mushy potatoes all the time.”

Milty looks up at Clare and her food. “Well, as soon as I win, I’ll share some of the winnings with you.”

“Like foo you will. That’s what everyone says. As soon as you win, you’ll be high-tailing out of here,” says Clare.

“No, it’s true. I’ll get you out of here too. It might happen sooner than you think. God willing.”

“What do you mean?”

“Margie’s got lung cancer. Doctor’s don’t give her more than six months. Why else do you think I spend so much time at her place during the day? She’s already given me a gold broach. A wooden swan-thingamajiggie. Her husband was a big real-estate tycoon when he died. She’s got all this money just sitting in the bank. It’s gotta go to someone.”

“Let’s hope it’s you and not her kids,” says Clare. She looks at Milty’s veiny, spotted hands.

“She’s got no kids. Besides, I can use the money more than her. I’ve got more pain than she does.”

“She has lung cancer, Milty.”

“Well, at least she’s got the money to pay for her painkillers. What do I get? Thirty-dollar drug check from Uncle Sam. A ten percent discount at the Rite-Aid. I got my pain, not as much as Jesus for sure, but I bet he never had my damn arthritis. Just shoots right up my legs and on into my head.”

“I know what you mean,” says Clare. She nods and lets the issue go. They eat the

rest of their food in silence. Soon, they clean up and go to Milty's place to watch *America's Top Porn-Star* on FOX and reruns of the *Golden Girls*. At eleven o'clock, Clare leaves and goes to sleep.

Time passes. The air grows cool. It is Saturday morning, ten o'clock. She has never slept-in this late before, but the pull of her bed is too great, and so fifteen more minutes becomes thirty minutes, then forty-five, and so on until the urgency of the day calls to her. She gets out of bed and makes coffee. Fetching the newspaper, she scans the front page and finds all the depressing headlines. War, elections, death. She eats half a bagel, cleans up and bathes quickly.

Sunlight catches the edges of clouds. There is a cafe nearby and Clare decides to postpone Saturday chores for an hour or two. The cafe is small and deserted. She knows that she should not be doing this—she barely has enough money as it is. But, one measly, little egg-salad sandwich and something called chai that the girl at the register recommends. What's the harm?

She sits at a table in the corner near a window and begins to eat. She flips through a women's magazine that she picked up on the corner stand, skipping straight to the section providing instructions for having a mind-blowing orgasm. After a few minutes of eating and reading, a man approaches her.

“Hello. Sorry to bother you. You live in the apartments down the street, don't you?”

“Yes, I do,” she says, “do we know each other?” Clare closes the magazine and flips it over.

“Oh, no, but I saw you yesterday in the lobby. I'm Dreb. Dreb Thomas. I just moved in and I thought I'd introduce myself.”

“Oh,” she says. “That's nice. I'm Clare.” No, that's not right . . . *Nice*. Say something more interesting, stupid. “I don't think I've ever met a Dreb before. That's an interesting name.” An even worse try.

“I don't think I've ever met a Clare. Can I sit with you?”

“Why?” she says.

“No reason. Just thought maybe you'd like company.”

“I'm sorry. That was probably rude. I just wasn't expecting anyone. Please, sit.”

What is going on? Who is this man? He is not tall, although he is not short either. He has thick arms, a full waist. His navy-blue blazer fits him well. There is a hint of dandruff on his collar. Ghost-white hair, cropped short to his head—he is good-looking. A well-worn posture, cheeks scarred from years of acne and shaving. An image of him as a teenager flashes before her eyes. He is a young man who most people ignore, his confidence always hiding under his skin. The years force him to change, to grow into himself. He has been in the military. The Navy perhaps.

She really wants him to go away.

“You're eating. I hope I'm not interrupting. Too late, I suppose,” he says, smiling.

“No, it's okay. Always good to meet a new neighbor. How do you like it so far?”

“Oh, fine. Everyone is friendly. Perhaps too friendly.” He lets out a laugh that nearly sounds like a snort. She realizes that he realizes that he's made another joke about him sitting down with her. Clare does not match his smile.

“So, what do you do?”

“History teacher down at Wakefield.”

“That's wonderful. You know, I always wanted to be one myself.”

“It's been alright, I suppose. I'm an old horse, though. After this year, they're putting me out to pasture. Forced retirement. Honestly, I don't mind it much. All these new teachers they got coming in with their Ph.D's and such. I can't understand what they are saying sometimes. Slapping on “New” to everything-- New Learning, New Group Vertical Learning. And that's not even counting all the achievement tests that our President rammed down our throats. Even the union is not the same thing anymore. Most like me have already retired. Or died.”

She smiles and tries to bury it into her cheeks.

“A smile,” he says. “Small, but significant.”

“I didn't sleep well last night.”

“No need to explain. So what happened?”

“With what?” she says.

“Why you didn't become a teacher.”

“Oh, well, Jack and I married young in '53. Joanne came along when I was in community college in my twenties. That's my daughter, Joanne. She's a teacher too. There wasn't time for myself raising her, but then when Jack died two years later, well, school lost much of a priority.”

“I'm sorry to hear that. I must be prying. I have a tendency to do that with women.”

A smooth talker. “No you're not prying. It was a long time ago.”

“You never remarried?”

“Well, yes, I did, actually. But, Robert and I, we . . .”

“I understand. We're in the same boat, you and I. Married, divorced, married, divorced.” He makes a scissor shape with his fingers and cuts something in the air, the meaning of the gesture eluding her. “Tommy, my son, he's been through a lot. I made a mess of things for so long I'm just lucky he even talks to me now.”

“I'm sorry,” she says. Clare frowns and places her hands on the table. “I'm sorry to do this, Dreb. I just remembered, but I have to get going now. Today is my laundry day and if I don't get a move-on, I'll never get it done. They're real tough there about laundry. You should know that. I've already gotten two warnings from Rachel about it.”

“Okay,” he says. “Well, maybe I'll see you around the building.”

“I'm sure,” Clare says. She gathers herself and stands. “It was nice to meet you. Again, I'm very sorry. It sounds terrible, but it's the truth. It was nice to meet you.”

“A pleasure,” he says.

She leaves the cafe with her stomach in knots.

There are more days behind than ahead. Clare thinks about this as she walks back to Arlington House. She knows that she will see this man, Dreb Thomas, again. Perhaps they will become friends. Nevertheless, she knows that she must first deal with Robert. He calls twice a week, “checking-in,” seeing how she is doing. She leaves messages on his answering machine that she is fine and that they will meet soon for tea. They do this, communicating through their recorded voices, for a month, and yet, Clare does not feel the urge to see Robert in person.

Technically, she is still married to him, a portly middle-aged man who has spent

nearly all his adult life managing pawn shops and thrift stores. After her first husband died, Clare saw nothing wrong with him. Robert didn't drink. He never raised his voice to her. He was more or less a good man. Clare knew Joanne would never take to him. "He's boring, and he sweats too much," is what she said years ago when they were dating. Joanne didn't quite understand that it wasn't easy for a woman with a child to meet another man, especially a widower in her late thirties. If it was up to her daughter, Clare surmised correctly, she wouldn't need anyone else for the rest of her life.

In her past, the years come and go. The past becomes the present. Here she is with another husband, her child, a home and she thinks her life is once again set. Joanne leaves for UVA. Clare's mother dies, then her father. With Joanne gone, she takes up odd jobs around town. Waitressing, answering phones, babysitting. Robert begins to stay late at work. He tells her on the phone that the company is opening up new Dollar-an-Item businesses all over the metro area and that he has to setup these new stores. She feels something is wrong. What exactly it is, she is not sure. A lingering annoyance, not unlike a pebble rattling around in her shoe. She tells all this to Joanne away at school who says that she should just leave the man. Clare assures her that things are just not that simple.

They have been married for thirty-two years. Sex ceases thirty-one years ago. Clare is certain that there is not even a smoldering ash left in Robert's body. An affair? *Robert?* The thought of him being with another woman sparks something strange in her. Not anger. Not quite. Curiosity, perhaps. *An affair?* Before sleeping, she has often seen her husband use the thumb-nail on his right hand to dig along the ridges of his toes to clean out dirt, occasionally even lifting his findings to his nose as if to approve of the odor. Does the other woman know of such a habit? Worse yet, what if she knows of

habits that Clare does not?

And so, she leaves. No confrontation. No dramatic demands. Just separation and about as much distance as you can have in a suburban town. She stays with friends and cousins all throughout Northern Virginia. Work and TV somehow mask the mark of time. Three years pass while she is out on her own. Joanne comes to visit her first as a graduate student and then as an English teacher at a private-girls school in Bethesda, Maryland. She urges her mother to do something, anything. “There are attorneys, Mother, people who specialize in this kind of thing. Don't do this to yourself. You can get at least half, maybe more of what he has,” Joanne says to her. But, Clare does not act. Does she still love him? If love means loyalty, then yes. A beaten-down, old dog of a concept to be sure, but this is something that Joanne will never understand. Separation is about as far as she will take it. Besides, Clare does not see how she possibly could go through all that lawyer business. She is simply not that kind of person. She is also simply too tired to bother.

Clare meets with Rachel Striker every Thursday morning at 10 o'clock. Most of these meetings have not amounted to much: Rachel asking what she thought of the facility; if she has suggestions for entertainment nights, group projects, and trips. Today, however, there is something different in the air.

“Good morning, Ms. Gallagher. How are you?”

“I'm fine, thank you.”

“That's good to hear. How has this week gone? Are things okay at the library?”

“Yes,” says Clare. “They are fine. They keep me busy there,” she smiles.

“Good. Glad to hear it. Now, one of the things I want to talk to you today about is last month's rent.”

“I know. I'm sorry, it was a little late, but I still came through with it.”

“You were three weeks late. And as for this month, you still haven't paid.”

“I will,” says Clare. “It's just that I ran short because my doctor put me on this new prescription for my eye.” Clare tugged at the puffy folds of flesh under her left eye. “You see? It's all irritated and red. Do you know how much the medicine cost for this?”

Rachel bobs her head in close and squints. “Oh, yes, I see,” she says. She types something quickly into her computer. “The problem is . . . perhaps I haven't done a good enough job of emphasizing how important it is for you to make your rent payments on-time. Arlington House is owned by a private real-estate company. The government does subsidize the cost of living here, but they don't have much say as far as how we conduct business. The thing is, I can only shield our residents for so long . . .”

“I don't understand, Rachel. Is there something wrong?”

“It's like this. You're not poor enough.”

“Excuse me?” says Clare.

“Don't get me wrong. You *are* poor. But, you're not poor *enough*.”

“Enough for what?”

“To qualify. You could be paying a cheaper rent check every month if you made less than \$9, 300 a year. As it stands, you're making about two-hundred dollars over that, making you ineligible for a greater credit than the one you're already receiving.

“But, I can barely keep up with the rent as it is . . .”

“I know. That's clear. But, the company doesn't see it that way. They don't like

late payments. One-too many, and your name gets put on a list of potential liabilities. The government can only do so much, and with their budgets for projects like this shrinking . . . well, I like you, Clare. I just don't want to see you go through a hard time here. I have a couple of suggestions --”

“I just don't understand,” says Clare. She lowers her head and feels as though she is about to cry. Money does this. It always does this to her. How could it be that she could have nothing and still have too much?

“Hold on, now. Remember, I'm on your side. This is what we're gonna do. Like I was saying—all the government sees is how much income you have, and all the company sees is how much you are paying them. From your records here, you get social security, you get your paycheck from the library, you get a small annuity from your first husband's death. My first suggestion is that you go on a direct payment method. The company will deduct rent each month from your checking account. That way you never have to remember to pay your rent.”

“My problem is not forgetting to pay rent, my problem is I don't have all the money I need. If it was only a few dollars, okay. . . but, you don't understand, I had to pay extra last month for my medication and --”

“I know, it's tough . . . what about Medicare and Medicaid?” Rachel says.

“They don't cover enough.”

“Then there's something wrong. We need to go through your papers, make sure you're getting everything you're entitled to.”

“What do they want me to do? Not eat? Not wash my clothes?”

“Calm down. Everything's fine for now. Let's you and I sit down tomorrow and go

through a budget. I think that once we look at the numbers, we can trim --”

“I’ve already done that. I’m stretched as it is--”

“Everyone needs a little help in this area, and it really does take another pair of eyes to see where some expenses can be cut. If it weren't for my husband and I sitting down every month--”

“Look, I appreciate the offer, but I don't think my budget is the problem. What I need is more money. Plain and simple,” she says. She feels like she wants to hit Rachel. Knock that silly device out of her hands and slap her across the face. That would feel good right about now.

“I’ll see what I can do, but it's not that simple. Maybe there's an extra credit or two that I can squeeze out from somewhere, but the way I see it right now, you're gonna have to either give up one of your incomes to make it under the poverty line or spend less of what you earn. And Clare? You must understand, I'm not your enemy here. I'm on *your* side.” She reaches out and squeezes her underarm.

“I know,” Clare says. “And I appreciate your help. I’ll try and do better.”

“You'll have to do more than that. I hate to say it, but it's the company policy that if a resident misses a rent payment three times in a row, I have to start procedures for eviction. Remember, Arlington House isn't like other residences. There's a long list of people waiting to get in here. You are lucky.”

“Yes,” she says. “I know I am.”

Most Arlington House residents rely on social security and pensions to pay their way. A few have jobs like Clare. In the beginning, she thinks herself fortunate. Not long

after her arrival, the city's senior-citizen employment agency finds her part-time work at the public library where she spends most of her time sitting at a desk, directing visitors to the stacks or the restrooms. She likes this job. She likes the librarians. She likes the young students and their strange hair-styles, even the old Dominican men who read the newspapers in the early hours of the morning. She works at the library until 4:00PM and then catches the Fast Tram shuttle (Milty calls it the Fart Tram) back to Arlington House. She has settled into the routine of coming and going to work, and so, it is strange to think that quitting this might somehow help her. What in the world would she do? Ever since she had Joanne, Clare has never known a day not focused around work, either going to it or spending a few days away from it.

She phones her daughter that night.

“I need to borrow some money.”

“Of course, Mother. How ever much you need. I'll wire your bank in the morning. This Rachel Striker . . . she seemed like such a nice woman when you first moved in.”

“It's not her fault. She's just doing her job.”

“Her job is to keep the residents happy. She will keep them happy by not kicking them out onto the street.”

“Milty says it's because she's from Texas. People from Texas are heartless. All that sun they get there, she says.”

“Milty seems to say a lot of things. Anyway, Mother, if worst comes to worst, you can always come and stay with us again.”

“Thank you. I know, Joanne, I have you to count on, but . . . I don't think I can do that right now. I would be too much of a burden on you and John,” says Clare.

“You would never be a burden. I worry about you.”

“I know.” They have exchanged clothes, exchanged bodies. How this has occurred, Clare is not sure.

“Have you spoken with Robert about a divorce?”

“Not yet,” says Clare.

“Mother . . . how long has it been?”

“Not long enough.”

“It's childish . . . the way you're acting towards him.”

“So, what? Don't put blame on me. I'm not the one who had the affair.”

“You're in limbo. Do you know what that means?”

“Yes, Joanne. I do.”

“You're stuck and you need to get out of the situation.”

“What did you think I was doing three years ago when I left him? How many times did we talk about me leaving?”

“Robert was already gone by then. You just didn't see it, didn't accept it.”

She has misspoken, but Clare does not want to bite. She knows her daughter has said this with purpose. Silence, and then, “I need to go. Thank you for the money, sweetheart. You're right, of course. You're right.”

“Mother, I'm sorry, I just . . .

“I know. I'll talk to you soon. Love you.”

Clarrisa Gallagher is not very good at math. She did fine in high school, but something changed in her after she had Johanne, like the neuron that connected the

arithmetic part of her brain to the rest got severed during the fourteen-hour labor. It becomes more and more difficult for her to keep the numbers straight. Sometimes she is only a dollar or two short, but that is one more dollar or two that she can't pay towards her telephone or drug bill. Last year, her total income was \$9,633 dollars. She receives \$676 from Social Security every month. Sometimes she accounts for her daughter's contributions, sometimes she doesn't. \$100 one month, \$600 another. Her rent cuts out \$85, her electricity, phone, and TV bills hover around \$150. The rest of her money goes towards her medical expenses, of which two-thirds is covered by Medicare. She pays the doctor's fees, but she does not pay the doctor. She pays the pharmacy, but she does not pay the pharmaceutical company. All of it seems elusive, her money going somewhere to someone who exists in the ether. There is something called a prescription drug-benefit program. She does not know what this is. She heard the President talk about it during one of the debates. The application process is long and confusing, and so, she just keeps paying. One trip last month brought back five vials of medicine and a pack of lignocaine patches for her feet. There are names, Star Trek-like names for things that she puts inside her body to cure it. Ultran. Braxxific. Vorabork. Floximate. Rendomine.

She takes long bathes on the weekends, one pleasure, that as far as she knows, costs her nothing. One night, she steps out of the tub and stands in front of the mirror, carelessly letting her bathrobe slip open. She looks. Why? She does not have the eyes of a younger woman, but she dwells a second or two upon herself. The relative dimensions are the same as when she was young. She presses her finger to her sternum. The skin is still smooth there, the flat space between, her hand moving down along the shape of herself. Around her belly, she notices how things are remarkably different. Everything

hangs, wrinkled like pizza dough. On the counter is a magazine that promises younger looks in ten days. Shaking her head, she smiles and wraps up the robe to get dressed.

She had a date. Well, not a “date” since people her age don't go on dates. No, this was dinner—a dinner between adults. Dreb was taking her out. She hadn't been on a date since . . . well, since before she married Robert. He was probably her last date more than thirty years ago. What the hell did people do on dates? But it wasn't a date. Dates are for people like Rachel—crazy people who have futures of more than twenty years.

He had asked her out in the laundry room. “Come 'round here often, stranger?” he said to her as she separated her whites from her colors.

“Hi, Dreb” Clare said. She handed him some fabric softener while she poured in the detergent.

He was cute she had to admit. This man, this old man by most people's definitions, trying to earn her favor.

“Why don't we go out to dinner?” he said.

“What?” she said.

“Dinner. As far as I know, it's not been outlawed yet.” He smiled and began sorting his laundry. What intimacy! she thought. She could see his boxer shorts and dirty socks.

“Oh. I don't know. I really don't have a lot of money right now.”

“Psshhaw, you're not paying Clare. It's on me. Unless you're one of those women who gets offended by a man paying for her.”

“Oh, no, it's not that. It's just-”

“Ha, no laundry excuse for you today. I caught you red-handed, madam.”

“Okay,” she said. “Let's do it. I'll go.”

Dreb takes her to an Italian restaurant a few blocks away from Arlington House. She does not tell him that she generally doesn't like Italian food anymore since it usually gives her bad gas. However, Clare does not want to spoil things before they get started and so she orders something benign—salad and chicken piccata.

“So tell me more about your ex-husband.” What does he want to know about him? What's Dreb's angle? Perhaps he is nervous, she thinks.

“What's there to say? Robert was a good man. I won't say anything bad about him, beyond the fact that he had an affair. Sometimes I blame myself for what happened. But I'm fine now, really. When my first husband died, I was just so sad and scared at the future. I had Joanne, and all I could think about for a long time was how was I going to make things work.? When Robert came along, it felt like just a giant sense of relief. A big burden being lifted, you know? Looking back, I'm not sure that we really loved each other. Oh sure, you know how it is when people are young and they first meet.”

“Yes, I have a sense of that.” Another smile. She liked the way one side of his mouth curled up higher than the other.

“Anyway. Enough of that. It's the past. Let me ask you now. How do you handle all this?”

“All what?” he says.

“This. Growing old.”

“Oh, well, honestly, I just don't think about it. I mean, don't get me wrong. I feel

the days getting shorter everyday. I feel the age in my skin, muscles, bones. But, I guess I've just accepted it. It's just a fact of life, like anything else.”

“Well, you are certainly wise.” She didn't know what else to say. She felt that she didn't want to look at him anymore. She was a stupid person. “I'm not as calm about it as you are. I hate getting old.”

“You're not alone. Believe me, I have my days. I just, you know, keep going. What else can I do? I have my son and his family—the grandkids. We have holidays. I still have some good friends at the school. Some of us go way back.”

“It's nice to have those kind of friends. Ones who have a sense of your history.”

“Yes,” he says. “So many people today have no sense of things. Like we're all living in just the recent memory.”

“There's no use for the past today,” she says.

“Hmmm . . . except for someone like Tom Brokaw.”

“Don't you just love him? I just love when he's on TV and he does his special programs. It's too bad he left the news.”

“All good things must come to an end,” he says.

“Sadly, yes. I've put in my share, Dreb. I just wish I didn't have to struggle for once. Everything for so long has felt like one long fight. Even now, just a few weeks ago, I thought Arlington House would be it—the place where I can finally be happy. I don't have to take care of anyone, I don't have to make myself be someone I'm not. And look what happens—Rachel tells me that ‘I'm not poor enough.’ What is that? What kind of place is that to be in? To struggle to have nothing.”

“Clare, if you need money, I can spare—

“Oh, no, Dreb. I couldn’t burden you. Joanne is going to take care of me. But still, it’s just the principle. I’m sixty-nine years old and I can’t take care of myself? How did I get myself into this situation?”

“I don’t know what to say.”

“Nothing. You don’t have to say anything.” Her cheeks were flushed. She knew that he could see that she was on the verge of tears. But, she wouldn’t let herself go—she knew he would have pity on her, and that’s not the way she wanted their relationship to start out.

The date that was not a date would end like it started. They walked in the shoes of their younger selves, ones who may not have existed before in the first place. They were awkward and hurried, not sure if they wanted each other's company but knowing also that they didn’t want to be alone. He walked her to her room. She lingered and kissed him softly on the lips. It was the kind of kiss between friends or relatives, almost like the kind she’s seen given by Europeans—brief, slightly wet, pleasant, but devoid of any meaning.

After this, there were more dinners and lunches. Clare and Dreb traded stories of their children and former spouses. They laughed at the absurdity of marriage, its rules and behaviors, the way it transforms individuals into new sorts of beings: aliens, monsters, the kind of creature that bristles over undergarments left out on footboards and the failure to have a child say very the thing you want him or her to say. They agreed that parenting and marriage were two completely different beasts and if it was possible to take the one without the other in their lifetimes, they would have led very different, perhaps happier lives. There was also the small worry, voiced and not voiced in their conversations, the fact that whatever brought them out of their marriages could also be the very thing that

would keep them apart.

Days blended into days, weeks into weeks. It was now Thursday night and Clare and Milty came downstairs in the commons area for TV night. There was some kind of commotion as more residents were scattered about than usual. Clare saw that Rachel Striker stood in the middle of a crowd of four, barking orders to two muscle-bound men unpacking what looked like a giant piece of artwork. How wonderful, Clare thought, maybe Arlington House would be the proud owner of some famous painting, bring a bit of culture to the place.

They walked closer and it soon became evident that what was being unwrapped with such delicacy was in fact a TV. The device was large, larger than any TV Clare had ever seen. At the same time, the thing had no actual girth, no substance to it. It was as flat as the frame of the painting that Clare had mistaken it for.

“Plasma,” said Rachel with a toothy smile.

“What?” Clare said.

“It's got plasma inside the screen. The stuff is supposedly a fourth-state of matter, ionized gas, I think. Ain't it cool that they can put it inside TV's? Fifty luscious inches, yet flat as my nine-year-old niece. Pretty neat-o, huh? Don't ever say that I don't come through for y'all. Of course, there might not be dessert on the dinner menu for the next couple of years, but you can't make an omelet without breaking a few eggs, am I right?”

The screen buzzed on and suddenly there were six semi-naked bodies, one man and five women, walking along a beach with their young, tanned, skin shimmering in the sunlight.

“Ooooh, *Survival* is on,” said Milty. “Let's watch this.”

“That's that new show, right, Milty? The one where they're all stuck on a deserted island?” said Rachel.

“Yeah, and the ones that get voted off are put to death on-camera. Last week,” she continued, a slight sparkle in her wandering eye, “they voted to execute Victor and use his body for food. That guy was such an A-hole, he deserved to get eaten.”

Later, Rachel left the residents to their new TV. Clare sat next to Milty, the two women watching the bright young things fight and yell at each other on the new TV. A few minutes passed before she noticed out of the corner of her eye Dreb sitting in the adjacent sofa. He was dressed in a polo shirt with beige khakis and looked like he was about to play a round of golf or give a lecture on macro-economics. Without turning towards him, Clare saw that he crossed his legs and then uncrossed them. He turned his head ever-so-slightly so that she was in his peripheral vision. A bolt of electricity shot up her leg, and she felt an intense urge to get out of there, anyway that she could. “Right now!” she told herself.

She leaned over to Milty and whispered that she was turning in for the night. As she gingerly strode past her ensconced friend, she heard a faint call from Milty-- “wimp.” Clare smiled and drew her eyes toward Dreb. He looked at her and tipped her a nod with his head like he was acknowledging a deckhand on a boat.

“Goodnight,” she said to him.

“Goodnight,” he said. Clare felt his eyes at her back.

There was a knock.

She let him in without really knowing what she was doing and seated him at her dinner table. Somehow it didn't feel right to have a man inside her apartment. He seemed larger than everything else, much larger than Milty, and for a brief moment, she felt that it was a mistake for Drebb to come in.

“Hi,” she said. “Can I get you some coffee?”

“No, I'm fine. Here, why don't you sit down. There's no need to attend to me, I just came to visit you.” She smiled and sat on her bed, away from him. He leaned back and rested his left arm on the table.

“Clare,” he said. “I can see you're not comfortable. Maybe I should go.”

“Oh, no. I'm fine. Really, don't leave. It's just that . . .”

“I understand,” he said. He stood up slowly and sat next to her. She felt his hand upon hers, the dry grain of his palm, and she leaned in to kiss him. The stubble under his lip tickled her until as he pressed his lips firmer and wider around her mouth, it began to scratch and irritate her.

It was all happening so fast. What was going on? What would Joanne think?

At some point, she had turned off the lights. At some point, she had got under the covers and seen him disrobe. Men are so brazen, she thought. Ready to go it at a moment's notice! She liked that he was hairy on his chest and stomach. He was graying all over with a few splotches of darkness at his nether regions.

They laid side by side in her bed, naked, and he ran his hand over her breasts as if trying to tease her into excitement.

“I'm nervous,” she said.

“I am too.”

There was nothing said between them for a time, how long exactly Clare did not know. They stared at each other with their arms and legs entangled. She felt an intense warmth between her legs. His legs felt heavy and powerful.

“If you don't mind my asking, when was the last time you did this?”

“Gosh, let me see,” she whispered. She didn't want to answer. She tried to summon the memory, but nothing came up. “It's been a long time,” Clare said. She smiled. She felt like she was always smiling with him.

Later that night as she was walking around the apartment, she remembered that she had asked him to go slow and to be gentle, not because she wasn't ready for sex, but because she worried that her old bones would snap under his weight. Pleasures like these had escaped her for so long, their sudden bursting into her heart felt dizzying, even perhaps haunting.

She closed her eyes into the night not wondering or caring what the next day would bring.

He slept face down with a light snore. She needed to get some water and so walked to her little kitchen, not even bothering to cover herself up. As she sat at her table drinking, she looked over at Drebb. Wait 'till she tells Milty! And Rachel, what would she say to her? Should she say anything? She couldn't remember any rules about relationships among residents. The last thing she needs is to get into any trouble that might get her kicked out of Arlington House. Milty would probably say something uncalled for-- “Screw her, it's a free country!” Or something to that effect.

Her eyes drift towards her small bookshelf. Joanne's things--“To pass the time,

Mother.” Clare hadn't read a word since she moved to Arlington House, but she used to be such an avid reader before the mess with Robert. She plucked a title from the shelf. Clare didn't recognize the author, but turned to a random section and started reading.

Consider, five-thousand years into the future, there are no words. If there are no words, there are no records. If there are no records, there are no histories, and if there are no histories, there are no stories. The last book disintegrated into nothingness sometime before the last library fell into debris. There are no roads, nothing even remotely resembling a building. Trace a line along the Earth's glassy sand and it will run forever until it meets itself again on the other side. The fields, once lush and verdant, run barren as a blank page. There are no oceans. No rivers or lakes or tributaries. Even the deserts, perhaps once the keepers of death, have long been robbed of their only treasure. There are only lands of flat, loose dirt lying along a spherical blanket that covers the whole surface of the planet. In another five-thousand years, this place will remain nearly the same as it is now as the most minimal of atmospheres remain. There is no weather system, no air current, only a thin wisp of carbon dioxide gas that clings low to the ground. One million years from now, the once yellow sun will approach the twilight of its life and the Earth will be consumed in a fiery red mist, the sun having expanded into a thousand times its original mass, soon engulfing everything of the solar system in a giant heat death.

But, let us not go there just yet. Five-thousand years from now, this barren Earth will be visited by a small device. It is no more the size of an egg with a metallic luster, weightless in composition, and it falls to the ground with no more than a whisper. Up

until this landing, the ground has not been disturbed for many thousands of years. The object explodes. There is a bright flash seen even from orbit, and a gash the size of nearly ten cities is left upon the once quiet land. The past becomes the future, the future becomes the past.

She slammed the book shut and swallowed down the rest of her water. What the heck was Joanne thinking? She noted that she will have to speak to her about getting some better books. None of this sci-fi stuff. Nora Roberts. Danielle Steele. Now, there's some good reading.

They decide to go to a movie, Meryl Streep's latest: *The Devil Wears Prada*. Neither Clare or Drebb know what a "Prada" is, but they would see any film that stars the actress from *The Bridges of Madison County* (Clare's favorite, one of Drebb's top ten). Walking out the mechanized, sliding doors of Arlington House, Clare is stopped at the sight of Robert leaning against a 1971 baby-blue Camaro and his eyes shielded by gold rimmed glasses.

"Nice car," says Clare. "Robert, this is Drebb. Drebb, meet my ex-husband, Robert."

"Technically, we're not divorced. But, nice to meet you fellow." The men exchange handshakes and Clare thinks instantly that some ancient masculine ritual of wife-swapping is taking place before her eyes. The two men are there standing so close to each other it looks like they might hug one another. She feels a brick in her stomach. She furtively grasps at Drebb's coattails and tries to push his body with the movement of her hips passed Robert and his Lee Majors car.

“I thought we could talk, just the two of us. You don’t return my phone calls—I’m really sorry to barge in on you like this, but what else can I do?”

“Robert, we have plans. I’m sorry—we can talk some other time,” she says.

“C’mon, it’s been too long, Clare. We just need to settle things. I’m ready to move on—it sure seems like you’re moving on.”

“Yes, I am, I mean I have. Look, this is just too much for me right now. We can have lunch some time. Don’t make me the bad guy her. Not now.”

“Maybe I should go, Clare. We can go out anytime this week” says Dreb.

“No. There’s no reason why we should change our plans on account of him showing up unannounced.” She grabs Dreb’s arm and pulls him further beyond the Camaro. She’s jerked back by Robert’s hand on her left arm.

“Hey,” she says. Her legs go stiff, and like that, she knows that things are not going to end well.

“Let her go, Robert,” says Dreb.

“Mind your own business, Skip. I need to talk to my wife.”

“Like hell you do!” says Clare.

By the time Milty Ardankovich sees her friend Clarissa Gallagher trying to pull apart the two men--one overweight and cursing, the other sweating so much that wet spots were forming at the armpits of his blazer—a sizable crowd has gathered to watch the spectacle (Milty herself heard from Fran Dietrich from quad-2B).

“I’m going to rip your head off, you punk” says Dreb.

“Robert, will you please leave? This is just crazy. Dreb, stop this. You two are

old, grown men. You're going to really get hurt.”

A fist is thrown. The witnesses see a blur of hands and limbs. At some point in the altercation, Clare finds Rachel Striker keeping true to her name and jumping between the two bloated bodies. She flings her hand, open-faced, atop Robert's temple.

“Aahh, goddamn it,” he yells. Robert yields, lurches back, and pats his head. “You little bitch.” There’s a trickle of blood running down his face, no doubt from a stray fingernail lashing across the left eyebrow. Whose nail it belonged to, such information would go unknown.

“Oooo, this is just like *Survival*,” says Milty. Clare sees her perk up and lean into the action in front of her.

“The cops are on their way, Mister. It's up to you—you can stay and talk to them, or leave and we all settle this later like adults” says Rachel. Clare sees her stand in front of Robert—this bony and fearless girl, someone who weeks ago she was ready to smack in the face herself.

Roberts says nothing. He turns around, straightens his hair and glasses, and hops over the door of the car, first his left leg, and then the right, not quite moving at the speed required to smoothly glide into the driver's seat. Falling in butt-first, he eventually drives off with a cloud of black exhaust trailing him out of the parking lot, but not before muttering to the crowd - “psychos.”

“Are you okay?” says Clare. The show is over. Time to pick up the walking wounded.

Dreb is standing next to her with his arms tucked into his blazer and tending some hidden injury. She feels the sudden urge to take care of him like the way she used to

soothe Joanne after she had hit her head on the dining room table of their old house. The old life was coming back, not with those ghosts of the past, but the spirits of those who were gathered around her. “Let's skip the movie and stay in tonight,” Clare says. The man next to her nods a look that is something between a wince and a smile.

“You'll be okay, my dear” she says. And they slowly walk back into Arlington House with its blaring white lights and shallow faces. There is nothing left to fight over, not now, and certainly not tonight.

ASYMMETRY

March 30, 1981

It was fifteen minutes after three o'clock when Geena Gershwin decided that she was going to change her life. Waitresses and busboys whirled around her as she thought of what her mother might say once she told her of the decision. One of the squat busboys, a pimply kid named Charlie, threw her an evil glance. Geena knew well how much the busboys disliked the waitresses—in their eyes they worked more but got paid less. He sped off to table twelve, and Geena heard Charlie cursing her and her kind in staccato Spanish, aware that seeing her staring off into nowhere only proved his theory right. But, she didn't care if she was slacking. Everything was going to change for the better. She could feel it, the warmth of certainty. For the first time in years she was hopeful of things to come.

*

He found the body lying face down on an oriental rug soaked through with blood. It always was the same at this point, he didn't think about what to do. Habit just took over. He walked around the perimeter of the body, touched nothing, walked into the kitchen, then the bedroom. He had arrived before anyone else--they would take samples, dust for prints, remove the body, question the neighbors. For now, he was the only one alive in the apartment, and the strange quiet of the place was disconcerting, even for someone who had been so used to it. Walking back to the living room, he stepped around

the body, collapsed down in the Lazy-boy adjacent to the sofa, and heard the sirens approaching the building.

*

She wanted to tell him as soon as she could, but she wasn't sure when she would see him. The hours he works, the late nights, maybe the sheer uncertainty of his career had contributed to her decision. But, Geena wasn't going to berate herself over the whys when she had already done so for the last two years. Besides, now was not the time to get queasy over her choice--she still had a few hours until she was off her shift, and an elderly couple sitting at table seven brought her back down to the here and now. The husband half of the couple had asked for four different dishes during the last half-hour on account of each one being either undercooked or overcooked. "Goddamn restaurant," he yelled, potato shrapnel shooting from his mouth. "Don't know how to cook chicken, don't know mash potatoes from au gratin, asparagus from my ass."

"Pipe down," the old man's wife commanded. "You're making too much noise. And that's the last time you're ordering. They aren't going to bring you anything else."

"Why the hell not? Whatever happened to customer satisfaction? These damn Mexicans they got back there don't know shit from shine-ola. If I'm going to pay for my food . . ."

"Will you hush up?!" said his wife.

Geena realized that the dish she cradled in her right hand would be the fifth meal she had brought out for the old man. More pertinently, she knew that this meal would forever serve as a marker for her decision to leave her husband. She did not like this fact, that the day she would tell David that she wanted a divorce would be somehow tied to

grilled salmon and a rude old man who had nose hairs like rat whiskers.

*

The body had a name. Geena Gershwin. Quartz glanced over at her mail lying unopened on the end table. A few bills, a postcard, one or two nondescript letters. Another dick might have started going through things, opening the mail for starters, then sifting through the trash. A good dick, a young dick, might begin taking notes on the appearance of the apartment, collecting photographs of family and friends, opening up her purse, her drawers, the fridge, jotting down any detail that was significant or insignificant. But, Quartz wasn't good, at least not anymore, and he certainly wasn't young. He couldn't say that he didn't care—he did care, very much so of what happened to Geena Gershwin and why she had died. And he couldn't say with any definitiveness that it was the harsh truth of his job which caused him to sit there in that chair staring senselessly at her corpse. He had grown comfortable sometime ago that he was less a detective and more a fabricator of stories about the dead. No, the thing that troubled Quartz was something else, elusive, a feeling that made him question why exactly he was the first badge on the scene to begin with.

*

It was Wednesday, which meant that Geena's shift ended early at six. The rest of her day was like every other before it at the restaurant. The old man left without much fuss and without much of a tip. All she could think about was getting home and what words she would use to tell him about the divorce. Should she be direct, blunt almost? Should she try to soften the blow, maybe cook his favorite dinner beforehand-- fried pork

chops with sauerkraut and potatoes? Should she feign sadness, remorse? She pictured herself as a character in a movie or soap opera, the camera stooped in a close up shot of her face, focusing on her eyes heavy with tears and mascara . . . 'honey,' she would say, 'We need to talk. I just don't know what to do.' A dark, dramatic musical score would play in the background. 'Love, I can't do this any more . . . we're not working, haven't been for sometime.' The thing is, it would all be an act to express anything other than elation at the prospect of leaving David. Their five year marriage had felt like a fifteen year long affair with her couch. How many nights had she spent at home, watching B-movies well past midnight, all the while waiting for that phone call, to hear him say that it would only be a few more hours until he made it back to their apartment? They made love when he wanted to, usually in the late morning when he would get woken up from her getting ready for work. She had already been through several marriage self-help books, the endless lectures from her mother about the keys to surviving a marriage ("surviving"--this was her mother's word, and Geena despised it—since when did the Titanic become a metaphor for marriage, an inevitable disaster that you had to get out of by the skin of your neck? More importantly, why didn't anyone tell her this before she got married?). She had secretly attended and graduated from a group for wives of policemen. Geena had never thought that she would be one of those women, a cliché of weakness. For a long while, what she was most depressed about was not the state of her marriage, but that she was incapable of not caring about her marriage. Somewhere in those five years, she had stopped loving David, and perhaps this is what troubled her the most as she left the restaurant that day—that even the strongest emotions could be laced with unreliability, risk and reward wrapped up in a word. Love was something she did not

possess anymore.

*

Quartz looked at Geena. She had ash-blond hair cut to her shoulders. Height was about five-four, maybe five-six. She weighed approximately one-hundred and thirty pounds. He leaned over and checked the sides of her face. Age—thirty-two. No jewelry on her fingers. Wearing a black T-shirt, the words, “Jesse's Restaurant” were printed across the back. Quartz knew of a Jesse's on 110st and Broadway. He had been there several times and he distinctly remembered that they served a very good cheeseburger with mushrooms cooked on the inside of the patty, right smack in its core. He wondered if this was the same restaurant on the woman's shirt. He wondered if he had ever seen this woman there, if by chance she had served him.

The stink of death was unlike any other. Quartz knew it well—coagulated blood in the extremities, secreted gastric fluid from the lower intestine, dried saliva and mucus in the nose and mouth, the outer most layer of skin, a quickly decaying epidermis. He could find no visible trauma to her back or head except some minor swelling in her neck and elbows. By the amount of blood that had seeped into the carpet, Quartz estimated that she was either shot or stabbed in the chest, the face, or both. Time of death, probably only a few hours ago judging by the rate of absorption. Sweepers would know for sure.

There were no signs of a struggle—except for the corpse in the living room, the apartment was in pristine condition. This could mean that the murder was premeditated. The killer had the weapon on him when he was in the apartment, either bringing it inside or using something that was already there. The neighbors had phoned in that they had

heard a loud argument, some screaming, and then a lone gunshot. Of course, Quartz had learned a long time ago to not put too much authority in what people said they heard—the fact is, most people don't know what a gunshot sounds like, nor can they distinguish between one type of gun fired versus another. To most neighbors, a wooden chair falling violently to the floor sounded as lethal as a .9 millimeter snub nose revolver.

If the murder was premeditated, then more than likely it would have been perpetrated by someone the victim had known. Of course, Quartz was already leaning towards a domestic violence case—a crime of passion perhaps. Husband discovers his wife cheating on him, wants to cash in on a life-insurance policy.

He knew this type of criminal, a man who believes that he has thought through all the questions and the answers, that he's of a sound enough mind to not let the hatred for his wife cloud his ability to conceal her murder.

He'll plan the caper in advance, make up some story about how he just stumbled into to the apartment to find his wife dead.

He'll ditch the gun down a sewer.

He'll cry in front of family, friends, the police, win the Oscar.

Quartz knew this man, what he would feel the night in question. Something he never expected.

A rush of blood to his head causing him to feel dizzy with energy. He discovers that he enjoys this feeling, however fleeting, the inescapable sensation of power. He'll feel alive after so many years of banality.

When he finally kills her, he's puzzled at how hot the blood really is. It would spurt onto his hands and face, and he learns how messy the whole enterprise is when he

tries to wash it off and can't get rid of the staining of his skin and clothes. He'll regret that he ever felt this way in the first place.

Quartz knew this killer well.

He knew that it was really all but a thin line that separated normal, generous loving men from becoming murderers.

*

She checked her tips and clocked out. Geena scrubbed her hands and face in the employee's bathroom, brushed her hair, and on her way to her car talked to the waitresses starting the evening rounds. She walked briskly, and outside there was a gray overcast. Geena thought that it might rain soon. She was alone, and the chill of the evening air made her fingers tremble as she fumbled with the keys, unlocked the door, and slid into the driver's seat of her Honda hatchback. Turning over with a laborious rattle, the car's engine grumbled to life and a wave of warm air rushed in from the front vents, blasting Geena in the face. There was a foreign hum that echoed from within the steering column, and she worried that she might have to take the car in for service soon.

As she waited for the car to warm up, she stared at her left hand resting on the wheel. She had not worn her wedding ring for over a year. David hadn't noticed. He still wore his, a gesture that kept her going during the last two years but quickly faded when she realized that it wasn't enough—they had been married it seemed in name only, outward signals giving shape to a committed relationship. They shared a bank account, filed their taxes together, sent Christmas cards signed with each other's names, had their initials printed on the bathroom towels. She felt as though the details of a *real* marriage

were notoriously absent, as if everything with David had weight but no mass. The only problem was that she did not really know what the substance of a *real* marriage amounted to—all she had ever known was him. She sat in her car and thought about this, feeling the warmth of the car's heater on her cheeks. She pumped the gas peddle with her foot, hearing the strained inhale and exhale of the engine.

Geena flipped on the radio.

“President Reagan, shot earlier today at close range in front of the Washington Hilton Hotel, was pronounced dead at 6:23 PM according to a White House statement. Exact details of the assassination are still hard to come by, but the President was supposed to give a speech to union leaders this afternoon, when John Hinkley fired several rounds at him as he was waiving to a crowd of supporters.”

“My God,” Geena said, feeling more alone than ever.

*

He felt the urge to call in some of the details to the precinct to get it out on the teletype so that driveby's could get a jump on the case. Before he could do that, he wanted to verify if the woman was really married. He looked at her mail again—all of it was addressed to one Geena Gershwin. There were no pictures in the living room, and he thought this was a strange fact. Most women decorated with pictures of their loved ones, fooling themselves into thinking that the people who stared back at them through frozen time—the sisters, the brothers, the best friends from college—were like trophies on display. A happy person was a loved person, so Quartz thought how they thought, and the more pictures they had of the people who loved them, the more they could feel content

with how their life was going.

Quartz had no pictures in his apartment.

He got up off the Lazy-boy and walked back into the bedroom. On the nightstand next to the queens-size bed was a chrome-framed photograph of a woman wearing a smile that nearly stretched around the entirety of her face. She swayed proud in a slim, strapless white dress, and a tall man in a tuxedo, his curly brown hair gently blowing in the wind, held her up with one arm around the small of her back, another at his side hand-in-hand with hers. They were on the beach, the sun fading into a violet evening, and they stared at each other with a look of unrequited bliss. He thought that the man in the picture bore a striking resemblance to himself.

Quartz called his captain at the precinct.

“This is Carella.”

“Captain. Quartz, here. I’m at the Gershwin crime scene.”

“So, what do we got there?”

“Victim was lying dead on the floor when I found her. Still need to call in the stats to central.”

“Good. She married?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Sweeps there yet? You didn’t touch her did you?”

“No sir. I reckon she was shot or bludgeoned. Only way this much blood could be produced.”

“You think the husband did it?”

“Too early to tell.”

“I know that nose of yours, Quartz. You're an old bloodhound, like me. But, we got to let the kids do their job on this one.”

“In five or so years, they're going to have my badge,” said Quartz.

“No, you'll just have to learn a bit of lab work, a bit of CSI all the same.”

“Hard to teach an old dog new tricks.”

“Stay sharp,” said Carella.

“I'll be in touch.”

“I know you will.”

*

Geena Gershwin walked into her apartment crying since she left the restaurant where she waitressed. Her husband was not home. She threw her coat and bag onto the sofa, kicked off her shoes, and walked into the bathroom. She looked tired. “The President is dead,” she said to herself. Washing her hands, scrubbing her face and neck, she felt the need to drink. She walked into the kitchen and pulled out a bottle of Moskva from the freezer. This was David's stuff. What the hell, she thought, poured a shot, downed it, poured another, downed it, ran to the sink, spit up the vodka and her saliva. Curled up over the sink, Geena caught a glance of one of her wedding photos sitting in a row of pictures in the living room. They were on the beach, the light retreating into the sea, and she remembered feeling emotions she had longed for her entire life. Contentedness. Serenity. Her parents, friends, the flowers, food, decorations--all weightless and ensconced in a golden hue. Perhaps it was the half-tablet of Valium she took before the ceremony that made things this way. No matter, even if she was slightly sedated, she felt the moment for all that it was, her husband the most beautiful man she

had ever met.

David walked in as a cold dripping mess. He stomped his feet on the doormat, and slammed the door close.

“You forgot your umbrella,” she said, lifting herself from the sink.

“What were you doing?”

“I felt like a drink, that's all. Can't believe you like that stuff.”

“It's a cop thing.” She gingerly returned the vodka, and walked towards her husband giving him a kiss on the cheek.

“I thought you don't consider yourself a cop anymore.”

“I don't.” He gripped her elbow. His hands were clammy, distant. “I take it you heard.”

“Yeah, on the radio,” she said.

“The station's gone all to hell. I can't stay here that long. Captain wants everyone with a badge out on the streets tonight.”

“Even you?”

“Even vets like me. Not everyday a President gets killed.” He pulled his badge from his belt and threw it on the love seat along with his wet coat and gun. She stared at the name on his New Jersey badge-- 'David Q-

“Hey, you ok?” he said.

“What? Oh, yeah. Fine. Why? You hungry?”

“Starving.” She unbuttoned his shirt revealing the paunch at his belly.

“I was thinking of making pork chops. What do you say?”

“That's just perfect, babe.”

“You go wash up. The food will be quick.”

“What would I do without you?”

“I really don't know.”

Geena's husband sat across from her, chewing silently, occasionally looking up to smile at her. A few minutes earlier, they had a conversation about something. She couldn't remember what it was about. David talked, she pretended to listen. It was probably something about the guys at the station. On those rare occasions when they ate together, most of their time was spent like this—him remembering some detail from work and then expounding upon it while she tried to feign interest at the minutia of police work he regurgitated back to her. She had inherited a trashcan model of husband-wife communication from her mother, the only problem being that the whole thing never entirely sunk into her skin. A good wife, a loving wife, was supposed to listen attentively, congenially nod and approve of whatever her husband said to her. Geena was not this wife, and she got annoyed that her husband did not ask about her day at the restaurant or what she read in the newspaper or about a movie she saw or just ask her about anything for that matter.

She needed to tell him.

Do it now.

Do it, stupid.

Do it, do it, do it!

The President was dead.

“David,” she said. “I want a divorce.”

*

Quartz left the Gershwin apartment soon after sweepers got there. They were surprised to see him. He gave them the run down on what he thought. They gave him the rudimentary joke about how dicks would make the worst killers because they'd go crazy trying to catch themselves, creating an endless trail of clues that only they could decipher but never solve. Quartz knew full well that the next morning he'll be arguing with them over their hair-brained theories. It was one thing to be able to calculate the time of death of a corpse based upon the incubation period of fly larvae embedded in it. It was another thing to catch the son-of-a-bitch who did it.

He walked out and lit a cigarette. It was late. Cold. He could feel a spring shower in the air. The moon peered over the edge of a mercury cloud, seemingly following Quartz along his trek. He needed to take a walk before he went back home. He started down Broadway and 72nd, cutting a left at the Advent Lutheran Church. A homeless man watched him from the steps, and Quartz noticed a trail of mucus running down his upper lip and plunging into his mouth. A cadre of street punks with their faces painted white and hair sticking pointedly up, blue, red, and gold, nearly rammed Quartz off the street talking and going on about a band named Plastic Armpit. He felt the urge to take out his gun, but ignored it and continued on his way, his ego only slightly bruised.

At Central Park West, he walked down to 59th and Columbus Circle, smoked another cigarette as he watched a young couple make out near the statue, cut a left along Central Park South until he hit Madison Ave. He had not realized how far he had come until he ran into Grand Central Station, the sooty monolithic building seemingly appearing before him and momentarily snapping him out of his late night haze. He felt

the rumble of trains beneath his feet and a light breeze brought on the onset of chills. A mist of rain began to fall, and Quartz threw down his last cigarette, stamping it out on the concrete with his foot. At this hour, the streets of midtown were desolate and dark--even the bums had left for more hospitable territory. He found himself alone, and before walking west for the lights of Times Square and eventually north back to his apartment, he thought about the next morning when he would resume the Gershwin case and catch her killer.

*

“Don’t you think we should talk about this?” Geena said.

“I’m tired of talking,” her husband said as he squirted a glob of Ajax onto a sponge.

“This is silly. What am I supposed to do now?”

“Anything you want. I don’t care,” he said. “I don’t want to talk now. I need to clean up here, I need to get back to the station.”

“David, leave it be.”

“Shut up,” he said.

“Please, keep your voice down, ok?”

“Keep my voice down?! Are you fucking out of your mind? You tell me you want a divorce, and you’re telling me to keep my voice down?”

“David, I’ve tried to tell you, to talk to you about our problems, but you don’t listen. You’re always at work, you’re always on a case. What more can I do? I’ve tried reaching out to you, but you live in a world that I can’t understand. I don’t think I want to

understand it.”

The sink began to fill with water. Geena saw her husband take a fork and dart it and in and out of the drain. She leaned against the counter and watched a miniature whirlpool suck stray shards of sauerkraut into the drain. Her husband left the kitchen, and she could feel the scowl on his face as he walked to their bedroom to change.

“Jesus Christ, you haven't said anything to me.” She heard his echo from the bedroom. “You know how hard I work, and you know what? It's all for you, but you don't appreciate it.” He walked back into the living room. “Here I am, busting my ass for you, saving all my money to get you back to school, and the thanks I get is you saying you want a fucking divorce.”

“I work hard too, David. Seven days a week, just like you. And you know what? I know exactly how much money you're saving. I check our bank statements. You don't think I know what you do with our money?”

“Fucking, Christ.” He stammered back into the bedroom.

“Please. We need to talk about this like adults.”

“Don't pull that shit on me. If anything, I'm not the one who's acting like a child here, throwing away your life like this. It's fucking crazy. It's crazy what you're talking about.”

“No, you don't understand. My life stopped the moment I married you.” She realized she was not talking to him, only his ghost. Even now, he was still somewhere else, his mind and soul living with the dead. “I need a change, David. I need to make you understand this, I can't go on like this. I just can't . . .”

“So, what are you saying, huh?” He stood in front of her. “You're not even going

to try and give us another chance?”

“There's no 'us' here, don't you see that? There hasn't been from the start. It was a mistake from the beginning. I should've known that you love your work. No, it's more than that. You carry it with you, I knew that before we got married, but this is different, all of it.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“I don't know, it's a feeling and it's real. I can't just dismiss it. You're never around for God's sake!”

“It's for you. I work for you.”

“No, you don't. Don't lie to me, don't lie to yourself.”

“I don't have time for this,” he said. He reached out for his gun and strapped its holster underneath his left arm. “Do you have any fucking idea what it's like out there? Do you? You just don't understand.” She tried to touch his shoulder, a movement that surprised her and was more instinctual than premeditated, but he shoved her away. “What the fuck? No,” he said.

“I'm sorry.” Geena couldn't quite grasp the speed with which everything took place. She rehearsed it all in her head, the last few minutes with him, him running out of the apartment into the storm. The President was dead. She wasn't crying. She was a little relieved, actually. Walking slowly back to the bedroom, she felt her body subside. It all happened so fast. The big sleep had taken her. She was alone, lying on the bed, and for the first time in a long time, she smiled before dozing off.

*

Quartz lived in a dingy hovel on 87th street and Amsterdam. Stepping inside, he threw his coat and keys onto the sofa, walked into the kitchen and pulled out of the freezer a bottle of Moskva, to which he filled a cocktail glass to the brim and downed the clear liquid in one gulp. The vodka felt like razors were going down his throat. He unbuttoned his shirt, walked into the bathroom and stared at his reflection in the mirror. Grazing his chin with his fingers, he felt this morning's shave giving way to barnacles of hair. He ran hot water from the faucet and splashed his face. It trickled from cropped salt and pepper hair, streaming in rivulets, the slight folds of skin etched around and under his eyes.

He sunk into the gray leather couch in his living room, cradling another glass with his right hand. He stared out through the only window of his apartment, overlooking the back alley of 87th street. There was the remains of a spider in the nook of the window sill, its web empty of food. The dead spider reminded Quartz of the cockroach he found under his sink yesterday. The other residents of his building had been complaining of roach infestations for months. Quartz was only able to find one cockroach in his apartment and it was a dead one. He couldn't help feel that he was surrounded by dead things. Even in his apartment, there was only death, common pests couldn't even escape the fate that he was tied to.

He got up to watch his Zenith black and white TV. The evening news was on.

“President Reagan today gave a speech to union leaders in Washington, assuring them that he would work with the new Congress to amend worker's compensation legislation and raising the minimum wage. Most analysts agree that the President faces

an uphill battle with Congress over . . .”

Quartz had not voted for Reagan. How could a former actor run the country? He remembered seeing a new science fiction movie last week at the Loews theater in Times Square, and the hulk of a man who played a robotic killing machine called a “Terminator.” He laughed to himself and pictured the barely comprehensible actor running for President. Only in America, he thought to himself.

He hated watching the news. It was all too real for his line of work. He turned the dial on the TV. A static noise erupted from each channel as he perused the late night stations.

A Hitchcock movie was on, half over it seemed. Quartz remembered watching it when he was a kid. He couldn't quite recall what the story was about, but before changing channels, he watched a strange scene where a man in a top-hat stared out from a crowd watching a tennis match. The faces around the man bobbed and turned in unison, keeping sync with the tennis ball going back and forth across the court. The camera stayed with him for some time. His face held no expression and his eyes were fixed at some point behind the camera. Suddenly it was clear to Quartz what was going on. The man was watching the star of the movie, a tennis player, about to take the court, but up until now, the camera had just focused on the man looking outward and did not reveal the star. Its gaze shifted and suddenly the tennis player appeared in view. He was tall and striking, his skin having that classic sheen of a 1950's actor. As soon as he realized that he was being stalked by this man of the crowd, a tight-lipped grimace dashed all the confidence out of his face. The tennis player watched the man watch him, and in all this, Quartz's thoughts dwelt on the crowd's reaction, how they were completely oblivious to this dance between

predator and prey.

The flicker of static, and he was now watching a variety show on the public channel. Two men sat in a dark room, the light only illuminating their bodies. Before he changed channels again, he overheard a sliver of their conversation.

“This sounds just fascinating, Brian, now lets see if I understand you correctly . . .string theory is - ”

“Charlie, it's basically about the possibility of several more dimensions beyond the three or four were familiar with. Each of these dimensions may have strange properties, or they might even contain worlds which are similar to ours, differing only in the slightest of details.”

“And Stephen Hawking, a good friend of yours at Cambridge, concurs with you . . .”

“String theory,” Quartz said to himself. “Multiple dimensions, other worlds.” He thought of Geena Gershwin. Perhaps in another world, he would be friends with this woman, even lovers. Maybe they've been happily married for years, had kids together, lived away from the evil of the city. Maybe the Quartz of that world wouldn't have shared the life he had lived. Maybe he would have known a kind of happiness that is now nothing more than an echo of a dream. He looked out through his apartment's only window and saw the slow burn of city lights. Thinking about this made him feel better.

He turned off the TV and fell asleep on the couch. In a dream which he later forgot, Quartz sits eating at Jesse's on 110th street. He looks up to see Geena Gershwin alive, her face bright and beautiful, and she stands in front of him waiting for his order. He smiles at her, she winks back. After eating, he writes his phone number and address

on a napkin, passing it along underneath his money like it was secret he was sharing with her. When her shift ends, she goes to Quartz's apartment with her face dressed in pink blush and red lipstick. He meets her at the door, slowly drawing her in, then heaves her body high into the air. They make love late into the night. He lies on his back and watches Geena lick his stomach, her tongue tracing a trail down below his belly-button. Quartz kicks his head back with pleasure, twists to the side, and reaches for the revolver underneath the mattress. The movements are swift, determined as he fires one loud shot into the wall to his left. The wall is white, and the cracks splay outward from the epicenter, eventually shattering everything.

SYMMETRY

They looked out at town below them and it was small and camouflaged in a purple hue left over from the sun. She squeezed her eyes shut, so hard tears welled up under her lids. She tried to burn this moment into memory. There was a couple she knew from her Victorian Lit class making out next to the statue of the U's founder. Two squirrels clawed their way up a willow tree on Packer courtyard. Jo sat close to her on the bench, and she felt a familiarity as their knees touched. Her jeans felt too tight at her hips. The smell of Jo's hair reminded her of her mother. There were U students milling about, some casting glances at them as they walked by. Jo looked almost the same as when they first met—her face, warm and full, the rill-like grooves on the corners of her mouth. She noticed a web of wrinkles etched into Jo's fingers, her palms weathered, worn from late nights washing dishes at the coffee shop. Her hair was the same stringy mess it was three years ago because she was like that, unchanging like the northern star. They were separated by years, Jo at twenty-eight, nearly twenty-nine. She never once looked at Jo with musing eyes, something she did with everything in her life. She never could understand anything until it lived as memory, the present always all too full with detail. She was leaving Jo and she did not want to do this.

“Cold out here,” Jo said.

“Yeah, we shouldn't stay out too long.”

“I know. Not often we're up here. Look at that view. I can see my place from here. Weird.”

“That's perspective for you.”

A grinding noise diverted her attention towards the President's house. A group of groundskeepers worked at sawing away the remains of an old sycamore at the rear of the house. She remembered passing by this tree many times since her arrival at the U, watching couples cut their names into its withered bark. She felt a bit sad to see it go, a piece of the landscape she had become accustomed to.

“I feel like you have something to tell me,” said Jo.

“Why do you say that?”

“That way you get sometimes. Why else would we be sitting here like this.”

“Like what?”

“Like this.”

“I'm graduating in the spring,” she said.

“That's not a big secret. Isn't that what most seniors do?”

“I guess I feel worried.”

“About what? I always figured you'd be leaving. You're just that type of person. This place isn't right for you.”

“It's not right for you either.”

“It's right for me now.”

“You've been saying that since we met, you know.”

“I'm happy. Feels good to have that.”

“I got a job.”

“Already? Didn't know you were even looking. Where?”

“Virginia, just outside of Washington D.C. Arlington. It's an entry level position, child welfare type thing. I'll be a TSA, therapeutic support assistant. Probably just a paper pusher. I think I may have to go into homes from time to time.”

“It sounds perfect. You should be happy about this. You love kids, seems like every time I call you're down volunteering at the church day care. Do your folks know?”

“Not yet. I wanted to tell you first.”

“I'm happy for you. Really I am.”

“I'm scared.”

“Why?”

“It's all happening too fast. I have no idea what I'm getting into.”

“That's why you're doing it. That's why you're getting the hell out of here.”

She thought of how they first met. It was her first semester, the U's grip already slipping like an untied shoe. It all started with an assignment in freshman comp. The adjunct wanted real-life on paper, he said, not the usual aristocratic drivel that spilled out of their silver-spooned fed mouths. She thought real-life on paper an oxymoron, and that he was a Marxist, but she didn't know what a Marxist was except that it sounded dangerous and cool. He said town was theirs for the viewing, don't let anything go unnoticed. Starting down Main Street, she kicked a Coca-Cola bottle cap as she hung a left at Victory Avenue. She passed a fruit stand manned by a woman who wore gray sinister eyes. She stopped at a barbershop and admired a boy getting a crew cut with his

father. She paused on rail tracks that bifurcated town, always wanted to flatten a quarter on the rail, but she moved on at the sound of police sirens. This was how she stumbled into the coffee shop on Victory. There was a sign on the outside ledge that read, “We serve good clean air.” She crept in, noticing paper turkeys hanging from the ceiling.

“Hey, spook! What will you have?” There was Jo. Green apron, faded jeans, an auburn lock of hair dangling in front of her face.

“Coffee.”

“Cool. Have a seat and I’ll be right with you,” said Jo, balancing five plates of pancakes on two arms. Sitting down, she felt her left hand tremble, her fingers pink and swollen. Real-life on paper. A man with a face like a crumbling brick wall stared at her from the adjacent table. He took slow drags from a nearly spent cigarette, bits of muffin populating his lower lip. She looked down at her table, pulled out her notebook and began writing. “Cracks flourished all over his face, he would topple over like Humpty-Dumpty.” As she scribbled into the red-spiraled notebook, she looked around and saw plumes of smoke emanating from almost every direction. She felt the need to light up, but she didn’t smoke, never smoked anything in her life, and even though she had survived through all the pressures of high school with nary an urge, she felt the need more than ever to fit in, to join this club of townie smokers.

Jo appeared to her left, coffee in hand, a smile on her face.

“Don’t get many of you down here.”

“What do you mean?”

“You kids from the U. Y’all don’t like coming into town.”

“How could you tell? What gave me away?”

“That look in your eyes. I could spot you a mile away. Nothing to be ashamed of, though. Glad for some new company. And don’t mind these losers, they stare at everyone who walks in. They’re harmless. That’s all they do, stare, smoke, drink coffee.”

“Zombies.”

“Yeah,” Jo laughed. “Zombies. Now, what can I get you?”

She had felt the need to meet someone like Jo, and need had always scared the shit out of her. Now, three years later, she felt that something was in the air that would change things for them. Light had retreated fast, and with it a greater drop in temperature. The October air was seeping into her veins. She still had to write a paper on Maguerite Duras, and wondered if she should hit the library or head back to Jo's coffee shop. She liked studying in her presence. She'd often sit buried in a book while Jo bustled about until her shift was over, occasionally stopping for a smoke break and sharing some bit of gossip from the cooks.

“We've never really talked about us.”

“What do you mean?”

“You know what I mean,” said Jo.

“What is there to say?”

“Sometimes it helps to speak things, even when we both know the words aren't necessary.”

“Why?”

“I'm not sure why. It just does.”

“I don't know what there is to talk about?”

“Us,” Jo said.

“Why now? Why here?”

“It's a good time as any.”

“What do you want to hear from me?”

“What I want to know, is,” she paused. Jo leaned in and kissed her. She didn't move away even though she felt she should have.

“What are you doing?”

“I don't know. I just wanted to do it, in public, not give you a chance to think about it.”

“We just can't do *that*.”

“Why not?”

“Because.”

“Because you're not ready?”

“Because . . . I don't know. Maybe I'm not. Are you?”

“I feel like we've been ready.”

“I'm sorry. I'm sorry . . . it's just . . .”

“It'll take time. I know. I was there. But, sooner or later, you're just going to have to be comfortable with it. Comfortable with not having answers, with just letting go. It's never going to be easy, but I guess it's not about that at all. So . . .”

“I'm trying.”

“I know you are.”

“I'm not sure what else to say.”

“You don't have to say anything.” said Jo.

“I think we're going to be okay. I really do, but I just need a little more time. And

with me leaving . . .”

“Don't worry, we'll figure it out. You know, you're gonna do great things down in Virginia. But, promise me that you'll listen to this piece of advice?”

“What's that?”

“You're going to have to smile more,” said Jo.

“That's it? You'd make a lousy therapist telling people stuff like that.”

“Yeah?”

“You would.” She felt herself inhale and exhale. The air hurt her nose as she breathed. “I'm sorry.”

“What for?”

“I don't know. For leaving.”

“You haven't left yet. Virginia isn't that far. I'll make trips down, you'll come up. We'll keep in touch, email every day.”

“Fuck email. We'll write letters. They're a lost art. I can tell you all about a TSA. I'll weep and sob and sign my name in blood.”

“Shut up, weirdo.”

“This is all dream. I'm not really here. You're not here.”

“It is a dream. You're asleep. You're not going anywhere. The U will keep you forever.”

A sign in the lobby greeted visitors to the gold-embazoned words, “We must help those neediest of the needy, the cost no greater than our very lives, our futures entwined as one.” It was 2:30 in the morning, a warm July Sunday. How many times had she strolled through these corridors, walked past that sign, her thoughts dwelling upon one thing or another, not appreciating the small, glowing faces looking back at her from photographs hung on the walls, the bright green paint outlining doors and windows, the rainbow of finger paintings adorning the lunch lounge? She tried to remember why she had joined the agency in the first place seven years ago, shifting her weight from left hip to right, tapping the floor with her toe. Her years there seemed to betray her sense of purpose. As a senior director, she worked less with the children and more with the bureaucracy surrounding them.

She knew she couldn’t linger for too long, but why not look for a last time, really look and see things as they are. Along the central hallway connecting the now empty offices and conference rooms, she gazed at the agency’s founders immortalized on stark wooden plaques. They were clean-shaven men with pasty skin, all of them wearing black wire-rimmed glasses. Ancient philanthropy, she thought, rich do-gooders of the sixties trying their best to help the black kids of the city. The founders’ bios read like the origins of comic book superheroes—*John V. Taylor, once a brilliant chemical engineer, dedicated the rest of his days to raising money for underprivileged children stricken with Leukemia, after he was unable to prevent the death of his own son from that terrible disease.* The agency was first an orphanage, transformed by city funding and private donation into the largest child welfare organization on the east coast. She walked off

feeling the founders' faces lurking behind her.

Soon, she was in the kitchen and programming the microwave to switch on in four hours. She pulled out of a backpack a can of DuPont spray paint and placed it inside the microwave.

Cooking gas rushing in from the main line at the back of the stove would fill the kitchen in less than three hours. With a wrench she took from the janitor's closet, she pried off the plastic seals of the valve. She recoiled from the hiss of the gas and soon the space around her smelled like eggs.

As she sped out of the building, she kept checking her watch, noting exactly how much time she had before the microwave switched on. She returned everything she had touched to its original state—the wrench on the third shelf in the janitor's closet next to the hammers and screwdrivers, angled just as she remembered it; she locked all three doors she had used to get to the kitchen; if any usable evidence was found after the blast, it wouldn't be because of fingerprints—rubber gloves ensured pristine surfaces.

Outside, she waited, hid and shivered in the crevice of Spruce alley across from the Arlington City Child Welfare Agency. She walked for two hours, first around the perimeter of the building, then marched erratically, staggered here and there avoiding gravel, mud, and grass so as not to leave footprints. If she was spotted, she had prepared her story ahead of time—she had forgot some paperwork that she needed to fill out for the board meeting later that morning. At such a discovery, she envisioned herself dashing inside to undo the crime she had put into motion. Ten minutes left. Her feet ached. Her left hand shook, fingertips pink and swollen. She cradled her watch as the second hand sped along its merry way.

Early Sunday morning, the Arlington City Child Welfare Agency on the corner of 4th and Broad Street would explode into a smoldering geyser of brick, concrete and steel. She would be a block away when the rush of the explosion would rip through her body.

It would be loud, much louder than anything she had ever heard, the unnaturalness of it all spilling inside her body. It would be all sound at first, deep and shrill, starting low at the ground and darting up high above her. The heat would swallow her whole, the oxygen sucked into the fireball fifty feet behind her.

She had imagined this moment over and over again for the past three months and was sure she could handle it—the hot air filling up her ears and nostrils, the ash on her tongue, the fleshy undersides of her fingers burning. Glass showered down upon her, left shoulder embedded in the sidewalk. Trying to get up, she would cut her chin on concrete as tentacles of black smoke leaked up from every part of her body. A terrible ringing in her ears, she would need to gather herself, get on her way, and try not to think about what she had done.

It was simple, she thought. She had always wanted to help. But, nobody knew what to do. A children's crusade all over gain, totally chaotic, fragmented, nobody knew what anybody else was doing and everybody was paranoid about everybody else. The wounds only got deeper. The question as always, was why was she doing it? It was simple, really. Here was the essence of her problem. Not so much in the method, but the nature of the problem itself. There were too many to help, not enough to help them. The arithmetic was daunting, no matter how hard she worked, there was no chance that she wasn't going to fail. That was the long and short of it. Unless she was willing to accept the futility of the job, there was no point in it any more. And that's why she did it, as

incomprehensible as it might seem, she reveled in the hopelessness of it all. Wallowing in martyrdom makes one feel important, a sense of dreadful but noble purpose. The harder she had worked, the more exhausted she had become, and eventually the whole dirty enterprise crept up behind and engulfed her whole, like she were nothing but a mouse running in a wheel. But, then again, not working, or rather letting complacency get the better of her, forced her to deal with people like Mr. Casey Snow who mistook his one and a half year old girl for a large, screaming chicken and baked her in a gas oven at 375 degrees. Because the wounds only got deeper. Everyone was always watching everyone else. Wounds showed up everywhere. She remembered Jimmy Reynolds, a six-year old boy who while not chewing on his fingers and toes like a rabid monkey, created paintings of such exquisite brilliance that his parents sold them to uptown politicians for over five-hundred dollars a pop. She remembered Carlita Jones. Rochelle Wallace. Eli Abramowitz. Darcy Flashman. Chucky French. Jonathan Dormen. Ali Richardson. Melvine Carlson. Taina Mora. Lita Fuentecilla. Christopher Johnson. Joey Delaney. Jennifer Rodriguez. Debbie Yang. Bobby Washington. Marcella Lopez. Timothy Charles. Kimberly Lombardi. Richard Bukowski. George Thomas Lyndon. Felicia Lynn Winslet. Charmaine O'Neal. Roger Chargrin. Amanda Zelina. Tyce Clemente. Michael Bell. Adam Skokal. Stanley Oberlin. Johnny Adams. Sarah House. Jay Owens. Darrell Thompson. Chad Hennessy. Colin Williams. Lucius Harris. Valerie Cobalt. Vincent Nunez. Scott O'Brien. Lazarro Kunyan. She remembered one case, Ms. Faye Landers, age thirty-five, who fed her one year old boy every hour of the day and into the night, little by little, not too much at a time, and when the baby went to doodle, she collected the diapers and stacked them around her apartment like books.

Sometimes, there is a disjunction between life and the memory of it. She thought this was especially true even at the end. What brought her there, here, she couldn't say. How was she supposed to have confidence in anything, anyone, after working for the agency? She had walked home and took a shower. The water felt good on her skin, and she scrubbed and scrubbed the soap into her arms, legs and chest. She finished in the bathroom, threw the smoky clothes she had worn into a garbage bag, hoisted on faded black underwear and a white T-shirt. Leaping into her bed and pulling the covers up to her neck, she felt like she was five years old again and hiding from her mother after spilling juice on the carpet. After falling asleep, she would later dream of the explosion and see herself destroy the agency over and over again like news footage playing out in her mind. She looked over at a picture of Jo on the dresser. Not long after they had met, Jo had that sad stare which she spooked of years ago loved more than anything she had known. She would be home any minute, her graveyard shift at the diner ending at five. Jo knew nothing of what she had done. Why had she been so afraid of telling her? Jo would understand. She understood everything. Perhaps she already knew. How do you keep a secret from someone you love? Jo would walk into the room, see her lying on the bed and know instantly, words spoken without being uttered.

Before she fell asleep, she wondered what would happen if they caught her.

INDONESIA

My wife, Joanne, is on the phone with her ex-boyfriend. His name is Kyle. I am listening to their conversation, and all I can make out is that Kyle caught some rare virus from a bug in Indonesia. He's in the hospital recovering from a blood transfusion. Apparently, he was close to dying. I don't think Joanne is taking it very well.

We had just gotten home from jogging, and I'm sitting at the table pretending to read the Sunday paper. I spoon through my cereal, now soggy, and try to fill in the silent spaces between my wife's words.

He's okay now, she says. He says that the doctors have no idea what they're doing. They're giving him steroids, she says. They're sticking him like he was a pincushion, she says. He has a crush on one of the nurses, she says.

Jo is not usually parrot-like, and I don't know who she's being like this for. They were close in college, really close. I don't know much about him because Jo has never really said anything. I know he studies bugs. I think he's called an entomologist. Or maybe he's an etymologist? I can never remember which one is which. That's why he was in Indonesia. Studying bugs. Beetles, she says.

They've been on the phone for about twenty minutes and I can't tell if Jo is crying or sweating. She's a much better runner than I am. In fact, she's usually much better at

everything. She doesn't need to jog, but she's doing it to motivate me. We're in our third week and my body feels uninterested. I look over at Jo on the phone—her small waist, slender thighs, and juicy behind. I look down at my belly spilling out of my Nike T-shirt. She's sniffing, she must be crying, and I'm not sure how I feel about this.

She hangs up the phone, sits down and says nothing. Her orange tank top clings to her skin like Saran Wrap, and I can tell that she can't hold whatever's inside her for much longer.

"I'm sorry. I heard everything. Are you okay?" I put my hand on her shoulder.

"I'm fine," she says.

"You don't look fine." I don't think she heard me.

"What? Oh, yes, of course. He asked about you, how you're doing and all."

"I know." I get up and clear the table. She's looking right at me. "Let me get you something to eat . . . how about eggs and toast. Some OJ," I say.

"That would be wonderful. I'm sorry, I'm acting like a such spook. I guess I'm just so taken back by it." She plants her face into her hands and then presses her fingers hard against her skin, and then smooths her hair so that it's taut against her scalp. "I just haven't heard from him in so long, and then to get news like this."

"You sound like you really care about him," I say. The eggs spill onto the frying pan and I look over at my wife, wondering what she's gonna say next.

"I do, well, I did. It's been years. I haven't even thought about him until just now. He says he wants us to come visit him at the hospital."

"Absolutely," I say. The eggs bubble, and I have to force myself to remember that I'm cooking—but I can't shake this vision of seeing Kyle. I have no idea what he

looks like, but I can't help see this image of a ghastly looking man, a pale stick figure, bald and swaddled in tubes and bandages. "What's Kyle's profession called again?"

"Entomology," she says.

"Right, right. That's what it is . . . entomology. Is he married, any kids?"

"No," she says. She sits still for a few seconds, and then begins flipping through the paper.

This past year has been rough on her. Her father died last spring, something she does not talk about except in a matter-of-fact kind of way. Perhaps there's not much to say about it really.

She had a pregnancy scare a few months back. "Scare" is probably not the right word—more like a "double-take." Maybe this is something that all women eventually face, even the most career-minded ones. I think a part of her wanted to be pregnant, although she also knew that it would seriously complicate her writing. That's this whole dissertation thing she's working on—something on feminism and band aids. I've tried reading her stuff before—I usually give up a couple sentences in, when words such as "discursive" start popping up like weeds. Somehow she's managed to keep at it while dealing with all this other life stuff. But, that's Jo for you. Focused. Knows what she wants and goes after it.

After finishing breakfast we sit at the table going over our schedules for the next week. Jo seems better and I'm relieved that this Kyle business is out of her head.

"I don't think I'm going to see much of you this week" she frowns, lightly scratching my knee with her fingernails.

"Why not?" I don't know why I ask when I already know the answer—it's a

school thing.

“Well, I have to teach a study session on Tuesday for the Spring Exams. You know how some of these kids are . . . they want to talk about books until day breaks.”

“Nuts,” I say. “How about Wednesday?”

“I’ll be out late too. Women’s group, but the next night is—“

“Thursday night poker. It’s not a big deal, I can call the guys and tell them I’m—

“No way, you’re the best player out of your friends . . . and I want you to spend your winnings on me Saturday night.”

“Are you sure, Jo? It’s no big deal, really, if I miss one game.”

“I don’t want you to do it just for me.”

“I *do* want to do it just for you.”

“Are you sure?”

“I am”

“You love playing poker, though.” She tilts her head slightly to the side and gives me *that* look which tells me she’s going to get whatever it is she wants.

“So?”

“So . . . I want you to play. Really, I do. Honest-to-God.”

This is how most of our conversations have been recently. Before either of us knows it, the week begins and ends like any other. Jo is busy. I’m busy. It feels like there’s a lot going on when there really isn’t. Somehow we manage to still have sex. We even get to talk if the moment is right, telling each other of what our friends are up to: who’s getting divorced, who’s laid off, who’s sick, who’s in therapy, who’s in rehab. The late night glow of the TV puts us to sleep. Sometimes Jo will wake up smack in the

middle of the night, run towards her desk in our bedroom, and scribble away in a notebook some idea that came to her in her dreams. It's this thing she's writing, a book that maybe five people in the world will actually read and understand. And yet, she says, that's sort of the reason she's doing it. It's not even about her, she says, but about how the ideas have taken on their own lives, living breathing things which sees it as her job to make sure they make their way into the world.

Whatever.

She doesn't like it when I tell her this, but I think it's some pseudo-maternal instinct playing itself out. But, what do I know? She's the future *Doc-tor*.

On Sunday, we go to see Kyle. Jo had been quiet on the ride down. Not that I thought she'd be all cheery, but I'm not used to her being that way. Jo is the type of woman who talks—about anything. She's doesn't have diarrhea-mouth, but she just knows about a lot of stuff--Japanese herbal medicines, the mating dance of Columbian fruit flies, the name of George Clooney's high school, the manufacturing history of paper clips, the way her nail polish curdles, the latest breakthroughs in polymer sealants, how some of her girlfriends are considering becoming lesbians, the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle.

But, not a peep from her on the way over.

Zip.

We shuffle past the lobby of the Temple University Hospital and go through two more waiting rooms before we get to Kyle's section. There's that hospital smell that I

can't shake. You never get used to it. Everything feels just too clean, like something's being covered up.

When we get to Kyle's room, Jo does not look good. She is wearing a kind of "I can't believe I'm doing this" look that I never see.

Stepping inside, Kyle is nothing like I imagined him to be. He does not look like a man who roams about the jungle for a living. Two beds had been pushed together to support his body, their middle portions sagging downward like a hammock. He was huge. Beached whale huge. He must have weighed over three hundred pounds.

"There must be some mistake," she whispers into my ear.

"Are we in the right room?"

"Yes," she says. "207, that's what the nurse told me."

"I thought you said he studied bugs."

"He does," she says in hushed voice.

"In Indonesia?"

"That's where he got sick."

"I take it he wasn't always, huh, this hefty when you were together."

"No." She takes a step closer to him, squinting her eyes like she's trying to unearth the face she knew not too long ago. "His hair is still the same, a bit shorter. He kind of looks like Kyle. I think." She turns her back towards him, and whereas instinctively she normally would grab me by the waist and kind of sink into me, she stops short in mid-embrace.

"Maybe we should just go home. This is a bit too weird."

"We're already here. Might as well see how the guy is doing."

“I just have a bad feeling about this.”

“This was your idea, Jo. We drove three hours to see this man.”

“I know. But,--

“Let’s at least wish him well, let him know that we came.”

“I’ll send him a card.” It is at this moment we realize that despite our attempt at whispering, we actually might be loud enough to wake the dead.

“Well, guess who’s coming to dinner?” Kyle’s voice is raspy and deep. Kind of British, but not really.

“Kyle,” Jo says. “It’s so good to see you again.” She puts on a smile and gingerly walks to the side of the first bed, placing her hand on its railing. Standing next to Kyle, my wife looks like a twig. A hot looking twig. Any feelings of resentment or jealousy I had earlier flush right out of me. Compared to him, I am Brad Pitt.

“It’s good to see you too. You and your fine husband. How are you, sir?”

“I’m good, thanks. I should be asking you that question,” I say.

“For someone like me, the road to recovery is a long and arduous one. But, Providence has always been my trusted companion, and I have no doubt that I shall post a recovery for the record books.”

“How has the hospital been treating you?”

“The nurses have been magnificent. Charmers to the last. The doctors, of course, because they are dealing with something quite unknown to them are even more incorrigible than usual. They assure me that I’m going to be all right, but then subject me to every test known to man. My prognosis is positive, and yet the treatments are brutal. They are informative while being condescending, sensitive while callous, deadpan while

capricious—they're like schizophrenics.”

“Sounds awful,” Jo says.

“It could be worse,” I say. “At least you’re not dead.” She throws a sinister look my way, careful to not let Kyle in on it.

“I must, of course, address those thoughts which linger in both of your heads. No need to be shy—why not get it all out in the open right off the bat? Joanne, you’re wondering how this fat, grotesque man came to replace the once dashing, supremely intelligent, thrill seeking, virginity stealing, Kyle Richardson? Am I right? As for you, gent, you would rather be home watching the Senior LPGA tour on TV than be holed up in this room with me.”

“No, Kyle, it’s not like that,” Jo says.

I pretend that I’m interested. “What happened to you?”

Kyle had a story to tell. As he began speaking, I couldn’t help staring at him, an act which he’s probably very used to by now. By looking at him, I felt like I was looking into a part of Jo’s past, one that she had never revealed before. But, because of his size, I had the hardest time connecting the dots between them.

He was not a sight for sore eyes. Perhaps I couldn’t see past the weight, but the man was so unattractive that I couldn’t take my eyes off him. His nose was shaped like a pear, mushy and dimpled around the nostrils. His eyes were expressive and drooping, and his hair, curly and red, hung wildly about his forehead. His skin was a mish-mash of color and texture, perhaps due to the drugs the doctors had given him.

Maybe his charm drew Jo to him years ago—his weird job and the delight he took

in it.

I don't know.

He was talking about his seven years in Indonesia. After his university funding ran dry, he stopped doing research and got involved in the exotic insect trade. He specialized in rare beetles and it did not take long before he ran into some unsavory fellows—those were his words--private contractors working for various government agencies.

“They are looking to build more powerful weapons, stronger body armor, lighter and faster transports.” His face was animated when he said this, as if he was letting us in on something top secret.

“The natural world is the ultimate R&D sandbox. Spider silk that has a tensile strength greater than Kevlar fiber; ants who can lift fifty times their own body weight; beetles who secrete an acid pore more toxic than Agent Orange. Learning their secrets could mean big money for the right investor. That’s what draws people like that to Third-World countries. Their economies have been so ravaged by globalization that the locals will do anything to acquire American currency, including pillaging their own land.

“My affairs eventually led me to one *Mormolyce Phylloides*, a strange creature found only in the remote jungles of Sulawesi. It resembles what is commonly called a Violin beetle, but its reproductive behavior is very odd, similar to *Nicrophorus*.”

“Nicro-what’s it?” I asked.

“Burying beetles. One of a handful of insects known to provide biparental care. Males will find host bodies, say small birds and the like, emit a sex pheromone to attract a female, and then the two will cooperatively bury the carcass and defend it against

intruders, all the while feeding the larvae which are hatched from within the carrion.

“Now, I had my share of run-ins with deplorable characters in Indonesia, all of which I had escaped relatively unscathed. But, it came to be that one encounter with a Frenchman named Pierre Montaigne set me on the course which has left me in the state you see before you. He was a crazy man who even in the searing tropical heat wore a full-piece suit and long gray trench coat. He brandished a black pencil mustache with the swagger of an aristocrat, and only communicated with others through one of his henchman.

“There were rumors about him, how he used to be a hitman for hire, Russian outfit, French underground type. Montaigne’s temper was legendary, but you wouldn’t have known it by the way he carried himself. He was a demure business man through and through, kept his hands clasped behind his back, and always stared at you with his beady, dark eyes.

“I had been working several weeks for him, collecting larvae of a rhinoceros beetle, no easy task mind you, and I expected Montaigne to pay me for my efforts. However, he changed the parameters of our agreement during our final exchange, claiming the specimens had dropped in value and wanted to pay me one-fifth of my selling price.

“My pride got the better of me, and I refused his offer. With no more than a blink of an eye, Montaigne sliced off my right thumb and the package containing the larvae dropped to the ground, free for him to carry away. The reason why he always wears a trench coat is to conceal his weapon of choice—a 19th century Russian rapier adorned in gold and now stained with my blood.

“The last thing I remembered before passing out was Montaigne’s expressionless face and my severed thumb lying next to me, looking much like a mangled shrimp.”

Jo and I both stepped back at this last statement. Our eyes naturally drifted towards Kyle’s right hand, noticing that his plump digits including his thumb were all there.

“I know what you’re thinking,” he said. “Your hand looks just fine. Well, it wouldn’t have been if it weren’t for my wily little friends, those burying beetles I had been studying for so long.

“Montaigne’s henchmen had dumped me and my thumb several kilometers outside of any established settlements. I awoke shortly thereafter, sweat streaming down my face, and I felt that I was on the verge of shock. My hand was a gaping wound, so I wrapped it up in my shirt to protect it from the corruptive elements of the jungle. I knew I was dangerously close to passing out again or that I would start convulsing at any minute, but in that strange moment I saw a very familiar mound of dirt about ten yards away from me. Slightly delirious, it suddenly dawned me that that mound might contain my salvation. I decided to go for broke and plunged my good hand down into the small cavern. I felt something warm and rubber-like. I immediately ripped the thing out of the ground—it was my severed thumb, swollen and a bit pinkish, but remarkably still intact.

“You see, Nicrophorus must inject a potent enzyme into the host body before they can fertilize their eggs. Such a process kept my thumb from decomposing. When I was unconscious, they must of spotted my thumb and quickly swooped in to make use of it as a nest if you will. Well, it was because of them that the doctors were able to reattach it. The science is still a bit difficult for us to understand, but somehow they possess

incredible regenerative powers, most likely developed as a result of their strange and complex reproductive habits. Their way of life was my way of life, and so I returned the favor. I scooped up the male and female beetles from their now demolished home, used the supplies I had on me to safely transport them, bandaged my thumb in some gauze, and used my GPS transmitter to contact the university.

“It did not take very long for my colleagues to locate me. When I got to an emergency room, I told the doctors everything that had happened and convinced them to reattach my thumb. As for the beetles, I constructed a makeshift breeding nest for them in the lab and eventually sent them on their way into the wild. Godspeed.”

Kyle looked proud as he said this.

“It took me sometime to recover. Physically, I was fine. But, Montaigne’s attack left me damaged beyond belief. I immersed myself in my work, trying to decipher exactly how *Nicrophorus* was able to save my thumb. It soon became apparent that I couldn’t leave the lab. For several weeks, all I dreamt of was Montaigne and his sword cutting through my hand like it was a tomato. I left all the fieldwork to my assistants. I negotiated every deal over cell-phone and email. I ate and slept in the lab, only taking an occasional CNN break or reading the next chapter from the latest Tom Clancy novel. My diet was horrendous—I relied on my colleagues to bring me food, and because of the Indonesian exchange rate, the McDonalds and Pizza Huts, considered to be among the finest restaurants in town, supplied me with an endless amount of cheeseburgers and pizza. Over the next two years, I ballooned up to two-hundred and ninety pounds, not an advantageous weight for someone whose livelihood depends upon things that live in the jungle.”

“How did you wind up here, then?” I said.

“A fluke really. What you might call a double whammy. A bout of food poisoning from all those hamburgers I consumed. That and some damn Malaysian Blister Beetles. Their toxins are strong enough to kill a horse, and any kind of mishandling can be deadly. Not a very good combination for a fellow. So you see, it was bugs all round. Bugs in my food, bugs in my skin. That’s what brought me back to the states.”

I didn’t know what to make of Kyle’s story. It was too crazy to have actually happened. The part about him sitting on his ass all day in Indonesia and gaining two-hundred pounds I could believe. The part about having his thumb cut off by a French mercenary over a few baby beetles I could not. But, here he was, speaking as if it were God’s word set in stone.

After a few minutes of awkward silence--Jo and I shuffling our feet around the room, Kyle trying to maneuver his body about the beds--our conversation suddenly veered towards Jo. She talked about what she had been up to these past seven years, mostly that period of time before we married, four or so years where she was traveling around the states, not really settling down anywhere and living out of motels and friend of a friend’s spare bedrooms. She had always been fond of this time in her life and I was surprised when she began speaking so freely about it to Kyle.

They talked for a while. A really long time it seemed. Going on and on about this and that. What it was like to be back at school, what Jo was writing about, the civil unrest in Indonesia. I almost felt like an intruder and wanted to come up with some excuse to leave them. I just didn’t have anything to contribute. I started thinking about random

things. Looking at the various devices monitoring Kyle, I thought of how they looked similar to the insides of that talking car that used to be on TV in the 80's. All the cool buttons and flashing lights. I remembered back when I was a kid and they had all those Disney live-action movies starring a talking Volkswagon Bug. The car had a name, but I couldn't remember it. I always wanted a car that would talk to me.

I flipped on the TV and started watching golf. They were playing in what looked like some far-off tropical paradise. Maybe it was Indonesia. I wondered if Jo and I would ever go there. Maybe visit Kyle some day.

At some point, their conversation ended. Jo said she was hungry. Kyle warned us about the cafeteria, but we decided to go there anyway. Located in the belly of the hospital, it was a dimly lit place, like an old-time speakeasy. We sped through an assembly line where burly station attendants slapped globs of food onto our trays. Sitting down, it seemed that the conversations of the day revolved around how bad the food was. I wondered if the food was really that bad, or if it was that people in hospitals were just generally in bad moods to begin with, and hence anything they ate automatically tasted bad.

"This food is disgusting," said Jo. She spooned through what seemed like a moat of mash potatoes and gravy surrounding a slab of turkey.

"I don't mind it," I said.

"You'll eat anything that's been made by someone else. I could cook goat shit and you would eat it right up."

"That may be true."

We ate in silence for several minutes. Jo stared at her food like it was talking to

her. I kept my eyes on the doctors, all of them looking like they were cloned from Adonis—tall, blond men with shoulders and biceps that stretched well past mortal proportions.

“How are you doing?” I said. She looked sad, her eyes tired and worn.

“Fine, I guess.”

“Something’s wrong.”

“It’s nothing.”

“C’mon. You seem like you’re out of sorts.”

“I know. It’s the whole situation. So damn strange.”

“How come?”

“All these memories coming back to me. Things I thought I had forgotten. It’s weird, you know, like how something which you don’t think about for so long becomes blurry, faded, almost to the point where it’s like you can’t be sure if it even happened to you.”

“Yeah, kind of crazy. I know what you mean.”

“When he called last week, I got scared, nervous. It was like the old me, the person I was when I was with him, had suddenly jumped back into my body.”

She wasn’t looking at me when she said this. I wasn’t sure what she meant.

“Just hearing Kyle’s voice was enough to take me back, years ago as an undergrad and always trying to keep up with him. When we were together, somehow I just knew that he was going to leave, that he wouldn’t be Kyle unless he was out there, getting into trouble.”

“Do you really believe that story he told?”

“Of course. Why, you don’t?”

“Well, not really,” I said. “Just seems so out there.”

“Kyle *is* out there. And the thing is, for the longest time I was always trying to measure myself against him. I felt like I was just standing by him, in his shadow or something.”

“It wouldn’t be that hard to stand in his shadow.”

“Not funny.”

“Sorry.”

“Even now, it’s strange, I still want to show him up, prove to him that I’ve moved on, that I have a better life without him than with him.”

“Damn straight,” I said.

“It’s all silly I guess. You’d think I would know better to let something like this get to me.”

“Seems just natural.”

“I was worried how you would handle all this.”

“Really? Why?”

“Well, it can’t be easy for you. Old boyfriend back from the dead, could uproot your sense of stability.”

“Uh, huh.”

“I was concerned about you, that’s all.”

She went silent again. My mind drifted back to Kyle and his time in Indonesia. I wondered about his story, what he looked like, what that crazy Frenchman must have looked like. There was Indonesia, pictures from National Geographic or Discovery, palm trees and short brown people running around half-naked. But, I almost felt the heat, saw

Kyle wiping his brow and staring down a pair of strange insects.

It was all a hoax—he wanted to impress Jo. More importantly, he wanted to impress me.

“Sweetheart?”

“Yes?” I said.

“There *is* something that I’ve been meaning to talk to you about. For some reason, I’ve been thinking about it more and more since we drove out here.”

“What is it?”

“We’ve talked about it before. And I know with what happened to us four months ago, this may not be easy for you to understand.”

“Spit it out,” I said. I realized that that was not what I wanted to say.

“I want to have a baby.”

The spaghetti felt like a rock in my stomach. “A baby?” I said. The words came half-way between a burp which I was just able to swallow.

“Yes.”

“What about your writing?”

“What about it?”

“How are you going to keep at it? Your course load, your life at school? You’ve put so much on finishing up—don’t you think a baby would make things more difficult?”

“There’s never going to be just the right time where one of us is more free than the other. It’s not a convenience issue. We’ll both have to make adjustments—it’s not just going to be something that happens to me.”

“I know that, and I’ve always figured we’d have kids, it’s just . . . , well . . .”

“I think we’re ready. I know we are.”

“Why bring this up now?”

“Why not?”

“How long have you been thinking about this?”

“Does it matter?”

“You know, you can't answer my questions with more questions.”

“Why now? I don't know. It's more of a feeling, just kind of hitting me that we should talk about this.”

“Jo . . . you don't *get* feelings.”

“I know, I don't.

“I’m going to be a father,” I said. “A father. The word doesn’t fit right.”

“It will. You’ll make a wonderful father.”

“What will we name him?”

“And suppose it’s a her?”

“I guess we’ll see, right?”

“Huh, uh.”

“I love you, Jo.”

“I love you too.”

We said goodbye to Kyle soon after. It was a quick goodbye, nothing really awkward about it. Jo hugged him, I shook his hand. He had a hell of a grip for a bedridden balloon. Perhaps we left a bit too hastily, but I think all the talk of babies got us eager to get started making them. Feeling quite daring, just a bit scared and excited all

the same, half-way home we pulled over on some deserted stretch of highway. I looked at Jo and leaned over to her side, kissing her hard on the mouth. We started to breathe heavily, and I undid my seatbelt. “Let's go to the backseat,” she whispered.

“The backseat?”

“Yeah, it'll be fun. Like teenagers.”

I smiled at her, and then hoisted myself up through the crack between the driver's seat and the passenger's, not thinking that it would be a lot easier for me to get there from the outside. I felt Jo's hand reach for my butt, shoving me on through to the back. “Get over there, big boy,” she said.

I fell through, tumbling onto the seat. She quickly followed, and before I knew it, we had somehow gotten our jeans off and were going at it.

“This is crazy,” I said in between kisses. I lunged for her neck and closed my eyes. She reached down and touched herself while her hips buckled on top of mine.

“Shit,” she said. She flipped her head down and hovered just a centimeter above mine. “Thought a cop spotted us.” She giggled as I began nibbling on her ear.

Our Honda Accord did not have much room in the backseat, so it wasn't easy to have sex. After bumping her head one too many times against the car's ceiling and window, Jo wanted to switch positions.

“I think you need to be on top,” she said, wincing.

“First time I've ever heard you say that.”

“Yeah, right,” she said.

I got on top and looked down at her small face and shoulders. She closed her eyes, tilted her head back. I kissed her chin and inhaled the faint smell of perfume on her neck.

This woman was going to be the mother of my children, I announced silently to myself. I tried to picture Jo's face and mine mixed together in a child. A boy. The first one would be a boy. I was sure of it. The best of both of us in him. I tried to take her in all at once, not just look at her, but feel her presence. I suddenly felt overwhelmed with wanting to do good by her, although I wasn't quite sure what that meant. Jo used to be so scared of pregnancy, like it would somehow be the end of the world for her, a fate worse than death. How did her feelings change so fast? Maybe it's been happening all along, and I just didn't notice.

“Are you okay?” Jo said.

“Yes,” I said.

“You look sad. What's wrong?”

“Nothing,” I said. “I'm not sad. I'm as happy as I've ever been.”

We were silent for most of the car ride home, like the radio and the endless stream of headlights kept us under a spell. We got home late, exhausted, and Jo quickly disrobed and stepped in the shower. I asked if she wanted me to join her. She said no. I ordered pizza, and for the rest of the night we watched black and white movies on TV until falling asleep, as if the day had ended like any other.

Two months later, Kyle visited us at our home in Washington. He was as large as the first time we had met, but seemed to be in much better spirits. He told us many more stories about Indonesia. He was going back next spring and he invited Jo and I to come see him. We agreed, said it would be a wonderful idea. We never went.

When the baby was born a year later, Jo wrote Kyle telling him that we had

named our boy after me. He was a big kid, had my nose and her eyes, and she included a picture of him in the letter she sent.

From time to time, I thought about Kyle and dreamed up all kinds of crazy adventures about him in Indonesia. He was not an average man. He was not me. Jo used to tell me about a writer she read when she was in college. He wrote about ordinary people, ordinary men. I can't remember his name, but I guess I might be one of them, just an ordinary guy with an ordinary life. Sometimes, not often, but sometimes, I would ask myself why Jo ultimately picked ordinary over extraordinary. I don't come up with any answers, so I forget about it and go back to my life, my family. I'd like to think Kyle would at least be envious of me, no matter what he's done.

Of course, I don't tell this to Jo. I don't think she would like it.

TRANSIT

Then the heat was gone and all that is left to mark its passage is the controlled fury of the music itself. . . - Ralph Ellison

A bloated sun hangs low in the sky. Two men sit in a cocktail lounge overlooking the main runway of LaGuardia International Airport. They watch the heat trails from the planes as they take off and land from a hot lake of concrete below. Condensation leaks from their glasses. One of the men sits at the round table with his elbows split, his arms forming a pyramid as his head rests at the apex of his hands clasped together as if folded in prayer. He drinks from a dark brown glass of cola and Black Label whiskey. The rays of the sun, split by the venetian blinds from the lounge window, paint yellow lines across the man's black forehead. His feet rest flat on the ground, unlike those of the man sitting across from him, and for the moment, all he can think of is how hot it is.

John Birks Gillespie feels his trousers ride up revealing his argyle socks sucking the life out of his ankles. His feet dangle from the stool he sits on and he watches the taller man across from him stare out the window. He tugs on the coarse patch of hair under his bottom lip, lifting his glass filled now mostly with ice to his forehead and swipes across. People have called the two of them Diz N' Bird, but now he wonders how long the title will hold up. They had not played together in months. He actually had lost track of his friend, heard rumors piled on top of rumors of his death, like there was some kind of reward for being the first cat to pronounce Charlie Parker dead. But, here they are

by some strange dash of fate waiting for a flight to Toronto. He has read how the press had dubbed the concert as a great pastiche of bop's early days, Mingus hitting the radio circuit foretelling of Bird's coming out concert at Massey Hall. The whole thing is fucking silly, that's what it is, he thinks. In 1953, how could this thing, modern jazz, 'bop, whatever it's called, be claimed to have outlived its pedigree? Only if folks make it something more than it is. Sitting there, Diz feels misunderstood. Just hot, fat, and misunderstood. He props his feet onto the stool and tries to release the slack in his pants. He then clears his throat and swallows down a chunky mix of phlegm, saliva, and gin. Perhaps, he thinks, he is to share in the blame that will go round.

*

Morning. Tre is gone, I can hear Petra's breathing while she sleeps in his bed. It is hot in the apartment, like the walls sweat paint. Look out for her, Tre said to me. Keep her safe. She's slight in his white T-shirt and cut-off sweats. I want to get up off the couch, my home for the last week. What is it with Tre, taking in strays off the street? I've never asked, I have to depend on his word. The apartment is small, one room for the three of us. He asked us to keep it as clean as it can be while he is on the road for a month.

A bit of wet hangs from Petra's bottom lip. The room is flush in an amber shellac as a heavy light peers in from the window. I pull my chin to my chest and look at the worn spines of Tre's jazz records lined along the wall. I see everything in a sober light dancing in the quiet of the room. Ash dusts a cinder block shelf under the window sill as melted candles, cigarette lighters, and beer bottles rest upon it. A tea colored piss leaks

down from the upper left corner of the window and I could even make out the little stick-figure hieroglyphics that Petra had drawn in pencil along the wall behind Tre's bed. The remnants of our lives litter the floor—my checkered boxers and twenty-cent murder mysteries; Tre's sheet music and cleaning snake; Petra's mascara bottles and crinkled candy wrappers with their strange Cyrillic names.

On the couch, I remember my first night in the city a week ago, curled up behind a stairwell on the third floor of the Port Authority. Something howled at me that night, kept me awake, and all I could think of was the security of the sun. Stepping out of the bus terminal that morning, I meandered about midtown, a duffel bag slumped atop my shoulder, and I remember feeling choked by the taxi-cab exhaust. I was like a pinball, ramming and bouncing off veteran pedestrians who gave me irritated, sidelong glances for not having mastered the art of negotiating New York City sidewalk space. Secretaries surrounded me, stampeding in sneakers and tight black skirts. A homeless man who was missing half of his jaw screamed to passersby that Elvis was his long lost Martian brother. I walked up and then down Eighth Ave as street vendors sold fruit and bagels to execs in cobalt blue suits, everyone haggling in urgent tones and riffing on the Mets pitching staff.

Petra turns, scratches the small of her back, and then plants her face back into the pillow. I want to wake her, tell her we should go eat, but I don't have the energy--my body still and weighty, resists effort.

A week ago, I wandered into the Starlight Diner on Tenth where I first met Tre. I had two cups of coffee and a blueberry muffin, and I watched as the waiters bustled about serving oblong plates stacked skyscraper high with pancakes and eggs. I pulled the

money from the pockets and found that of the fifty dollars I had brought with me, I spent thirty on the bus ticket and five on the food. The lower part of my back ached. I itched all over. My hair was a greasy mess and hung wildly about my head. I desperately wanted to call my parents. I wanted to tell them that New York was just like the one from the movies—tall, distended, and mean.

It was on my second cup of black coffee when Tre sat down next to me. He wore a ruffled gray suit, the white of his shirt stained through with a mixture of cologne and sweat. We did not speak at first, instead traded glances at each other and the diner patrons. I noticed that he tapped his right foot incessantly and he would occasionally snap his fingers to some rhythm unavailable to anyone else. I thought he was a strange man at first as he could hardly keep still. Even his eating seemed to come second to whatever it was that was playing inside his head, as he timed spoonfuls of oatmeal in between his snaps and taps and shakes. A few times, he beat the counter-top with the edge of his knife, making a metallic ting that spread throughout the thick air of the restaurant. When he finally did take a break, thudding his elbows and hands on the counter as if having just expended an exhaustive amount of energy, he pulled out a handkerchief with a small red robin stitched into the corner and patted his brow.

There was something about the look of him that compelled me to talk. Perhaps it was his eyes which possessed a waywardness that I wanted to relate with. I got up the courage to ask if he was a musician, but he was reluctant to answer me straight, as if he were enrolled in the witness protection program and couldn't reconcile with his new identity. But, I kept at him. He said he was a trumpet player who had just gotten back from a two week tour of Boston and Rhode Island. He said that he lived downtown on the

East Side, a territory then unknown to me. He said that his girlfriend, Petra, was staying with him. He said that she sleeps all day and curses in a broken, Slavic tongue. He said that all that he loved, pointing to his head, was in there. He said he needed a roommate.

*

At LaGuardia Airport, Charlie Parker waits for a plane that will take him to what will later be called the greatest jazz concert ever performed. It is May 12, 1953. Less than two years from now he will die at the Manhattan Stanhope Hotel. Before his death, his daughter, Pree, will die from complications due to a congenital heart defect. A few months later, he will be admitted to Bellevue Hospital after attempting suicide. All of this is somehow known to him, the particulars obscure, but his fate drawn like a map on his skin. Like the Greek's Cassandra, he is unable to do anything about his future, instead resigning himself to what will come.

The heat of the room makes his silk Cortini shirt cling to his chest. He sees two white boys sitting at the bar who throw furtive smiles towards him. Beatnik punks is who they are. He knows that they are probably just some harmless fans, but something in their stares unsettles him. Yes, I am Charlie Parker, and yes, the question is, what the fuck am I doing at an airport like this? Didn't their mothers even teach them that it's not polite to stare? It's not like he ain't used to it, though. *Hey, look, it's Yardbird! Come one, come all, and see the world's greatest dope fiend, drunk, and nigger sax player! All you white kids, come see Bird a last time 'fore he flies off!*

He takes out a cigarette and begins smoking. With a few drags, he tongues the

inside of his mouth with the taste of tobacco. His worthy constituent sitting across from him has taken out a Cartier pen and he twirls it between his index and middle fingers like an airplane propeller.

“I need to give a call to Chan. I promised to call her when we got there, but figuring this delay, I don't want her to start freaking out.”

“Sure thing,” says Diz.

“How's it with you and Lorainne?”

“Oh, just fine. You know how it is. She yaps and yaps and I yap and yap, and you got these two crazies yapping, probably kill each other if we ain't careful.”

“Yeah,” he says in a throaty voice. “Okay.” He slowly gets off the stool. “I'll be back.”

“Okay,” says Diz as his cheeks balloon into his clown smile. But, he knows better. There will be no call to Chan. He's not even sure if speaking to his wife (is that what she is . . . can she really be called that?) is on Bird's mind. No, it's something what he's seen time and time again in the glistened crevices under his eye lids. Diz has already seen the slender lump in the breast pocket of his companion's sports coat to know what will happen. He thinks of how he might have to tell Granz, Bird's promoter, of how Charlie Parker died on his way to Toronto. Of all the things John Birks Gillespie wants to be remembered for, he sure as hell does not want to be the one on watch when Charlie Parker OD's.

He cannot remember a time when Bird was not like this. Even when they met back in K.C., there was word of his habit, like the two things could not ever be separated. Of course he was fast, a fast player, no denying, the baddest muthafucking sax player

around, which everyone knew, but how much of it was him and how much of it was the dope? They were doing new things with the music, molding it into something that couldn't be danced too, couldn't quite be understood at the time by the white folks; just too internalized, too foreign, too black.

Back during the forties, there was a war tax on fun. The “prohibitive entertainment tax” was what the government called it. If you danced at one of the halls, you were going to be taxed an extra twenty percent. Wartimes, insanity at home because of the insanity in Europe and the Far East, so they were forced to bring the whole thing closer towards the insides of a person, find some kind of channel for the energy. Maybe that's how it got there. Everyone knew the myths, the legends of bop's beginnings, instrumental virtuosity born in the after-hours of places like Dan Wall's chili house, Clarke Monroe's Uptown and Minton's. You could tell in the enunciation of notes, playing those early sides of “Grovin' High,” and “Shaw 'Nuff.” Diz sure knew because those notes were so close to his own. Together, they played the lines so similar, as if the music just poured out of them uninhibited. But, if you were to ask him, was it possible to separate things, how would he answer?

It comes eight years later, 1961, by way of a TV recording appearance. Dizzy Gillespie and Ralph J. Gleason on the show *Jazz Casual*. When Gleason asks him, Diz will pause and tilt his large bulbous head sweating underneath the hot lights of the studio. He will not answer for another few seconds, and it appears as though he will lose his train of thought. Viewers of the program might think that the man, usually so ebullient in front of a crowd, has been switched down a notch too reserved for the white man's liking. But, his mind is indeed lucid, calm with the thought of his friend who he once called the other

“half of his heart,” now dead six long years. The answer, he would think, is yes.

Man, when you gonna come down off that shit?

Oh, Diz. You know I ain't using nothing.

*

I awake to the sight of Petra taking a shower, her silhouette peering back at me behind the bathroom screen. I watch as she scrubs herself and runs water through her hair. My mouth has that pungent taste of after-sleep, so I get up and fill a glass with tap and drink it down in long, painful swallows. I try to clean the apartment, shuffle books here and there, corral stray socks and scraps of cellophane paper. There just isn't enough space for us, and I feel cramped, closed off.

She steps out from the bathroom divider in one of Tre's collared shirts, brushes by me to her side of the room smelling like talcum and rubbing alcohol. Her skin is the color of steamed shrimp and as she sits down on the bed, I catch a glimpse of her legs mottled with nicks and cigarette burns. Her hair seems painted onto her cheeks.

“Feeling better?” I say.

“Yes,” she says, a slight Slavic dip accenting the word. She stares at me for a few seconds and then, as if what her eyes find is not worthy of any more attention, she stoops over and searches the floor for something. I watch her as she curls one arm into her waist while the other rummages through our things, the hem of the shirt rising and revealing her Babbar underwear.

We had not spoken much since I arrived. In fact, this was the first time we were

alone together. Tre and Petra seemed almost inseparable when I met them, she following him to all his gigs and practice sessions at Pence's club. At the apartment, as far as I could make out, they rarely even talked, just laid in bed and stared endlessly into the ceiling. Now that he's gone, I feel uneasy at her presence.

“Smoke?” she asks. “I got these from some guys at Pence the other night.” She pulls out an opened pack of filters and waves it in front of me like candy.

“No, thanks,” I say.

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah.” She lights up and sits down across from me, waving her knees like a third grader. The smoke from her cigarette seems to stay on her like mist.

“I am missing him already,” she says.

“Yes,” I say. “He is a good man.”

“If you only really knew.”

Tre told me that Petra was once a model in Moldova, but after an escalator accident left her face looking like a waffle iron, she lived an ex-model, ex-pat life with a Hungarian ex-bodybuilder in Tokyo before moving to the States. There was something sinister in that past that she revealed only in sporadic sobs, and she would often mute her agony by pushing a small pink pillow with three embroidered geese into her face as if kissing it.

Before he left, Tre said that something was wrong with her. When she moved in a year ago, he said all she did was pot, pills and booze, but the last few months, she was getting high constantly from bangers, any salt she could find off the street. But, he must've known that something else was up. *Keep her safe, keep her out of trouble.*

“So,” I say.

“So,” she says, between drags. “Tre said, you go to college. Is that right?”

“Yeah, I’m done with it, though.”

“What are you doing here? Are you not going to work? Make big bucks?”

“I studied English literature. There’s not a lot of big bucks in books.”

“Ah, so you are a . . . what is word, intellectual? Like Kafka,” she says.

“I wouldn’t say that. I don’t know shit about a lot of things. Kinda why I’m out here. What about you? What’s your story?”

“Tre did not tell you?” she says, running a finger down the worm of flesh that splits her face.

“He told me his version. I want yours.”

“Perhaps you have not earned my trust, then. I do not do anything for free. I am not as giving as Tre.”

“Few are. I may not be here for too long, though. I could get up and leave tomorrow, today even.”

“You will not.”

“How would you know?” I say.

“Because . . . you are too curious. You still have not got the taste you want. You need to get close to danger, very close.”

“You’re probably right. There’s no plan other than just getting through the day. All I got is here in this apartment.”

She smiles and blows smoke over my left shoulder. “Where is Momma and Dadda?”

“Hey, fuck off. You don't know my life, you don't how it is.”

“Easy, easy. Chill out, College.”

“My name is not College,” I say.

“You must be careful. You are going to push and push. You will starve yourself, drink your body to a skeleton. Get near death.”

“I know that. Don't you think I know that?”

She smiles, ashes her cigarette, and kicks herself up towards the back of the bed, daring me to look at the space beneath her knees.

*

He stammered passed so many on his way to the men's room, checking their eyes for that hint of recognition. For some reason, Bird felt the need to remember the exact moment when he began to do this thing, a process of anticipating the consequences of his fame. He told this to Chan, his most recent wife, the night before he left for Toronto, and she laughed at him like no one had since K.C. Laughed at him like he deserved it, knock the great Charlie Parker off his high horse. It was the strangest thing that he actually missed her, then. Her face and the smoothness of the dips and valleys of her back, smooth like the bell of his horn, how he liked to caress her there when they made love. But, as close to him as she was at that moment, her impression was soon replaced by Doris and the rich umber of her voice, her skin black like a plum, that squat, hat-check girl on Fifty-second Street who he loved hard and fast late on into rain-soaked mornings. Then there was Geraldine and he remembered writing to her of the habit, how he felt love with her in

the sharing of a needle, laying back together, foolish and welcoming death like Romeo and Juliet. And of course, he finally thought of Rebecca, the first wife, so young the two of them, running around in their high-school blues until their wedding day in July '36, just children holding hands, wishing and dreaming of a way out of K.C.

He strode sure-footed into the restroom, each step pregnant with anticipation. The bathroom tiles possessed an ammonia stench, one strong enough to sear his nostrils and cause his eyes to water. Bird's eyes were always watering. A picture of him wandering the grounds of the Camarillo State Hospital in 1946 showed a man in a listless gaze, the two ends of his mouth turned upward into a joker's smile that perhaps even his mother would not have recognized. Who was this frail figure in the picture dressed in carpenter jeans buckled high up on a flannel shirt? Those eyes swooped down in the glistening of a varicose rot. Rolling up the left sleeve in the dimly lit stall, he traced with his finger a path across the rough grain of his skin. His teeth bit down hard on his leather belt as he tugged it tight round his arm. Put to use, finally, he emptied the contents of his pockets onto the white shelf of the commode—an aluminum bottle cap, cigarette lighter, pink party balloon, and handkerchief. Soon, he was cooking the brown powder dumped from the balloon in the bottle cap, using water from the toilet bowl, and tapping the syringe to shake out any bubbles. The spike into the worn wound of his arm, his thumb pushed on the plunger. There's a tight pinch. A rust-colored plume mushroomed in the syringe. It started as a sparkling rush at the back of his neck, deepening until everything in the room glowed hot. He sat on the toilet seat, his head hanging between his legs, and found that the skin of his arms had gone the color of bone.

*

We have left the apartment for jazz. There's a heat all around us and my eyes drift up to this blackberry skinned cat piping down on an ax, his high rainbow of notes so golden that all I can hear is their echo through the thick haze of the room. His fingers dance, a barrel chest heaves, and I look down at the sweat puddling at his feet. It's high noon at Pence, and the cats wind down a late practice before lunch. There's no stage, just the players and their playing with this current audience of three arranged around them. The bass moves fast in a stair step rattle of vibrating timbre. I turn my head towards Petra, who even in the non-light of this basement club imitates a ghost, her peroxide-tinted hair falling into her crescent-closed eyes, and I can't tell if she's conscious, half-conscious, or just swimming through nirvana, so I nudge her with my elbow and she mouths a frail 'yes' into the air. Somehow, the gentle see-saw swing of "K. C. Blues" morphs into a leap frog of blow, skin, and string, the trio trying to up-end each other in tempo. They stab at the notes, stretching them and pull them into uneven sections, and even through this I feel that I could at any minute join Petra in her golden sun. I know that the big guy and his crew will soon burn themselves out this way, how they've done all their jams this week—a fire extinguished as quickly as they started it.

There's silence, then Pence's cavernous claps are the only noise in the place. Sitting straight, I pull up a glass and let two ice cubes tumble into my mouth. The slick cold feels good against my throat. I join in trying to match Pence in volume. Petra lightly snores next to me.

"Bravo," I say. The word comes out half-way between a yawn and a burp. Pence throws me a look and then eyes the Sax player stepping down towards him.

“Atomic. Just fucking atomic. Even better than yesterday, man, fucking brilliant,” he says.

“Get those tongues out of my ass,” says the Sax player. He smiles and saunters over to the bar where Pence fixes a scotch for him. “I figure we're a bit sweet on that last run. You got carried away didn't you, Erik?” Sax nods at his drummer, a yeasty skeleton of a man with oily black hair tied tight in a pony tail behind his head. His stage name is Erik the Red on account of a to-do with the color—red tinted spectacles, red kettle, red sticks, fake Versace red shirts.

“Well, like I always say, I'm not the kind of pussy to scream when I get a bit wet, right? Gotta keep up with it, right, Sax? You can handle that sugar.”

“It's a straight blues, Red,” says Sax. “I shouldn't have to go sugar on that tune.”

“Bollocks, you're right. We'll wind it down next time,” he says. He slams out a quick beat across the skins before resting his sticks.

Sax sits down on an uneven stool in front of Pence, the wobbly thing aching and settling down as he unloads himself. When the big man moves, it's like the whole club moves around him. Of course, there's not a lot of room to begin with. Pence's place, Pence, is really a basement on Orchard Street in Chinatown. There's a sign on the wall behind the bar stating that it's unlawful to have more than thirty people in the club at one time, except that the number three is crossed out and a six is scratched in its place. Pence likes to brag that the Triads used to throat traitors on the exact same spot where he serves his watered-down whiskey. Somehow I get the feeling that he made that shit up when he opened the joint, figures it adds to the allure.

Petra bites down on my shoulder like a chipmunk. I wince and lift her head up

while I slither out from under her. I walk up to the bar and sit next to Sax. He's still sweating and Pence throws him a towel to wipe his glistening bald head. He has a silver ring on his pinkie the shape of an eagle's talon. Sax unbuttons the top two buttons from his white shirt and takes deliberate gulps from his drink, each swallow accompanied by an undulation of his gullet.

“You should fucking get AC in here, Pence,” he says.

“It's a basement joint, my man. There's no windows. Hence, no outside air. Hence, there's no AC.”

“Well, pipe it in from upstairs. You can do that, can't you?” says Sax.

“I don't own the upstairs, tricky.”

“Don't call me 'tricky,' ya pencil-necked pike. Hey, boys, we need to get our gigs at cooler joints, don'tcha think that?”

“Shut-up and drink. The only no-cut place in the city and you gents are complaining? You want AC, try the Blue Note or some other tourist attraction. 'Sides, where else you gonna get this character?”

“Character? You mean that dead chicken on the couch and the wake-the-dead stench of the lavatory? That kind of character is what you're talking?”

“Best acoustics in town. The last true jazz hole in the city.”

“Guess that's why we're here then,” says Sax. He pulls out Marlboro Lights and begins smoking. “I'm hungry. I wanna get some of that Middle Eastern vaginarian shit. What's that stuff called?”

“Falafel,” I say.

“Right, right. Falafel.” He turns his body towards me. “Don't mean to be a

forgetful fart, but what's your name again there, son?"

"Tre's girl calls me College. That's alright by me, I guess," I say.

"College, eh? Oookay. Sure thing, easy to remember." He points to his temples and says, "I got over a hundred tunes up in here but still can't remember the name of me old mum." Sax pats me on the back before relieving the stool. "C'mon fellas, let's take off."

The band leaves with a trail of smoke behind them and it's just the three of us now. I can feel Pence's look through the haze.

"You two ain't looking so tip-top, you're aware of that, aren't you? Every day since you been coming here with Tre's girl, you been looking more and more like her—kinda rancid looking."

"Yeah, I know," I say.

"You're a friend of Tre's, I'll give you that."

"You're a generous man for letting me hang here."

"Like fuck I am. Thing is, when Tre's on stage, it's hard to resist him as it is, and I mean hard like the nips of a dykie standing in a fish market, that kinda hard. Fact is, I don't know what to do with fucking Sylvia Plath over there but you keep up like her, and I'll tell Tre I got no choice. You two's are bad for business like this. In the least, man, you guys could float your own way with the booze if you're gonna be in here day in and day out."

"Look, I'm not trying to suck you off. I was just going off what Tre said, mi casa, su casa type thing. I don't got much by way of money, and the thing is, I don't quite know what I'm doing right now. Tre brought me here, told me that jazz will help me find what

I'm looking for.”

“Kid, I've seen the lot of you before. You're all the same. You leave your homes looking for the action, get to the city, fancy the pro's on the street, get to know the winos a bit. That right?”

“I've only seen the winos. Haven't talked to them. Yet.”

“You want my advice?”

“Not really.”

“Hehe, good answer. Don't give a shit attitude. Well, listen to me anyway, for fuck's sake. No doubt you can learn a bunch being here. Fellows like Tre don't come along too often. He's got the touch, might just save jazz as it is. When he blows that horn, it's like some kinda African voodoo. Downright nasty is what it is, like he's spraying his balls. Something in the black man's spirit, I guess. You know all that ancient chanting, the headdresses and shit from their voodoo days.”

“I don't understand,” I say.

“Look, let me lay it out for you. You play in this sandbox because you want what he's got. Am I right? You think it's some kind of freedom. It's cool. It's fucking exotic. Am I right? Well, take it from someone who's been here longer than you. The more you stay with Tre, the more likely it is you never gonna go home. Is that what you want? Of course, you say to yourself. But, listen to me . . . be a smart kid. Don't be like the rest. You'll regret it, I promise you.”

*

Yardbird returns to the lounge and sits across from Diz, whose own body begins to register the weight of his immobility, now stretching into its second hour waiting for a flight to Toronto. Diz knows what has happened. There is a fullness to Bird's face that was absent before, the steadying of his fingers and eyelids, how an underlying blush of red has returned to his lips.

“You, okay?” says Diz.

“Just fine,” Bird replies.

“Alright, we should probably check in soon, they may have found us something.”

“Fuck, man, last time we let Mingus handle this shit.”

“Ha, yeah, you got that right. So, you talked to Chan?”

“Oh, sure. She's good. You know, looking after Pree and Kim. It's hard, you know, Pree's so young, fragile. She gets sick all the time, but I just never got enough money for all the doctors she needs. Fucking medicines and treatments are killing me, man.”

“Yeah, I know how 'dem kids are. They got germs just crawling all over.”

“I try and do good by them. I want to. My Daddy wasn't around when I was young, just Momma hauling me and John around wherever. I remember what it was like, not having a father . . . and look at how it is now, right. History just repeats itself, even when you know how to change it, know that you got no choice but changing it.”

“Ain't that the truth. Say, I never met your mother before. Can you believe that? After all these years, I never met her?” says Diz.

“Well, we should rectify that, right? I tell you, next time we swing back to K.C., we'll have dinner sometime, all of us together.”

“Alright, then. Lets do it, man.”

“You know, Diz . . .”

“What's that?”

“I just wanted to say . . . that, well . . . I'm excited about this trip. I think this is gonna be good for me. Good for us.”

“Shit, it better be with all these hoops were jumping through. You wanna know something? Marciano is supposed to fight the same night we're playing. Did you know that?”

“I did not,” says Bird.

“Well, yeah, this great, great concert and all, how are they calling it, 'remembering bop' or some shit like that, it's on the same night as this championship fight. How's that for planning? I tell you, it seems like it's one thing after another.”

“It will be fine. They'll come to see us, don't you think, no matter what. We're Diz N' Bird, right?”

“Shaw 'Nuff!”

“Ha, ha, yes sir. Diz and Yardbird together again.”

“Together,” Diz says, smiling, his thumb and index finger pulling at the short strands of hair growing like weeds from under his lip.

*

This is transience I have fallen into. My parents have lived the good life. I am educated. Someday, I know I will be married, have children. You grow up in a suburb surrounded by Volvos and block parties, that's just what happens. What you're supposed to do. Even if you try to outrun it like a fox, somewhere along the line, it's gonna catch you. That end so clear, but the particulars obscure, like trying to see underwater.

I cradle Petra around her waist and tug her body onto the bed. She has been unconscious the whole ride home. A few times on the train, I had to check her pulse just to make sure she was still alive. I'm not sure what she took, but whatever she doped up put her out for the rest of the day. She rolls over onto her side and folds her left arm under her head to use as a pillow. A white spittle has developed around the corners of her mouth and for a second I am tempted to wipe it away with my index finger, but instead just pull off her half-heeled burgundy shoes and throw them onto the floor. I tip-toe over to the sink and wash my hands and face in warm water.

The air outside is salty of smoke and chorizo cooked from the street corner below. Cymbal cadence is still in my head from Pence, and so I prop myself through the apartment window and sit Indian-style on the fire escape, my scrawny knees protruding through the corroded metal slits. There is a breeze in the air and I lean back and try to absorb the quiet around me, catching only the rare hum of a passing car that cuts the silence.

I think back to that first meeting with Tre a week ago at the Starlight Diner on Tenth Ave and Thirty-Eighth Street. The memory is frayed like the sleeve of an old

sweater. There is feeling for sure, the heat from the cook's grill and the staccato splash of grease. Tre sits down next to me and I see his face without looking at him, the deep grooves under his eyes, the swoop of his jaw line. What is it with him and taking strays off the street?

At the diner, he says to me, “The fuck you staring at?”

“I'm sorry, I didn't even know I was.”

“Didn't your mother ever teach you it ain't polite to stare?”

“She did,” I say. “I guess I didn't learn the lesson too well.”

“Ha, well, neither did I, tell you the truth,” he says. He eases up. “Strange thing is, watching and listening, that's how you learn. You mimic people, find something that sticks out and you grab it and don't let go. Make it your own. Especially in my line of work.” He smiles and extends his hand. “Name's Tre. Tre Johnson.”

“Good to meet you,” I say.

“You're new to the city, right?”

“Yeah, how'd you guess?”

“Not so hard man, it's that look in your eyes, like you got ants in your draws. But, it's cool. Everyone goes through it when they get here. So, what's the mission? Girlfriend or maybe you come here looking for love? Perhaps you're on vacation.”

“No, none of that. I don't know what I'm doing here, honestly. Just kinda hanging out.”

“I hear you. Maybe you wanna be a hipster. Cool-cat. That kinda thing.”

“No, no,” I smile. “I don't even know what those are.”

“Alright, alright.” Silence, and then, “You know, you ever listen to much jazz?”

“Some, here and there. You're a player, right? What's your instrument?”

“Trumpet. Got myself a couple of groups and we hit town all over, sometimes play weddings and these Richie-Rich birthdays uptown. Times are tough, though. Most players gotta teach lessons to survive, but I been doing fine so far with commitments. Who knows, right? God giveth, God taketh, or as I like to say, God shits and then sometimes he don't.”

I smile and he smacks my shoulder hard, nearly ramming me over the counter. Tre begins to eat again, but instead of lapsing back into an internal rhythm, his body falls nearly still. I fidget in my seat and push the salt and pepper shakers into a dance of figure-eights. The chatter of old men fills the air, as they bark at the waiters and gnaw at their cheese blintzes.

“So, why don't you just pop the question, man? No need to dick around.”

“What are you talking about?” I say.

“You need a place to stay, I know you do. Young kid like you, you're gonna get your ass beat if you stay out on the streets for too long.”

“Fuck, I couldn't ask you . . .”

“Bullshit, all you gotta do is ask. Hell, I offer it to you anyway, since you just too shy.”

“Look, Tre, that's very nice and all, but – we just met . . .”

“Shut up, it's a done deal. 'Sides, I'm gonna need a babysitter for Petra while I'm gone.”

“Who? What? Where are you going?” I say.

A week later, and like a Polaroid in reverse, there is an encroachment of white eating

away at the memories. I hear kids throwing slang at each other on the street below. It is late in the afternoon, a redolent hush draped across everything. I feel a prickly tingle in the tips of my fingers. I am being hauled into sleep. There is hunger. There is heat.

Petra is awake in the apartment. I yell to her from the window's perch, "We need to eat."

"I know," she says. Pacing the room, she scratches the crown of her head and eases herself up against the wall next to the window in a lethargic motion. "Sorry to, how do you say, 'skitz' out on you at the club. Was Pence pissed?"

"Yeah, Pence was pissed, alright. I think he might not let us in next time."

"He's full of shit," she says. The words come out in a slow gurgle as she moves her chapped lips. "You don't think that Tre's got that man in his hand?"

"Tre can only do so much."

"Yes," she says. "He's looking out for us."

"You, maybe. I don't know about me. I'm new to all this. How can he trust me?"

I crawl my way back into the apartment and sit on the couch. She's still and silent against the wall.

"How much longer can you last like this, Petra? Don't you think you're going to die if you keep this up?"

"I'm already dead," she says. She pats her tummy and stands like a flamingo, one leg bent forward to support herself.

"There's still hope, you know. You can change things."

"Maybe I don't want change. Did you ever think that? You come here, you think you understand us, you understand Tre. This is nothing, College. You haven't seen how

we'll go.”

“Petra, I don't know what you're talking about.”

“Yes, you do,” she says. “I know that I am ugly. Disfigured.” She tugs at her cheeks. They stretch, nerve-less, like Play-Doe. “I know you stare at me. Everyone stares. It's no different than when I was on the runway in Paris or on a photo shoot in Milan. Men are curious. Foolish and curious. They enjoy my ugly face. I can see it without seeing them. They reveal everything with the eyes. They think I do not know what they look for. ”

“What is that?” I say.

“Escape.”

“That's stupid,” I say. “You don't know what you're talking about.”

“Escape. Escape. Escape,” she laughed. “Didn't you learn, College?”

Who spoke those first words? He sits next to me and soon I say, “So, what are you staring at?”

*

“Diz, let me tell you something. I'm going down hard. My days are numbered for sure.”

“Don't talk like that.”

“Just listen straight, okay? I need you to do me a favor,”

“What's that? 'Course, you gonna ask me for some money, I can't count on it

going where it should, am I right?” says Diz.

“No, it ain't that at all. I'm not gonna ask you for no bread.”

“What is it then? C'mon, spit it out.”

“You can't tell anyone. Not Chan or Doris, Mingus, no one,” says Bird.

“Yeah, yeah, 'course.”

“Here's the thing . . . I've gotten into some trouble and I may have to go under again.”

“What?”

“Yeah, I know how it sounds. But . . .”

“Go under? What the fuck you talking about?”

“Doctors at Bellevue already know, it's just a matter of when and how long.”

“What are you saying?”

“I'm saying that when it hits the newspapers that Charlie Parker has attempted suicide again, that Charlie Parker has lost all sense of himself, that Charlie Parker ain't nothing but a washed up, dope fiend, I don't want you to believe a word of it.”

“I wouldn't. You know I wouldn't believe it.”

“Someone is after me. Someone is after me and I think they could go after Chan and the kids, which is why I gotta go under for a bit.”

“Look here. I know they want you to go down, my man. They want you to go down in a great ball of flame, and you done bought into it. That's how it is . . . they want their gods tragic. Their heroes have to die, else they ain't gonna remember them. They gonna talk about you long after you're gone, and in the here and now, they gonna strip everything ya got. How you play, how you dress, how you talk, and when you dead, they

gonna take your music from you and make it their own. You and I know this is true, from the first time we started playing together, we know it. Our whole lives we've known it. But, what you're saying now . . . this, what you talking about, it just sounds crazy, even for you. Something's wrong here . . . ”

“Diz, have you ever heard of ----?”

*

Petra and I leave Tre's apartment. We walk a few blocks down Avenue A until we hit Tompkins Square Park. It is black out, the air sticky. Petra's hand is limp in mine. She straggles along behind me and I try and urge her to walk a bit faster. Soon, we sit down on a bench and hear the lone performance of a man playing saxophone. He is scraggly, amateurish. He could be homeless, but maybe not. He knows only a few lines from “Putting on the Ritz” and “Strangers in the Night,” and he weaves the two songs into a discordant soup. We watch him under the hood of a park lamp as fireflies circle around us. Petra sits close to me, her skin clammy and white.

“What do you think,” I say. “Should we tell Pence about him?”

“Ha, yes, of course. Let's go talk to him. Maybe he can teach me something.”

“I don't think so,” I say, gripping her hand tight.

“College, college. Isn't this what you want? See the wild life, like in a zoo.”

“I think we're just fine here.”

“You're no fun,” she says tossing her head back to an impossible angle.

“And you're fucked up.”

“So, are you,” she says in a hiss.

“Shut up, I know.”

I shake my head and pinch the gummy skin above my kneecap to try and keep me awake. I look over at Petra and she looks asleep again. All I feel is heat. I want to drink. I can taste it so bad already. Sweet and burning.

“He keeps me around.”

“What?” I say.

Is that Petra's voice?

“Tre. He keeps me around. The same is with you.”

“Petra, shut up,” I say, pushing her away from me. “You've been talking shit the whole night.”

“Don't you see? College, we are his weakness. You don't know because you don't sleep next to him, but I hear it in his voice when he dreams.”

“You're getting on my fucking nerves, you know that, just shut the hell up!”

“His whole life, his music, it is all about this fact. He helps those who are already dead.”

“Petra!”

“We are dead. Dead! It's too late for you, College. The moment you stepped into this life.”

“Shut up,” I say. I reach over and put a hand over her mouth. She doesn't move. She says nothing.

“You are dead.”

“Fuck,” I say and press down as hard as I can. We are on the bench, and I grab her close to me, pull her head to my chest. I kiss her and in one last breath whisper, “I know.”

*

Mimic thrushes the idea. No one really knows for sure if it was always already there or if something in the current itself, ricocheting from a nerve to another nerve, propagating down the arm into muscle and bone, creates the idea. Gives it shape, what critics might call the rhetorical charge bringing the fire that separates Miles from Monk. But, no matter. The idea then becomes rhythm. A cutting of the molecules of air creating an acute temporal collapse of space. The movement of air currents, what sound is. Such a simple thing, really. Begin by snapping fingers from the right hand creating a steady beat of one-two, one-two, one-two, and so on, into infinity. The band leader can look down at his shadow on the floor and see what's left from the wake of his movements. The shadow follows the idea, the human factor gives it context. Following the leader, enter the bass line. This is perhaps the most ancient part of the ritual, a thunderous calling of dead gods. How can this machine of wood and fiber recall the shaman's curse? The bass player's long fingers flutter up and down the neck of his instrument like spiders teasing silk webs. He tucks his bottom lip under his upper front teeth, a gesture now instinctual only after so many years of watching and mimicking his high school band teacher do the same thing. Out of this, there is this echo of his breathing as it becomes synchronized to the cadences of his playing. Listen closely and you can hear his brawny, glottal inhale each time he twists out a low tweed of notes.

And then the horn enters stage right. One can hear proof that this was once the angel's instrument, its ear-splitting squeal caught between something that may have been good at one time but now had fallen far from a state of pure grace. Devil's music indeed, the trumpeter accentuates his ambivalent sound, history always on his mind, and he plays

a lick as old as slave times but one that he has invented again and again and again during early morning practice sessions, with now an even different feeling in mind, a slightly lazier phrasing, the notes just a degree or two brighter. *Maybe* that is what art is—an embrace of limits if only to embellish, and yes, even in the rarest of moments, demolish them. History is always on the trumpet player's fingers. The notes are the same as King Oliver, Bunk Johnson, Buddy Bolden, Louis Armstrong, Captain Drye, Shorty Hall, Dizzy Gillespie, Roy Elridge, Miles Davis, Chet Baker, Wynton Marasalis, and all the nameless trumpeters history ignores. A great building up. Pain is alleviated in music. The academics might call it a conversation through the ages. Verisimilitude. That is how the score must proceed. An end without end, beginning without beginning. Go to the matter of finding it. Hold it close and never let it escape.

INVENTIONS

I. AUTOBIOGRAPHY

We start with facts.

Michael Dunleavy is thirty-four years old. He is not tall, but not short. He is thin, although since he turned thirty, he has noticed more and more a bulge at his waist line. He is balding at his temples and on the back of his head. He is not happy about this and he often catches himself staring into mirrors more than he would like, as if constant observation would somehow impede the receding of his hair.

More.

Dunleavy lives with his girlfriend, Mary Rivenballer, in a small apartment just outside of Allentown, PA. He has not always lived in Allentown. He moved there from Virginia to attend Lehigh University, first as an undergraduate and then as a graduate student of English literature. Now he is an adjunct instructor of freshman composition, a job that he and many other graduate students liken to slave labor. Since teaching two classes a semester doesn't cover all of his living expenses, Dunleavy hasn't always been a university-man. There have been stints, some interminably long for him, of odd jobs around town. He has worked in a physics lab; another time in a bagel deli. There was a very easy job at a laundry mat. For six months, he worked on a glossy magazine that

covered the town's fairs and antique festivals. He has had messenger jobs, packing jobs, moving jobs, secretary jobs, waiter jobs, and coffee-shop jobs. He is not like most of the other grads who have received parental grants to cover their expenses--Dunleavy sinks every nickel he earns into his education.

There is more, of course, much more, but for the sake of the story, let us go to the matter of plot.

It begins Wednesday night at the bar that Dunleavy and some of his grad friends frequent after teaching. It is the time of their weekly imbibe at the Happy Pod on 3rd street, not far from the U. All four have run afoul of the good drunk's golden ditty—beer then whiskey mighty risky, whiskey then beer, nothing to fear.

“The goddamn feminists are taking over the world,” said the beagle-eyed grad student named Martin Lentz. Dunleavy and the rest looked back at him waiting for a refinement of the statement.

“What are you crying about now, Lentz?” he said.

“You don't believe me? Just look at the cc¹ for next semester. It's Woolf and Wollstencraft, Friedan and Frida Kahlo. I'm telling you, man, it's all chick lit, and 'get off your back' theory.” Lentz was hunched over the table. Every time he finished a sentence, he slammed his Amstel Light against the table, rustling shot glasses and compare-and-contrast essays. “Check out the fall reading for freshman comp . . . whaddaya find? Only two writers with balls, Keuroac and Ellison.”

“And one of them was a homo, so his balls don't really count,” said Trevor Bladstone. Blad had been in the department the longest, eight years of adjuncting, nearly

1 Course catalog

exemplifying a model DMD² for the rest of the underlings.

“Alleged homo. There's never been any conclusive proof,” said Lentz.

“C'mon, everyone knows that Whitman, Ginsberg and those guys were, how should we say, fond? Yes, fond of male companionship.

“You are fucking crazy,” chimed in Burowski, his frown directed at Blad. If there was anyone to testify to Keuroac's straight-as-a-ruler sex-life, it was Burowski. He had the word EXISTENTIALISM tattooed on the back of his neck and wore cowboy boots when he taught Professor Frakes' recitations. He bragged about fucking almost everyone of the first year femmes. No one had read a word of his dissertation, yet he said that it was about the moments of spontaneous sublimity that arose in the works of D.H. Lawrence and Jack Kerouac. Every time he described it in this way, for some reason Dunleavy couldn't stop thinking of mold spores.

“Look, all I know is that we're being run out of this place. Our dicks are our liability.”

“You're drunk, Lentz. Let's go and play darts or something. Besides, I'm not in the mood tonight to get into another pointless argument with you.”

“What's eating him?” he said, turning towards Burowski.

“More like, who's not eating him, that's the issue for our boy, Professor Dunleavy.”

“Shut up, Blad,” said Dunleavy.

“He's in a grumpy mood . . . there's trouble in paradise.”

“Yeah, poor, poor Dunleavy, not getting any on the home front. What's a stout soldier like you gonna do if your manly needs aren't met? You can't keep up the good

fight with all those cretins in freshman comp if you're battling a case of blue balls," said Burowski.

"What about you, To-mas? Last I heard, sodomy was still illegal in this state. You're lucky she's of age, as they say."

"Agreed. At least you could have locked the fucking door, Tom. I got that image of your hairy ass-cheeks forever burned into my occipital lobe."

"Maybe Ginsberg and Oscar Wilde are more your style," barked Blad, smiling at Lentz.

"She said she locked the door, OK? How many times I gotta apologize?"

"Burowski, you're just lucky it was me and not Governor Frakes." Blad shook his head and waved his beer at him. "On the floor? The *floor*? We all gotta use that office, man."

"Hey, at least you didn't have to clean up after her. I think some junk got on the desk. No worries, though, I cleaned it all up after we were done--Pledge'd it good and clean."

"I'm going to ask the Gov for another room assignment," said Dunleavy.

"You let her spit?" said Lentz.

"There are no other offices. Everything's booked. This is the largest the class has ever been," said Blad.

"And three-fourths of them are chicks. We're a dying breed, my friends. The whole department is becoming pussified."

Dunleavy got up from the table feeling the beer hit his legs. "I'm gonna play some pool. You guys indulge him." They were right of course. Even Lentz. The department

was changing. That's all they did at the Pod. Drink and worry about the future. Tonight, he couldn't stop thinking about her. Dunleavy couldn't stop thinking about leaving his girlfriend.

Dunleavy lived with Rivenballer in the smallest apartment in the Villa, an enclave of Carter-era condos set aside for grads, renovated with anchor-peppered wallpaper and lead-free paint on cupboards. After leaving the Happy Pod a bit after midnight, he came home to apartment 1509 and slid through the door, scraping his chin against its frame. It could only be opened six-inches wide because of the stacks lining the walls on the inside of the apartment. It had been a long summer and the place smelled of their books. When he walked in, he heard the hum of Mary's computer, which due to its size, acted like a heater in the winter.

She was there, sitting cross-legged in flannel and sifting through a morass of charts and tables. He threw his brief-case on the floor, kicked off his shoes, and tried to sneak in a kiss behind her ear. It was after her non-reaction that he realized how instinctual this gesture was, two years of coming home to a woman who shared bed, bath, and body with him. Tonight, however, he asked himself if noticing the routine of his coming home was itself a routine? It felt like *deja-vu*, that he's come home a dozen times already and wondered about the routine of kissing his live-in girlfriend behind the ear. Routine triumphing over anything he would do or think. Routine gestures layered under routine thoughts.

She hadn't showered today, perhaps not the previous day or even the day before. There were crumpled brown bags piled next to her containing the remnants of various

sorts of deliveries. Unlike the English department, Mary's Earth Sciences and Climatology cadre provided their future professors with enough funding for endless amounts of MSG³-laced, local fare. She never took to his cooking and who could blame her, really-- Dunleavy long ago learned to relish staples of graduate or penitentiary cuisine, usually canned baked beans over toast served with a side of chilled apple slices.

“Hey,” she said. “How did things go today?”

“Oh, the usual. Kids did pretty well with Wycherley. I have to get them ready for Swift next week. Frakes can be ruthless with him, especially against the women in the class. I've noticed that he'll often pose a question when doing a reading of something like Pope's 'The Rape of the Lock' and hover over some poor sophomore like a vulture. His cheeks peel back and he gives that Grinch-like smile.”

Silence and then the clickity-clack of computer keys. “And who says chivalry is dead? I wouldn't feel too bad for those poor, defenseless maidens, sir knight. I bet they are more astute at handling themselves around the lecherous than you give them credit for.”

“Probably right,” Dunleavy said. “How are things here?”

“The same way when you left this morning,” she said. “There's just too much to do, not enough time to do it. And I can't ask for another extension.”

“You never know what the committee might say.”

“They will say, 'you've had three extensions already. What the fuck is your problem?’”

“Haven't they heard the academic credo-- *a deadline is only a deadline if the money runs dry.*”

3 Monosodium glutamate

“I never heard that one before.”

“Neither have I, but there should be one like that,” he smiled.

“Well, the money *is* almost gone. You know its just not the school that's pressuring us.”

“The DOE, Exxon, General Electric . . . c'mon, small beans. You can stand up to those suits.”

“Go ahead and mock. I wouldn't expect someone in the humanities to understand this kind of pressure,” she said.

“Don't start, please?” He collapsed into their only piece of non-book-shelf furniture, a ratty, hand-me-down love seat that let out a creaky moan at the weight of its occupant. “If anything, we naive, artsy, fartsy humanists feel even more pressure about funding, or the lack there-of. I mean, how often do we here it? *The world has gone to the utilitarians . . . there's no need for an understanding of art and literature in the face of starving children, AIDS, and nuclear armageddon.* Isn't that the usual line?”

She turned from her seat and faced him. This movement surprised him. “I'm sorry. I didn't mean to snap,” she said. He got a good look at her, her hair neatly tucked into a pony-tail, deep purple grooves under her eyes. The freckles dotting her nose barely stood out in the artificial light from the computer screen. “You know how hard the last few months have been.”

“I know,” he said. “It's been a rough year . . . and a very long day.”

“Yes,” she said. Her eyes dropped and she slowly returned back to her work. He noticed that she began to chew upon her hair and fold and unfold the corners of each document under her perusal. Dunleavy closed his eyes and imagined the time when these

movements and gestures were not so familiar. Things seemed to have changed far long ago in Dunleavy's mind, so long in fact, that he found it difficult to recognize Mary as the woman he fell in love with some two years past.

He met her at one of those humanities social functions where newborn grads were supposed to relish the opportunity to swim ever-so-closely with their senior faculty, those aged men and women of academia whose salty, tenured hides had long ago given up research for vacations in the Hamptons and lecture circuits stretching along California's San Fernando Valley. Inspired by decades of docs writing about the death of the traditional academy, the U's higher-ups began discussing the possibility of merging English, Theater, History, and Philosophy into an uber-department, one that would physically take form in the newly constructed Rogers Complex, a building that nearly rivaled the DOD⁴ in size and that was originally constructed for the Physics-Engineering division, who later abandoned it at its ground-breaking when a snooping lab-rat writing his dissertation on AGUTs⁵ exposed the inadequacy of its subterranean cylindrical walls for subatomic isolation. At the party, the running joke that was not, was how so many profs and would-be profs who couldn't tell a lepton from a neutrino, could be housed over an inert five-thousand ton particle accelerator and not feel a micro-volt of electricity in their veins.

Call it post-traumatic reversion. Maybe it was the residual electromagnetic field emanating from so many copper coils beneath their feet. Regardless of the explanation, the attendees of the party quartered the silvery dining room that was once an electron-gas chamber like seventh-graders at their first slow-dance. The over sixty-five crowd took

4 Department of Defense

5 Alternative Grand Unification Theories

one-side of the room, forty or so male professors huddled together talking-while-chewing havarti cheese and occupying a corner, while a gaggle of the female professoriate gawked across the way at them, staring nearly wide-eyed at their pale and gangly cohorts. The thirty and under crowd took up the other side, no one really talking and most of the students kicking themselves for not going to law school. Occasionally, a brave young soul darted to the other side and asked a question inspired by a professor's recent publication, inquiring about a topic he or she more than likely hadn't thought about in over a year. Confronted with befuddled silence from the professor, the student wandered back to friendlier territory, head tipped down in shame, no doubt the sight of which inspiring some other adventurer to charge forth and acquire proverbial approval from those faculty who undoubtedly gripped success and failure in their shriveled, flaxen fists.

Mary Rivenballer came to the party for the free food. Dunleavy spotted her out of the corner of his eye. She did not eat like most of the young doctoral students he had met during his first year at the U, that weight-conscious giraffe who devoured and feigned delight in piles upon piles of multi-hued lettuce, carrots, and tomatoes. Mary ate like a tiger feasting on fresh kill, hording the food nearly everyone ignored—skewered Swedish meatballs, cuts of salami and baked ham, deviled-eggs, and barbecued chicken wings. He knew that she was eying him as he looked upon the last apple-spiced mini-sausage. Who would prevail in this great contest for resources? Something in her enjoyment of the catering made him think that she was not of his kind. He called her hand, walked up to her and asked what department she was in, to which she responded, “we science people, we don't *do* this kind of bullshit.”

Bullshit, indeed. He got up off the couch and went to the bedroom. She would be

up for another two hours, perhaps three. Some nights, Mary didn't bother coming to bed, just crawled her way to the couch where he would find her softly snoring the next morning. She was in the home stretch of her doctoral research project, the end of a twenty year study that would include more air, ocean, and glacial data than any of the existing fifteen models of global climate. Mary signed-on during the project's last phase and worked her way up to project-lead among the other grads, a role she described as eventually landing her a footnote in a journal like *Nature*. Professors always kept their students on a short-leash and Mary was about as far as one could go. Ultimately, it was more about her graduating and becoming a real professor so that she would one day move to some welcoming school in Oklahoma or New Mexico and start her own research project, perhaps even a seventeenth climatory model.

For Dunleavy, the question was where he would be in these plans? Was he just fooling himself? Was it her work or was it her? And the most prescient question he always asked himself in the moment of lecture or faculty luncheon—is this fucking life for real? Perhaps it was really about him. He undressed and slipped into bed and watched Mary settle into the early morning.

Thursday.

His comp class winds down. He explains the details of the midterm essay, a five-page response on Plato's cave. They must answer if it is possible to experience external reality unhindered from limited sensory data. He knows the topic is beyond them, but who cares? They aren't training for the Pulitzer, the Nobel. All they have to use are three properly cited secondary texts in their paper.

Q&A ensues.

“Can we use the Internet?” one student asks.

“No, you cannot use the Internet. You cannot use a word, phrase, sentence or idea from any web page. The point of this assignment is to get you into the library . . . I know it's an absurd concept for you cosmonauts, but there is such a thing as a building called a 'library' that contains books made of paper and glue that have words written on them for you to read and study. Next question.”

“Can we use --”

“No, you cannot use the essay as one of your secondary sources. That is what we call a primary source. Your job is to find secondary sources. And before anyone else asks, no, the bibliographical page does not count towards your five-page page count. Nor does a title page. You must have five fully double-spaced pages, standard 12-point Times New Roman font. Don't give me a Courier font, don't give me San Serif. I don't want to see Wingdings or Webdings or Japanese or Ancient Greek. Not Latha, not Lucinda, not Georgia. Standard Times New Roman font in the English language in black ink, not pink, not green, not blue ink. And, yes, you must type your paper, not hand-write it. Are there any other questions?”

Dunleavy believes he's heard it all during the past three years of teaching freshman comp. He stares out at his students, most of them looking down at their notebooks with a Kafka-like pain tattooed upon their faces. They are expensively dressed, well groomed students, worldly and arrogant and apt to get away with what little they can when it comes to matters of arts and letters. Little do they know what he really thinks of them, these would-be leaders of America who would sell their mother's souls if it meant making them a million bucks. Rare to find a potential English major in the comps, the

few, the proud, they placed out of first-year drudgery, stepping head-long into their electives and core requirements. No, most of Dunleavy's students were future neocons, financiers, and engineers. He thinks they should all be exiled to Serbian labor camps to learn life's meanings; they'd receive more education there than writing some inane paper on the blatherings of a dead white guy writing about another crazy, dead, white guy.

“Okay, that's it, see you all next week. Get cracking.” He waits for them to leave and eventually heads to his next class.

Dunleavy lets the Frakes recitation out early. The professor, *Governor* is what the whole sick crew call him on account of his un-locatable, approximate British accent, finished a difficult unit on Jonathan Swift, and the undergrads were clearly exhausted. He decides to give them a break before starting up again Monday. A rare treat, his afternoon free, he heads down to the Pod for a few beers before heading home.

Arriving at the bar, a balloon of guilt rises in his throat. Every doctoral student knows that he or she should be in the library when not in the classroom. There is always more to read: more journals which feature endless permutations of the words 'culture,' 'society,' and 'representation'; more conference notes; more emails from professors declining to be interviewed; more Marx; more Derrida; more Foucault; more footnotes, more endnotes, more indexes.

It is fall outside. The days have grown cool. Dunleavy finds a booth and slides in for a drink. He is alone, save the bar tender. He soon finds that he has no interest in a home that has no interest in him. Mary will be there like the day before and the day before, her work taking up the entirety of his space. He has nothing of his own, except

So much for theory.

He notices a rise in his crotch. The memory inspires a flechette of electricity to run up through him. All of sudden, he finds that it is the body he desires, its heat and slickness. It is her detached form, not really her, not Mary Rivenballer born 1972 of burned-out doves, the squat girl of five who finds love in the weather one dramatic day when a thread of lightning reaches down from heaven to her backyard play-set and kisses her left cheek, but rather what Dunleavy wants is the fleshy matter of her, its sheer otherness to him, soft and smelling of pheromone, that mossy scent of population propagation.

He must relieve himself. The urge is maddening, innate, he can think only of expulsion. A flurry of movement, he dashes from his table and heads to the bathroom in the basement of the Happy Pod. He rushes inside, does not dare stop and notice the array of vulgarities stenciled on the walls. The door locks. Standing over the toilet, he unzips and pulls down his slacks and boxers, releasing the erection. He pumps and wrenches out the vision. His eyes are closed and yet he sees the upturned ass-cheeks of some unnamed woman. He presses the tip to her puckered flesh and goes as far down as the fantasy will allow.

It is over.

He wipes down the stall and washes up. This is what has become of Michael Dunleavy. Could he even say that the fantasy involved a woman? What he saw was a part of the body, but what did it matter—if that's what it takes for him to get excited, a piece of flesh cut off from the whole, could he even say that it was desire? What he must want

is something else, distant, perhaps even inhuman.

The air is sticky around him. He reaches for the back of his head, tugging on the curly brown hairs as if they are weeds. Light bleeds in; the Happy Pod bustles with patrons. Dunleavy sits down and tries to calm himself. It is then that he catches sight of Amala Egundu. She is also an adjunct at Lehaine. He thinks she might be a lesbian. She is the only black woman he has ever seen around campus who does not wear her hair in some sort of tribal curl. They have only spoken a few times at department meetings and mixers. She has certainly read more than him as she could talk about obscure critics from Ghana and the Douglas Islands as if she were related to them (who knew they even read Foucault over there!)

No, no, no, no.

She turns, smiles, and walks toward him. He dips his head, trying to dodge her recognition, but it is too late, they are already committed to an engagement, and so he returns eye contact and formally invites with his smile.

“Professor Dunleavy, how nice to see you here. I take it your cohorts will be arriving soon? Where are they--Martin Lentz, Trevor Bladstone, Thomas Burowksi?”

“Hi, Amala. No, just me tonight. Trying to keep the brain cell count in equilibrium, that kind of thing. And you?”

“Ah, no special reason. Girl's gotta get out once in a while, can't stay cooped up in the library or home for too long. May I?”

“Of course, sit down, sit down.”

Motherfucking shit. Of all the bad timing. Amala sits, taking in a petite breath to squeeze into the booth. She is not an unattractive woman by any measure. Ample thighs

and hips usually covered in a flowy spread of color, her plum-color skin glistens in the bar- light. Dunleavy must look a mess to her now, greasy-haired, a pathetic white guy pretending to know something about English Lit who jerks off in bathroom stalls and runs away from his live-in girlfriend as if she is a leper.

“So,” he says.

“So.”

“How is your teaching going? I hear you have one of the biggest electives in the department this year. What was the name of the course again?”

“Post-colonial Gothic Narratives: Exploring Otherness in Behn through Ellison.”

“That’s a mouthful. Only in an English Department can one find course titles like that.”

“Ha, that’s nothing. You should see what they got on the west coast. It’s a nightmare for registrars trying to cross-list ‘Postmodern Quantum Numerology: Waiting for Godel.’”

“You’re kidding. You have to be,” he says.

“I am. Thank God.”

“Hey, hey, be careful with the ‘G’ word. You could get black-listed in these parts.”

“I’ve already been.” She smiles and runs her index finger along the grain of her arm.

“C’mon, can’t be that bad, can it?”

“How would you really know?” she says.

“I guess I wouldn’t. But --”

“Let’s not go into that conversation.”

“What conversation?”

“The one we're not going to have involving the R-word.” She laughs. Dunleavy twists his mouth into something half-way between smile and grimace. “Anyway, in all seriousness, it's a double-edge sword teaching such a big class. I mean, I'm thrilled that these kids want to hear what I have to say about a few dead people, and considering I'm just an adjunct, it's a great thing for my career. But really, I think any of us would take quality over quantity. I don't know how I'm going to get to any of these students.” A pause, and then, “How is your writing, Michael?”

“Let's not go into that conversation.”

“C'mon, can't be that bad, can it?”

“I haven't written anything new in three months. I was supposed to finish last year, Amala. The dissertation committee is going to rescind my funding if I don't submit a second draft by the first.”

“Too many distractions, perhaps. Are you getting swept up in your teaching?”

“No, that's not the problem . . . I guess you could say my genres are mixing, the modern-day work epic clashing with the tragic romance.”

“A fair supposition, if you could really call what we do 'work'. Elaborate. You need more evidence to support your thesis.”

“You know what really gets me? She knows we're having problems, but that doesn't stop her from getting her research done. She's going to finish up before I am, and I've been at the game for much longer.”

“She's a weather-girl?”

“Yeah. Climatology.”

“C'mon, you and I both know the game is different when the tools involve differential equations and Bose-Einstein condensates.”

“That's physics. Mary studies weather.”

“Isn't it all the same in the end? Anyway, the point is, you shouldn't compare our work to theirs. We operate on a different sense of scale.”

“Yeah, I know. They have epochs where the temperature varies by eight degrees. We have a few decades of social satire, and then boom, head-long into epistolary novels and nineteenth century Gothic.”

“Why not just get away from her,” Amala says.

“Why do you think I'm here?”

“No, not circumnavigation. I mean, why don't you leave her. For good.”

“It's not that simple.”

“Sure it is. People do it all the time. I take it you don't have kids?”

“We don't.”

“Ah, then your job is even easier.”

“But . . . I don't think I can . . .”

“You hesitate. Which means, there are only two possibilities. Some part of you is still attached to your girlfriend. Or . . .”

“Or what?” Dunleavy says.

“Or . . . you're scared of change.”

“Scared? *Scared?* Ha, if *only* that we're the case.”

“Then, why don't you do it.”

“Do what?” he says.

“Leave her. Tell her your current arrangement isn't working, you'd like to renegotiate the terms of the relational contract. Just do it. Like Nike says. Tonight, even. Tell her tonight, Michael.”

“Tonight?”

“Yes, tonight.”

“I don't think so.”

“Coward.”

“Maybe I am.”

“You men, all the same when it comes down to it.”

“What does *that* mean?”

“Here's what you'll end up doing, I bet. You'll stretch things out, wait another three to four months all the while driving each other crazy. You'll invent all kinds of excuses for staying away from home . . . then you'll find some skinny young thing at a dive like this who will listen to your sorrows, she'll flutter her eyes, suck your dick whenever you want, and for a year you'll keep her around as the other woman until she gets fed up with your bullshit about why you won't stop seeing the name you call out in your sleep. How does that sound?”

“You have problems.”

“Yes, I do, but at least you have to admit it, that you're inclined to take the easy way out . . . which is to place the burden of being an adult about your relationships upon the women you're fucking. Like I said, you men, all the same. Living in a fantasy world.”

“That's not true. I love Mary, but things changed. She's changed.”

“Have you told her how you feel?”

“No, I --”

“Unbelievable.”

“I need to be sure of what I'm saying before I say it.”

“And what is it that you're saying. What is wrong with your relationship, Michael?”

“I don't know . . . it's hard to say really. I . . . just don't feel the same way,” says Dunleavy.

“It's funny, you know. What does Jeanette Winterson say? 'Very rarely is the beloved more than a shaping spirit for the lover's dreams . . . the pain is when the dreams change.’”

“I never read any of her work. She said that?”

“Yes. A smart lady, don't you think?” says Amala.

“Very smart. She's right . . . isn't that how it is? We have a preconceived notion of who our lovers should be. We don't even think of them as real people. They are fictions, apparitions of our dreams. And we do whatever we can to keep them unreal.”

“And then when they stray from our fantasies, which they inevitably do, we chisel into them. We mold, we cut away what we can. We write them as how we think they should be.”

“Interesting that you chose that word.”

“Write'?” says Amala.

“Yes. Do you think it's that way?”

“Absolutely. A kind of conjuring, in fact. Why else have writers been feared for so long? Because they bring forth a power that most people only use unconsciously.

Writers invent people and they do it all the time as part of their vocation. Whereas you and I, well, not you and I, but normal people, most people, they invent only when they crave.”

Dunleavy stops on that last word. He holds it in his mouth like he would a blossom of wine. *Crave*. Was that not what he was doing just a moment ago? It came over him all of sudden, the insatiable hunger for flesh. And how did he satisfy it? Not by the real thing. Not at all. The phantom was enough for him there in the bathroom stall. But, a phantom of what?

“Let me ask you this question – why is it that so many of us started out as writers?” says Amala.

He doesn't want to answer. He feels tired of talking. Why is she pushing him like this? They hardly know each other, and yet, they argue with poison-dipped spears. He responds, slowly, dragging the words across his teeth. “We're still writers I like to think. We just do a different kind of writing.”

“Yes, I agree, of course. We are analytical, where the creative writer is . . . what? Anti-analytical?”

“Creative writers describe the emotions that people are afraid of experiencing.”

“Interesting . . . I'm not sure I agree. Take Melville. Given all the man wrote, he didn't have a character who possessed an iota of feeling. Even Ahab, for all his demonic anger, he is no more a true character than you and I. He is a supposition, a puppet posed on one side of a debate.”

Dunleavy is being baited. He knows he should not play along. “You don't think it's strange to punish people who don't exist? How can you indict a character--a hocus

pocus act, second-cousin to Peter Rabbit--for not being real? The point is—they aren't real, and they aren't supposed to be. They are made to serve us.”

“The only one I'm indicting is Melville, the person, a flesh and blood human being. I indict him for being a flim-flam artist, a trickster on the order of tricksters in the worst of his very, very bad books, *the Confidence Man*.”

“Realism. Melville's realism, our realism. That's what we're talking about, isn't it?”

“I suppose so.”

“That writers, like Melville, should strive as much as they can to make their characters believable, each of them possessing a kernel of truth. Well, my first question is what version of realism are you talking?”

“Version?' The supreme one, the only one worth talking about. The reality you and I live in.”

“But, you admit, that we could in the least talk about two different types of realism.”

“Explain,” says Amala.

“Excuse me for the somewhat clumsy term, but the first is what I might call strong realism, or to paraphrase a writer like Elizabeth Costello, the realism of smelly underwear and runny noses.”

“I see where you're going.”

“The second, or what could be called weak realism, is the kind that purports to exist at a remove from reality, the one that trades minor details such as Napoleon's bad-breath for chronicling the sequence of events leading up to his exile.”

“This whole discussion needn't be so philosophical, Michael. Strong, weak, it doesn't matter. Perhaps what I'm really talking about is a matter of instinct. Tell me. When you pick up a novel, isn't instinct the first thing that hits you when you read? A central question of whether or not you believe in the world you are presented?”

“I don't know. It's difficult . . . at this point in my studies to designate what my first thoughts are when I read something. This is our job for God's sake and so much is unconscious. All of our training, the theory, the history, reading 'against the grain.' I suppose that I have much of my mind already made up about the book before I read it, regardless whether or not it's believable.”

“You and I are probably alike in this respect,” Amala says.

“And what of it anyway? Who says that a writer need be committed to realism? We both know that the notion itself is a fairly recent invention, two-hundred and fifty-years old, give or take a few decades. Homer certainly wasn't concerned with realism when he spoke of Achilles, Agammennon, all those surly creatures.”

“Homer didn't have novels in his time. He didn't even have paper. His characters lived in the minds of readers, free from the confines of the page. The Greeks believed in Achilles because he existed inside them, lived and breathed their air, their food and drink. When they passed along those lyrics, the speakers passed along something of themselves. A lot like sex, perhaps,” she says. “And back to where the conversation began.”

They smile. “It began with me talking about my relationship problems,” says Dunleavy.

“It began with us talking about the hobby-horse. School, work, career. 'I hear you have one of the biggest elective classes in the department this year.' Isn't that right?”

“To the decimal. How?”

“Something like a photographic memory, except I can only do it with spoken language. I can remember conversations from two weeks ago down to the article and preposition,” she says.

“Red card. Unfair. I forfeit the match here and now.”

“It's a useful trick, I admit, especially in our line of work.”

“No wonder men can't stand you,” he says. He realizes he can only speak in drunk spurts.

“Cheap shot, you bastard. And who said it was a man, anyway?” says Amala.

“You did.”

“I was talking about men, colloquially. Not personally. But, for your information, not that you should care . . . I've fucked plenty of men.”

Again. He looks at her mouth. The word echoes. *Fucked*. Past-tense. Does it carry future potential? A stirring below. Have they been flirting this whole time? Isn't this what his kind does? Trade punches over literary theories, climax when the two sides have used up all their allotted time. [Insert named of debate style]. How would he know anyway? He's been jerking off for so long . . . when was the last time he felt this kind of . . . heat? Fucked. Past-tense.

“It's late,” she says. He notices her weight on the table. She bifurcates her breasts with crossed arms. She is lovely. Those lazy eyes. He could see himself kissing her, drill his tongue into hers.

“Yes, it is.”

They bat silence between them--what to say, what to do.

“I’m sorry about your girlfriend,” says Amala. “I know it’s not an easy decision, but ultimately you have to do what’s best for you.”

“I know . . . but the question is . . . will things change? What if I make a mistake? We were so in-love once . . .”

“There is no permanence to anything . . . believe me when I say . . . it’s better to try something out and see how it feels than to make yourself miserable with complacency. The both of you might benefit from some distance. Real distance.”

“Yes, you’re right, of course.”

“And here I am, playing the part of cliché.” Amala withdraws.

“What? What do you mean?”

“The consoling black woman, soothing the heart of her troubled white master. Mammy, mistress, slave pussy-- take your pick.”

“I don’t even know what to say to that.”

“You don’t have to say anything. So, what’s next, professor?”

“I’m going to walk home.”

“Okay. I’ll see you back at headquarters then,” she says. “Look . . . I’m glad we talked.” She reaches across and grips his forearm. “Let’s not be strangers around town. Things are certainly lively when we’re around each other.”

“Deal,” he says. They stand up, attempt to shake the laziness from their bones, and walk out of the Pod.

Quiet on the street, it startles Dunleavy as he walks towards the Fayhee bridge. His mind leaps from word to word. Amala. Text and context. Mary. Rivenballer. Realism and anti-realism. What does it mean to create the person you desire? What of the reverse,

to desire and love your creation? He knows his brain is soaked through with whiskey. All this is semantic mumbo-jumbo that impresses freshman.

The south side stretches out before him, its lone street lamps illuminating the laundry mats, barber shops, and delis all closed for the night. In the distance, Allentown Steel rises above. Its spires emerge from enormous rusted vats. Tentacles of brown crisscross and weave around dead assembly belts. Running along the river, the entire structure is over a mile wide. It rises to the sky, a monolith of another era. The industry of industry. Dunleavy walks over the bridge and peers at the old factory. He cannot hear a sound, not from the river, not from passing cars, not even his footsteps.

He walks up to 1509. The apartment is still, silent as a book. No hum from the comp, he wonders if she is even there, maybe stepped out for some late night meal, the rare cancer stick craving. Dunleavy must reek. He wants to take a shower but finds that he can't summon the energy to make his way towards the bathroom. How long had he been at the Pod? He checks the bedroom alarm clock—midnight, on the dot. He and Amala had talked for nearly four hours.

Mary is there sleeping. Curled up on her side, her mouth creaked open, he suddenly feels the need to be close to her, feel her warmth. He pulls a lip of cover back and slides in, not even bothering to remove his drinking clothes. The clutch of sleep is upon him when he feels the nuzzle at his shoulder. She attaches herself, molding into a miniature of him. She smells sweet, of lotions and shampoo, which even in this not quite awake state, he thinks of their composition, what makes the sweet, sweet--boiled animal fats crossed with chemicals that have Stak Trek-like names.

“Dunleavy,” she whispers. He opens his eyes and sees she has not opened hers. “I

missed you. Thought you'd never be home.”

“I know,” he says, and again. “Let's go to sleep.”

UNIONTOWN

Fantasy

Before he came to Uniontown, he felt himself to be restless. The bus ride had stretched along the entire arm of Pennsylvania, its towns and cities, vast swaths of grassland, evergreens and pines blanketing distant hills, and it was only now that he decided his seat intolerable—every time he tried to straighten his back, he felt the seat absorb his movements, giving nothing, and then it snapping back and forcing him into a cupped position, his shoulders slumped forward and aching. There was an older man next to him, his mushroom-shaped head angled back, mouth agape, lightly snoring and occasionally mumbling a woman's name, Victoria, into the uninterested air. He couldn't quite position his own head to facilitate sleeping as well, either being only a few dangerous inches from the snoring man's shoulder, or upon resting against the window, he felt the staccato vibrations of the bus each time it rolled through a pot-hole or upended groove along the road.

Defeated, he opened a book from school, turned to a random page of the middle, and began reading. He had only cracked Beckon's *Prayer's and Other Pieces* a few weeks earlier, plumbing its depths so as to get a head-start for class, but now turning to

this new, unexplored section, he found its words troubling.

Is that bread which a little afore was corn in the ploughman's barn, meal in the miller's trough, flour in the baker's boulting-tub, and afterward tempered with a little water and baken of the wafer-man between a pair of hot printing-irons, come now suddenly through your charming into such dignity that it is 'the Lamb of God, that taketh away the sins of the world?'

Becon's railings against the Catholic Mass made him remember a story he had heard from his freshman-year roommate one sleepless night at school, who had in turn heard the tale from his cousin attending seminary in upstate New York. It was about a ten-year-old altar boy named Fairing Bernblott who attended St. Christopher's Catholic Church. Father Ignatius, the pastor of the church, had been complaining for months about rats, the vile creatures scurrying about the sanctuary at such impromptu moments of the holy liturgy. Fed up with such defilement, the priest went so far as to charge Bernblott with the special and maligned task of disposing of the rats, which, upon inspection, had infested much of the lower basins of the church (hiring a professional exterminator was out of the question, given that such a man would have to be sanctified before God in his effort to cleanse the church—and what would be the point, reasoned Father Ignatius, if such a man was never to return to mass?).

Unbeknownst to the priest however, Bernblott harbored a secret heritage of having descended from a long lost Jewish mother, the mysterious conversion to Catholicism occurring so far back in time that his present mother and father never really bothered to consider the liabilities of their family name, until, after learning of Bernblott's method of extermination, such an origin seemed to explain in the end, at least in the eyes of the Church, the perfect and wretched failing (ontologically, metaphysically) of his task.

It was a late Saturday evening, long after the last parishioner had left when Bernblott descended upon the church. Given his age, that he was old enough to wield a responsibility such as this, young enough to be absolutely incapable of carrying it out, he found no other way of getting rid of the rats other than luring them into traps which he had purchased at the local 7-Eleven near his home, five dollars for a twenty-count lot. He only needed bait, and in his haste to complete Father Ignatius's task by the next morning, he forgot to purchase any bread or crackers from the convenience store. Thus, upon walking into the Father Ignatius's chambers and eyeing the stacks of white trays with their tops sealed air-tight, he weighed the prospects of earthly and supernatural punishment if he utilized the dry wafers as bait. He decided that he really had no choice, and that in the end what mattered was his own sacrifice for the well-being of the church. He pulled one nearly weightless tray from the top shelf and held it up to his ear, rattling the sacred contents like he was shaking a tambourine.

Bernblott peered into the clear sheet of plastic covering the tray. There was a name etched into its transparent surface-- Faithful Services, Inc.. Ignoring the label, he ripped the lid open and put aside the small cups of sealed grape juice, finally pouring the brittle wafers into a make-shift pouch he had created with the bottom portion of his T-shirt in which he had pinched its ends, pulling them upwards and out. It was then that he set his traps with the food and scattered them about the sanctuary. Flashlight in hand, he then backed off to a corner and waited in complete darkness until he heard each trap snap shut.

Hours passed. Bernblott was not afraid of the dark, for he knew that the Lord's spirit was with him in his quest. Despite such faithful resolve however, the occasional

noise--a lethargic breeze rustling leaves, perhaps a wooden support beam settling into itself-- caused his body to tighten up. It was nearly morning when all of Bernblott's traps had been sprung. Flipping on the light, he rushed towards them and to his horror and astonishment, he saw sixteen dead rats, all with their necks broken, eyes and tongues protruding from their bloody orifices. Four traps, however, were empty.

He panicked at the thought of leaving even one rodent free to run around the church. Surely, Father Ignatius would chastise Bernblott if he stepped into one more pebble of rat waste. He retrieved another tray, and after emptying its contents, Bernblott setup a make shift observation post behind the tabernacle whereupon he would spy on exactly one trap to see how many rats he was dealing with. He positioned the eye of the flashlight beam, and then, after what seemed like another hour or two, he waited for one lone rat to step into view.

The particular creature that Bernblott discovered happened to fear neither light nor foe. It was a monstrous thing, larger and more lumbering than the others. Its tail seemed to sway in its wake and its whiskers ran like wires underneath its lanky claws. The traps were simply too small. For some reason in that instant, Bernblott felt compelled to name the beast, and the first thing to pop into his mind was Ruth, not of the Old Testament, but the baseball player who possessed perhaps the widest rear-end to ever cross home-plate. All of Ruth's body was covered in sewer-black fur except for its vampiric head and its sagging flanks which were dressed in white.

Bernblott watched Ruth march onto the trap and eat the body of the King of Kings, the guillotine-like trap blunted by the shear mass of the rat's haunches. In fact, despite blowing his cover and knocking his flashlight for several rolls, nothing caused the

rat to retreat back into the nooks of the church except for the loud cry of Father Ignatius's voice.

“Bernblott!” The priest switched on the ceiling lights, and upon discovering the shattered hosts, he rumbled down the center aisle, repeatedly yelling Bernblott's name into the empty air. Painfully aware that his time had come, he gambled on a kamikaze run to capture Ruth with his own hands. Bernblott dashed towards the rat, and when it darted underneath the door to the church basement, he tumbled face first into Father Ignatius's crotch with such a force that the two finally collapsed arm-in-arm in front of the altar.

“Boy, do you realize the extent of your misdeeds?” he said, after recovering. “The devil himself must have possessed you in perpetrating this stunt.”

“But, Father--,” said an exasperated Bernblott.

“It's not only your own feeble soul that is at stake here, Bernblott, but by allowing Satan to enter your heart, you may have contaminated the host, potentially preventing the whole of this parish from partaking of our Lord and Savior tomorrow. Just look at this mess,” he said. The priest gazed at the surrounding traps. “The smell of the blood of these grotesque creatures . . . intolerable.” Bernblott noticed a deep purple vein in Father Ignatius's forehead suddenly come to life. “Thankfully, there is still time. Hurry, son, we may be able to right the wrong that you have committed.”

“What do you mean, Father?”

“Child, it is not my own intervention that will save you, but our holy Church which thankfully for your sake, has just the guidelines for such a travesty as this.”

“But, Father, there is something I have to tell you. One of --”

“Hush, now, boy. We have no time to waste. Gather up all the bodies. We must

head for the parish kitchen and begin holy exhumation.”

He closed the book and yawned. His ass was falling asleep there in the bus seat, and so, he flexed first his right ass-cheek then the left one, wiggled his toes, and rotated each foot in a semi-circle. There was the slight sensation of numbness in his left foot and he wondered foolishly if it was actually true that letting an appendage remain asleep for too long, one risked it simply shriveling and falling off like a dead leaf.

Looking out the window, he saw that it would be dark soon. It had been a very long ride, and he estimated that he would not arrive at his aunt's house until well after seven. When he phoned her at school early this morning, he urged her not to go out of her way to prepare things, that she should not provide him any special treatment. Despite his protests however, he knew that she would be more than hospitable, perhaps even doting and concerned like a mother. It was something that he as of yet did not possess—Filipino hospitality.

He forgot the rest of his roommate's story. Bernblott's final plight was unknown. Of course, he did not believe a word of it-- the story was a hand-me-down, achieving almost a mythic status among the gullible idiots of his college. Nevertheless, in his mind there was something tangible about it, its absurdity acting as a kind of alibi. What he really wanted was to know the rest of it.

Reopening his book, he thumbed through a few more pages. The editor had collected nearly all of Beckon's writings of the early sixteenth century, a vast and well argued case against those who he referred to as “mass-mongers.”

It is directly against the verity and truth of Christ's natural body to be in more

places at once than in one, as he must be in an hundred thousand places at once, if your doctrine be true. A stinking sodomite or a wicked whoremonger, being dressed in his fool's coat, and standing at an altar with a little thin round cake in his hand, shall with these five words, Hoc est enim corpus meum, and with blowing and breathing upon the bread, make Christ, the King of glory, to come from the right hand of his Father, and to touch himself in the accidents of the little cake, till ye have eaten him.

In a footnote, he read a passage which once more made him hearken back to Bernblott.

The mouse's entrails must be drawn, and the portion of the sacrament that there remaineth, if the priest be squeamish to receive it, must reverently be laid up in the tabernacle, until it may naturally be consumed.

There he saw the boy and Father Ignatius slicing their rats, blood and filth covering their hands and faces, all in the name of saving the hosts. As the priest renounced Satan from each morsel of bread, he imagined seeing Bernblott seeing the survivor of who he nameth, the last and only rat, nibbling fast and furious upon a stack of wafers it had stolen in the confusion earlier. He hated anthropomorphisms, but for some reason, he imagined the rat named Ruth winking at Bernblott from the far corner of the church sanctuary, and then heading off along that great winding path leading to rat Nirvana. It would be in the sewer that Ruth would mate with a plump and virginal female named Victoria, and the two had many children and lived happily ever after.

All of this he had dreamed before the bus pulled into its last stop. The remaining six or seven passengers disembarked one by one, and the driver handed out their luggage underneath the storage compartment, finally shoving his suitcase into his awaiting arms when his turn came. He nearly dropped the thing onto his feet, but managed to wrestle it to the graveled ground. There was nothing around him but a thicket of trees. He looked down first and then up, as if after being relieved to be back on solid earth like a sailor, he needed to turn to the deities in the sky for thanks. A threat of rain was in the air. He whirled about looking for his aunt, feeling suddenly like his heart had risen to his throat,

until with a light tap upon his shoulder, he turned around and said hello to a short Filipina woman who very much looked like his long dead mother.

History

He found his aunt staring at him. Her left arm was hooked around her stomach while her right rested on the table. Her fingers caressed a cigarette, and she took slow drags from it, inhaling and exhaling slowly. At first, he couldn't tell what was smoke and what wasn't. There was just so much on the table--hot plates, bowls, and dishes seemingly edging each other out for attention. His aunt had placed her ashtray next to a brown saucer filled with steamed cabbage; to its right sat a casserole dish containing macaroni and chopped hot dog smothered in cheddar cheese. A plate of chicken adobo and mashed potatoes occupied the center, separating a clear crystal salad bowl filled with patches of iceberg lettuce and tomatoes from the pancit noodles anchoring the right side. There was a plate of buttered pagach bread covered in Saran wrap near her plate, and he wondered when would be the best time to swipe a piece of it. This was the food he grew up with, and although he had had it for so many days in the past, no one had ever combined it like she. Her hand tapped the cigarette and pulled it to her mouth for one last drag before mashing it into the tray. The skin of her hand was mottled dry and brown. His aunt picked up the ash tray and placed it on the counter to her right. He turned his eyes away from her when she saw him staring at the trails of smoke. Getting up from the chair, there was a pain in his lower back from the ten-hour bus ride.

“Where are you going?” she said.

“Just forgot to wash my hands.”

She smiled and eyed him walking to the sink. He turned on the faucet, rubbed soap into his hands, and then rinsed off.

“Everything looks great,” he said.

“I wasn't sure what to cook, so I threw a bunch of things together. Hope you're hungry.”

“I am,” he said. He wiped his hands with a Brawney paper towel, sat back down and pulled the chair towards him. He found himself scooted too close to the table, so he pushed back and then grabbed a napkin before placing it onto his lap. The fork that he picked up to begin eating did not belong to his aunt. He remembered its dull edges and dimpled prongs. The fork was old, older than him and perhaps older than her, but the other utensils were not, each of them possessing the plastic sheen of a recent Walmart purchase.

They started eating, and before long, he found his ears becoming acute to all the noises they made--their chewing, spoons and knives picked up and let down, how they organized cabbage into small piles near the edges of their plates. He cut the spiced meat from the chicken leg, first skewering it with the old fork, then cutting across perpendicular, slicing through quickly to bone until cutting it length wise. He heard a metallic bounce each time his knife cut through and hit the plate. His aunt drank from a bottle of Miller Draft, and he heard the slow gurgle of the beer when she hoisted it down from her mouth and rested it onto the table.

“Do you have any dirty clothes?” she said. “I was going to do laundry and I could just throw yours into the wash with mine.”

The word 'wash' came out sounding like 'warsh.' The last time he saw her was at the end of his sophomore year in high school. "No, I'm okay," he said. "All my stuff is clean." It occurred to him that he was not very hungry after all, but he found himself heaving mounds of pancit onto his plate anyway, along with two large scoops of macaroni. The only thing he really wanted was the pagach.

His aunt looked down at her food while she ate. She was not as old as she looked. Her hair was long and gray, worn tight into a pony tail. That evening, she had worn a faded blue, button-down cotton shirt wrinkled at the hems and rolled up at the sleeves. He remembered that she was never much for jewelry except perhaps the occasional pair of gold hoops or silver studs dotting her thin ear lobes. She was short, perhaps a hair above five feet, but something in the long years since they saw each other had made her seem shorter than that.

"You must be tired," she said, looking up.

"A little. I slept a bit on the bus."

"I remember taking that bus ride when I first came out here. It's the worst thing," she said. "Just when you think it's going to end, it stretches on for another hour and then another and then another." Her fork danced around the pancit, twirling the greasy noodles into a small mesh before lifting it up to her mouth.

"Yes," he said. The more he heard her speak, the more he recognized something strange in her voice. It was the intonations, different, not quite a country drawl, not quite anything he was used to. He remembered her difficulty with words that started with the letter 'f': 'first' sounding like 'pirst,' 'for' sounding like 'por.' "I may have to call school tomorrow. I think I straightened a lot of things out, but I didn't get in touch with a few of

my professors until the very last minute.”

“They'll understand,” she said.

“Yeah, I suppose they will. It probably doesn't matter, but I should try anyway.”

“How were your studies? What were you taking?”

“Mostly courses in my major. Early Modern French society. Post-Enlightenment Germany. There is this course on the philosophy of biology that I'm excited about. We're going to read all of Darwin's books.”

“Biology?”

“I never thought there was anything philosophical about it, but I guess there is.”

“I thought you were studying history.”

“It's just an elective. I think it'll be fun. The professor wrote this book about a non-creationist refutation of the theory of evolution. I just bought the paperback before I came out here.”

“As long as you like it.”

“I think I will, if they even offer it when I go back. I don't know. I might not even go back . . .”

“You're going . . . you're too young to . . . putres. I'm sorry, but just hearing you say . . .” His aunt looked at him, looked at his plate filled to the rim with food, then looked back at some point behind him. The skin under her eyes creased upward, causing her to look sad and angry in one long gaze.

“Yeah, I know.” He paused and then asked his aunt to remind him to call the attorney in the morning.

“Of course,” she said, and continued eating.

Later on, they finished off dinner in silence. She leaned against the white G.E. stove and smoked another cigarette before going to work on the dishes. He gestured to help her, but she shooed him out of the kitchen, out of the house even onto the porch. Sitting down on a wooden bench, he heard his aunt switch on a transistor radio. A Garth Brooks tune was on.

There was barely enough room on the porch for the bench and a metal-tubed recliner his grandpap used to sit in. He sat there for a few minutes, shivering occasionally, then finding himself standing up and dragging his feet against the grainy matting atop the floor boards. His loafers made a swishing sound, and he sensed that this was some ritual he was rehearsing, something more than *deja-vu* because he had actually been there before, exactly like this, shivering and unsure.

“What are you doing out there?” called his aunt.

“Nothing,” he yelled.

He let his body slip into his Grandpap's chair, it giving a little to support the long-lost weight. Propping up his right hand, he pretended to nurse the old man's tarnished mug. What did he used to call the whiskey he drank? Jolly juice. He could almost hear his grandpap's voice beaming through him, the fledging nine-year-old piano player.

“Why don't you get on in the house and practice that pi-ano? Play me a tune . . . some polka would be nice. You know how to play polka, don't you? 'Rambling Rose,' 'Blue Skirt Waltz,' I got this book of Patsy Kline tunes . . .” It was difficult to hear his voice now, the cadences and exact tonality lost to him over the years, but the feeling of mild annoyance at hearing the old man beckon him was still there, the words etched down in his gut.

His grandfather had died seven years ago, his grandmother three years before that. His mother died of cancer ten years ago, and his father, at fifty-three, died of a sudden heart attack two weeks ago. As for himself, he was too old to be an orphan at twenty, too young as well, he thought, to be without family. But, these were facts. Events rendered into history. He was well aware of the matter at hand, that he was old enough to be executor of his father's estate, which now included this house once belonging to his father's parents. He was not inheriting a great sum of wealth, but enough to warrant the hiring of an attorney. Two weeks ago, attorneys were fast-talking, court-room showmen on TV and in John Grisham movies. Now, he had his very own, a tall man with a distinguished sounding name-- "K. Gordon Ball III." He mouthed the lawyer's name silently to himself, pushing the air from his lips until it misted up before his face. He felt the weight of his shoes upon his feet, and for a brief moment, his stomach calmed and he was no longer afraid.

That night, he settled into a bed his aunt had prepared for him. She was downstairs watching Jay Leno utter bad jokes while he laid on his back, his hands resting upon his belly. He felt the slight rise and fall of his chest as he breathed, inhaling the stillness within the sheets under him. He closed his eyes and tried to sleep, shoes, pants and all from the bus ride still glued to him. He curled to one side of the bed and then a few seconds later rolled over to the other. There was dust on everything in the room and he felt himself slightly irritated that his aunt had not gotten around to cleaning the upstairs more sufficiently.

After drifting in and out of nothing that could be called sleep, he begun staring at

a dresser along the wall across from him. It was made out of red oak and was in badly need of a new finishing. Upon it, there were several silver spired boxes that once contained his grandmother's jewelry. He thought it strange that after his grandmother had died his father chose to pack away everything else of hers but these boxes. An old square alarm clock sat dormant next to the boxes, its hands stopped at twelve minutes after four. Stacked next to it was a few wooden blocks with blue letters and numbers embossed along their sides. These were surely some of his father's toys, and upon closer inspection he saw an abandoned Lincoln Log beam and a stack of pinochle cards puddled around the blocks. All of the items seemed out of time and place, like a time traveler had plucked them from a few stochastic points in the past and dumped them right there in front of him.

He got up off the bed and stared at himself in the mirror above the dresser. He scratched his head and then planted his face into his hands, pressing his fingers into his cheeks as if wiping away something from his skin. Staring at himself, all he could see was the almond-shape of his Filipino eyes, his mother's eyes. But, he was not just Filipino. Mestizo, rather. Mixed. What his friends in school teased him about—being a mutt. Yes, a mix of his father and mother for sure--his nose, her eyes, his lips, her skin—but a mutt of cultures as well, East and West. Occident and Orient.

When he left for college, he lost track of his aunt. He had heard that upon moving into his grandparents' house in Uniontown, she got a job in a sewing factory, but he never called her, nor she him. An unspoken agreement, perhaps, but they were so close before, the distance between foreign, unaccustomed. She had lived with him at home all through elementary and junior high, and although she was not his mother, not even the mother he

had imagined in his mind for so long, she was the closest thing to such a woman he would ever know. It was for this reason that he lamented what happened (or did not happen) at dinner. The whole thing did not go very well. He should have tried to put her more at ease, after all, he was the one who asked her to come out, to put on hold the life she had started in Uniontown.

Before he was sure of what he was doing, he walked down to see his aunt, into the small living room with the floor settling as he stepped. She flipped through the local TV stations as he approached.

“I had trouble sleeping,” he said. The hoarseness of his voice surprised him. She sat supine on an olive green Lazy Boy.

“Come, sit down,” she said. She was not smoking now and for some reason this did not put him at ease.

“What are you watching?”

“Nothing,” she said. She picked up the remote and turned down the volume two notches. “Nothing's good on at this hour. Do you want to try it?” she said, waving the remote control in front of him like it was a piece of candy.

“No thanks. I am terrible with that thing. My roommate at school calls me a remote Nazi.”

She smiled and threw him a furtive glance before fixating her eyes back on the TV. He was not sure if she understood what he meant.

They did not talk for a while.

A really long time it seemed to him.

Instead, their eyes and ears remained transfixed upon one commercial after

another. First Toyota SUV's, then a flurry of fast-food and detergent commercials, followed by two ads for medicines which seemed to gleefully proclaim their virulent side-effects rather than what ailments they were supposed to cure, the whole whirlwind finally topped off with an advertisement for something called 'www.Indemnity.com.'

The living room had not changed much since he was a boy. His aunt had cleaned it up a bit, but for the most part she left what his father had left, which was most of his grandparents' things. Everything seemed to be arranged around a large painting of Jesus—a worn yellow sofa, the two recliners, a beat-up end table. It was a small room, the exposed wooden ceiling hanging low with a broken fan at its center (he had never seen it work). Somehow, they were able to fit an upright piano. It stood silent in the corner, and he was fearful that if he stared too long it would bring back memories of his Grandpap.

The picture of Jesus was a half-portrait, its most striking feature being Jesus's bleeding heart surrounded in flames. His skin was soft and ghostly, his brown eyes staring straight out of the picture. The eyes seemed to follow anyone who stared into them. He felt himself look at the picture, sick, wanting and not wanting as the TV droned on in the background. He forced himself to shift his attention, and the TV perhaps, animated as it was, readily accepted. It reflected back an illusion, and he felt that he was not really there but there maybe ten years ago sitting on the couch, another trip to the old house with his father, the two fathers and the son watching TV, watching commercials, the carpet under the TV with the stain from that time ten years ago when he spilled as a child, like all children do, that can of Pepsi discoloring that mossy carpet, fumbling about, a child and his tears, hoping he didn't do anything wrong because his grandmother had just died, and the whole house, this old house and its smell a ragged specter. Jesus

presided over everything, and he was still scared.

He wanted to say something to her, anything, but he couldn't conjure the words, not even small talk.

“Do you have a girlfriend at school?” she said.

“No,” he said without looking at her.

“Why not? You're so handsome and --”

“Aunt Rose . . . there's no reason, it's just . . . well, I was busy, I am busy.”

“You're so young. You need to enjoy yourself.”

He laughed at this remark, but wasn't sure why he did. “I know I do,” he said.

“But, I can't think about that now. You know, I have --”

“It's okay,” she said. “But, some day. You'll find someone nice to take care of you. Your Mom and I always talked about you getting married. Having kids.”

‘Ha!’ he thought. ‘Take care of him?’ He didn't need anyone to take care of him. He didn't want anyone to take care of him.

A political talk show buzzed into view. He recognized it from late nights at school when he had finished his homework and there wasn't a soul around to hang out with. Four men and one woman, all of them pasty and wrinkled as prunes, sat and argued about the events of the day.

“Leave it here,” he said. “I like this show. The McLaughlin Group.”

“You do?”

“Yeah,” he said.

“Issue One: President Bush along with Vice President Cheney have both stated publicly that the United States will, if necessary, pursue a unilateral solution to Saddam

Hussein, possibly invading his country as early as March or April. As of this week, President Chirac of France and German Chancellor Schroder have both stated emphatically that they oppose any war with Iraq. Question: What kind of risk is the United States taking in ignoring the positions of its two biggest allies in the European Union? Can it afford, politically and economically to invade alone? To you . . . Eleanor Clift from Newsweek--'

“John, it's a huge risk and the U.S. has everything to lose. Donald Rumsfeld in stating just yesterday that France and Germany represent “Old Europe” has already lost much . . .”

The five soon erupted into a foreign policy debate, conservative pundits sitting on the right, liberals on the left, each one slinging insults like they had been born to do so. He sensed in his aunt a quiet frustration over hearing these people speak, so he told her to change the channel and she did. Before going back upstairs, he looked up at a set of picture frames hanging just above the TV. He first recognized himself in one of them, three or four years of age, his skin still possessing a baby-fat buoyancy. Soon enough, he felt his eyes glaze over at the sight of his mother and father sitting behind him, smiling. His father's parents stood farther still behind them, and he remembered this as his entire family back then on some improbable summer day of 1981, all gathered together for his grandparents' 50th wedding anniversary. The picture stayed with him for the rest of the night, late past when he left his aunt for bed. He thought it would make him too sad to dwell on a long faded memory now nothing more than a picture bereft of weight and depth, and so he tried to push it out of his mind, focus instead on the business of getting to sleep, but he found himself again restless in the room with the longing for his parents

and grandparents filling up his whole body.

Nothing, he felt, really belonged to him.

Morning came and he awoke hot, groggy. He curled his fingers to wipe the sleep from his eyes, and then, hopping off the bed, he opened up his suitcase and began rummaging through his things, throwing up tangles of shirts and socks. It surprised him when he finished emptying his suitcase how much he had been able to fit inside it. Along with three collared shirts, a pair of blue-jeans, khakis, gray slacks and several T-shirts, he had managed to pack most of his books from school. He scratched his forehead, feeling the warmth of the sun leak into the bedroom, and then let out a laugh, unexpected and as thick as the air—no wonder his suitcase had felt so heavy as he lugged it around the bus station at school—half of it was anchored down by books.

Out he pulled them, uniformly stacking them atop the oak dresser. He stared at their titles, horizontal and inert.

Marxism and the Meaning of History.

The Early Modern European Soul.

Darwin's Black Box.

The whole house was hot. He felt his skin sticky. It was early still, a few minutes after six. He cleaned up his things and then skipped downstairs to find his aunt seated and drinking coffee. Before flipping another page of the sports section, she turned and saw him standing in the stairwell.

“Good morning, anuk. You're up so early. What can I make you?”

“Oh, nothing. Just sit there, I'll get some cereal.”

“No, sit down. I’ll get it for you.”

“Come on, it’s no big deal, Aunt Rose,” he said. He walked past her and made his way to a dim enclosure adjacent to the stove. His grandmother always kept the cereal in the same place, atop a shelf near the door to the basement, and this was where he found an unopened box of Cheerios. She was not his grandmother, this short, old Filipina, but how could his aunt walk as she did, think as she did? He heard her let out a throaty cough. There was the smell of her cigarette smoke in the air.

“That’s a nasty cough,” she said. “I’m quitting, you know,” she said. He felt her smile upon him as he turned and sat down with the Cheerios. “It’s good that you never started.”

“Nope.” He smiled and dipped his spoon into the bowl. He did not really like Cheerios. Not enough crunch. Before long it would be like mush in milk. He wanted something more artificial. More sugar, more preservatives.

He ate, she read. Turning his head as he chewed, he peered through the window to his left. The air seemed to thin before his eyes, the sun burning off a once milky overcast. Looking past his aunt’s house, the odd faces of the surrounding houses stared back at him. Some of them had been painted over with a vanilla cream, replacing the chipped green paint of another era; others were remodeled with a vinyl-like siding. They were all one or two level duplexes erected on the sharp incline of a hill with one gnarled and distended road snaking around the homes, eventually opening up to First Street, which five or six miles long was the only way to get to anywhere else. It was less a neighborhood and more like a patchwork of structures that had sprung up like weeds in a garden. He remembered his father using that word to describe the place of his birth, ‘the

patch.'

"I'm going into town today," he said, sucking the spoon.

"You are? What for?"

"I don't know, walk around a bit. Get to know things. I think I might get a haircut."

"Oh, that's nice. Well, I can drive you in. I have some errands to run, I could drive you to a few places I've seen."

"If you don't mind, I wanted to go by myself."

"Are you sure? Why you don't want me to accompany you?"

"No, it's okay. I'll be fine. It looks like it'll be a nice day, nice to walk outside."

"Anuk, I don't want you to be by yourself, so soon since your father--"

"I'm not a child anymore, Aunt Rose. Don't call me that." She looked at him. He felt that his cereal was getting soggy.

"I'm sorry," she said. "It's hard you know?" The words tumbled out of her mouth slowly and naked. "I remember when we used to live together. You were still small when I saw you for the first time. You were scared of me, you stood behind your mom when you met me at the airport, and then as your dad drove us back home, you sat with me in the backseat. You fell asleep and put your head on my shoulder. Remember how I used to cook you spaghetti? It was your favorite food and I . . . I'm sorry," she said. She glared at him with that same look he saw earlier. "How are you going to get there?"

"I'll take the bus. I saw on the schedule that it makes stops downtown."

"Okay, well, I'll be here. I've got things to do. You can call me if you need to," she said.

“I know,” he said. “Aunt Rose?”

“Yes?”

“Thank you. And I'm sorry.”

“It's okay,” she said. “I understand.”

She did not, though. Nor did he.

Fiction

There was something noble in the enterprise of knowing the past, of acquiring the details, the particulars that have come to comprise and form the present.

He didn't always think this way.

It was during a freshmen survey on American history that he theorized how the notion of history itself was a degenerate thing. After all, was not the present the thing that truly mattered? Why bother in wallowing with what already happened, the past simply dead weight that needed to be flung overboard. The past was more a concept in the mind than anything real. But, like a changing wind current, it dawned on him sometime in his sophomore year that it was in fact the present that was subordinate to the past. A slave. For what, he thought, was the present but a series of infinite moments which had, in the act of experiencing them, already occurred? Truly, the present was nothing but an illusion. Love, death, comedy, war, romance—not unlike a long reel of film, the images spliced up and speeding along to give the sense of immediacy.

Knowing the past, however, was not an easy thing. Should one, following Leopold von Ranke, strive for a one and only true past? There was something teleological

in Ranke's *Historismus*, a progressive linear sequence of events under the eyes of God. Of course, it was Benjamin and Nietzsche that challenged such a naïve view. They charged of a German history only for the victors, the imperialism of Europe effectively erasing the organic truths of other peoples and nations. Accordingly, Friedrich Meinecke retorted with the declaration of barbaric relativism—how could one reconcile competing histories, how could one ever know anything if the tools by which one is to know are thrown into question?

All of this he pondered while on the bus ride through Uniontown. The bus rolled down Main Street, passed a boarded up Woolworth's department store, passed littered side streets and dilapidated hovels with spotty yellow walls and roofs stripped bare of shingles. Traffic lights blinked stop and go without cars at their beckoning, sidewalks devoid of pedestrians. There were a few apartment buildings standing seemingly proud, despite their classical architecture being caped in soot and grime. At one time, these were indeed beautiful buildings, pre-WWII, each having infinite variety in their designs. Roman and Gothic windows checkered their faces, often decorated in ornate trimmings of gargoyles and cherubs. He could tell that even the bricklayers had taken pride in their work—the skins of each building were composed of large white bricks or minute red ones, deep brown ones who possessed girth in their sides or skinny black ones which alone couldn't support much more than the weight of dog, never mind a whole building. Globes of mortar were splattered intentionally around some of their edges, others were neatly cleaned to precision. Still, many of these buildings were abandoned, row after row, empty. He had once heard of a phrase for a place such as this—a city of last things. First

the people passed, and then slowly with time, brick by brick, even the most sturdiest of structures crumbled to the earth and vanished.

It was a vision of decay, but the strange thing was that he couldn't fully believe it. Every time he felt as if he would give himself over to it, the city of last things beckoning him like a siren's call, he found a pattern of hope to thwart its power. Years ago, he had given up on religion, but here, when he faced a building on the verge of extinction, there was always a church that stood fearless in his way. Scores of them, sometimes two or three to a single block. They possessed even greater variety in their architecture, and he couldn't keep track of all the different varieties of Christian faith: Roman Catholic, Byzantine Catholic, Orthodox, Greek Orthodox, Protestant, New Protestant, Reformed, Newly Reformed Protestant, Evangelical, Methodist, Lutheran, Methodist Lutheran, Lutheran Methodist, Baptist, Baptist Evangelical, Reformed Evangelical, Freely Reformed Evangelical, Episcopalian, United, Unitarian, Unitarians United, Non-Denominational, Multi-Denominational, United Denominational.

The bus let him out at the corner of Main and Victory. The high-noon sun illuminated everything, allowing him to see even the layers of rust along the railroad tracks that bifurcated town. He walked two blocks before coming across the barbershop. His aunt had told him about it, she in turn having heard about it from her former boss at the factory. From the looks of it, Ragnu's had survived more than it disclosed. A dark green awning shielded much of its inside from onlookers. There was a barber's pole, the red, white, and blue stripes swirling round and round next to the steel door at its entrance, and as he walked in, the smell of leather and Aqua-Velva aftershave greeted him. He sat down quickly next to a sleeping man dressed in what looked like a turquoise bowling

shirt. The man awoke, turned his head towards him, and smiled, revealing a long gap between his upper front teeth.

“You're not a regular here, are you?” the man said.

“No. First time,” he said, trying to look at ease. He wished he had an umbrella, and that he had not sat so close.

“You're in for a treat then. Tony's the best there is. He'll fix you up good.”

“I'm sure he will.”

“Here, take one of these titty magazines, you know, get settled while you wait.”

“Okay,” he said. He looked down and saw the man hand him an old issue of *Penthouse* along with what seemed like last month's *Cosmopolitan*. He glared at the *Penthouse* for a few seconds, but then read over the list of articles on the cover of *Cosmo*. It promised ten ways to drive a man wild with desire.

“I know what you're thinking . . . what the hell is that lady's journal doing here in a man's barbershop? Well, Tony got this free subscription a couple of years ago. Turns out the guys read it more than the porn. Just between you and me, I like this here *Glamour*,” said the man in the bowling shirt, placing emphasis on the “-mour.” He jabbed at his arm with a folded issue of Tina Turner on the cover.

“Right,” he said, trying not to look the man in the eyes. “I'll take a look.”

He flipped the *Glamour* open, pretended to read, and then looked around the room. There was only one barber at work, and he guessed that this must be Tony. No one else was in the shop except for a long-legged man getting a cut. There was one other barber's chair, it currently occupied by a sleeping black cat. He then noticed that there was hair everywhere, most of it being some shade of gray. As for Tony, he was a

middled-aged man, balding with what few strands of hair he had left slicked back, his whole head smooth and shiny as a seal. He moved deliberately, snipping his shears with his left hand in an efficient rhythm, one-two, snip snip, one-two. For all the sounds made by the scissors, snip snip, snip snip, there didn't seem to be much actual hair being cut from the long-legged man's head. Tony cut at air, but he apparently was making enough progress to warrant a change of instruments as he waddled over to his cabinet, all the while muttering to himself a long string of words in Italian and English.

He watched the barber hands move about the man's head. Tony soon finished trimming and then pulled out a razor and shaving cream. He seemed to work effortlessly as he first applied a thick lather over the man's thin neck and sides of his face and then with a quick succession of strokes and gestures, he whisked away the white second skin, shaving with his left hand while his right wiped off the excess lather that built up on the blade. He felt that he was witnessing a small miracle watching Tony work—the swiftness, the precision—this was a man whose long years had given him something few would ever possess.

Tony coughed, inflated his cheeks, and sauntered over to a cup resting on his cabinet. He released a large yellow ball of saliva and mucus into the cup and then continued cleaning up the man in his chair. He finished shaving him and then dusted him off with talcum powder. The long-legged man stepped up from the chair and patted Tony on the back. The barber shook his hand, took a five-dollar bill, and begun brushing the hair off the chair. He dipped the razor blade he just used into a basin filled with a murky liquid and set it aside.

“Okay, who's next? You there, you come here to get haircut or look at naked

women?”

He felt Tony's stare upon him, and then looked down to find that the *Penthouse* was accidentally spread across his lap revealing to the world a blond woman's balloon-sized breasts.

“Go 'head, kid. You're up,” said the man next to him. “Tony don't like to wait.”

He scooped himself up from the leather chair and walked over to the barber's. He sat down and Tony draped a black tarp over him. “So,” he said. “What kind of haircut you want?”

“Just a trim. A little off all over.”

“Sure, sure,” he said. He wheeled back and picked up a pair of shears and a comb. “Don't get too many Chinese boys in here. You outta town or what?”

“I'm not Chinese. I'm Filipino.”

“Okay, okay. Don't get so ticked off. I didn't mean anything by it, no need to be so sensitive.”

“I'm not ticked off. I was just correcting--”

“Look, son, I'm not racist. You know old Tony's wife is from Vietnam? Bet, you didn't guess that, huh?”

“I'm not mad or anything . . . I think you've misunder--”

“You know, son, I fought in WWII?” he said. He started to clip away at his hair. There didn't seem to be any connection to the way his hands moved and what came out of his mouth. “I served this great country of ours over fifty years ago. Didn't do a whole lot, never saw combat. Just had base duty and all that. But, serve I did, and I'm proud of my time in the army. You learn a lot about yourself, about being a man.”

“Yes, I’m sure,” he said. He decided not to egg the man on—anything he said would inevitably be misconstrued.

“Well, you do. As much as they tell you to depend on your team, your brothers, family all that, it’s just you and God out there. That’s what being a man is about. Knowing it’s all you out there. No one’s gonna help you.”

“I know what you mean.”

“I bet you do. That look of yours. And I’m not making anything of your race or nothing. But, I think we both know what it’s like. Anyway, like I was saying, back when I was serving on base, my bunk mates called me ‘Duck,’ on account of . . .”

Tony launched into an elaborate tale about a practical joke his squad pulled on their first sergeant, something to do with a Vietnamese prostitute and the local water fowl. The thing was, he couldn’t hear his story, instead he remembered a half-dozen war movies he had seen and all the actors he knew that played soldiers. Here was a man giving him the real thing, a true war story, and yet all he could summon was a bunch of movies about war.

He left Ragnu’s soon after Tony finished cutting his hair. He tipped the barber five dollars over the cost of the cut, said goodbye to the man in the bowling shirt, and left wondering why exactly he had went there in the first place.

Realism

The day had grown long and stale. He walked evenly, not looking at anything in particular, passed several more churches and liquor stores. When he came to a clearing

set between a pair of warehouses, he stopped and looked at their stark brick walls. Painted on them, there was a faded yellow sign that read “Uniontown Shipping Co.” Looking down, he saw a stripped sedan at the back of the clearing, the outer husk of the car glimmering in the fast retreating sun. He picked up a smooth stone from the ground and flung it at the car. It hit hard against the steel crown of the windshield, and he followed its trajectory as it bounced against the wall chipping the brick under the “t” of the sign, until, finally, in a parabolic arc it returned like a boomerang to the target from which it emerged. His eyes locked onto the stone as it encroached faster and faster towards his forehead until it landed with sharp knock against his right temple.

The stone had hit in the same spot where as a child he accidentally bumped his head into the corner of the dinner table at his grandparents' house. He remembered that moment when crying, his father heaved him into the air and tried repeatedly to kiss away the pain. He felt blood leak from his head, forcing him to his knees, and he was overwhelmed with the knowledge that he would not be seeing his father for the rest of his life, however long or short it may be. His father's voice was already fading, and soon, like his mother's, it would be unrecoverable. He wished to know where they went, as if they were simply on a trip, that he could follow them, go where they went, angry too that they had left him, alone to walk among the dead things of the world, that they never told him of his history, that he would never get the chance to learn of things beyond himself, blamed them too for his faults, all of his inabilities and weaknesses, it was all coming now too fast, too furious, he could not keep it inside him any longer, the immense sadness he shielded (that he had shielded for so long) and perhaps because he was alone too in the clearing that he was able to do this, to just let go, let his anger and sadness

overwhelm him, not to worry if he was being dramatic or if he was playing up his crying for his audience or that he had not cried enough for them during the funeral because he knew all too well that death was something that couldn't be shared no matter how many people tried to assure him otherwise, and he didn't care about the record of his grief, how it appeared to others, if the evidence pointed to a cogent reality for the comfort of discomfort of others, because try as they may, they would never know it, understand it like him, the truth too strange and horrible and real for him to communicate, that all of his past was gone, yes, it was all coming out now, that his father's death was as much an internal struggle as it was an external one, how he projected the perception of normalcy and silent struggle, a contradiction true enough, but real, his tears felt real, his blood felt real, no contradiction there, how his knees ached from the pebbles on the ground, and he needed to get it out of him, finally, at the urging of others, yes, he was now speaking to his audience, that they would be forgiving of the record, its bathetic attempt to sway them, and perhaps what he only wanted was their acknowledgment and acceptance, despite all the flaws, they would know that he tried to get it out as best as he could, and he hoped there would be some measure of success in that effort, because what he learned finally was that some things were too big even for stories, too big for history as well, and that he would have to keep some things for himself, selfish as a child.