Utility

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Utility
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“I can’t write . . . simply from good intentions, wanting to set things right, make it all better; the energy will leak out of it, will end by meaning less than it says.”

- Adrienne Rich

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Introitus

I know exactly where my story starts—that is, the part that you or anyone else cares about. I even checked the time so I could have an anniversary: 4:18pm on January 20th, 2011. I was on my way home from my class in New Jersey when I heard about the preacher.

Again, that’s what you’ll care about, but I feel compelled to start just a little bit before that. Whatever, you can skip this part if you’d like.

I can’t say I ever knew exactly what “drear” meant, but whatever it is, this day was chock full of it. The morning started out cloudy, and the clouds descended toward us over the course of the entire day: by the time I left for class, they already seemed low enough to where I might be able to see them race across the sky if they weren’t such a uniformed mass of white and grey that gave them the appearance of just hanging there. But by the time class let out, I felt like I could clasp my hands over my head in a streamline and safely dive off the sidewalk in a reversal of gravity into the eternity of uniform white and grey nothingness.

And they kept getting even lower than that; once I got stuck in the traffic jam, I had nothing better to do than to notice the haze of cloud and the mist of rain slowly depress until the brake lights obfuscated into glowing blurs. All my attention bored into the pairs of bulbs. The glows slowly drifted away from me and slowly drifted back, and I went on staring. The haze continued to thicken, continually blurring, which forced me to lock my leer in even steadier. So steady, so locked, the latitude of my chin and longitude of my neck so unchanged, that the slight 5mph listing around a 10° turn caused my eyes to noticeably lull back and forth.
And then a switch went off.

The ensuing metronome of a yellow turn signal pulsed in the back of my eyes in an act of synesthesia.

“Chissus.” The attempted betrayal of the second commandment just came out as a hiss.

The yellow relented and a new pair of glowing, red blurs settled in front of me innocuously.

“Jesus Christ”; I annunciated this time. The thought storm came in such fast succession that it was all semi-simultaneous:

*Volume is only one part of traffic. It is only one part of an equation made up of three equal thirds. One fucking part of a three-fucking-part equation. If you take a train going 55mph—even if the train is 30 god-damned miles long with not even the slightest break between each train—the final car’s still going to be going the same-fucking-exact 55mph. Do you understand that? Stop blaming traffic on there being too many cars; in that analogy there is no delay, in spite of there being literally the maximum amount of possible fucking cars for a 30-mile-stretch. But then you close a lane for 500 ft on the Jersey Turnpike, BAM! an hour of traffic.*

*The thing is, you Volvo-driving piece of shit, is that the equation is v*n*t=x where v is the amount of cars in a given lane, n is the number of reactions (due to brakes being used, lanes being changed, etc.) and t is the natural delayed reaction time we all have as humans. (x is how long the traffic delay is, like duh obviously). See? You get a lot of cars together going the same speed, no problem. Once someone touches the brakes and the person behind them has a delayed reaction time to the brake pushing and the ensuing*
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re-acceleration, it effects a chain reaction of delayed reaction times to speeding back up, and all of those split seconds add up to ruining people’s days.

But by all means, swerve into the lane next to you the second it goes the slightest bit faster for the slightest window of time (because, you know, every other car is going to insta-pile into that lane, too, making it quickly the slower lane; do you really not realize that, you jizzcock?) because it might save you a millisecond. Don’t mind the fact that it only adds to the number of delayed reactions, thus making traffic worse before even taking into account the possibility of there being an accident.

A yellow globe faded in and out of my vision, even in the absence of the turn signal. The yelling was coming on . . .

Someone changing lanes over and over again in a traffic jam, getting one car closer at a time, makes me think of a 5-year-old Ricky Bobby yelling, “I wanna go fast!” Of course, it’s just funny to imagine them as cross-eyed Americans with Southern accents, but this isn’t a hick problem or an American problem. There’s no “they” in this situation. American, European, African, Christian, Muslim, Atheist, soccer mom, business man, Honda Civic-driver—it’s a “we” problem. A problem of humanity.

People spend an enormous amount of the time in the car, a lot of which is in traffic and 99.999% of us have put zero intelligent thought into the best way to handle this common circumstance. We just wanna go fast! And if a lane opens up, we’ll turn left sometimes!

Slaves to our instincts, common sense, truthiness, whatever you want to call it, but just about nobody has put a single fucking ounce of logical thought into something they put 15 hours a week into. Hell, the whole bloody lot of piss-kidneys called the human race could literally have the answer right the fuck in front of them in the form of
two boring paragraphs about trains and human reaction delay time and just say, “Fuck this! I don’t want to take the 10 seconds and 1st-level analytical thinking it takes to revolutionize how I act during the 750+ hours a year the average American spends in a car” and instead turn the volume all the way up on the drive-time radio to hear about how awesome mammary glands are and how it’s only natural to be willing to burn your ass with a cock-shaped brand only to get a crack at getting with a girl with child-bearing hips.

That’s about when the yelling started.
Arc 1
Sugaring Over Like a Sweet

I.I
“Here’s No Great Matter”

4:18pm: that’s when the report came on. I leaned in and turned up the radio to make sure I’d heard the lead-in correctly:

“. . . the body of the 62-year-old evangelical preacher and religious right activist was found in his own home by his wife this afternoon. The police said he had passed away this morning. The cause of death has not yet been determined.”

A short report but by the time the broadcaster had turned it over, I had my head tilted so close to my speaker that the tires on my right side were starting to drift. I had to jerk the wheel suddenly to the left to a blare of car horns. Construction on the RFK Bridge between Randall’s Island and Queens had reconfigured the lanes enough to throw off my autopilot. A barrier crept from the guardrail into my lane, eventually boxing it out completely. I looked over the 3-foot barrier to my right across the East River. Just a half beat longer of continuing in my straight course would’ve deposited me into the waters.

I let out a deep sigh with a shiver. I can’t always go left there, I thought. One of these days I’ll go straight.

I stopped at a liquor store on the other side of the bridge to pick up a bottle of wine for Evie to make the night extra special. I had already planned on having dinner for her when she got home to celebrate her first day at her new position. So marking the night as something special wouldn’t seem too suspicious.
At first I heard the fidgeting at the other side of the deadbolt, then the dark, 80-year-old wood door unjammed from the awkwardly-fitting doorframe.  

“Hello?” came her apprehensive call.  

“Just me!”  

Her high heels clicked and clonked and dragged across the swelling and waning woodwork of the floor; she passed by the kitchen archway in a frame of grey and black; her perfume gently wafted by in a tease of musk and citrus. She put her things down in our room before coming into the kitchen to continue the conversation.  

“Did I get your schedule wrong? I thought you had work.”  

She stood in the doorway—decidedly kempt. Dark hair of sheen and straightness; grey, short-sleeved, v-necked, cable-knitted sweater; black skirt; black-and-grey-threaded, opaque stockings; high heels; rouge lipstick.  

I looked at her with a grin. “I lied.”  

She pulled me toward her for a hug with an “mmmmmm!” She relaxed and bent her head down for a kiss. She tasted different with lipstick, and with high heels on she was just barely taller than me. The combination reminded me of kissing my mother goodbye when I was little, so I recoiled a bit once she went for tongue.  

I drew the curtain of sheening brown to look into her dark eyes. “Maybe you should take your heels off.”  

She tilted her head and pulled the heels off without taking her eyes off me. There was something about her perfume that got my attention. So consistent. Musk and citrus.
Traditional yet Fresh. We kissed a little longer before she asked if there was anything she could do to help.

“Nope, just a waiting game at this point. The wine’s already open so you can just start on that.”

She poured herself a glass (I didn’t drink) but took her eyes off of me as little as possible in the process. “I can’t believe you surprised me like this. You’re lucky Sammy was busy tonight, or I’d’a had other plans.”

I winked at her. “She lied, too.”

She laughed and grabbed the bottle, so she could move to the other room. She opened the swinging door to the dining room ass first, her pinstripe skirt squeezing her rump in a tight embrace. “And you set the table and have a little candle and everything!”

When it was all ready, I carried the dishes out to a cheer of “oooooooloool!”

“How did your first day go as a full-on, full-blown, full-time, fully-endowed saleswoman?” I put the dish down for a second to poke her in the boob.

She smiled back in faux annoyance, “Yeaaaah, not as glamorous as you try to make it sound, but I appreciate the pizzazz.”

I lost track of the rest of her answer. It was easier to pay attention to putting the exact right ratio of r:c (where r=amount of rice and c=amount of curry) on each plate, making sure the sprig of mint I put on top was proportionately sized and that it was placed perfectly off-center in the shallow bowl.

She wrapped up her summary of the day quickly and finished with “How was your day? What’d you do?”
I sat on my side of the table, reached my hand into the pocket that had my domino piece in it. I started to twirl the domino piece between my fingers. “Well, today’s when I have my class in Jersey.” She already knew that. I scrambled to shed my day in a satisfactory light. The domino piece twirled faster under the table between my fingers. “By the time I got back and cleaned up the dining room and my desk and all—” I waved my hand over to the other side of the room that doubled as my office; she nodded her head with a smile at this “—and cooked dinner, you were back.”

“And before class?”

From across the table, her fragrance still had a slight presence—a consistent, flawless presence—kinda like that slight lemon accent that’s the difference between homemade vinaigrette and Safeway brand.

“I did some work. A little less productive, though.” I gotta come up with a different phrase than just “some work.”

“Well, what work did you get done? Anything on the job front?”

I wasn’t coming up with anything to say. As I tried to think, my head crept from left to right and then slowly accelerated—right to left, left to right—as I gave in to having no response.

“Well, Jesus. Nothing’s gonna fall into your lap, and you know you have to build your résumé, make connections, give yourself a chance to work your projects into natural conversation.”

“I know, I know.” I took my hand off the domino and put both arms on the table to move toward sincerity. “I haven’t been urgent enough. I’ll bear down and send stuff out more regularly.”
I didn’t actually think the prospect was any less hopeless, but I had to at least put off disappointing Evie. I just had to keep buying time by being rejected by a few places.

She eased into a smile. “I’m sorry; I didn’t mean to jump down your throat.”

Evie devoured the citrus mint curry, enjoyed the merlot and gave a toast to both accomplishments. I was proud of the meal, but since I had no experience with drinking, the merlot choice was pretty much completely haphazard. So I just shrugged that part of the toast off as random variance.

The preacher did come up toward the end of dinner.

“Did you hear about Thomas Mayo?” she asked like she was asking, “boy, did you see that Mets game.”

“I did.” My left hand found its way back in my pocket to twirl the domino piece between its fingers. “Makes you wonder what grievous sin he had buried in his past for his god to justify taking him so young.”

“Well, ok, it’s hard to get too torn up over someone who would take something as tragic as the earthquakes in Japan as an opportunity to get on a soapbox about God’s vengeance.” She was trying not to get upset, and I appreciated her for that. “But I don’t find jokes about the dead all that funny, especially if you’re going to mock his beliefs.”

*His* god—I knew that’s what made the joke intolerable to her. At any rate, it deflected the conversation and no attention was called on how my line seemed premeditated—so I had my cake and ate it too on that one.
We brushed our teeth and were using mouthwash to get ready for bed. Evie went to squeeze past me toward the bedroom. I pinched her tush as she passed. She jumped sharply, turned around and pointed at her puffed out cheeks with a pseudo-stern look. A little glob of foam trickled down her chin either from being startled or trying to hold back laughter.

I followed her into the bedroom where she swished and squished the liquid in her mouth while putting some clutter in the hamper. I lightly caressed the small of her back so she wasn’t startled to find me behind her. She turned around, head cocked again trying to seem stern but a hint of a smile somehow manifest itself through the puffed cheeks and the swishing. I closed my eyes tight and puckered my lips for a kiss—fish lips at the end of my blowfish face, still swishing. I could tell she was reluctant but eventually I felt her kiss me back—or not so much kiss me as clumsily place her lips against mine, leave them there for long enough for it to feel like a romantic exchange, and then pull them away. I opened my eyes and could somehow tell through her cartooned features that she was holding back laughter. This made me have to hold back laughter. My inference that she was holding back laughter was confirmed when she started convulsing, then we had to run to the bathroom, me in front of her, little bits of foam dribbling and squirting out of my mouth as I went. I spit it out just in time to let out laughter over the sink. Evie couldn’t wait for me to move and sprayed the seafoam liquid over the back of my head, through my hair and down my neck.

“Oh shit I’m sorry!”
Through fits of laughter, I pulled up to kiss her. As a show of faux repulsion Evie leaned away and reluctantly took it, and then we went back to laughing.

I could never keep my mind on the task at hand whenever I was between Evie’s legs. There was always a song playing in my head whose general rhythm my tongue would follow as my mind wandered off. This time there was a more loving, intimate tone as I played along with the largo movement of a Bach concerto.

I thought about how uncomplicated a life built around Evie was—the engagement in due time, the marriage, just worrying about raising a good family. It was so much simpler than thinking about a life built around my career. With Evie, all I had to do was make sure I didn’t blow it.

An arpeggiated chord in the soundtrack playing in my head called for me to slide my tongue over half a measure, in a more even movement. Evie gave a moan at this that refocused my thoughts for a bit.

But my mind wandered again as I thought of the view over the RFK bridge—the long, orange reflection of the winter sun flickering with the current of the river—a Pentecostal presence as it set over Queens.

I can’t go left everytime. One of these days I’ll make the mistake for just that split second and go straight, t into the east river. I didn’t know if it’d be an oversight—like forgetting to cross a “t” or carry a one or zip my fly (I can’t always go left!)—or if it’d be on purpose. Or maybe it’d be somewhere in between.
A series of staccato notes in the soundtrack led me to whip my tongue in quick, doubletime procession. The moan that followed was more of a surprised one; her breathing had gotten heavy. She was close enough that I was able to keep my attention as she reached for my hand to hold. Then, her whole body tensed.

Usually afterwards she would be a bit restless with small bursts of energy, but that night she was drunk and satisfied, falling asleep midsentence with a smile on her face. I turned the bedside lamp off but kept my eyes open. Conversely, I’d usually be too tired to move or think, but that night my mind raced.

The news had come sooner than I’d expected. I hoped that wasn’t a problem, though I didn’t imagine it would be.

I wished I hadn’t changed my date with Babel that night, but there was nothing I could do about it at that point. Our system was a beauty in many ways, but there were obvious disadvantages to only being able to talk on IRC and only knowing which channel he’d be on once a week or so. For the first time, the cons were starting to show; for the first time, I was looking forward to talking to Babel.
1.2

Ethos: A Life Built around eV

From a meta-game perspective, there was something big going on here. After all, the reason that Robin Hood was such a big deal wasn’t because of the relative pennies he got from the rich—it was because of meta-game.

Alright, that’s skipping way too far ahead. Let’s start here. There’s three general directions you can go in with ethics:

1. Rely on sacred texts.
2. Do whatever seems right.
3. Think about it theoretically: what is actually the best way for me to act?

I’m not even going to bother with Number 1.

Number 2 leads people both to avoid taboos that are perfectly harmless, and to talk themselves into unethical things being okay—at least for them in that situation.

Number 3 basically boils down to game theory—whatever has the highest expected value is the best choice, which is basically utilitarianism. John Stuart Mill just happened to measure this (which is stupid to begin with) using “happiness” (whatever that means) as the value whose expectation should be maximized. You could just as well replace “happiness” with “the overall progress of society” (whatever that means) or “suffering avoided” (whatever that means), etc., and we’re still talking about the same thing—you’re a utilitarian who’s trying to maximize the expected value of something . . . you’re an expected value-ist (an eV-ist).

Should you kill people?

“No.”

Should you kill Hitler if given the opportunity?
“Of course. The world’s better off without Hitler.”

If someone is attacking you and your only means of self defense is to kill them, should you?

“Yes.”

If a super awesome person that the world can’t afford to lose is attacking you and you’re a scum bag, and your only means of self defense is to kill the super awesome person, should you?

“Erm.”

Well that’s besides the point anyway.

As the expected value of a particular act of homicide (the positive value of getting rid of someone less-than-desirable to society plus the negative value of homicide) gets closer and closer to a zero sum gain, people are going to play it safe. In other words, when a highly variant decision like killing someone isn’t *obviously* good, people generally go for the lower variance decision of not doing anything at all. Or in other other words, they don’t kill them. That’s besides the point too, though.

Immanuel Kant had thought this thing through a little deeper. He proposed a way of looking at it sort of like meta-game. But let’s first explain meta-game. Let’s say you’re playing someone in Rock Paper Scissors who plays rock 30% of the time, paper 30% of the time and scissors 40% of the time, then how frequently should you play rock? Your expected value is highest—that is, you most heavily exploit his weakness of playing scissors too frequently—when you play rock 100% of the time.

But you can’t play anything 100% of the time without expecting villain to readjust and start playing paper a ton, and then *you’ll* be getting exploited. The best
strategy then, is probably closer to like rock 45%, scissors 33% and paper 22%, or something like that. This—i.e. taking a lesser eV approach because doing the same thing 100% of the time might lead to readjustment—is called meta-game.

I guess an easier way to’ve explained this is to just say that even football teams who are by far most effective when throwing the ball, still run the ball quite a bit.

Kant thought of ethics in a similar way. If you can justify any given action in any given situation, then you might as well be justifying anyone doing that action in that situation. In other words, if you’re going to decide to make an exception for yourself to the rules, then you are deciding that it’s ok for everyone to make the same exception to that rule—if you don’t, then you are self-contradicting.

Hence, our evolutionary aversion to murder. It’s not necessarily because any one person’s murder would have an adverse effect on society, but because if we weren’t naturally programmed to not murder, then everyone would do it, and the human race would be unsustainable.

So the reason that Robin Hood was so scary wasn’t because of the relative pennies he got from the rich—it was because of meta-game. If one man can justify taking money from someone who’s wealthier than they are, even the second poorest man in the world is at risk of robbery.

Luckily, I don’t think my opponent’s going to readjust.

♠ ♠ ♠ ♠ ♠

Monday morning greeted me with a dream that I missed a test and failed it. These types of stress dreams were basically the only type I had, but this one made me think of the 3rd worst I’d felt in . . . but I was drifting in and out of my own thoughts halfway
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asleep and halfway awake and halfway stressed and halfway relieved knowing that my
stress was only the product of a reality I was slowly coming to realize was only a dreamt
reality and I drifted back into my own thoughts . . . in a movie before or something—a kid
gets his test back, and he got an F, yadda yadda yadda, he snaps and . . . but I was boring
myself because I swore I’d thought all these things before in one way or another though I
wasn’t certain it had been in this exact context and I wasn’t sure it’d lead to the same
conclusions so I was halfway curious at the same time and it was kinda like when you
have déjà vu and you’re doing an experiment with yourself to see if you can predict
what’s gonna happen next so I drifted back to caring about my own thoughts . . . an F in
my life, and I’ve never fired a gun. I was just a moderately successful grad student in one
of those fields where you need to be like one of the 1,000 best in the world to ever call
yourself . . . and I fell back asleep.

I finally woke up around noon to an empty bed—Evie was out of town on her first
big job of selling her company’s magazine to an upstate distributor. I didn’t have class
on Mondays and the restaurant was closed, so it was always a day where I had to make a
concerted effort to use my time wisely (whatever that means). Without the promise of
Evie coming home from work that night, it was even trickier.

Really, though, it was tough because I was finally having my rendezvous with
Babel that afternoon at 2pm. Little else seemed important in comparison, so I just bided
my time with coffee, breakfast and Sportscenter.

Then, at last, it was close enough to 2. Babel had decided the channel: #asp on
thundercity.net. I liked it—easy enough to not need to write it somewhere. I never
wanted to have to write it down. The motto was “Keep Shit Simple, spoony.” At the
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same time, though, I couldn’t forget it or else I’d miss the date, and we’d never have any idea how to contact each other ever again.

I got my remote IP address and signed in, greeted by this message:

![Image]

This caught me off guard—so much so that I wasn’t even relieved to see that Babel was in the channel. I immediately got a private message from him.

 `<ThePsycho_Babel>` que pasta
 `<ThePsycho_Babel>` thats mexican for what noodle
 `<spoony316>` WTF IS THIS PLACE?!?!
 `<ThePsycho_Babel>` haha, asp=alt.sex.passwords
 `<spoony316>` you fucking nuts?
 `<spoony316>` pick a different channel
 `<spoony316>` now!
 `<ThePsycho_Babel>` dude what are you on about
 `<ThePsycho_Babel>` this place is awesome
 `<spoony316>` i'm not having this conversation in a place that has to specify no rape
 `<spoony316>` and where one of the channel rules is no “non-porn”
 `<spoony316>` plz get us the fuck out of here
 `<spoony316>` now
 `<ThePsycho_Babel>` fine
 `<ThePsycho_Babel>` #swingers
 `<spoony316>` fine
 `<ThePsycho_Babel>` k thx bai

`* ThePsycho_Babel (IceChat7@wireless-128-62-32-179.public.utexas.edu) has left #ASP`

I joined #swingers and was immediately private messaged by Babel.

`ThePsycho_Babel slaps spoony316`
`<ThePsycho_Babel> u gay or osmething?`
`<spoony316> YOU RETARDED OR SOMETHING`
<ThePsycho_Babel> I CAN TALK IN ALL CAPS TOO
<ThePsycho_Babel> #asp=most hilarious in the world
<ThePsycho_Babel> #1 according to wikipedia
<ThePsycho_Babel> spoon
<ThePsycho_Babel> look me in the eyes and call wikipedia a liar and see what happens
<spoony316> how do you possibly think that the most likely hang out for pedophiles and snuff artists is a low profile meeting place
<ThePsycho_Babel> dude
<ThePsycho_Babel> you really
<ThePsycho_Babel> think
<ThePsycho_Babel> cops
<ThePsycho_Babel> spend time
<ThePsycho_Babel> on fucking irc?!!?
<ThePsycho_Babel> Imao
<spoony316> idk what cops do and im not fucking around with finding out
<ThePsycho_Babel> w/e
<spoony316> anyway
<ThePsycho_Babel> whats the deal with cancelling wednesday?
<spoony316> my bad about that
<spoony316> the girly had her first day with her new job
<spoony316> wanted to try and make it special with dinner and candles and sex and all
<ThePsycho_Babel> lol what
<ThePsycho_Babel> shes gettin promotions and shit and your hangin back and cookin dinner?
<ThePsycho_Babel> ^ dynamics at spoonys place imo
<spoony316> lol

There was a pause.
<ThePsycho_Babel> question
<sponny316> what's up
<ThePsycho_Babel> the 316 at the end of your name...?
<sponny316> lol i came up with this sn way back when i was religious, just never felt like changing it
<ThePsycho_Babel> you realize you choose your sn every time you sign into irc right?
<sponny316> lol yeah whatever
<sponny316> i like it
<sponny316> has a nice je ne se qua or however you say that
<ThePsycho_Babel> lol right
<ThePsycho_Babel> john 3:16
<ThePsycho_Babel> isn't that the one where it's like god so loved us that he managed to forgive us for eating a fruit 4000 years earlier by turning himself into a human and sacrificing himself to himself
<ThePsycho_Babel> which will save you from him torturing you for eternity so long as you believe in the fact that that's what he did without any evidence for it because it happened in iron age palestine where there was basically no such thing as accurate historicity and like 10 people a day were outing themselves as prophets and messiahs
<ThePsycho_Babel> and jesus rose from the dead to become zombie jesus to make sure that you give up your brain to believe all that hoopla so that he has nothing to feast on when he comes back
<sponny316> hahaha, something like that
<sponny316> i think that last part comes later though :)<n
<ThePsycho_Babel> loljesus
<ThePsycho_Babel> still get a kick out of the fact that the guy from the first job was so yayjesus yet bought into all that eastern herbal medicine crap
<sponny316> pretty sure that type of person can be talked into believing anything
<ThePsycho_Babel> yeah like what do you want god?
<ThePsycho_Babel> niggahhhhhhhhh, you need to chop the tip of your penis off
<ThePsycho_Babel> right away god
<ThePsycho_Babel> like duh its not racist when god says it though
<ThePsycho_Babel> not cause hes black
<ThePsycho_Babel> but cause he had all those h's at the end
<ThePsycho_Babel> god likes to hedge his bets like that
<sponny316> lol what
<sponny316> are
<sponny316> you
<sponny316> on
<sponny316> about
<sponny316> anyway, i like to think of it like his taking that pill represents his lack of faith in jesus medicine, so really it was his lack of faith that killed him
<ThePsycho_Babel> woah dude
<ThePsycho_Babel> deep
<ThePsycho_Babel> in before his coworkers go on air and actually say that's why he died young
<sponny316> awesome
<ThePsycho_Babel> anyway
<sponny316> yeah anyway
<ThePsycho_Babel> you think of anyone for the second job?
<sponny316> yeah
<ThePsycho_Babel> what're you goin with?
<sponny316> i thought of someone
<ThePsycho_Babel> lol
<ThePsycho_Babel> dude
<ThePsycho_Babel> who is this someone?
<sponny316> i don't wanna be given this detailed of stuff away
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<ThePsycho_Babel> im not lookin for an address
<ThePsycho_Babel> just wanna make sure were on the same page before we go blowin off
some guys head cause he smells funny
<spony316> fine, goin with your lobbyist idea
<ThePsycho_Babel> sounds good
<ThePsycho_Babel> your a bit on edge today
<ThePsycho_Babel> other plan come through or something? ;)
<spony316> ha, no [I lied.]

People like T.S. Eliot were scared shitless that people were going to start growing
up not reading Shakespeare and the *Odyssey* and such. As if there were any time ever
when these things were read for pleasure by a large portion of the population. If
anything, Eliot was born in the time period where it was actually becoming common for
people to be literate.

Well, now people can read, and they’re doing so more than ever before in the
history of human civilization. It just so happens to be paperbacks, magazines and tons of
shit on the internet—just what any other generation would’ve chosen to read. While T.S.
Eliot was bitching and moaning about how low society is becoming down in midtown at
his cake and tea parties, Langston Hughes was snapping his fingers to that low, low art
form called jazz and floating across the brick rooftops of Harlem.

And now jazz is like the most sophisticated thing anyone could listen to these
days, and classic cinema is for the pretentious—meanwhile everyone else is listening to
snap music and watching anything with skull-crushingly awesome graphics. In before
*Die Hard* is for the snobs.
Honestly, just kick back and enjoy the weird incredibility that is the internet—YouTube and RedTube, Facebook and 4chan, online Deal or No Deal and online poker. There’s something for all the degenerate, friendless fappers of the world.

That Monday was a long day of the future’s high class entertainment for me. It was mostly catching up on the Chive’s TGif’s and half a season’s worth of Family Guy on Hulu—of course not without the sporadic Wikipedia stream of consciousnesses. By the time I’d gotten sick of this, it was going on 3am. I closed out of one of the two Stud Hi/Lo tables I was on, but I couldn’t bring myself to close out of the one where I had position on a terrible player. Waiting a minute between hands had me bored without anything else to split my attention, but I still couldn’t bring myself to close out of it.

After a few hands I started to try to think up something to do.

Masturbating always seemed like a good way to get over the hump from bored to in bed. I wasn’t horny, but I had the excuse of my girlfriend being away, so meh. But for as long as I could remember (so probably since my very first hard on), my mind had a taboo regarding sexual gratification. At first it kept me from doing anything remotely sexual before marriage, then little-by-little I compromised that and just resolved to not have sex until marriage, then when I did have sex before marriage I tried to suppress it by keeping it to just once a month (which turned into once a week which turned into whenever), then mental mores regarding positions other than missionary were very slowly but surely overcome. In my early post-Catholic years, blaming this stunt in my sexual growth on my strong roots of Catholicism seemed too easy and stereotypical—like something straight out of a standup comedy routine—but I was beginning to buy into it. That just because it was a common critique didn’t make it a wrong one. The point is, it
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still lingers a bit; my hesitation to masturbate or to write in this journal about my sex with Evie is almost like the last remaining relics of my Catholicism.

At any rate, I thought that masturbating 100% of the time I wanted to or, much less 100% of the time that I had no reason NOT to touch myself would be less than ideal. So I started to shuffle the domino—alternating twirls with tumbles. While I did so, I decided if I got the face and half with 4 pips, I’d rub one out; if I got 3 pips, I’d watch another episode while I finished out at the Stud table; if I got the face with makeshift, drilled-in 1 and 2 pips, then I’d just go to bed. That made it a 50% chance I’d go to bed, 50% I’d stay up, only half of which (25% total) I’d masturbate. Once I’d decided, I stopped the domino between my forefingers and felt 4 spots in the shape of a square, so I started looking up videos.

I had almost 10 tabs of videos fired up before I even began to feel that much in the mood. I had Damien Rice playing through my head. *Tonight I dream without you* . . .

Luckily I was getting dealt garbage in the Stud game through the first few minutes of being pantsless, so I could just immediately minimize the table whenever I was interrupted and keep going. I was only halfway through the third video when all my senses, warmth, blood, concentration began to rush to my crotch. The Stud table popped up with a playable hand.

“Fuck.”

. . . *And I hope that I don’t wake up* . . .

I stayed slouched and just made sure I didn’t knock my knob on the way to clicking the “Call” button. I didn’t want to lose my erection, but I couldn’t see even gently rubbing myself in the middle of a poker hand—even pulling up the video between
actions wouldn’t do. Of course the person left to act behind me used half his time bank
before deciding. The next card was dealt, which gave me a nut flush draw and remote
hopes of a straight. The action went, bet, call: action on me.

“Fuck.” I called.

. . . ‘Cause wakin’ up without you . . .

I felt my head start to depress, but I made an effort to not look down, not even at
the pre-cum that I felt dewing on my tip. My hand somehow managed to brick all the
way through, so I went back to jerking off.

All the concentration of my circulatory and nervous system was focused back on
my crotch in no time.

. . . is like drinkin’ from an empty cup.

I closed out of the porno tabs and erased my recent history. I left the singular
table of Stud Hi/Lo open. Eyes glazed, half asleep, I went on staring at the screen and
clicking my mouse for another few hours.
Mondays were my off days. I’d make at least one trip on the N/Q train in Midtown to stroll past the condo. Babel and I decided it was the best, most untraceable way to get a feel for his habits. *No need to rush anything; Keep Shit Simple, spoony.* No bites on day one—I didn’t expect one; I never expected one. No need to rush anything.

It took until the following Monday before things could heat up.

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**Produce**

I tapped my pen against the pad, and cocked my eyes to the side to feign deciding if I really needed Goya beans or whatever I happened to be standing next to. I wasn’t sure how much more I should write.

**5 Apples**

I wrote, but I was disinterested. *I can’t stick a fucking pill in an apple.* My mind wandered while I looked off to the side, just keeping him in my peripheral. I thought back to the 3rd worst I’d felt in my life. It was months earlier, but crucial to what brought me to the grocery store.

—*He’s a hack!*

It wasn’t about me. I think I even remember agreeing with the person—that only made it worse.

—*How could you say that?*
—‘Cause what has he done that I should give a shit about? He went to a good school, made some good connections, and now you know his name. That’s a hack.

But that was the exact career path I was going for—to be a hack. I was going to pull the wool over people’s eyes all the way to the top.

One head of lettuce (Iceberg)

I laughed to myself, which brought me back to the moment. Like I need to know about the lettuce . . . much less that he was getting exactly one . . . much less that it was iceberg lettuce.

Robbie, as I’d come to call him, moved on to the next aisle. With his back to me, I was able to look at him more directly. There was something about his immaculate suit that seemed worth noting.

4 Cans Stewed tomatoes

The pasta and sauces aisle was just as useless for me, so I went back to my half-thought thoughts from months earlier.

I never got an F in my life though, and I’ve never fired a gun. I was just a moderately successful grad student in one of those fields where you need to be like one of the 1,000 best in the world to ever call yourself truly a professional in that line of work, much less ever make money off of it—something like skateboarding, novel writing, spelling bee contestant.

It took me 3 years before I realized that being a moderately successful grad student isn’t good enough to become a professional in something that pays off 1,000 people in the whole world. Let me be clear about something: that’s a retardedly long time for me to come to such an obvious conclusion.
2 Boxes of

I strained to see what kind of pasta he’d grabbed. I halfway spaced out staring at the green boxes before I realized how silly I was being. Imagine if that’s how I’d been caught: determining if Robbie preferred Spaghetti or Linguine. I snapped out of it and wrote:

...spaghetti of some sort

Anyway, let me finish this one thought. So I could blame it on Evie for it taking me so long for that to dawn on me (the whole, being moderately good isn’t good enough in my field thing), but I would never do that. But just for shits and giggles, I’ll explain why I say I could.

Every day I came back from class, having survived another day of being prepared and giving input, she would kiss me and assure me and give me improper perspective on just how likely I was to finish with my usual A or B. I always felt like this was bullshit, and if I weren’t with her, I wouldn’t’ve spent so much time ignoring that instinct—that my GPA had nothing to do with the probability that I was going to be, let’s say, a concert pianist or professional poker player or whatever it was I was going for. Sometimes I would have a fit of reality and tell her that she really ought to be worried that I might not be good enough. But it didn’t work. Either it came out wrong and it sounded like I was fishing for compliments, or she really was too much of a sweetheart and too in love with me to see how that could possibly be the case.

Robbie got closer to my half of the aisle, which got my heart racing. I started to back away a bit, but my eyes were enticed by his irl suit—dark; pitch dark, navy with subtle pin stripes, almost tuxedo-like lapels and a quiet; whisper quiet, sheen. Seeing him
in the light of day made me want to commend him; it made sense for him to not feel the need to hire someone to do the shopping for him. Someone shouldn’t lock themselves away from the real world because of the extreme outlier chance that someone will actually harm you doing something as mundane as going to the grocery store.

I managed to back out of the aisle, and wait for him there. I swear that I’ll finally finish my thoughts in this paragraph: if I were ever to turn these ramblings into a book for publishing, and I had an editor or an agent or whoever says these sorts of things who was putting a gun to my head forcing me to put a title to all of this, I’d probably call it “Utility.” ‘Cause that’s probably the best way to sum up why I was there—the night of the hack incident I got to thinking about what I’m actually, exceptionally good at (analytical thinking, logistics, balancing my ranges [which I guess you could call lying, which I’ll concede for now because this isn’t the place to argue it], eV systems that objectively [if not accurately] determine unorthodox action that’s beneficial for society, etc.), and I got to thinking how I could put these skills to use. And that’s what eventually brings me to the grocery store in midtown Manhattan, going to work on my unorthodox “calling.”

Then, Robbie got my full attention by moving on to the vitamin and pills aisle.
I realize I haven’t talked about the restaurant much.

I was a line cook at a pretty nice place in midtown. I liked it. I kind of felt like the chef’s protégé. I’d spend the downtime just asking him a ton of questions—everything from the history of cuisine to what spices went with what. Most of the questions got deflected with a tone—either of the no-shit-Sherlock variety or of the what-are-you-gonna-go-home-and-try-to-make-this-yourself-yeah-that’s-real-cute-of-you variety. But I could tell he enjoyed the talks. Not enjoyed, no that’s not near strong enough a word—I knew that about as literally as this statement could possibly be taken, he lived for these talks. His life at the workplace revolved around walking through the kitchen he ran, just waiting for opportunities to display the breadth and worth of his skill set. Maybe outside of work he was capable of pulling off the double consciousness it would take to live life normally out there, but I wouldn’t be surprised if he wasn’t able to and he felt totally out of place in the many non-cuisine contexts the world has to offer. Besides, when I got him excited enough talking about something he had in stock, I’d get some free food out of it.

Anyway, first thing Chef had me do when I showed up was cook the family meal, so I was jiggling chicken stocks to see which was the worst. The other cooks told me that I was the only line cook allowed to prepare family meals—that Chef would joke on my
off days about how he wished his “little bitch” was working, so he could make me do family meal. I was able to suss the kudos out from between those lines.

I decided on the chicken stock that was too thick. Shaking the pan just got a modest wiggle, like a jello. I’ve seen Chef brag about his best works—the ones that were so close to a liquid that if you touched the top, a tiny ripple would go out; the ones that when you took them out of the pan, they would wobble in all directions looking in danger of toppling this way then that, but still managing to somehow contain itself in a single solid body. Point is, Chef was straight up bananas for his stocks, so I used the inferior one for our meal.

As I checked on the beef tips I had in a chipotle marinade—which were from the trimmings of the sirloins we had cut earlier—I mused on my periodical victories in the kitchen. The rare chance to improvise new presentations when we were out of this dishware or that sprig of whatever, the couple of times I whipped up a unique dish that was deemed not terrible. Chef—while retaining his obstinate, self-confident composure that dulled even the brightest of compliments into a reticent affirmation—even seemed to think me as talented. Not ever remotely considering any of my ideas for the menu, of course, but I didn’t expect that—I never expected that.

The stock was de-coagulated, so it was time for the magic. Okay, that’s a terribly cliché word to use, but taking disparate food elements that range from bland (the canned white beans) to revolting (the raw garlic, the cellulite we called stock, the raw meat) and combining them into a Frankenstew that effected compliments and dopamine dumps is pretty fucking cool.
In that groove, I thought about how I would’ve liked to be a chef. It was almost the perfect job: there was a creative output that would keep me engaged and make me not hate my job, there was enough pay to support a family and, what was most important to me, it was purposeful—delivering the art of cuisine to people, offering aesthetic experiences that otherwise would never be undertaken. Of course I say almost, but the one drawback is a deal breaker for me. Chefs—especially when working their way into the business, still actually having to spend time running the kitchen—work insane hours. I wanted to actually, you know, be able to raise my family and actually, you know, be a father.

I was completely annoyed by the general response this line of prioritizing got. Some people thought it was really admirable, like “oh, how sweet of you. I personally would never’ve even considered that seeing your family some time could be more important than a career.” And then obviously there were the ones who disdained this prioritizing completely—thought it was some sort of euphemism for ambitionlessness.

When everything was prepared, I set two places for me and Chef next to each other. Then, I went to the basement to fetch Chef from the office. I pushed the industrial light switch into the “on” position. Whiteness just barely eeked from the fluorescent lights as they warmed. They hummed like a buzz saw in a neighboring room. A puddle slept in the middle of the concrete like a house dog. I leapt over it hanging onto the meat locker for balance. Light and foggy smoke drifted from under the office door. Chef was sitting on just the other side of the door. I startled myself bumping into an outfit hanging from the rafters. I backed away watching the headless, footless, armless figure sway back and forth from on high. I knocked on the door. I got no response, but the faint smoke was a
sign that Chef was trapped just on the other side with no choice but to hear my call for family meal. Like taking in the faint smell of tobacco was sniffing the essence of Chef’s presence. I lingered for just a second, then went back upstairs.

With all of us standing around the steaming pot of fresh fabada—waiting while trying to make it look like no one was waiting—Chef finally entered. I swear his eyes grew redder and redder with every passing month. He seemed to be at the backend of his transition from leaving everything downstairs to becoming Chef and all the responsibility, expectation and personality traits that came with that. “Well. Eat.”

He was a tall Spaniard. He was one of those people who covers up his balding by shaving yet manages to perpetually have that crown of stubble. The best comparison I can come up with is that he looked like Billy Corgan. Except his height and his attempt to put up a hard shell maybe made the main character from the Hitman video games a better comparison. But he had that weird type of personality to where the tougher he tried to come off, the more likely he seemed to wail out a nasally love song to Courtney Love. I don’t know, maybe I coulda saved a bunch of time and textual space by just saying that he looked like Zinedine Zidane—just as likely to invent a bedazzling thing like the spin move as he is to make the most infamously pointless headbutt in history.

Chef and I each had milk crates to sit on, making us the privileged few who got seats, while the servers stood around and looked pretty and sarcastically asked all the other servers, “What are you doing? Just standing around looking pretty?”

Chef was wont to take these opportunities to go on one of those dime-a-dozen rants about welfare queens or how those damned animals were ruining all the once beautiful buildings in Harlem. He was on one of his more unique rants that day, though.
surviva

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With everyone else distracted in their own conversation, Chef turned to me: “These young people are just useless, Abby.”

He called me Abby because he thought it was a terribly clever way of pronouncing my initials, AHB—in other words, he pronounced it like Ah-B. And then one day one of the servers said that I looked like a grandmother in my shower cap. He probably got the biggest kick in the history of the world, and he called me Abby la Abuela for the rest of the day. Anyway, I’m not even sure he remembered what my real name was at that point.

“—a generation chock full of uselessness,” Chef continued. “They don’t care about shit anymore. They just don’t care about shit anymore.” Every time he said a swear, he would pause and lean in and say it quietly (see: the part about him failing when trying to seem tough).

“People used to be tied to their work. People talk about getting their hands dirty, but fuckers’ work used to literally be putting their hand in the dirt. There weren’t foodstamps, there was grow some shit so you can eat—or die! They were tied to their work. They ate their work, and then shit it out, and put it in the ground, and grew more work out if it, to eat it. They did something they cared about.

“Now the more technology comes out, the less these shits feel connected with anything. Look, I’m not saying these phones and stuff are bad, I’m—look, I don’t hate the phones and shit. I wanna make it clear that I hate these fucking people. That’s what I hate. I wanna make that clear.” Chef continued, rocking back and forth with every swear, “If they fucking cared and put any effort into finding something to fucking make their fucking lives worthwhile, then it wouldn’t be anything.”
He narrowed his eyes and looked straight ahead of him for a second, calculating something.

“You know what? I always thought it was crazy when I hear those stories on A&E where the killer cuts off the fingers and teeth so there’s no way to identify them, ya know? I always thought it was crazy that detectives could tell every single person apart from every other person.

“Well, this generation’s such a blur of worthless blobs, they’re such a mass of crack-addled preying mantises who gave up trying to figure out how to make their existence worth the dirt it took to make them, I wouldn’t be surprised if this is the first *fucking* generation where that isn’t the case anymore. And I’d test the theory, too. I’d kill one of these ants and leave all his little fingies and teethsies intact just to test the theory. It’s the best use their bodies would go to. Ha! Their bodies are temples, hahahahahaha.” The man literally had to wipe tears out of his eyes at that joke.
Babel had shown up for the rendezvous at the appointed place and the appointed time, so his existence proceeded. Trying to stay on task, I read off the rest of the list, and we settled on the obvious: the vitamin E. Though we hadn’t gotten as lucky as with the first job (what with the supplements and Eastern medicine and all that Tommie did), we were fortunate to have a specific routine from Robbie (or at least over the small sample size of 6 weeks). We hammered out the details, of which there (purposefully) weren’t many.

It was tough to keep Babel on task that night, though. Or maybe it was always tough to keep him on task, but this was the first time that I made any effort to.
He At one point, he excitedly linked me to a thread. It was a Christian forum where Babel himself was posting in a thread “Support for Those Questioning Their
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Faith,” where members went to talk through their fits of skepticism so that other members could reply with explanations, sympathies and so forth to get them to stay in the faith. Well Babel was pretending to be a 12-year-old who had reread the Old Testament and was starting to think that Lucifer was the one worthy of praise rather than God. His argument was rooted in the Eden story where God forbade eating of the Tree of Knowledge, while Lucifer encouraged them to eat from it—a symbol of coming to know more about the world, to think for themselves and to decide right from wrong instead of merely following some totalitarian God who just demanded unquestioning praise (His words; not mine). Babel’s persona went through the rest of the Old Testament, listing the atrocities, the pettiness, the opaque, random and contradictory laws he had us follow. He argued that Lucifer had been cast down as the embodiment of hubris, when in actuality God was the one whose message relied on the dogmatic belief that He was the only God, that his people were the only Chosen people, that their laws were the only laws of veracity and that all laws, people and gods in opposition were lesser and ought to be ruthlessly killed. All Lucifer embodied, Babel pretended to argue, was open-mindedness, and this made him the natural enemy of Him.

The poor forum members were too naïve and innocent to be familiar with the obvious leveling. As much as he outted himself as not being the 12-year-old he purported himself to be by quoting Plato, referencing regimes of ancient and modern history and going on long discourses on epistemology, the members became impassioned with converting the fictional character Babel had created. The thread had blown up with posts upon posts, pages upon pages, of responses from concerned Christians fighting for the soul of a poor impressionable child who’d gotten his hands on a dangerous logic.

<ThePsycho_Babel> LOLOLOLOLOLOLOLOLOLOLOLOLOLOLOLOLOLOLOLOLOLOLOLOLOLOLOLOLOLO
2.3

“You wouldn’t ask why the rose that grew from the concrete had damaged petals—
On the contrary, we would all celebrate its tenacity;
We would all love its will to reach the sun.”

When I got home from work, Evie was waiting for me in her pajamas. She had gotten back that day from a 3-day sales trip. She greeted me with a smile. It was genuine; it always was; it almost stressed me out how unconditionally happy she was to see me every time. She’d already showered: no decidedly kempt work outfit, no lipstick, no flawless and consistent perfume, no high heels.

“How’d you get by without me?” she asked, sticking her tongue out of her smile.

*Like drinking from an empty cup.*

“Well, I survived at least.” We kissed.

She pulled back and fingered the indent the shower cap left in my temples. “Get anything done on the job front?”

Let me just stop for a second and talk in present tense and all that other shit and just tell you something straight up: I can’t deal with the most mundane, easily accomplishable of shit sometimes. I don’t know, maybe you’ve already realized that by now, but FUCK! I shoulda known on the spot when I was 15-years-old arguing with my dad about how I wouldn’t be the one to call in to order the pizza—about how I couldn’t be the one to order the pizza—I shoulda known right then and there that I was fucked. That’s it, spoony—don’t even bother with the rest of your life. The world’s gonna present you with more complex problems than being able to get the toppings right without having the pizza guy think you’re dumb or having my dad OCD over forgetting to ask for extra napkins or whatever it was I was afraid of.
Anyway, this is my way of saying that applying for jobs (aka making my first baby steps toward entering the real world) wasn’t going well. I felt under-qualified for every single job I applied for. Or maybe it’s better to say that I felt I was barely almost qualified for the lowest threshold of what the lowest tier of jobs was looking for. But, you know, that’s the same exact thing; it’s just that this is the first time I’ve acknowledged it in quite those blunt of words.

But I figured that if I got into all this, Evie would respond pretty much the same way she did whenever I brought up that I might not be good enough to make it in my field. And I couldn’t stand to see that unconditional smile. The one that reminded me that I did not, in fact, have nothing to lose.

“I got some work done toward my second job.” I had to at least put off disappointing Evie.

“What do you mean your second job? You mean like the restaurant as your first job and applying for jobs as your second one, or . . . ?”

_Really, spoony_, I thought. _You’re gonna do that cheesy, sitcom, technically-telling-the-truth thing?!_ “Nevermind,” I said, “just being stupid.”

She seemed appeased—I exhaled out my nose long and deep enough to put my innards back to rest.

✦ ✦ ✦ ✦ ✦

I couldn’t help but think that I might’ve missed my routine call to my dad. Obviously, I didn’t want to think about that then, but you know how when you try to _not_
think about something, that never works out. That’s what I hear people say about
impotence—if you don’t fixate on getting it up, then it’ll just happen naturally. So you
try to not think about it, but thinking about how you’re trying to not think about it is
thinking about it even harder. People have the same problem with premature ejaculation.
So in the grand scheme of things, it’s one of the smaller disservices I could do to Evie.

Anyway, so long as I talked to my dad once a month, he was happy and felt
connected enough. It’d been a habit to call him at the top of the month around the time
he sent the check for my rent and school. So I was simultaneously trying to figure out if
I’d called him that month, and trying my hardest to *not* think about that, which of course
made me think even harder.

Evie saved me by whispering into my ear, “I’m crazy for you.”

It was only fair to get my bearings straight before responding. I kissed the nape
of her neck and looked at my part going in and out of her part. Not that I could actually
see the penetration—it just kind of appeared and then went behind the horizon of her
pubic hair. That was good; I didn’t want that gross, overly-biological porn angle of the
shaft being swallowed whole—but I wasn’t gonna think about that right then.

I moved my eyes up the rest of her body from there. She had pulled herself up to
press her body against mine when she whispered to me. It was almost amazing that she
could keep perfect posture doing that, keeping her back straight instead of hunching
forward in a “C”—but I wasn’t gonna think about that right then.

Anyway, it shelved her breasts flatteringingly. She really was gorgeous from head-
to-toe.
I continued up, and the second I met her eyes, she opened the shades to her pitch dark brown pupils and received me with a gentle kiss—subtle, kinda like that slight lemon accent that’s the difference between homemade vinaigrette and Safeway brand—but I wasn’t gonna think about that right then. She pulled back with a casual smile. She was the sweetest thing; she felt amazing.

“I love you.” I meant it, too—that might sound patronizing, but only to the naïve someone who doesn’t understand the surprise, the almost literal incredibility, the freedom and ease of knowing how much power is behind those words and still having the clarity of mind to mean them. I didn’t mean it just because she was beautiful; not just because she felt great; not just because she always managed perfect posture—but I wasn’t gonna think about that right then.

Afterwards, Evie went to the bathroom to 1) pee, 2) clean herself up and 3) help with some irritation she felt by doing whatever her technique was to alleviate irritation after sex. Being a boyfriend really is a sweet gig in some respects. It’s like being the grandparent of the naughties. You get to coddle, kiss, love and spoil them, and they’re always so excited to see you. And once they start shitting and pissing and vomiting and needing cleaning and all that, you just pass the responsibility off to the parent. I could build a life around this.
2.4
"Passion [inside] the parentheses"

Though, like I said, I pretty much liked my job at the restaurant, things were
growing to be a bit less pleasant. Anyone who’s ever worked in the restaurant business
knows that there’s a lot of downtime. I filled these downtimes in a variety of ways.

One of my favorites was to get a roll of duct tape and stand at one end of the long,
metal tables (two of them sitting end-to-end, making for a 10’ of table). I would roll the
duct tape toward the end of the table, trying to see how far I could get it without going off
the edge. Not like you asked, but the trick was throwing it far with back spin to reduce
the amount of variance that came with the roll itself; you could get the aim of throwing it
about 6’ with heavy backspin down much better than you could throw it exactly down the
middle with just the right speed—not hitting a dent or misdirecting off the crack between
the two tables—to stop before it went off. Again, not like you asked or anything.

In fact, one time when I was in Chef’s office, I happened to see that he was
keeping a journal, and he had left it splayed to 2 pages—which I was able to read while
he was fetching something for me—about this exact sort of thing:

He said to me, “Yes, Chef,” almost to himself without
taking his eyes off the garlic he was cutting. I just exhaled
and counted to three in response. It’s how I’ve learned to deal
with Abby. You give him instructions and pray that they stick.
Amazingly, they do most the time, but you’d be amazed what he
manages to fuck up sometimes.

He can run a kitchen and cook a family meal, though, so
just so long as I manage my patience and let him do things his
way here and there, he’s the best cook to have on staff.
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He’s a short little fidgety fucker. He could spend hours playing with a roll of duct tape and a metal table. A short, shaggy, fidgety fucker. He shows up half the time having just gotten out of bed, so his hippy scruff hair will have cowlicks in it. Whenever this happens, I make him wear a shower cap because his cowlicks would stick out of the standard hair nets and had gotten into my dishes a few times. Working in a shower cap is what got me calling him “Abuelita.” This is what led me to start calling him Abby.

I probably could have saved all that time by just saying it was quite a bit like working with a 5-year old. From there, you could’ve just filled in the blanks with the child’s play, the cowlicks, the space-cadet mistakes and all that.

I’ll get back to my story, but a quick side note:

I know that earlier I made it sound like I could read right through Chef or something, and while I guess that is true to a very very small degree, there are ways where I really feel incapable of getting inside his mind and seeing things like he does.

You see, it’s that he is people, and I guess you could kinda say I don’t really get people. I don’t know, you know what I mean? People, with their peoply thoughts and their peoply approaches to life. And Chef was especially peoply: “Oh my God, Abby, you’re doing [insert the randomest, most innocuous seeming action here]?!?” “Is there a problem with me doing x?” “Oh my God, of course!” “And why’s that?” “Because of . . .” I don’t know. I can’t finish that sentence. That’s the problem; that’s the part I don’t get.
I guess I’ll just fill that in with “Because then people will think you’re a pedophile.” You can’t pick your nose because then anyone who sees you will think you’re a pedophile, and being confused for a pedophile might get you arrested (this is why it’s especially pernicious to do it in public). Evie was so embarrassed that one time I ate a grapefruit at the movie theater because it made people think I was a pedophile, and being with someone perceived to be a pedophile is embarrassing.

It all makes sense now. Carry on with your story.

So I was playing with the duct tape during the slow part of a shift. Every once in a while the familiar mechanical crunching and zipping sound would ring through the kitchen. This would be followed by our Mexican fry cook yelling, “No mames!” as he ripped the ticket out of the printer and got started on the deep fryer. I’d look up in time to see Chef vigorously rub his forehead and mutter something semi-audible. He’d look at me, and I’d suspend my game, pretending like I was just drumming with the tape. I’d, then, go back to playing.

The next time I looked up, it was in startlement at the shouts that I only started to process retroactively: “WILL YOU FUCKING STOP WITH THE DUCT TAPE AND FIND SOMETHING TO DO OR PRETEND TO BE LOOKING FOR SOMETHING TO DO OR AT LEAST FUCKING PRETEND TO BE BORED!” I processed those words just in time to see Chef’s face within a few feet of me, which was just in time for him to grasp the table and throw it, a clamor of metal bowls and appliances and the table itself all exploding through the stark acoustics of the otherwise still kitchen.

And after the explosion, the kitchen somehow managed to go even quieter than it was before. Even the dining room outside went noticeably quiet. The final noise left was
the spinning of a bowl on the floor, which finally stopped. Leaving the kitchen
deafeningly quiet. Which called attention to the fact that I was just standing there
unresponsively.

But actually, I lied, there was still a final sound, and I finally noticed what it was
in the contrasting silence. It was Chef’s breath. He eventually lengthened and calmed
the breaths until I saw my opportunity. “Sorry, Chef,” and I went to start picking things
up from the floor, “It won’t happen again, Chef.”

Chef just walked past me, saying nothing, and went down to his office—probably
to avoid spending the next 10 minutes overhearing the servers talking about the whole
thing.

I did eventually get an interview.

The day of, I double checked what they were looking for in the ad. I, at best,
fulfilled the minimum requirements. The strengths they were looking for were my
weaknesses. My actual strengths were not listed anywhere as desirable. (It’s funny how
intelligent, creative and personable are practically the three least sought after qualities in
an employee). I double checked the address. I double checked the time. I went to the
mirror and double checked my outfit.

I printed my résumé and almost stuck it in a folder in my book bag, but this made
me rethink bringing the book bag altogether. I couldn’t go in looking like a student,
much less looking like a grade schooler. I took my notepad out of the bag and two pens and decided to just carry everything to the interview.

I couldn’t remember if I’d brushed my teeth before breakfast, so to play it safe I brushed them. The specific action of putting the pasted brush in my mouth reminded me very clearly that I had already brushed, but I did it again anyway. I triple checked my outfit for toothpaste. I moved my tie slightly to the left and moved it back to the exact same spot.

The soles of my dress shoes clicked and clonked and dragged across the swelling and waning woodwork of the floor as I walked to the door. I didn’t trip; that was good. I stopped and stood dead still at the door to focus all of my attention on the checklist in my head. I checked my pockets for keys—check. I double checked everything in my hands to see my notepad, two pens and résumé—check. I triple checked the time. I quadruple checked my outfit: suit jacket, shoes, tie, shirt, pants, underwear—check. Feeling as sure as I was going to feel—in other words, doing enough to feel at peace with any ensuing mistakes because I’d have legitimate reason to feel they were unavoidable—I closed the door to the apartment.

There wasn’t a hint of the oncoming spring outside. The wind, most notably, was still a wintry one. It blew my résumé back around the edges of the notepad. I held it firmly in both hands to prevent it from creasing. Holding it firmly crinkled it between my hands. Holding it loosely did nothing to keep the wind from bending it back. Indecisively alternating between the two resulted in both consequences.
The lobby was red, white and artless. The receptionist was attractive and Victorian. I was led to an office that was square and appallingly inoffensive. I was greeted by a name that was forgettable and forgotten. His handshake was moderate and polygamous.

At some point very early into the process he said, “So basically the Technical Studio Assistant assists with the technical things in the studio.”

I almost responded by saying, “How terribly succinct.” It seemed like the perfect line; so perfect, however, that it seemed paradoxically unoriginal—kind of like how the ending to an episode of CSI that surprises you the least—the one that makes you roll your eyes at the predictability of it all—is when the murderer is literally the last person you would naturally have expected. The second most ironic murderer is meh; it’s when you get into the third to fifth most unexpected endings that you find the sweet spot. In this way, the 3 all-too-perfect words of “How-terribly-succinct” seemed even more of recycled humor than blurting out a knock-knock joke or letting out an audible fart.

Of course having thought all this out in livetime at the interview, I was far behind on keeping up with what the interviewer was saying and even farther behind on the remotest possibilities of opportunely timing my joke, so it was all a moot point by then. Feeling hopeless and not knowing what to say next, how to sit, what countenance to wear, I vaguely considered letting out an audible fart. It certainly had to have been extremely unexpected while not being literally the last thing he would have expected—it was the perfect crime—err—joke.
Holding back a grin, I came back to the scene where I felt somewhere in the air that there was a question hanging. The interviewer’s blank, unspeaking face seemed to confirm this intuition.

“Yes,” I guessed.

He seemed somewhat surprised by this response. *Shit!* That part of my mind that was at least somewhat paying attention played the audio back for me . . .

“Oh, I’m sorry, I misunderstood: no.”

He eked out a frown on the left half of his lips. Of course he did. This was not the best way to demonstrate being attentive to detail and excellent at following directions.

The rest of the interview went a little less seamfully. After it, he welcomed me to one of the business cards he had at the end of his desk facing me, which encouraged me a bit. I grabbed one and opened my wallet, from whence a condom wrapper fell out. My immediate reaction:
The interviewer had gotten up from his desk and was heading over to show me out of the office, so it didn’t seem like he noticed. Not knowing how else in the world to respond, I stood up from the chair, said the usual parting formalities and walked out of the office, leaving the wrapper behind.

Getting on the subway to go back home, I noticed something on someone’s face that made me do a double take. I thought it might have been the lighting or a spot of grime or a simple instance of my sight being unclear for a second, but double checking made it unmistakable. Streaked across the forehead of a fellow passenger was a somewhat faded, black cross. Looking around the car, I noticed one or two others.

It was a strange thing, a bit of a role reversal. Over half a decade ago, back in high school, I was the one who knew it was Ash Wednesday, and my unabashed display of the cross on my forehead served as a reminder to everyone else. Over the next several years—though it seemed a bit of an unlikely coincidence that I could go that many separate occasions without seeing a single cross displayed—it did at least seem (and seeming is probably all that mattered) that Ash Wednesday had gone in a long dormancy in my life. Now the role reversal was complete, and the nameless patrons of the New York City Metro Transit Authority were using their foreheads—the billboard of the face—to have the holy day rise in its own ashes back into existence in my world.

With its revival came the recollection of the most central practice to the day: giving something up for Lent. Subtracting from yourself in an effort to be more complete
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Utility

seemed unmistakably Catholic, I thought. Hell, I knew that Babel was trolling, but I couldn’t help but see the Eden story as an allegory for this. Compromise your critical thinking through faith, become more perfect in the eyes of God; compromise your sexuality, become more perfect in the eyes of God; give something up for 40 days, get a sweet pinball machine added to your baller suite you have waiting for you in heaven.

Perfect had somehow come to simply mean—and not just for Catholics either and not just in regards to religion—doing nothing wrong. That the life prescribed for us was to lock ourselves in our rooms and not touch ourselves, that a pristinely produced Nickelback album is more perfect than *Hamlet* with a singular typo. That we should be judged by our shortcomings instead of our contributions.

When I got back, Evie asked how the interview went. In a split second I went through the entire spectrum of adjectives in my head and was saying one before I’d settled on it: “It went great.” The accompanying smile came in a 60 beat per minute delay. I had to at least put off disappointing Evie.
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2.5
“Nos buscamos los dos. Ojalá fuera
Este el último día de la espera.”

I’m sure there was a more proper way of doing it than just melting a shit ton of wax and shoving my hand into the mess, but there was something immensely therapeutic about doing it that way. The shock of the senses in the not-quite-burning heat, as I dipped my hands one-by-one into the puddle; then, emerging anew, the mass would coolingly embrace my hands. *Coolingly*—though it was the initial burning sensation that awoke the senses, the cooling is where my hands reveled between pain and reprieve—a masochistic tease that was its own unique awakening sensation, like the fleetingly constant affirmation that I was there, and I was feeling. *Embrace*—the grooves, the imperfections from years of use, the calluses from twirling the domino piece, the indentations that designated my identity, they were all filled in or covered over, leaving a greasy, blank slate. *Tabula Rasa*, my hands were reborn—impressionable with no history for which it was accountable. A Baptism by Wax: my hands were born again, not in God of course, but in utility.

Once done, I calmly went through the list—*No need to rush anything; Keep Shit Simple, spoony.* New hoodie?—I took the brown zip up off the hanger and put it on for the first time: check. The bottle?—I patted my side pocket and felt the soft plastic cylinder resist against my hand: check. The clippings?—I peaked in the pocket I’d just patted to see the cylinder resting on a nest of multi-colored, multi-textured hair: check. Domino?—it was already twirling between its fingers in the opposing pocket, wax flecking off my hand as it went: check.
The subway was at perfect capacity. Since I was getting on at the Q train’s second stop, I was able to get my own seat away from anyone else—no need to hold onto the railings with slick, printless hands. (It was strange to think about how making my hands uniform and unidentifiable made me alien—that it was noticeably unhuman to not be unique.) But also, since it was still the backend of rush hour, the cars would get more crowded, which would lend more to anonymity and less to people watching. God bless New York City, birthplace of the bystander effect.

Once at the 34th Street stop, I had to decide if I wanted to get to the store by walking above ground or through the subway transfers. I started twirling the domino while I decided on 50/50: 1 or 2 for below ground, 3 or 4 for above ground. I stopped and felt one pip: I’d go underground.

This was probably auspicious because regardless of the time of day, the subway transfers at that station were full—full of ads, full of street performers, full of activity, full of things to grab your attention, simultaneously full of people willing to give that attention yet full of people who couldn’t give a shit. I was able to almost literally go with the flow.

*I could’ve just woven myself into society.*

Between the stairs for the 7 train and the tunnel that took you to the A/C stops there was a plot full of bookshelves and a folding table that was always there—one that was frequently manned by a Christian group armed with pamphlets and sermons.

On that day the pamphlets demanded more attention than pro-life, the preachers offered more than advice laden with the light weight of vague threat, the sermons transcended concern and opinion. On that day, they had a date and they were urgent
about it. On March 28th, just two weeks away, the world was going to end, our souls were going to be judged, and they would ultimately be proven right (or at the very least, proven wrong, which was still something). With my left hand twirling the domino piece, I raised my right hand as a “No thank you.”

The preacher had singled me out, though, much more adamant on this day. “Time is running out to turn to your Lord and to give yourself to his mercy!” My hand turned from a “No thank you” to a stop sign.

Trying to force the message into my open palm, his face was within a foot of mine, “For the sake of your soul, heed the message and repent!” New York, the crammed city, is simultaneously the place where you are most likely to be forced to be within a foot of anyone at any one time and yet the place where you are least likely to voluntarily be that close to anyone. The preacher’s insistence on getting that close had effected the panic in me he was looking for; the hand turned from a stop sign to a stiff arm, bracing then grasping then shoving the preacher.

Not a single stride was slowed; not even a single neck was turned to watch the scene, but it was enough to move pupils from straight-in-front-of-them to slightly-off-to-the-side. It was a scene out of Scooby Doo where the eyes of a painting inconspicuously used as peepholes; not a single thing about the picture changed—the flow, the strides, the necks, the tunnels—except for the pupils. God bless New York City, home of a range of normalcy so astoundingly wide that abnormal may not even exist as a possibility.

The domino spinning so vehemently that wax shavings were now flaking off my forearm, I was too frenetic to hear anything he shouted after me. But March 28th stuck in my head.
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At the stairs for the corner of 33rd and 8th, I was able to stop and breathe normally again. No need to rush anything; Keep Shit Simple, spoony. I patted my side pocket and felt the soft plastic cylinder resist against my hand: check. I focused on my breathing as I took the stairs out of the underground one at a time. Breathe in, up; breathe out, up; breath in, up. I kept my eyes down, not noticing if anyone thought anything strange about my labored walk. I grew grateful that Spring was still a few days away. The above ground climate reached the top of my head and found its way between each individual hair and turned the sweat therein from a useless, stagnant puddle of warmth into a cool, rejuvenating stream. I stopped at the top of the flight and drew in one final deep breath and let it out slowly to complete the reconfiguration.

I was at the grocery store with plenty of time left to pre-empt Robbie’s routine. This allowed me to make a normal grocery trip out of it. I stopped by the pill aisle first and picked up two canisters of vitamin E. I pushed the front row slightly back while doing so. I tried to make it seem like this was a perfectly normal thing to do when selecting vitamins. I rested them on the child seat at the top of the cart. I took the bottle out of my hoodie pocket and, keeping it close to my body, wiped any remaining hair off with the lining of the hoodie. I placed the bottle in the base of the cart far away from where I planned on putting anything else.

Then, I went to milk and dairy and got milk, eggs and a few packages of yogurt. I also got bread, three frozen dinners, a bag of pre-popped kettle corn, two oranges, two pears and two apples from their respective aisles. I kept the casual aspect of the trip short but not rushed.
Finally, I returned to the pill aisle and returned the two bottles from the child seat to the top of the first row. I delicately pinched the remaining bottle between two fingers from the base of the shopping cart, the one that had been in my hoodie pocket on the way downtown. I held it in front of my face for a split second on its path to the shelf of identical bottles for something between a final inspection and a final farewell. I rested it on the space in front of the first row I’d created when picking up the other bottles. In a legato movement between my legs and my arms, I was moving away just as I was finishing the placement.

Checking out, as I placed the cash on the counter in front of the cashier, I saw Robbie enter the store out of the corner of my eye. It was like Scooby Doo; not a single thing about the scene changed except for the pupils.

Once outside, it became tough to not turn around at the window of the grocery store, pull out the popcorn and watch how exactly everything turned out. *No need to rush anything; Keep Shit Simple, spoony. If no news crops up in the next few months, it means it didn’t go through, and you’ll just do it again.* But it was tough to not betray myself.

I thought about the first job, Tommie, and became overwhelmed with how astounding it was that everything happened just as it needed to. It was like going to med school and learning about all the millions of ways that the body can fail on the spot. Like it’s amazing that every single second of every single day for 70+ consecutive years every single aspect that’s crucial for the continued survival of the body just unyieldingly . . . works! The brain stem unfailingly sends the signal to the heart to pump, the heart unquestioningly listens, the blood dogmatically obliges—it can’t *not* do exactly what’s asked of it; it can’t color outside the lines. If the blood resists its call and reverts back
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through the valve to stay at home in the womb of the heart, the heart floods and you die; if a school of blood cells diverges off the path to wander through the circulatory system even just once, you die; even if he heeds the call and stays on the right path but slows to sightsee over the mega-circuit board that is the brain, the vessel clots and you die. I can’t always turn left.

And that’s just the circulatory system. Everyone knows you need your heart to work infallibly, but even your large intestines can’t take its two-weeks vacation. It’s gotta keep pulling the last semblance of nutrients from the stomach’s bi-products, has to keep absorbing the moisture and moving it along, or surely you die of whatever disease they call it when your digestive track drowns in its own shit.

And that’s just from a physiological standpoint, but then add in the chaos of quantum physics. Or maybe chaos is the wrong word. If anything, chaos is the worst word for it because for how unguaranteed any one thing is—the unguarantee of the location of anything, the fact that even an electron cloud is just a measure of probability, that as likely as it is for an electron to be within a fraction of a nanometer of the nuclear cluster, it could also (though obviously vastly less likely) be an entire lightyear away at any moment for no reason other than the mere fact that it’s possible, and that since any ONE electron can be anywhere at any time, 100 billion electrons can just as well randomly coincide at any one location at any one time with no explanation other than it’s possible, and that location could be your brain causing whatever dysfunction that would likely (but unguaranteed, of course) cause, that the ONLY reason that this doesn’t happen, that the only reason that all the electrons of the chair you’re sitting on remain within the chair you’re sitting on, that the ONLY reason that they don’t conspire and
conjoin in your brain causing you to die is, plain and simple, because they’re unlikely to—no, for how unguaranteed everything is in the world, everything is decidedly, paradoxically, almost suspiciously unchaotic.

As certain as I felt of any one step in the plan, as certain as I felt that any one second of the world’s existence would proceed from the preceding one, the mere fact that I was relying on several separate steps going right gave me the illusion of relying heavily on chance. No one alternative path seemed even the remotest bit plausible, but the sheer immensity of alternatives made it seem like at least one of them had to happen—maybe even the preacher would be right, and the world would end on March 28th, before Robbie ever had a chance to get to the bottom of the bottle.

As unfit as my human brain was to comprehend such a seemingly ordered world begotten from a set of rules whose mantra is likelihood (instead of certainty; how can nothing be based on certainty?!), it was tempting to call all this realization of probability a greater power. Science’s insistence that everything I took for granted was something less than 100%, made me feel special: chosen for not being the victim of an outlier. How terribly self-contradictory and ridiculous a feeling to feel that I—that we, as part of the nine-hundered-ninety-nine-million-nine-hundred-ninety-nine-thousand-nine-hundred-ninety-nine who aren’t the one billionth—are special for the very reason that we reaffirm probability!

Without turning around to see if the bottle was still there, I walked away from the store. You could call it faith if you want.
Arc 3
Festering Like a Sore

3.1
"God, god himself could not undo these nets
Of stone encircling me."

Though I tried to keep my research as limited as possible and scattered among various public computers, I got some good stuff in the weeks leading up to deciding on Robbie for my second job. From one site:

The most influential man in all of politics is not the president. It’s not a congressman or any other politician. In fact, it’s someone who doesn’t even live in Washington DC. Bateman & Associates has had, almost inarguably, a far more profound impact on some of the most important bills of the last 20 years, then any other single person or organization. Though Robert Bateman has been running the firm remotely from his home in Manhattan for the last several years, his fingerprints continue to show up in every governmental move of any kind of importance.

Note: by “any kind of importance,” I don’t mean tax breaks or immigration or gay marriage or any of those misdirections we are forced to hear from our media on a constant basis. I mean the things that slip under the rug. I mean political decisions that either lead to the prosperity or suffering of thousands, tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands, millions, at home and abroad.

Kind of like how Robert Bateman and his firm lobbied to delay a human rights resolution, one that was aiming to help with the international problem of gross underpay, dangerous working conditions that kill hundreds around the world monthly, child labor (just to name a few things that have to do with labor alone, and of course plenty of other human rights issues were to be addressed). Why did he do this? Well, these discussions would obviously bring negative publicity to China, and Bateman didn’t want to risk China’s bid for the 2008 Olympics. Wait, why would he care about the Olympics taking place in Beijing? Well, one of his clients, a prominent casino owner, wanted to win the bid to build a casino in, you guessed it, China. So this casino owner contracted Bateman & Associates to help China with their Olympics bid.
Bateman & Associates succeeded, the 2008 Olympics happened in Beijing, the casino owner took credit for that, the casino owner was chosen for the casino bid, and within a few years, there was a multi-billion dollar casino built.

By issues of any kind of importance, I mean political decisions that either salvage or end lives. Kind of like how Robert Bateman and his firm worked to fight against the retention of water rights for impoverished towns in South America. While several towns dry up leaving thousands to thirst, Bateman & Associates has fought against their rights to drink from their rightful, local water sources. Wait, what motivation could he possibly have for thirsting villages to death? Well, one of his clients is a prominent soft drink company, duh, and those villages are near factories that need all that water for themselves.

By issues of any kind of importance, I mean W-A-R-S. When one of your biggest clients makes their bucks off the mobilization of war, you might somehow grossly become in favor of war, licking your chops at the thought of war, thinking of all the ways you can get your congress to make wars happen. Look, I think there’s some good the US can do as a military power. They could, for example, stop the genocide in Sudan, they could mobilize against countries in danger of developing nuclear arms that could lead to the end of the world, they could bring Kony to justice, they could do all sorts of good in the world. But when another of your clients is one of the world’s biggest oilfield companies, you might as well kill two birds with one stone. Never mind all the lives sacrificed for a lost mission, you can cut your overhead of buying steaks for congressman in half by satisfying two of your biggest clients at the same time . . .

The article kinda goes on like that from there. Maybe I shoulda prefaced it with one of those, “This article does not necessarily reflect all the views of the person who’s including it in his journal” type advisories, and I don’t know if I would’ve explained it quite the same way with all that rhetorical presentation, but you can kinda see the point. You put the world with Robbie on one side of the equation (with the hundreds of deaths monthly, just from one part of one small aspect of just one of the things he pushed through) and the world without him on the other side (with his family grieving and all that), then maybe you can kinda see where I’m coming from.
I’d found my utility. I was saving hundreds of lives a month (baseline) from death. What have you done for your world lately? Okay, so fuck off then.

I think it was around this time, but it doesn’t matter anyway; I just have to tell you this story.

I was on my way to class, so I was transferring between the downtown Q and the uptown A at 34th street. All I needed for class that day was my sheet music book that was my “journal of ideas,” so I didn’t bother bringing a bookbag. Whatever, I don’t need to get into that. So, I was getting off the subway at 34th. The doors slid open with me at the front of the charge of all the people getting off the train. But as I started to step off, the man on the other side of the doors started to step on. Without changing my path at all, I bumped the part of his body that he couldn’t slide around me. “Ey, what da fuck!?” he shouted. The guy was easily bigger than me, but the accent still sounded ridiculous coming from his profoundly-normal-looking self; apparently he thought the situation demanded that he pretend to be a second generation Italian straight from a semi-rough part of Brooklyn. With people squeezing through the doors of the subway on either side of us, making sure they didn’t miss their stop, I returned: “Oh, was I mistaken? I could’ve sworn I was getting off the train, but now I’m all turned around. Sorry, apparently you had the right of way, and now I’m on the train and—and you’re off it?—but I need to be getting off of it, which makes me all sorts of fucked.”
At this point, the doors were trying to close, hitting our backs, and opening back up and hitting our backs again. “You the right-of-way police, wise guy? [That’s seriously what he said. I know, it doesn’t even make sense] I got places to go.”

“Dude, you fucking kidding me? You do realize that getting on before I get off doesn’t get you anywhere faster, right? The train doesn’t go—as in, ya know, you don’t fucking go anywhere—until you get on and I get off. Me getting off is a prerequisite for you going anywhere. BUT! if I get off first, then I can get wherever I need to go immediately ‘cause, ya know, all I have to do is get off the train for me to start heading my way, and you getting on isn’t a prerequisite for me to get anywhere. You fucking serious?! You really don’t understand that this is the main reason why people are supposed to get off before people get on?! Have you really never fucking thought this through before?! Jesus Christ!”

No shit, this is exactly what I said. I was on a fucking roll. It was fucking awesome. I had no idea at this point how the rest of the subway was regarding this situation, and I didn’t care.

The profoundly normal villain just responded by slapping my book of sheet music out of my hands, up into the air. The pages splayed out, making the sound of a pigeon frantically flapping its wings, and loose papers spewed absolutely fucking everywhere. Completely pokerfaced, I just shrugged and took a step back. Villain got absolutely vehement over my nonchalance and leaned way back for a punch that had housed within it every ounce of energy of every ounce of frustration this pathetic asshole had ever felt in his life. But the subway doors were finally unobstructed and able to close all the way—
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Utility

right in the path of his fist. Just before I turned away I was able to see the dawn of
dejectedness overtake his vehemence, and the train start to leave the station.

♠ ♠ ♠ ♠ ♠ ♠

<ThePsycho_Babel> alright so lets skip the who what and when for a second
<ThePsycho_Babel> and lets get to the how

When we were setting up this meeting, Babel had said that he had an idea he was
excited to share, and apparently his enthusiasm hadn’t tempered.

<i>ThePsycho_Babel> i have an idea
<sponny316> well thats all well and good but you might as well skip to why its better
<sponny316> i dont want to get lured into bells and whistles
<sponny316> start with the meat
<i>ThePsycho_Babel> well thats easy
<i>ThePsycho_Babel> so obviously weve talked about it before
<i>ThePsycho_Babel> that the simpler we keep it
<i>ThePsycho_Babel> and the further we remove you from the scene
<i>ThePsycho_Babel> the safer it is to keep you out of the fray
<i>ThePsycho_Babel> then the lower the expectation for the job being a success
<i>ThePsycho_Babel> and much worse yet the higher the variance
<i>ThePsycho_Babel> so best example from the last job was the chance that the wife goes
down
<i>ThePsycho_Babel> cause youre not there for quality control
<sponny316> wait
<i>ThePsycho_Babel> so i got an idea for how to keep you at the scene without ri
<i>ThePsycho_Babel> what?
<i>ThePsycho_Babel> wait what?
<i>ThePsycho_Babel> why wait?
<i>ThePsycho_Babel> i was on a roll
<sponny316> dude, i gotta go
<sponny316> sorry, #SStakes on efnet for next time
<i>ThePsycho_Babel> wtf
<sponny316> i have to go NOW! give a date and time

He couldn’t belabor it if I showed that much urgency.

<i>ThePsycho_Babel> alright alright
<i>ThePsycho_Babel> #SStakes on efnet on
<i>ThePsycho_Babel> thursday at 2pm EST
<sponny316> ok bye

And there it was. The 2nd worst I’d felt in my life. We’d discussed how
removing myself from the scene lowered expectation, but I was totally fine with that. I
figured a scenario with no murder had an expected value of 0, so not being at the scene to assure the plan went through couldn’t make it a bad decision, just a less optimal one.

But the whole thing he was saying with the wife—well, listen, I know there’s no way you’d believe me, but I really hadn’t considered it. Even if you do believe that, then I’m sure you think that it was only carelessness that had me not consider it; there’s no way you’d believe that I’d thought everything through as thoroughly as I could possibly think anything through, but that’s absolutely the case; you have to believe that—it’s crucial. There’s no way to convince you, of course—no empirical evidences I could produce for the thoroughness of my ruminations—but I’d double checked, triple checked, quadruple checked every aspect of the plan on those many nights when I’d stayed up several hours after Evie had already fallen asleep. Leave it to me to let something slip through the cracks.

I know, woe be fucking me, right? Well shut the fuck up with that; it really isn’t all that pleasant to’ve come to such a gross miscalculation that suddenly makes your work at best meaningless (and of course, at worse, cardinal wrong-doing).

It was a long few days between that conversation with Babel and our next appointment. Usually doing nothing could happen in a blur for me—I get caught into a routine of nothingness and when I finally stop to check what day it is and what day it was when the nothingness started, I realize entire fractions of weeks have passed. This isn’t how it worked in this elision between our meeting times.
The two-day period started with something that’d never happened for me before. Regardless of how quotidian a first might be, how often could you say that you had a landmark, unreplicated moment in your life?

I’d stayed up the whole night before. The day before, after I got off of IRC with Babel, I dropped $2,000 on the latest big-deal No Limit Hold’em online book and spent the rest of the day and the entire night going through it. I only got a couple of chapters in, letting myself go on long mental tangents on the weaknesses of the strategies and ways to exploit anyone who used them and doing about a half million eV calcs that I semi-organized into a word document that I saved as MUS501_ConcertReviews.doc with a password. It’s not like Evie ever snooped through my word documents, but it was such an easy precaution that it wasn’t worth risking her seeing how much time I spent on all this gaming stuff. I gave myself a ceiling of playing no more than 10 hours per week, which she could verify whenever she wanted by looking at my Poker Tracking client. I used a different software to track my hands in Stud games, though, which is why I started to play a lot more of those games, along with the fact that they were so mindless that I could play them while I watched TV and shit. While I did all this, I had all my equipment out just in case I accidentally got inspired so I could accidentally get some work done, but the last thing I wanted to be was emotionally vulnerable. Anyway, all that is just to say that I had to set my alarm just to get up for my 4pm class.

I rolled over from my sleep to see a half drunk bottle of wine that Evie clumsily recorked.

I’d had close enough interaction with Alcoholics Anonymous through my father’s involvement that I was familiar with a lot of their slogans—“Don’t think, don’t drink, go
survive
Utility
to meetings”; “Good things happen when you’re sober”; “Don’t pick up a drink one day
at a time”—and I’d gathered that for alcoholics, “being sober” was an activity. For every
second of every day, they were partaking in the arduous yet fortuitous action of not being
drunk. This, along with many other things, differentiated me from my fellow non-
drinkers. For me, not drinking was as much an activity as not collecting stamps was a
hobby—it was just one other thing I didn’t happen to be doing at the moment, along with
dancing, cheering for the Ghana national soccer team, traveling faster than the speed of
light and so forth.

But as I lay there, a Bill Hicks quote repeated a few times in my head:

*If you want to understand a society, take a good look at the drugs it uses. And what can this tell you about American culture? Well, look at the drugs we use. Except for pharmaceutical poison, there are essentially only two drugs that Western civilization tolerates: Caffeine from Monday to Friday to energize you enough to make you a productive member of society, and alcohol from Friday to Monday to keep you too stupid to figure out the prison that you are living in.*

It all seemed to make sense right in that moment, that my non-usage of drugs
would lend to two of my greatest flaws: struggling with productivity and thinking too
damned much.

And lying there, eyelashes still gooped together with boogie serum, staring at the
wine bottle, thinking of the Bill Hicks quote, reminiscing on the AA jingles my father
had built his life around, I had that landmark moment. For the first time, being sober was
an action. I told you it wasn’t big, but the moment still resonates for me even now. For
once, what I was not doing was being juxtaposed with what I could be doing.

Of course having never been drunk before, I had nothing to go on but clichés, but
even the clichés appealed to me: blacking out, drinking yourself stupid, drowning your
sorrows.
I knew I wasn’t going to drink the wine. The temptation wasn’t large enough to overcome the fear of inheriting my father’s addictive personality. There I was in New York City, starting again a million miles away from my childhood, and I was still fearing my dad’s genes. It shouldn’t’ve been too surprising; my father was right there in all sorts of figurative ways; I felt his disappointment too—all-but-palpable, all-but-literally sitting next to me in that very room, having a conversation. The all-but-literal conversation proceeded as I got up to get ready for class. Getting ready for class, it was a trifle as my subconscious had already decided without consulting me that I wasn’t going to be going to class. It knew all about my uncertainty over showing up for the rendezvous with Babel in the first place, much less hearing him out on his new idea, much less continuing with my unorthodox calling. It had gathered from that that there wasn’t a prayer I’d be going to class.

It was auspicious that I should get ready regardless because I had to be out of the apartment anyway for when Evie got back from her sales trip in DC. This was the only way I could sell the fact that I’d gone to class.

Again, though, all of that stuff about going to class was unconscious, so my conversation with the all-but-palpable dad continued. My father, my mirror image, my inversion on a theme. I stepped outside and it was raining, so I thought about my father’s route back from work everyday. We lived in a town like the one in *Rosanne* or *Step-by-Step*. Taking the intuitive, shortest route to get home from work involved going through a large portion of residential neighborhood, but if it were raining out, he had the presence of mind to take a different way home. He was startlingly correct in making this adjustment; the 1/10,000 chance he’d hit a kid would ruin his life, making the extra 2
minutes of driving worth it. It was astounding, unfathomably, intimidating how reliable he was at making this small, very obviously +eV adjustment. If he came from the right, that meant the weather was fair; if it were raining out, that meant that we could know he’d be coming from the left—these were necessary statements.

This torrent of thoughts from the city-wide web of rain was interrupted by an ambulance siren. The siren fired a long-dormant trail of synapses that lead me back to a classroom at Northern Catholic. Our teacher was having us pray an Our Father for the sake of the human life the ambulance was fretting to save. I thought it intensely profound—that is, both the 12-year-old me sitting in the classroom and the 20-some-year-old me wandering the rainy streets thinking back to 12-year-old me both thought it was profound. We were saving a human life.

I didn’t think much on this, though, as my thoughts were quickly steered by the radio in the bodega I stopped in. A sports station was embarking on a canonization of the former NFL player Dave Duerson. This was just weeks after the man had martyred himself with a bullet to the chest during the labor disputes between the NFL and its players. He took his own life without shooting himself in the head so that studies could be done on the degenerative brain issues he had accrued from his playing days. And on that day the sports radio host was affirming the realization of his motives by citing the suicide as a turning point for negotiations, as the defining moment for the millionaires gaining ground on the billionaires in their fight for health benefits. The story educed hopefulness and envy from me. An arbitrage of purpose. I tried to think of my own while I wandered the streets.
And eventually that street wandering had turned into subway wandering. I was underground somewhere, like the R train or something. There were tracks on either side of me. I walked along the yellow warning strip for the tracks on my left. I stared down at the rails below as I walked along. I imagined climbing down onto the rails and nestling between the long strips of metal. I closed my eyes as I gently interrogated myself. I was being the good cop:

*The eV?*

*Irrelevant. I won’t be responsible for it anymore.*

*But what dreams may come?*

*None.*

And I heard a train coming and I thought of it drawing over my shoulders like a comforter. As the sound of the train approached, though, I thought of it going over my head, and I imagined immense pressure squeezing from my feet, like a tube of toothpaste, until my head popped from all the blood compacting into it, and I wasn’t going to think about that right then so I opened my eyes.

Luckily the sound of another train cut through my thoughts, and everything around me—things other than just the two rails running perfectly parallel to each other—came back into existence. I saw the lighting on the opposite side of the platform change just enough to indicate that a train was approaching from far away. I deserted the pair of rails next to me and walked at a right angle to the other side.

Across the halfway point of the platform, I became more certain of my intuition that a train was coming. *I can’t always go left.* I was coming up on the yellow warning at the last two feet of the platform. *One of these days I’ll go straight into the East River.*
And all in a flash—in that step between the yellow and the edge of the platform—
I thought of the East River. The elongated, orange sun flickering off of it. And a grave
female voice welled up to my consciousness from somewhere. Whispering to me:

\[
\begin{align*}
Et la mer avait embrassé moi \\
Et la deliver moi de ma caille: \quad \\
Rien ne peut m'arrêter maintenant.
\end{align*}
\]

And I understood it. I had no idea how it translated into English or even what
language it was in the first place, but I understood it.

And in spite of this uncanny unison of consciousness and sub-consciousness on
one purpose to just go straight, something made me veer left at the very last moment—
just as the train thundered by, so close that it physically shook me. I felt eyes on me, and
I tried to act as if nothing was amiss. I summoned all the strength I could into the
hydrogen bonds of the water in my eyes so that they didn’t trickle. But as I started to
calm down, I heard my breathing, and I knew that the short, uneven gasps were giving
me away. The world wobbled on the other side of the aquarium in my eyes. Some social
instinct knew that the only natural thing to do was to get on the train that had just stopped
in the station. Everything in a blur, I stumbled into the nearest pole I could find to lean
on.

Eventually my eyes cleared, and I found myself near an old latina lady praying
the rosary. Eyes clasped with the beads moving through her frail fingers, she mouthed
the words to each of the prayers that were the soundtrack of my childhood. She was
saying them so quickly, and the segues from prayer to prayer were so sparse that her
fingers’ progression through the beads was an almost constant syncopated rhythm.
Grasp, pull-grasp, pull-grasp, pull-grasp. By the time she was on the “for us sinners” of
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one Hail Mary, her fingers were pulling the chain through her hands leaving the last bead behind and grasping the next one at the “full of grace.” And just a dotted eighth later, she was at the last few lines again, pulling toward the next bead, grasping it at the “full of grace.”

Grasp, pull-grasp, pull-grasp.
A syncopated rhythm.
Almost hypnotic.
The Rosary Blues.

After every twelfth bar (10 Hail Marys, 1 Glory Be, 1 Mystery+Our Father), the train would reach its next stop. People marched off; people marched on—pull-grasp, pull-grasp. “Boong, boong,” sang the doors before closing—the first note higher than the second. The train started up again. Eyes clasped, the supplicant’s head unconsciously swayed with the accelerandos and decelerandos of the subway. Grasp, pull-grasp. I was holding onto the rail nearest her seat. Non-consciously the crucifix swayed and twirled just below the prayer’s fingers. I was leaning over her; semi-consciously my body swayed and leaned; I was almost leaning into her. Pull-grasp.

I even started to tap the domino with my finger and then twirl it in the rhythm.

Twirl, tap-twirl, tap-twirl.

The Rosary Blues. The Hail Marys were the I chord, grasp, pull-grasp, pull-grasp, pull-grasp, pull-grasp, pull-grasp. The Glory Bes were the IV chord, pull-grasp. Fittingly the announcement of the Mysteries were the V chord—the Tensest in the progression, demanding Resolution through the Cadence of the Hail Marys, pull-grasp.

The Rosary Blues reminded me of grade school. I remembered it being the exact opposite experience: instead of a hypnotic rhythm and meditative chord progression, it was a thought-intensive tedium. In a self-righteous refusal to let my prayer sessions be
simple, empty chants whose words might just as well be the jingle from the Goldfish commercials, I thought I could make myself special from every other Catholic by recognizing every idea in the prayers as I said them. Not recognize, no that’s not near strong enough a word—I would (try to) contemplate, embody, envision every single line, every idea, every word. I remembered imagining for the line “give us this day . . .” a massive hand coming through the clouds to hand me a calendar, but then for the second half of the line (“ . . . our daily bread”), my mind’s eye zoomed in on the calendar, and it turned into a bag with the words Strohman’s Bakery across the front.

This mental asceticism seemed to have the converse effect I intended. The harder I thought about what the 2,000-year-old words meant, the more the meaning slipped out of my grasp, pull-grasp, pull-grasp.

The swaying crucifix transfixed me. A thought crossed my mind that made me shake my head and rest my palm on my face. Maybe if I didn’t think so much, I wouldn’t’ve grown so sick of forcing myself to believe. Maybe I’d still have faith to that day.

Grasp, pull-grasp, tap-twirl, tap-grasp, pull-twirl.

*I could’ve just woven myself into society.*

That night, Evie and I were kissing and breathing heavily. The soundtrack began in my head. Though it eventually turned into a Nine Inch Nails deeptrack, it started as a
buzz saw—like I had a special type of tinnitus where the ring was being fed through an amplifier with the distortion up to 9.

I noticed that when Evie drew a breath in, it came through my nose, out of my mouth and into her lungs. I looked at her nose as I drew my next breath in and noticed that her nose sucked inward. It was her turn to breathe in again, and again she drew her air from a mixture of what my nose drew in and my lungs exhaled—a wholly symbiotic relationship. What she was inhaling was my exhale, which she then exhaled and so it became my inhale again in an infinite interchange. No air was put to waste; no potential connection was left unconnected. It seemed terribly romantic.

Of course it probably couldn’t literally and scientifically carry on that way. It was probably like the European royal family—what could be more romantic in literature, in lore and in little girls’ fantasies than princes marrying princesses? But looked at literally, the family tree of cousins marrying cousins is not very appealing to the educated senses. On a scientific level, such a small gene pool could not be recycled over and over and be sustained. In the same way, the romance of the symbiotic breath was lost on me when I considered our inbred air becoming more and more imperfect with each generation of inhales and exhales.

But I wasn’t gonna think about that right then, so I started to move down Evie’s body. When I first moved between her legs, I was able to focus for just a bit on the progression of my pleasuring—the teasing, slowly turning into gentle play, slowly instensifying—but the repeated line of the soundtrack was starting to lull me a like chant. *I keep slipping away...* It numbed me, like a mantra. It reminded me of the Rosary Blues.
The soundtrack was briefly interrupted by an ambulance’s siren going by the window, and I was thrown back into grade school. In response to the ambulance, the teacher had us pray an Our Father for the sake of the human life the ambulance was fretting to save. We were saving a life, just so long as we were sincere (whatever that means).

I tried to turn my brain off; the words of the Our Father drifted through my head; “Slipping Away” drifted through my head; the Our Father and the mantra melded; myself keeps slipping away.

Maybe religion was effective when it was a white noise—a white noise I agreed with.

I only got to “Thy will be done” before I started to come back to the scene with my girlfriend where she was tapping my head. I realized that I was unconsciously alternating licks and lyrics along with the interlude of the soundtrack.

I pulled my head up, and she laughed blissfully. I laughed, pretending to mock myself along with her, then went back to what I was doing.

The maddeningly repeated mantra quickly crescendoed into a maddening scream, a plea. The buzzsaw tinnitus cranked the distortion up to 10. Past 10. Up to 11. My mind could only drift for a bit before Evie started to crescendo into a maddening scream, a plea. I realized I was being much rougher than I usually was. I almost let up until I realized that she wasn’t protesting—or at least not literally. Her screams quickly became muffled as she clamped her thighs around my head. She somehow opened herself even more. She began to flood. She used her hands on the back of my head to force me into her. She was drowning me. My entire nose was enveloped. The moisture collected at
the outer edges of my cheeks. Just beyond that was the prickle of her labia’s hair. It smelled of musk. There’s no other way to describe it. Except maybe that it smelled the exact opposite of synthetic. Taste and smell were completely married. It tasted like musk. There’s no other way to describe it. She was drowning me. Even my ears being covered by her thighs—the muffled screams coming from the other side—gave me the impression of being underwater. I was never so turned on. She had completely let herself go. I had let myself go. *Tried to save myself!* *Tried to—tried to save myself!* Anything could happen. I could say I wanted to fuck her like a possum and she would go on cumming. I wasn’t thinking. Everything was a heavy buzz, a white noise. A white noise I could agree with. *I could build my life around this.*
3.2
“Sometimes I write someone else’s name on my underpants to forget who I am.”

My brain racked at work. I had no idea whether or not I was going to show up for
the appointment Babel and I had scheduled for the next day. The thought of ending his
existence by not showing up appealed to me. I thought of breaking the appointment,
breaking up with Evie, breaking off communication with my father. There would be no
need to be anything. I’d take a full time job at the restaurant and work my way up to
Sous Chef. Maybe better yet, cutting ties with everyone would allow me to just play
poker full time. I was already making $50 an hour playing big bet games, and I presumed
it was a very safe estimate to say that would only go up if I took studying seriously and if
my bankroll got large enough to move up from midstakes and if I was playing enough to
move my way up the VIP tiers. I could make SuperNova Elite in 2012. There would be
no expectations. There would be no music where I had to create something from nothing.
There would be no obsessions over how to make society better. There would be no one
but me, my mouth to feed and my own desires to fulfill. There would be no need at all . .
to be! . . . anything.

I fucks up the alternation I was attempting, cursed to myself, kept going,
succeeded enough times in a row to be able to drift into my thoughts again. This time, I
drifted into my illogical thoughts. The ones where I was anxious over who would take
the pill, Robbie or his wife. It was ridiculous. It was results-oriented. Regardless of
which one died, I’d made the same decision based on the same set of information, so I
was exactly as correct or incorrect as I was before the results happened. The outcome
had zero effect on the expected value, only on the actual value. If Robbie took the pill,
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even though he would have accounted for 100% of the deaths, it made no difference to
the fact that my original decision gave a 50% chance of his wife being slain.

I told myself to stfu and focused on sautéing the crucifix. I was getting so good at
it, though, that I was losing interest. This is why I preferred to make games for myself
that I was doomed to never perfect. I was playing with the plastic crucifix that had
broken off of Chef’s rosary he kept in the kitchen. At first, I spun it like a top on the
metal table to see how weighted it was. Since I had little-to-no control over the outcome,
though, I put it in the pan and started flipping it like a sauté. I was trying to alternate
Jesus-side-up flips with Jesus-side-down flips, but it was much more difficult to do than
you might imagine. Since the Jesus-side-down side was so bulky and didn’t lay flat in
the pan, Jesus’ face would smack against the pan and flip Jesus-side-up a lot of the time.
I started to get better at it after some practice with very gentle flips that didn’t have the
cross get any air—it would just slide up the curled-up end of the pan, stand on it’s
tippitoes and gently tumble to the other side. I also had to ease my wrist in just the right
position so that the metal pan braced the landing, so it didn’t bounce. When I’d finally
managed 30 successes in a row, I got bored/proud enough to stop and turn around

only to have a chill run through me. I found Chef staring at me from the other
side of the kitchen with a stare so steady and intent that it did unspeakable things to my
innards. Something about the scene—I think mostly the fact that he called no attention to
his catching me in this action, even though I’m sure that my blasphemy was pissing him
off—resonated as some sort of perverse voyeurism that disturbed me.

“H—” is all I got out.

“Why do you go on being such a miserable being?”
There was a nameless darkness to Chef’s cold opening. It felt like a dream. Chef looked and sounded mostly the same, but his actions were off just enough to give a sense of an ominousness that wasn’t bound to physics—or reality at all. The rules of the world seemed changed in that confrontation.

“Wh—”

“Why live as such a miserable fuck? If your lack of faith has made you so tirelessly . . . miserable, then why don’t you just have faith? It seems simple.”

I knew exactly what my answer was, but it was the last thing I was going to say. I was no longer socially retarded enough to say that whether believing in God would make me happy or not was moot. I couldn’t get into how I already did my time being a Catholicistic atheist for years, telling myself that I believed in God, waiting to get confirmation that God existed, not even vaguely considering the almost certainty that I wasn’t going to be any different from anyone else—that I was going to be the 13 billionth Homo homo sapien to pass away before ever seeing proof of God. I couldn’t tell him how I finally realized that belief doesn’t work like deciding what sports team to root for. Becoming a Mets fan when growing up in Brewers country was as easy as buying Mets gear, watching Mets games and being pleased when the Mets won. Believing in God was not as easy wearing crucifixes and showing up for Church and being pleased by what apologists had to say. I couldn’t go on to repeat the fact that I’d tried that for years, and it did not make me a believer. The last thing I could have done was talk about how I also think it vastly more preferable to believe that the Bubonic Plague was caused by benevolent aliens who were speeding up the process to get to the Renaissance and out of
the inescapable doldrums of the Dark Ages, and yet I was wholly incapable of believing anything other than the fact that rat shit had more to do with it.

I’d come to terms with my double consciousness. I’d learned to not go on rants about how stupid batting average is for measuring a batter’s prowess because people hated you to tell them that tradition and “common sense” is sometimes wrong. I’d learned to admonish my music taste and pretend to believe in the retardedly ironic position that liking any off-the-beaten-path music is snobbish and closed-minded.

In short, I learned to be a different me to everyone out there, one that could satisfy people and not shake things up too much. It had been a long time since I felt despair over betraying the real me (whatever that means).

My thoughts were my thoughts; my words were my words; they knew better than to intermingle.

And while I thought this, I said, “Hm, I’ll think about it.”

It was later that night, after I’d gotten home from work; Evie was easing her way onto me on top, and I knew immediately that I wasn’t going to last long. I had The Flashbulb’s “Lawn Wake IX” stuck in my head (not that I knew which exact track it was at the time). I was trying to find something to think about, so I didn’t go so soon. I thought about the ethics of masturbating while Evie was away. I started to decide that if I’d masturbated earlier that week, then I wouldn’t be so rearing to go by the time we did
it, and I wouldn’t be going so soon, so I started to lean toward the idea that it was good both for Evie and me if I masturbated while she was away.

It didn’t help that this was one of those rare times that I wasn’t using a condom. Evie took the pill, and as the prospect of her getting knocked up seemed like less and less of a disaster, we made less of a massive fuss over doubling the protection. Not only was I not used to everything being so much more sensitive, but I started to realize that I got some sort of turn on from actually ejaculating into Evie without any obstruction. This reminded me of back in high school—in my Catholic days before I was having sex—when I used to find the legitimacy in the belief that using contraception was a perversion of the sexual act. I’d imagine how putting a membrane between the two lovers completely robbed the act of intimacy; I’d ruminate on how keeping the seed from the egg robbed the act of purpose—tricked our brain into thinking we were taking part in the most vulnerable, potential-laden, purposeful act humans are able to take part in, but then sheathing the vulnerability, rigging against the potential and eradicating the purpose. The last remaining relic of my Catholicism.

This train of thought was far too closely related to the exact thing I was trying to get my mind off of, so it wasn’t working and all the warmth was starting to go to my crotch. I tried to think of a different song that wasn’t so damned urgent, but I can’t exactly choose what song to have stuck in my head.

So as I looked up at Evie—about to go—she reared back so that her body was at a right angle with mine. But then Evie’s face twisted horrifically. At first I thought she was orgasming, which almost got me off, but then I realize she had gone dumbfounded—
like she had seen a ghost. She covered herself with one arm and jumped off of me against the wall and pulled the covers over her shoulders all in one move.

“What’s up, what’s the matter, what’s wrong?”

“Oh my God,” deep breath exhale, “Oh my God.” She rolled over and buried her face into my shoulder, and I thought that she was just breathing heavily at first, but I started to feel wetness trickle onto my shoulder.

“Are you okay? What’s wrong??”

“I saw someone. I know I saw someone. A man was peeking over the shed, staring at me.”
I just sat back and waited for him to type.

I was nervous at what he was going to say.

I hung on Babel’s words, but I hated the bit about having a short list of people he had in mind that I could’ve done the job on. Of course he could guess within a few people whom I was targeting and of course the second one of them went down he’d know it was that nameless spoony guy on the internet who did it. Just another thing I hadn’t considered. Like how I, for the most part, hadn’t thought of the possibility of the wife taking the pill.

I could tell that he would give me every last second I needed to formulate a response to what he’d just laid on me. I couldn’t tell if I loved him or hated him for that.
Even though it wasn’t a spoken conversation, the emphaticism of his speech was palpable—just as if he’d been shouting the diatribe, the world seemed to go completely quiet in comparison once he came to his abrupt ending, like when the air conditioner turns off, and though you didn’t even realize that it was making any noise, the second it turns off, the silence deafens. The silence was broken by the dry smack of my mouth opening. My arid tongue managed to coolingly desiccate even more on my next intake of breath. The world tasted like nothing; it sounded like nothing; it smelled like nothing. Even the palpability of Babel’s words were slowly fading to nothing.

<spony316> well we’re certainly in disagreement on the wife. maybe, just maybe, I'm undervaluing the good of the lobbyist’s death and i’m almost definitely overvaluing the taboo of killing in the first place but we’re miles apart on the wife
</spony316>

<ThePsycho_Babel> meh
<ThePsycho_Babel> its a moot point anyway
<ThePsycho_Babel> you know it
<ThePsycho_Babel> i know it
<ThePsycho_Babel> lets move on
<spony316> and how in the fuck is it a moot point?!
</spony316>

<ThePsycho_Babel> sigh
<ThePsycho_Babel> lets say for some backwards ass reason you came to me asking advice on a poker hand
<ThePsycho_Babel> you say “so should I call and go all in or fold”
<ThePsycho_Babel> and I ask “well what happened on the last hand you went all in on? did you win, lose or split the pot?”

Pause. A long pause. Babel was very patient before making his next comment.

<ThePsycho_Babel> ill take your silence to mean you get my point

My forehead had found its way into my hands. With elbows on either side of the keyboard, interlocked fingers suspended my head above the keyboard. I had a long, unwinnable staring contest with the “g” and “h” of the keyboard. My right hand unwove its fingers from their counterparts, and my pinky hunt-and-pecked the two letters for my response.

<spony316> ok
I leaned my head all the way back, clinched my eyes as tightly closed as they
would clinch and let out a grunting sigh—“ooooooouuuuuaaaahhhhh”—as I let my
hands type out the continuation.

<i>spoony316</i> i'll hear out your idea.

It sounded just completely, insanely cheesy at first. I mean, he opened by saying
that he’d just read a really cool book and it had a really cool murder idea in it. So, yeah,
there was already a bad first impression, and now there was a bad second impression to
go with it. But I heard him out.

Basically, he had read a Sherlock Holmes where the killer gives each of his
victims the choice between two pills, one of which was poisoned, the other of which was
innocuous—kinda like that one scene <i>Princess Bride</i>, minus the whole thing with the
antidote. Anyway, I digress. The killer in the book just left it up to fate, let it come down
to a coinflip as to who dies—kinda like Russian Roulette. Anyway, Babel’s idea was to
do a similar sort of thing but to rig the game—kinda like a carnival. Or <i>Princess Bride</i>
for that matter. Actually, probably like Russian Roulette, too. Anyway, when he was all
done explaining:

<i>spoony316</i> i understand the ethics favor me being closer to the crime scene so i can
ensure everything goes as plans and reduce variance but i don't know how i feel about
being so close to the crime scene. it mad increases all the risks on me
<i>ThePsycho_Babel</i> ok i know things have been heavy tonight but heres the way I look at
it
<i>spoony316</i> go on
<i>ThePsycho_Babel</i> why did you get caught up in this in the f
<i>spoony316</i> how is this “the way you look at it”
<i>ThePsycho_Babel</i> because i bet i know the answer
<i>ThePsycho_Babel</i> so it's kinduva game of what do i have in my pocket
<i>spoony316</i> well then why don't you just tell me whats in your pocket then
<i>ThePsycho_Babel</i> look
<i>ThePsycho_Babel</i> im sorry i really am, im not trying to make this like pulling teeth but it
inevitably is
<i>ThePsycho_Babel</i> for what its worth im wholly aware that i have the benefit of just being
the ideas guy, an easier said than done thing
<i>ThePsycho_Babel</i> you get the shit end of the stick and im not gonna pretend to know
what its like to be in your spot but i might as well do my best to give you some advice
I sighed again, but this one was more of the hopeless type of sigh. As I typed out my answer, I could’ve cried just seeing how corny it was, I really could’ve.

<spoony316> it was to give my life purpose. its cause it was one thing I thought I could be certain I was doing right
<spoony316> obviously that last part isn’t the case anymore though
<ThePsycho_Babel> EXACTLY! I knew that was your answer cause that was the only answer there could be. look this might sound a little rough
<ThePsycho_Babel> but again the thing about being able to come at it from an emotionless angle gives me the advantage of coming to these sorts of answers
<ThePsycho_Babel> if this is the best way you know how to give your life purpose and if all you care about is making a positive impact on the world then its worth it for you to, as the saying goes, take this fucker out or die trying
4.1

“I define myself
By how well I hide.”

I was picking from about half an aisle worth of choices. It was all about which one would look best. I picked one up in my hand, felt its weight, inspected every aspect of the barrel and handle and trigger. An intimidating-looking man in a Harley-Davidson tanktop walked by, and I played it cool. Once he left the aisle, I went back to my inspection. The sights didn’t look quite right, so I put it back.

There was plenty left to choose from though, and I went to the next one, but the barrel looked so long that I could practically imagine pulling the trigger and having a flag pop out that said, “BANG!” Just as I was about to pick up another, a middle-aged mother approached, so I took my hand off the gun and made it seem like I was looking at something else. Her child trailed behind her nagging the mom about something, and I tried to be nice and smile at him as he went by but he was too busy complaining to notice me. The two steered off to school supplies, so I went back to looking for the right gun to execute the third job.

I ended up finding one that I liked, but it was quite a bit cheaper than the rest and it didn’t feel right to get the cheapest thing they had for such an important use. But then I realized that it was probably only cheaper because the rest of them came with caps, and I obviously wouldn’t need caps, so I picked up the one that looked the realest and took it to
The area behind our duplex with the shed and all was a massive clutter. There were pallets and paint cans and spare bricks and unrecognizable parts to things strewn all over the place. I took one of the spare pieces of cardboard from the side of the shed only to find that it was soggy from rain. It didn’t matter, though. I took the cap gun out of the bag I’d gotten from my first trip to the North Jersey Duane Reade, and the spray paint can that I’d gotten from a separate trip from a separate North Jersey Duane Reade.

I placed them both on the soggy cardboard and checked my phone. I’d set my laptop on the dining room table facing the front door to the apartment with the volume all the way up so that I’d know when Evie got home, this way I could pack everything up and come inside. I put my screensaver on, and she never really used my computer so it was unlikely she’d notice, but even if she did, I’d just tell her I’d accidentally called myself and left it on. What reason would she have to suspect much of anything. Anyway, there was nothing stirring according to my phone, so I started the spray painting.

Things had been moving along much more quickly on this job than with either of the first two. The other ones required research, which in turn required getting enough of a sample size to find the research reliable, and then they required planting something that could take as much as a month to result in anything. I just had to prepare all the supplies
and then execute. Even determining the person to have at the receiving end of the plan was decided quickly.

I didn’t much know my way around spray paint, but I just kinda doused the gun in that shit. I was satisfied with my work and was able to put everything back as was, putting the gun between a pile of bricks and the wall that was at the back of our landlord’s property. I disposed of the cardboard and was back in my place washing my hands before Evie got back.

While I waited for Evie to get back, I prepared a surprise for her that I knew she’d love. It only took me about an hour to do, and it had gotten me in a bit of a lovey-dovey mood, so I started looking around online for engagement rings.

I don’t know why I did that when I was in lovey-dovey moods; all it did was stress me out and get me completely out of that mood. You see, Evie was an American, and this meant that I was getting a diamond for her, end of discussion. My thoughts were kind of along these lines: it seemed like the most obviously -eV decision, like ever. I was so far from comprehending how it made sense to perpetuate the absolute motherfuckin’ horrors of an entire region just so that I could prove to my bride-to-be that she’s not marrying someone who’s cheap. But if the Disney narrative’s 20+ year indoctrination of American girls had taught them anything, it was that you’d rather be wedded for life with someone completely bereft of all ethical perspective than to wed someone who would question even the smallest aspect of the wedding tradition.
Maybe it would have made me feel better if I’d thought that Evie’s reasoning was that buying a diamondless ring makes you look like a pedophile. Having your family think that you’re marrying a pedophile is obviously a bad thing. That makes sense.

But I didn’t think of that, so I slammed the laptop shut. My mood was completely ruined. This roadblock to us taking the next step seemed immutable. Diamondless engagement rings were so far out of the realm of acceptability that I felt certain that wasn’t going to happen. Either I was going to give in to the obviously -eV choice, or we were never going to forge the eternity of our love for each other.

Evie and I had a chill night. We just interlocked on the couch and watched TV for like two and half episodes of House Hunters. Though we snuggled as close and kissed as much as usual, I was wary about making any moves. We hadn’t been intimate since the incident a week earlier when she thought she’d seen someone (I was never even finished off), and I wanted to make sure I didn’t make her uncomfortable. It felt like a bit of a waiting game, seeing who made the move first, and in the absence of this habitual segue between the couch and the bed, the move never really seemed to happen.

Finally, I stood up and moved over to the piano. She looked over, curious at first, then hopeful.

I turned on the synthesizer and all of the accompanying equipment, and perhaps seeing some confirmation in my face of her hopes, Evie ran over.
I sounded the high, accented piano chords to open things up. The piano throughout the whole song was only in the treble, so I was able to play the bassline with my left hand on the second-tier synthesizer to complete the oom-pah rhythm. After a bar, I produced the four rhythmic claps with my right-foot pedal and then introduced the electric drum track I’d prepared earlier that day with the foot pedal by my left foot. There was a guitar strum that goes along with the –pah of the rhythm in the original song, but I didn’t bother with this for such a silly diddy.

Evie recognized the song immediately but waited for the chorus to sing along so she could hear the menial adjustments I would always make to the verses:

_Eeeevie sells her paper to the market place_  
_And I’m the singer in a one-man band;_  
_Evie says to me, “Bro, I like your face,”_  
_And I sing this as I take her by the hand:_

_Ob-la-di, ob-la-da life goes on, brah!_  
_La la how the life goes on._  
_Ob-la-di, ob-la-da life goes on, brah!_  
_La la how the life goes on._

I skipped the second verse and went to the interlude. For the brass part here I coulda broken out my organ foot pedals, but, again, that was just overkill for such a song. So I ditched the bass line whenever the brass part came in and crossed my left hand over my right on the second tier of synthesizers and played the treble melody.

_In a couple of years, we will build a home sweet home_ (brass line)  
_With a couple of kids running in the yard_  
_Of Evie and Adam Berj-Rones._ (she laughed at this hacking of my own name)
At the final chords, I hit the right pedal which simultaneously stopped the drum line and played the track I’d layered earlier with hearty Ho Ho Ho’s and feminine cackles and such. Evie loved the little touches like that regardless of how easy they were to pull off.

“Ho ho ho ho,” she mimicked holding her belly and clasping her eyes. “I love it,” she bent down for a kiss and came up beaming and laughing (genuinely now), “It’s been so long since you’ve done that. Only complaint is,” she playfully jabbed, “you know you skipped my favorite verse!” she playfully jabbed.

And then, she cocked her head up toward the bay window and let out an horrifyingly screeching scream. It’s truly difficult to even begin to describe how wrenching the scream was. It was such a massive outlier that it seems to envelop every proximal instance of time and space into its surrealness. I can remember nothing about the moment of the scream, other than the scream. I can remember nothing about the
moments just after it, other than the scream—still ringing in my ears with such lucidity that it haunted me in a way more literal than I’ve ever meant that word. I can remember nothing about the normalcy of the moments just before the scream from any perspective other than to juxtapose it with the complete meta-normalcy of the moment just after it: the scream itself. This makes that moment the most surreal of them all to remember.

Anyway, this is all to say that at some point in some way that I can’t remember or understand, the information was transferred between Evie and me of why she was screaming. She had seen a man looking at her. It was the same man she had seen the other night. This time, they exchanged stares for long enough that she was able to describe him in detail. He had dark, eerily attentive eyes. He was bald. He was sitting on the stairs leading to one of the duplexes across the street. He had a book in his lap that was open, but he wasn’t reading from it—just staring into Evie’s eyes.

Now—with no doubt whatsoever left in Evie that she had in fact seen someone staring at us and with most of my own doubt shattered—we both took the situation much more seriously. By the time we were far enough in time from the scream—that is, by the time both of our bloods had uncurdled—the man was gone from sight. Evie had to strongly and persistently urge me to go outside and investigate. I don’t know exactly what we wanted to accomplish out of having me go outside to find this person—maybe, if nothing else, she just wanted to confirm that these sightings were real, and I was curious enough and doubting enough to feel an urge to be convinced; regardless, I was eventually swayed to go outside.

I unjammed the 80-year-old door to our apartment from its doorframe and walked down the hall to the door that led outside. I stopped there for a moment, still palpably
I walked out into the street and continued to be haunted by the sound. I was being so de-humanized by it (or maybe re-humanized?) that my suddenly logically bereft mind was recklessly considering anything possible. The first passerby I encountered, though it was a female jogger, could be the voyeur who was waiting to run around the corner and stab me to death in an instant; the globe of the nearest street lamp could be a spy camera from the government that knew all along of my felonies and was waiting for the right moment to vaporize me in its deceptive, yellow light; the street I was walking across could suddenly turn into a massive, black anaconda with two parallel, yellow stripes running the length of its back, and it could jolt me into the air in one move, ensnare me, suffocate me to death and swallow me whole.

I started talking to myself aloud in an attempt to drown out the scream, but it was futile. The haunting of the scream wasn’t an audible noise that could be drowned out; it came from within—remained within to put every organ in a fit of unrest, to fire each and every one of the millions of synapses in my brain all at once. So that I was helplessly haunted by the scream. Not only can I not describe it, I can’t even describe how difficult it is to describe. I guessed that some several-millenia-old instinct had been unlocked in me. She had unearthed a 10,000-year old sound used to alert everyone within earshot that her children were being eaten by wolves, and it had unearthed within me a 10,000-year old purpose of being jarred enough to be stripped of all the pauses of my reasoning faculties—senseless enough to throw myself into a hopeless battle against the wolf. Like Evie had been unknowingly honed by hundreds of generations of evolution to produce a sound so horrifying that it had unknowingly honed in me a response that transcended all sense, logic and realism.
raving. I can’t even begin describe what the haunting of the scream was like; I’m doing a terrible job of it right now.

I passed several alleyways, walked around several corners, passed many cars that were parked closely enough together that there were glaring blind spots, and at each of these moments my brain collated every last harrowing imagining in the world—the entire realm of possible and impossible. Just so long as it was harrowing. Millions upon millions of renditions of death and abandonment and failure were imagined at each opportunity and hundreds of opportunities emerged: of alleyways, of corners, of cars parked closely enough together. I was walking through a Hollywood set and didn’t know which character of which horror movie I was, but it wasn’t going to end well. I was in a labyrinth of streets and alleyways and apartment windows and fire escapes and dumpsters.

♣ ♣ ♣ ♣ ♣ ♣

I couldn’t sleep that night. You might be able to guess what I heard in my head every time I closed my eyes. So I didn’t close my eyes. And yet, I lay on my back staring at black for a couple hours, waiting for some magic to come out of nowhere that would somehow allow me to fall asleep, but then I finally gave up. I rolled over and kissed Evie, partially as a loving gesture but mostly as an excuse to wake her up so I could free my hand from under her neck.

*
Back when we had roommates, Evie would be pleasantly annoyed with my fits of sleeplessness on behalf of the others in the apartment. When I’d slink out of bed, she’d sweetly say, “Make yourself a ghost.” She’d have a childish grin on her face, as if she literally had Casper on her mind whenever she said it. Of course, she just meant to stay out of people’s way, but I eventually came to think I had become an apparition, a haunting: what was known to be there but made to appear as though it wasn't. I became the door that squeaked shut just as you turned the corner, the light that snapped off a split second before you could confirm it was on in the first place, the thing on just the other side of the wall that wished you would just fucking leave.

* 

It was unpleasantly lukewarm outside. Since, you know, it was a March night, I’d worn a zip-up hoodie before I left, but then I took it off, and now I was carrying it, until I stopped in a storefront window, and I begrudged how I looked in the reflection with the hoodie cradled in my arm. Walking around like that, staring up and down the streets of the Upper East Side would probably make me look like a tourist. Of course, I don’t know why I was concerned with looking like a badass when that was probably counterproductive to my objective, so I just left it off.

When I started walking again, I heard a far-off “clop, clop, clop” coming from behind me in the empty, late-night streets of Queens; and then, thinking retroactively, I realized that noise had been going on before I stopped at the window, too—the only time it had ceased was while I was looking in the window.

*
Babel and I didn’t think that we needed to do on-site research around our target for the third job, but with my sleeplessness affording me a few hours to kill, it seemed worth the trip to Manhattan. After an N train to 53rd and Lexington and then a green-line train (lol east-side subways), I was on Miggy’s block. Miggy was the target for our third job, in case you didn’t follow that.

* 

I’ve been spooked pretty bad before, and it always feels so real. But regardless of that feeling, it’s pretty much always been irrational. By the way, by spooked, I don’t mean just scared.

Like that one time I was running down the stairs to get a bowl of Lucky Charms, and I thought I heard an old, crackly female voice say, “Hello, dear.” I mean, there were like four theories I could think of: either my little brother was fuckin’ with me, or an elderly woman had stumbled upon the wonders of invincibility and her first wish for how to use those powers was to watch a 13-year old run down the stairs to make a bowl of cereal; either my fear of decrepit women (who’s with me on this one?) was taking the opportunity of my noisy feet to interject a projection of imagined noise into my mind, or the purgatoried soul, in a desperate attempt to get her message out to the living, went through all the excruciating means necessary to cross dimensions, and her message were the two words of choice “hello” and “dear” and her auditor of choice was a marshmallow-craving teenager. But none of that fancy rationalization mattered, obviously. I was spooked just the same. I don’t know, I guess I don’t need to go into great detail to convey the fact that people are legitley shaken by stuff in spite of reason.
Anyway, Evie’s scream, the fact that the streets were dark and empty, the fact that I was being mad paranoid about the “clop” I’d heard earlier all lend to the argument that I was on edge, which lends to the argument that I was merely a victim of my irrationality. This fact did not in any way, shape or form temper the unabashed, bat-shitty fit of craze I was thrown into when I felt as though I saw a face peering out at me from the exact alleyway I was scoping out for the third job.
Yesterday was March 28th. The day began by not ending. More notably, it ended by not ending. Life went on; the universe proceeded to exist; the doomsday preacher had been wrong. Wholly, inarguably, inextricably wrong.

It was a Monday and as usual Evie was starting out the week by going out of town. She made me wake up early with her to walk her to the subway. She had become extremely skittish since the night of the scream. She had all the blinds closed to every room; she refused to take the garbage out, instead leaving the bags for me with little notes on them; she was waiting until I got home to go to the bathroom. And we’re talking about someone who I used to have to remind to close the blinds when she was getting dressed and such. It was strange witnessing this in Evie. It wasn’t just that she was scared; she somehow seemed fundamentally changed. She wasn’t just scared of a strange man; she was now ashamed of herself.

I didn’t bother going back to bed when I returned home from dropping her off at the station, but I wasn’t able to motivate myself to get started on my day either. I wasn’t asleep; I wasn’t awake; I spent hours like this. Finally, when it was almost noon, I went to work on the errand I had planned for the day. For March 28th.

I slid a plastic bin out from under the bed, found the latex gloves and snapped one onto each hand. I opened my closet where I had my work clothes, got my shower cap and slid that over my hair; it was a chore making sure no stray wisps were hanging out. I went to the H&M bag I’d left on a chair in the bedroom and pulled out the red turtleneck I’d just bought and went to put it on only to realize my error in putting the shower cap on.
first. I threw off the shower cap, put on the turtleneck and started the process of housing my hairs over again. I went into the kitchen and pulled out the pills from our vitamin cabinet. I walked back into the hallway to our linen closet and dug threw a basket of first aid stuff until I found the syringe. I walked back down the hallway—past the kitchen as part of my very-obviously-non-optimal route to collect all these items—so that I could get the soft plastics, which were in my desk with other random wires and strings for my instruments and studio equipment. I took out the molds next, which were with the measuring utensils for baking. I fetched the fateful ingredients from the medicine cabinet in the bathroom. There were a couple of additions to this routine, too. I searched our baking items for the darkest food coloring we had, which was an opaque green. And then, the final ingredient that I took out was the metal shavings.

I pierced several of the vitamin E pills and spilled their innards into a small pyrex bowl. For the first one, I added as much of the food dye as I could without messing with the proportions. I then added the metal shavings, making sure the coloring was opaque enough so that the specks weren’t noticeable. I mixed everything thoroughly and was ready to blow mold the gelatin capsule. I realized that, since I wasn’t actually trying to disguise these pills as vitamins this time, I didn’t have to be so technical, but I stayed true to routine anyway. Once I was done, I put the finished product in a Monday pill container with a normal vitamin E. I took a magnet from the fridge and rubbed it, magnet-side-up, against the bottom of the bottle. The green pill moved wherever the magnet moved. The normal vitamin E stayed put, obviously. I made quick, jerky movements to make sure the green one didn’t move too sluggishly or unpredictably. The pill darted around the shallow container, and I was satisfied.
For the second pill, I used the same mixture of vitamins and food coloring but then added the poisonous mixture. This obviously diluted the coloring a bit, so I added more until it became the same shading as the small, elliptical pill I’d already made. Once done, I blow molded another capsule. Without paying too much attention, I threw the second pill into the Monday pill container with the identical one and shook it up. I purposefully lost track of which was which to make sure I couldn’t tell by sight. I couldn’t. I also made sure that I could tell by using the magnet. I could.

I put everything back, right where it belonged: gloves in the trash, shower cap in the closet, turtleneck in the drawer, the vitamins in the cabinet, etc and so forth. I put the pills in the Monday container and placed it in the drawer where I kept my shirts. I didn’t bother hiding it too well. If someone found it, then so what? I had some pills in my shirt drawer; what could that possibly mean? Keep shit simple, spoony.

Then, I had some real people errands to run. I went to the bodega to pick up a few things for dinner that night. Once there, my ear was caught by one of their teasers; “After the break, hear the story of the most important man in American politics you’ve never heard of.”

This caught my interest. News always tended toward sensationalism and hyperbole, but surely I couldn’t pass up on hearing about the most important man. Maybe if I was lucky, he’d live in the New York area, and I could make a last minute change to the person I had in mind for the third job. Again, the research process of this job was so minimal that it wouldn’t be too big of a headache to make the switch.

To bide my time, I looked more thoroughly than usual for the right carton of eggs. I proceeded to the small produce cooler and took my time looking for the right bell
peppers and the right onions. The first few onions I looked at were too pristine. Since this was for a meal I was making that night, I could afford to get something that was a little soft, one that seemed like it would go bad soon. It didn’t make sense for me to take the long-lasting ones away from people who were using them to cook for their families for the next few weeks. I thought, in fact, that probably no one would buy the softening ones if I didn’t, which seemed like a waste for the store owner and of the world’s food resources. Finally, I found a couple of onions that had the smallest margin between my use of them that night and their decay so that I was able to maximize the overall food value in the world. Searching through the bell peppers I realized that instead of just getting two good ones, I could get a collection of 4 or so that all had multiple brown and soft spots that I would have to cut out and discard. I had the time and inclination to deal with the mild inconvenience of doing that (I actually enjoyed the static of things like cutting vegetables or driving to class or the like as they were rare opportunities to feel productive even though I’m just gliding through on auto-pilot). My father paid for my groceries anyway, and two extra bell peppers certainly wouldn’t put a dent in our family’s quality of life.

When I was just about done with all of this, the news radio station had come back from commercial, after playing the 650AM jingles and taglines and all that garbage:

“Over the course of the last two decades, there had grown to be an influence on the policies that came out of Washington. One that was so strong that many would grimly joke that Capitol Hill had its own Executive Branch.”

Just imagine all of this being spoken in that prototypical cadence every single field reporter had. Dum-dum-dum-dum-DUM (high note with a fermata for dramatic
pause)……dumdumdudm (this last part in a quick, falling cadence). It didn’t matter how non-climactic the words scripted to come after the fermata were; they would still insist on framing every sentence this way: This particular dog WAS……..being walked by his owner. In spite of this, I was able to stay focused on the report:

“This powerful arm of the Legislative system wasn’t housed within the halls of congress, though. It wasn’t found anywhere on the Hill, or even in Washington DC at all.”

Everything was becoming more and more familiar in a way that bore my attention into the sounds coming from the ceiling of the bodega. It wasn’t a déjà vu. It didn’t have that same confounding mysticism to it. It wasn’t a misfiring of the synapses. It wasn’t a programming error in The Matrix. Instead, the familiarity seemed concrete. This was familiar for a reason, and every word got me closer to why. And as I got closer to the why, my feelings oscillated—no, that’s not near strong enough a word because it wasn’t just between two different feelings; it was along a whole spectrum—no, fuck that it was along a whole plane of human emotive responses, so I wasn’t oscillating between emotions, I was swerving and swirling, dipping under and hurdling into and all sorts of things until these emotive responses seemed to have a traceable arc toward something (at last!).

“This influence came from a remote office in Manhattan—from the very home itself of one Robert Bateman. And over 20 years later, this man who pulled the 400-mile-long strings has passed away. While the causes of his death are still unknown . . . ”

Pokerface. The news report went on for the entire segment between commercial breaks, going through the long litany of policies Robbie had influenced and the clients
that served as his motivations for doing so. I had heard of some of the bigger ones, of course, but since I kept my research sparse, there were plenty of surprises. Most of these new nuggets of information bolstered my confidence but some of them only served to make me annoyed at the report for falling for some obviously fallacious enthymemes, which made me vehement at the reporter and the script writer for forcing me to defend Robbie. Anyway, my emotional traversions continued to vary a bit, but were steadying toward one distilled emotion. I kept my external pokerface (as much as my innards bombarded against the back of my ribcage, looking to rupture through into the real world) until, at long last, something came through the speakers that would seem unsuspicious for me to cheer about.

“The Yankees beat the Orioles today 3-1...”

“Yeeeeeessssssss!” I shouted, chock full of fist pumps and all. I was so overwhelmed with joy and relief that I didn’t even feel remorse about cheering over a Yankees win.

I paid for everything I’d picked out and dashed out of the store. With a massive weight off my shoulders (suppressing my logos, which knew that none of this affected the ethics and utility of my actions weeks earlier), I resolved to go through with the third job that night.
4.3

“Feel it coming apart
Well, at least I tried.”

I was on the above-ground subway platform in Queens, waiting for the N/Q to Lexington and 59th where I could transfer back up to the Upper East Side. I was staring between the rails. The domino was twirling between its fingers.


I decided to walk along the yellow strip beside the rails. I vaguely hoped that someone along the way would try to jump in front of the train. I imagined leaping onto the tracks, throwing them out of the train’s way just in time. Sacrificing my own life to save someone else’s—an arbitrage of purpose.

But wait, I told myself, if someone of less value than me were to be spared while I perished, then I’d still be acting unethically. I didn’t think THAT highly of myself, but even assuming that I was a median value-ite, saving someone about whom I knew nothing was 0eV, so I’d have to assess that it’d be worth it to save the person that jumped onto the tracks. I couldn’t think of a way I could make an assessment of value in that split second; the arbitrage was seeming less and less tenable.

The train showed up uneventfully, and I was forced to grumble and get on.

I stared directly at a single S-shaped gum stain on the floor of the train and tried to slip into a white noise of thoughtlessness. I twirled the domino in my left pocket and shook my right leg vigorously and alternated squeezes and relaxes on the pill bottle in my right pocket. But at our second stop, this girl in her early twenties caught the train’s
attention; I mean, she barely caught our attention. She ran into the doorway and stood their holding the doors for like 5 seconds until her friend or boyfriend or husband was able to get on. The train looked at them—they didn’t even stare; they just looked and noticed the situation and immediately went on to their next thoughts. The girl in her early 20s tried to understate how pleased she was about the whole thing, but she was failing; she was clearly very pleased with herself about the whole thing. For fuck’s sake, I think she was pleasing herself by trying and purposefully failing at trying to be coy about how pleased she was with herself. Miserable fuck, I thought to myself. That this was her shining moment—the one thing she could do that made her interesting was to hold the subway up for like 2 seconds. This fucking pleased over people looking at her—not even staring.

I clutched the pill bottle in my right pocket tighter than I ever had before.

We were at my transfer within a few stops. I got up to get off behind a tall, wide black man who had one hand in his coat pocket, standing abnormally close to a smaller black man in front of him, and for a split second my imagination got carried away and I thought he might be holding up the smaller guy. This involuntary thought was immediately followed by the voluntary thought of reprimanding myself for thinking such a thing when I probably wouldn’t think the same thing if the two were white.

It was pretty obviously a racist thought process but I couldn’t decide if it was unethical. A series of questions ran through my head. Nothing bad came of it, but is it a sign of something else -eV in my character? Is it a totally innocuous thought process that becomes deplorable the second it’s voiced? If we’re all racist to some degree or another, then was it actually plus eV that, even though I thought it, I immediately reprehended it?
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Is it somehow better if I decided I still would’ve assumed that it was a hold up if it were
two white people? That seems like an obvious “yes,” but how the hell is being cynical
toward MORE humans better than only being cynical toward some?

The incalculability of it all confused and disillusioned me, so I ran to the nearest
public restroom to regroup.

I counted my deep breaths as I sat on the toilet with my pants still on. My eyes
settled into the floor until I was staring at the pattern of tiles surrounding my feet. The
design was the retro kind with the small, inch-by-inch, tiles of one color with sporadic
inclusion of a contrasting one. A pang of nostalgia ran through me when I saw this
design.

My grandmother’s bathroom used to have the same design. It’s kinda where I got
my gaming career started. I’d always loved math conceptually, but never did well in
classes. When it came time for the test, I’d only get full credit on a quarter of the
questions: another quarter I would do all the work right but make a silly mistake
somewhere along the way and get the wrong answer, another quarter I would get the
answer right but come to it a completely different way than we were taught, so the
teacher would say I didn’t learn the material right, and the remaining quarter I would get
no credit because I did it a different way than we learned in class and made a silly
mistake so the work and the answer were wrong. Anyway, when I was 13, I spent a
couple weeks of the summer in Chicago with my grandmother, and I spent every shower
looking out over her dark-colored tile floor with sporadic white tiles included throughout.
I wondered if the tiles were really placed randomly or if there was some sort of non-
obvious pattern. I was incredulous that there wasn’t some order to them; even though I
was thoroughly entrenched in Catholicism and was by no means a believer in determinism, I couldn’t imagine how there could be a true randomness to human action. This was back when school had me convinced I was terrible at math and before I’d practiced figuring out these types of algorithms, so it took me forever to invent the wheel conceptually. So I spent a whole week of half-hour-long showers figuring out the unconscious algorithm the floorers had used. This was my maternal grandmother, the old-school Catholic one, and she scorned me every night that I got out of the shower. She told me how long showers would make me go blind and all that. This made my obsession over the tiles seem unnecessarily, dramatically taboo, which added even more allure to the fact that nobody seemed to think about things in the world quite like I had for those few weeks.

I finally cracked the patter and was so excited about it that I stayed up the entire night. I drew out a large tile grid, figuring out where all the tiles would continue to be if my grandmother’s bathroom had been larger. Then, I tried to think if there was any way to bring in the same floorers to see if they would in fact make the same design, which—though I didn’t use this type of terminology at the time—would make my study falsifiable. (For anyone who knows anything about Random Number Generators would know that this would be ridiculous because even if there’s an algorithm to our thoughts, the pattern would continue unconsciously so that by the time I brought the floorers back years later, they would have already moved on to the next random arrangement which would have in no way resembled my predictions. This is how slot machines work—that is, they keep producing new “random” combinations every split second, even between
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spins so that you can’t calculate the next number the “Random” Number Generator will generate, in spite of the fact that there is an algorithm buried in there somewhere).

It was exhilarating. Someone at some point somewhere explained getting good at poker exactly like how I felt. “It was like that scene in the matrix where Neo suddenly sees that everyone is just a bunch of structured numbers and then he starts bending those numbers in really weird ways.” I felt invisible. Needless to say, I tried to find every experience I could to replicate that feeling.

I only needed a few minutes figure out the formula behind the pattern of the seafoam tiles of the bathroom in New York. And it only took these few minutes of distraction for me to feel inexplicably better and ready to continue my calling.

♠ ♠ ♠ ♠ ♠ ♠

Within minutes, I began to feel hopeless. My legs were already falling asleep, and I couldn’t afford to sacrifice even the slightest alacrity once the moment came to leap out, but I couldn’t do much to readjust because being crouched behind a row of trashcans in a mask was reason enough to draw suspicion, and it’d be very obvious upon a search of my bag that not only was I up to no good, but that I may have been the one who was up to no good in the past, and this was a wholly unbearable thought, but it was equally unbearable to think about my legs falling asleep to the point of futility and me missing my chance or, even worse, attempting at the opportunity and having it backfire miserably.

It really didn’t end up being a big deal as the next chance I got with no one approaching, I just carefully readjusted myself and massaged my legs back to feeling.
But as I had potentially hours in front of me of being in this situation, the anxiety and helplessness came in a cycle like nausea does sometimes when you’re ill and you swear that you’ll die, but then reprieve comes and even though you’re still feeling worse than you usually do, feeling better than you were for a bit feels nice, except for the fact that you can’t enjoy it because all you do is dread the next inevitable bout of nausea. And this circular series of anti-climaxes continued

until at last Miggy entered my vision and slowly approached my hiding spot. I slowly adjusted my crouching stance so that I was ready to spring as my hand dug around in my unzipped bookbag for the gun. Miggy was 10 paces away when I found the gun and pulled it up to ear level ready to pounce. Then Miggy was 4 paces away and then 2 and when he got one pace past me I jumped out, reached over the trashcans and grabbed him by the shirt collar. The wax wasn’t malleable enough to handle such athletic movement and flecked off quickly. Luckily, Miggy was dumbfounded as I drug him into the alleway, first looking around as if someone he knew had just tapped him on the shoulder, then darting his head around confused and then stuttering whispers. It’s as if his main complaint was simply that I was making a scene, and so he rebuked me as quietly as he could.

I got him into the alley and walked him down the darkness of the alleyway at cap-gunpoint, until we were out of sight from the street. Finally, I turned him around and we were eye-to-eye. He continued to be more confused and—offended?—than anything else. His blue eyes (he was a white dude; I just found Miggy to be the best nickname for someone named Mike) looked on me like I was a child he ought to be rebuking. I moved to change the expression by gently placing the barrel of the gun between his eyes; the
plan couldn’t move forward if he wasn’t scared. This succeeded, and so I pulled the pill container from my right pocket.

“One of these pills is poisoned, and the other isn’t.” I spoke these words grandiosely, trying to come off as threatening as possible. The cliché of the words and the villainous persona I’d taken on made me self-conscious, though, and I quickly changed back to my normal voice and explained everything else matter-of-factly. I continued, sounding like I was flatly reading from the rulebook of a board game. “Take one, and I’ll take the other.” I opened the pill container and settled the tip of my middle finger (with the magnet taped to it) behind the two green capsules inside. The one on my left listed toward the magnet, so I moved the magnet directly behind this one, ready to pull it away from Miggy’s fingers. “You have a 50/50 chance at life—much better than if you simply let me shoot you.” Miggy nodded his head at this. I think my change in tone had somehow had the same effect on him as it did on me. He wasn’t a frightened man at gunpoint; he was a patronizingly attentive man ready to play a game with his nephew. “Pick your fate at random, and I will take the other fate, and we’ll swallow them together. May your God sort out who lives.”

Without much hesitation, Miggy reached down with eyes closed (God bless him) to make the fateful choice. As his hand approached, I jerked my middle finger to the edge of the container, as far from his fingers as the plastic boundaries would allow me. The suspense built exponentially with every nano-second. One hand was occupied by the pill container, the other by the gun, so I couldn’t fiddle with the domino. I twirled it in my head, trying to turn the circuitry of my brain into a random number generator just to see how many pips I would get. I closed my eyes in a long blink as I tried to shout in my
mind numbers 1 through 4 at random in some sort of superstition to see if the flips could favor me as Miggy rooted around in the container. It was to no avail. I couldn’t randomly generate numbers. As I opened my eyes, Miggy simultaneously opened his, coming out of his own supplication. I looked down at the container and placed my magnet under the remaining pill. I moved my finger to the right, and the pill stayed in the middle of the container. My nerves didn’t react; they were in denial; it was random variance; the billions of electrons in the metal shavings housed inside the capsule all happened to coalesce in the same exact improbability of remaining put, resisting the draw of the magnet. I moved the magnet back to the left under the bottle, and still the pill didn’t budge. At this, my heart finally sank. I looked up to the avuncular eyes of Miggy; he was holding the green pill square between his blue eyes in the black alley, waiting for me to place the remaining one in my mouth—waiting for me to kill myself.

Miggy was patient. Several seconds went by of me coming out of denial, of understanding the weight of the situation, of even getting to a place where I could begin to look at my menu of shitty options for action. He didn’t seem too concerned with interpreting my disillusioned response to his choice; he didn’t seem too anxious to get on with the game; the man was so . . . unassuming!

I shoved Miggy out of my way and ran down the alley, away from where I’d entered it. I managed the pill container into my pocket as I ran. I thought that maybe, for the sake of meta-game, I should’ve taken the pill with Miggy. It was people like me—running away when the supposed-to-be victim made the right choice—who gave people no reason to have faith in the game. Maybe taking the pill was my arbitrage of purpose. But of course that didn’t make any sense, so I kept running.
Before I got to the end of the alleyway (it was a long one because it was between the Avenues), I started to hear the baritone claps of hard-soled shoes bouncing off the brick all around me. I didn’t expect the docile man to chase after me, but the rhythmic sound was unmistakably the approach of footsteps pursuing me.

I went from the jog-like pace of a stunned and contemplatively panicked saunter into a full-on frenzied instinct of flight. As I approached the light at the end of the alleyway, I ripped the tape that was holding the magnet to my finger off and threw it into a row of trashcans. Then, I threw the last row of trashcans down behind me as I turned out of the alleyway and ran down the street. I wasn’t sure if I was better off running out in the open, or if I should duck into the next alleyway. It seemed like common sense to be displaying my face to as few people as I could when I was attempting the “M” word, but then again, my pursuer must have looked like the mad man to the unknowing people. I didn’t know if I should throw my pill case out as well and regretted throwing my magnet aside at the crime scene, even if it seemed impossible to find. I was overwhelmed by everything.

I whimsically decided to duck into the next alleyway where the echoes of rhythmic, baritone claps haunted me again. I threw more trashcans into the path behind me and, soon after, the claps became arrhythmic. I wanted to feel hopeful over this, but hearing the footsteps get slightly further away only made me feel harrowing amazement at how close I was just moments earlier to being torn to pieces by all of the problems of my life.
And with the footsteps slightly further away, they were still close, meaning that when they’d been even closer, they were chillingly close. A closeness I couldn’t properly appreciate until I sobered from my instinct of flight.

I threw more trashcans down behind me and passed a dumpster that I considered moving sideways so that it jammed the entire alleyway, but I realized that this was a high-variance decision for which I wasn’t bankrolled because the worst-case scenario was death, as I couldn’t afford to risk that I would spend the time to bother with moving the dumpster only to find that it didn’t take up the whole alleyway, so that I would lose more steps by moving it than my pursuer would by simply side-stepping the thing, or maybe I wouldn’t be able to move the dumpster at all, and then finally I snapped back out of my ruminations and flung more trashcans behind me and dashed out of the alleyway, across the street and into the next one. I must’ve been getting close to the park at this point.

I continued to throw trashcans, and then noticed that this time the footsteps didn’t simply fall out of rhythm but actually stopped. Just before the onset of relief came, I was startled by the accented bang of someone slamming a heavy metal door shut on a metal container, which made me nearly jump out of my skin, and now I fell into arrhythmia, and within a second, another boom came and another one and I heard something scrape against the brick wall—scrape into the brick wall—and I thought bombs were going off around me, and I’d almost chastised myself for being over-dramatic until I realized that I was only barely being over-dramatic because what was actually happening was I was being shot at. And then I heard a hollow clicking from far away down the alleyway, and the booms had stopped (this probably all happened within 5 seconds?). I was still alive,
though I’d already given up, and I vaguely regretted that my instincts had saved my life,
and I exited the alleyway and ran halfway through the park before I slowed down to a
walk and tried to find the nearest subway station.
4.4

“The galleries seem straight
But curve furtively, forming secret circles.”

I took a deep breath to regroup while I slowly descended into the underground tunnels. My ears were ringing or pumping or producing some kind of involuntary message to my brain. These rings and thumps made a classical piece drift and recite through my head. I couldn’t recognize what it was just yet—it was just a smattering woodwind melody drifting somewhere. I thought there might be words to it, but it was too far off at the moment.

My breaths of exhaustion had slowly morphed into frenetic breaths of anxiety by the time I got to the subway, but I made a conscious effort to slow them into long, deep blows. I became less self-conscious. I simply became part of the MTA travelers pack. The periphery of the tunnels was dynamic—a street performer was playing the steel drums, something like “Stars and Stripes” or “Under the Sea”; a man wearing a blonde wig with a sign asking for Lady Gaga tickets was doing a 180 to shout back at a preacher, “You’ve convinced me; I believe!”, and the preacher rejoiced “I’ve converted Lady Gaga; the Lord can save even Gaga!”—but I was part of the pack, staying in the middle.

A homeless man reached from his world out on the fringe, through the pack, toward me, asking for change. I neither gave him change nor left his plea for help unheeded: I kept walking, but I started to say the Lord’s prayer. It was the closest I’d come to reliving the profundity of my days back in grade school. The days of saving lives whenever we heard an ambulance’s sirens just by saying a prayer. I shut out my thoughts and let the words of the Our Father recite in my head, along with the classical
melody that was becoming crystal clear. A white noise—a white noise I might be able to kind of sort of start to agree with.

I closed my eyes and turned my palms upwards. If I slowed my pace just enough, I wouldn’t trip over the feet of anyone in front of me. I flowed through the tunnels of New York City with the other thousands in perfect harmony. I was a blood cell being pumped through the capillaries of the city. I didn’t resist the city’s call and revert against the flow; I didn’t diverge off the path and wander through the circulatory system; I didn’t slow to sightsee.

*I could’ve just woven myself into society.*

Toward the end of the Lord’s prayer running through my head, the words of the classical piece entered, and I finally knew what it was:

> “Ach! möchte mich von meines Leibes Ketten
> Der Herr erretten;
> Ach! wäre doch mein Abschied hier,
> Mit Freuden sagt ich, Welt, zu dir:
> Ich habe genug.”

The words of the Our Father drifted through my head; “Ich Habe Genug” drifted through my head; the Our Father and the cantata melded; I tried to keep my brain shut off. There was a translation of the German somewhere in there, but I left it in German to stay with the melody, to stay with the flow, to stay with the meaning of no meaning, to achieve the meaning that transcended directly through the meaningless, to stay with the white noise, the white noise I was beginning to agree with, or at least grooveg with.

I felt nice. I felt warm. I felt relaxed. Like I could relax every muscle right down to my bladder and let the warmth flow.

*One of these days I will go straight.*
5.1

“You've been going around thinking thoughts your whole life, and look where that's got ya.”

After I got back last night, I felt compelled to get this all down in one sitting, to suss out what to do next, which I’ve been working on ever since. And that brings me to today, March 29th, 2011. I have an appointment with Babel in an hour. I’ve called out of work for it and everything.

I place my laptop up on the elevated shelf I have on my desk for when I’m using my synths and need my laptop for mixing or displaying lyrics. But I place it there and leave this word document open while I mindlessly finger and pedal through some of my least hated movements of my thesis portfolio. A half an hour goes by, and I go back to my laptop, retrieve a remote IP address (I’m as careful as I’ve ever been to pick a normal-looking [ie, USA] IP address but one that is thoroughly dissociated with me), and pull up IRC. I think for a long time about what my screenname should be. I settle on DJ_Pediatrix. I join #psychology over 15 minutes early for the appointment and go back to playing. This was the channel where Babel and I first met.

I select the classic Grand Piano patch on my synthesizer and start playing NIN’s “Something I Can Never Have” while I think back to that first IRC session. It went something like this:

<spoony316> anyone see those associative studies they did with the new magic question
<spoony316> ?
</@yguwfuw>

Mrs Palin, what's the difference between your mouth and vagina?

Only some of the things that come out of your vagina are retarded.

<freudobaggins> I lol’ed
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<freudobaggins> 3 years ago
<freudobaggins> When this picture was first posted on /b/
* freudobaggins was kicked by @yguwfuw (YOU WILL LAFF AT MY FUNNIES!)
<DaMoonRulez#1> i approve
<sponny316> anyone? if it joggs anyone’s memory, the magic question was: how would you go about killing someone without ever confronting them in person or going to where they live?
<sponny316> it had interesting results
* freudobaggins (Mibbit@thundercity98j.I74.711ehk.IP) has joined #psychology
<freudobaggins> yus mastuh, i laff at yah jokes mastuh
<freudobaggins> pless dun flog me wit ban hammuh
* freudobaggins was kicked by @yguwfuw (NIGGER PLEASE)
<DaMoonRulez#1> OH SHIT
<DaMoonRulez#1> permaban for having teh aids imo
<sponny316> is nobody interested in this study
<sponny316> you guys should give your answer and see what the study shows we can gather from what you say
<ThePsycho_Babel> i believe he was impersonating an american slave
* freudobaggins (Mibbit@thundercity98j.I74.711ehk.IP) has joined #psychology
<ThePsycho_Babel> and american slavery ended over a century before the aids pandemic
<ThePsycho_Babel> thus making your joke anachronistic
*@yguwfuw* Did someone say something?
<ThePsycho_Babel> in case anybody didnt get that ^ its funny cuz though he can clearly see what i typed hes pretending like i dont exist hence making my words nonexistent
*@yguwfuw* I’m sure if I put babel in a circular room, he would spend day and night looking for the corners
<ThePsycho_Babel> genius analogy
<ThePsycho_Babel> in case anybody didnt get that ^ its funny cuz his analogy makes no fucking sense at all hence making my post ironic

I’d been going from channel to channel trying to bait an answer to this question.

Every time I forced some BS about why the question made sense to be asking in that channel. This was like my 7th attempt, and I was ready to move on to my 8th.

@sponny316> for what it’s worth the study covers those who avoid giving an answer
@sponny316> and you don’t want to know what it says about people who feel uncomfortable answering the question
*@yguwfuw* Oh babel hi. Didnt see ya there at first. How’s life? How does it feel to need a remote ip address to be able to chat here
*@yguwfuw* I bet it makes you feel really cool that you need to disguise who you are for you to even be allowed to socialize with us normals
<DaMoonRulez#1> sponny nobodies heard of you and nobodies heard of your study
<DaMoonRulez#1> and the “study” doesnt make any sense
<DaMoonRulez#1> so theirs 3 reasons why nobody cares
<DaMoonRulez#1> theres*
<DaMoonRulez#1> take your pick of which is your favorite reason for why were not answering you
*@yguwfuw* ^lol well done

And then—just as I was about to leave—I got a private message.
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<ThePsycho_Babel> the store
<ThePsycho_Babel> thats all you need to know really
<ThePsycho_Babel> grocery store drug store etc
<ThePsycho_Babel> all the places where everyone gets their shit that they ingest
<ThePsycho_Babel> tons of ways to go about it from there
<ThePsycho_Babel> howd i do
<ThePsycho_Babel> did i live up to my name?

And we went from there, making the new appointments every week or so and keeping in touch with each other’s existence.

Babel enters the channel. I still haven’t decided what I’m going to do, so I just stay signed in under DJ_Pediatrrix and keep playing “Something I Can Never Have.”

Simple as that. Click Send and it was all over with. Click Delete and he was back where he started. If taking your own life were this easy, there’d be thousands of suicides every day. Stub your toe on the way to the bathroom. Click. Get marmalade on your cuff while eating toast. Click.

I continue to play, serenading ThePsycho_Babel as he receives messages from other members of the channel.

<LetsGetWeird> oh look
<LetsGetWeird> babtrolls back
<LetsGetWeird> its been a long time
<LetsGetWeird> you get sick of catching no bites here?
<LetsGetWeird> i guess trollins pretty boring if no one gives a shit about anything you say

Babel says nothing. I say nothing. That is, I type nothing. I keep singing the song. I distract myself with the interlude for a while, weaving threads of other tracks in and out. Nothing happens. Absolutely nothing at all that’s relevant to me or that’s relevant to Babel or that’s relevant to me and Babel. I thought that joining the channel while Babel was there would tempt me to contact him a hundred times, but I don’t even think about it. I just stare—devoid of all thought while all of it is dedicated to the baseline, the treble line, the lyrics and the right foot that pedals in the acoustic guitar.

Toward the end of my hour-long rendition of the NIN song, Babel gives up:

* ThePsycho_Babel (IceChat7@wireless-128-62-32-179.public.utexas.edu) has left #psychology
Babel’s gone without a word. He’s left the channel without us having set up our next appointment. He clearly has no intention of ever returning to #psychology—he was reluctant to make this our meeting spot in the first place. Babel’s gone—completely.

I’ve hit the last chord of the song, and it is evaporating away as I continue to hold down the keys. It dissipates and eventually there’s nothing left but silence. I close out of IRC. *Tabula rasa.*

Nothing but silence and my thoughts about what the fuck I’m going to do next. I still have my fingers rested on the keys and my eyes bored into the nothingness coming from the speakers
5.2

“Suddenly, Ninjas—thousands of them.”

when a buzz comes at the door. A little perturbed and a little curious, I step out my apartment and walk down the hall to get to the front door, where someone’s ringing the buzzer. The door is mostly glass, and the lacy window cover doesn’t quite cover the whole glass section. I see slices of a recognizable figure, which only confuses me even more.

I open the door. “Chef! What are you doing? I swear I switched my shift last week.” Though I say this, I’m not at all certain that I didn’t screw it up and switch the wrong shift or forget altogether. The stress overwhelms the senses that would be able to point out that it doesn’t make sense that he’s at my duplex regardless of whether or not I was missing my shift.

“Abby,” he says this like he’s exasperated by my naiveté, “It’s not about that.” Chef’s eyes are as red as ever. I’ve always just considered him to be someone with a red hue to his eyes—maybe getting a bit worse with age, maybe reddening with stress—but now they seem downright pathologically red. As if there needs to be an explanation for it, like drugs or having zero sleep whatsoever in the 3 days since I’ve seen him. “Just let me in.”

I finally realize that I should get out of his way to let him in. We go into the apartment, and I ask if he’d like something to drink.

“No.” He says this gravely, distracted. “Eh, yes!” he corrects, “Get me a brandy and coke.”

“I have neither of those.”
He seems completely fed up with how all of this has developed, and he puts his hand behind him and returns it in front of him—this time with a gun in it. And he points it at me. I’m not exactly processing all of this, and even when I do, I think that I certainly must have forgotten to switch shifts.

“Get me the pill.”

I’m as lost as you are.

Grumbling this time: “Get…me…the…pill.”

The pathologically red eyes are making sense now. His words aren’t.

“Look, Chef, I don’t know what—”

“The one you had last night in the alleyway.”

Dread. Dread and stress. And the overwhelmingness of an entire lifetime catching up on me. This is much worse than getting a pizza order wrong when I was 15. But it isn’t wholly independent of my feelings regarding getting a pizza order wrong when I was 15. My feelings right now *transcend* directly through that feeling, as well as my feelings on my career and all the inevitabilities of my relationship with Evie and the realization of all of my stress dreams. Not a single thing about the gun pointed at me or me being caught committing attempted “M” word or Chef’s red eyes are new to me. It’s just that my feelings=$n$, where $n$ is my usual feelings of stress, but it’s now against the limit as $n \to \infty$. It *has* been approaching infinity. My entire life. And here I am. Right there. In front of the red eyes. In front of the gun. Et cetera. So forth. So on.

Apparently Chef is somehow empathetic with my thought process because for the first time in this confrontation, he isn’t impatient. He’s just waiting for me to make my next move, seemingly confident that it will be what he’s waiting for whenever it comes. I
missed my chance to pokerface. There’s no point in playing stupid. There’s no point in making sure he means the poisoned pill.

I grab a step stool from the kitchen, take it to the linen closet and open the door. I open the door and climb into the closet. I reach up past the top shelf and blindly slide my fingers in the small space between the wall and the stanchion that holds the shelf up. The “Monday” pill container slides out. I glide it past my vision and to my chef, Atimán.

He opens the container but doesn’t seem content. He looks the pill over a few times, alternating inspections with instances of almost saying something. His gun slowly droops while he does this. I worry that I’ve unnecessarily handed myself over—that this is just a misunderstanding and now he’s surprised that I have a poisoned pill in my position.

Just as I wonder if there’s a way I can play this off like I didn’t just admit to two “M” words and an attempted one, Chef finally materializes his thoughts into words: “What pill were you passing this off as? How did you get anyone to take this?”

I started and stopped a few different times. I wasn’t sure how much Chef knew, if anything, and I didn’t know how to explain why the pill was an opaque green without admitting to the attempted murder of Miggy, without contrasting it with the murders of Robbie and Tommy. *Keep shit simple, spoony.* “I made an identical one.”

Chef goes to speak, but the words gargle up in his throat. A split second of awkwardness ensues as he clears his throat and repeats himself: “Make another one.” To make up for the chink in his persona, he shouts the next part: “A safe one!” To make sure there’s no opportunity for the silly juxtaposition of tone and words to set in, he pulls the gun back up from his side and puts it between my eyes. The gun doesn’t smell of
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spray paint. The barrel doesn’t make the gun look as if a flag is going to pop out that says “BANG!” There is no place to insert caps.

I oblige him, walking all around the apartment retrieving all of the tools for forging another pill. Chef follows me every step along the way wielding the gun. There are a few times that he stands too close behind me so that we almost bump into each other or so that I have to squeeze past him in the narrow corridor, and each of these moments are immediately followed by Chef reestablishing the positioning of the gun on a fatal body part and barking an order. Once everything is on the kitchen counter (I don’t need the poisonous ingredients this time, or the gloves or shower cap or hoodie), I spill the innards of several vitamin E pills into a Pyrex bowl. I add some of the food coloring. While stirring, I ask for the fatal pill in Chef’s hand so I can compare the shades of coloring. He refuses to let me hold it and reaches from behind me to hold the pill over the bowl so we can both compare. It is a strange give and take. We’re like a couple baking.

Once the coloring’s right, I blow mold the capsule. We compare the two pills for a final time before Chef takes it, throws it in the pill container, closes the lid and shakes container. The rattling seems to momentarily make Chef catatonic, and he stands there shaking the container for almost a whole minute. I bide my time by twirling the domino, counting how many pips were coming up.

My general rule of thumb was to favor higher numbers, so for example, if I was in the mood for 4 different dinners—and I figured if I left my eating decisions up to my cravings alone, then I would eat terrible—then I would do something like twirling the domino twice, making the highest numbers my desired result. So, for example, an
aggregate of 7 or greater (20%) would be my “winning” result where I’d get to eat my unhealthy food; an aggregate of 5 or 6 (40%) would mean I’d eat a normal meal; an aggregate of 4 (20%) would mean I’d eat one healthy option and an aggregate of 2 or 3 (20%) would mean I’d eat another healthy option. I had a similar lenience toward even results, but even/odd factored rarely into my randomizations.

I get 4, 2, 2, 3, 2, 3, 4, 1, 2, 4, 2

The aggregate number is higher than the average expectation, which is auspicious. But then again, if I were treating it as a coin flip, then I got less of the 3 or 4 side than I did the 1 or 2 side, which is a bad sign. If I’d stopped after the first flip, I would have won. If I’d stopped after three (or after two and then did a tie breaker), I would have lost. If I were going even or odds, the aggregate number was odd, but there were more even flips than odd ones. But of course there were more even flips than odd ones; that had to necessarily be the case for me to get the higher aggregate number in spite of getting more flips on the low side because the higher value on each side was even (namely, the 2 was the higher value on the 1 and 2 side, and the 4 was the higher value on the 3 and 4 side, so I would have to have gotten more of the higher value [i.e., the even one] in order for the aggregate to not reflect the fact that I was getting the lower side more often), so using those two as both being positives was silly because they were necessarily redundant.

My twirls are worthless. I’m making the classic mistake of trying to see the significance in a non-random sample size, a sample size where I hadn’t set out the rules before I started so that any meaning I got out of the results was completely unfalsifiable.

Finally, I realize that Chef has been shaking the pill container for a very long time, and I realize that he’s semi-catatonic, so I snap him out of it. He clumsily uses the
hand with the pill container and the hand with the gun to claw at the clasp on the lid until it’s open. The second he gets it open, he reasserts his demeanor and swings the gun back between my eyes. The hand with the pill container eases between us, palm up. The case is open with two identical green ellipses staring back at me. “Take, eat,” says Chef.

My hand hovers over the case for a second as I think of how to optimize my chances. I think about taking the one on the left and can’t decide how it gives me a better chance; I think about taking the one on the right and can’t decide how it gives me a better chance. I go through the same process again and come to the same conclusions. There is a 50% chance if I take one, a 50% chance if I take the other. I’m powerless over the situation. Finally, I take the one on the right because that just happens to be the one closest to my hand.

As I draw it up in front of me, Chef immediately grabs the remaining pill, throws it down the back of his mouth and swallows. I’m surprised by this. For a second he’s distracted by his own fate before he turns his attention back to me. The gun is drawn between my eyes again. “Swallow your pill.” He says this calmly.

I’m just staring over the pill and through the gun at Chef’s face. Since I kept my research on the poisons at a minimum, I’m not completely studied up on the side effects. I know it has something to do with preventing aerobic respiration in the heart and central nervous system, but I don’t know how to diagnose this. I look to see if his skin is turning blue; I try to see if his breathing is changing.

He just shouts at me, “Take your pill! Would you rather I shoot you?!”

“How . . . are you feeling?” It was the best way I could think to buy time. The pills took a few minutes to be fatal, but surely the ingestor started to die before that.
Chef doesn’t answer my question, but I continue to study him. I look at his fingers which are wrapped around the trigger. They are white at the knuckles and hairy in between. There is no sign of them turning blue. I try to see if there are any signs of dizziness or light-headedness. His hand is shaking but not wobbling. His stance is steady. The corners of his mouth remain in their attempt of realizing a domineering persona—no signs of them sagging into complacence. His eyes, fixated and bloodshot, aren’t relenting either. I start to realize that perhaps I should be thinking of a Plan B instead of simply waiting for the 50% chance that he dies—especially now that that 50% chance is dropping with every second that goes by where he shows no sign of dying.

“Abby, I know of your misdeeds,” though he is no longer speaking in accented commands, his words are still stern and certain, “Swallow your pill and let chance sort out the justices of our situations.”

Plain and simple, I don’t have a Plan B. I have nothing to say in response to his ultimatums. Also, I don’t understand what exactly he means by all this. And so, like some sort of defense mechanism, I responded to his ideas. “And what is ‘your situation,’ and how does a 50% shot at death bring it to justice?”

“This conversation is not about me, and I am not the one left with a loose-end in the situation. I have taken my pill, now take yours.”

Several seconds are passing away, and the chances are approaching zero of the situation resolving itself by Chef falling into a coma and eventual death. I continue to ignore the gun. I continue to ignore the fact altogether that this conversation is happening face-to-face. I am typing my ideas to him in posts on an internet forum, and he is powerless to shoot these ideas to death. He can only respond to my concepts. “I killed
Thomas Mayo because he defrauded thousands upon thousands of well-intentioned
tithers out of millions of dollars, yet he continued to be an honored public figure who got
a soap box upon which to spout his respected beliefs 5 days a week. The fact that he was
the main figurehead of a shit worldview of despising victims for being sinful enough to
necessitate God to turn them into victims was an incalculable factor, so I simply
considered it icing on the cake. Again, what is your situation, and how is the potential of
death bringing it to justice?”

“Abby, this is not the way it is supposed to go. I have the—”

“—And HOW exactly is it supposed to go. And I continue to ask you, WHY is it
’supposed’ to go that way? I killed Robert Bateman because he had already, among a
hundred other Montgomery Burnsian acts of unbridled evilness, gone so far as to
misguide military efforts, so it was a safe assumption that taking him out was saving the
world from countless more horrifying policies at his hands. That is called a reason
Atimán. What the hell is yours? What the hell is Gods?!”

“You’re not in the position to be judging people’s actions and people’s
motivations. It is clear that the Good News are lost on you. We would have to start ‘In
the beginning’ for you to even begin to understand what justice is. No sin can go without
consequence. We’re deciding who it is that will be shouldering those consequences.
Now take . . . your . . . pill.”

“Are you an egocentrist? Clearly not because you are attempting justice at the
risk of your own life. You must be acting in accordance of some thing that improves
something beyond you, then. How the hell is risking your own death improving our
world?!”
surviva
Utility

“HA! That’s the problem right there. You think that something larger could only be ‘our world.’ There are things much larger than what you see around you, Abby, and that which I serve is exactly that which is unseen.”

I ignored him. “I attempted to kill Michael Thompson because he is a leader of one of the most self-serving and the most powerful group of chairmen in the United States. They print all of the money in this country and sell it to our government on interest; they have been implicated in several of the most appalling events in recent history and all of the most severe economic declines of the last—”

Chef is finally fed up. He points his handgun directly above him and fires it into the ceiling. Though the sound startles me, my strategy does not change. The chances of the pill being poisoned is so close to 100% at this point that I have no fractional life eVs left to lose. Neither of the choices optimize my chances at living, so I continue to post my explanations and rebuttals to Chef. I’m even more confident now. I am now certain that I am not making the wrong choice because there is no wrong choice anymore. The game is rigged. The gig is up. There is no Plan B. I have nothing left but my ideas. “I hereby admit that I had a bias toward selecting Michael as a representative from that organization because his arrogance regarding religion annoyed me. Yes, this is a personal score that does not have calculable effects on the world, but while I’m pulling the strings, I might as well choose the man who makes me feel best about what I’m doing. Have you shown any personal biases? Are there any reasons outside of optimization that motivate your choices? Or can you admit to nothing but perfection in your actions?”
“Take the pill!” He slides the gun just past my ear and fires another warning shot into the pantry behind me. The explosive sound gives way to a ringing. His lips move in a frenzy, but the words are lost on me, and thus powerless to convince me. Chef has clearly taken the safe pill. My chances of death are 100% if I take the pill; they are 100% if I let him shoot me. There is no way to optimize my outcome. I simply stand in apathy—grateful of the white noise of the tinnitus—waiting to see how my life ends.

As Chef continues to form inaudible words, he grabs the pill out of my hand, shouts more inaudibility, throws it into his mouth with a spiteful look and swallows. I continue to stand in apathy—continuing to be grateful of the white noise—as I watch Chef lecture at me. He seems to soften as he redirects his words from me to the sky. My hearing begins to fade back in as he gets on his knees to plea to God.

Once the tinnitus goes away, my callousness dissolves. I quickly become moved—by Chef’s words and by his imminent passing. I am overwhelmed by the—I don’t know what the word is: reality? humanity? These words seem too hackneyed to appropriate the . . . the what? the finality?—of Chef’s death. Maybe finality is best. The things I am feeling are not a transcendence through other emotions I’d already felt in my life. It’s a new one. The closest one I can think of is playing those old Sega games where you’d go through so much work to manage to still have 10 lives left when you get to the final boss, and then those lives whittle away with each failure, until finally you only have one life left and then—OMG, OH NO, HOW COULD IT BE, I’D BEEN DENYING THAT THIS WAS POSSIBLE ALL ALONG—you lose that life as well, and it’s over. That is all. Yes, finality’s definitely the closest word, but it’s still not even
close to the feeling of losing that last life in Sonic, and it’s even farther from what is going on in front of me.

My eyes well up as he shouts, “Thy will be done! Thy will be done!” At this, I close my eyes, turn my palms toward the sky and begin the “Our Father.” Atimán, on his knees in front of me, joins in:

\textit{Our Father,}  
\textit{Who art in heaven,}  
\textit{Hallowed be thy name.}  

\textit{Thy Kingdom come;}  
\textit{Thy will be done}  
\textit{On earth as it is in Heaven.}  

\textit{Give us this day}  
\textit{Our daily bread,}  
\textit{And forgive us our trespasses,}  
\textit{As we forgive those}  
\textit{Who trespass against us.}  

\textit{And lead us not into temptation,}  
\textit{But deliver us from evil.}  
\textit{Amen.}  

I make my hand into a fin as I give the sign of the cross over Atimán. “In the name of the father and of the son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.” It is intensely profound.

We are saving a human soul, just so long as we were sincere.

Chef becomes quiet as he begins to succumb to the poison. I place my hand on his forehead and voice all of the sins I can manage to voice before he passes. I get through all of the murders quickly but can only impart so many of my blasphemies onto Atimán before, at last, he falls to the floor.

* * * * *
You can keep shit simple all you want; you can plan everything to a T; you can murder with the perfection of God himself; but when someone shows up at your doorstep and commits suicide in your house with the murder weapon itself, you’re fucked. It seems that there was a method to Chef’s madness. If nothing else, his kamikaze mission has succeeded in making me an unavoidable suspect for both his death and everyone else’s who died at the hands of the poisonous concoction.

I make a quick checklist in my head about what to do next but can’t decide where to put calling 9-1-1 on the list. I decide on doing it after I clean up everything from my apartment, then I’ll call 9-1-1, then I’ll check for anything incriminating on Chef’s body. The hair and the clothes I used for each of the murders were already disposed of. I always took them with me to class in Jersey the first chance I got and threw the clothes into a dumpster around the back of the dining hall, open up the bag of hair, and douse it all over the clothes. Since I was more paranoid this time, I didn’t wait for my weekly class in Jersey, instead disposing of my sweater at a dumpster in Queens. I saved enough of the hair for a different dumpster, where I could dispose of the mask and fake gun, which I had to dig down and bury deep into the garbage. Anyway, all of that is taken care of already. I figure the gloves under the bed are innocuous, as is the shower cap. The syringe in the first aid basket is safe. I’m undecided for a second about the gelatin capsules. I figure that they have dissolved in the victims’ stomachs, so there’s no way my specific capsules demonstrate any sort of signature similarity. I decide to move them from my desk to the vitamin cabinet, though.

The most obvious incriminating thing is the poisonous ingredients. Only one of them is a non-standard thing to have in a medicine cabinet. I take the white, child-proof
container out. It looks different from the standard thing you’d get at a drug store. It
doesn’t have a bottle neck; it’s a perfect cylinder from the cap down to the base. The cap
is also a special type of squeeze-and-push while twisting device. Anyway, the first step
is to peel off the label, which states exactly what it is. Once I peel it off, I rinse it as
thoroughly as I can so I don’t accidentally make for some sort of mustard gas when I
burn it. I singe it as thoroughly as I can—opening all the windows to let out the stink of
burning adhesives—cut the plasticky remains into as many small pieces as my patience
allows and flush them down the toilet. I pour the granular contents of the bottle into a
large container of salt and shake it up as thoroughly as I can. I put the salt right where it
belongs and move onto the bottle itself. I don’t want to screw up drinking water lines or
anything, so I go to the bathroom and rinse it out with the toilet water over and over and
flush the toilet. Once done, I dry it with a towel that I bury into the bottom of the hamper.
Finally, I stow the bottle inside an old margin tub which is inside an old pretzel container
which is inside our cupboard where we keep our Tupperware.

There’s one thing left that I can think to dispose of: the mold for the gelatin
capsules. I take it out of the drawer of baking utensils and place it on the counter. With
my bare fist, I slam down on the counter, breaking it into several (but less than 10)
pieces. I take them into my hand and go to the kitchen trash can. I place one piece a
quarter of the way from the bottom of the garbage and another piece a quarter the way
from the top. I go to our bedroom and place one on the bottom of the small trashcan and
one in the middle of a few used tissues and condoms. I put one in the bottom of the pale
at my desk. Finally, I go to the bathroom and place the last two pieces on the bottom of
the bin there. The last remaining relics of my utilitarianism.
Now, I have to call 9-1-1. It’s been over ten minutes since Atimán’s gun shots went off, so I need to make the call as quickly as I can.

I’m not thrilled for this part. The stress of all of the pizzas I’ve ever ordered are culminating into this one call. I dial, breathe and am connected before I can finish my breath.

“9-1-1, what’s your emergency?”

“Yes, I need an ambulance and I need the police. Someone—well I know him; it’s my Chef; not my Chef, but the one I work with at the restaurant, at a restaurant—well, he just stormed into my house and held me at gunpoint.” I just keep going, leaving no time to read the reaction, no time to adjust and readjust and all of those things. I cared about none of those things anymore. I was calling for emergency response and saying what happened. *Keep life simple, Adam.* “He wanted me to choose between two pills? and then he took one and now he’s not breathing.”

The operator is not concerned with reading me. She is getting the address and sending help out as fast as she can. Those are her two concerns and her two concerns only. She keeps me on the line while she dispatches for help. I do not expect this part of it. I squeeze the phone between my shoulder and my ear and visit the vacated temple of Atimán’s body. He has a booklet in his back pocket that catches my attention.

“Oh, yes, yes, sorry, it’s about halfway between the avenues, on the left if you’re coming from Astoria Blvd.”

I slide the book out to find that it’s a journal. I open to the first pages, which read:
Monday, January 24th

I don’t know how it works for anyone else, but for me, waste begets waste—missed opportunities beget missed opportunities.

That’s the best explanation for me standing stone still in the room for hours. The room that was as dark as death is for unsaved souls. And just like death for unsaved souls, all I could see was one image: the missed opportunity. And just like death for unsaved souls, all I could feel was separation.

The sleeping boy was just a few feet away, but I was just a stranger in the room—an unacknowledged stranger, no less. And as central a part the unacknowledgement played to my hell, I had no choice but to remain unacknowledged—

— in order to go on watching him sleep.
— in order to feel the false sense of connection I felt by breathing in unison with the boy. Taking in breath whenever I saw the covers over his chest rise, and letting it out whenever they’d sink.
— in order to go on feeling as un-separated as I could possibly feel.

I knew that making up for the wasted day by missing the opportunity of sleep would preclude me from future opportunities, which would negate further opportunities in a chain reaction that was started by seemingly innocent decisions made years earlier.
Yet I felt compelled to watch the boy sleep. To feel as un-separated as I could possibly feel.

“There’s assistance in your area. They should be there within five minutes.”

“Okay, thank you. Thank you, okay.”

I flip to the end of the journal but do not have enough time to read. Scanning through the main words of it, I can gather that this log is as damning evidence of my wrong doings as my own journal is.

I shut the journal and think quickly of the best place to hide it. I think I’m more motivated to protect the journal from police confiscation than I am to keep myself from arrest. I go to the reading room, where the bay window is, to stow it in an inconspicuous but not-suspiciously over-hidden place on the book shelf. As I approach the reading room, I can hear sirens coming from outside. I don’t know if they’re getting louder because I’m approaching the window or if it’s because the sirens are getting nearer the duplex. I find the perfect balance between inconspicuous and insuspicious on the shelf as the oscillating red of ambulance lights flash off of the windows down the block. The sirens are blaring.

I close my eyes, put my palms upward at my side and pray the Our Father. \textit{Ich habe genug}.

* * * * *

The EMTs come in a flurry, but their frenzy summarily relaxes as they quickly realize that Atimán has already passed.

Then, the police come. I expect them to stand in the doorway, chewing on gum, asking pointed questions that I don’t feel like lying about. I expect them to take interest
in me, to take interest in my apartment, to move past each of the trashcans, finding nothing suspicious about a piece of plastic, to go through the cabinets and find nothing suspicious about the Tupperware. I expect one to be young and attractive and for the other one to be the veteran—for the young one to purvey the house while the gruff one laid waste of my alibis.

They spend no time on me, though. The police come in, they confirm with me where the body with a look, and they rush to Atimán. Once there, they nod their heads. They speak into their radios and turn to me.

“Mr. Bergeron, you say you worked with this man?”

I nod my head.

“Do you know of any reason why he would try and attack you?”

I shake my head.

“Well, Mr. Bergeron, while it’s not clear why this man came after you, it is who we thought it might be when we got the call. We’d already been looking for Átiman Dioro. We regret we couldn’t find him before he not only took his own life but before he came to disturb you, sir. Mr. Dioro had a warrant for his arrest on the suspicion of killing one Robert Bateman.”
To un-eat of the tree

From Atimán’s entry for March 14th:

A man was trying to force one of the pamphlets onto Abby, but he was stubborn about it. With the preacher shouting about God’s mercy, Abby violently shoved him aside. How fucking fitting, I thought.

I got caught at the booth for a second, listening to what they had to say and pocketing their information. The smell test told me that it was all the stuff of false prophets: well-intentioned but misguided fools. But even as I walked away, I had to wonder if the pamphlet could have been correct.

I thought of the world ending in two weeks. I thought of Christ coming again to the scorched earth, down through the blackened and stormy clouds, parting everyone into two lines without force — without even a motioning. All lined up: all the ones that aren’t allowed to stay with Christ unto the Kingdom of Heaven and all the ones that are. And thinking of the possibility of this coming in two weeks made me feel relieved.

I didn’t know what I possibly could have accomplished in the meantime to make this calling worth it with such little time left. I wondered what would transpire between me and Abby from then until March 28th that would have substantiated Providence’s involvement in our meetings. Maybe my only part in this was to guide Abby to this exact spot at this exact time so that he could be confronted by the aggressive preacher so that there’d be even
the slightest chance of repentance, but I couldn’t think what possible role I could have had in affecting Abby’s habits enough to steer him there. Besides, if God’s only intention was to get the two to confront each other, there could have been simpler ways than having me follow Abby for seven consecutive weeks: he could have inspired Abby in some simpler way to leave earlier that day, or he could have made for a simple circumstance that made the preacher late so that he’d run into Abby at his normal time to be traversing those subway tunnels, or he could have just spoken to the preacher semi-directly and had him stay a little longer and hold out until that one hopeful walked by.

I decided that if the preacher was right, that Judgment Day was so nigh, I was far from achieving what I was meant to; I had my work cut out for me. This thought pretty much shattered all of the preceding feelings of relief.

It’s been several months since Atimán passed away. Don’t worry: I took care of the salt and the bottle shortly after that incident so no one else got hurt.

I’ve read through Atimán’s journal several times, and it answers a lot of questions: how he came to start following me, the exact extent of everything he’d seen, the fact that the boy in his first entry was his son (incidentally, I also learned that Atimán stayed up every night to try and teach this son Spanish while he was asleep), the fact that he was the one who chased after me and shot at me the night of the botched third job, etc. But the core issue, the one that really prodded my interest in reading and re-reading
Atimán’s journal, was the why of his martyrdom. And this was the question that remained so cryptic to me.

I do know that the date March 28th was very obviously at the core for Atimán. He’d scribbled it all over his journal; he’d repeatedly refer to everything in the form of a countdown to the date; when Robbie was slain on March 28th, he “took it as the most unmistakable sign yet.” This sign goaded him while purchasing the gun, while chasing me in the alleyways of the Upper East Side, while traveling to my apartment on his fateful day.

It seemed as though it would take a lifetime of studying his book to ever really understand it. This isn’t meant to sound like such a bad thing, though. Where in past days I would have grown frustrated with such inexplicable mystique, I’ve grown to be intrigued by Atimán’s mysterious ways.

Anyway, much has transpired since my last entry in this journal, and I’ve been very busy. This week, most especially, is a big one for me. It started with my Baptism. I’d already been baptized, of course, but I still felt wrought with original sin. Having spent so much time trying to play God, the lasting effects of eating from the Tree of Knowledge seemed inexorable without His assistance.

It was my first time in a Catholic church in years, and I couldn’t believe how jaded I must have been for me to never have noticed the utter majesty of a Catholic church. The struts on either side of me started as gotchically spiked pillars and soared into the sky on opposite sides of each other, until they conjoined a hundred feet above, forming ribs that ran down the sternum of the roof. Along the walk to the alter—under these ribs—was the swish, swish, swishing by of rows upon rows of mahogany pews,
which were cast under the sombered, colored, hallowed light from stained glass windows depicting the Stations of the Cross. The swish—I don’t know if the sound was a figurative projection in my head, or if there was an actual sound—lulled me as I approached so that I reached the priest at the front, delicately sobered.

This priest would bellow archaic English that were cast through speakers: thrown all the way to the sternum and ribs a hundred feet in the air, which sectioned the sound and brought it back in scattered delays. Like hundreds of raindrops of words that pattered on me in quick succession—five words multiplying into twenty instances per word, all chopped up and reorganized so much that, unless I actively tried to parse through the words and the order of them, were just a celestial, baritone hum. I did not actively try to parse through them, and so my blessings sounded much like I’d imagine God’s voice would—a booming calamity of peaceful waves washing over you. I closed my eyes, turned my palms upward and soaked it in. *God is in the rain.* I didn’t remember where I’d heard that, and I didn’t care, and it made sense by circumventing the necessity of sense.

* * * * * *

I plan on ending this glorious week of Sacraments by asking for Miss Emily Vicker’s hand in marriage. I’m at my desk, trying a hundred times to go through the plan for the night in my head, swiveling back-and-forth, staring into the diamond ring. I’m distractible, though. Thinking about Atimán’s martyrdom, smiling on the thoughts of the Providential week, alternatively regurgitating and repressing my memories of the roadblock that had for so long kept us from this long-awaited juncture.
Finally, I give into the memory, thinking that I wouldn’t be able to move forward with my thoughts until I sussed through that one. I begrudgingly remember the disagreements Emily and I would have about getting her a diamond. I un-repress me caustically saying, “Does that really make me such a jerk?”

“I can answer that, Adam,” I want to relay back to the me of all those months ago, “It does. And so does that pompous question. And there really isn’t much more to be said on that.”
5.4

"The galleries seem straight
But curve furtively, forming secret circles."

March 24th

I sat outside and watched Cristóbal drink the coffee. I hate referring to him as Cristóbal because he wasn’t Spanish. His name was almost definitely Christopher (or maybe even Chris, for crying out loud), but they made him use a fancy-sounding name for his job. After several minutes of tedium, Chris’s head made a sudden movement. I excitedly leer, only to find the jerk was just to look up from the papers in front of him to the TV screen off to the side. He wasn’t nodding off yet. He did take another sip of the coffee, though, which pleased me to see.

I undid the second button on my suit and decided that looked better. It was the second new suit I’d bought for the purpose of looking nice enough to pass as a resident (the other suits I had at home weren’t nice enough). It was even more expensive than the first one ($850), and it was the first suit I’d ever owned to have three buttons, so I bided much of my time figuring out how many buttons I was supposed to do.

And eventually Chris started to bob his head dazedly. I watched intently, waiting for the right moment to move in. Finally, his eyes closed for enough consecutive seconds for me to figure he’d passed the point of no return, and I rushed through the revolving doors to get in.

I ran across all the pillars and marble of the lobby, jumped into the elevator and stared at the columns of numbers for
a split second. I decided there was no time to decide if any floor was more likely than any of the others to house Abby’s subject, so I frantically slapped at the 23. But the circle didn’t light up when I pressed it, and the doors remained open. I pushed another number and another one and nothing was happening.

I looked up to see that someone was approaching the elevator, so I held my hand out, pretending to hold the doors until he got on. Once on, he pushed floor 31 and the number glowed as a green light above it blinked. I just said, “Oh, same floor, thank you.” He poked his head out of the elevator, to the other side of the vast lobby, at Chris’ desk, and when he pulled himself back within the elevator, he was checking me out from head to foot out of the corner of his eyes.

He tried to understate his sternness: “Are you new here?”

“Oh, no. I’m visiting a friend.”

This actually seemed to satisfy him, and the doors opened and we both got off.

I walked slowly down the hallway, a bit unsure as to what to do next. This option was far from my first recourse. Plan A was to do as Abby did— that is, wait for the subject in front of his condo— but this fell through a week earlier. When I’d finally ran into the man who wore the never-ending series of nice suits, I asked about what vitamins he used; about what pills he would have that would be in a brown opaque bottle; about if he knew Abby and how, but wait, Abby isn’t his real name, oh shit, I
forget Abby’s real name; and so forth. The man just completely ignored me, his eyes remaining ahead of him, simply narrowing into a glare at nothing in particular.

It was now time to take more drastic measures.

Once the man who had helped me in the elevator went into his condo, I leapt into the nearest stairwell and went down a floor. I haphazardly knocked on the first door I came across. No answer. I cursed myself for wasting so much time waiting at the doorway for there to be no answer, so at the next one I knocked at one door, went around the corner and knocked at the next nearest one, waited back at the corner where I could see both doors and waited. One man answered between the two of those places, but it wasn’t the man I was looking for. “Sorry, wrong apartment!” Though there were many floors to get to, there weren’t many doors per floor. I continued knocking on doors two-at-a-time. Sometimes I would hear a muffled question from down the hall, on the other side of the door, and I would rush down to the door and reply. I would not always learn conclusively from these exchanges that I was not in fact at the right condo, but I would move on anyway. If I hit every door in the building, only getting answers from half the doors, only being mostly sure at most of the doors that it was not the right one, then I would still be able to eliminate much of the building in one night. Besides, if Abby’s subject didn’t let me in or at least open the door, then I was powerless to do anything to help him, anyway.
Floor 30 ran out of doors before I found the slick-suited man, and so did 29 and 28. 27, 26 and 25 were then eliminated. My first knock on the 24th floor was answered by a man who peppered me with a heavy line of questioning, so I spooked out and abandoned the rest of the floor. I skipped 23 and 22 as well in a panic. I noted each of these floors, so I could revisit them another time, and this made me regret not noting all the other doors that had gone unanswered. I took a deep breath and pulled out my pocket Bible, so I could read a Psalm. The one I flipped to was this:

Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble, and He delivered them from their distress. He made the storm be still, and the waves of the sea were hushed. Then they were glad that the waters were quiet, and He brought them to their desired haven

I could not have been blessed with a more fitting and less ambiguous verse, and so I immediately pulled out my rosary and prayed a decade.

My nerves thoroughly sedated and the past forgotten, I moved through the 21st floor. In a more relaxed state, I was able to knock on the doors one-at-a-time and patiently wait for the answers. I got a quick answer at the first door, and it wasn’t Abby’s subject. The second door was much longer before an answer, but someone who wasn’t the businessman I was looking for eventually came to the door. The third door took even longer for an answer, and then I finally realized that one was never coming. I knocked at the fourth door on the floor, and the door was answered so quickly I wasn’t even yet expecting it. And then,
after a second or two of the man standing in front of me, I came
to realize that I was looking Abby’s subject in the eyes. “Can I
come in?” I said it in a panic. I couldn’t keep a cool
composure. I heard the elevator door ding and a group of men get
off. “Do we know each other? I’m not expecting guests.” Around
the corner came a police officer followed by two more police
officers followed by Cristóbal. “You have to let me in! You
don’t know me, but you picked up a pill bottle from Abby and I
have to get to it!” I was trying to force my way in at this
point, but the man was surprisingly strong and kept me at bay
without effort. The officers grabbed me.

“Sir, you’re going to have to come with us. We suggest you
leave in an orderly fashion.”

“No! I’m not leaving. I just need that man’s pill bottle,
then I’ll leave and I won’t bother you ever again. Or I don’t
think I will. I promise that I won’t do any more than I am asked
to do, but right now I have to get the pill bottle!”

And then they drug me outside.

It’s been years since I’ve picked up Atimán’s journal, and reading through it again
incites . . . things. Fires a long-dormant path of synapses, a perfect example of which is
using phrases like “long-dormant path of synapses.”

Anyway, just to catch this journal up on everything: you probably already know
this, but Black Friday happened just a couple weeks after Atimán’s death, on April 15th,
2011. In the short term, this probably led me to wasting even more time on forums and
researching poker laws and banking laws and looking into Obama’s job plan, which one poster speculated had red ink in it that inadvertently affected poker law, which led me to researching the Obamacare bill as well. So, yeah, a lot of time-wasting in the short term, even more than if poker had still existed.

But this was all God working in mysterious ways to getting me down the path of making a living in a much more respected manner than gambling. Once I scented even the slightest essence of the possibility of the loophole, I was storming down that path with blinders on. Everything happened very quickly. I suspended my hated thesis almost instantly; I only needed a small nudge for this to happen, and I felt uncautiously optimistic about the prospects of the arbitrage. I started taking ritalin as immediately as I could get my hands on it so that I could keep up with all of the reading I had to do and all of the errorless focus I needed to keep all of the caveats in mind all at once to make sure I wasn’t missing some small detail that would close the gap on the loophole. Within a week of doing nothing but eat, sleep, read, I entrusted the details with my father, who was an excellent business and legal mind who could confirm the viability of my plot and who could help enact it. It helped that he was my father, so I could trust him as much as I could trust anyone else with the information of the arbitrage, which needed to be kept as much of a secret as possible to maximize the time that the loophole was left unnoticed and to minimize the amount of pie I had to share in that fleeting time before the gap closed.

Anyway, my father didn’t even for a second regard it as “too good to be true” because he was very familiar with the commonality of these types of things; he even said that this was far from some of the most glaring ones he’d seen people get rich off of (ugh,
I hate that phrase “get rich off of”). The first thing he did after a few, quick internet searches for some sort of vague confirmation of the idea, was buy a plane ticket to New York to research it more fervently and, if viable, map out our first steps.

And then, the ball was rolling. My father moved out to New York (my mother stayed back because she was stubborn about not moving my 17-year-old brother out of his school for his senior year). The firm was opened. I dropped out of school. Hell, before the end of the year, Emily and I were wedded and moved into a new condo in midtown. In those first 8 months—while we were still setting up the firm and making sure we spent as much time as we could assuring that we cashed in—there wasn’t time for much of anything. Not even time for so much as thoughts.

Emily handled all of this so adorably that I wished her extra-human love for me could be just the slightest bit more overwhelming so that I could die just by merely basking in it. I thought she’d be thrilled with the changes. (The changes HA! I didn’t really think everything was changing all that much, or at least not in ways that she could have been privy to). After all, no one was more perturbed by my late-night sessions of constructing depressing tracks; no one knew the extent of my blasphemies enough to be offended by them as much as she was; no one, not even my financier father, was more befallen to suffer the consequences of my useless degree than she was. And yet, she was actually the one to meet some of the most menial things with an ambivalence. “You sure you don’t want to finish out your degree first? Surely, losing one month on cashing in won’t matter in the grand scheme if this is ‘printing money’ like you say it will be”; or “you sure about selling the mixer? Surely, we can find a box to fit it in”; or “are you sure about taking up drinking?!” She was so damn—sincere!—about it all, which was what
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made me want to die with love for her whenever she said any of these things. Of course, she wouldn’t fight it much. She would relent once I told her the God’s honest truth:

“Emily, we have the perfect life. Sometimes you have to subtract some things to make everything flawless. And there really isn’t much more to be said on that.”

Eventually we were all moved into the condo and work started to relent enough so that we could entertain. The little music equipment I had kept came in handy for these social gatherings. My “Ob-La-Di, Ob-La-Da” arrangement and my layered canon version of “Heart and Soul” were huge hits with friends and friends of friends who would hear about it through the grapevine. It made me more semi-famous than anything else I’d ever done. I didn’t produce anything new and any arrangements I did for covers were astoundingly simple, so I wasn’t doing much “creative” developments, but I’d finally, agonizingly come to the realization that people don’t want you shouting at them about how you want to fuck them like an animal.

*   *   *   *   *

And now, Emily and I are in our sitting room, in our respective wing-back chairs. She on her Kindle, me with Atimán’s journal. I didn’t much worry about Emily coming upon the journal anymore. I hardly regarded Abby as being me anymore—just another character in another thriller—and I’d expect her to be exponentially more incredulous about the connection if she were ever to bother leafing through it.

Emily and I have our arms reached awkwardly over the armrest and into the large space between us to hold hands. I have two glasses at my side. One is full of Sprite. The other is half Sprite and half alcohol—but not just any alcohol! It is a very new and quite rare spirit that is made to be astoundingly easily disguised by anything it’s mixed with.
In other words, it tastes like nothing (something that’s almost necessary for anyone who never developed a taste for alcohol, like me). I put the journal down every several seconds to take two sips: one from the Sprite and one from the alcoholic mixture. My purchase feels so pleasantly vindicated at each of these sips by seeing how indiscernible the two are. I purposefully lose track of which glass I place on which side, so that I can marvel at how I literally cannot tell which is which.

And as I get toward the end of Chef’s journal, the warmth of intoxication starts to set in. More vindication, as if this was the first confirmation that I was even drinking alcohol.

The warm tingliness starts in my hands; it crawls its way up my arms and courses through the rest of my body. It goes right to my core. Emily pulls her hand away from mine so that she can cough, and I realize that I hadn’t even noticed her hand entwined in mine anymore.

As the warming serum of intoxicated blood cells works its way all the way through my circulatory system, I begin to feel it creep through my neck, through my facial features and into my head—I can hear it creeping up. Its dull thump interspersed with a crackle. At long last the hushed warmth of static begins to rattle in my ears, mercifully crackling through my brain.

THE END