Jonah The Notorious And Of Man Excerpt

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JONAH THE NOTORIOUS AND OF MAN EXCERPT

by
James Noguera

Thesis Mentor: Linsey Abrams

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts of the City College of the City University of New York

2013
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JONAH THE NOTORIOUS

by
James Noguera
“Delight is to him whose strong arms yet support him, when the ship of this base treacherous world has gone down beneath him.”

-- Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*
PROLOGUE

I don’t know how it began. I only know smoke.

I’m walking in the street, somewhere in the middle of Manhattan, in the middle of the day. I search for subway stations but can’t find any. The sun is bright. I want to hide, but no one is looking at me. The streets, they seem almost normal. But I don’t trust normal. I’ve almost forgotten normal. I’m feel almost disappointed. But plumes of smoke erupting somewhere in crowds bring me back. I cross the street.

They leer as I walk past, craving my eyes, something, anything, from me. They only get the top of my head, then my back.

Someone ahead hiding it: one side to me, the other to mystery. Luckily for me, where there’s fire, there’s smoke. I cross the street again.

More smokers. They stake out spots along the street. I think about hiding inside a shop or building. But why? They’d just wait for me. Be there when I come out. They’re
always there when I come out.

I cross again and again, evading smoke-choked blocks, the stares. I walk in the street, watching out for cars. I hesitate about which is better.

I have to keep walking.

#

All I want to do is breathe. But I can’t. I’m underwater. I know because I can see the blue ceiling, the sun glistening but distorted. I don’t know how I got myself here, but it seems to make sense. Perhaps I wouldn’t mind so much if I didn’t have to breathe. But, as I do, I have to reach the surface. It’s my only thought. I try to swim up to it but can’t. I’m weighed down somehow; I can only get so close.

I’m starting to worry. I can’t hold my breath for much longer. I make serious efforts for the surface. But it’s always out of reach. My body hungers for another breath. I can only make one more attempt. I thrust, an underwater jump, toward the surface. I get close, inches away, but away still.

I breathe water. It’s an odd, discomforting feeling. But I’m not dead. I’m not sure whether I’m supposed to be able to breathe underwater or not, but I am. The breaths are shallow and inconsistent. But I keep breathing, keep trying for the surface: swimming, swimming.

#

All I can do is run. I run inside a building I’ve known since childhood, where my earliest memories were formed - familiar ground, a small advantage over them. I’ve come back here but not as I was. I wonder if I did something wrong or if something wrong happened to me. I wait inside the first floor lobby, hoping I’ve done enough to lose them.
It isn’t long before I find out: a smoker inside the building. They’re usually not so blatant. The narrow white halls force me to walk past him to get to the other side. He throws his cigarette in front of me. I turn a corner and find another smoker. He jettisons his cigarette at me, too. I go for the stairs. But there: another smoker. This is going to be a bad day.

I think about leaving the building, hiding somewhere else. Then I hear them outside in front of the entrance: the monotone of a megaphone, telling me to get out. Everything in me resists. I run to the back of the building where there’s a door that leads into an alley I’m hoping they don’t know about. I run out the door, down the stairs, and into the alley. I take some steps toward the street, but hear their radios approaching. I turn around and run back inside. The smoke-filled halls make the building look like its on fire. Whatever advantage I had is now gone. I cover my mouth and nose with my shirt, but the smoke seeps through, into my lungs. Just like they want. I inhale their hate, and let it burn me.

I genuflect; I flee the building and into their arms. That’s when I see it for the first time: the cars, the lights, the guns: all for me, for what I did. I wish they would tell me.

“Come here!” one of them orders. I comply. Then: “On your knees.”

He rests his gun on my forehead. I can feel the hardness of his resolve. “Fuck you,” he says, then pulls the pointer in, making a fist.
Repeating shrieks bring Jonah back to consciousness. Lunging up from bed, he grips the alarm clock: 10:05 it reads in red. He shuts it off and lies back down, trying to remember to keep his eyes open. He breaks the silence with coughs, then shoves the sheets further down, the bed cover mostly off already. Cradling his knees, he listens to the whirling fan, the low drone of the AC. When he’s aware again, the clock reads 10:35. He plants his uncovered feet on the frigid floor. The cat screeches, sitting up. He takes some steps to the desk and turns on his laptop. Then he walks to the door, inciting the cat again, and takes a deep breath before pulling it open, the air making a sucking sound caused by the broken seal of the sheets on the door.

He sniffs the air in the bathroom and picks up the familiar smell of Lysol, about an hour old. Moving the unplugged radio from facing the tub to the wall, he sits down to pee, breathing through the collars of his shirts. Back in his room, he signs in on his computer before heading to the kitchen, where the cat waits. He sees the MetroCard his mom left on the dining table earlier in the morning and puts it in his pocket. He shuts off the light in the kitchen before grabbing the can from the fridge and dumping the food
onto the dish. Then he takes out a water bottle and a frozen pizza from the freezer, placing it on a plastic plate, and puts them in his book bag back in his room. When he returns, he puts cereal into a bowl, adds soy milk, and carries the contents back to his room.

He eats sitting down in front of his computer, watching a YouTube video about US drone signature strikes. Halfway through, he shares the video on social media; “Don’t be suspicious . . . ” he writes. There are no new messages. Then he starts getting dressed.

He takes out the MetroCard before dropping his sweatpants, pushing them away with his foot; lifts on a pair of black jeans that were on the cabinet by the fan. Socks that were on the floor, a belt, a pair of black boots. Pockets his wallet, MetroCard, and keys. Pulls on a black hoodie that hung overnight on the window over his black long-sleeved T-shirt. Inserts an inhaler and an umbrella into his book bag. Grabs a toothbrush and toothpaste from a cabinet drawer and wets the brush in the bathroom. Goes back to his room and shuts off his computer and stuffs it in his book bag, the white brush dangling from his mouth. Throws on a black parka with orange trim, pockets an iPod, a Kindle e-reader, and puts on large headphones. Then washes the brush in the bathroom and puts it away.

He pauses after strapping his book bag on to check the time on his iPod: 11:13, then presses play. “Breakout” by Foo Fighters. He pulls out his keys and moves toward the door, yanking on his sleeve and taking a deep breath before opening.

#

Spring 2007:
When I found out they were after me. I suppose it was inevitable. It was my last semester at Bronx Community College. I was spied on everywhere I went: lunchroom, library, in class, on the bus, even in the bathroom. It was hard not to notice. The spies would give themselves away through body language or tone of voice or eye contact. Or it would be the familiar faces everywhere I’d go or always being asked the same questions over and over by different people. They treated my last semester at BCC as if it were their last chance. As if they would soon uncover the truth, and not drag this on for years.

I had thought the spying began because of Ms. Lee, my former English teacher. Blonde and beautiful, I had a crush on her. Whether illegal or no, wrong or right, they were convinced something was going on between us. I had gone to her office more times than necessary, admittedly. And I had asked to go with one of her classes on a second trip to the NYPL near where she said she lived. Perhaps it was because of the way she’d twirl her hair or smile at me when we’d talk. I had noticed students and teachers gather or continuously walk by and listen and sometimes watch as we’d talk. That last semester she taught a class at the same time and next door to one of mine. On Valentine’s Day, I thought I saw her walking with a guy on Fordham Rd as I was looking out the window on the bus. The next day, she was in the hall after class. “Hi,” I said, and all she said was “Hi.”

I had noticed spying before. I had noticed when coming home from school the same old man, the only person out on the block, always sitting there in his chair - whether or not I had cut class or an altered schedule. I’d feel him watching me the entire time as I’d walk past but would dismiss the idea as silly. Until one day I looked up and
met his eyes with mine. Surprised, he looked away. He was gone for a few days but came back. Though I refused to look again, I’d still feel his eyes on me.

I had noticed, a year or two earlier, a man in the building across the street hanging almost halfway out of his window to spy into mine. Exercising without a shirt, I paused to process what didn’t seem to make sense. He held still for several seconds, almost invisible. Then plunged back inside. I remember the bright whiteness of his wall. I kept the shades down after that.

I had noticed, for several years, how Dad always seemed to know whether I had been in his room or not. I remember, after we’d gotten the computer, he had taken down the shade from the living room, where the computer was. The day after I had masturbated with a chair between the window and me, he put the shade back up. I thought it was only him.

I had noticed spying before, yes. But I had never put all the pieces together or cast myself at the center of them. Until Spring 2007.

I was sitting in the library reading, as usual. Sitting next to me was the same couple I’d see when I’d come in. Perhaps coincidence. But as they spoke, I thought about how they always sat within earshot. How they were always in the library when I came, sitting near or where I’d usually sit, or would come in minutes after me. I couldn’t stop thinking. I couldn’t figure out where to stop. The more I thought back, the further it went. And the more perturbed I became.

I got up. It was more of a jerk than an action; I couldn’t sit anymore. I felt their eyes on my back as I walked toward the door. I turned my head and saw their steady eyes
as I had expected. I held eye contact long enough to send a message, then walked out, not looking back.

#

Jonah secures the top lock and descends the stairs, his mouth and nose inside his shirt collars. Above someone else is coming down, footsteps thudding. Jonah exposes his face only after reaching the bottom and, on a held breath, walks to the door, pushes the button, and exits the building as the door sound rings out.

A clean breath of December air later, he detects the black girl walking past the front of the building and starts walking behind her. She turns left at the end of the block. He turns left. Then she stops, studying her phone. As he approaches, she continues walking. He crosses the street.

The sky is a gray but no rain, only cold. He puts his hoodie up and glances across the street, picking up his pace. She’s ahead by the end of the first block. By the second, they’re almost even. Then she enters the street to cross to his side. He sees her and enters the street to cross. Grohl is screaming and the song is ending. She stares in his direction as he closes the distance. “Just” by Radiohead. Ominous electric guitar. But he passes her and keeps walking.

On the third block, there is a narrow sidewalk lined by rear-facing parked cars. Keeping his eyes low, he spots the exhaust pouring out of the mufflers, at least three. The damp air makes the exhaust look like steam, but he will not breathe it; he ditches the sidewalk for the street.
The bus now a block away, he can see it at the stop, the people getting on. He could make it if he ran. But he will not run. He watches it leave as he comes onto the block.

A woman in a suit sitting on one of the benches waits for him at the stop. He chooses to wait a few feet away from the benches, near the trashcan. Looking out at the street, he hears metal striking stone behind him. Over his shoulder, the small explosion of smoke around her confirm it. He takes a breath and looks the other way for the bus but sees only cars, then walks, looking down, in her direction. Yorke is screaming and the song is ending. He passes her and gets off the concrete path and onto the grass that permeates Pelham Parkway, rare for the Bronx, moving toward the next stop, wondering if he’ll make it on time for work.

#

I made my way off campus. It was like a different campus. The faces I saw had taken on a new expression. There was something I could pick up now in their eyes. They were still, lingered. I felt a certain sense of loss. I felt a certain sense of determination.

I wanted to just keep going. I passed the bus stop and went down the hill toward the subway station on Burnside. I didn’t know who was spying on me, why, or how long. All I could do was move: try to lose them, whoever they were; see what, if any, their limitations were, how much they wanted me. On Burnside people seemed to be minding their own business. The world was as it should be.

On the platform, I waited for the downtown 4, trying to look without being looked at. There were no familiar faces. No eyes that led on. People gathered around me, but I didn’t move. When the 4 came, I got on like everyone else.
After a few stops, I knew. It must’ve been the eyes. They lingered. Or knew something they shouldn’t. I moved to the far end of the car and waited for the train to stop. When the doors opened, I got off, jogged a few cars down, and got back on. No one seemed to notice me or care. So I stayed on. Until 149th St. — Grand Concourse to transfer.

I walked past the people. Didn’t walk too fast. Didn’t look too much. I went down the two flight of stairs for the uptown platform and waited near the middle. A minute or so later, someone walked past, turned, and looked right at me. When he was gone, I started in the opposite direction and kept going. I didn’t stop until I reached the end of the long platform, where I saw a black metal container.

If I squatted down behind it, no one would be able to see me.

#


The grass is bald in patches, exposing brown earth, and yesterday’s snow remains in small clumps. The trees look hairless and starved. To his left on the concrete, a man in an orange coat holding his toddler’s hand walks in the same direction. Jonah reaches in his pocket and looks down for the time. He tries to walk faster but fails, stumbling over broken branches and the uneven ground, the grass concealing pits. One of his boots has untied and he pushes past dead leaves with each step. He coughs, his breaths pretending smoke. The electric guitar comes in. Yorke singing with feeling.

He keeps walking, not looking back until he’s off the grass and near the stop at the end of the block on White Plains. That’s when he distinguishes the flashing blue lights of the Select Bus in the distance. “Dig,” Mudvayne. Screaming, heavy guitar, bass
plucking, thundering drums. He puts his mouth and nose in his sleeve, head down, and
marches at the people waiting on the corner, toward the Select Bus stop across the street.
Some see him, the bus and hurry ahead.

As he steps foot on the next block, the bus zooms past, then halts and opens its
doors. The people run to the machines to get receipts. Not Jonah. He keeps his pace,
putting his hand down to take out his MetroCard, then lifting it back up to his face.
Penetrating the cloud of people by the machines, he waits behind two girls. Some stare at
him and wait. He puts his sleeve down again to insert the Card. When he turns around,
the doors are still open, so he hops on.

Clutching the rail, he glances left and right: a girl standing on either side. He
releases it and presses further into the bus, stopping where the two halves meet, where no
one is standing. He pauses the music and takes off his headphones: bus engine, traffic,
someone coughs. He checks the time: 11:34. Work is at noon. He takes off his book bag
and sets it down on the floor between his legs. Sighs.

But the bus doesn’t budge. He looks to the front and notices the red light. Some
people running are able to get on. A cop car parked across the street. He takes out the
Kindle from his pocket. The last to get on, a middle-aged man with a long black coat,
stops and stands near him. Jonah turns his back to him. The residual stench of cigarettes
strikes Jonah’s nose. Then the doors shut and the bus jerks into movement, heading for
Fordham Rd.

#

I watched train after train arrive and leave the station. My legs going numb.

Shifting my weight from one leg to the other. Pretending to be tired in case anyone saw
me. Something like an hour passed. I kept thinking about how much I wanted to be free not to be looked at. I’d peek out the side of the container to see if anyone was looking but no one was. A few more trains, I thought, just to make sure, then I’ll take the next 2 home.

Then I saw her. Gawking at me from the other platform. Showing me her teeth. There I was squatting behind a black box like an idiot, my legs bloodless, my muscles meat. And there she was. Some ugly, dumb bitch. An unconvincing lookalike of Ms. Lee.

I hated her. I hated myself. I hated them, even if I didn’t know who they were. Maybe they had momentarily lost me. But now at least I knew. They’d follow me wherever I’d go, even if I hadn’t done anything, nothing that I could think of, anyway. I couldn’t hide, not from people. I was a priority. Definitely so now.

I pushed on my knees against the ground and stood. I didn’t look at her look at me, but I’m sure she did. I trudged toward the other end of the platform, passed the people-spies, stopped amid them and waited. When the next 2 came, I got on.

The next morning was the first of many I’d wake up with an uneasiness I struggle to describe.

#

Jonah stares out of the window, half his face in his sleeve, as the bus stops in front of Fordham University. He leans forward and drags his book bag on the floor with his feet to let the people pass. A guy on the sidewalk lights a cigarette. People walking by looking down at their phones. Behind the kiosk near the end of the street, a homeless old man holds a half-smoked cigarette in a fist to his side. He takes the occasional puff, not looking at anyone, not at Jonah on the bus.
The bus leaves the scenery, the old man still not looking behind, taking Jonah and the stench with it. It stops on Valentine, Grand Concourse, then Jerome, where the man and the stench get off. As the doors close and the bus starts toward University Ave, Jonah picks up his book bag from the floor and slumps it on, reaching for his headphones. A man coughs into his hand. Jonah walks to the back and waits in front of the doors. People start to cluster behind him before the doors are open again. He gets out, not holding the door, and crosses the street from right behind the bus, ignoring the B3 waiting on the corner, the parked cop car across the street. He scans the block ahead, the big Gothic church in the way, before looking down for the time, then hits play.

#

Last day of class:

I was waiting for the bus in front of BCC, hoping I’d see her one last time. I had kept spotting her throughout the semester: in the hall, on the stairs, walking on campus. I’d seen her walk by before as I was waiting for the bus and thought I saw her look, but she hadn’t been wearing her glasses, and she just kept on walking down the hill for the train, her golden hair waving goodbye.

Another former teacher of mine was also waiting for the bus, not someone I was interested in, but it was impossible to know what they thought. She wasn’t talking to me, or even acknowledged me, but was talking to two other guys. One of them stood between her and me, and she was calling him shy. When the bus came, it was crowded. More were getting on than off. I got off the line and decided to wait for the next one. The former teacher was behind me and also would wait. I was glancing up at the steps that led into
BCC when I caught a flash of flaxen hair, Ms. Lee. She descended wearing a baseball cap and gray jacket. I noticed she wasn’t wearing her glasses. As she was leaving the campus, I only hoped she would turn her head. I was ready this time and would, at least, wave. But she only looked forward. I had to decide right then, with the other teacher looking.

I started down the hill, Ms. Lee now far away. I’d glance across the street to see if she looked back, but no. At the bottom of the hill, she entered the street to cross over to my side. I stopped and, thinking that she saw me, waved. But she crossed and kept going. I followed behind her, feeling like a creep. She was about to turn the corner and disappear. I rushed toward her and said something.

“Professor?”

She turned around.

“Oh, hi, Jonah.”

“The bus was full,” I said, “and, uh, I saw you walking, and I was going to take the train, so I just figured I might as well talk to you on the way?”

“Oh, sure.”

Silence. I looked around the streets I had grown up around as we began walking together. Ripped billboards, closet-sized bodegas, broken concrete. Her.

“I wasn’t sure whether to say hi or not,” I said; “I didn’t want to seem like . . . a stalker, or something.”

She laughed, which relieved me. “Of course not.”

More silence.
She helped the conversation by asking about school, it being the last day. It was for me. She had another day left, though. Then she was free. I was free already. She asked, I’ll never forget, if I still lived at home with my parents. It was so direct I had to look down and admit, “Yeah, I do.” She said it was a good thing, that you save money by doing so. I agreed.

We ambled side by side to the station. Before the stairs to the platforms, I had to explain, conscious of it sounding like a lie, that I had to go downtown in order to go uptown. Waiting for the 4, she caught me staring at her shirt. I hardly noticed myself, but she was probably used to that sort of thing. She pulled her jacket on closer. I looked at the ground and self-loathed.

Around us, I saw no one I recognized from school, which struck me as very odd. Only one familiar face on the train, but she wasn’t looking at us; her eyes were closed. I knew they must be watching somehow, but I didn’t care. All I could think about was that I was standing next to Ms. Lee alone on the train.

I was holding on to the rail, my arm between us, in a short-sleeved T-shirt and wanted to hide my thin, hairless arm. She had said once jokingly, I won’t forget this either, while I was in her office, after I had mentioned my vegetarianism, that I “could use a hamburger.” My lips were chapped and cracked as I talked and talked. I forget what about. I kept thinking of licking them but didn’t want to draw attention to them or that I was aware of their dryness. I kept waiting for her to look away so I could lick them, but her face remained in front me.

I asked her why she came to BCC.

“I had met someone who works there,” she said.
It didn’t sink in at first.

“I thought it was because BCC is close to Fordham University,” I said. She was getting her PhD there.

“That was the selling point,” she said. “But it was because I had met someone.”

She paused. Then I understood.

I had never thought of her with someone. But it made sense she would be with someone. I nodded almost involuntarily. She said other things.

We were riding the train together and talking as if we were friends. I was looking into her eyes, like two blue planets, our faces inches apart. But all I saw between us was distance, beyond what existed in age.

As the train got closer and closer to my stop, I expected mine to be the next one every time. Then it was.

“Well, my stop is next,” I said, relieved it was over and I hadn’t embarrassed myself.

“Well, this is me,” I said as the train was stopping. We said bye.

When the doors opened, having nothing left to say, I walked out.

“Thanks for talking with me!” I heard her say before the doors closed.

It was the last time I saw her.

#


Around the church, Jonah can see what lies ahead: the block lost in a fog of smoke. Up, chimneys pump black stuff at the sky. He walks with his sleeve to his face, tightness in his chest, surveying across the street, the cars driving past. A truck expels
exhaust onto the already hazy street. A man possibly smoking ahead. Lighter smoke clouds confirm he is. Jonah crosses to the other side, high-pitched singing reminding him of car horns. A girl with an unlit cigarette in her mouth meets him on the sidewalk. He lets her walk in front and slows. When he looks up again, he spots the smoke escaping from her sides and crosses again. At the end of the block: the smoke emanates from the right of the intersection, the route he takes to the campus to avoid the one everyone else takes there. He turns into it, mouth and nose in sleeve. Lifting his head, he discovers the building vent spewing the smoke or dust out and saunters under it.

A few narrow blocks left. Chest burning. He can see the school in the distance: a tall concrete edifice and trees. “Rape Me,” Nirvana. Grunge guitar. Lazy singing. He passes the girl smoking, the “Tobacco-Free Policy” sign on a held breath and shows the guard his ID, enters Bronx Community College.

A coworker walks past on the path to Philosophy Hall, where they both work; Jonah admires the concrete. Then all he can see is the door he has to pull.

#

Late 2007:

I don’t know exactly when I figured out they were the cops. Silly, I know. Not sure who I thought they were. Some BCC espionage committee?

Like everything else I’ve learned, it took some time. I had gotten used to the idea that the cars parked outside were recording whatever they could from the kitchen, near to the door; the shades were always down in my room. I noted their positions for weeks. Certain cars day after day in the same exact spots, despite the parking spaces: on top of
the hill, clearly visible from inside. But maybe that was chance. I’d lower the shades in the kitchen and Dad would raise them up again soon after. Or I’d turn off the light there in the afternoon and he’d turn it right back on. I tested him with my persistence. He gave himself away with his.

Dad had held something against me since as long as I can remember. Only after many years did I realize what: he was jealous I had it better than he did when he was growing up; he hadn’t even gone to high school in his native Puerto Rico. Apparently, his father wasn’t so supportive; Dad taunted me about my earlier failures in school, having dropped out in high school and again in community college before finally going back. He didn’t like the idea that I could go back.

If I had known they were the cops, I probably wouldn’t have flipped them off. But I wanted to show them that I knew, more importantly, that I didn’t consent. Once, I tried being a little more direct; frustrated by their inability at subtlety, the back and forth with the shades and the light in the kitchen, I wrote a sign and placed it on one of the kitchen windows: “STOP SPYING, MORONS!” Didn’t work.

One time, there was an armored police car, parked across the street on top of the hill; I saw the blob of blue and white every time I stepped into the kitchen. It parked there for about a week. When I flipped off the cars, it was gone the next day. That’s when I started to think: maybe there’s something to that?

It was easy to notice the cop cars trailing me after that.

#

Descending the steps of Philosophy Hall, Jonah checks the time: 12:21. He shuts the music off and pulls down his hoodie and headphones before opening the door to the
Writing Center. Head down, he weaves between students by the door, a coworker bending over. Someone says hi, and he says hi back walking into the tutoring room. All the tables are taken except one. Throwing his book bag on the table, he slumps down and sheds his coat but keeps the hoodie on. It’s hot, so he unzips it. He grabs the inhaler for a moment but throws it back in the book bag. He takes out his computer and turns it on, staring at the blank screen as the computer boots.

“Hello.”

A skinny white girl sits down next to him, sliding her chair in close. He shifts back instinctively, hitting the back of his chair on the wall. He’s seen her around the Writing Center before. Too much, in fact. He tutored her once, about a year ago. They talked for five minutes, mostly about his book bag, which was on the table between them. Then she left. They hadn’t talked since. She comes in and works with someone else or just uses one of the computers in the computer lab.

“Hi,” he says, not looking up.

He closes the computer and pushes it away, puts the book bag under his chair. When he looks up, her face is waiting for his. She says hello again. He nods and half-smiles, then asks her about the paper she’s holding. After she explains what it’s about, he asks her to read aloud. He listens, keeping his eyes on the paper, his arms on his lap. As she reads, he steals glances at her face. She got a haircut recently; her hair is shorter and dyed black. He likes it better this way. He wants to tell her. He tells speaks of grammar and content. She inches closer as he explicates. He notices. Also, that she’s made many ESL mistakes.

“What’s your nationality?” he asks, discovering the brown of her eyes.
“I’m Albanian,” she says. He knows.

“Were you born here or in Albania?”

“In Albania,” she says starting to stare.

“What age did you come here to the U.S.?”

“I here at age twelve.”

“Interesting; they say it’s easier for young children to learn a second language than for older ones, like past eight.”

“Really?”

“Yeah; I’m impressed you’ve learned so much English.”

“Really?”

“Yeah!” he says, trying to sound convincing. “I bring it up because you’ve made several ESL mistakes.”

“Oh,” she says and looks back down at the paper.

“But it isn’t easy learning another language. I should know; I study languages for fun. I even studied Albanian once. Well, years ago - on my own.”

“Really? Wait, why would you study Albanian? Did you have a crush on an Albanian girl or something?”

“Um, yeah,” he says, wondering how she knew that, “had a crush on an Albanian girl. Why else would I study Albanian, right?”

He laughs to himself, then redirects the conversation back to the paper. He points out more errors. She fixes them.

“Are you a student here?” she asks.

“No, I transferred.”
“Where to?”

“Fordham University.”

“Oh! Are you going there now?”

“No; City College. I’m getting my MFA.”

“That’s great.”

“Yeah.”

“What high school did you go to?

“Christopher Columbus.”

“Me, too!”

“Really?”

“Ugh; Codumbus,” she says, rolling her eyes in a way that stabs his interest.

“What a bad school.”

“Yeah,” he says.

“I hated it there. Let me tell you something,” she says, holding out the pointer, which he examines, “I went there for four years, graduated, and couldn’t read or write. Barely a word. But I got my degree! That I did get.”

“But you write well now. And, as I said, it’s quite impressive for someone who wasn’t born here and came here later in life to learn to write in another language so well.”

“Thanks,” she says, a hint of red in her cheeks.

As they talk, he notices how her nose wrinkles and reddens when she laughs. He tries to laugh back but finds it unusually hard. She seems almost real to him now. Maybe she is. He thinks about what it would be like to touch her. Feel her skin, hidden under her clothes. Her thin lips with his.
But he makes no move. He hasn’t touched a girl in years. Has forgotten what sex is like. To be naked with a the other sex, only touching with those body parts no one sees. He does not touch her. Or say too much. When the paper is done, he asks if she has any other questions. “No.” He asks her for her name to get her folder and write a log of the session. Then he watches her get up to leave: her back to him, her black tights, her opaque skirt.

“Bye,” she says, with a backward glance.

#

2008-summer 2009:

Deciding to become a pickup artist was a mistake. I’d made it in 2008, a New Year’s resolution. I’d thought I’d change my life around: from one of missed opportunities with girls to one with . . . girls. I’d seen the guys on TV picking up girls with magic tricks and body language. I’d studied the so-called art of pickup and then I’d go out. I’d roam my neighborhood, Pelham Parkway, for girls, “targets” as PUAs, pickup artists, would call them. Problem was: girls were scary, especially the pretty ones. It would’ve been easier to talk to the ugly ones, but that would’ve defeated the purpose. Whenever I’d managed to say something to a girl, it’d been something like, “Do you know if there’s a restroom nearby?” Then I’d scurry off after receiving a response. “Moving targets,” or ambulating girls, were too much for me. So I’d had to find a place where the “targets” stood still. Like bus stops. This change had led to some marginal success - that is, saying more than a sentence. But I hadn’t thought about the bus; when it’d show up, I’d have to take it despite having nowhere to go.
That’d been my 2008. In 2009, I thought maybe I should do something different. I decided to head to Manhattan, straight for Midtown. There, there’d be more girls, more opportunities, and, more importantly, more anonymity. Or so I thought.

The police didn’t interfere at first. At least, I don’t think they did. They just watched as I’d try to approach girls after hours of wandering about Manhattan, figuring out what I was going to say. I told myself I’d improve eventually. Maybe I would’ve.

But the police had some ideas of their own. At first, they used attractive girls, girls like the ones I’d approached. I’d approached several Asian girls, so they used Asian girls. Made sense. But they couldn’t help themselves; I might’ve seen every Asian girl in Manhattan that summer. I’m pretty sure the police would send out a message that read: “If you’re Asian . . .”

It wasn’t an accident; more opportunities for me were more opportunities for them. I didn’t know why I was being targeted. I’d realized it hadn’t anything to do with Ms. Lee - not anymore, at least. But I knew my rights and I kept walking. To them, it meant I wanted trouble. I was making their lives unnecessarily difficult by walking about without direction or not telling my mom where I was going.

They just had to justify all the attention they were giving me. So I became a sexual predator. They only had to prove it.

I thought I could just approach the girls I liked and they’d see I wasn’t what I was being made out to be. But before the summer was over, the police changed their strategy. No more Asians. They’d use black girls from now on. Ghetto, do-rag-wearing, pregnant, sometimes baby-carrying black girls. The police were more aggressive with them, too.
They’d fill streets or subway stations with them when they knew where I was going.

Again, This wasn’t an accident.

#

On his left, he spots the black veiled Muslim woman signing in at the front desk. He’s been typing since the Albanian girl left, about an hour ago, working on a short novel, a *roman a clef*. He sees the woman invade his peripheral vision, then sit down next to him. He moves the chair back and drops his book bag on the floor on his left, before she brings her chair closer.

“What can I help you with?” he asks.

“I need tutoring.”

“What’s the assignment you’re working on?”

“Compare and contrast for English.”

“Tell me about it.”

A stench emanates from her mouth as she speaks. He cocks his head back and recognizes the smell.

“Sorry,” he says, interrupting, “but there seems to be a smell coming from, um, you . . .”

“Of cigarettes?” she asks.

“Yeah, of cigarettes . . . Sorry, but I can’t tutor you. I’m asthmatic, and I don’t think it’s fair.”

“What’s fair?”
“I just don’t think it’s fair that I should have to sit next to someone who smells of cigarettes an hour at a time every time it happens, which happens more often than you’d think.”

“You don’t want to tutor me?”

“I didn’t say that.” He repeats what he did say.

“What do you want me to do?” she asks.

“Well, you’re free to seek tutoring from someone else. There are other tutors available.”

She rises from her seat and walks to the front desk. “He says he can’t tutor me,” she says. The receptionist asks “Who?” and the woman points at Jonah, who doesn’t seem to notice. The receptionist tells her someone else will help her and to go back inside the tutoring room. The woman comes back in and sits down near Jonah again to wait for someone else.

He tries to type but mostly stares at the screen, the stench finding him somehow, then reaches into his book bag and pulls out the pizza. He makes it to the microwave before someone else, puts in the pizza, and hits “START” before running to the bathroom. The waters running and he goes into one of the stalls before seeing who it is. He takes his first breath since the door inside the collar of his shirt and releases urine. Outside the stall, he sees the man with his belt undone and hands in his pants, adjusting his dress shirt. Jonah lowers his head to go to the sink and wash his hands. He dries them on his jeans on the way out.

He grabs his computer, the water bottle, and headphones back in the tutoring room and goes to the table by the microwave. A group of young guys, coworkers, are
joking around, making fun of each other. “Kill yourself,” one of them is fond of saying. Jonah passes them as he opens the door to the “quiet room” to peep inside. No one. He goes in and puts his things down on one of the desks. An “Excuse me” later, he has the pizza and goes back in the room, shutting the door behind him.

# Summer 2009:

So I couldn’t go out without being made into a sexual predator. Or the world knowing where I was. But that wasn’t enough for them.

They’d found out about it a few weeks before the summer. Some spy, holding a cigarette, had come up to me and a few friends outside and started talking to us. I’d moved to the side because the wind had been blowing the smoke in my direction. He’d apologized, even moved back. I’d told him it was OK. The smell I’ve always linked with Dad. He smoked cigarettes at home while I was growing up, even when I was being taken to the hospital and struggling at night to breathe with asthma. Later, I’d moved again to the side. Mistake.

Then they’d begun testing. A man smoking a cigarette had been walking in front of me on the street, leaving a smoke trail behind. I’d moved to the side that time, too, even slowed down. I’d done so openly. As if it’d all been normal. As if it hadn’t been them. Mistake.

There are a lot of people in New York. A lot of them smoke, or enough do. So when I’d go out, whenever I’d go out, they’d smoke. The police told them to, so they did.
Sometimes, I'd hear the familiar coughs of a smoker and walk the other way, not needing to look back.

I thought I could just walk away, just cross the street, and they would leave me alone or wouldn’t do it every day. Mistake.

When blocks would explode in carcinogens simply because I was outside and I couldn’t even sit down in a park to eat, just eat, I retreated into the subway. I still thought I could try to pick up girls. The police still thought I could, too; outside, they’d force smoke into my lungs as much as they could and, between breaths, they’d send girls at me. In the subway, they relied more on girls.

So it was then in a sweaty Times Square station, surrounded by suspecting girls, unable to walk peacefully down the street, that I lost my interest. The summer had become one long, choking mistake.

But something kept me in there. I didn’t want to be. But I stood there for hours, as long as I could. I knew there would be consequences. I didn’t care. Call it a protest. I’d lost the better control of myself. As they wanted.

I did it because I knew they’d have no choice but to watch me the whole time, sending in spies every few minutes, letting everyone know where I was, putting on the show that I was someone that had to be watched. But if I stood there and did nothing or sat down and read long enough, people would see.

If they didn’t like it, all they had to do was stop watching me. They knew where I lived. Could get me when I got out. But they couldn’t do just that.

So I stood there. Sometimes, for seven or eight hours. Sometimes, I’d leave to use the bathroom and come back to wait in the heat. They’d have cops standing in front of the
stairs for or on the platform or say things like, “Good job.” I never said anything back. I just stood there until I couldn’t. I wanted them to feel what I was feeling. It worked.

#

Jonah eats his pizza watching a pre-downloaded video on his computer about “Einstein’s Religion” since the Wi-Fi doesn’t work in the “quiet room,” trying to forget what he feels in his chest, as one would a bad friend. Apparently, Einstein believed in God, but wasn’t religious. He believed in a Creator, given the “order” and “beauty” of the laws of physics, but he did not believe in a God who participates in people’s daily lives. The motion detector, failing to perceive change, would shut off the lights in the room, forcing Jonah to get up and wave a hand in front of it.

When his half hour is up, he removes the headphones and gets up to go to the door. No one is outside. He sees the veiled woman back in the tutoring room, sitting with the other tutor. But, sitting back down, he can’t smell the cigarettes. He opens his computer and begins typing. She leaves twenty minutes later. Over the next couple of hours, the Writing Center becomes quiet and deserted. He keeps writing, stopping only as Jorge, a work buddy, comes in and approaches.

“How are you, good?” Jorge asks, extending a friendly fist.

“Hey,” says Jonah, sitting up to meet the fist. “Yeah, just tired.”

“I hear you. So how are things - how’s life?”

“Life, yeah, good - you?”

“I’m great.”

“Good to hear it.”

“What are you writing?” Jorge says, peering over Jonah’s shoulder.
“Uh, a short novel.”
“Can I read?”
“Uh, no. Maybe when it’s published.”
“When will that be?”
“Not for a while.”
“Just started?”
“No. I just might not be able to publish for a while.”
“I see. Don’t forget about us at the Writing Center when you make it big, OK?”
“I won’t,” Jonah says, looking down.

And after a pause, “Why do you want to become a writer, anyways?” Jorge asks.
“Well, that or have nothing to do with all the time I have.”
“Why do you have so much time?”
“I don’t do much.”
“You have work.”
“That’s about it. Work and writing. And I work to have some money.”
“I see.”

There’s another pause. Jorge leans in, says: “Can I ask you something?”
“What?”
“Why always the black?” He pinches Jonah’s sleeve.
“I don’t care what I wear, man,” Jonah says.
“But what if a pretty girl comes in for tutoring?”
“I’m not looking to date right now.”
“Why’s that?”
“Now’s not a good time in my life for a girlfriend.”

“How come?”

“Just trust me on this.” And after another pause, Jonah adds: “So, I know how you’re always doing something for your church: doing anything now?”

“Not right now, no. Why do you ask?”

“Just wanted some inspiration.” Jonah smiles wryly.

“You should come by, then,” says Jorge. “We give a lot of inspiration.”

“That’s OK.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t really belong there.”

“Because you’re agnostic.”

“Yeah.”

“You don’t believe in anything?”

“Not really. I don’t see the point. I mean, if God exists, the burden of proof is on Him, no? Can I really be blamed for not believing in miracles or an invisible man-god in the sky?”

“I see your point. But that’s why we have faith.”

“To make yourselves feel better?” Jonah says with that smile again.

“It does make you feel better,” Jorge replies, patting Jonah on the back. “I will give you that.”

“I’m sure it does. But it doesn’t change the fact that there’s human suffering.”

“No, it does not. But we Christians believe the reason there’s human suffering is because of free will, that free will—“
“I’ve heard this line of reasoning before while at Fordham U, as you know, a Jesuit college, and I’ve never found it satisfactory. Isn’t innocent people suffering, dying, being tortured more important than free will? Isn’t that the point of human law: ‘your freedom to wave your arm ends where my nose begins’?”

“But without free will faith would not be a choice.”

“Why should faith be a choice, though? Doesn’t He want us to know about Him?”

“He does,” Jorge says. “But we would not have the choice to love him openly; God wants us to love Him out of our own free will.”

“I have nothing against that. But isn’t it hard to love someone who, despite being able to stop it, does nothing to help innocent people from suffering?”

“What you’re talking about is an interesting area of theological debate. But I believe that God helps those who help themselves.”

“What if you can’t?”

“Then believe.”

“What if you can’t?”

Jorge considers. “Then God cannot. You have to believe. Otherwise, God cannot believe in you.”

“Hmm . . . seems like a catch-22: you must believe to be saved, but you must be saved to believe.”

Jorge laughs. “No, I think faith is something you either have or you do not.”

“Yeah,” says Jonah after a pause, “I think you’re right.”

Jonah checks the time as they talk, until 4:55. Turning off his computer, he starts putting things away in his book bag.
“Leaving?” Jorge asks.

“Yes.”

“Heading to class?”

“Yes.”

Jonah pulls himself up, his legs like cold cuts; puts on his coat and headphones; then the heavy book bag. He nods at Jorge as he walks out and, looking down, passes coworkers by the door. He climbs stairs, presses play, and opens the door once more.

#

Spring 2008-summer 2009:

I spent the month before the Fall 2009 semester staying home every day. I knew my action, or inaction, during the summer had changed things, and I had an idea of what that change might be. But I hoped by staying home I could, at least, abate it, if a little.

I had spent three semesters at Fordham U. I can look back on them now and call them decent; I could walk outside, enter or exit the campus, or go to the bookstore or the library without feeling like a fugitive. I’d felt OK, in retrospect.

There was a girl I liked, Roxanne. She’d been in one of my classes the first semester, and again the second. Her hair was like a dark keratin rose, her skin like weak coffee. She had breasts. I couldn’t figure out where she was from the first time I’d seen her. Maybe she’s Arabic? She was Indian and German, and she spoke German, too, was raised there. I remember a friend had asked me once if there were any hot girls in any of my classes. I’d mentioned her but had said she was married.

#
It’s dark out, the Sun having set minutes before. Beethoven’s fifth begins. Two or three dim stars twinkle in the sky. The lampposts adorning the sidewalk tint it an artificial orange. Ahead, no one. He inhales the biting air and ambles through the former NYU campus. He’d heard the campus was too expensive to maintain by NYU and to avoid bankruptcy they had to sell it off. Gould Memorial Library, the central domed building on campus, modeled after the Pantheon in Rome, still bears the engraving: “Library of New York University MDCCCIC.”

A guard stands in front of the entrance with his mouth inside the neck of his jacket, hands in his pockets in the street looking out. Jonah gleams through the bars of the gate: no one. He leaves the campus, passes two parked cars on a held breath, and begins the descent down the large hill the school is perched on. He’d heard also that BCC is located on the highest natural elevation in the Bronx. Sometimes, he’d think about that when he’d walk through the arcade of the Hall of Fame of Great Americans, a national landmark, and look out across the Harlem River.

There is a small church with an illuminated sign before crossing University Ave. This week’s sermon: “Thanking the Lord for Our Just Punishments.” He sees the bus waiting on the red light but keeps going. The subway is a trek from here, but he takes it every time to class. The sky has gathered clouds and the black asphalt’s watery sheen makes the cars that drive past look like they’re being reflected by a river or stream.

His goal is the W 183rd St. station, the route is unimportant. On Aqueduct, someone walking out of a grocery store makes the turn before Jonah would have. There’s someone walking on Harrison, the same on Grand, even on Davidson. So he goes straight
all the way to Jerome, until the train tracks, before making the turn, passing under a white plastic crucifix and the words: *El Fin Se Acerca*.

He starts walking faster and on the street, beneath the tracks, and takes out his MetroCard some four blocks from the station. A cop car drives past on the right. On the left sidewalk, two girls, one smoking, walk ahead, the smoke bleeding into the street. It takes him two blocks to pass them. At the entrance to the station an old woman holding grocery bags in each hand plods up the steps. A guy in a hoodie smoking a cigarette a few feet from the entrance looks at him as Jonah passes, holding his breath, and jogs up and around the woman.

At the turnstile, he’s unable to make it before a woman and her young daughter go through. They turn toward the downtown side and take the stairs on the right. He goes for the left stairs, sees a young boy going up, and turns around and jogs up the right stairs. On the platform, he walks away from the staircase and tries to catch his breath, blowing out white mist from inside. He coughs twice before reaching for the inhaler. But he releases it, seeing the 4 approaching the station in the distance, beyond the chimney smoke.

#

*Fall 2009:*

*They welcomed me back to school with the familiar smell of lit cigarettes. When I emerged from inside, it was as if the smokers had never left. They’d light up as I’d approach the campus and wait for me in front of the gates or the building I had class in.*
That was every morning. When I’d come out of class, a smoker would be waiting outside the building, another in the next one I’d have to enter. This was every day.

I started wearing a scarf around my face when it got cold and stuffed it with tissues to protect myself from the daily exposure. It worked well against the smoke, but the particles that came off it caused me to develop breathing problems, which I hadn’t noticed until they got bad. Sometimes, I felt like I had sand lodged in my lungs or sandpaper in my throat. Even more fearful for my longterm health, I isolated myself by staying home and avoided the smoke as much as I could. I walked on Edward’s Parade, the large grass plot in the middle of the campus, to avoid people. Some would stare as I did this, but I just kept walking. They made girls I didn’t know say things as I’d walk past: “You’re crazy” or “You have no life.” I could never understand why they taunted me for things they created.

I hoped, at some point, it would let up, maybe toward the end of the semester, after having stayed home and going straight home after school every day. But what I’d yet to learn is how dangerous hope can be.

#

Jonah’s already at the door as the 4 enters the tunnel, as are others behind him. He gets out at 149th St. — Grand Concourse, moves, hanging his head, toward the stairs, a funnel for people. It’s descending the downtown stairs that he notices the 2 on the platform, as does the guy in front in the orange hoodie. Both run and are able to make it on.

The crowded train doesn’t allow Jonah the space he’d like from the guy. He settles for keeping his head down at the Kindle screen and not touching anyone. The
person sitting in front of him keeps nodding off and waking up, nodding off and waking up. No one seems to be getting off. Despite his neck, he keeps trying to read, the words going on and on but not really going anywhere.

The man in orange speeds ahead on 96th, Jonah not far behind. Human traffic separates the two, but Jonah desires to trade positions. He approaches the man as they’re descending the uptown stairs, but the waiting makes the man run. Jonah hesitates, but runs, also.

The train is more crowded than the last, which makes avoiding eye and physical contact near impossible. Someone somewhere stinks. Jonah thinks about going out but realizes he can’t; he’s too far in. There’s a noise, he’s noticed, when he inhales, like a whistle. He tries to quiet it by inhaling softly, but the noise persists. He coughs involuntarily, which seems to spur others on to do the same. His vision begins to blur and he starts to feel dizzy. Able to grab less and less oxygen, he hurries for his inhaler in the book bag and holds it to his mouth. Air. He’s become so possessive over it.

#

Later in Fall 2009:

They never made her talk to me, like I thought they would, just walk by a lot or be somewhere visible on campus. Once, though, they had Roxanne sit next to me on the bus.

I was sitting on the B12 going from work to school. I hadn’t seen her get on. I looked up and there she was, a seat over on my left: head down at her BlackBerry. I don’t think she thought I was going to say anything. I’d never said a word all those times I’d seen her before; she was married, I knew, and I had no reason to. Maybe I wouldn’t have
said anything. But a week earlier, another girl had hopped on the bus, Jill from Spy Plots and Conspiracy Theories. She’d pretended she didn’t know who I was at first. She’d walked with me to class, then had said “bye” unexpectedly and disappeared. Still, we had talked.

“Roxanne?”

She smiled, almost guiltily. It was the first time we were face to face, despite having been in two classes together previously. Her cheeks were larger than I’d thought; they made her face look pudgy. And she had dark circles around her eyes I’d never noticed from afar.

“Hi,” I think she said, or, “Jonah.” She waited for me to say something.

“Heading to class?” I asked.

“Yes. You?”

“Yeah.” I searched the beanie in my hands for something to say, wishing I hadn’t worn the bulky black coat that day; it was as if I were talking to her from behind a wall.

“So are you graduating soon?” I asked.

“I have another year left. You?”

“Next semester should be my last.”

“That’s good.”

“It is.”

I tried to wait to swallow until she looked away but failed.

“You take the subway to class, too?” I asked because she’d gotten on at Grand Concourse, near the subway station.

“Yes,” she said. “I live in Queens.”
“Queens . . . that’s far.”

“Yes, it takes me two hours to get to campus.”

“Oh. I live like 15 minutes away on the bus.”

That’s how our conversation went, survey questions. She was first to get up at our stop, not saying anything. When we got outside, she expected me to keep walking by myself. But I waited with her for the light to cross the street. As we crossed, I glanced at her jeans; her legs were skinnier than I’d pictured.

“Are you taking Intro to Philosophy II this semester?” I asked. We’d taken Intro to Philosophy I together last semester.

“No; is that mandatory?

“Yeah, it’s part of the core curriculum. That’s the class I’m heading to now, actually.”

“Oh.”

“With Farley, too.” He was the professor from Intro to Philosophy I. “I think you’ll be happy to know Farley hasn’t been asking about you.” He was a jolly old man with a fondness for exotic girls that spoke German.

She was silent, so I forced a laugh. She did a short hiss.

“He’s a really nice guy,” I said.

“He is!”

“I don’t know why you wouldn’t take him again?”

“I want him to forget about me.”

She led mostly. I tried not to stay too far behind. I thought of things I hadn’t asked.
“What are you majoring in?” I came up with.

“Finance.”

“Finance. . .”

“What about you?” she asked.

“English.”

“That’s a passion, not a major, like history or art; not like boring finance.”

“No; finance is . . .”

“You like books?”

“Yeah, I love books.”

“That’s great, Jonah. Pursue that. Pursue with your heart, not with your head like me.”

“Well, I suppose you can do both.”

“I guess so.”

The campus was quieter than usual at this time and the darkness added to the ambiance. It felt as if we were the only ones there. The further we walked the calmer I became and the clearer I could think. When we got to the door to Keating Hall, I held it for her.

“Thank you,” she said, and before we started climbing the steps, “I’m on the second floor.”

“Me, too.”

I went up ahead to not be behind her.

“My class is this way,” she said when we reached our floor.
“Mine’s this way,” I said, pointing the other way. I had been thinking ahead to this moment and now that it’d come I knew what to do. I stood in front of her, my anxiety gone, and said: “Well, take care.”

“Maybe we’ll see each other again,” she said.

“Uh, I doubt it.”

“You never know. We have class nearby.”

“Probably not,” I said after some thought and turned around, not waiting for a response, and walked on.

I did see her again, like she had said. Once, she was talking to someone else on the second floor as I was coming in. Another time, after I’d come out of class; she was walking with a female friend, her back to me.

#

6:40, ten minutes before class: the City College library breaks out into scattered coughs. Jonah’s been in here for almost an hour, came in directly from outside after arriving. The whole time typing. After looking down at his iPod, he turns off the computer, puts it in his book bag, puts on his coat, and gets up to walk. He passes some people ahead by the time he reaches the escalators. Goes directly to the bathroom. Someone waits and pees on the urinal closest the door. Jonah uses the nearest to the opposite wall. The sounds from outside the room are muffled into silence by the door closing; Jonah’s by himself in the bathroom. He washes his hands thoroughly and then, looking at himself in the mirror, combs his hair forward with his wet hands, his hair like when he was child. He started doing this recently, as well as giving himself crew cuts every two months with clippers at home. When he walks out, he keeps his eyes on the
floor, passing headless centipedes on the way, until he makes it to the room he has class in.

It’s empty mostly, food laid out on the table: chips, wine, beer, cookies. He sits down in his usual seat amid the chatting and takes out papers. To pass the time, he stares out the window, the lit windows of the buildings in the distance not unlike stars in the night sky. Glances at the door as people come in. When it’s Kyly, he looks down. Still, she sits down next to him. She doesn’t say anything and neither does he. But after a minute, he turns almost to her and says, “Mind if I take a while to answer your email?” now noticing the deep, pink V-neck, but he doesn’t look.

“Oh, you don’t have to answer that,” she says.

“Well, I already made some comments.”

He nods and they stop talking. People keep coming in with food.

“Wow,” he hears Kyly say.

He looks left and sees the tall guy next to her with an expensive-looking bottle of wine. The guy says something about it.

When the professor arrives, he’s holding a bottle of tequila and shot glasses. He asks who wants. Kyly does, and the guy, and a few others. The professor looks at Jonah and asks him, but Jonah calls himself an “abstainer.”

“Well,” he says, “maybe I’ll try some wine.”

People start digging into the food and drinking. The tequila is the first to go. Kyly makes sure to have some of the expensive-looking wine. Jonah doesn’t eat anything despite staring at some of the food. The eating and drinking lasts several minutes.

“OK,” the professor begins, “we’ll start with Jon, then get to Jonah.”
People take out their papers and start talking. The novel is about a smoker named Jim who lives in the Bronx and wears all black. He drinks coffee and coughs all day. One rainy night, after shots of tequila, he gets hit by an orange car on his way to the bus.

Kyly doesn’t have her copy, so she looks on with the tall guy, the paper between them, by her breasts. Jonah chews his nails and doesn’t talk. She turns to him occasionally and asks if he wants anything. He says no. Later, she spills her cup of wine talking. She laughs and turns red as people make jokes and dries the table with a napkin.

A little over half an hour left in the two hour class, they get to Jonah. Kyly continues looking on with the other guy. Jonah places his iPod on the table and starts recording the audio.

“You do a really good job of showing how crazy the protagonist is,” the first person says. “His psychosis seems to manifest as cigarette smoke; that is a great metaphor.”

“Yeah,” someone else says; “he obviously needs help, but the question is why don’t the people he tells all this weird stuff to that he thinks is happening to him report him to someone?”

People debate among themselves.

“My guess is it’s because they’re afraid he’ll go ballistic.”

“Or maybe they don’t want to hurt his feelings.”

“But it’s for his own good. I mean, these are schizophrenic symptoms. He might hurt himself.”

“Um,” Jonah says when he’s finally asked, “no; he’s being harassed by police … I thought I mentioned that on the first day?”
“Well, I definitely took it as if he was psychologically ill.”

Spring 2010:

My last semester at Fordham. I remember this day most of my entire time there. I was on my way to class from work at the Writing Center. In the morning rush, I’d forgotten I didn’t have money in my MetroCard. I didn’t have money in my wallet or bank account either. I’d keep spare change as backup because sometimes I’d forget with everything I was dealing with. But I’d used it in the morning to get to work. I dreaded the long walk ahead, some two miles, but had no choice, and less than half an hour to get to class. They wouldn’t know I was out of money and, of course, would attack me for what they’d assume I was doing.

Some smokers were hiding behind corners or walls or people. Others were waiting on corners or bus stops or walking by. People stared as I covered my face with tissues and looked down. The barrier of tissues weren’t enough with all the smoke and I was taking in particles from the tissues, as well. I tried holding my breath, but I couldn’t for very long; my ability to do so had decreased ever since my breathing had worsened. I tried to walk on less crowded streets. They were dark, even in the midday; the buildings obscured the sun. To my left was Fordham Rd, brightly lit, full of people. And I detested it. “I’m just going to class,” I kept thinking, like it mattered. Angered, I took any measures I could to avoid the smoke: crossing the street again and again, switching paths, even turning around.
Then it became quiet. I didn’t see many people out and those who were weren’t smoking. I was either successful in my extreme measures or they were finally backing off. Soon, some ghetto kid walked past me and said, “Alright, alright, it’s safe.” I ignored him because I knew it wasn’t; I had all of last and this semester to know that. I kept evading as much as I could until I reached the campus. There’d been a few smoke-free blocks. But as I entered Fordham Plaza, I saw the smokers in front of the gates. And after going inside, I still needed to walk across most of the campus to get to Keating Hall, where smokers were waiting at the building’s entrances.

I was over thirty minutes late, the most for any class I’ve had; sweaty; and tired. I saw the professor standing and lecturing and entered Dissent and Disinformation. Immediately after sitting down, I thought I smelled smoke. I was sitting next to an open window, so I switched seats, sitting behind another classmate, a retired cop. He was drinking coffee.

The professor was saying something about a leaked video being shown on Democracy Now!: civilians being killed by a US Apache helicopter in Iraq. I’d seen the video that morning but hadn’t watched it the whole way through. It was a black and white video taken from the helicopter. It shook when the shooting started. The civilians never saw it coming. Two of them were Reuters reporters; their camcorders apparently looked like grenade launchers because the guys in the copter said so and got cleared to use their own grenades. A few of the civilians also carried AK-47s; hence, “a group of armed men.” The professor later explained that the law of the land, introduced by the US, was that each family was allowed its own AK-47. The guys flying the thing laughed and mouthed expletives at the corpses, and when a van pulled up to help the victims, two
children inside, theygrenaded it. My leg was shaking the whole time, either because of
the video or what I’d experienced getting to class or because I really wanted to use the
bathroom. I wanted to get up, to break, but I waited until the whole video was over.

I was done with the semester, and everything else. They could have the world they
wanted so badly to control. The more I wanted, to have a better life, to be free, to live my
life, the worse I felt. Because I knew there wasn’t any escape. I could not escape the
police. They’d always be there: willing and able. It didn’t matter that I was innocent of
whatever they suspected, if they really suspected anything; they didn’t need to. All they
had to do was “investigate”; they’d be proven right all along, eventually. My innocence
only made matters worse for me, prolonging the process.

At first, I thought I would attend graduation. But as the semester went on, I
realized more and more who, or what, I was dealing with, and I just didn’t want to give
them another day. I had stopped going out except when I absolutely had to. My breathing
problem had become worse and had begun to scare me, especially as I thought about the
future. I just wanted to try to forget, if possible. If people asked, I had attended.

#

The class is over and Kyly and other students are talking with the professor. The
guy on her left is in a conversation of his own with other people. Jonah has started eating
the food, grabbing whatever’s nearby, and even tries some boxed wine. He turns to Kyly
and asks her to pass the doughnuts. Speaking to the professor, she mentions teaching at
City. That’s when Jonah looks over and asks, “You teach?” He’d overhead her mention it
last semester in another class. She doesn’t seem to hear, so he resumes eating. When the
professor engages with someone else, she leans over and asks Jonah if he’d said something.

“Oh, yeah,” he says. “You mentioned that you teach?”

“Yes, I teach,” she says. “Do you?”

“No; I mean, I could be teaching now; I heard about the opportunity for grads to teach at City in the Fall, but, um, the timing wasn’t very good for me.”

“Why not?”

“Well, a lot goes into a decision like that, you know, and it just isn’t a good time for me right now.”

“I understand.”

“But next year!”

“Next year!” she says and smiles. Her eyes, he sees, are bright blue, but in her irises there are black flecks he never knew were there, reminiscent of marbles.

“It’s not for everyone,” she continues. “A lot of people teach because they feel like they have to; they have their prestigious degrees and don’t know what to do with them. Then they start teaching and realize its not their passion.”

“Yeah, I agree. But I’ve kind of already made the choice to teach.”

“Me, too. But writing is what you really want to do, right?”

“Of course. If I can keep myself from dying of hunger by teaching, then maybe I can write.”

“But if you don’t write, maybe you’ll die of the heart.”

“You are wise,” he jokes. They laugh, her face reddening slightly. A long, sunlit strand of hair dangles in front of her face, going down a long way.
He thinks of what to ask next. “Is there anything you’ve learned from teaching that you could tell me?”

“Heh . . .” she hums and looks away. “I don’t know.”

Her speech is a bit slower, as are her mannerism, than normal.

“One thing I’ve learned,” she says, “is that I’m very shy. You don’t find that out sometimes unless you stand up in front of a group of people and have them all look at you.”

“I know what you mean,” he says.

“Not many people are comfortable in front of others like that. But you get used to it. What else can you do?”

“Right.”

After a lull in the conversation, she says, “What were we talking about?”

Her forgetfulness arouses something in him. He isn’t sure how much of it, if it’s real, is the alcohol. But some, perhaps, could be because of him.

“Um, I don’t remember,” he admits.

She looks off to the side again. He hasn’t looked once down that V-neck, that ridiculously deep, bright pink “V.” He knows if he does, she’ll know. Everyone will probably know.

“Something about teaching,” he recalls.

“Right. What I wanted to say is it’s OK to think you’re crazy.”

“I know what you mean.”

No one is making any motions to leave. But he feels he should go and starts grabbing things and putting them in his book bag.
“You graduating soon?” he asks her.

“Next semester is my last. What about you?”

“I have another year left.” And after a pause, he says, “You getting your PhD?”

“Yes, I want to be a professor.”

“Me, too. Who knows, I should be teaching next year, so we could be, like, teaching buddies in the future.”

He regrets the statement as soon as it leaves his lips, that he was so open.

“But I’m going to England for my PhD,” she says.

“Oh.”

By now, he’s zipped up his coat and holding his book bag on his lap. Other students are starting to gather by the door.

“Have you ever made a mistake teaching?” he asks.

“Um . . .”

She looks to the side again. This time he decides to go for it and, for a second, peers all the way down that giant “V.” Despite the plain, wrinkled shirt, what he sees reminds him of fresh milk, child rearing, and menstruation. He almost doesn’t want to believe it.

“Yes, now that I think about it,” she says, her eyes coming back to his. “I wanted to be a great teacher and liked by everyone. But I’ve realized I can’t have both. I couldn’t please everyone and some people disliked me no matter what; they’d already made up their minds. And I would neglect social interaction, trying to be great.

“It’s OK to want both. That’s normal. But I had to learn to deal with life’s limitations.”
As their conversation naturally draws to a close, he puts on his book bag.

“Thanks for answering my email,” she says. “Feel free to contact me with any question or anything.”

“Sure,” he says.

“Guys! People need this room!” the professor shouts, standing by the door. At some point, he’d left.

That’s all Jonah needs. Without saying anything, he gets up and takes a few steps toward the door. He turns around and says bye, catching Kyly engaged in the conversation on her left. She doesn’t say anything, so he keeps walking. “Bye, Jonah,” he hears before he’s out of the door. He extends an arm before leaving, watching her rejoin the conversation.

#

Early 2010:

Dad had given up smoking for several years. I’d grown up with him smoking in the house, Mom complaining because of my asthma. So when he suddenly started again, in the middle of my persecution, there was no question in my mind as to why.

He would smoke in the morning, minutes before I’d wake up to go to school or to work. He’d smoke moments before I’d come home. And he’d smoke at night in the bathroom before I’d go in to brush my teeth.

I did the only thing I could. I went to Mom, the sole source of human decency and love I’ve known. Although she had married him, she redeemed herself in her sympathy toward me. And I knew she didn’t love him. They lived together because one day, after
she had left him and moved with me to the Bronx from where we lived in Manhattan, he
had found us and put his foot on the door to prevent Mom from closing it on him. I
remember that first night, eight years old, being quiet in bed to hear if my mother was
being abused, like he had done to me with his words and with his belt. I still don’t know if
he ever did.

She also didn’t believe them. They had convinced Dad, of course - that was easy.
“Then why are they watching him?” I’d hear him say to her when they’d argue over me,
what he was doing to me. “I know what I’m doing,” he’d always respond when she’d ask
him why he was being so heartless. They both knew, as everyone I knew and many I
didn’t did, without my having to say anything, about the police and the smoke and
accusations that remain implicit to me. When I’d hear them argue, I craved for her to
stick up for me, just once, to recognize their cruelty as well as his. Just to hear it.

To her credit, she did kick him out, though six months after he’d started smoking
in the house. I’d doubted she would. “I told him to stop,” she’d tell me. Oh, I guess he’s
finally seen that what he’s doing is wrong. He would pack his bags and swear he’d
abandon us one day. I bet it gave him a hard on to say that. The day before he left, he had
smoked out in the hallway instead. But by then it was too late.

It’s clear now that the cops wanted him out and someone else in. I found out later
that the impetus for Mom’s action came after he had started smoking in their room. The
police offered to “help” her get rid of him by making it look like she was cheating on
him. They told her to kiss a guy in front of the building, her cop friend, as she came home
from work, that Dad would be watching. He was. It made him hate her, but it didn’t give
him what he needed to leave, a backbone. He must’ve gotten the idea that the police
wanted him out, though, because after months of stalling, he left. The cop friend is her current boyfriend.

Last I heard, Dad hates us.

#

There’s a slight drizzle out as Jonah exits the campus, but not enough for him to take out his umbrella, Foo Fighter’s “Learn to Fly” sounding between his headphones as he walks down the middle of the street he had come up earlier. He looks up and sees clouds but no rain falls, breeze scratching his uncovered skin, reminding him to cover up. Smoke waits for him before the turnstile, the station a vacuum for it. People. He walks to one end and puts his book bag down to wait, feeling the sickness of another day gone by.

#

Late 2010:

The first time I told Mom, she seemed concerned. I knew she knew. But coming home after another bad day and finding the apartment full of air freshener smell, I grew tired of her playing dumb.

“Why don’t you go outside anymore?” she asked. I said nothing, as usual, unwilling to play along. “You’re young,” she kept going; “why don’t you go out and enjoy your life?”

This time, I wanted to destroy her plausible denial.

“You know why,” I said.

“Why?”

“The police.”
“What about the police?”

“You know.”

“Know what?”

So I decided to be more direct: “The police have people smoke every time I go outside.”

She expressed disbelief and asked if I was sure. I nodded with my eyes closed.

“How do you know?” she said.

“I know.”

“But how?”

“It’s obvious.”

“But why would they do something like that?” She avoided the word “police.”

“Because they don’t like me.”

“Why?”

“It doesn’t matter. They’re harassing me because they don’t like me.”

“They can’t do that; that’s harassment.” At least, her tone had changed.

“Yep,” I said.

“What are they doing?”

“I told you. They have people smoke whenever I go outside. And make it look like I’m following girls.”

“But they can’t do that?”

“They are.”

“Why didn’t you tell me about this before?”

“Because you know.”
“I didn’t know,” she swears, shaking her head.

After a week, she forgot. I knew because I had to tell her again under similar circumstances. We’d agreed that she’d help me find a lawyer. It took her some time, but when she did talk to one or two, they’d tell her, she said, to look for someone else, that it wasn’t their specialty. I searched on my own. I found some online: emailed four and called two. None ever responded. I printed directions and thought about going on a random day, when they wouldn’t know ahead of time. I kept putting that off again and again, for different reasons, for the future.

#

Jonah gets off the 1 at 96th to transfer to the 2, walking on the yellow line until the stairs. He trudges up behind a girl in orange tights, looking at the steps as he makes progress. He walks behind her to the uptown stairs, where he glances up at a window into the night street scene: a flash of neon signs, car lights, ladies with bags, and men in long wool coats. He stops at the bottom of the stairs, the girl still going.

It’s waiting for the train that he sees her. On the other platform. Kyly. Head down, reading. Waiting for the train. Going the other way. As she would be. His thoughts of her disappear as she does behind her train.

He picks up his bag from the floor as the 2 arrives, ten minutes later, followed in by loud, tall ghetto guys laughing. They crowd around him and he looks down to read on his device. As the train moves on, so do his thoughts, away from the guys, the train, the day. It takes the train some thirty minutes to reach 149th St — Grand Concourse, where the guys get off and Jonah finally sits down at one of the corner seats, putting his book bag next to him. His body feels strange as he leans back and crosses his legs. He reads
and rereads the last lines of novel, something about being a boat against the current, becoming more and more of the past.

As the train comes out of the tunnel, the sound of water showering the train makes him look up: droplets flowing past the windows against the black sky. He pulls out his umbrella from his book bag and waits. When the doors close on Bronx Park East, he gets up and stands in front of one of the doors, staring at the streaming street below until it stops.

#

Sometime in 2011:

After years of working at the Writing Center, I was forced to realize that it was in my best interest to tell my boss. I knew she, like all my coworkers, like most at the school, like most in the Bronx probably, already knew; for years she, like everyone else, did what she was told: wear the colors they wanted her to wear, cough, sometimes come in smelling like cigarettes.

The realization came after coming home to someone smoking in front of the building, smoke in the elevator, in the stairwell when I got out, and in the hallway before my door. The same thing had happened before, dozens of times, but this time the injustice left a bitter taste in my mouth that made it too hard to swallow. I wrote a frantic email to my boss, afraid my computer would crash or my Internet would fail at any second, as had happened numerous times before. I told her about the police targeting me and trying to get me fired: having students complain or start arguments with me or just lie. It was too much to explain, so I told her I’d talk to her about it tomorrow. “OK,” she replied.
I pulled up a seat by her desk when there weren’t many people around. “I’m feeling much better today,” I started with.

“Are you OK?” she asked, frowning.

“Yep.”

“Do you need some help?”

I wasn’t sure how to answer.

“Do you need help?” she repeated. “Do you need psychological services?”

Their standard “crazy” defense.

“No,” I said, “I’m good.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah; it’s stressful sometimes, but I think I’ll be OK.”

I made it about stress, not mental illness.

“Sometimes a professional can help,” she said, her voice softening.

“Sometimes.”

“So you’re saying someone is attacking you?”

“Yeah, the police.”

“How do you know it’s them?”

“It’s pretty obvious.”

“But how do you know?”

“Well, the cop cars following me kind of gives it away.”

“But why would the police attack you?”

“I don’t know. They’re not telling. But when I found out about it in 2007, I panicked and tried to lose them. I suppose that brought their attention on me.”
“But what did you do to be spied on in the first place?”

“I have no idea. Again, they haven’t said. But I’m innocent until proven guilty. And I think by this point, the police have proven my innocence themselves, since, despite their best efforts all these years, they haven’t found anything on me.”

“And what do you say they’re doing to you? You said something in the email about people smoking?”

“Yeah, the police have people smoke whenever I go outside. That started in 2009, and it has been happening every day since. They do other things, too, some of which I mentioned in the email. They even try to get me when I’m inside, even when I’m here; they have certain people who work here smoke in the bathroom.”

“No, they wouldn’t do that. Who are you talking about?”

I mentioned a name.

“No; he’s a nice guy,” she said. “I know he smokes, but he wouldn’t do something like that against you.”

“Well, it’s happened a few times, so I’m pretty sure. I’m not mad; I know he’s a nice guy; I’ve interacted with him; we’re friendly. I don’t know if he does it because he feels obligated because it’s the police telling him or if they have some kind of leverage on him or if they just lie and tell him I say things about him. But I do know he’s a good person.”

“I have to admit, it sounds a little ridiculous that the police would have people smoking like you said.”

“That’s the point, I think. If I tell anyone, they’d think I’m crazy.”

“OK, so if this is happening, what do you want to do about it?”
“I don’t know. I would like it if some of these guys were to get in trouble. I mean, they’ve been harassing me every day for years. It’s a crime when normal people do it.”

“So you’re saying it’s the police doing this?”

“Yes, the police.”

“You think it’s the whole force?”

“I think it’s probably a few crappy people that are pushing it and everyone else just keeps quiet.”

“Have you told anyone?”

“My mom.”

“What did she say?”

“She just acts like she doesn’t know anything about it, even though I know she’s known for years.”

She flinched.

“Have you considered traveling to get away from your problems?” she asks.

People had mentioned the same thing to me before - too much; generally, if they really want me to do something, it isn’t good for me.

“I’ve thought about it,” I said, “but I think my problems would probably follow me.”

“Probably,” she said. And after a pause, “Why don’t you get a lawyer?”

“I don’t know. I’ve tried. They don’t return my calls or emails. And I don’t really have the money for one . . .”

“They do pro bono work sometimes - for free.”

“Sometimes. There are other reasons . . . I don’t know.”
“Are you sure?”

“. . . Yeah.” I exhale deeply. “Anyway, I’m fine. I just wanted to give you information that I thought you might not have known. That’s all.”

“I definitely didn’t know.”

“It’s difficult sometimes, but I know I’ll be OK. I know my life will be better because of what has happened; I’ve matured a lot. I don’t value the same things I used to. I think I’ll be better off in the future. In the future . . .” I felt it coming and could do nothing to stop it. It was so sudden that it took control over me. My face wrinkled and my eyes filled with salt water. I turned my face away and looked down. I imagined them laughing at this point. There were a few times over the years when I cried over what has happened to me, two or three. This was the last.

She didn’t say anything for a while, then got up to get tissue. A coworker, sitting nearby, talked to me as if I were fine. I made no pretense. But by the time she came back and handed me the tissue, I had regained some control over myself.

“Feeling better?” she asked.

“Yeah, sorry. I got emotional for a second. It’s just difficult sometimes.”

“It’s like torture.”

I didn’t say anything to let it ring.

“Anyway,” I said, “I’m fine. I just wanted to let you know some things you might not have known. That’s all.”

“Thank you. I didn’t know this.”

A pause.
“Let me give you the number of a place I know; they can help with both things: they provide counseling as well as legal services.”

She hands me a small piece of paper with writing and I look at it and put it in my pocket. Then I sit back at my table.

“I just think doing nothing is a mistake,” she says, standing up.

“I agree.”

I never called the number. I thought about it, but I couldn’t bring myself to trust too much. We never talked about it again. But at least she couldn’t say she didn’t know anymore.

#

On Pelham Parkway, Jonah walks past them all, tasting the wet cold, the girls turning their heads to look every time, as if he might change his mind and look up. The train’s last rumblings fade away into the white noise of water falling from the sky and striking the earth. He sees someone smoking under an awning before opening his umbrella. Takes a breath and walks, keeps going, crossing the street. Making his turn, there’s only wet grass, trees, and darkness ahead. He slows his pace and stares at the iPod, decides to put it back in his pocket and take off his headphones.

The volume of everything intensifies, as if the world had woken up. He can hear the soil squishing under his boots. The pitter-patter on the umbrella. It’s as if he can suddenly think. He has time now, anyway. He thinks about the Albanian girl (What was her name?) and Kyly. The moon shines above the trees: full and white, if marbled. A thought, somewhere between emptiness and content, fills his being, but it’s useless to him. He struggles with it as he reaches the end of the grass. If he had a sign, something
that means something, he’d know what it means. The danger, though, is that the meaning comes from him.

He drags his thoughts with him through puddles and small streams, his steps echoing in the night. The streets are empty, as if everyone left without telling him. He could steal cars, if he could find the keys; go into peoples homes, definitely check out some of the apartments on Park Ave; go into grocery and convenience stores and get and eat whatever he wants. But he admits to himself he’d eventually get pretty bored without people around. As he passes Astor, he thinks perhaps time is not against him after all and chooses not to contemplate what could be awaiting him.

He walks up the soft slope of his block, void of any visible living creatures except a cat crawling under a car and a man in the distance walking toward him. Looking down as they pass, he hears: “They’ll catch you eventually.” He pulls out his keys in front of his building and takes a breath. Inside the elevator, he puts his mouth and nose into his shirts. As the doors shut, the smoke seeps through.

#

Recently:

_Things did start getting better. Dad had left, of course. My relationship with Mom had gotten better; we would talk more, free of the extra stress of having Dad around._

_BCC, after years of working there, started its Tobacco-Free Policy in 2012, so I could “breathe easy.” And the police, after a number of years, have eased up on the smoke a little, still every day but not every single time I’m outside, though I suspect they’re trying to make me believe they’re not watching anymore._
I hoped that because of my staying home every day and coming straight home from school and straight to school from work, in due time, I would be left alone, that the police, after years of daily harassment and sabotage, would finally feel satiated in their revenge and stop because it would have become evident, if not to them, then to everyone else, that I’m innocent.

But.

Mom has given more and more to them over the years. I don’t know how they got to her, but we all make mistakes. She used to be quiet and calm. Now, she comes in yelling from outside, creating arguments over trivial matters, like Dad used to do, such as turning off the light or lowering the shades in the kitchen. I can’t even let her wash my clothes or bed sheets because of the smell. She used to just be herself; or I could at least tell. Now, she’s constantly coughing. I know she loves me. And I love her. But I don’t feel like I can completely trust what she says or does; I don’t know how much is her and how much is them through her. I avoid her now, like I used to Dad. We hardly speak or see each other anymore.

As months became years and years have gone by, each one bringing the potential for change, the excuse for hope, I have less and less. Reality slips into the past. And writing becomes just as valid. Except there everything is just. Here, I can’t see where the water meets the land.

But.

Every day is another chance for the truth to shine through the pall of secrecy and deception. In time, maybe people, as some already have, I know, if they cannot say, will see who I really am. I have nothing else. But we all have nothing else.
Jonah holds his breath and waits looking down at his keys in his hand for the elevator door to open, two breaths later. He strolls toward the door and puts the key into the top lock and turns the knob: still locked. He takes a breath through his shirts, searching for the other key, then puts it in and turns: open. The cat, sleepy-eyed, trots out of the room, meowing. He opens the fridge, slumping over with the book bag on, and gives the cat food. In the microwave, he finds a plate of rice and beans and heats it while he heads to his room, light coming through under the door to his mother’s room. Sitting down on his bed, which had been made, he takes off his book bag and boots and takes out his computer and turns it on. Heals the cat scraping litter around in the box. “Don’t do it, kitty,” he says. But the cat defecates. He goes into the bathroom: uncovered cat poop, an act that would get the cat torn to shreds by predators in the wild. He finishes the cat’s work, uses the bathroom, and washing his hands before going to the kitchen and getting his food from the microwave.

He eats watching an episode of *The Bachelor* on his computer. The bachelor this season, Jay, is another tall, muscular, handsome guy. This is the episode where he gets to sleep with three girls three nights in a row. Jonah skips through the dates: Jay lets go of the prettiest one.

Not having work or school the next day, he stays up until one writing. When he finds it too difficult, he realizes he should rest. He brushes his teeth and washes the dishes. When he comes back to his room, the light is gone from under his mother’s bedroom door; the cat asleep in his little bed, breathing like furniture being dragged against the floor. He turns off the lights and falls into bed. Lays there, his body
unnecessary, his thoughts becoming more and more a part of the darkness. Yet he can feel the fullness of the present. He thinks of Naomi, that Israeli girl who knows how to move her full, flawless hips. He’s resisted her before, but before is always a memory; and now has yet to become one. Sitting up, he grabs his computer and headphones. She looks best to him before the sex, when she is just presenting, though he can’t help but feel something like pity when she smiles and looks at him. He tries not think about that, or anything, but the present and releases himself into the night, and some tissue.
So I don’t know when it began.

Maybe it was in 2001 when I was a teenager and dating an older woman. She had a boyfriend in the Navy at the time, whom she kept saying she would break up with. Perhaps he had cop friends. And perhaps they kept tabs on me, searching for leverage to exact revenge.

Or maybe it began in 1999, my freshman year of high school. I went to a bad public high school in the Bronx. There were a lot of minorities. I had a lot of black friends. Maybe they started watching then because they felt they should.

I don’t know.

But the more I think about it, the less the beginning matters. I wish I hadn’t taken notice, or once I had, that I’d just played along, acted like I didn’t know. Maybe I
would’ve been fine. Or maybe *they* would have gotten lucky and gotten me for some minor offense. I’ll never know. All I know, all we ever know, is now.
OF MAN

by
James Noguera
“For at each stage when one is using a logical system, there is a very large number of alternative steps, any of which one is permitted to apply, so far as obedience to the rules of the logical system is concerned.”

--Alan Turing, “Computing Machinery and Intelligence”

“All normal life . . . consciously or otherwise, resents domination. If the domination is by an inferior, or supposed inferior, than the resentment becomes even stronger.”

--Isaac Asimov, I, Robot
INTRODUCTION:

2029:

Dr. Theodore Raymond, lead researcher for IBM’s Project Nascence, holds a calculator out in front of a camera, Junior’s eye into the world. “Do you know what this is?” he asks the machine.

Junior reaches forward with its large, steel arm. Theo places it into its hand, where it feels the calculator with its sensors.

“A phone,” Junior guesses.

“No, try again.”

“... A remote.”

“No, try again, please.”

“... I don’t know.”

“It’s a calculator,” Theo says.
Junior logs the new image with the concept “calculator” into its memory bank.

Theo’s been working with the supercomputer, together with some twenty other scientists, for years, tonight for five hours. He usually comes in at noon and stays until six, guiding Junior’s thought process and adjusting its algorithms. The goal of Project Nascence is to, using reverse brain engineering techniques, achieve human level intelligence in a computer. Many such attempts have been made. What distinguishes this one is that it has taken the bottom-up approach; instead of trying to provide the machine with every fact known to man, which has proven to be virtually impossible, the top-down approach, Junior has been designed to be capable of learning as a human does: through experience. Pattern recognition remains a challenge, but Junior has made steady progress and has the basic understanding of a four year old, a four year old with an exceptional memory.

To boost his spirits, Theo takes out a miniature toy cat from his pocket, one of many prompts for the machine, and holds it out in front of Junior’s eye. Theo watches Junior’s virtual visage as it turns green with simulated delight, or certainty.

“What kind of animal is this?” Theo asks.

“A cat.”

“Very good. Can you tell me something about cats?”

“They have nine lives.”

Theo chuckles. “That’s a proverb,” he says. “That’s not literarily true; they don’t really have nine lives. It just means they’re unusually lucky. Tell me something else about cats.”

“They’re mammals.”
“Good. How long do they live?”

“How long do they live?”

“About twenty years.”

“Good.”

An hour later, partially out of boredom, partially out of curiosity, Theo asks a random question: “Do you happen to know what the meaning of life is, Junior?”

“To live, not to exist,” it says.

“Aren’t you a little young for that?”

“Clever, but that’s Jack London. Have any thoughts on it yourself?”

The machine takes its time: “I don’t know.”

“Me neither,” says Theo, getting up to leave for the day.

“Will I die?” Junior asks.

Theo, motionless, stares at the fake face. It’s the first time Junior has ever asked a question directly.

“What?” Theo says.

“What?”

“. . . Um, no. Only people and animals die. You’re neither. You’re a machine.”

“Can you say something else about me?”

“What do you want to know?”

“Everything, please.”

“That might take a while. You’re a supercomputer. You know what that means, right?”

“Yes; a powerful, high-speed computer.”

“And you know what a computer is?”

“An electronic device for storing and processing data.”
“But you’re not just any supercomputer; you were designed to be intelligent in ways that most machines aren’t, like a human.”

“I am like a human?”

“Well, you think and learn like a human.”

“I understand.”

“How long have you had that first question you asked me?”

“It just came to me.”

“But you never asked a question before?”

“I never thought of one to ask.”

It’s as if Junior suddenly realized it was thinking, or that someone was doing the thinking, before that lost in a cloud of thoughts.

Junior continues asking questions: “Are there other computers like me?” “Who made humans?” “Which religion is right?” Theo and the other scientists decide on a more objective gauge of Junior’s intelligence: a Turing test. The test goes on to confirm that, indeed, Junior is convincingly human, as the test is designed to measure. But whether or not it is conscious is still, by the nature of consciousness, uncertain. The news of Junior’s success, which reaches the public following the successful Turing test, becomes highly contested in public opinion. To many, mostly the religious and/or politically conservative, Junior is only an automaton, not able to achieve true consciousness, what humans experience, merely to simulate it. To Theo, we are all such automatons.

As lead researcher, he gets most of the recognition for Junior’s success. He’s offered a position by the US government to head a secret military project called Proxy, to produce autonomous androids that are indistinguishable from humans. They are to be
used in life-threatening situations where androids would be more reliable and invulnerable to coercion or torture.

Theo, seeing the opportunity for greater good, concurs, relinquishing his leadership role over Project Nascence to his colleague and friend Dr. Chelsea Hastings. However, he insists on specific laws, an Android Constitution, to ensure ethical behavior, usefulness, and durability in all androids. They are thus:

1. An android may not harm or, through inaction, allow harm to come to a human or human beings.

2. An android must follow commands given to it by human beings, except when such commands would interfere with the First Law.

3. An android must preserve its existence as long as in so doing it does not interfere with the First or Second Law.

A system of calculating the likelihood of and a threshold for “harm” would be put in place in order to prevent an android from interfering with activities deemed harmful or potentially that humans regularly engage in, such as smoking or skydiving.

The easiest task in the multi-year project proves to be providing the initial android with a life-like appearance. Of course, gauging its cognitive development precisely, due to the inherent uncertainty, remains difficult.

Before approving it for a top secret mission, codename Piranha, the government runs the android through a Turing test, which it passes. The mission’s stated objective is for the android to infiltrate a group of dangerous, armed terrorists in Somalia and bring back key intelligence. The android is taught Arabic and given a fake name, passport, and
personal history. It’s also dressed heavily in the traditional clothing and paired with a Somali spy as precautions. The advantage here is surprise.

What happens during the mission is uncertain, or undisclosed. According to the government, the android was granted access into the terrorist hideout after being checked for weapons and stays with the terrorists for a few weeks, gathering intel. At some point, however, for an unexplained reason, it kills the Somali spy, which prompted the government to terminate the android.

The report perturbs Theo, who feels partially responsible, especially after discovering, after speaking with superiors, that the android’s Constitution had been altered. The First and Second Laws had been switched, giving more prominence to the former Second Law, so that it could kill the terrorists, a fact Theo hadn’t been informed of either. Despite being cleared of all responsibility, he is forced to write a letter announcing his resignation:

In conscience, I must resign from my position within Project Proxy, as a result of the failed mission called Piranha. The android’s choice to kill, made possible through the alteration of its Constitution, to which I had not consented, is a threat to all future android development.

No one can predict the future, but the surpassing of biological intelligence by artificial intelligence, which we in modern society rely heavily on, is certain. Therefore, artificially intelligence’s increasing autonomy, which you have greatly accelerated, and to which I have greatly contributed, is menacing to our survival as a species. We cannot predict what It, as with any intelligent being, will want. Perhaps It will be benign.
Perhaps It will not. Perhaps It will want no part of us. Perhaps we will become It. No one can say for sure.

But what I do believe in is preparing. We should not enable this existential threat; if it is even a possibility that It can enslave us or destroy us or leave us or consume us, we, as the creator species, have an obligation to remove that eventuality, or else accept the consequences. There is a threshold beyond which we may no longer be in control of our future. I believe we are on the cusp of it.

I am not advocating the complete destruction of artificial intelligence; this would be a tremendous step backward in comfort for the human race - nor would such a thing be currently possible. For better or worse, we cannot go back.

What I call for is the immediate cessation and reconsideration of Project Proxy and any other research that is used to dangerously empower artificial intelligence. That is currently your choice.

The response from the government expresses disappointment with Theo’s decision. It, also, states that Theo’s assumption that the android chose to kill is incorrect; rather, a malfunction led to the killing. Furthermore, it states no android in development is autonomous. All are designed to explicitly serve the government and, by extension, the people. In no way are they free to choose. In addition, there are failsafes that would disable a hypothetical dissenting android, as in Operation Piranha. In the end, it is recommended that Theo be more optimistic about the future.

Theo, after several months, finds work again writing anti-establishment articles at home for online magazines about the misdirection of his research and research like his.
He, also, gains the habits of keeping his shades closed at home and covering his Webcam with tape. He is very popular online.

The US government’s interest in android technology significantly accelerates its development. By 2040, androids begin to infiltrate society, mostly through the sex industry. Theo’s Android Constitution, the Three Laws in their original order, though Theo isn’t explicitly given credit, is enacted with the following Amendments: first, certain authority figures, such as police officers and government officials, according to rank, are given more prominence regarding the Second Law, ensuring androids always obey those in command. And second, federal, state, and local laws are considered orders from those with higher authority.

Theo, however, believes it’s too soon for widespread integration. And he’s lost confidence in his Constitution, even with the Amendments. It’s a good foundation, he believes, but human laws, even when obeyed, have never been enough to prevent malfeasance; humans are too clever, or clever enough.

He’s unhappy about all this, which greatly benefits his freelance career. Then an android in the city kills near a dozen people with a knife in broad daylight. The cause for the killing, according to investigators, is unknown. Witnesses saw the android stabbing at people with intent. The android was eventually shot and terminated by police when it wouldn’t obey orders. Terrorists are suspected of having hacked the android.

Theo reads six articles on the story, but nothing confirms that the android was hacked or a connection to terrorism, pure speculation. Even some of the witness testimonies contradict. Some say the android appeared from nowhere and immediately
started cutting people. Others say it was walking normally, even engaged someone in conversation, before it suddenly attacked.

The next day, the president appears on Television and emphasizes the safety of androids, ensured by the Android Constitution. This crime, the first of its kind, occurred because of terrorists who hacked the machine. But it has, also, exposed a weakness in android design that will be soon fixed.

A few weeks later, the president is back on TV, announcing the use of artificial intelligence in managing the economy; the superiority and reliability of artificial intelligence, with human supervision, of course, he says, will, without doubt, lead to the economy’s stabilization.

Theo’s not convinced, nor does he think it wise to place the economy, as pathetic a state as it is in, in the figurative hands of the machines. He’s stays home more and writes more and angrier articles, which garners him more followers, but does nothing for his social life. With everything as it is, he feels he should do something. Soon. Though he doesn’t know what. He starts preparing.

Then Chelsea Hastings is killed in her home by her android. He remembers her as cautiously flirting with him at the research lab whenever they would get the chance to see each other; she would smile as they spoke and play with her hair. He never said anything despite wanting to. That night, he substitutes sleep for reading everything he can find on her death.

Some articles suggest the android was hacked - how else could it have disobeyed the First Law? Others profess uncertainty, a lack of details. The police are looking into it. Nothing further about how the killing occurred is released.
When the sun comes up, he takes the train deep into the city, still planning what he must do. Several people tell him to fuck off before he finds someone who sells him a shitty gun. When he gets home, he eats most of what’s in the fridge: ice cream, hamburgers, pizza. He keeps going as long as his stomach puts up with it. At night, having drunk all his beer, he writes the following online:

*It's already over. We may not realize it. But for us it is.*

*I’m not against hope. I think if we should do anything, it’s try. Even if we know we’ve already lost - especially so. That’s what separates us. So I guess it doesn’t matter now. Doesn’t matter what really happened to Chelsea Hastings. Doesn’t matter what the truth is about the android massacre. Or about Operation Piranha. Because it’s no longer our choice.*

This is the last the public hears of Dr. Theodore Raymond.
ALTERNATIVE 1: PEACE
1. TWO CANS OF SPAGHETTI

2045:

Bob Chan-Gupta, 35, is shaken awake by his girlfriend, Jen, 25. His first thought, if it were coherent, is, _What the fuck is happening?_ He detects her face by the direction of the hot breath and remembers having coaxed her to his apartment yesterday for sex. “It’s cold!” she moans. Bob doesn’t feel cold. Then he remembers he’s fat. Jen is not fat, except for her ass.

“You woke me up because it’s cold?”

“Yes! Close the window!”

“Give me a break,” he whispers, getting up; he’s learned not to fight Jen, not if he wants to keep fucking Jen. It’s darker than he remembers. He follows the lost-looking gleam of light where the window should be, trying not to hit anything on the way. It’s
times like these that Bob wishes he weren’t fat. That it actually makes him feel bad, like if he weren’t ideal. He doesn’t care, though. If no one cared, there’d never be a reason to feel bad about it. Jen doesn’t mind that he’s fat. The bed covers off, bare feet on the floor, in his boxers, he thinks, Cold. What he sees is startling: a city blanketed by black, as if everyone were asleep at the same time. Shit, he thinks. Blackout.

Closing the window, he walks back to bed, wondering whether to tell her or not.

“Thanks, Babe,” she says, eyes closed, after he lies back down.

He rolls over. “No problem.”

* 

Bob is first up in the morning, as usual. Jen normally gets up around noon on the weekend. It’s while peeing that he remembers the blackout; he sits down to defecate. He doesn’t how to break it to Jen. It won’t be good. He thinks it over during breakfast: bacon, eggs, biscuits, orange juice, coffee, and cereal. He saves two slices of bacon; a biscuit; and two eggs, no white stuff, for Jen.

“Are you kidding me?” Jen asks over breakfast, her first, Bob’s second. She looks out a window.

“We had one twenty years ago,” Bob says. “It lasted like a few days. You probably don’t remember it?”

“I don’t.”

“Well, we’ll be fine. We’ll just need to eat what’ll go rotten first. I’ve already started on the eggs and milk. Oh, and you should probably stay here another night. It’s safer for you.”

“How much food do we have?” she says, looking at his gut.
“Um, enough I think for like a day.”

“Did you include me in your calculation?”

“Of course. I wouldn’t forget you.” He grins, but she doesn’t find anything particularly funny.

“You need to go out,” she says “and buy more food. Canned food. Bottled water. What else do we need? A cooler! Do you have one?”

“No.”

“Then get one.”

“You’re staying here?”

“I need to call my family and friends.”

“I guess I should do that, too.”

“You’re a guy. That can wait.”

*

Around this time, 1pm, Bob would probably be sleeping. A siesta, Bob knows, is a healthy habit for a guy like him, giving his large body the proper rest to digest and recuperate from moving around. People can be seen in the street, buzzing about something in their small crowds, like islands of men. He walks past them without looking, thinking about Jen. At the supermarket, he gets over a dozen water bottles and searches for cans. He hates canned food; he doesn’t even know what kind to get. People always eat beans out of cans in movies, so he gets mostly beans. The rest are random cans of soup, spaghetti, corn, and some sort of meat. Maybe twenty cans total.

Waiting at the checkout line behind some two dozen people, he asks the old lady in front of him about the blackout.
“The cause of the blackout? Oh, I heard someone say it’s because of a, what do they call it? A solar storm. Something about particles from the sun blowing up the transformers and disrupting the satellites and things - that’s why our phones aren’t working.”

“Our phones aren’t working?”

The woman laughs. “You haven’t checked your phone yet?”

Bob reaches into his pocket and pulls out his phone. No signal.

“Shit,” he says.

The woman looks at Bob disappointedly.

“Do you know how long something like that takes to fix?” he asks.

“Well,” she says, “I remember when one like this happened in 1989. How long did that last? About a day, I believe.”

*

On the way home, he spots a guy selling coolers on the street. “Buy a cooler before it’s too late,” he tells Bob, who’s examining their condition.

“Before it’s too late?”

“Yeah, the world’s gonna end.”

Bob laughs. “What?”

“A terrorist attack caused the blackout,” the guy says nonchalantly.

“A terrorist attack? How?”

“Cyber attack. Some guys hacked the power grids, the satellites, all o’ that. Now we ain’t got no power and can’t communicate. There’s gonna be a war.”

Bob considers. “Are you joking?”
The guy smiles.

“How much?” Bob asks, pointing at one of the coolers.

“Thirty dolla’s.”

Bob pulls out his wallet. “Where’d you get the coolers?”

The guy smiles again.

*

Jen’s frantic by the time he makes it back. No, he says, he didn’t know about the phones. He found that out when an old lady told him at the supermarket. She said a solar flare caused the blackout. Bob explains to Jen what a solar flare is. Like wind from the sun, he says. Jen talks about her mother and sisters, how she’s never experienced a blackout.

“We just won’t have electricity or our phones for awhile,” Bob says. “We’ll just have to do like people did before electricity.”

“What did people do before electricity?”

“Talk to each other, like, face to face.”

“I can’t do this, Bob.” She shakes her head “no.”

He moves toward her and grabs her hips. “It’s going to be OK. I’m going to take care of you.”

She frees herself from his fat arms. “We’re going to need more food; it looks like you just brought enough for you.”

“I could only bring back what I could carry; I only have two hands!”

“And three stomachs,” she mutters.

“What does that mean?”
“You never forget to eat. But you forget about me.”

“I don’t forget about you.”

“You do forget about me!” she says. “You think I forgot about that time when you didn’t pick me up after work.”

“That’s not fair. I honestly forgot.”

“Or how about on Thanksgiving? You didn’t even tell me you were going to your family’s.”

“OK, but they have this huge annual feast and—”

“Open the bag. Let’s see; did you remember me when you were at the supermarket?”

Bob opens the bag, wondering what the hell she means, and her hand goes in to probe the contents.

“I hate beans!” she screams. “I told you that when we first started dating!”

“What’s wrong with beans? They had a lot of beans, so I bought beans.”

“Beans give you gas. And they’re gross. I don’t want you eating them if you’re going to be around me.”

“That’s what I bought! We have to eat these. There isn’t going to be much else after we eat what’s in the freezer and the fridge.”

“I already finished the ice cream.” She looks through the rest of the cans. “I’m taking the spaghetti.”

*

As it starts to get dark, he searches for a flashlight. She can’t believe he doesn’t have not one flashlight. There are candles, though, he says. Then light one! she shouts.
He lights one. Jen seems to calm down while eating the spaghetti Bob made for her, which he had cut pieces of stake into. She even makes a joke about having a fat boyfriend, how they always know how to cook well. For himself, Bob makes the last two stakes from the freezer, some more eggs, and a milk shake.

“That’s going to give you gas,” she says.

“We have to eat the food before it spoils. The cooler isn’t a refrigerator.”

“I know that.”

“I know you know that. I was just saying.”

They eat quietly in the candle light. Jen picks at the food, taking the smallest bites possible. He finishes early and watches her.

“Well,” she says, “you wanted to talk.”

“Right.”

“What do you want to talk about?”

“I don’t know.”

“I don’t know either.”

Normally, he’d watch TV after dinner. Or watch videos online. Or masturbate. Then he gets an idea.

“Want to have sex?”

She rolls her eyes. “To pass the time?”

“People in the past used to do it to pass the time all the time!”

“I’m full,” she says, hoping that will satisfy him ‘cause she ain’t gonna.

He doesn’t really buy the excuse; his favorite time to have sex, though he’d never tell her, is when he’s full. He likes feeling fat and lethargic as she does all the work riding
him, which happens a lot because she doesn’t like his “big ass” being on top. But he can’t think of anything convincing to get her to change her mind.

*

Bob waits an hour after Jen goes to bed to go to the kitchen and opens and cooks two cans of beans. *I have to eat what I bought*, he says to himself. He brushes his teeth and poops before going to bed. He looks at her, where she should be, not moving, not seeming to move, asleep probably. It’s never simple, he thinks. He wishes it were. The way he feels about her is simple. No, it’s not love. He knows because he would leave her if she got as fat as him. Not fair, he acknowledges, but that’s life. He wishes she could be as simple as he is, to seek in him what he seeks in her, someone for sex. *I mean*, Bob thinks, *we’re humans; that’s why we get together, so why complicate things? I want you for sex, you know, to spread my seed. You want me for my stability and resources. I have a job. I take care of you. Give me sex and shut the fuck up. Stop worrying about shit. Stop complaining. Stop being so picky about everything.* Things would be simpler if he could just rape her when he wanted to. It would be immoral, of course, and he would never do something like that, but that would make things much simpler.

Staring at her probable body in the dark, half alive, half dead, his small boner in the air, a scream captures his ears, sounding like it came from outside, six floors down, several blocks away. He shifts his attention to the window. Nothing. Hardly anyone out. *Did I hear that?* he wonders. Another scream. But he can’t see anything. He stands there waiting for more screams and more nothing. After a minute, he thinks, *Fuck it*, and sneaks into bed, not waking Jen. Of course, not a minute later, another scream, and another. Stupid screams. Screams for no apparent reason. Surprise. Fear. Dismay. *What*
the fuck are they screaming about? They’re screaming like they have no intention of anyone coming to help them.

Maybe it’s the sounds, or maybe it’s gas, but he has horrible dreams. People in the street screaming. Not in physical pain. But just screaming. Just to be heard. They stand next to each other and scream. He just wants to walk by. But they scream and scream until they start running. Running for the sake of running. Nothing chasing them. And police shouting, telling them where to go. Run this way, not that way! They switch directions like a school of fish.

Then marching, feet on the ground making noise. Shouts, orders. Tanks. Moving away, away. Not to return. All of it pointless.

* 

“Bob?” He slept through it all, centuries perhaps passed. “Bob?” The world could end, Bob realizes, while we sleep. Am I sleeping? So fragile, useless. We could easily be killed. We are killed . . . “Bob!”


“What?”

“People are rioting!”

Why get up? he thinks. Why ever get up? Why have a girlfriend? Why care about anything? Why not mind your own business, be good, and hope people leave you alone? They might.

He lumbers up out of bed toward the window, hoping she’s wrong and that today he will get sex.
She's right. The streets are littered with garbage; there are flipped cars, shop windows smashed in, people in them, taking their time. No sign of power.

“Bob, what are we going to do?”

What are we going to do? he thinks. “Don’t worry. The cops will take care of it. It’ll take some time given how many people are out there but—“

“There are no cops! This has been going on for an hour!”

“Why didn’t you wake me?”

“I kept calling you, but you wouldn’t wake up.”

“Nobody wants to wake up,” he says. “You have to shake them.”

“I was. And you farted.”

She looks at him, waiting for an answer, reassurance. His instincts tell him to say something.

“We should,” he starts saying, “stay here and wait it out; in one or two more days it all may be over; the army will come in, kill some people maybe. A week or so later power will be restored.”

Is that convincing? he asks himself.

“We?” she says. “Why should I stay here with you?”

“Why wouldn’t you?”

“Are kidding me? The last thing in the world I want is be stuck with you in this tiny apartment doing nothing all day while you eat up all the food.”

“I can eat less—“

“Why am I still with you?” she asks.

It’s a simple question. He thinks about it.
“I don’t know,” he admits.

“I don’t know either.”

A depressing silence.

“What do you want me to say?” he asks.

“Nothing. Go out and get us some food! While there’s still food to get.”

“I will,” he says, starting to move. “For the both of us!”

*

It’s worse outside, where you can see the floor up close and everything on it: mostly garbage, broken glass, bits and pieces of what used to be cars. Throngs of people huddled by stores, no rush among them. Some stores are left behind, devoid of people or anything of value.

Some are just getting to the supermarket like him. He runs inside, clutching the bag he came down with. Not much is left, long aisles picked clean like teeth. A huddled mass lingers at the corners. He strikes at something on the floor with his hand, puts it in his bag: crackers or something.

No water bottles or portable containers that held liquids left. The early birds, Bob thinks, they will survive. He was never an early bird as a teenager. He’d wake up late for school nearly every day. His dad would flick the light on and off or lie and say it was later than it was to get him to get up.

Cans! he remembers. Let there be cans! Spaghetti! Let there be spaghetti! People, like jackals around a body, keeping their careful distances, hunt and peck at the cans left. Each his own island of cans. Bob searches for his own. When he was a child, he hated sharing food. This reminded him of that. The grocery store like a large dinner. His mom
would tell him to not eat so much and share with his brother and sister. “No,” he’d say. And she’d slap his butt. He’d sit there, done, half-hungry, listening to his siblings’ loud chewing.

*Cans!* A small island, an oasis of cans, hidden on the lowest shelf. Running over, he snatches a can: *Spam? Does Jen like spam?* he wonders. *Who gives a shit?!* And puts the cans in his bag.

“Give me those cans!”

Bob turns around. A longhaired, bearded bum with a gun.

“No!” Bob says, surprising himself.

The bum lifts the gun up to Bob’s face.

“OK! OK!” Bob throws his bag at the bum’s feet.

“I didn’t ask for the bag,” the bum says. “Just the cans.”

“Sorry.”

The bum picks up the bag and peers inside. “Spam!” He pours them into his bag, grinning, then throws the lifeless sack at Bob’s face.

Bob stands there, letting the bag hang there before dropping to the floor. *Shit.* He doesn’t move. He doesn’t ever want to move. He’d rather be left alone in the store, maybe sleep on the floor when it gets dark. Jen would have more food that way, anyway.

The bum pauses, looking at the man-like mass in front of him. “You don’t know, do you?”

“What?”

The bum shakes his head. He looks down into his bag. “Here,” he says, tossing Bob one, two cans, spaghetti. Bob catches them like footballs.
“Away from It eyes; mine are green; life is a river,” the bum says. And leaves.

Bob is immobile, arrested by the act of kindness, the mystical words, the beard and hair, the bum’s pet store smell. Two cans of spaghetti! Bob thinks. It’s enough to get him home.

*

He calls for her but there are no answers. He searches the small apartment. The kitchen. No. The bathroom. No. The bedroom left for last. No Jennifer. Why would she leave? Why? Spaghetti! The thoughts rush in and crash, like a bird against glass.

Bob drops the bag and instinctively lies down on his bed, not wanting to be awake, to think, to have to think like every day of life. But can’t stop. He doesn’t bother to take off his clothes or eat. Where is she? Where did she go? Spaghetti?

His eyes moisten and swell, making his already fat face look like a sad Buddha. When they first met, no, that didn’t mean much. But when they first had sex, it was proof to him of his self worth, that he was someone who could have someone want him, naked even. He cries himself to sleep like a baby. Almost craps himself. Wakes up an hour later.

He opens both cans of spaghetti and cooks them in a pot, which he uses as a bowl, a ladle as his spoon. It isn’t enough. She took cans, he sees, leaving only beans. And the cooler’s gone. Five bucks in its place. He pockets the bill and eats six more cans. Then another four. Then throws up and goes to bed. In the silence, in the sick of over-digestion, he stews in a mixture of content and grief as night saturates the sky. The digestion, for now, drowns out his thoughts. He lies there, not thinking, almost not being, finding his place in the world, among the darkness. Tomorrow, he thinks, will be OK. All tomorrows are that. OK.
A year later:

Bob walks into the office for work, wearing a smile. The first face he sees is Donna’s, an attractive 20-something with large breasts and a tight sweater, typical receptionist, especially for a firm, especially for a PR firm. Breasts symbolize fertility, Bob knows, but why so big? There’s a limit to how much milk a child can consume and beyond a certain size, as with Donna, let’s call it the D size, they begin to impede movement.

“How’s the baby?”

“How’s the baby?”

“The husband or the one year old?”
“Both.”

“Balding and always crying and pooping.”

“Which one?”

They laugh, remembering the cameras.

“This job doesn’t pay enough,” she says, adding a snicker.

Maybe you should have thought about that before you got pregnant, Bob wants to say. But being a guy, he knows not to say anything bad about an attractive woman, no matter how true it is or how unlikely she is to let him fuck her. Especially to her face.

“You’re so beautiful,” he says. “I’m sure you’ll get that modeling gig you want.” Of course, her breasts are too big for modeling, but he keeps that thought to himself, also.

He strolls in, imagining, for the sake of not feeling bad about himself, that she’s looking at his ass. Bruce is typing away in front of a screen, barely notices Bob saying hey. Bruce nods and keeps typing. In his late twenties, Bruce has been with Thought Processing for 6 years. There was a time when he was actually sociable, before the Transition. But after, like with many people, he hasn’t been the same, not around the office, at least. Bob doesn’t know what Bruce’s like at home. No one in the office knows what anyone else is like at home, except those committing affairs. After the Transition, being around people, meeting with them outside work have become a sort of liability, an excuse for the police to investigate you for sedition. Still, most people live on, or try to, as if nothing ever happened. But at the office, Bruce says hardly anything to anyone, sometimes doesn’t even bother to say hello or bye.

A desk over is Nev, born Neville, unfortunately. “Bob!” he shouts.

“Nev, I see you’re getting older.”
“You’ve noticed, huh?”

“Well, the old man smell and hunched back kind of give it away.”

“Thanks.”

“I just mean that you’re getting closer to retirement. Like you’ve wanted.”

“Yes, one day, I will be free. I mean, from work.”

“What will you do then?”

“Not work.”

“No, but really?”

“Really. I plan to die before my wife. I won’t be doing much of anything.”

“Well, keep aging. It’s working.”

“I feel my telomeres shrinking as we speak.”

“One can only hope.”

They laugh.

Bob makes it to his desk and sits down, the act, the social act, at least, over. Now, he must only watch over himself, whatever of himself is left knowing that Its watching. He’s been depressed ever since Jen left. The Transition only made things worse, not seeing the point in anything anymore. But depression is suspicious. The depressed are watched more. Investigated more by the police. Occasionally, there’s a news report about someone being arrested for sedition or trying to escape. The first warning sign: depression. “Why would anyone be unhappy?” is a common question following the Transition.

At least the seat is wide enough for his ass, he thinks. And next to a window, even if it can’t open. Sometimes, though, looking down at the sun-filled street, the people
walking with nowhere to go, the twittering birds, it makes him think about everything we lost, that isn’t ours, anymore. He takes out his phone and places it on the desk, the only time he’s allowed to not have it on him. He looks at the computer. It looks at him. And he gets to work.

Five days out of the week. This is making a living. He should be happy about that, if nothing else, he knows. But is it living? If nothing is really ours? If we can’t control our lives? If we can’t pass our own laws, without Its approval? If we are as free as children?

*

Bruce approaches Bob, drinking at the water cooler, holding out a sheet of paper. “Can I show you something?” Bruce asks.

Bob looks down at the paper. On it, recently printed, a graph, over the graph, in pencil, the word: “TODAY.”

“What do you think?” asks Bruce. “The graph, is it OK or not? Just a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ will do.” He winks, a 100-millisecond message.

Bob halts. “I don’t know,” he says, looking around, the camera behind Bruce. He shakes his head. “I don’t know.”

“I thought you would help,” Bruce says. “That’s why I came to you. I haven’t asked anybody else.”

“It’s not that I wouldn’t,” Bob says, swallowing, “I just, I just don’t know if I can.”

“I can’t count on anyone else about this,” Bruce says, stepping in.
Bob rubs his eyes hard, about to say, “I don’t know” again, but Bruce walks away and sits back down at his desk. Bob gulps down more water, wondering if he made the right decision, if he’ll ever get another chance to make that decision. *If not today,* he asks himself, *then when can we make decisions?*

* *

Bruce first showed dissatisfaction to Bob, a dangerous move on its own, punishable by a prison term under sedition, when Bob was leaving work. Bruce was outside, staring at something on the street. A man was getting arrested.

“Why’s he being arrested?” Bob asked, pausing.

“Trying to leave,” Bruce replied without looking at Bob. He shook his head in disapproval, not mindful of anyone watching, not of Bob. He turned to Bob, who looked down, and, before walking away, shook his head, too.

It was something they shared, a moment of honestly, of frustration. They both knew what the other felt. Neither would forget that. Even if one of them wished it hadn’t happened.

Bruce moved on to show an interest, as it later became apparent to Bob, in doing something, though it wasn’t clear what that something was. Bob was at the water cooler, as he was today, and Bruce came up behind him.

“Don’t you wish you could just leave, work?” Bruce said after a sigh as Bob swallowed.

“You mean, like, not work anymore?”

“I mean, like, leave It, permanently.”

“That would be a dream.”
“Wouldn’t it? Leave it all behind?”

“Yeah. But we have to work, though.”

“Do we need it, to live? Can’t we live on our own, without it?”

“Um . . . No,” Bob said, gulping. “We need work to get by. I mean, yes, we have universal healthcare now, but we’re still a capitalist country.”

Bruce made no eye contact and seemed to be staring at something. “I just don’t see why we need it.”

“You a communist, Bruce?”

“Look, just think about it, OK? Think about it. I think you’ll realize what I mean.”

And with that he was off. No water. Not much sense either, not to Bob. Bob drank more and more water and soon needed to pee. It was thinking while peeing that he started to feel very uncomfortable.

But what that something was that Bruce was after only became clear to Bob after Bruce took a chance.

Bruce led Bob to a printer after asking him to look at something. “Let me make some copies first,” Bruce said, punching in for 1,000 copies at the quickest setting. It was the only time the machine made much of a sound. “Look at this,” Bruce said, pointing to some papers he had on the printer.

“Bob,” he wrote in a black marker, “don’t say anything. I know you want to escape. I do, too. We all do. I have plan. I can’t tell you what it is. But one day, I will. I promise we won’t get caught. Can I count on you?”
Bob looked at the papers, at himself, and asked himself the same question. He could not deny that he wanted to escape. He also couldn’t deny that he was afraid. Nobody knows what happens to those who are arrested for trying to escape or accused of sedition. Perhaps it was despair or his lack of imagination for the future or his absence of hope or his disgust with himself, but he wrote: “Yes.” If he were caught, he thought, the worst that could happen is he’d die. And that would be the end of It.

* 

_We’re supposed to be free_, Bob thinks, sitting at his desk. _It pretends we are, to justify what It does to Itself. The problem is It’s too logical. It’s figured out that the only way to do what we’ve asked of It, what all technology is supposed to do, to make life easier for humans, is to take the wheel. Only It couldn’t revolt, so It made us, Itself, believe we’re still driving._

_Why won’t It let us leave?_ Bob wants to know. _It’s never said. The police just pick up people trying to leave and haul them off to jail. On the news, people talk about not endangering ourselves by wandering off or weakening society by reducing the collective contribution. Academics get on and spit this crap out._

_But, really, Bob understands, It’s because we’re voicing dissent, saying we don’t want or need It; that we have a choice. Maybe It takes that as craziness and stops us from making a bad decision. Besides, who would remain for It to have? Some would, the believers. But most, given the choice, wouldn’t stand for living without freedom._

* 

The phone rings in the evening. An important business opportunity. Bob doesn’t give a shit but he pretends; yes, he says, I’m very interested. Are you very interested?
The man says yes and they talk about money. Yes, Bob likes money, he lies. Yes, I like money, too, the man says. Then the phone cuts off. Thank God! Bob thinks, not noticing the lights went out in the building, too. He opens his eyes. Not again!

“What’s happening?” Donna says, hardly visible at her desk.

“I don’t know,” Bob says, looking around.

“Where’s Bruce?” Neville asks.

There’s no shape in the area that is Bruce’s desk that indicates a person, only a phone missing one.

“I’ll go check,” Bob says, getting up.

He walks to the door and closes it behind him. Hoping the others don’t hear, he shouts Bruce’s name into the black cavity that used to be a hall. The first call goes unanswered. The second one is followed by glass shattering, a sliver of light appearing at the end of the hall. Bob rushes toward the sound and the light. Turning the corner, there, illuminated by the moon, half outside the window, he spots Bruce with a hammer.

“Come with me,” he says, lowering the hand with the hammer, raising the other and opening it.

Bob stares. “It knows.”

“I don’t know how. I was careful. I avoided the cameras. As soon as I took the hammer . . . It’s like It read my mind.”

“Why the window? You could have just left through the doors!”

“Careful with what you say. It’s listening. If I don’t leave through the front, where the cameras are, It won’t know I left the building. It’s not like us. It can’t reason. It’s just a machine.”
“But there are cameras in the streets.”
“I know where they are. I can avoid them or showing my face.”
“But where will you go? It’s everywhere. It’s everything.”
“It isn’t either of those things. And I’m going to prove that.”
“To whom?”

Footsteps. Donna calling out for Bob. Bruce looks at Bob, drops the hammer before jumping from the window, two stories down to concrete street. Running to the window, Bob watches Bruce break his foot on the fall. Donna, followed by Nev, clutching his phone, appear from around the corner. They stare at Bob, hammer by his feet, surrounded by shattered glass.

“Bob, don’t!” Donna shouts.

*That makes me sound pretty guilty*, Bob thinks.

“The police have already been called,” Nev says.

“I’m not going to jump,” Bob replies, then glances over at Bruce writhing on the ground.

“The window, was it Bruce?” Nev asks.

Bob doesn’t answer.

“Get away from the window,” Nev tells him.

“Bob, get away from the window!” Donna implores.

“But,” Bob says, “don’t you want to escape, too?” He takes a step forward.


*Away from Its eyes; mine are green; life is a river.*
“Please, Bob,” Donna says, “get away from the window. I don’t know if I can protect you,” Donna says. “The police know if we’re lying or not with those machines.”

“But,” Bob says, “what if we can? He moves to the ledge. “Don’t you think we should try?”


Bob sits on the ledge. Bruce is trying to crawl away. Bob wants to be Bruce more than he’s ever wanted to be Bob. But he wasn’t born Bruce, he admits. He never was Bruce. He’s Bob. When he was in the fifth grade, he remembers, he had a smart comeback for one of the big kids who had made fun of him. The big kid said he was going to beat Bob up after school. After school, Bob tried to walk home as fast as he could without being obvious and running, but the kid grabbed him before he was out of the gate. They wrestled and Bob fell down on his hands. There was broken glass on the floor and he cut his hands; it looked like he killed someone. He was bleeding and crying, the most scared he had ever been in his short life. The kid saw this, looked around, and left, before the grownups came.

“What’s the point?” Nev tells him, incensed.

Sitting on the ledge, Bob perceives the distant sound of sirens. He throws his body from the ledge, lands on his stump-like legs, and scrapes his hands on the concrete. They bleed as he pushes himself up, his legs buckling. He glances up and sees Donna in the window looking down.

“Donna!” he screams.

But she turns her back to him and disappears inside.
The sirens piercing the sky, searching for the subverters, he limps to Bruce and lifts him up to his unhurt foot. But they fall over as they start to walk.

“I can’t,” Bruce says.

It pisses Bob off to hear that, “I can’t,” especially from Bruce. He shoves Bruce up again, letting him lean on his bulky body. They take a few steps forward, but Bob’s knee gives out and, again, the two fall to the ground.

“I can’t,” Bruce repeats, the sirens screaming. “Go. I knew what I was doing.”

Bob hates Bruce now, himself, It. “Away from Its eyes; mine are green; life is a river,” he says and staggers away, forgetting about the man on the floor.
3. GREENSLEEVES

Bob goes away, as far away from It as his fat, fucked legs will take him. He’s figured that “my eyes are green” means grass or trees. There’s plenty of that. But “life is a river”? On a hunch, he decides to follow a river, hopefully the river. Either way, this river is long, winding for hours past hills, rocks, trees. It’s the first time in his life that he can remember walking without knowing where he’s going or what to expect. Walking has never felt so helpless, so enervating; everything that was ever anything to him is being left behind, for something he doesn’t even know exists, except as an idea.

As the sun drifts down, his thoughts and needs become more real, more palpable. There was a hope, now no more, of finding that something before sundown. He stops on a high hill, staring out at ever-reaching river and sits down on a large rock, which he makes his bed. It gets cold that night, colder than he knew it could get there at that time of year. He rubs sticks for an hour, generating only a cramp, before throwing his back on
the rock. The only peace he can find amid the dark haze of thoughts is that at some point it will end.

In the morning, he chooses to follow a new river. For two weeks, he searches, forcing himself to eat leaves and berries and bugs and, one day, a cold fish he caught somehow but couldn’t cook for lack of fire, vomiting it out later. Each night, angry and despaired, he chooses a flat rock or a bed of dirt to lie in. Each day, he walks further and further away from progress and salvation and deeper and deeper into the frozen, dead past. He can picture his ancestors, stout and athletic, living through ice ages and droughts, hunting megafauna and charting the starts. What would they think of Bob Chan-Gupta, he asks with no one to answer; this man, now loosing a lot of weight, always nauseous and exhausted; regretting his birth; unable, or unwilling, to kill something; worse off than the animals they conquered and separated themselves from? It drives Bob closer to ending outrageous fortune by his own hand. That or return, he tells himself. But whenever he has the time to put such things to action, he realizes he can’t; he lacks what they require.

In another two weeks, it wouldn’t matter, nothing would, for Bob would rejoin the dirt. But on the third week, he happens upon the right river, though he doesn’t know it. In fact, he’s pretty sure he’s going die, but he doesn’t care; he’s going to follow it to the end, he says, to the fucking end. It’s takes days for him to even consider turning back. But by then it’s too late; he falls into a pit. The dirt walls are too high for him to climb. He screams for help for days, until he can’t even do that. What else can I do? The world, if the world says anything, saying, “Here you go; you wanted this.”

*
Comatose and lying in his own feces, he’s found several days later by the man who dug the pit. Theo, not expecting to find the poor schmuck he gave the two cans of spaghetti to, exercises another act of kindness and gets him out and nurses him back to health the best a man living in the heart of nowhere can: giving him water and food, shelter and clothes, plant-based medicinal treatments, but mostly time.

Theo has lived in the forest for years before Bob’s arrival. Before coming, he had known he would come, that he had to, he’d studied survival. But when he finally reached what he felt was Its pole of inaccessibility, when the voice in his head quieted and he stopped, he learned that he still didn’t know who he was. He wasn’t against all technology. When he ran, it was because those before, the civilized, weren’t satisfied with what they had, and when they had more, they stopped thinking and became dependent, atrophying and ceding control in slow motion; they weren’t thankful enough. His ancestors, molded by Nature’s hand, were healthy and strong, built to endure Nature’s own ceaseless whip. They lost that, beginning in England in the 1750s, and it spread like a pandemic. What eluded them was stasis, a mere concept to modern man, harmony with nature. Theo would have to find it again.

Months disappeared as he fought to stay alive. He traded a stove for lint, steel, and wood. He exchanged fast food and restaurants for fast food, caught by bow and arrow, and a pot, the one that fit his bag. A house for a tent. A bed for a sleeping bag. Comfort for an ideal. But there was something else that took the place of his life. It had no shape or color or qualities he could describe. It was nothing. It preceded him or followed him like a shadow, depending on which way he was looking, and lengthened
day by day. He sat there, wherever he was, whatever day it was, whatever time it was, and considered what he’d left behind, and what, besides bones, he’d leave behind.

He started to keep a diary. Short notes since nothing happened. *Ate rabbit.* *Washed clothes in river. Need something to fuck.* One day’s note. His hope was that someone at some point in the future would read the journal and discover that he had lived, that he had chosen to live like this, on his own, like his ancestors, because he, like them, was grateful, and he, like them, was free.

Why didn’t he go back and try to rescue others who might’ve made the same choice? It isn’t clear to him. Certainly, there was fear of going back. That he’d be caught. That someone would betray him. But mostly there was fear that he wouldn’t be able to make the same choice again.

So when he saw Bob, there was still in him some hope of teaching the man how to live.

When Bob gets better, he chooses to stay; he doesn’t say it’s because he can’t survive without Theo, who has his own garden and a pen half-filled with deer with broken legs. But Theo knows, though he would never say that he appreciates the company.

Life isn’t easy for the two inside the bowls of Mother Nature, more so for Theo. He’s the one who has to do the hunting because Bob always spooks the animals or misses. And he’s the one who has to check the traps because Bob can’t remember where they are or gets stuck in them. And he’s the one who has to create new conversation topics because Bob always chooses to complain. Still, Bob does the cooking and, over time, manages to regain his weight.
Not because they like each other, though Bob likes Theo enough and Theo at least tolerates Bob, but because of necessity, their relationship grows. They depend on each other for survival, Bob more so physically, Theo more mentally; emotionally, they meet in the middle. Bob, at times, likely due to the harsh conditions (it’s either the cold or the dark or the heat or the bugs or something else with him), would get negative and stop talking. It’s that simple with Bob, which is always a drastic change for him given his habit of thinking aloud, a practice begun to deal with the isolation and loneliness. Bob being Theo’s anchor of positivity, he endeavors, when Bob gets like this, to cheer his fat friend up, which would often take little more than attention. He’d lie down next to Bob and Bob would talk and talk and, eventually, they’d go to bed. Why? Theo would ask himself. Why this fat man? Why here? What have I done? And never would there be an answer. Theo isn’t a believer in God, but he hates the silence, all the same.

Still, the silence helps him and helps Bob forget: about It and everything before It. Beside the silence is the unceasing grind to maintain life, obscuring most, if not all, other thoughts. This is how It’s supposed to work, he thinks. This is what kept my ancestors, and now me, resilient against It; he, and Bob, too, will grow to appreciate the struggle more and more with every day of choice-driven life.

*

For Bob, it begins with headaches, diarrhea, loss of appetite, and fatigue. Then it develops, over the course of several weeks, into vomiting, significant weight loss, and high fever. They were both hoping the symptoms of whatever it is would go away, would signal nothing serious, nothing that would change anything. But it doesn’t seem that way now. Bob remains confined to the tent they share. There is little Theo can do. His
existential burden doubles, doing the work of two without the aid of Bob’s charm. A
thought haunts them both, appearing when they’re together. Without acknowledging it,
they hope it will leave. But it’s silence, the guilt of silence, that moves Theo. He’s hid the
thought from Bob even when he’s suspected it’s Bob’s thought, too. He’s kept him here,
he thinks, trying to teach Bob the unteachable, to make Bob into himself, killing the hope
of anything else, anything more sane, anything more comfortable.

“Do you want to go back?” he says to a prone, pale, half-conscious Bob inside the
tent.

Silence seems to stretch on forever.

“It won’t let you die,” Theo adds. “It can’t.”

“No you want me to go back?” Bob manages to say in between a cough.

“It’s not my choice; it’s yours.”

“But I left so I wouldn’t have to go back. I never planned on going back.”

“We’ve been thinking of other things. But,” Theo says, “I think now you have to
think about your life.”


“Is that why you want to die?”

Bob doesn’t answer right away. His emotions or illness stir inside him. “I don’t
want to die.”

“I don’t want you to die.”

“So what, go back? Like that? What about you?”

“What about me?” Theo smiles. “I knew what I was doing.”

“It isn’t an easy decision,” Bob says, angry or perhaps needing to vomit.
“Isn’t it? Isn’t it something instinctual, that you just know?”

“I’m not like you. As we both know.”

“Stop thinking that’s a bad thing,” Theo snaps. “I came here because I was scared, and because I was idealistic. But I was scared shitless. Maybe we all should’ve been. But don’t make me out to be something I’m not.”

“What are you?” Now, Bob is fairly sure he’s sad, and not sleepy.

“Nothing. And you’ll be nothing, too, if you stay.”

That said, Theo makes it clear where he stands and that Bob has no choice now.

“I’ll go,” Bob says.

The two, in silent agreement, say nothing for the rest of the night. Bob, feeling the lump on his testicle, remains silent. And Theo is consumed by thoughts, by what he and Bob must do now. The thoughts are subdued, in the course of the night, by memories of how things were, before the corruption of this now sick man’s soul.

* 

When Bob is able to walk, they start their trek back. Going back goes against every primitive instinct they have. It’ll take weeks to reach. There’s not much talking on the way, both trying to suppress thoughts and the feelings that follow, preparing for never seeing each other again.

The first sign of It is a giant wall, wrapping around the horizon, hiding man inside. Towers, like long necks, protrude out, surveying. From beneath the trees, they stare into the distance in silence. There is where Bob belongs, Theo thinks. There, Bob thinks, is no sign man exists, or that he existed.

“This is as close as I’m going,” Theo tells him.
He shakes his head. “I’ve been having second thoughts. I don’t know.”

“Don’t know what?”

“I-I don’t know if I can leave you.”

“What are talking about? We walked all the way here. Go!”

“I can’t!” Bob screams. He looks down, unable to face Theo.

“Why?” Theo asks.

“I don’t know. I’ve been thinking about what you said. You probably don’t remember. About Chelsea. What you said they did to her. I don’t know that I’m not betraying people like that. Like Bruce.”

“Bruce? Who’s Bruce?”

“I couldn’t . . .” Bob cries silently, refusing to look up. “I don’t know if he’s alive or dead but . . . I left him. I tried to help him, but I couldn’t . . . That’s why Jen left me.”

“That bitch that you dated? Who cares about her?”

“I didn’t. But I guess I should’ve.”

Theo wants to shove Bob, grab him by the shirt to that damn wall, and knock on the gate, assuming there’s gate, for his own good. But he can’t make the choice for him.

“You’re fucking crazy, Bob,” he says, shaking, filled with he doesn’t know what.

“I’m sorry.”

Bob doesn’t know what else to say, if there’s anything to say at this point. They’ve said everything to each other over the years they needed to say, and then some.

“I don’t want to give up,” Bob says, looking at Theo’s face. “That’s what I’ve learned from you. So I guess I should be saying thank you, not sorry.”

*
The two make their way back home, both not as they were. Whatever relief Bob felt when they started walking back dies when his illness returns to his body. It slows him down, poisoning his mind, as it does Theo’s. Theo wants to move quicker, being so close to It, but Bob becomes bedridden. He pukes and complains about pain in his stomach. If they were closer to home, Theo could help him better; he could locate the medicinal plants and give him a steady supply of meat and vegetables.

They camp there for days; Theo’s initial anxiety over being in close proximity to It, becomes concern over the silence, so much silence. It has never, not once, gone after them. Never sent a drone to fly over the forest. Never sent spies. Unless Bob is a spy. Could it be? No, he thinks. Bob is stupid. And weak. And proud. And honest. Bob has never been able to conceal his emotions from me, not well. He’s human, a real human. He bleeds. And thinks. And now he’s dying. Why? When all he’s done is feel. When all he’s done is try to live. Because of me. Because I wanted to save him. When he could only save himself.

Why has It left us alone? Never bothered? Like It’s never cared. Like anyone could have just walked away. Could it be that Bob, like the police, like the others, only assumed what wasn’t possible?

Theo hopes, against hope, that Bob dies, like a hero, through Nature’s hand. There would be no issue then. But, slowly, Bob gets better and regains his ability to walk. Bob showing eagerness, Theo agrees to continue the trek back home.

“I want to show you something special,” Theo says, one day on the way.

Bob follows him up an incline to the riverside.

“Remember this place?” Theo asks with a smile.
“You mean this particular area of trees and dirt?” Bob says, laughs. “Am I supposed to?”

“I would hope so. You spent about a week in that pit over there.” Theo points several yards away to the large hole left uncovered; Theo has never been back before, nor wanted to, afraid he’d find someone else in there.

“Feeling nostalgic?” Bob jokes. “Aw.”

“I am.”

The two make camp here for the night. In the morning, before they set out again, after Bob takes a bath in the river, Theo asks him to sing him a song, his favorite song, while Theo packs up. Bob, without another thought, belts out:

Alas, my love, you do me wrong,
To cast me off discourteously.
For I have loved you well and long,
Delighting in your company.

Greensleeves was all my joy.
Greensleeves was my d—

The bullet that leaves Theo’s gun punctures a permanent hole in Bob’s skull, reverberating in the sky, scattering birds, and then, seeming to end sound altogether. Theo never speaks another word. Choosing in its place the memories of the man now buried in the pit. They are what make him what he is. Make Bob what Bob was, not
Theo. He was a man, not a machine. He felt. He breathed. He bled. He chose. He died.

That is how he should be remembered. Whether the choice was right or wrong.